

Behind the Badge: The Psychology of Policing and Public Trust

Student: _____ **Grade:** 5-6 **Length:** 3-Week Sprint

ESSENTIAL QUESTION (DOK 4)

Why do people in the same community feel such different things—trust or fear—about police, and how can understanding psychology help close that gap?

Your Challenge (Problem-Based Learning Scenario)

Your city's police chief has asked a team of student consultants (that's you!) to help redesign how officers connect with the community. Before you can make recommendations, you need to understand three things deeply: why officers do the job the way they do, why some residents trust them completely while others are afraid, and how an officer's training, equipment, and daily choices shape both.

Depth & Complexity Lenses to Apply Throughout

Depth & Complexity Lens	Guiding Prompt to Keep Asking Yourself
Multiple Perspectives	How might the same traffic stop look completely different from the officer's, the driver's, and a bystander's point of view?
Ethics	When, if ever, is it fair for someone in authority to make a split-second decision that affects someone else's freedom or safety?
Patterns & Trends	What patterns show up in when and why community trust in police rises or falls over time?
Language of the Discipline	What do terms like de-escalation, community policing, implicit bias, and use-of-force actually mean, and why does precise vocabulary matter here?
Big Idea	How does a society balance the need for authority and safety with the need for individual freedom and trust?
Unanswered Questions	Why do two people who experience the same police department end up with completely opposite feelings about it?

Guiding Investigation Questions (DOK 3-4 / Upper Bloom's)

Why Cops Do What They Do

- Analyze three specific duties of a police officer's daily job and explain how each one connects to keeping people safe. *[Analyze, DOK 3]*
- Evaluate whether police officers today are trained more for helping or for enforcing — defend your judgment with evidence. *[Evaluate, DOK 4]*

The Psychology of Fear and Trust

- Analyze at least two experiences that could cause someone to fear police, and two that could cause someone to trust police. *[Analyze, DOK 3]*

- Evaluate which has the bigger influence on how a person feels about police: personal experience, media coverage, or community stories. Justify your ranking. *[Evaluate, DOK 4]*
- Design a psychological model or diagram explaining how trust or fear of police develops in a child over time. *[Create, DOK 4]*

Tools of the Trade

- Analyze the equipment a police officer wears or carries and classify each item by its purpose (protection, communication, enforcement, identification). *[Analyze, DOK 3]*
- Evaluate whether a specific piece of police equipment builds trust or fear in the public, and propose one change that might improve public perception. *[Evaluate, DOK 4]*

Research Menu — Choose at Least 3 Ways to Investigate

- Interview an adult about their views on police, and record at least 5 quotes.
- Find and analyze 2 news stories: one where police helped someone, one where police actions were controversial. Compare tone and facts.
- Create a labeled diagram of standard police gear and research the purpose of each item.
- Research the terms 'implicit bias' and 'de-escalation' and find a real example of each in action.
- Track how police are portrayed in 3 different TV shows, movies, or books and compare the messages.

Show What You Know — Product Choice Board

Required Final Format: Poster Board — a visual, evidence-based poster presenting your findings and recommendation.

- Annotated diagram of police equipment with psychological and practical purpose labels
- Two-voice script (officer vs. resident) dramatizing a misunderstanding and its resolution
- Infographic comparing trust-building vs. trust-breaking police actions
- Recorded or written interview compilation, podcast-style

Along the way, use at least one product option to show progress at each weekly checkpoint (see timeline below).

Study Timeline

Week	Focus	Checkpoint (Show Your Progress)
Week 1	Build background knowledge: the roles, duties, and equipment of police.	Completed gear diagram + 3 duty summaries
Week 2	Investigate the psychology of trust and fear.	Interview notes + comparison of 2 news stories
Week 3	Synthesize findings and build the final poster.	Draft poster reviewed; final poster + short presentation

Final Project

Design a poster board titled 'Building Trust: A Student's Guide to Police and Psychology' that presents your top 3 findings about why cops do what they do and why fear exists, plus one realistic recommendation for building more trust in your community. Present it in a 3-5 minute talk.

Audience:

Classmates, teacher, and/or an invited guest (school resource officer, counselor, or family member).

Success Criteria:

- Uses evidence from at least 3 different research sources
- Clearly represents at least 2 depth & complexity lenses (e.g., multiple perspectives and ethics)
- Answers the essential question directly and thoughtfully
- Poster is visually organized, labeled, and presentation-ready

Reflection Journal Prompts

- What surprised you most about the psychology behind trust or fear of police?
- How did your own opinion change (or not change) over the course of this study?
- If you could ask a real police officer one more question, what would it be and why?