

Corruption and unethical conduct in the Nordic police forces

Nordic Research Council for Criminology (NSfK) Contact seminar

The contact seminar took place 21–22 October 2021, instigated by the conclusions from a Norwegian government report on police corruption

<https://www.politiet.no/globalassets/dokumenter/pod/rapporter/rapport-fra-evalueringutvalget.pdf>).

The report *Police corruption. Leadership, risk recognition and lesson learning (Politikorrupsjon. Lederskap, risikoerkjennelse og læring)* called for the need for more Nordic research on police corruption. The report was written in the aftermath of the so called "Eirik Jensen case", which had caused a lot of debate concerning the organization of the Norwegian police:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41313700>

The seminar was arranged by Norwegian NSfK member Heidi Mork Lomell (now Chair), in collaboration with professor emerita Liv Finstad and senior advisor Per Jørgen Ystehede. 16 Nordic scholars and practitioners from the field, prosecutors/investigators and representatives from the police, participated. All Nordic countries were represented at the seminar held at Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo.

Summary of the seminar:

October 21st

12:00–14:00: **Police corruption: A Norwegian Case**

Liv Finstad, professor emerita at Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law and one of the commission members, presented the "Eirik Jensen case" and the report made by the commission appointed by the Norwegian Police Directorate. The presentation gave the background of the case, the commission's work and which lessons that had to be learned.

Jensen served in the Norwegian police force from 1977 to 2014 when he was arrested. He was a highly profiled policeman and had a key role in Oslo Police District's work against organised crime for many years. In 2020, Jensen was sentenced to 21 years imprisonment for gross corruption and complicity in the import of 13.9 tonnes of hashish. The mandate of the commission was to identify lessons to learn with a focus on the leaders' responsibility for ensuring that employees comply with relevant codes of practice/codes of conduct. The fundamental failure was that messages of concern over a long period of time were not properly looked into by the responsible leaders in Oslo Police District. Concerns about violation of rules were not investigated, and thus overlooked and in practice accepted. Jensen's leaders emphasized that he was doing "good police work" and getting "results". In the fight against organized crime, Jensen was a police «superstar» – in the media and in the eyes of top leaders of the police and prosecution authorities, and many people inside and outside the police and prosecution service trusted him. The risk of corruption was never assessed even though a number of risk factors were present. Leadership failures and lack of risk recognition allowed Jensen to work with police informants for decades without complying with the codes of practice/codes of conduct. The report pinpointed that corruption risk must be acknowledged, that the internal control in the police must be strengthened and that police leaders must be in charge of lesson learning, and not outsource the task to consultants. The report emphasized that research about police corruption is strongly needed. (A powerpoint of the presentation is available).

Short comments were given by **Guro Kleppe** (Deputy director, The Norwegian Bureau for the Investigation of Police Affairs), **Kolbrún Bendiksdóttir** (The District Prosecutor, Iceland), **Ulf Mörkås** (Head of investigation unit Gothenburg, Special Investigations Department, Sweden) and **Niels Raasted** (Efterforskningschef, Independent Police Complaints Authority, Denmark), followed by an open discussion. The case was summed up as a typical case of police corruption, involving narcotics, organized crime and informant handling. The problem of a blue code of silence in the leadership level was also discussed. The case was characterized as a suitable case for lesson learning, and it was underlined that the police must take the main responsibility.

14:30–16:00 **What is police corruption? With a special focus on the distinction between corruption and unethical conduct**

Short presentations were given by **Gunnar Thomassen** (Associate professor, The Police University College, Norway), **Vesa Muttilainen** (Chief of Research, Police University College, Finland), **Ingibjörg Yr** (MA, Lögreglan, Iceland) and **Adam Diderichsen** (Lecturer, University College Copenhagen, Denmark), followed by an open discussion.

