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# Ethics Training in Law Enforcement Agencies

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## Abstract

Professional organizations in the law enforcement community have brought attention to the importance of ethics training. Many police chiefs believe that it reinforces the mission of the organization, adherence to policy and procedures, and the ability to resolve moral dilemmas. This article examines ethics training among police chiefs throughout the United States. The frequency of training, content, and instruction, as well as perceptions of the value of ethics training, are addressed. Results indicate that preservice ethics training among recruits is typically four hours or less. The content of instruction includes a variety of tools representing a student-centered approach. There is a perception among chiefs that ethics instruction is worthwhile and should be offered throughout an officer's career regardless of rank.

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Ethics training in law enforcement has received considerable attention for a variety of reasons. First, many police departments are participating in voluntary accreditation through standards set by the Commission of Accreditation in Law Enforcement Associations, and ethics is often included as a component of required training. Second, organizations such as the National Institute of Ethics benefit by promoting the need for ethics training in law enforcement. Third, police departments experiencing incidents where officers have violated organizational policy, have been accused of excessive use of force, or have engaged in questionable conduct want to prevent further damage and future incidents. Finally, the administrators of many police agencies believe that ethics training reinforces the mission of the organization and adherence to policy and procedures, and enhances the ability to resolve moral dilemmas.

This article examines ethics training among a sample of law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. The frequency, administration of training, content, and instruction, as well as perceptions of the value of ethics training, are addressed.

## Ethics Training in Law Enforcement

Ethics training is essential for law enforcement personnel due to the nature of the position and the potential for liability. As public servants, law enforcement officers are held to a higher standard—when officers behave unethically, it is a violation of the public trust and damages the image of law enforcement everywhere. Numerous civil lawsuits have been filed against police agencies as the result of unethical conduct (Trautman 2000). The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *City of Canton, Ohio v. Harris*, 489 U.S. 378 (1989), that cities can be held liable when it is demonstrated that failure to provide training is a factor that resulted in the violation of a citizen's constitutional rights. Many professionals and organizations in the law enforcement community hold that ethics training bridges the gap between written policies and actual behavior by introducing or reinforcing rules and expectations of behavior. Ethics instruction exposes officers to ethical dilemmas and scenarios through training prior to “hitting the streets” or moving up in rank.

Ethics training in the law enforcement community gained considerable attention in the mid-1990s when the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) established an Ad Hoc Committee on Police Image and Ethics. The committee noted that several factors, such as increased litigation, professional and personal destruction, public perception, and even suicide among officers, necessitated this kind of training in law enforcement. Based upon a needs assessment conducted by an independent consultant, the IACP offered several recommendations, including: providing job-specific ethics instruction for all ranks and throughout an officer's career; improving instructional content by incorporating decision-making models, discussing values, and critical thinking exercises; and developing appropriate training styles by utilizing adult-learning models (Gaffigan and McDonald 1997). Community leaders, police chiefs, and officers met in Washington, D.C., in 1996 at the National Symposium on Police Integrity to address issues of ethics. The symposium recommended a national workshop facilitated by representatives from the premier law enforcement leadership programs to address an ethics curriculum for training programs for both preservice recruits and in-service officers. The symposium also recommended the identification of best practices among law enforcement agencies to develop, maintain, and address issues of integrity (Gaffigan and McDonald 1997).

Ethics training has been identified as one of three critical components of the “Shared Responsibility” technique to improving standards in law enforcement agencies. Patricia Robinson (2004) refers to the Shared Responsibility technique as “the next step in professional ethics” and describes this method as including a focus on prevention and leading by example, in addition to the larger component of providing education. One should not expect officers to step into the role of ethical behavior without having appropriate training, just as one should not expect them to automatically know how to perform a technical task. Therefore, training must include scenario-based activities and include officers at all ranks. These real-life examples help officers understand how to respond to dilemmas and enable supervisors to better distinguish between insubordination and legitimate intervention in a challenging situation (Robinson 2004).

Following a similar line, Paul Whisenand (2009, 59) identifies three important components of ethics training: inspiration, collaboration, and education. Inspiration may be fostered through leadership by example, value orientation, and limitations

of laws and regulations. Leadership by example is important because subordinates pay attention to the actions of leaders and model their own behavior accordingly. Value orientation is the process of establishing an ethical culture and making sure the members of the organization understand the rules associated with the culture. Whisenand (2009) believes that organization personnel should be taught that the law is limited, and it is not enough to follow the letter of the law; one must also abide by the spirit of the law. As a secondary component of the limitations of laws, there is too much reliance on rules and regulations that describe restricted and required behaviors. These should be replaced with learned ethical values, behavior that extends to the higher purpose of the law and not the regulation itself. Whisenand (2009) notes that law enforcement agencies often view ethics instruction as a single training block, when it should be continually reinforced through the three components. In addition, ethics instruction should avoid the lecture approach, which is the typical method of delivery, and emphasize small group discussions. These discussions should focus on group decisions, not the motivations that led to them.

