Law enforcement has a structure that is similar to the first police organization in England. Sir Robert Peel organized the first modern law enforcement agency, and the form is assumed to be militaristic in style and in purpose.

The agency is led by a single, authoritative figure in the chief of police. He or she gives the final word regarding policy and procedures of the police agency. The chief determines the vision, establishes the goals, and determines what model of policing the department will follow. He or she is often assisted by a deputy or assistant chief.

Below the assistant chief are the subordinate commanders such as majors. These senior officers are assigned command of a particular division, such as the patrol, community service, detective, or special operations division. These officers are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the division and for providing short-term management as to their functions.

The division commanders oversee lieutenants, who are assigned to various shifts or particular subsets of the division. For example, a patrol division operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The division is normally divided into three shifts, and those shifts are supervised by a lieutenant. A lieutenant may also command a subset of a division. An example of this might be a detective division that has three units: general investigations, juvenile investigations, and narcotics investigations. The lieutenant might command one of these units.

Each of the various divisions usually has sergeants as front line supervisors. A sergeant assigned to patrol may be given four or five districts to supervise. He or she will respond to calls along with patrol officers and will be the on-scene commander making tactical decisions. A sergeant is usually responsible for the paperwork required of the shift as well.

Some departments may promote officers to the rank of corporal. This is usually an intermediate rank between officer and sergeant and is normally done based on performance, or it may simply be done based on longevity within the department. Corporals normally have little supervisory function, but they do have authority as senior officer on scene until a sergeant arrives.

The administration of the department is often complicated until all of the processes become familiar. Hiring is normally conducted by a human resources office in a local jurisdiction. Potential officers apply, and they are given various tests to qualify for employment. After they are initially
qualified, then the department processes them for hire. This may be an extensive process, as it could involve physical fitness tests, polygraphs, medical exams, and psychological evaluations.

Police departments are funded though taxpayers’ dollars; however, the allocation to the police department comes from a city council. It is important to remember that sometimes the agenda of the council may not match the agenda of the police department. If a city council wants to garner votes and a particular neighborhood group is begging for a program to be funded, the money may come from money that the police department wants to use to hire new officers. Law enforcement functions do not return cash to the city coffers. Building inspectors are largely funded through the use of building permits and licenses. The police department is essentially a 100% expense for the city. Therefore, the police authorities must always find new ways to be efficient and effective. It is not often that the police department is the recipient of unexpected funds.

Regardless of the particular organization of an agency, the role and responsibilities of the police are virtually unchanged from city to city.