Some themes that were presented and commented on:

- What is a useful definition of police corruption? The broad definition is any abuse of the power of the police, while the legal definition is very narrow.
- There are many ways to test corruptive actions: Is it legal? Is it ethically problematic? How does it look like in the media? What would your mother say about this?
- How is it in reality, what is conceived as corruption in practice? “There’s nothing like a free coffee”.
- How do we know that the problem is not bigger in the Nordic countries? Is there a kind of “Nordic naivete”?
- Cynicism in the police and “loosing your ideals” is problematic because it transforms the relation between police and the public. If cynical you may be tempted. Cynicism tends to produce unethical behaviour. There is a need to find a way of work that speaks to the ideals of the police.
- In investigating corruption as a crime, the definition needs to be a legal one.
- Leakage of information might be the biggest question.
- The Jensen case looks like an extraordinary case, but the mechanisms involved has similarities to other cases of police misconduct, for example cases involving sexual abuse.

16:30–18:00: **Anticorruption work in the police forces: Prosecution and preventive efforts**

Introductions from **Anders Kassmann** (Avdelingsdirektør, Swedish Security Service/Säpo), **Kristin Kvigne** (Chief, The National Criminal Investigation Service/Kripas, Norway), **Kolbrún Bendiksdóttir** (The District Prosecutor, Iceland), **Marianne Pedersen** (Fuldmægtig, Independent Police Complaints Authority, Denmark), **Beate Gangås** (Chief of police, Oslo Police District, Norway), followed by open discussion.

Some themes that were presented and commented upon:

- **Kassmann:** The worst is the insider, the spy. It’s very important to avoid recruiting the wrong people, you have to ask questions, test, consider personality and personal factors. This process must be continued after persons have been recruited to the service. You must be clear about what kind of unwanted behavior you don’t accept. You need to have strong tools and strong internal security and systems to identify if people are committing

wrongdoings. The aim is to prevent before it becomes a Jensen case and/or a spy case. But every day can't be a day of perfection, you need to have the possibility and a decent dialogue to talk about failure.

- **Kvigne:** Kripas is responsible for methods concerning informants and undercover police work. Corruption is always a risk everywhere. There is a need for robust management systems and a healthy work environment. Covert methods are vital for the police, but also vulnerable. Both the value and the risk of covert methods are high. Understanding this fact makes us better understanding corruption. Leadership is both trust and control. The importance of systems in place: vetting processes, interviews, education program, systematic awareness. In the Jensen case the systems were not enforced, there was lack of respect for systems. You have to think differently about leadership, close follow up is not a personal insult. Special attention and close follow up is needed. You can develop blind spots if no one questions you. We need to talk about why the system is so important.
- **Bendiksdottir:** People are vetted when they are recruited, but not later in their careers. Should this also be done after 3-5 years of service? Unethical behaviour often starts small, and when do officers cross the line? Island had two cases, both about informants and leaking information. If rules had been followed, there would be no cases. Change in culture is needed, take random checks, vetting, surveillance systems of computer data.
- **Pedersen:** The Independent Police Complaints Authority handles both criminal cases and complaints. Most cases concern conduct. A lot of research could have been done about these cases. There are not many cases of classical corruption, only a handful of cases and only one verdict in 2015 about bribery as one form of corruption. Two police officers got a gift from a billionaire, they were acquitted in district court and later sentenced to 40 days suspended prison. The courts are reluctant to convict.
- **Gangås:** Risk recognition was too poor, reports were not handled correctly, routines of notification were poor. Leaders were seriously criticized in the report, but some leaders took action. The importance of internal control. There must be clear expectations and transparent reactions. Risk assessment will give knowledge of risks of fraud and corruption. Example: a former police chief stopped the culture of free hot dogs. What is corruption and what is the new corruption? Social media is a risk arena.

Themes mentioned in the discussion:

- The problem of blind spots – what are the blind spots now?
- Reports from the Bureau give a lot of information about risk.
- Being too late to pick up wrongdoings limits learning potential.
- The problem of tolerance towards colleagues who for instance are sleeping at the job.
- How to learn as an organization? The importance of mandatory handling of reports concerning criminal cases and complaints, training programs, a working environment where it is possible to speak out safely. Mandatory handling through the chain of command in cooperation with the unions.

