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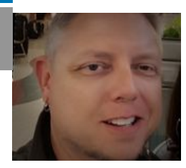

James Rayroux

No one else can tell your story

A digital public archive is looking for LEOs to share their experiences of working during the COVID-19 pandemic

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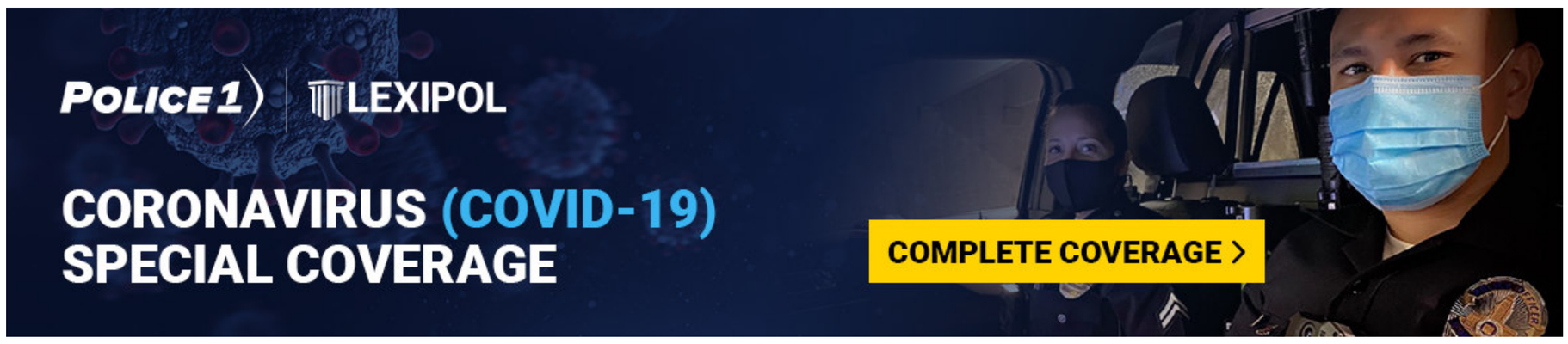

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I need your help, and there's no one else I can ask. I need you to help write the candid history of wearing a badge during the coronavirus pandemic, even if you need to remain anonymous.

About two years ago, I made the heart-wrenching decision to leave cop work to take better care of my family and me. I collected my retired law enforcement identification card and went about finding something to fill the void in my life. The search led to the long-overdue completion of my undergrad, and that led to a master's program in global history at Arizona State University. That's why I'm writing to you today.

In this, May 1, 2020, file photo, a New York Police officer wears a mask to protect against coronavirus. (AP Photo/John Minchillo, File)

My graduate studies at ASU include work on a digital public archive called Journal of the Plague Year that collects COVID-19 stories. The archive accepts submissions from anyone in the world, in any language, and in almost any medium and format that helps someone tell the story of their pandemic experience.

Despite the many thousands of public submissions, I found what historians refer to as a "silence" in our archived collection. We have very few submissions explaining what it's like to stand on your side of the skirmish line, to report to roll-call amid the early transmission uncertainties, or how the pandemic continues to impact your protocols and public relationships.

"WHY DOES THIS MATTER?"

The Journal of the Plague Year intends to serve the public and future researchers of all backgrounds and social science persuasions, *including* LEO trainers, administrators and legislators, who will someday study this pandemic like we study the Spanish flu pandemic now. We hope to leave behind a far greater and more diverse body of evidence for future generations than we inherited. As a member of both our society and the small group tasked with maintaining order

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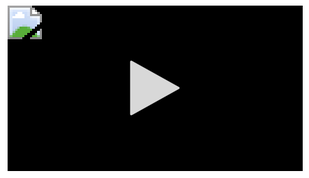

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Hundreds of submissions talk *about* the police – presumptions of police action and intent, alleged police brutality, peaceful protest, protests that look to me like riots, and pictures of torched and destroyed squad cars. Images of protestors squaring off with gear-laden cops in skirmish lines are preserved for future generations of researchers, as well as a few that show cops hugging strangers. The *silence,* the perspective that's missing, is *yours*. As a member of *your* public and a former cop, I desperately need to hear your pandemic story, the one that's yours alone. The one no one else can tell, even if it must be done anonymously.