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### *Frequency and Administration of Training*

Most states typically require that law enforcement personnel have some exposure to the subject of ethics during their preservice academy training. The literature indicates that there is significant variation in the length of preservice academy training, ranging from twelve to twenty-six weeks. However, little time is devoted to ethics training—typically two to four hours (Delattre 2006; Gaffigan and McDonald 1997; Kleinig 1996; Marion 1998). According to Johnson and Cox, the proper placement of ethics training in the preservice academy has also been an issue for decades:

Where to place ethics in the curricula has been an ongoing discussion since at least 1970. There are two problems to this. First, by the time ethics training is presented, the officers have already, for the most part, been indoctrinated into the manner in which the department wishes them to act. Second, if and when ethics instruction occurs, cadets are not listening to the lecture because of fatigue from a long training period filled with numerous activities. (2004, 73)

In comparison to preservice academy training, the subject of ethics receives even less attention during in-service instruction. Neal Trautman asserts, “Virtually none of the 17,000 agencies across the nation provided any in-service ethics training” (2000, 22). When in-service instruction is offered, it is often narrowly focused on executive development. A few practitioners and scholars in the field of law enforcement have attempted to increase awareness of the importance of ethics instruction throughout a police officer’s career. For example, Trautman (2000) demonstrates that the emphasis on preservice ethics training and later in-service ethics instruction at the executive level misses a critical mass of officers who are likely to experience ethical quandaries mid-career rather than as a rookie or a senior officer. Similarly, Prevost and Trautman (2008) note that the most often overlooked group to receive

ethics instruction are the supervisors and leaders of an organization. They suggest that leader education should include additional information on identifying and addressing unethical behavior, and they encourage early intervention. Sharon Chamberlin (1998) contends that reinforcement of ethics can only occur through repeated exposure to the subject and that ethics training should be as consistent and as frequent as firearms training. The 1997 IACP needs assessment also recommended continuous in-service training to reinforce ethics. In addition, the U.S. Department of Justice (2001) listed integrity and ethics among the subjects that should be included in preservice academy training and covered on a regular basis for in-service instruction.

### *Content and Instruction*

Several studies have demonstrated that traditional pedagogical approaches are ineffective for developing moral reasoning skills and ethical responses among law-enforcement personnel (Birzer 2002; Chamberlin 1998; Morgan, Morgan, Foster, and Kolbert 2000). The IACP Ad Hoc Committee on Police Image and Ethics recommended the development of appropriate educational styles that utilize principles of adult learning that incorporate decision-making models to address ethical dilemmas (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1997). The traditional approach follows a lecture format with the instructor as the expert transmitting information to the student. In comparison, the andragogical approach, which focuses on the needs of adult learners, emphasizes mutual involvement and incorporates experiential learning and problem-solving activities that allow the instructor to identify individual needs (Birzer 2002; Marenin 2004). The andragogical approach developed by Malcolm Knowles (1984) is considered the most appropriate method to teach ethics to recruits and in-service officers because it emphasizes self-directed learning, values the experience of participants, and makes the material relevant to current or future responsibilities (Birzer 2002; VanSlyke 2007). This method might include video simulations of ethical dilemmas, ethical discussions relevant to the topic of each class topic presented, and role-playing scenarios (Prevost and Trautman 2008).

The content of instruction also ranges from the applied to the theoretical, often with a combination of the two. While philosophical theories such as virtue ethics, the categorical imperative, and utilitarianism are sometimes addressed, there tends to be a preference for the applied (codes of ethics, organizational policies, and law). There is a general consensus that codes of conduct provide basic information about expectations of ethical behavior, and some contend that codes provide a system of moral support (VanSlyke 2007). Nevertheless, several scholars and practitioners have pointed out the advantages of incorporating philosophical foundations into training. The focus among police academies on rules and regulations fails to provide a “true understanding of ethics and professionalism” (Johnson and Cox 2004, 72). Similarly, Sharon Chamberlin (1998, 25) contends that interpretation of ethical issues as adherence to rules is of limited use in helping officers resolve dilemmas that fall into gray areas not addressed by agency policy. Instead, she advocates John Rohr’s (1978) concept of “high-road ethics,” which emphasizes values and moral principles. Overall, philosophical theories allow one to develop a framework to interpret and respond.

