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# National Police Research Platform



## Police Integrity, Responsibility, and Discipline

Jack McDevitt, Chad Posick, Ruth Zschoche, Dennis P. Rosenbaum, Marc Buslik and Lorie Fridell

### Introduction

Concerns about integrity are some of the most important issues facing the profession of policing. Cases of police misconduct can seriously harm years of work to establish trust and confidence between the police and members of their community. The National Police Research Platform (NPRP) explores police integrity from a variety of perspectives. Because the NPRP collects information from police officers about their attitudes, experiences and feelings about policies and procedures in their agency, it offers a unique and innovative way to collect systematic information about integrity in the policing profession.

This report looks at the issue of police integrity from three separate perspectives, the susceptibility of police officers to corruption, the level of personal accountability for their behaviors that police officers feel and finally the attitudes that police officers hold toward those policies in their organization that are intended to promote integrity. As a preview of the detailed information below, based on data from police officers working in agencies participating in the NPRP

- most police officers believe that other officers they work with would report misconduct if they were aware of it
- most police officers believe that they and their fellow officers should be held accountable for their behavior even where excuses for misbehavior may exist
- officers from small agencies are more likely to view the discipline processes of their agency as fair when compared to officers from larger agencies

### Susceptibility to Police Corruption

The Platform Survey on Accountability, Ethics and Discipline included items related to police corruption. Subjects responded to questions for each of three scenarios describing corrupt police behavior. These items were based on those created by Klockars, Ivkovich, Harver, and Haberfield (1997) and used in their study entitled “The measurement of police integrity.”

## The National Police Research Platform

The National Police Research Platform was developed as a vehicle to continuously advance our knowledge of police organizations and their employees and to provide regular and timely feedback to police agencies and policy makers nationwide. In doing so, the Platform is expected to advance both the science of policing and evidence-based learning organizations. This project was supported by Award No. 2008-DN-BX-0005 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

The three scenarios presents examples of officer corruption. The first scenario presents an incident of an officer accepting kickbacks from a local auto body shop, the second scenario describes an officer covering up the illegal behavior of a fellow officer, and in the third scenario an officer lies about evidence found on potential suspects in order to make an arrest. Respondents are asked four questions about each scenario:

1. *How serious do YOU consider this behavior to be?*
2. *If an officer in your agency engaged in this behavior and was discovered doing so, what, if any, discipline do YOU think SHOULD follow?*
3. *If an officer in your agency engaged in this behavior and was discovered doing it, what, if any, discipline do YOU think WOULD follow?*
4. *Do you think MOST POLICE OFFICERS IN YOUR AGENCY would report a fellow police officer who engaged in this behavior?*

Options for responses range in level of perceived seriousness, severity of discipline that should or would follow, and amount of certainty on the part of the respondent that other officers in the department would report the behavior. Answers are indicative of individual officer opinions and acceptance of the deviant behavior, and of officer views of their agency's acceptance of the behavior.

Here we report findings from the results from seven agencies that participated in this survey – including two small agencies (jurisdiction population under 10,000), three medium agencies (jurisdiction population between 50,000 and 200,000), and two large agencies (jurisdiction population over 200,000).

### Reporting Behavior by Agency Jurisdiction Size

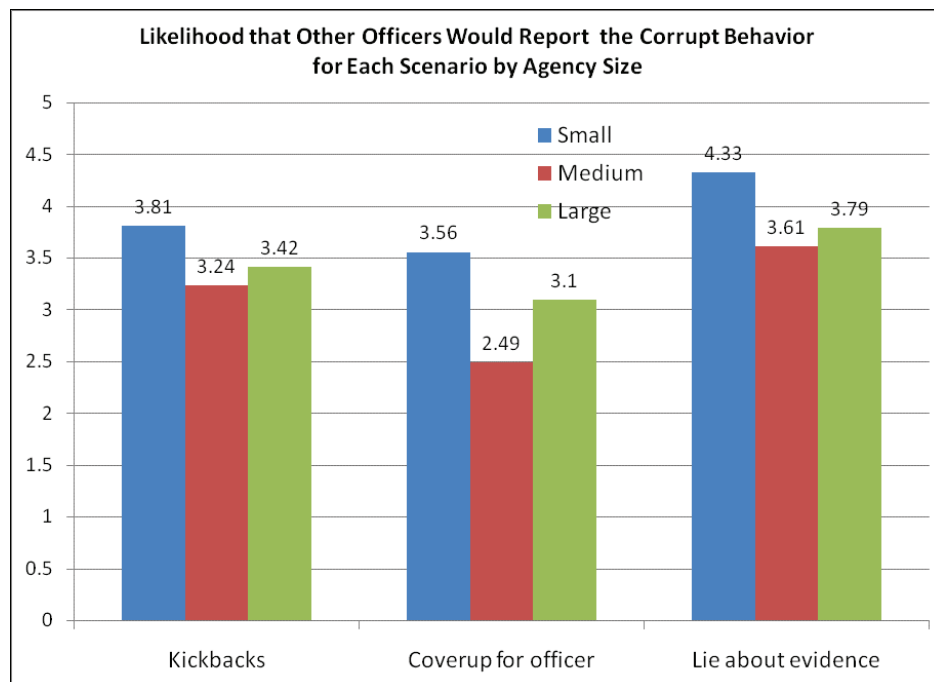
Significant differences were found among agencies based on jurisdiction size for the item that asks officer respondents to

