

Ethical Foundations for Strengthening Professional Conduct in Modern Policing Practices

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Abstract

Ethics plays a central role in shaping professional conduct and public trust in modern policing. As societal expectations evolve, police organizations face increasing pressure to behave transparently, uphold human rights, and maintain accountability. This study examines the ethical dimensions of policing through an analysis of decision-making models, institutional frameworks, and professional standards that influence officer behavior. Using a mixed-methods design, data were gathered from 62 semi-structured interviews with officers, community leaders, and legal experts, as well as document reviews of internal codes of conduct and oversight reports. Findings indicate that ethical awareness training reduces complaint rates by 27% and enhances officers' ability to exercise discretion proportionately during high-stakes encounters. Nevertheless, organizational culture, peer influence, and inconsistent disciplinary mechanisms remain significant barriers to ethical compliance. The study concludes that ethics must be embedded in recruitment, training, leadership, and accountability systems to build a resilient and trustworthy police institution. The research contributes to policing science by offering a structured ethical framework that integrates normative principles with operational realities.

Keywords: accountability; ethical policing; integrity; law enforcement; professional conduct

A. Introduction

Policing is an institution fundamentally built upon trust, legitimacy, and social responsibility. Unlike most professions, the police are granted extraordinary authority—such as the power to detain, search, and, under certain conditions, use force. These powers are justified only when they are exercised ethically, proportionately, and in alignment with democratic values. Ethics therefore forms the backbone of effective policing, shaping not only individual officer conduct but also institutional culture and public perceptions.

Historically, ethical considerations in policing were often subsumed under general notions of legality and discipline. However, contemporary social dynamics have expanded the expectations placed on law enforcement. Rapid information circulation through digital media exposes police misconduct instantly, intensifying public scrutiny and demanding greater transparency. Meanwhile, diverse communities expect officers to treat people fairly regardless of race, gender, religion, or socio-economic status. These factors underscore the necessity of a robust ethical foundation within policing.

Ethics in policing encompasses several dimensions. First, procedural justice highlights fairness in decision-making and interpersonal interaction. Research shows that individuals are more likely to comply with the law when they perceive police actions as respectful, neutral, and transparent. Second, integrity refers to an officer's ability to resist corruption, favoritism, and misuse of authority. Integrity failures not only harm individuals but also erode systemic legitimacy. Third, professional responsibility requires officers to perform their duties competently, avoiding negligence and ensuring public safety. Fourth, human rights principles obligate police to prevent discrimination, unnecessary force, and coercive practices.

Existing literature affirms the critical role ethics plays in public trust. Studies demonstrate correlations between ethical policing practices and reduced civilian complaints, fewer use-of-force incidents, and greater community cooperation. Ethical policing also contributes to officer well-being, as clear moral frameworks reduce role ambiguity and moral injury during difficult encounters. Nevertheless, ethical compliance is not solely a

matter of individual character. Structural determinants—such as organizational culture, training quality, supervisory leadership, and disciplinary mechanisms—profoundly influence officers' capacity and willingness to act ethically.

A major challenge lies in balancing enforcement responsibilities with ethical constraints. Police frequently operate under conditions of uncertainty, stress, and time pressure. They are expected to resolve dangerous situations while mitigating harm, protecting rights, and maintaining composure. Ethical decision-making models such as the PLUS model, the Recognize–Assess–Decide framework, and the Ethical Triangle provide guidance, yet their implementation in real-world scenarios depends heavily on training and institutional support.

Moreover, ethical dilemmas in policing have become more complex. The rise of digital tools, surveillance technologies, predictive analytics, and body-worn cameras creates new ethical considerations regarding data privacy, consent, proportionality, and algorithmic bias. Officers must navigate these challenges while adhering to human rights standards. Similarly, interactions with vulnerable populations—such as individuals with mental health issues, minors, and marginalized groups—demand heightened ethical sensitivity.

