

Bad Apples or a Rotten Orchard: Detroit Police Culture and its Protection of Corruption

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Abstract

In the light of substantial police corruption and misconduct in the history of the Detroit Police force, the defense of “a few bad apples” is frequently proffered. To examine the validity of the bad apple defense, this paper examines how the DPD’s leadership and rank and file officers responded to allegations and criminal charges for police corruption under Mayor Coleman A. Young. The paper concludes that police culture played a role in law enforcement corruption and points to the importance of understanding police corruption and its causes to better address the issue.

“It’s going to be a black mark in a lot of people’s eyes ... I don’t think it’s more widespread. Every organization has got problems. You have your bad apples. You get rid of them, and you’re that much better off” (Cannon 2). This comment was made by Police Chief Stanley Knox in response to one of the many police scandals that rocked the Detroit Police Department throughout the 1980s and 1990s. How did a department continuously lit with controversies condense these offenses to just a few small figures making bad decisions and not something larger? This point of view isn’t solely held by those higher in the department but can be seen in its officers and public officials in the aftermath of allegations of misconduct and corruption. These opinions can influence the structure and behavior of the department. This essay will explain how the structure, culture, and minimization of corruption in the Detroit Police Force have contributed to the shielding of criminality in the department.

To better understand the connection between misconduct and police culture, we must first understand Detroit and the history of the police

department within it. The Detroit Police Department, even before it ran under the city's first Black mayor, Coleman A. Young, was not unmarked in the eyes of the public. Police misconduct and brutality towards its citizens was not out of the norm between the 1950s and 1960s, specifically towards its Black citizens. The city's Black citizens felt that the mostly White officers policing their neighborhoods were both neglectful of and harmful to them; in a fifteen-city survey post-uprising, 60% of Black Detroiters felt that the police weren't timely in their responses to predominantly Black neighborhoods (Fine 101). Between May 1961 and February 1964, 1,041 instances of force were used against citizens by the DPD, 617 of which were against Black citizens (Fine 100). This treatment infuriated its citizens to the point where, in late July of 1967, a civil disturbance—starting at 3:45 a.m. July 23 and stretching until July 29—resulted in 43 deaths, nearly 1,200 injuries, and over 7,000 arrests. The after-effect of the uprising led to an even more fragile relationship between the DPD and its citizens which the force responded to by putting even more radical policies in place.

There was an effort to turn the DPD around in the 1970s, but unfortunately this turnaround resulted in a police department with even more inappropriate policies. In 1974 Mayor Young was adamant about changing the department, firing Police Commissioner Nichols, and dismantling the controversial STRESS unit established three years prior. Young faced an uphill battle during his formative years as mayor because of how resistant the DPD was to change. A focal point of Young's 1973 campaign was reforming the DPD, mainly through affirmative action, which the predominantly White Detroit police force wasn't keen on and even made claims of reverse discrimination (Deslippe 932). This did not deter the mayor since he still dismantled STRESS within the first six months of his career, and the number of Black officers increased from 18.7% in 1974 to 35.6% at the end of his first term (Deslippe 939). It can be said that the racial climate of the city at the time and the Detroit Police

Department's feelings towards the mayor could've played a role in why corruption developed the way it did in the department. The mayor would achieve his goals but did not eliminate all the problems present, specifically those involving corruption. Due to misconduct and corruption not being wholly rooted out, the Detroit Police Department would attract the attention of larger outside forces who felt that an investigation into the force was necessary.

One of these scandals was in the case of the murder of 13-year-old Damion Lucas; the young boy was killed in a drive-by shooting on April 29, 1985, targeting his uncle Leon. This case acted as a catalyst for what would become the infamous undercover investigation "Operation Backbone." The boy's uncle owed money to notorious Detroit drug dealer Leo Curry, half of the Curry Brothers, for selling the gang fraudulent boxing game tickets (Wilson B11). Despite the apparent connection, the DPD chose to arrest Lekeas Davis, a man Leon was seen with earlier in a dispute. This surprised the FBI and raised particular flags with agent Herman Groman. While investigating the Curry Brothers, Groman discovered that Johnny Curry had called Mayor Coleman Young's security guard and police Sergeant James "Jimmy" Harris and the former Head of the DPD Homicide Department, Gil Hill, the morning after the shooting (Lengel and Sinclair 12A). With the apparent connection being ignored by the DPD and the relation between Harris, Hill, and Curry coming to light, Groman took the evidence to Davis's lawyer to free the man (Smerling and Stuart-Pontier 13:25). Still, the agent was hellbent on this point on exposing the high-level corruption he suspected was present in the DPD.

