



Designing Policies for Real-World Policing: From Compliance to Cognitive Accessibility

Guest post written by Dr. Rudolph B. Hall Jr., Hall and Harrison Solutions, and Dr. Brian Sprowal, Future Policing Institute Fellow

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Policies and procedures have long served as the backbone of law enforcement, reflecting and expressing an agency's core values, legal obligations, and operational priorities. According to the DLG Policy Center, these documents are designed to provide clear direction, enabling officers to carry out their responsibilities lawfully, effectively, and ethically. From the first day at the academy, recruits are introduced to a wide array of policies meant to guide every action and decision they make.

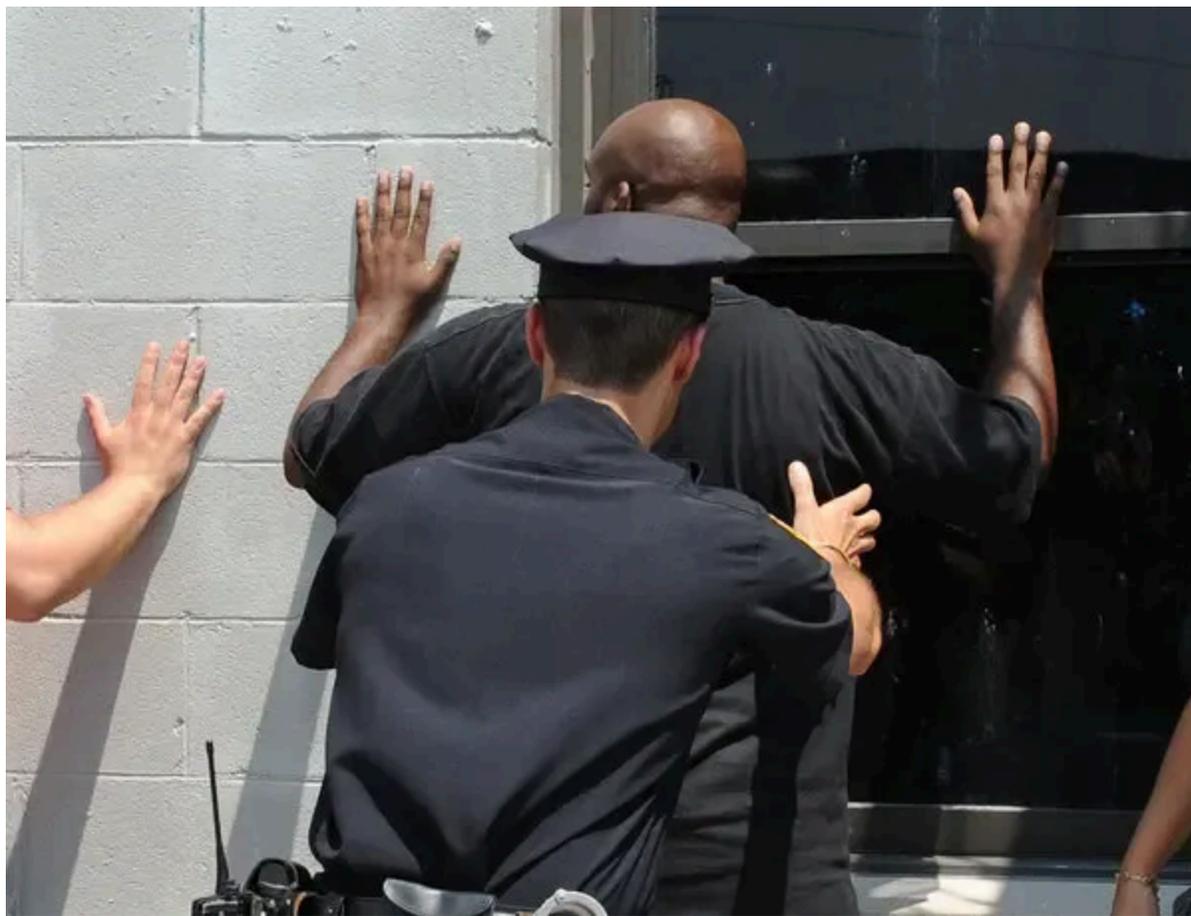
Yet, for many officers, meaningful engagement with these policies often occurs only three times throughout their careers:

- During academy instruction or onboarding
- When preparing for a promotional exam
- When facing discipline for a violation

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incidents, legal requirements, and evolving community expectations. In doing so, they have often created sprawling documents, sometimes 15 to 25 pages long, without ensuring that the officers responsible for applying them truly understand their content. Policies become a catch-all repository of legal language designed to protect the agency, while their practical utility for those in the field diminishes.