In making their argument to emphasize values and moral principals, Chamberlin and Rohr follow the path suggested many centuries ago by Socrates. Derek Bok

(1987) writes that there was a great disagreement in ancient Greece about the best form of preparing the youth to make ethical decisions and meet civil responsibilities. Socrates argued for lessons that would teach students to reason through the issues they might encounter in life. This position was based on the belief that rules or guidelines cannot be created for every possible circumstance. Therefore, education in ethical behavior should include lessons in reasoning that lead to appropriate decisions and outcomes. Aristotle, Bok contends, took a mixed approach, providing lessons that blended the development of reasoning skills with admonitions about good behavior and following the rules.

The challenge for instructors of law enforcement ethics is to balance theory with practical application. Seasoned trainers are attentive to the needs of adult learners and use a variety of student-centered instructional tools, such as videos, case studies, and personality assessments. The case study is an especially useful tool for an andragogical approach because it promotes critical analysis and discussion among participants. Student-generated dilemmas are also a valuable strategy. Participants submit dilemmas that are grouped together into similar categories, such as discretion, duty, honesty, and loyalty (Birzer 2002; Pollock and Becker 1995; VanSlyke 2007). Frameworks such as religious ethics, natural law, ethical formalism, utilitarianism, and ethics of care are then used to analyze them. The advantage of this approach is that it combines applied and theoretical perspectives. The use of theoretical perspectives in the absence of real-world applications leaves participants wondering about the relevance of the material to their position. The use of applied perspectives in the absence of critical analysis and broader reflection leaves participants paralyzed when confronted with a dilemma not addressed by organizational policy.

### *Perception of Value*

Others contend that ethics training has not been effective because it targets the wrong audience or is focused on the wrong subject and strategy. Trautman (2000) found that the average officer who had lost state certification as a law enforcement officer had five to ten years' experience—neither a rookie nor an executive-level officer. Because ethics training tends to focus on preservice recruits or senior executive officers, mid-career officers are neglected. The emphasis on ethical dilemmas and theoretical perspectives in training misses the mark because character development is neglected. Delattre argues that even if courses were in-depth and comprehensive enough to develop scholars of ethical theory, the individuals taking the courses might still lack good character:

Few common moral failing and failures stem from inept reasoning about dilemmas. Many more arise from moral indifference, disregard for other people, weakness of will, and bad or self-indulgent habits. Otherwise, every philosopher who is good at moral reasoning, and every student of ethics would be a person of excellent character. This is simply not the case. (2006, 149)

Delattre contends that pre-employment screening is a more effective approach, including the use of the polygraph. The polygraph should also be used as an ethics tool after the selection process. Many officials, particularly in the federal service, oppose the use of the polygraph because it cannot be used in court against defendants

in criminal trials. Delattre maintains that the main objection in criminal trials—that the defendant cannot be compelled to submit—is set aside in selection and career screening because the candidate for a law enforcement position can opt to not take the polygraph and the career officer can resign.

Some critics suggest that Delattre (2006) takes a deterministic view of ethics in law enforcement. His argument very nearly comes down to the view that one is either of good or bad character and that training has little to do with changing or preventing unethical behavior. However, one could also view his writings as deterministic of law enforcement recruiting and screening efforts. He observes that recruits increasingly demonstrate undesirable characteristics and reminds the reader that everyone passes through a developmental process during the young adult years. One could argue that this, contrary to the view that he discounts the value of instruction, supports ethics instruction in the early years of one's career. In fact, a thorough reading of his work hints at another contradiction to a fatalistic view. In his discussion of the faults found in the actions of gang-enforcement units, Delattre (2006) argues that academy instruction fails to provide officers with the proper way to gather intelligence and handle informants to help them develop a model of integrity needed to perform those tasks.

## Ethics Training Survey

To explore in greater depth the type and character of training, a questionnaire was developed to examine frequency, content, and perception of ethics training. The questionnaire was pilot-tested among senior police officers at a training academy in a mid-Atlantic state. An on-line version of the survey was later developed and posted on SurveyMonkey. The U.S. Census Bureau's *County and City Data Book* (2000) was used as a sampling frame to identify city police departments that serve populations between 100,000 and 500,000. A purposive sample was then used to identify and select 100 police departments throughout the United States that met the population-size criterion.<sup>1</sup>

Once the sample was established, it was necessary to obtain e-mail addresses for the chiefs of police. E-mails were sent to 100 chiefs during the summer of 2008. Follow-up reminders were also sent out. Six police chiefs opted out of the survey, thirty-four responded. Although an average response rate has yet to be established for on-line surveys, reasonable response rates for mail surveys average between 20 and 40 percent with a follow-up (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 2000, 207). Other recent studies in law enforcement ethics have resulted in moderate to low response rates. Although Trautman (2000) used a large sample size for the IACP needs assessment and his study on law enforcement ethics, the response rate was only 18 percent. Regardless, the response rate in the present study is a limitation that requires that the findings be interpreted with caution. Readers should also interpret the results in relation to existing literature and experience within their own agencies.