Agent Herman Groman already had suspicions stemming from the Damion Lucas case and a critical link between a supposed leak in the DPD and narcotic dealers. Gil Hill and Sergeant James "Jimmy" Harris were found to have a connection with the Curry Brothers following the shooting (Lengel and Sinclair 12A). Surprisingly, this wasn't Officer Harris' first scandal in his career since Harris was a member of the controversial police

division STRESS. In 1972, the officer was charged with assault and intent to kill because of his role in the “Rochester Street Massacre,” a shootout between Wayne County Deputies and stress members that resulted in the death of one and the paralysis of another (Pavich 3A). Despite this, the jury found him and two other officers not guilty, and in the aftermath of their acquittal, Wayne County prosecutor William L. Cahalan explained that no new charges were necessary (“No More Charges” 3A). With this, Harris’ role in the DPD was still secured and is an example of questionable behavior in his career that potentially led to his corruption and subsequent arrest in the investigation, “Operation Backbone.”

Agent Groman’s investigation didn’t stop at the connection between Curry and Harris but spiraled into a year-long undercover investigation. Using Rick Wersche Jr., also known as, “White Boy Rick,” as an informant for the FBI, the young man introduced secret agent Michael Castro, who was playing a Miami drug dealer, to Johnny Curry’s wife, Cathy Volsan-Curry (Dietz and Clarke). Cathy Volsan-Curry is Mayor Colman Young’s niece, and many assume that is partially why the investigation extended the way it did, in an effort to dig up dirt on the mayor. Volsan fell for the setup and ultimately introduced Castro to her father, William Volsan, who linked with Sergeant Jimmy Harris and other DPD officers to secure “drug money” through the Detroit metro airport to banks. Four operations were completed with the support of these officers, who were paid upwards of three grand for their work. Taking the case a step further, Castro, under the alias of Mike Diaz, invited Jimmy Harris and William Volsan onto a yacht in Miami with a hidden camera to discuss moving kilos of cocaine into Detroit for \$50,000 (*United States v Harris*). The results of this secret project were the arrest of eleven cops and five civilians, including Jimmy Harris, William Volsan, and Cathy Volsan.

This revealed case was another hit to the department and the Young administration. This case saw a lot of coverage and was widely publicized because of how high up it went with its connection to the mayor’s personal

relationships. The case reached far, so immediate responses in the aftermath varied. The quote at the top of this essay was by none other than the Chief of Police, Stanley Knox, in response to “Operation Backbone” becoming known to the public. Knox essentially explained that Sgt. Jimmy Harris and the other officers involved were “bad apples” and that the department would be better off without them. In another comment concerning the incident, the chief doubled down when he said, “This is a sad day. What can you do... it’s only a few people, but it’s going to hurt everybody” (Mitchell, McHugh, and Schaefer 2A). Knox’s questionable observations weren’t just reserved for this case either since during the arrests and subsequent indictment of his predecessor, former Chief of Police William Hart, also at the hands of the FBI for stealing 2.6 million dollars from the DPD, he made comments practically in defense of the man (*United States v Hart*). Knox told the *Detroit Free Press* almost a year after his comments on “Operation Backbone” that he was “Shocked, surprised like everyone else. I’ve known him a long time; I don’t think he’s that kinda person” about Chief Hart’s conviction (Schaefer and Ghannam 6A). This thinking style isn’t exclusive to the chief or the department.

