



Police Corruption

An Analytical Look into Police Ethics

By RICH MARTIN, M.S.



INTEGRITY
RESPONSIBILITY

COURAGE
PRUDENCE

TRUST

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Although studied and researched, the topic of police corruption, in large part, remains a mystery. Sir Robert Peel was credited with the concept that the police depend on citizen cooperation in providing services in a democratic society. As such, the detrimental aspects of police misconduct cannot be overstated. In terms of public trust for law enforcement, recent polls show

that only 56 percent of people rated the police as having a high or very high ethical standard as compared with 84 percent for nurses.¹

Over the past few decades, great strides have occurred in the law enforcement profession. To begin with, many police agencies have avoided hiring candidates who have low ethical standards and have identified those onboard employees

early in their careers who might compromise the department's integrity. In addition, research has discovered new methods of testing candidates for their psychological propensity to act ethically. However, unethical conduct by the nation's police officers continues to occur in departments large and small.

Research into police corruption offers some understanding of the phenomenon in the hope

of rooting out this behavior that serves to undermine the overall legitimacy of law enforcement. Theories on the role of society in law enforcement, the negative influence of an officer's department, and a person's own natural tendency to engage in unethical behavior have been offered as explanations of police corruption.² So, the author poses the question: Is this noble goal to rid our nation's police organizations of unethical behavior possible and plausible?

Integrity

First of all, the discussion of ethics as related to law enforcement must begin with a definition of the word *integrity*. One researcher has said that it is "the sum of the virtues required to bring about the general goals of protections and service to the public."³ He created a list of

characteristics that he feels officers must possess to have integrity.

1. Prudence: the ability to discern between conflicting virtues and decide the best action to take
2. Trust: loyalty and truthfulness in relationships between officers and citizens, fellow officers, and supervisors
3. Effacement of self-interests: without this, officers may exploit their authority to further themselves
4. Courage: the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness
5. Intellectual honesty: not knowing something and being humble and courageous enough to admit it

6. Justice: not in its normal context, but, rather, adjusting what is owed to a particular citizen even when it may contradict what is strictly owed

7. Responsibility: intending to do the right thing, clearly understanding what the right thing is, and being fully aware of other alternatives that may exist; taking responsibility, rather than finding excuses for mistakes or poor judgment

Leadership

Leadership constitutes an integral part of police work, and the head of an organization holds the ultimate responsibility for its shortcomings. Conversely, this individual greatly can influence the success of an agency. As such, leaders have a significant impact in preventing corruption.

In working toward the goals of a department, the top executives play a primary role in forming the organizational climate. Those who strive to maintain a high standard of ethical conduct can serve as the key to prevent corruption and maintain the public's trust.⁴ As one researcher explained, principled leaders do not act to protect their own egos, try to put on a good appearance without substance in their decisions or efforts, or attempt to intimidate those under them. Instead,



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principle-based executives who work with their subordinates can take an important step toward creating an ethical climate by developing an agenda that explains the moral purposes of the department.

But, leaders bent on taking on the task of stopping corrupt behavior in their departments must use care. Unless a thorough understanding as to the nature, extent, and organization of corruption exists, efforts to combat it may be counterproductive. Without gaining the necessary understanding of the department's climate, administrators actually may lower morale among members and strengthen the solidarity of those who will start to doubt the ability of these people to effectively lead the agency. Moreover, such actions can waste valuable department resources.

While leaders certainly play an integral part in forming the overall climate of the organization, they alone cannot ensure that high levels of integrity are maintained. During a national symposium on police integrity, one speaker noted that it still is "our sergeants, lieutenants, and captains who have the daily and ongoing responsibility to ensure that the appropriate workplace standards are maintained."⁵ But, while ethical supervisors help maintain an ethical workplace,

the opposite also remains true: uncaring and incompetent officials actually can promote misconduct.

The possibility exists that no matter how conscientious they are and how thoroughly they do their jobs, first- and second-level commanders cannot keep an officer inclined to act unethically from doing so.⁶ The ratio of officers to supervisors is too high to allow for close enough

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oversight. However, in police work, leadership is not solely defined by rank. Instead, all officers need to exude some leadership skills because they operate, for the most part, without direct supervision.

Officers receive training and a large quantity of rules and regulations and are entrusted to perform their normal day-to-day duties within those guidelines. Supervisors generally are not involved unless a complaint against an officer or a serious incident requires

their response. So, while it is incumbent upon the leaders to create an atmosphere that promotes ethical conduct, it falls to each member of the organization to ensure that this standard of integrity is carried out.

Finally, mentoring younger officers can allow corruption to spread. Once a void is created by the lack of strong or cohesive leadership, it will fill with substandard or unethical officers looking to bolster their ranks. Therefore, it becomes imperative that effective leaders—who share the same goals—be in place to set the standard for subordinates to see and emulate.