assess the likelihood that fellow officers in the respondents' agency would report the corrupt behavior (Item #4 above). Figure 1 presents results for each scenario for small, medium and large agencies. The item was scored from 1 to 5, and a higher score represents a respondent opinion that more officers in their agency would report the incident, indicating that the agency may have a lower acceptance of deviant norms.

For all scenarios, small agencies had the highest means, indicating highest perceived likelihood that fellow officers would report the incidents. Large agencies had the second highest means, followed by medium agencies, indicating that the officers in medium agencies were most likely to believe that their fellow officers would NOT report the corrupt behaviors.

T-tests were used to assess the statistical significance of the differences in means across groups of departments. These tests indicated that smaller agencies had **significantly** higher scores (greater likelihood of reporting) than both medium and large agencies on all scenarios. However, large agencies only scored **significantly higher** (having greater likelihood of reporting) than medium agencies on the scenario in which an officer is covering for the illegal behavior of a fellow officer. In sum, officers in smaller agencies were **most likely**, and officers in medium agencies were **least likely**, to perceive that their fellow officers would report the deviant behavior of other officers.

Figure 1



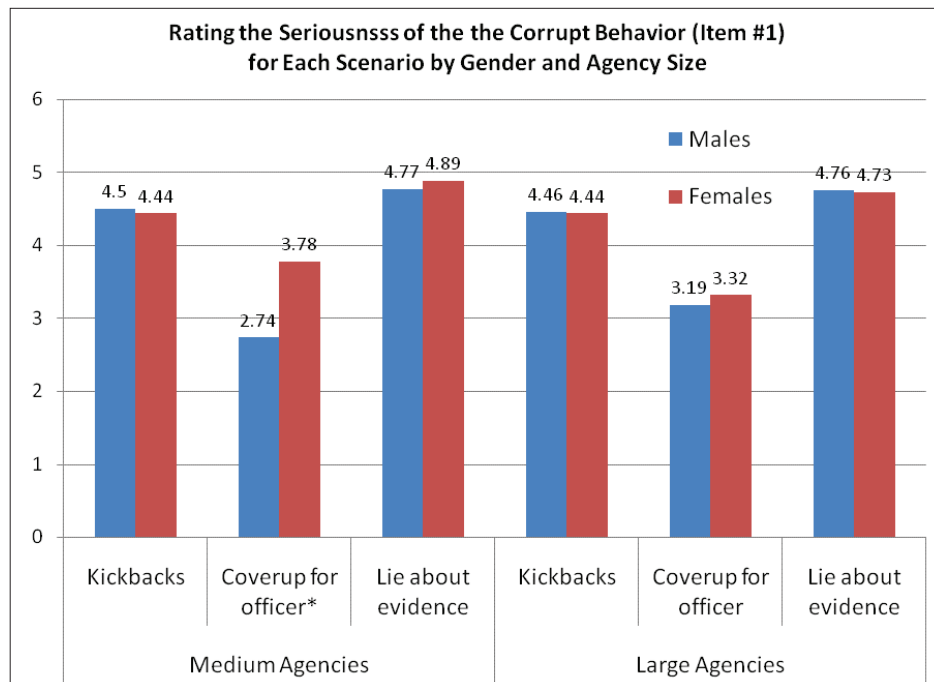
## Gender Differences within Agency Size Categories

Male and female respondents were compared on responses to Items 1, 2, and 4 for all three scenarios within the medium and large agencies, with an interest in any gender differences that may also vary by agency size. Small agencies were not included in this analysis due to their small number of female respondents.

For Item #1, a higher score indicates that the respondent thinks that the behavior is more serious. For Item #2, a higher score indicates that the respondent thinks a more severe discipline should be imposed. For Item #4, a higher score indicates that the respondent thinks that fellow officers are more likely to report the behavior.

