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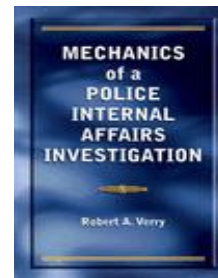
Internal Affairs | Harassment | Workplace Investigator

Robert is **not** a lawyer. If you need legal advice, please contact a lawyer. (^-Retired SBB-NJ)

Internal Affairs Professional Standards/Guidelines

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Police Cover-Up: Why Attempting to Conceal Policy Violations is Significantly Worse By Dr. Robert A. Verry (Chief-ret)¹

On n'a guère de défauts qui ne soient plus pardonnables que les moyens dont on se sert pour les cacher

In chapter one of my book, *Mechanics of a Police Internal Affairs Investigation*, I quote the above, in English, the 17th-century writer François de La Rochefoucauld (“La Rochefoucauld”) translated to mean, “*Almost all our faults are more pardonable than the methods we resort to hide them.*”

La Rochefoucauld’s 17th-century quote holds profound relevance for law enforcement, where integrity forms the foundation of police legitimacy. His saying perfectly captures why police departments consistently treat cover-up attempts more severely than original policy violations—officers who lie during internal investigations, file false reports, or engage in deception face termination, criminal prosecution, and Brady list placement that effectively ends their careers, while those who honestly acknowledge mistakes typically receive corrective training or short-term discipline. The attempt to conceal misconduct compounds the original offense and creates lasting damage to both individual careers and public trust that accepting responsibility for the initial violation would not have caused. In essence, La Rochefoucauld’s quote should remind law enforcement officers that transparency about their minor violations or performance deficiencies demonstrates integrity. At the same time, concealment reveals deeper character defects that prove far more destructive than the original faults.

Without question, in law enforcement, honesty and truthfulness represent the cornerstone of police legitimacy and public trust. When a police officer violates departmental policy, the way they subsequently handle the situation—whether through acceptance of responsibility or attempted concealment—dramatically affects both the severity of disciplinary consequences and the broader implications for police accountability.

When officers attempt to cover up policy violations rather than accepting responsibility, they effectively create multiple separate offenses. The original policy violation becomes compounded by additional misconduct, including dishonesty, obstruction, and potential perjury. Research

¹ This work was supported by OpenAI (comparable to Grammarly) for language, grammar, and punctuation editing and refinement.

demonstrates that police departments consistently view attempts to conceal misconduct as significantly more serious than the underlying violation itself.²

Police officers routinely provide testimony in criminal proceedings, and their credibility is essential to the criminal justice system. When officers engage in dishonesty—whether through false reports, perjury, or cover-up attempts—they compromise their ability to serve as credible witnesses in future cases. This creates what legal scholars term “Brady implications” (also commonly referred to as “Brady Violations”), where officers with histories of dishonesty may be subject to impeachment or disclosure requirements that can effectively end their careers. Law enforcement agencies emphasize that truthfulness is a fundamental requirement for continued employment. Police ethics codes consistently identify honesty as a non-negotiable professional standard. Officers who attempt cover-ups violate these core ethical principles in ways that accepting responsibility for the original violation would not.

Internal Affairs Investigation Findings

Studies of police internal affairs processes reveal that officers who are dishonest during investigations face significantly harsher penalties than those who acknowledge their mistakes.^{1,3} Body-worn camera implementation has made this disparity even more pronounced, as technological evidence makes cover-up attempts more detectable and their consequences more severe.²

Research analyzing police misconduct cases shows that officers who admit to policy violations and cooperate with investigations typically receive corrective training, short-term suspensions, or other remedial measures. In contrast, officers who attempt cover-ups through false statements or report manipulation face termination, criminal prosecution, or permanent placement on Brady disclosure lists.^{2,4}

Erosion of Public Trust

When officers engage in cover-up attempts, they contribute to broader public skepticism about police accountability. Research demonstrates that communities are more willing to maintain trust in law enforcement when officers acknowledge mistakes rather than attempting concealment.⁵

² Police ethics and integrity: Keeping the ‘blue code’ of silence
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1461355720947762>; Strategies in Police Integrity Enhancement: A Comprehensive Literature Review <https://journal.budiluhur.ac.id/index.php/deviance/article/download/2376/1404>

³ Body-Worn Cameras and Adjudication of Citizen Complaints of Police Misconduct
<https://www.crimrxiv.com/pub/8mun93u>

⁴ A machine learning analysis of misconduct in the New York Police Department
<http://www.emerald.com/pijpsm/article/44/5/800-817/452545>

⁵ The Politics of Police Data: State Legislative Capacity and the Transparency of State and Substate Agencies
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/EEAFC141FC36FDD2F699EFADA934216F/S0003055422000624a.pdf/div-class-title-the-politics-of-police-data-state-legislative-capacity-and-the-transparency-of-state-and-substate-agencies-div.pdf>; Public trust on the integrity of Royal Malaysia Police: better or worse <https://www.spiedigitallibrary.org/conference-proceedings-of-spice/12936/3011772/Public-trust-on-the-integrity-of-Royal-Malaysia-Police/10.1117/12.3011772.full>

