

# Research paper on ethnicity and police corruption

[Government](#), [Corruption](#)



## **Ethnicity and Police Corruption**

Police corruption refers to an immoral, unethical, or illegal act in the part of a law enforcement officer for the benefit of the officer's own personal gain.

These acts may include accepting or demanding bribes, abuse of power or authority, concealing criminal evidence, facilitating or encouraging criminal activity, violation of human rights, sexual coercion or misconduct, or ethnic and racial discrimination.

Weitzer and Tuch (2004) conducted a study on the perceptions of police misconduct, including corruption, by different ethnic groups. For each type of misconduct analyzed, African-Americans were more likely to have negative views of the police, with whites having the least, and Hispanics falling in the middle. For corruption, 6% of whites, 22% of African-Americans, and 9% of Hispanics believed that police corruption was “very common.” In addition, 11% of whites, 26% of African-Americans, and 20% of Hispanics believed that police corruption was “fairly common.”

People who lived in cities had a significantly more negative view of the police, regardless of ethnic group. For example, when asked their experience with the use of excessive force by the police, 3%, 15%, and 12% of white, black, and Hispanics thought it occurred very often in their neighborhood, whereas in the city, the perception of excessive force was 5%, 26%, and 16%, for each group, respectively. Clearly, people who live in cities have a more negative perception of the police than people living in the suburbs, with African-Americans having the worst opinion. This makes sense, for law enforcement officers have more opportunity for misconduct within the anonymity of the city.

Weitzer and Tuch (2004 ) also analyzed the correlation between income and education and perception of the police, and found that whites with higher income and Hispanics with more education tended to have a more positive view of the police, though it was not as significant as the correlation between race or ethnicity and perception of the police. However, another study showed that people who lived in neighborhoods where they did not feel safe, and in general those represented the poorer neighborhoods, tended to have a significantly lower opinion of the police than people living in more affluent surroundings, regardless of ethnicity or race (Williams, 2002).

An ethical problem when considering police corruption is the fine boundary that exists between “ corrupt” and “ non-corrupt.” A police officer’s duties often requires that the officer engage in activities that would otherwise be considered unethical, immoral, or corrupt; in time, the lines between the officer’s “ normal and ethical” activities and activities that call for the officer to choose “ police ethics” over “ social ethics,” may begin to blur, and the officer may find that the line has been crossed.

A society’s cultural mores can also affect the development of moral standards in law enforcement. In Latin America and Africa, bribes are the normal way of life; a police officer that regularly accepts bribes may still be considered to be an ethical and moral officer. The problem in these countries is that there is no set of standards for police conduct; furthermore, their laws are very complicated and life is much easier when people just go ahead and circumvent the law (Williams, 2002).

According to Williams (2002) there is no such thing as a “ bad apple” where

police corruption is concerned. His view is that police corruption occurs within the context of a police department's culture, and that there exists different levels of tolerance among the various police departments. As Lawrence W. Sherman (1985), Wolfson Professor of Criminology at the Cambridge Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University said, " Most police departments have members who commit corrupt acts from time to time. Only some police departments, however, become corrupt police departments." There are other extrinsic factors in addition to police culture that affect police corruption, but the most significant are opportunity, and the attitude of the community towards corruption.

There are also intrinsic factors that affect police corruption, related to the type of individual that the law enforcement officer is. Most law enforcement officers are recruited too young to have developed a strong ethical base or to have experienced higher education, factors that have been shown to correlate with the ability to make the right choices and lower the probability of engaging in corrupt activities (Newburn, 1999). This is important because new recruits tend to be trained under the worst conditions, where they get to witness the negative side of policing and where their integrity and values are challenged on a daily basis.

Experts suggest that the best way to control corruption is to develop stronger recruiting and screening programs to weed out potential problems. People have gone as far as to suggest that each candidate be given a polygraph test, but that has met with considerable resistance (Newburn, 1999), while others recommend the administration of psychological and personality tests to identify corruption-prone police applicants (O'Connor and

Chandler, 1997). Still others support educational programs that place strong emphasis on ethics and values training (Klockars, 2000). A strong code of ethics would provide guidance as to how a police officer should enforce the law, help develop professional pride, and prevent corrupt policing of the law.

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