Oversight mechanisms also play a significant role in shaping ethical behavior. Internal affairs units, civilian review boards, and external auditing bodies exist to monitor conduct and address complaints. However, the effectiveness of such mechanisms varies across jurisdictions. In some cases, bureaucratic delays, inadequate transparency, and political interference undermine accountability. Without consistent enforcement of ethical standards, misconduct can persist despite formal regulations.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how ethical frameworks are integrated into policing practice. It explores the relationship between training, organizational culture, and officer decision-making, and identifies barriers to ethical compliance. Through a mixed-methods approach combining interviews, document analysis, and performance metrics, the research provides a comprehensive overview of the state of ethics in contemporary policing.

The objectives of this research are:

1. To assess the effectiveness of ethical training and codes of conduct in shaping officer behavior.
2. To analyze factors influencing ethical decision-making within police organizations.
3. To identify challenges to ethical governance and propose a structured framework for improvement.

Through this study, the aim is to contribute to the ongoing global discourse on policing reform and to offer evidence-based recommendations that enhance the professionalism, integrity, and legitimacy of police institutions.

B. METHODS

1. Research Design

A mixed-methods design was used to triangulate quantitative performance data with qualitative insights from practitioners and community members.

2. Data Collection

- Interviews: 62 participants including police officers, commanders, legal scholars, community leaders, and ethics trainers.
- Document Analysis: internal regulations, codes of ethics, complaint reports, training curricula.
- Quantitative Data: 5-year misconduct records, complaint statistics, and training participation logs.
- Observational Data: evaluations of simulated training sessions on ethical decision-making.

3. Instruments and Tools

- The Ethical Decision-Making Assessment Scale (EDMAS)
- Institutional Ethics Compliance Index (IECI)
- NVivo for thematic coding
- SPSS for regression and descriptive analysis

4. Analytical Framework

- Thematic qualitative analysis for recurring ethical dilemmas and institutional patterns.

- Multivariate statistical analysis examining relationships between ethics training and misconduct rates.
- Comparative organizational analysis evaluating differences among police units with varied training intensity.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Impact of Ethical Training on Officer Behavior

Analysis showed that units implementing structured ethical training experienced:

- 27% reduction in misconduct complaints,
- 19% decrease in excessive-force allegations, and
- higher compliance with supervisory directives.

Interviews revealed that officers felt more confident applying proportional decision-making after receiving scenario-based ethical training.

2. Ethical Decision-Making in Operational Environments

Ethical dilemmas frequently emerged during:

- high-stress arrests,
- domestic violence calls,
- interactions with vulnerable groups, and
- digital surveillance operations.

Officers highlighted time pressure and incomplete information as the main challenges. Nonetheless, those trained in conflict resolution reported better control over emotional impulses, reducing escalation.

3. Organizational Culture and Peer Influence

Culture strongly influenced ethical conduct. Units with supportive leadership showed higher integrity scores and fewer internal conflicts. Conversely, negative peer influence—“this is how we do things here”—often discouraged reporting of misconduct and promoted tolerance of ethical shortcuts.

4. Accountability Systems

Civilian review boards and independent oversight bodies improved transparency but struggled with limited authority or procedural delays in

some jurisdictions. Clearer disciplinary guidelines and faster investigations were identified as urgent necessities.

5. Technological and Digital Ethics

Officers expressed concerns about ethical constraints in the use of:

- body-worn cameras,
- facial recognition systems,
- predictive policing models
- digital data monitoring.

Without proper guidelines, the use of these tools risked infringing privacy or creating perceived bias. Ethical frameworks must therefore adapt to technological advancements.

D. CONCLUSION

Ethical policing is essential for maintaining legitimacy, protecting human rights, and ensuring professional integrity. This study demonstrates that structured ethical training, strong organizational leadership, transparent accountability mechanisms, and adaptive ethical frameworks significantly enhance officers' capacity to make sound decisions under pressure. Sustaining an ethical police force requires not only individual virtue but also institutional design that reinforces integrity at every organizational level. The framework proposed in this research contributes to the development of evidence-based ethical governance in policing and supports long-term improvements in public trust and safety.

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