As seen in Figure 2, the only significant gender difference in assessing seriousness of an offense (Item #1) was in the medium-sized agencies in the scenario in which an officer is covering for a fellow officer (Scenario #2). Female officers perceived this behavior to be more serious than did male officers. In larger agencies there were no significant gender differences on perceived seriousness.

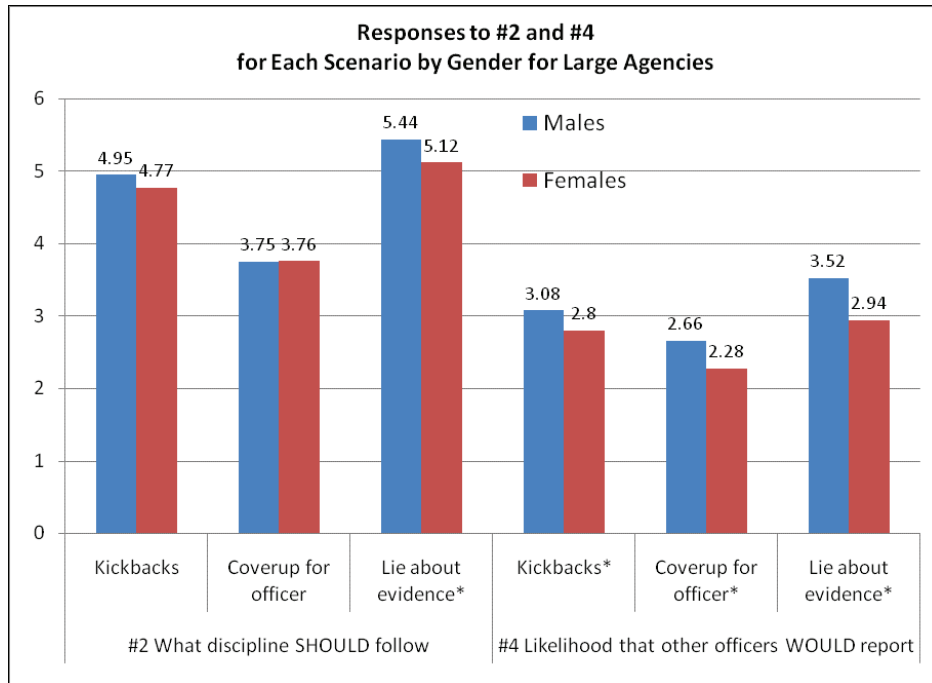
Figure 2



For Items #2 and #4 significant gender differences were found in the larger agencies, but not in the medium agencies. These differences are presented in Figure 3. In the larger agencies there was a significant difference regarding what discipline SHOULD follow (Item #2) for the “Covering

for another officer’s behavior” scenario only; male officers believed that more severe discipline should follow the behavior than did female officers. Also in the larger agencies, male officers were significantly more likely to believe that their fellow officers would report the corrupt behavior (Item #4) than were female officers for all scenarios.

Figure 3



## Conclusions and Implications

Current results suggest that agency susceptibility to corruption, as determined by the perception of “other officer” reporting behavior may vary by agency size. Officers in the smaller agencies were more likely to perceive that fellow officers would report deviant behavior, indicating less tolerance for the behavior. The implication is that large- and medium-sized agencies may have a greater tolerance for and acceptance of deviant norms, hence a greater susceptibility to corruption, than small agencies. This could be due to the familiarity of officers in small agencies with each other compared to officers in large- or medium-size agencies. The Platform project will be able to explore these differences in more depth, for instance, comparing susceptibility to deviance across agencies that are of the same size and identifying differences among them – differences that might produce policy implications for preventing corrupt behavior.

There were some mixed findings when comparing item responses across gender within agency size categories. On one hand, female officers in the medium-sized agencies rated the seriousness of covering up for another officer as higher than did male officers. On the other hand, female officers in the larger agencies advocated for a lesser penalty for lying about evidence than did male officers. Female officers were also more likely than male officers to perceive that fellow officers would not report the corrupt behavior described in the three scenarios. This could reflect female officers' poorer perceptions of departmental accountability compared to male officers. These mixed findings require further exploration and present an example of how the Platform project can look across agencies to identify various risk factors for corrupt police behavior. The Platform data can also produce for the participating agencies information on the results – such as those presented here – from their own officers benchmarked against similar agencies. As the number of agencies participating in the Platform continues to grow, the data will become more robust in its ability to identify stable differences by agency size and gender of respondents.