The transparency associated with accepting responsibility helps maintain legitimacy, while cover-ups fuel perceptions of institutional corruption.⁶

Integrity Concerns

Law enforcement agencies understand that efforts to conceal wrongdoing jeopardize organizational integrity more than individual policy breaches do. When officers falsify information or hide misconduct, they generate systemic dangers that can affect entire investigations, hinder prosecutorial efforts, and harm departmental integrity. Officers involved in dishonest behavior, such as attempts to conceal actions, might be added to Brady lists that mandate prosecutors to inform defense attorneys about their credibility problems. This essentially terminates an officer's capacity to testify in criminal matters, rendering them unsuitable for employment in law enforcement.

While violations of the policy usually lead to administrative penalties, efforts to conceal them may result in criminal charges such as perjury, obstruction of justice, and submitting false reports. These consequences far exceed those associated with acknowledging the original violation.⁷

An individual's integrity needs to be demonstrated long before they are hired or sworn in. Those fortunate enough to be accepted into the police academy must commit to upholding that integrity throughout their entire career. As an example, from day one, police recruits are routinely tested on material presented by academy instructors. Depending on the subject, like Use-of-Force, the recruit must achieve a 100% passing score to remain in the academy. Due to the significance of these examinations, they are securely stored and kept confidential until the time of testing. Any access to an exam—whether intentional, accidental, or by coincidence—constitutes a serious breach of integrity and must be immediately reported to the academy administration. This obligation extends not only to the individual who gains access but also to any recruit who becomes aware that a peer has obtained such access, thereby requiring prompt notification to academy staff. Utilizing exam materials or failing or refusing to report a colleague found in possession of such materials reasonably constitutes grounds for expulsion from the academy and will likely disqualify the expelled recruit(s) from ever obtaining licensure. Therefore, the act of concealing such misconduct is equally serious—if not more so—than the actions of the individual who obtained and used the exam to cheat. A recruit who cheats on an exam that requires a 100% passing rate will lack the essential knowledge necessary to perform effectively in the field when engaging with the public. Moreover, the recruit who fails or refuses to report the breach implicitly accepts—and thereby enables—an academy graduate to be actively on patrol, interacting with the public without the requisite knowledge and skills to perform their duties.

Career Impact

⁶ Enhancing police integrity by exploring causes of police corruption
http://www.growingscience.com/msl/Vol11/msl_2021_6.pdf; Bad Apples or a Rotten Orchard: Detroit Police Culture and its Protection of Corruption <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/rushton/vol1/iss1/6/>

⁷ Laundering Police Lies <https://repository.law.wisc.edu/s/uwlaw/ark:/86871/w1165617s>

Research indicates that officers who admit to policy violations, excluding those related to false declarations or fraudulent reports, typically retain their positions with appropriate consequences. At the same time, those who conceal their actions face termination and long-lasting challenges in the field of law enforcement.⁸ Police departments increasingly emphasize cultures of learning and accountability rather than punishment-focused approaches to misconduct. Officers who are honest about their mistakes maintain credibility with supervisors and colleagues, enabling continued professional development and career advancement. Cover-up attempts destroy internal trust relationships and can lead to isolation within the department.⁹

Early Intervention Programs

Law enforcement agencies should adopt early intervention systems that encourage self-reporting of policy breaches and clearly outline the repercussions for dishonest actions. These programs can help officers understand that taking responsibility often leads to corrective actions rather than punitive ones. Consistent training must highlight the career-ending repercussions of dishonesty versus the usually manageable results of admitting policy breaches. Officers must recognize that attempts to conceal issues elevate trivial administrative problems into significant professional crises.

Transparency in Disciplinary Processes

Departments must uphold transparent disciplinary processes that clearly distinguish between the treatment of officers who take responsibility and those who attempt to conceal their actions. This openness fosters cultural standards that deter efforts to hide information. Police officers who try to conceal policy breaches experience significantly harsher repercussions than those who own up to their behavior. Studies consistently show that integrity and responsibility are essential for law enforcement officers, and efforts to hide wrongdoing only worsen the initial crime, jeopardizing the officer's career, the department's credibility, and public confidence in policing. Grasping this reality is crucial for developing accountability frameworks that promote transparency while preserving efficient law enforcement actions.

⁸ Strategies in Police Integrity Enhancement: A Comprehensive Literature Review <https://journal.budiluhur.ac.id/index.php/deviance/article/download/2376/1404>; Body-Worn Cameras and Adjudication of Citizen Complaints of Police Misconduct <https://www.crimrxiv.com/pub/8mun93u>; A machine learning analysis of misconduct in the New York Police Department <http://www.emerald.com/pijpsm/article/44/5/800-817/452545>

⁹ Strategies in Police Integrity Enhancement: A Comprehensive Literature Review <https://journal.budiluhur.ac.id/index.php/deviance/article/download/2376/1404>; Identifying misconduct-committing officer crews in the Chicago police department <https://dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0267217>