October 22nd

09:00–10:30: **Corruption in the Nordic police forces: Knowledge and research gaps**
Gunnar Thomassen (Assistant professor, Police University College, Norway), **Vesa Muttilainen** (Chief of Research, Police University College, Finland), **Elin Edblom** (Special investigations Department, Sweden)

Each presented a list of 3-5 knowledge and/or research gaps, based on their research and/or professional experience followed by an open discussion.

- **Thomassen:** The need to know more about corruption - “the Nordic way” –bribery, noble cause corruption, opportunistic theft. What are similarities and differences between the Nordic countries? Is there a “Nordic exceptionalism” when it comes to police corruption? Does the high level of trust in the police protect us against corruption? In-depth and comparative studies of different types of corruption are needed. Punch writes about grasseaters and meateaters. This is hard to study, but we can collect information about the opportunity to be grasseaters, causes of corruption, factors that facilitate corruption. We have some data, as surveys from Transparency International, but we need more data.
- **Muttilainen:** Studies should reveal the multidimensional nature of the phenomena of police corruption. It is important to have careful concept description in surveys. Themes surrounding corruption is ethics, openness, trust, integrity, security environment. Linking police corruption to related concepts and problems can be a useful way forward.
- **Edblom:** What we know about police corruption is experience-based. We have “truths” we have experienced. Is really “noble cause corruption” more prevalent in Nordic police forces than acts involving money? The use of police register data without a professional purpose – what can we do to detect it?

Themes pointed out in the discussion:

- How do people and the police understand the concept of corruption? There is a need for a mutual understanding.
- Is police corruption a gendered problem?
- The importance of opening up police archives for researchers. Reports from The Bureau and other police accountability agencies gives a lot of information. Who report information that lead to a case? Who are reporting what they conceive as corruption?
- The importance of research about risk factors connected to hidden police work.
- Research on the responses to corruption scandals: Do such scandals lead to overreactions? Is this a risk in the field? Reactions might lead to unwanted effects.
- Might ethical reflection papers by police students be a good source to gather information from? These can be about all kinds of misconduct.
- Knowledge is so important because it helps us to know the drivers of corruption. Police service is embedded in political matters and linked to the world changing. The importance of an international perspective.
- About drivers of corruption: Narcissistic corruption.
- Status is one of the challenges – low status can be a driver of corruption.

10:45–11:30 **Nordic perspectives on future challenges within the field of police corruption: Research, prevention, prosecution**

In a roundtable discussion each participant had prepared a list up to three future challenges, based on their professional background/research:

- The challenge of financing research, to get research access into hidden police work, implementation and evaluation studies, material from police accountability agencies.

- A Nordic language for talking about corruption. Connecting corruption with minor fields of misconduct.
- Recruiting the “right” people to the police since wrong people also apply.
- The issue of police culture – how to work with that all the time. It’s easy for subcultures to grow.
- Issues of leadership,. Finding the balance between trust and control.
- The concept of corruption and how it manifests itself in the Nordic countries. We live in small countries/communities, so this should be a focus.
- Learning from lessons and implementation/evaluation studies.
- The problem of overreacting, the balance between trust and control. If you loose the trust of police officers it can backfire. The problem of using wrong methods to combat police corruption.
- There will be new forms of corruption in the future, you have to have an open mind. How will corruption in the future look like?
- Vetting processes, profiling, motivations for corruption. A big task for management. React when you see something.
- Research into data from investigations than don’t end in court.
- Never ignore the risk of corruption.
- Police is not an ordinary job, a good system of recruitment is key. Educate management systematically to be responsible for their own unit. Be aware of the impact of social media, of risks, vulnerabilities to corruption and narcissistic corruption.
- The representations of crime and corruption in media is an important source of knowledge, what is presented? What kind of police corruption do we want to do research on? Blind spots, “the black swan”, becomes more and more important for researchers, the police and society.

11:30 **Closing remarks**

In her closing remarks, Heidi Mork Lomell stated the importance of gathering both researchers and practitioners from the Nordic countries to discuss corruption and unethical conduct in the police forces. The topic is characterized by scarce research and little systematic knowledge, so hopefully, the seminar can be a starting point for developing future research plans and developing a network of both practitioners and researchers interested in knowledge development within this important topic.