

Ethics and Police Corruption

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Abstract

By nature, police work entails dealing with issues that can result in corruption. In turn, involvement in corruption leads to the problem of ethics and morality. What are the practices of police work that are deemed as corrupt? And how are they unethical or immoral? Is police corruption an administrative or ethical issue? Police corruption involves corruption of authority, kickbacks, opportunistic theft, shakedown, protection of illegal activities, direct criminal activities, payoffs, flaking, padding, etc. In this paper, I shall address some of the most common forms of police corruption, in relation to its ethical aspect. Police corruption has remained a big dilemma to society. Not only is it a problem within the police sector, but also to that of the public. And at the heart of this corruption problem is the question of whether a morally good end justifies the use of ethically, politically or legally dangerous means to its achievement (Klockars, 1985, 56). For, upon deciding whether to punish an officer who has achieved ends we applaud but who uses illicit means to achieve them, we are thus faced with an ethical dilemma. (Newburn, 1999, 11).

Ethics and Corruption

In general, corruption involves unethical and immoral activities involving a person's misuse of office for personal gain. But what is police corruption? In order to understand this concept, it is important that we know its meaning. Police corruption is defined as the "abuse of police authority for personal or organizational gain by a police officer acting officially" (Dempsey and Forst, 2010, 230). Indeed, police corruption is a major social problem all over the world. Police officers often lack integrity and professionalism. In effect, such corrupt activities pose significant obstacles to improve police public association and relations. Acts of police corruption may include corruption of authority, accepting gratuities, perjuries, kickbacks, opportunistic theft, shakedown, protection of illegal activities, direct criminal activities, payoffs, and flaking. This paper is aimed at discussing the different aspects of police corruption, while relating them to the abused code of ethics.

Police gratuity is one form of corruption that is deeply rooted in nonfederal police officers in the US. Gratuity is the act of a police officer receiving free services, discounts or free meals; these kinds of acts are sometimes considered as fringe benefits of the job. Gratuity also involves financial benefits and rewards, all of which is a violation of the police code of ethics. Gratuity is corruption because the police officer has been placed in a position where favors are available in the present and in the future (DeLattre, 1996).

For example, gratuities may involve a police officer asking for a bribe in return of giving valuable information. In effect, we see police officers skimming for valuable evidence from crime scenes, warehouses, property rooms or any place that is accessible to them. This is clearly a violation of the police code of ethics. For, it is the duty of law enforcement officers to serve mankind, safeguard lives, and protect property.

Police shakedown is another form of police corruption where a police officer extorts business properties or owners for protection money. A typical scenario is a bar. Here, police officers are tasked to inspect bars, making sure that they comply with liquor rules and regulations. In this case, police officers may threaten bar owners of violating the laws if they do not give payoffs. They even go on saying that they promise to intercept reports emanating from department channels. In cities like Francisco for instance, police officers usually promise extra protection against gay bashing, given that they are paid an extra fee. In New Orleans, moonlight officers often make an extra dollar in liquor establishments, and thus overlooking more serious crimes such as prostitution or illegal drug dealing.

Shakedowns also occur in strip bars, illegal gambling, prostitution rings, drug dealing, and even in construction projects. All these activities are against societal and community morals. They encourage social vices to continue cropping up in the community. Most especially, they violate the police code of ethics, which states:

“I will never act officiously or permit personal feelings, prejudice, animosities, or friendships to influence my decisions. With no compromise for crime and with relentless prosecution of criminals, I will enforce the law courteously and appropriately without fear or favor, malice or ill-will, never employing unnecessary force or violence, and never accepting gratuities” (DeLattre, 1996).

Police perjury is another act of corruption whereby a police officer may leave out certain pieces of information for him or her to fix a criminal prosecution. The officer may testify untruthfully, and he or she can do it in a manner that can eventually incriminate an innocent person or free a guilty person who poses to be innocent. In this case, the judge may pretend to believe officers who are completely telling lies. This often happens with crimes involving

influential and powerful individuals in society. After winning the case, the police, prosecutor, the defense lawyer and the judge receive their credit. In most cases perjury is committed by decent police officers that truly believe, that a guilty defendant will not go free unless they provide a false testimony. But does it mean that good ends justify unethical means? These acts are unethical and completely immoral. It violates the police code of ethics, which dictates that the police officer will strive uphold justice and law enforcement (Kleinig, 1996).

