

6.7: Police Misconduct, Accountability, and Corruption

Learning Objectives

This section will cover police misconduct and accountability. After reading this section, students will be able to:

- Discuss the different corruption types in policing
- Explain the difference between a meat eater and a grass eater
- List the different ways an officer engages in noble-cause corruption
- Describe how a police officer uses stereotyping on the job
- Discuss the importance of having a reliable internal affairs division/bureau
- Explain why excessive use of force is difficult to quantify

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How are grass eaters and meat eaters different?
2. What is noble cause corruption?
3. Why are there misunderstandings of police accountability?
4. What are the functions of an internal affairs division/bureau?
5. What happens if a police department shows a pattern of excessive use of force?

Corruption Types

Police officers have a considerable amount of power. With one fail swoop, an officer can take a person's freedom away. That is a tremendous amount of power. An officer is also given the authority to carry a gun and for protection of either the officer or a person, take the life of a citizen as well. These decisions are dangerous, and unfortunately, at times there are officers who not only overstep their boundaries but jump directly in the pit of corruption.

While the media paints a picture that most police officers are corrupt, this could not be further from the truth. The Bureau of Justice confirmed that only 0.02% of the police officers in the U.S. engage in some type of corruption. While the media makes money selling stories, the police story that starts the five-o'clock news is not always true. When the media covers a police shooting for instance, the investigation has not been completed, therefore the only answer the police department will have for the media is 'no comment.' A cover-up then comes to mind; however, when the investigation is completed weeks to months later, the media is not always as interested in the story, especially if there was no police corruption. Even more importantly it takes two-years to basically train a new police officer. The same police officer then continually trains every month to ensure the knowledge of current laws and many other tactics are up-to-date. Unless one is a trained commissioned law enforcement officer, there is no way the public, nor media can truly understand why an officer acted and responded the way he or she did, unless they experienced the exact same circumstance.

No matter the profession, whether it is an actor, a cashier, a president of a non-profit organization, or a police officer, corruption can occur. The focus on law enforcement is more dramatic due to the glamour of the type of work performed. Either way, corruption should not be condoned and if it does occur, the reaction must be swift and stern. Those in law enforcement hold a badge which grants the carrier the authority to take away a person's rights therefore, the authority that comes with the badge should NEVER be taken for granted.

Grass Eaters

In 1970, The Knapp Commission coined the terms '**meat eaters**' and '**grass eaters**' after an exhaustive investigation into New York Police Department corruption. Police officers that were grass eaters accepted benefits. Whether it was a free coffee at the local coffee shop, fifty percent off lunch, or free bottled water from the local convenience store, these cops would take the freebie and not attempt to do the right thing by explaining why they cannot accept the benefit and then pay for the benefit. By accepting benefits, the officer was, in turn, agreeing that whoever gave the benefit, i.e., coffee, or lunch, etc., was to receive something in return. What if the coffee shop wanted the officer to patrol their shop every morning between the busy hours of six and seven a.m.? Would that be fair to other coffee shop owners that did not give free coffee to the officer? ^[1]

Meat Eaters

These officers expected some tangible item personally from those served, in order to do their job. Whether it was money ‘shakedown’ to ensure a convenience store was not robbed, or the officer felt there was nothing wrong with stealing from a drug dealer during a drug raid; ‘no one would notice a pound of cocaine missing, right?’ These officers felt entitled and were aggressive in making sure they got what they thought was theirs. If a person has the lifelong goal of being a police officer, then that same person will want to protect the innocent from those criminals that aim to do them harm.

Noble Cause Corruption

Noble-cause corruption is a lot more commonplace than many think. Many officers work twenty-five years and may never see another cop steal something, but they will see noble-cause corruption. Most officers join the force to make the world a better place in one way or another. While officers understand they cannot solve everything alone, they do think they can make a difference. The **noble-cause** is the goal that most officers have to make the world a better and safer place to live. “I know it sounds corny as hell, but I really thought I could help people. I wanted to do some good in the world, you know? That’s what every cop answered when asked why he became a police officer.”^[2]

Officers sign on and get hired wanting and striving to do the right thing. However, it is a slippery slope that the officer continually slides on from the academy, through field training, and on into the deeper parts of a police career.

Slippery-Slope Model of Noble-Cause Corruption

1. **“Forget everything you learned in training (school), I’ll show you how we really do it out here.”** This is what an officer often first hears from a TO (training officer). The statement is only superficially about the lack of utility of higher education. What it is actually about is loyalty and the importance of protecting the local group of officers with whom the officer works.
2. **Mama Rosa.** It looks like a free meal. This is not to test willingness to graft, but whether an officer is going to be loyal to other officers in the squad. It also serves to put officers together out of the station house.
3. **Loyalty Back-up.** Here, an officer is tested to see if he or she will back up other officers. This is more involved because officers may have to ‘testify’ (give false testimony), dropsy (remove drugs from a suspect during a pat-down and then discover them in plain sight on the ground), the shake (similar to dropsy, only conducted during vehicle stops), or stiffling-in a call. These are like NC (noble-cause) actions, and may indeed be NC actions, but their purpose is to establish loyalty.
4. **Routine NC (Noble-Cause) Actions Against Citizens.** Magic pencil skills increase penalties by shifting the crime upwards. Protect fellow officers with fictitious chargers. Construct probable cause. Illegal searches of vulnerable citizens.

I am the Law. This is the belief that emerges over time, in which officers view what they do as the right thing to do. This is the practical outcome of the old adage ‘power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ A police officer does not have absolute power, but he or she has the backing of the legal system in almost all circumstances. Behavior can become violent, as with the Rampart CRASH unit.”^[3]

Therefore, every officer can start out wanting to save the world somehow, but when the real-world job of an officer starts to take hold, it is a problematic grasp to release.

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1. Caldero, M. A., Dailey, J. D., & Withrow, B. L. (2018). *Police Ethics: The Corruption of Noble Cause* (4th ed.). New York, NY, USA: Routledge/Taylor and Francis. [↩](#)
 2. Baker, M. (1985). *Cops: Their lives in their own words*. New York: Pocket Books. [↩](#)
 3. Withrow, B.L., Dailey, J.D., & Caldero, M.A. (2018). *Police ethics: The corruption of noble cause*. New York: Routledge. [↩](#)
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