The Detroit police officers and their accessible comments haven’t differed much from that of their chief regarding cases like these. They also speak in defense of the men or diminish the damage to the department. Retired homicide detective Danny Knepp commented on the arrest of Lionel Dickens, another officer arrested in the FBI sting, and James Harris, saying “All I can tell they were two good cops. Hell, I worked for years with both of them ... I’d go out with either one of them right now” (Kresnak 2A). Another downtown officer said this about Hart during his trial: “Bill Hart was good to me, and Bill Hart was a good guy. I think Bill Hart got caught up in something he had no control over” (Schaefer and Chelsey 8A). These two quotes may seem as if they are simply speaking regarding these men’s characters, but considering the wording, it’s concerning to hear officers speak like this in response to the arrests of

alleged corruption. One comment asserts that they were good cops despite being charged with breaking the very same laws they were meant to enforce and would still have close enough relations with them to hang out. The other takes any accountability away from Hart by saying he was involved in something he had no control over as his trial began. However, it was never discussed, even in the early stages, that Hart acted at someone else's discretion, so his actions shouldn't have been minimized or shifted elsewhere as this officer attempted. These assertions by those working for the Detroit Police Department aren't that different from other public officials at the time, even in the local government. After the arrests of those caught in "Operation Backbone," Councilman Clyde Cleveland said, "I hope the citizens of this city do not feel the whole police department is dirty. The police department is made up of honest, decent, dedicated officers" (Cannon 2A). This is another one of those comments meant to separate the "bad apples" away from the department in an effort to save face.

This is, of course, only a few figures and their thoughts on the arrest of their peers and employees, but there is an obvious pattern in their opinions on the subject. These statements help explain how the DPD most likely protected corruption instead of eliminating it. This isn't just a DPD problem but an issue of the culture instilled in the police force. It is first essential to note the learned culture in police departments like the DPD. Lanza-Kaduce and Chappell found an emphasis on lessons upholding the structure and culture of the police in academies (Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce). One of the themes they noticed was the teaching of solidarity and loyalty among the officers. Thomas Schneider, president of the Detroit Police Officers Association, explained, "Chief Hart was a friend to many of our members, and they and others are saddened that his career has to end in this fashion." This exemplifies how loyal they are to each other and how tight knit this department is (Schaefer Ghannam 6A). This system of

loyalty is a critical component of police culture and is responsible for the creation of the code of silence among them.

Officers develop an “us versus them” mentality regarding the public they serve to the point where they are increasingly secretive about their work. During his time serving, Chief William Hart was adamant that the public shouldn’t know too much about police work because it was above their understanding. A *Detroit Free Press* editorial noted that “after years of brazenly insisting that the public had no business knowing too much about police operations, William Hart now is on trial for corruption charges” (“Police Secrecy, Arrogance Continues” 8A). This secrecy that Hart abided by was apparent enough that Detroiters picked up on it and is an example of this isolated mentality. Hart also was fiercely loyal to Mayor Young and mentioned, “All you have to do to stay police chief is have the mayor behind you, and he’ll be there as long as you’re loyal. I’m his (Young) employee ... I answer to him and no one else” (McClure 5B). Hart and Young were loyal to one another even to a fault, placing this commitment above others. It can be reasonably stated that the lack of transparency and emphasis on hierarchy allowed the chief to embezzle millions.

To further understand police culture, Michael Caldero, in *Police Ethics: The Corruption of Noble Causes*, describes it in the form of an onion, meaning that it has layers (Caldero 201). Layer one is standard cop work, protecting citizens and arresting criminals. The second was uncertainty about protecting themselves. In this context, the third and most relevant layer is their solidarity with their fellow officers. They gain this solidarity from the isolation they feel in their profession, giving them a strong shared identity instilled in officers through their training. Marilyn Corsianos, in *The Complexities of Police Corruption: Gender, Identity, and Misconduct* explained that “The perceived probability of dangerous instances promotes. Sense of solidarity intersected with an understanding of police work... where officers must protect and support each other” (Corsianos 63). This solidarity driven by the danger in police work often has officers closely