In addition, police profanity is also another corruptive act where police officers use obscene and profane language to the public. Good communication skills are vital tool in the execution of police duties. Commanding tones of voice along with an authoritative presence are basic skills taught at police training institutions. This does not mean that police officers should use typologies like words indicating excretory, words connected to sexual functions, and words having religious connotations. The intention of using an abusive language is especially for gaining the attention of citizens who may be less cooperative, to establish a dominant submissive relationship, to identify with an in-group, the offender or police subculture, to label or degrade an out group and to discredit somebody or something, like an alibi defense (Madsen and Shafritz, 1991).

The actions cited above are essential for the transition from prejudice to arbitration, especially where racial typologies are used. Ethically, all persons are equal and are entitled to fair treatment by the police officers regardless of their race, gender, culture, status and political stature. Furthermore, police profanity violates the police code of ethics, for ideally, a police officer ought to remain calm whenever faced with danger, scorned or ridiculed; thereby maintaining and developing self restraint and being mindful of others (Kleinig, 1996).

Sleeping while on duty can also be classified as a corrupt act. In fact, police vehicles are at times referred to as travelling bedrooms. This is mostly common with police officers who have daytime duties to attend to like college, or part-time jobs to facilitate their daily needs. As a result, by the time their night policing duties start, they are tired and resort to sleeping instead of performing their duty well (DeLattre, 1996). Sleeping while on duty simply means avoidance of work, or performing minimal work that only satisfy the superiors. This is a moral problem that should not be condoned as it contradicts the police code of ethics. For, with the minimal work performed by a police officer, it seems unjust that he or she will get paid all his remunerations. Getting what you have not worked for is completely unethical (Heffernan and Stroup 1985).

Sex on duty is another form of corruption in itself. It is evident that some women are naturally attracted to policemen (Madsen and Shafritz, 1991). Others are infatuated to an extent that they wave to police officers when they are told to stop or pull over. When women get caught with an offense, the police officer may corrupt her by setting up a meeting to have sex in exchange of charging the woman with her violation. Other situations include: traffic stops – to get a closer look at the female or information about her, voyeurism – window peeping or interrupting lovers lane couples, fox hunting – stopping college girls to get the I'll do anything routine, opposite sex strip searches – touching and/or sex with jail inmates and sexual shakedowns – letting prostitutes go if they perform sex acts (Kleinig, 1996). Worst of all, police officers at times coerce women into having sex with them. Having sex with a woman or man who is not your wife is unethical, more so, doing it during work. And those officers who use sex as a bribe go against the moral code of the law and of society.

Lastly, the misuse of confidential information by police officers is considered as a form of corruption in itself. For, it normally jeopardizes crucial investigations that may be ongoing.

Some police officers have a habit of leaking critical information to the press, to criminal suspects, family, relatives or members of their gang for some credit in return. In some cases these officers may not even know that they are leaking information, such as cases that involve pillow talks with their accomplices. Of course, there are some police officers who are working in the justice department who may use resources like computer systems to access information that consist of valuable background about a case. This is closely related to searching for criminal background for accomplices such as consulting firms, private detectives or area employers (Madsen and Shafritz, 1991). These acts are in contrast with the police code of ethics, and in fact go against the law that enforces justice in any system. But what does this say about ethics and morality?

Conclusion

The heart of this corruption problem is the question of whether a morally good end justifies the use of ethically or politically dangerous means to its achievement (Klockars, 1985, 56). In deciding whether to punish an officer who has achieved ends we applaud but who, in believing there to be no alternative, uses illicit means to achieve them, we thus face an ethical dilemma. (Newburn, 1999, 11). This paper illustrates the simple but uncomfortable fact that complex ethical problems are an inherent part of policing (Newburn, 1999, 13). In any criminal justice profession there will always be codes of ethics, statements of values, and principles of conducts and standards of practice that govern their execution of policing duties. And so in order to understand this problem of police corruption, we should not just understand the internal conflicts within the justice system, but also its external ethical and moral manifestations in society.

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