Work Environment

Law enforcement professionals completely understand that their typical work environment may be less than ideal at best and life threatening at worst. Within minutes, officers must solve problems that have taken days, months, or sometimes years to develop. In this environment, excellence is a necessity. A single incident in law enforcement can have devastating effects felt throughout the country; this serves to illustrate the intolerance of police misconduct in American society.

“The major cause in the lack of integrity in American police officers is mediocrity.”⁷ Leadership that allows for mediocrity to first exist and then



Law Enforcement Oath of Honor

On my honor, I will never betray my badge, my integrity, my character, or the public trust.

I will always have the courage to hold myself and others accountable for our actions.

I will always uphold the Constitution and community I serve.

—*International Association of Chiefs of Police*

remain, rather than demanding the highest level of conduct within a department, can create a climate ripe for misconduct. However, a high degree of ethics that will prevent leaders from compromising their integrity in lieu of expediency or personal profit can stifle potential misconduct.⁸

In police work, results are measured in such terms as the number of arrests and the amount of weapons and drugs recovered. This being the case, officers will find ways to accomplish these tasks or risk being passed over for promotions or specialized assignments. As a result, some officers may choose to “cut corners” or violate the law and not even consider their conduct unethical. In an interview following his conviction and subsequent incarceration for his activities, one officer explained, “The

pressure is to produce, to show activity, to get the collars. It’s all about numbers, like the body count in Vietnam. The rest of the system determines if you got the right guy or not.”⁹

It is this push for results by administrators that some officers can interpret as their agencies not caring or wanting to know how those results are obtained. These officers may see it as a license to get results at all costs. Because policing often is equated to war (e.g., the “war on drugs”), this war mentality can produce many of today’s integrity issues.

Such a work environment causes officers to feel that they are doing what is wanted by their organizations and the public. However, when their conduct becomes illegal or unethical, their departments impose punishment. Then, afterwards, the officers may continue with

the behavior because the pressure to produce results is greater than that to follow the rules. Further, the fear of punishment usually is not enough to change unwanted behavior.¹⁰

So, while no law enforcement agencies should tolerate mediocrity, another aspect of the moral makeup needs to be patience. Those who engage in criminal conduct do so as a matter of business. Rarely are they committing such an act for the first time. It is this notion that needs to be instilled in the psyche of today’s police officers. The fact that an offender is known is the key. If officers cannot arrest that subject on one occasion, other opportunities will arise, thereby removing the imperative need to compromise their integrity to get the “bad guy” now.

Police Subculture

The profession of policing, as well as many others, has a subculture unto itself. The morbid sense of humor perhaps illustrates one of the most widely known characteristics. In relation to corruption, however, the police subculture either can prevent the existence of it or be a vehicle to spread it throughout a department. This subculture may be the most difficult aspect to address.

A subculture is a group of individuals who generally share attitudes, perceptions, assumptions, values, beliefs,



ways of living, and traditions. Because police work entails so many experiences unique to the field, the subculture almost can become stronger than the officer's family ties. Additionally, work schedules outside the normal realm can lead to feelings of isolation that further strengthen the bond of the subculture.

Senior officers may test new members of the law enforcement profession. For example, they may see how amiable recruits are to accepting gratuities. It long has been believed that this practice can be a gateway to more serious corruption as it provides the opportunity for corrupt intent.¹¹ Accepting the free cup of coffee is the example most often used, and it is held that once officers engage in minor illegal or corrupt behavior, they find it easier to do more.

But, accepting small gratuities is a test of loyalty. In the corrupt subculture, fidelity becomes more important than integrity, and officers learn that their peers frown upon morality and independence.¹² Research into this process of inculcating recruits into the group found that newer officers were more willing to admit to seeing unethical acts (e.g., accepting free food) committed by other officers than were those with more time on the job. One conclusion would be

that the length of time an officer is exposed to this socialization process, the greater its impact.

When this loyalty to the subculture becomes too strong, the solidarity that follows can adversely affect the ethical values of the officers. The typical "us versus them" mentality creates an allegiance to the members stronger than that

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to the mission of the department or even the profession. And, the "them" may include not just nonpolice but also their organization when officers feel a disconnect and animosity between themselves and administrative policies. Thus, conflicts can and will arise when personnel face a choice between what may be ethically right and their devotion to the other members. Such a strong fidelity toward their fellow officers over commitment to do what is right causes members

to trade their integrity for that loyalty.

A distinct line exists between constructive dedication that results in team cohesiveness and misguided allegiance that pits a group or an individual against the overall law enforcement mission. It is important that leaders have a means of gauging the atmosphere of their agency. Every police organization will (and probably should) take pride in doing difficult and dangerous tasks. In addition, a certain cohesiveness likely will occur between those who share job experiences. This probably exists more in units considered elite because of the greater dangers and difficulties in those assignments.