## Findings

The findings reported here address frequency and administration of training, content and instructional strategies, and perceptions of the value of training. With respect to



frequency and administration of training, the survey included questions on the extent to which ethics training was voluntary or mandatory among preservice and in-service personnel, the typical length of instruction, the organization responsible for delivering training, and the location of training. As expected, more chiefs reported ethics training as a preservice requirement than an in-service requirement. Twenty-four reported that ethics instruction is offered as a preservice requirement during academy training. In comparison, fewer departments ( $n = 14$ ) mandate ethics instruction as an in-service requirement. Six chiefs reported that although ethics instruction is not mandated as an in-service requirement, it is offered as an optional training block to fulfill in-service requirements. Surprisingly, only 7 percent of departments require officers who have received infractions for misconduct or policy violations to attend ethics training.

Among those departments that require ethics training in the academy as a preservice requirement, most indicated that the instructional component lasted half a day or less ( $n = 16$ ), while a few departments required one full day of ethics training ( $n = 4$ ). However, two departments report that one week of ethics training is required as part of the preservice academy training. Similarly, among the departments that offer ethics training as an optional block to fulfill in-service requirements, seven spend a half a day or less on the subject. Among the written comments, several chiefs indicated that in-service ethics instruction was provided periodically every few years. One chief indicated that the first in-service training of the year typically addressed ethics, and another reported that the city also provides annual ethics instruction. One chief indicated that in-service ethics instruction is mandatory for new field-training officers. However, supplemental classes outside the organization were also provided to sergeants, detectives, lieutenants, and executive-level managers. The comments below, taken from responses to the survey, support the call for ethics instruction as a continuous process.

Respondent 1: Ethics training should be a constant in officer training in any department. It encourages officers to discuss unethical and ethical behavior and allows the department to reinforce its expectations that officers will act accordingly.

Respondent 2: Ethics cannot be just another training block. It has to be embraced and practiced by the organization at all levels, or the training becomes a waste of time.

Agencies often use a combination of delivery mechanisms to provide ethics training. Nevertheless, in-house development and delivery was used most frequently ( $n = 25$ ). The chiefs also reported that their agencies used state criminal justice organizations ( $n = 6$ ), colleges or universities ( $n = 3$ ), and private consultants ( $n = 9$ ). Although it may appear that the location of training does not coincide with organizations that deliver the training, it is important to point out that many organizations, including colleges and universities, are willing to provide instruction on-site. Although all training is provided in the traditional face-to-face format, two chiefs commented that in-service ethics instruction in their organization was moving in the direction of an on-line format (see Table 1).

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**TABLE 1**  
**Delivery and Location of Training ( $n = 34$ )**

<i>Organization that delivers ethics training (check all that apply)</i>		
Developed and delivered in-house	25	(89%)
State criminal justice organization	6	(21%)
College or university	3	(11%)
Private organization or consultant	9	(32%)
<i>Location of training</i>		
Police department	20	(71%)
College or university	1	(4%)
Regional police academy	7	(25%)
On-line	0	
Videoconferencing	0	
Missing (not included in % count)	6	

### *Content and Instruction*

The survey included questions about philosophical theories, practical applications, and instructional methods used to teach ethics. Most departments reported the use of traditional philosophic theories, such as Aristotle's virtue ethics ( $n = 13$ ), Kant's categorical imperative ( $n = 11$ ), and Bentham's utilitarianism ( $n = 5$ ). One chief reported that the department also addresses Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development. A few chiefs commented that philosophical theory is not addressed. Typical course materials that address practical applications of ethics included copies of the law enforcement code of ethics ( $n = 24$ ), copies of the agency's mission and values statements ( $n = 24$ ), ethical decision-making models ( $n = 22$ ), and rules and regulations via the agency's operational and procedural handbooks ( $n = 12$ ). Materials used less frequently included legal cases ( $n = 10$ ), journal or magazine articles ( $n = 8$ ), and textbooks ( $n = 6$ ).

