

Collapsing the canteen: Empowering and encouraging police officers to report sexual misconduct among their colleagues

Investigating the barriers among police colleagues when it comes to reporting sexual misconduct and how the topic is addressed in training.

Key details

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Police region	South East
Level of research	PhD
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Research context

An investigative article exposed that over the past five years, 800 police officers faced reports of rape and sexual assault, resulting in only ten convictions, with 350 officers still active (Hague and Jones 2023). A broader analysis of thirty police forces in England and Wales revealed sexual misconduct across various ranks, including constables engaging in relationships with crime victims and higher-ranked officers involved in sexual bullying towards juniors (Sweeting and others 2020).

Baroness Casey's review emphasised significant shortcomings in the Metropolitan Police, attributing them to poor management (Casey 2023). The inefficiency of current disciplinary processes for officer misconduct raises serious concerns about the existence of the 'blue wall of

silence' — a phenomenon suggesting a pervasive pattern of deception and truth withholding within the police, creating a ritual cover-up for their colleagues (Wieslander 2018). This culture not only enables perpetrators but also instils fear in potential whistle-blowers. Furthermore, the identified impediments to reporting police corruption and misconduct, notably loyalty to colleagues and fear of reprisals, compound the issue (Maher 2003, Westmarland and Conway 2020).

Waddington's (1999) concept of 'canteen culture' emphasises how officers' discretion, often divorced from legal precepts, contributes to the gap between policy and practice. This organisational subculture, guided by informal norms, may play a crucial role in sustaining the 'blue wall of silence' and hindering the reporting of misconduct, including sexual misconduct.

Social identity theory proposes that this 'canteen culture' forms as officers favour their in-group, leading to reluctance in reporting misconduct to maintain police affiliation. Social power theory suggests that interpersonal contexts can exert social influence, changing attitudes and behaviour. When these changes become widespread, organisational deviance emerges.

Research methodology

The research addresses the following key questions:

1. How does the organizational 'canteen' subculture, as described by Waddington (1999), significantly impact sexual misconduct identification and reporting?
 - Anonymous survey to collect data on the prevalence of sexual misconduct and perceived barriers to reporting within the police force.
 - In-depth interviews with current and former police officers and staff to gain qualitative insights into the police culture -related aspects.
2. In what ways can the organisational aspects of police culture be modified or reformed to create an environment that discourages sexual misconduct and encourages the reporting of such incidents?
 - Thematic analysis of case studies to analyse the interaction between police culture and the handling of sexual misconduct cases
 - Examine existing design and implementation of training programmes which adhere to the Police (Conduct) Regulations, specifically relating to sexual misconduct within police

organisations.

References

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Sweeting F, Arabaci-Hills P and Cole, T. (2020). '[Outcomes of police sexual misconduct in the UK](#)'. Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice, 15(2), pp 1339–1351

Waddington PAJ. (1999). '[Police \(canteen\) sub-culture: An appreciation](#)'. The British Journal of Criminology, 39(2), pp 287–309

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Wieslander M. (2018). '[Learning the \(hidden\) silence policy within the police](#)'. Studies in Continuing Education, 41(3), pp 308–325

Research participation

Police forces with an interest in the research are invited to take part in the [online survey](#).