

Cops on the make: officers' views on the nature and extent of police sexual misconduct and how to control it

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

This is an exploratory study that examines the nature, extent, causes and control of police sexual misconduct (PSM). The primary objectives of this work are to (1) identify hidden cases of PSM by exploring police officers' perceptions of the nature and frequency of such behavior (in its various forms), (2) identify factors that police officers believe facilitate sexual misconduct in policing, and (3) identify ways that this behavior might be better controlled. The data include three samples of police officers from four counties in the St. Louis, Missouri metropolitan area. The first sample consists of 40 police officers and employs survey and interview data. The second sample includes 20 police chiefs and used only interview data. The third sample consists of 20 female police officers; it also relies exclusively on interview data. Analysis of the data reveals that PSM involves both criminal and non-criminal behavior, that PSM is common (especially the less serious forms of such behavior), and that it receives organizational and cultural support. Implicated in the data are Cultural/Learning (Sutherland and Cressey, 1974) and Routine Activities (Cohen and Felson, 1978) theories.

PSM appears to be embedded in the larger social issue of service professionals misusing their power, authority, and trust to sexually exploit people under their care. The problem does not appear to be limited to individual cases of misconduct, but rather involve cultural support, as well as organizational denial, cover-up, and tolerance. Efforts to control PSM likely will require a strategy that involves an eclectic approach, which not only reduces the opportunity for PSM, but also increases the likelihood that officers who engage in such behavior will be identified and punished. Specific changes needed to control sexual misconduct among police officers are discussed, including those aimed at the police organizational structure and culture.