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Research Brief One-Sheet No.3: Police Drug Corruption: What are the Drugs of Choice?

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Philip M. Stinson, Sr., John Liederbach, Steven Brewer, Hans Schmalzried, Brooke E. Mathna, & Krista Long

Background

Police scandals during the 1980s and 90s exposed dramatic cases of drug-related corruption in a number of large American cities. The scandals in New York City culminated in the establishment of the Mollen Commission which focused on the investigation of corruption within the New York City Police Department (NYPD). The two year investigation identified a nexus between police misconduct and the operation of local drug markets, in particular cocaine and crack. A handful of scholarly studies from the same period provide the basis for most of our knowledge on the problem of drug-related police corruption. Data from these studies are primarily qualitative and/or difficult to generalize because they are derived from a single or small number of local police agencies (*see e.g.*, Carter, 1990; Carter and Stephens, 1994; Kraska and Kappeler, 1988).

The purpose of our study is to provide contemporary empirical data on drug-related corruption that augments the comparatively short line of existing research on the topic, and to describe the various forms of drug-related corruption as the phenomenon occurs in police agencies across the United States. Our research identifies and describes incidents in which police were arrested for criminal offenses associated with drug-related corruption through content analyses of published newspaper articles.

Methods

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger study on police crime. The primary information source was the internet-based Google News search engine and its Google Alerts email update service. The research team located and printed news articles identified through these applications, examined them for relevancy, and archived them for subsequent analyses. Coding initially involved the identification of drug-related cases within the larger data set on police crime. These cases were identified using Stinson's (2009) typology of police crime. The typology includes five broad categories of police crime, including crimes that are drug-related. Additional content analyses were conducted in order to code the cases in terms of the: (a) arrested officer, (b) employing agency, (c) charged offense(s), (d) specific drugs, (e) the nature of the underlying misconduct, and (f) employment outcomes and criminal case dispositions. Statistical analyses included classification tree analysis intended to uncover causal pathways between the types of drugs involved and the various forms of drug-related police corruption.

Findings

The news searches identified 221 cases of drug-related corruption. The most serious offense charged was a specific drug/narcotics offense (drug trafficking and/or use) in just over 44% of the cases. The most serious offense charged in more than one-half the cases was *more* serious than drug/narcotics offenses, including cases that involved robbery, rape, aggravated assault, burglary, and thefts. More than one-half the cases involved stimulants, and cocaine was the most prevalent specific drug.

Marijuana was the second most prevalent drug. More than one specific drug was identified in 33% of the cases.

The most recurrent pattern of drug-related corruption was drug trafficking. Police were found to have been selling/dealing drugs in about one-half of the cases. The second most prevalent pattern was thefts/shakedowns, most commonly warrantless searches/seizures and the shakedown of drug dealers. Classification trees were utilized to identify causal pathways between the types of drugs involved and the various forms of drug-related police corruption. Cocaine was the strongest predictor for five of six decision trees where specific drugs were the independent variables. The models that examined various forms of theft/shakedown had the highest levels of predictive power. Significant predictors of job loss (*i.e.*, termination and/or resignation) included drug crime charge, duty status, officer age, and agency size.

Implications

The study demonstrates that forms of drug-related corruption including the use of drugs, trafficking, shakedowns and other types of crimes are perpetrated by police in all types of agencies. The data also corroborate the notion that drug-related corruption—wherever it occurs—tends to instigate the perpetration of a wide range of crimes by police. Likewise, cocaine and crack impact drug-related corruption in ways similar to those described by the Mollen Commission. Specifically, the presence of cocaine was the most predictive variable in five of the six patterns of corruption examined. The models suggest that the presence of cocaine is likely in cases involving various forms of theft/shakedown, drug use, and drug trafficking.

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