Police Deviance and Corruption

In a broad sense, police corruption and deviance can be considered as "any type of proscribed behavior engaged in by officers within the scope or purview of their official capacities that contradicts established normative systems, undertaken with the expectation of an actual or potential unauthorized material reward or gain" (Roebuck & Barker, 1974). Discretion is an essential part of the discussion of ethics for police officers to be successful in carrying out their duties and exercising their authority within the community. It is important to understand that policing involves individuals making decisions that other citizens are not empowered to make and exercising judgment that affects the lives of others.

From a historical perspective, the role of the police officer has often been shaped by factors outside of his or her control. Economic conditions that separate those who have wealth from those who do not, pressure from the political establishment as a result of conflicts among constituents, community and religious activists questioning police practices, and attempts at controlling the police have all influenced the role that police play in society and how corruption is viewed and handled.

Certain restrictions are placed on the police so that the individual rights of citizens are protected by and from the authority of the police. However, there may be some reluctance to take necessary action that would in effect reduce officer misconduct and corruption, but that, by its very nature, would make police less effective in carrying out their responsibilities. This reluctance can serve as tacit acceptance of misconduct (Loewenthal, 1981).

There are some who would say that corruption could be effectively curtailed—or possibly eliminated altogether—through the use of repressive measures. However, corruption involves a combination of factors, including the nature of the work, organizational climate, and how the police are viewed by society as a whole. There is no easy solution to this problem.

To be successful in preventing and reducing incidences of police misconduct, various approaches must be taken both internally and externally. Risk management and controlling those factors that contribute to corruption are critical components. To manage the risks within the law enforcement organization, multifaceted strategies must be put into place that involve the entire life cycle of a police officer’s career.

Police officers themselves, in an attitudinal survey conducted, overwhelmingly supported the following (Hunter, 1999):

- Restrictive selection and screening of applicants
- Better training
- Strict and fair disciplinary practices
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- Clearly written policies and procedures
- Professional ethical standards and codes
- Investigation of allegations by internal affairs units
- Review of incidents by external entities, such as civilian review boards, as means of regulating police behavior and reducing misconduct

Policies and Practices

Policies, procedures, rules, and regulations are important in defining role expectations for all police officers. They act as a guide to the philosophy and mission of the organization. Part of this communication process is also a way of helping officers interpret specific elements. Policies are not intended to be specific but rather as a framework used in drafting more specific operational procedures. Procedures are more specific than policies, serving as action guides, but less restrictive than rules and regulations. The rules and regulations that arise from the underlying policy statements refer to the specific requirements or prohibitions that are intended to prevent deviations from policies or procedures.

There is historical support in the relevant literature regarding external codes of values as a means of combating the social, organizational, and opportunity-based influences that can contribute to occupational deviance by police officers (Simpson, 1977). If a code of ethics is to be effective, the climate within the organization has to be fully supportive of these efforts. Every aspect of the organization—including the hiring, training, supervision, and decision making—has to embrace the code.

References


