

POLICY VS. PROCEDURE

IN PUBLIC SAFETY, WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Policies. General Orders. Standard Operating Guidelines. Standard Operating Procedures. Directives. In public safety, we use a lot of different words to refer to the documents that shape our conduct.

Sometimes, these words are used interchangeably. But there are important differences that can have an impact on personnel and on how the agency operates.

Lexipol clients can customize their manual to incorporate their agency's preferred nomenclature, whether that's standard orders or directives or SOGs. But one distinction we try to maintain is policy vs. procedure.

To be sure, the distinction is not black-and-white; there will always be some procedure in your policy manual and vice versa. But attempting to keep procedure separate from policy has important benefits for public safety agencies.

Before we jump into those benefits, let's look at the policy vs. procedure question a little more closely.

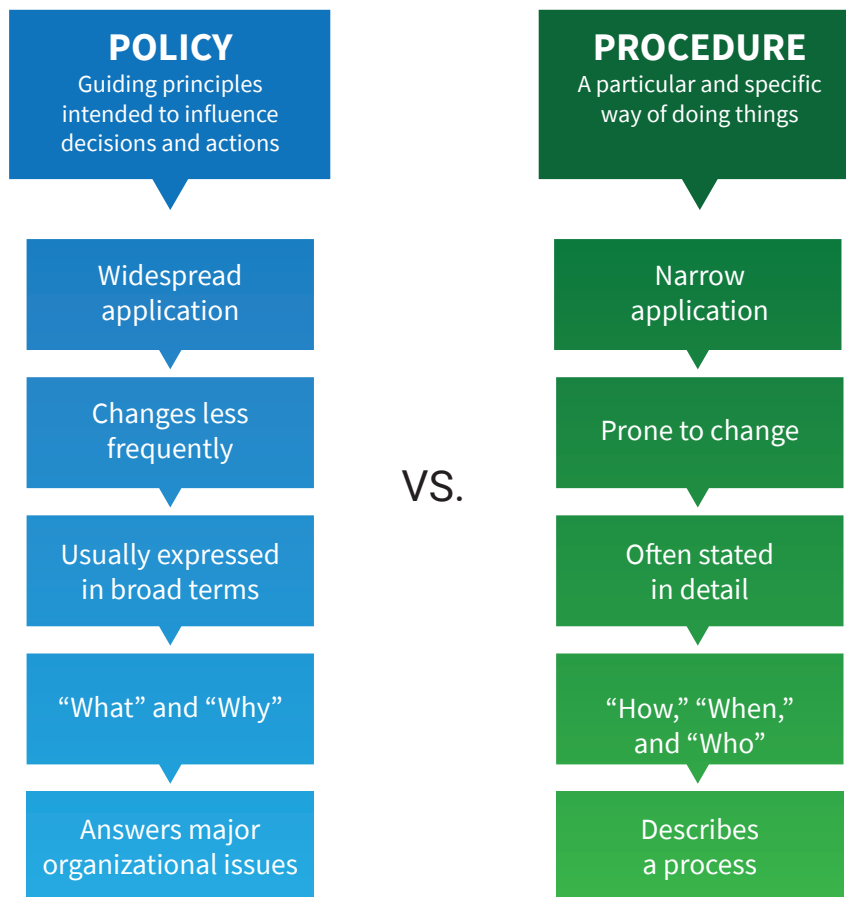
DEFINITIONS

Policies: At Lexipol, we define policies as "guiding principles intended to influence decisions and actions." Policies have the following characteristics:

- Reflect the "rules" governing the organization and employee conduct
- Explain the rule rather than how to implement the rule
- Are often scrutinized in litigation targeting agency liability; they should be as simple and direct as possible
- As a body, they represent a consistent, logical framework for members' actions
- Widespread application
- Usually expressed in broad terms
- Focus on the *what* and *why*
- Answer major organizational issues
- Change less frequently than procedure

Procedures: On the other hand, procedures are defined as “a particular and specific way of doing things.” Procedures have the following characteristics:

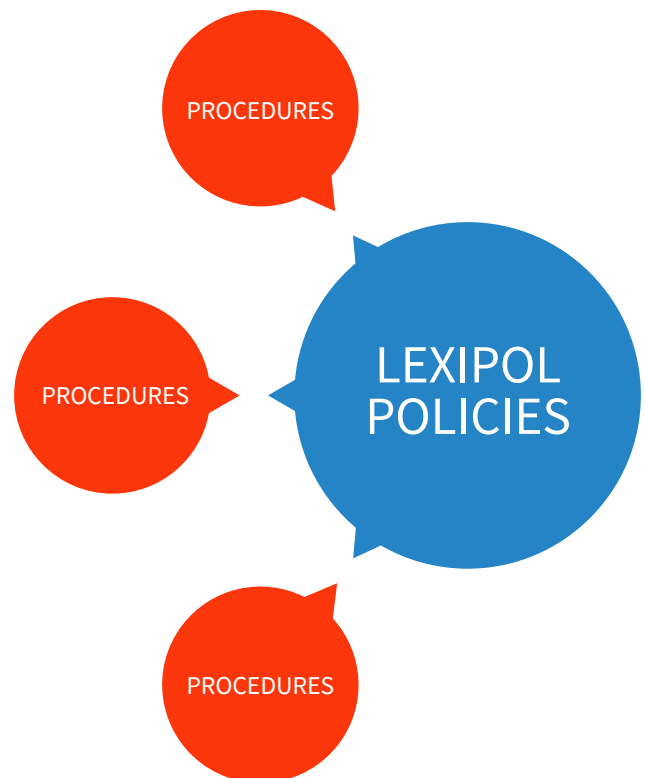
- Represent an implementation of policy
- Evolve over time as new tactics and tools emerge, new processes are designed and the risks associated with an area change in response to internal or external changes
- Narrow application
- Often include high level of detail
- Focus on the *how*, *when* and *who*
- Describe a process
- Prone to change



EXAMPLES

As with most things, it helps to look at a couple examples to illustrate this difference.

- **Fire:** Your Incident Command Policy will likely include the directive that incident commanders use an ICS/NIMS-compliant incident management system. The components of that system—your accountability system, how you designate divisions, etc.—will be in a separate procedure.
- **Law Enforcement:** Your department's Bias-Based Policing Policy will outline the department's commitment to fair and objective policing. It will cover responsibilities for members and supervisors, reporting requirements and training requirements. However, it will not go into specifics about how to complete arrest reports or field interview cards or what the officer can/cannot do on traffic stops. These items will be found in associated procedures.
- **Corrections:** Your facility's Suicide Prevention and Intervention Policy will indicate the facility should have a suicide prevention plan. But it will not serve as the suicide prevention plan; it will simply provide broad guidelines for the information the plan should contain.



BENEFITS OF SEPARATING POLICY FROM PROCEDURE

So why do we go to such lengths to keep policies and procedures separate? After working with thousands of public safety agencies across the country, we've learned this division has several benefits:

- **Reduces maintenance time.** Most agencies have complex, time-consuming processes for policy changes. Leaders can't just make a few changes, notify personnel and be done with it. Labor groups, lawyers and others must get involved. Procedural content, however, is less formal and rarely so closely governed and is often system-, division- or unit-specific. If you're changing procedural content but it's wrapped up in your policy, you may be subjecting yourself to a lengthy and unnecessary review process. Procedure revision should allow an agency to be nimble in management.
- **Promotes personnel safety.** Many procedural documents are very specific, revealing details you may not want to be publicly accessible (think tactical operations). Yet states and local governments are increasingly requiring public safety agencies to post their policies on websites or other publicly accessible forums. Yes, you can usually redact portions to protect your personnel. But if your procedural content is separate, it's one less thing you need to worry about.
- **Enhances policy understanding and compliance.** When procedure is mixed in with policy, policies quickly become very long. We all know it's no fun to read a long, complex legal document—which is essentially what a policy is. Focusing your policies on the broad directives and keeping procedural details separate can help personnel better understand your policies and commit them to memory. Further, electronic policy management systems like Lexipol can easily link your procedures, checklists, forms, etc. to your policies so personnel can still access everything in one place.

Policies and procedures are both important items in managing risk within public safety. Understanding the difference between the two is equally important.

NEED HELP MANAGING YOUR POLICIES?

Lexipol provides state-specific policies for public safety agencies and an online platform so you can easily make changes, issue policies to personnel and track policy acknowledgement.

Contact us today for more information.

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