### **Attribution of Responsibility**

The Police Platform is also interested in departmental processes as well as individual perceptions and characteristics. The attribution of responsibility is one individual level characteristic that has been captured by the NPRP organizational surveys.

An index of responsibility was constructed using four items from the organizational survey.

These items include:

1. *You can't blame a person who plays only a small part in the harm caused by a group,*
2. *People cannot be blamed for misbehaving if their coworkers pressured them to do it,*
3. *People are not at fault for misbehaving at work if their supervisors mistreat them, and If someone leaves something lying around, it's his/her own fault if it gets stolen (alpha = 0.70).*

Overall, the results indicate that officers believe that responsibility for one's own actions is that of the individual regardless of the actions of others. In other words, regardless of the situation, most officers believe that individuals should be held responsible for their actions. In all cases the score on the index of responsibility was above 13.0 on a scale ranging from 4 to 16. There are few differences between demographic groups or status. Table 1 shows the means of the different groups

in the analysis with higher scores indicating higher attribution of responsibility on the individual (range from 4 to 16) and significant differences using a t-test. Only race is significant, indicating that minorities are slightly more likely to attribute responsibility to the individual than whites.

<b>Table 1 . Attribution of Responsibility</b>		
	Mean	Significant
<b>City Size</b>		
Large	13.61	
Other	13.66	No
<b>Race</b>		
White	13.47	
Minority	14.01	Yes
<b>Supervisor</b>		
No	13.41	
Yes	13.85	No
<b>Military</b>		
No	13.63	
Yes	13.39	No
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	13.84	
Male	13.54	No

Understanding how individuals attribute responsibility may help in understanding how discipline is perceived and accepted by officers. It is also shown to be significantly correlated with other variables in the survey such as the perceived seriousness of treating citizens rudely. Correlations show that individuals who attribute more responsibility to the individual (high scores on the responsibility index) find it more serious to treat citizens rudely than those with lower scores.

### **Departmental Discipline**

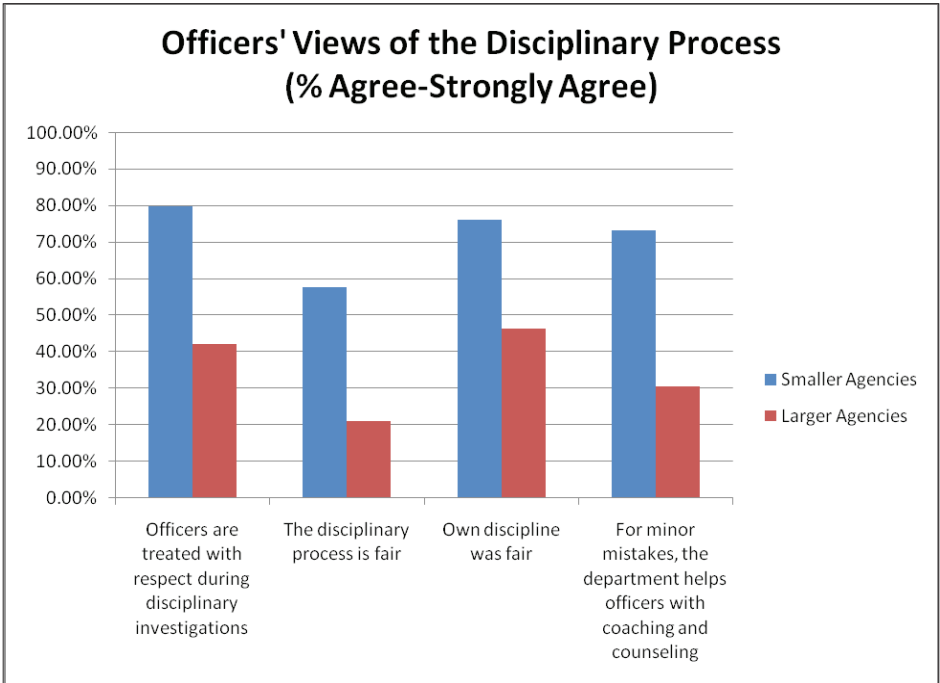
Systems of discipline in law enforcement have been a source of controversy for many decades. Too often all parties – officers, unions, administrators, and the public – are frustrated by the process. Understanding how employees view the disciplinary process may be an important indicator of organizational health and local police culture. If handled well, the disciplinary process is



an opportunity to encourage desired behaviors from police officers and over the longer term, build stronger police-community ties. But if not handled well, the process could undermine employee morale and erode organizational legitimacy with the public.