The instructional tools typically used in ethics courses included case studies ( $n = 22$ ) and videos ( $n = 17$ ). As expected, most respondents addressed a variety of issues that officers need to be aware of, including off-duty conduct ( $n = 25$ ), falsifying statements/reports ( $n = 23$ ), excessive use of force ( $n = 23$ ), use of position of authority for private gain ( $n = 23$ ), failure to report employee misconduct ( $n = 23$ ), providing false testimony in court ( $n = 22$ ), accepting gifts or gratuities ( $n = 21$ ), and using property of the police department for private purposes ( $n = 16$ ).

### *Perception of the Value of the Training*

Chiefs were asked whether they believed that participants learned something new and whether ethics training reinforced organizational policies and reduced the number of infractions. The majority reported that training reinforces written policies of the organization ( $n = 28$ ). The chiefs were also of the view that training promotes discussion of ethical issues ( $n = 25$ ) and helps officers to recognize ethical issues as they arise ( $n = 23$ ). Ethics instruction was also perceived to reduce infractions among officers ( $n = 18$ ) and make officers more willing to report unethical behavior ( $n = 18$ ) (see Table 2). One chief commented that officers gain an appreciation of the



**TABLE 2**  
**Perception of Ethics Training**

	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
Community expectations of police officers may be reinforced through ethics training	58.6% (17)	31% (9)	10.3 % (3)	0	0
Field-training officers are primary influence in developing ethical behavior of police officers	51.7% (15)	34.5% (10)	6.9% (2)	6.9% (2)	0
Ethics training reinforces positive behavior	55.2% (16)	41.4% (12)	3.4% (1)	0	0
Ethics training should be provided throughout one's career	69% (20)	27.6 (8)	3.4% (1)	0	0
Ethics training reinforces value and mission of organization	58.6% (17)	34.5% (10)	6.9% (2)	0	0
Ethics training should only be provided during entry-level training	6.9% (2)	3.4% (1)	3.4% (1)	44.8% (13)	41.4% (12)

*N* = 34, response count = 29.

organization's expectations. Although most chiefs held positive perceptions toward training, one chief was more skeptical.

Respondent 3: By and large, people bring the moral and ethical values into the workplace, and law enforcement is no different. Providing the training merely allows the agency to keep the subject of ethical behavior on the surface. The training will not, in my opinion, markedly change the behavior of attendees, either positively or negatively.

## Conclusion

There has been a call for greater attention to ethics training among law enforcement personnel since the IACP Committee on Police Image and Ethics and the National Symposium on Police Integrity in the mid-1990s. Regardless of the call, the results of this study are consistent with Trautman's research (2000), which demonstrated that ethics instruction is only a small segment of preservice training. In contrast, in-service ethics instruction appears to be increasing as an option to satisfy in-service training requirements. This provides evidence that some agencies are following the recommendations of the IACP Ad Hoc Committee on Police Image and Ethics by emphasizing the importance of ethics instruction throughout an officer's career.

The committee also recommended improving content by developing appropriate training styles, and this study provides some evidence that agencies are following its recommendations. The andragogical method, codes of ethics, ethical decision-making models, and the case study approach were reported as the preferred strategies for instruction.

Results of this research are also consistent with the literature supporting the view that the law enforcement community perceives ethics training as a worthwhile endeavor that should be offered on a continuous basis to all ranks within the organization. The majority of the chiefs believe that community expectations of officers may be reinforced through ethics training, and that such instruction promotes positive behavior and reinforces the value and mission of the organization. Nevertheless,

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***Coupling better recruitment and screening with more effective programs should increase the overall effectiveness of departmental efforts to improve ethical decision-making.***

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there are limited data to support commonly accepted beliefs found in this study. One previously noted relates to the benefits of the training programs. Additional research should focus on producing a clearer understanding of the cost/benefit relationship and reveal more effective

measures of training. Future work should emphasize training effectiveness in terms of measurement of reduced liability and organizational performance.

While the results should be interpreted conservatively, the study provides a snapshot of current trends and practices within the law enforcement community. It demonstrates that agencies are working to meet the recommendations established by the IACP to strengthen and improve ethics instruction. Although training cannot serve as a substitute for screening in the hiring process or an individual's personality or character, it can reinforce the values and expectations of the organization, the community, and the department, and thus strengthen decision-making by identifying ethical dilemmas and problem-solving models. Coupling better recruitment and screening with more effective programs should increase the overall effectiveness of efforts to improve ethical decision-making.

## NOTE

1. In states where a number of police departments are serving a population of 100,000–500,000 (e.g., California and Texas), at least two departments were selected. State capitals that met the population size criteria were selected first, and the second city was selected based upon geographic distance from the state capital. When the capital did not meet the population size criteria, two cities with population sizes of 100,000–500,000 that were geographically far apart in the state were arbitrarily selected. There were also instances where a state had only one city that met the population criteria, in which case it was included in the sample.

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