Consider the New York City Police Department's experience with its stop, question and frisk (SQF) policy. Following a 2013 federal ruling that found the department's practices unconstitutional, the NYPD revised its policies and training, producing a 100-page document meant to clarify lawful procedures. Yet more than a decade later, full compliance remains elusive for some officers. This is not a problem unique to New York; agencies across the United States routinely add policies but rarely audit them to assess comprehension or operational impact.



The Cognitive Challenge of Modern Policing

The underlying challenge is one of human cognition. Research from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) shows that individuals can only hold a limited amount of information in working memory at any given time. The Harvard Business Review similarly warns that information overload impairs focus, judgment, and timely decision-making.

Patrol officers, already inundated with sensory input and required to act decisively under pressure, face significant risk when policies are overly detailed, overlapping, and ambiguous.

This problem is especially pronounced for Generation Z officers, born between 1997 and 2012, who now make up a growing portion of the workforce. With attention spans averaging five to eight seconds and near-constant interaction with electronic devices, asking these officers to read and retain dense, multi-page policies is increasingly unrealistic. The result? Officers often sign acknowledgments of understanding without truly comprehending the content, and agencies respond to policy violation with discipline rather than reflecting on whether the policies themselves are accessible or practical.

Even seasoned Generation X officers, trained in a pre-digital era of concise policies and mentorship-based learning, now struggle to navigate the maze of overlapping documents driven by legal, political, and administrative pressures. For them, the shift toward policy inflation has replaced intuitive, experience-based decision-making with bureaucratic navigational collision that invites decision fatigue and increases the likelihood of procedural missteps.

Human Fallibility and Policy Complexity

The theory of fallibility, articulated by Gorovitz and MacIntyre, offers a vital lens for understanding human error. Human error should not always be viewed as negligent, but rather as an inevitable consequence of cognitive limitations interacting with complex systems.

Policies that are excessively detailed, ambiguous, or poorly structured can themselves become sources of fallibility.

Recognizing this, agencies must move from a punitive approach to policy violations toward one that sees human fallibility as a catalyst for systemic improvement.

Building Policies Officers Can Use

What does that look like in practice?

1. Embrace Cognitive Accessibility

Policies should be designed not only for legal precision but also for ease of comprehension and application in real-world conditions. This involves auditing existing policies to identify redundancies, eliminate outdated procedures, and streamline guidance—particularly in sensitive areas such as crisis response, youth diversion, and the use of force. Policies should be living documents, continuously evaluated and updated in alignment with legal standards, operational best practices, and community expectations.

2. Leverage Technology

Technology offers significant opportunities to bridge the gap between policy and

assistants, can provide officers with immediate, interactive access to policies, break down lengthy documents into concise, plain-language summaries. Platforms like E-Train already incorporate body-worn camera footage, decision-making scenarios, and agency-specific policies into realistic training modules.

When paired with automated policy update notifications, these systems keep both sworn and civilian employees informed and engaged.

3. Create Real-Time Field Tools

Implement decision-support tools designed for field use—such as condensed checklists, flowcharts, and mobile-accessible quick references—that officers can consult in real-time. These should be reinforced through scenario-based training that emphasizes discretion, critical thinking, and judgment rather than rote compliance.

4. Foster a Culture of Feedback

Leadership must foster a culture of reflection and feedback. Officers should feel empowered to report where policies are unclear or impractical, creating a feedback loop that drives continuous improvement rather than reactive discipline.

Authentication processes, such as electronic acknowledgments of having read a policy, should not be treated as a mere formality but as the start of an ongoing dialogue about how policies are understood and applied.

From Punishment to Progress

The evolution of law enforcement policy must strike a balance between the need for legal rigor and the realities of human cognition. By recognizing the limits of working memory, designing policies that promote accessibility, and leveraging emerging technologies, agencies can create systems that foster lawful, ethical, and effective policing—while respecting the cognitive limitations of those tasked with carrying it out.

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AUTHORS:

[Dr. Rudolph B. Hall Jr., Hall](#) and Harrison Solutions; and

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