**Views of Disciplinary Process.** As part of the survey on Accountability, Ethics and Discipline, the Platform measured officers’ views of their agency’s disciplinary system and the possible effects of this system on employee behavior. Drawing on procedural justice theory, we examined whether officers feel they are treated with respect and whether the system is fair. As shown in Figure 4, there are sizeable differences between smaller and larger agencies. Nearly eight in 10 employees from smaller agencies (versus only four in 10 from larger agencies) feel that officers are treated with respect during disciplinary investigations. Similarly, 57.6 percent of employees in smaller agencies feel the disciplinary process is fair, while only 21.1 percent of employees from larger agencies see the system as fair. (Those who had direct experience with the discipline system are less critical, as shown in the figure). To some extent, the discipline issue in larger agencies may be due to a perceived failure to offer alternative informal mechanisms to address problem behaviors. In larger agencies, for example, only 30.6 percent felt that “For minor mistakes, the department helps officers with coaching and counseling,” while 73.1 percent felt this was true in smaller agencies.

Figure 4



**Consequences of Perceived Fairness.** Whether police officers perceive that the system of discipline is fair or unfair may affect their attitudes and behaviors on the job. Human factors research would suggest that employees who do not feel supported by supervisors or managers (e.g., view discipline as unfair, random, excessive) will be less committed to the agency and will work less hard to achieve departmental goals. Furthermore, procedural justice research would suggest that officers who feel the discipline system is unfair will be less likely to follow the rules themselves. The preliminary findings support these hypotheses. A Discipline Fairness Index was created from survey items in Figure 4. When this Index is split between High and Low Fairness scores, group membership predicts different attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Officers who gave their agency a high score (above the median) on the Discipline Fairness Index were more committed to making their department successful and placed greater value on departmental goals than officers who gave their agency a low score on the Discipline Fairness Index.

Similarly, employees from high-scoring agencies were less likely to feel it was necessary to break department rules in order to advance and were more satisfied with their current jobs than employees who rated their agency as less fair with discipline. With one exception (commitment to the department), perceived fairness of the disciplinary process was related to all outcomes in the same manner for both smaller and larger agencies. Since data from the Platform at present is cross-sectional we cannot determine if officers who thought their agency's discipline process was fair were more committed to make the agency better, or that those committed to improve their agency were more likely to view the discipline process as fair. We attempted to improve our understanding of the relationships by employing a regression analysis. In this analysis the discipline fairness index moderates the bivariate relationship between department size and outcome variables. Table 2 shows the relationship between several outcomes (survey statements) and predictor variables (listed under the survey statements). Results indicate that the fairness index is significantly related to all outcomes above and beyond the other variables in the analysis. Two other variables are found to be significant; race in the department goals analysis and supervisor status in the job satisfaction analysis. These findings indicate that minorities are slightly more likely to endorse department goals than whites and that supervisors report that they are more satisfied with their job than non-supervisors.

**Table 2. The Consequences of Fair and Unfair Discipline**

Survey Statements	Statistical Significance	
	Significant	Non-Significant
<b>I am strongly committed to making the department successful.</b>		
Fairness Index	X	
City Size		X
Race		X
Supervisor		X
Military		X
Gender		X
<b>The department's goals are important to me.</b>		
Fairness Index	X	
City Size		X
Race	X	
Supervisor		X
Military		X
Gender		X
<b>It is sometimes necessary to break department rules in order to advance.</b>		
Fairness Index	X	
City Size		X
Race		X
Supervisor		X
Military		X
Gender		X
<b>Rate your overall satisfaction with your current job. (% very satisfied)</b>		
Fairness Index	X	
City Size		X
Race		X
Supervisor	X	
Military		X
Gender		X

## Conclusions and Implications

The Platform was able to successfully measure employee perceptions of the fairness of agency discipline and whether people are treated respectfully during the process. These indicators could be useful for measuring organizational effectiveness in handling disciplinary matters. These data also underscore the importance of these indicators, as they correlate with morale, commitment to the goals of the organization, and attitudes toward rule violations. When employees do not view the discipline system as credible and fair, officers can become cynical and disengage, and a wide array of consequences may follow. Seeking alternatives to the current punitive system (e.g., restorative justice and conferencing) may be important to maintain organizational credibility both internally and externally.

This report illustrates how the Platform can increase our understanding of police integrity issues. This report describes how police officers from NPRP agencies view issues of police misconduct, personal responsibility, and departmental discipline. Overall the report paints a relatively positive picture of police officers who believe in personal responsibility for their actions and who feel their peers share their views of integrity and discipline. As the Platform grows and more officers participate in the surveys, we will have additional opportunities to address issues of police integrity.