INCREASE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

Everyone who ever raised their right hand and donned a badge, gun and vest knows how little the public understands their job. The tumult of 2020 has only exacerbated that divide.

If you'll forgive my use of the collective here, *we* cops, as a culture and segment of society, have historically not been very good at trusting the public in the same manner we ask them to trust us. Without digressing into the multitude of reasons for that, many of which are valid concerns, I'm putting out a huge ask: I need you to trust this archive project with your experiences, if only because I trust this archive project with mine. To be transparent with you, I have submitted my most personal and candid narratives anonymously. You can do the same.

Thankfully, I'm not the only one putting trust in this archive. The archive has collected and preserved perspectives, experiences and thoughts of current and former cops. If we apply the corresponding FBI definition here, our Law Enforcement Collection has a few serial contributors lurking among us. I'm grateful for their trust and willingness to tell their side of the story and allow us to preserve it for the future.

For the remaining skeptics in the audience, I'll offer answers to the standard LEO concerns here:

- **"I can't post anything online without approval from the PIO, the chief, the mayor, the Pope and Zuckerberg's assistant."** We understand that, so the archive allows anonymous submissions. Identifiable sources best benefit future research, but unnamed contributions still greatly help our present and future societies realize how this pandemic has impacted both cultural groups and individuals. We welcome your anonymity.

- **"My experience is the same as every other cop, so just put me down for 'ditto.'"** The public tends to think of cops as a homogenous, lock-step entity with no internal dissent, no unique perspectives and no individual thought. You and I both know better. If I ask 10 cops a question, I'll get 12 answers, all of which are offered as the *one* best solution. We're a Type-A group with a tremendous diversity of opinion, especially when we can speak outside official channels. We want *your* experience and thoughts, and no one can speak for the whole of law enforcement.

- **"I type all day, so I don't want more paperwork on my days off."** I get that, and so does the archive. Turn on your audio recorder and just start talking. I *always* have a lot to say when I can speak freely, and someone wants to hear what I think. You might have the same problem. How about sending a photo of something important or significant to your pandemic experience? What about those redacted "mask-up" selfies you took in uniform and posted to your anonymous Twitter and Instagram accounts? We're happy to curate your audio and visual files, and we're grateful to have them.

WHAT TO WRITE OR TALK ABOUT

If you are struggling to think of what to write about, here are some writing prompts that I think the public should know about cop work and your pandemic experience:

- When and how did you learn about the coronavirus in early 2020? What were the first conversations you had about it at work?
- How did your agency first deal with the COVID-19 pandemic? Has that changed during the past year?
- What did your first pandemic briefing or roll call look and feel like? Were you and your whole squad wearing masks?
- Has the pandemic changed your sense of security around fellow cops, fire crews and EMS?
- What happened on the first call where you had to wear a mask? How did you first feel talking to the public while *they* wore masks? How has that changed?
- Does it feel different to take arrestees through the hospital for medical clearance? How has your relationship with the medical and hospital staff changed?
- What did you think about during your first pandemic arrest? How are the arrest, transport and booking processes different than before?
- Has a suspect told you they had COVID-19 to avoid arrest or to threaten or terrorize you from the backseat of your car? Has an arrestee threatened other inmates or arrestees with infection to create turmoil and chaos?
- How has your daily job evolved during the pandemic? How do you think it will change in the future?
- Will you ever go back to the way you did business in 2019? What, if any, pandemic practices do you think you'll keep?
- Has the pandemic inspired you to reconsider your career track, or are you thinking about leaving law enforcement for some type of work-from-home position?
- Shaking hands with the public is a critical foundation of trust and humanity between cops and civilians. How have you worked to being rapport without direct human contact?

Please consider submitting your stories, photos, audio recordings, news articles, or whatever you deem important related to this historic moment in the human experience. Tag your submissions with #LEO to ensure it is added to the archive's Law Enforcement Collection.

Thank you for your service and for pressing on through these anxious and uncertain times. Take care of yourselves and each other. Be safe out there.

Share your story here.

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