In such units, pride can evolve into a general feeling of superiority among its members. This, in turn, can lead to a type of separation from the rest of the agency. When this occurs, these units may develop their own conduct, which may not align with departmental policy and procedure. The "this is the way we do it in this unit" mentality begins to set in. If left unchecked, it can lead to a feeling of being untouchable, especially when coupled with a lack of strong leadership. In monitoring this cohesiveness, effective leaders can detect when the pride that members feel toward doing their difficult and dangerous job and



the closeness of sharing that experience with their coworkers crosses into an unhealthy misdirection of loyalty.

Corruption Prevention

The obvious sought-after result of all of the research into police corruption is the eradication of that malady. Each topic discussed so far plays an integral role in determining the ethical standard. As such, it becomes crucially important to focus efforts toward these specific elements.

A major consideration in rooting out misconduct is not hiring unethical individuals. Agencies adequately must screen candidates and hire the most conscientious ones because they have a higher degree of integrity. Conscientiousness can be assessed through conduct because, as one researcher states, an incorruptible person “is truthful in word and deed just because truthfulness has become second nature with him.”¹³

Once new hires are on the job, their leaders must continue to work toward creating an atmosphere of ethics and integrity. Fostering such a climate is an integral part of reducing unethical behavior. In a study conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, 7 of the top 10 issues determined as critically important to officers actively working in the

field of law enforcement involved ethics and integrity. Positively, the research concluded that a majority of the agencies surveyed (80.3 percent) commit resources to train instructors to teach ethics courses, and 72 percent of the organizations said that they provide some ethics-related training beyond the basic academy experience. But, while almost all of the agencies (83.3 percent) taught ethics to

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recruits in the academy, only a surprising minority (34.4 percent) had ethics as a rated category on their field training reports for those new officers.¹⁴

An apparent recognized demand exists for expanded training hours, more quality training resources, and greater involvement with ethics training at all levels of the organization, but the number of hours dedicated

to this training remains rather insignificant in the face of such a need. “Strategies for accepting the fact that officers do not control their police role, but do have absolute control over their integrity and professionalism have to be taught and practiced.”¹⁵

Conclusion

Policing requires perfection and unyielding ethics and ultimately depends on each employee’s own level of knowledge, rationality, and devotion to moral excellence. Anything less than perfect ethical conduct can be disastrous for a department, a community, and an entire nation. While officers are only human and will continue to make mistakes, ethical misconduct cannot be tolerated.

To ensure the ethical behavior of their officers, agencies must possess three basic tenets. First, they must have a policy in existence that spells out their ethical mission and sets standards that officers must live up to. Second, strong and ethical leadership must exist and be in place. These executives set the tone for the department and lead by example, never choosing the easy route in lieu of the ethical one. Third, agencies must ensure that they hire ethical people and appropriately deal with those onboard who are not. In short,



an ethical police organization “will require the scrupulous adherence to existing policies and standards, the ability to detect an individual or collective pattern of performance which falls short of that expectation, and the courage to deal with those who are responsible for those failures.”¹⁶ ♦

Endnotes

¹ Gallup Poll News, “Nurses Shine, Bankers Slump in Ethics Ratings,” November 24, 2008, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/112264/nurses-shine-while-bankers-slump-ethics-ratings.aspx> (accessed April 16, 2010).

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³ Stephen Vicchio, “Ethics and Police Integrity,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 1997, 8-12.

⁴ For additional information, see J. Conditt, Jr., “Institutional Integrity,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, November 2001, 18-23; and R. Hunter, “Officer Opinion on Police Misconduct,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 15, no. 2 (1999): 155-170.

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⁶ Vicchio, “Ethics and Police Integrity.”

⁷ Los Angeles Police Department, i.

⁸ E. Meese III and P. Ortmeier, *Leadership, Ethics, and Policing: Challenges for the 21st Century* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004).

⁹ M. Kramer, “How Cops Go Bad,” *Time*, December 15, 1997, 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

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¹² Meese and Ortmeier, *Leadership, Ethics, and Policing: Challenges for the 21st Century*.

¹³ J.E. Delatore, *Character and Cops* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute of Public Policy Research, 1989), 65.

¹⁴ International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), “Ethics Training in Law Enforcement: A Report by the Ethics Training Subcommittee of the IACP Ad Hoc Committee on Police Image and Ethics,” <http://web.archive.org/web/20010620062511/http://theiacp.org/pubinfo/Pubs/ethictrain.htm> (accessed April 14, 2010).

¹⁵ K. Gilmartin and J. Harris, “Law Enforcement Ethics: The Continuum of Compromise,” *Police Chief*, January 1998, 5.

¹⁶ Los Angeles Police Department, ii.

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As with article submissions, the *Bulletin* staff will edit the speech for length and clarity, but, realizing that the information was presented orally, maintain as much of the original flavor as possible. Presenters should submit their transcripts typed and double-spaced on 8 ½- by 11-inch white paper with all pages numbered, along with an electronic version of the transcript saved on computer disk, or e-mail them. Send the material to: Editor, *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, FBI Academy, Outreach and Communications Unit, Quantico, VA 22135, or to leb@fbiacademy.edu.