associating with other officers. Retired Detroit police officer Fred Williams explained to the *Detroit News* in 1991 that “cops tend to socialize with other cops; they tend to get myopic” (Chelsey 4A). This quote means that cops are aware that when they are so closely associated with one another, they become narrow-minded in their thinking and victims of a hive mind. A consequence of this mentality is that it can create a culture where corruption and misconduct are protected instead of criticized. The fourth layer is officers protecting themselves from external oversight, which some claim interferes with their work. This layer is one that the DPD has commonly exhibited because of their reluctance to accept outside investigations or help. Farmington Hills police chief William Dwyer, a former DPD officer, said, “Before I left the department, we were plainly instructed not to offer assistance to federal authorities” (Bowies 2C). Dwyer further explained that federal agents would have trouble getting backup or information; law enforcement agents had also felt that there was a lack of trust and cooperation, leading to them losing suspects because they couldn’t get the necessary resources in times of collaboration.

It’s also important to note that the Detroit Police Department is an organization that, in 1991, had an astounding budget of over 300 million dollars, and the goal of any organization is survival (1991 Detroit Police Department Annual Report 24). This means that at the top, the job of those higher up is to protect the organization and guarantee its survival. This is why we have comments by Stanley Knox, William Hart, and Mayor Young, all essentially saying that it’s not an organizational problem but just a few “bad apples.” These are the people at the top of the hierarchy, and the problem with them downplaying these instances of corruption in favor of self-preservation is that it sets a precedent for what is allowed. Weisburd and Greenspan discovered that 85% of officers surveyed “agreed or strongly agreed that a police chief’s strong position against the abuse of authority can make a big difference in deterring officers from abusing their authority” (Weisburd and Greenspan 6). This means that those at the top

of the hierarchy are responsible for setting the standard for what behavior is allowed. A retired officer, Isaiah McKinnon, stated that when he was a rookie cop, “I’ve always respected and worked well with Bill Hart. As a young police officer coming on the job, I worked with him, and he was someone I looked up to. He gave me guidance and inspiration” (Schaefer and Ghannam 6A). This quote explains these administrative leaders’ impact on their officers and how much they follow them; McKinnon still said this even in the aftermath of the chief’s indictment. If used properly, this impact could deter misconduct, but if those at the top, like Chief Hart or Knox, don’t set this example or commit crimes themselves, it further creates an environment where corruption is accepted.

The rotten apple metaphor used by Chief Knox is an example of those higher up in the DPD veiling the severity of corruption and not using their authority to come down harder on it. The Knapp Commission noted that “the rotten apple doctrine has been a basic obstacle to meaningful reform” (Braziller 7). Corsianos also mentioned that “by avoiding or minimizing discussions regarding the incident with peers and rather centering communication on the media representations and the public’s reaction, a culture of tolerance for this behavior is preserved” (Corsianos 95). When asked if the department was out of control after reports of police misconduct, Hart said, “I don’t think the public had that perception. That’s the perception of the media, not the public” (Sinclair and Wark 6A). This comment is the chief wanting to separate the incident from the police and the genuine concerns of the public and shift it toward media reaction as if the media fabricated claims of corruption.

It is significantly worse in the case of police chiefs and mayors protecting corrupt officers. The FBI sting and Hart indictment were complicated for the city’s mayor since three key figures had a connection to him being his appointed chief of police, niece, brother-in-law, and former security guard. Young was never formally charged in either of these instances, but there were allegations that the man had a connection to the

money stolen by Chief Hart. Kenneth Weiner, who was Chief Hart's partner in the embezzling scheme, explained that more than \$400,000 of the money was spent on buying lavish gifts for Mayor Young, but this had no significant impact on the case (Wark and Farrell 4A). It was also officially uncovered in the case that of the \$300,000 traced to police operations, some of it was dubious, like expenses to guard Young's relatives full-time (Lengel Ankeny 3A).

Young broke his silence on the case a month after the arrests in "Operation Backbone" and said, "Do we reinstate them [cops]? What if they are found not guilty? Their reputations have been besmirched. It is irresponsible on the part of the federal government" (Lengel and Tschirhart 8A). This comment speaks less of discipline and more of criticism for the parties that caught them. It makes sense that the mayor would want to protect his favorite niece who was involved, but he had similar thoughts when Police Chief Hart, who he instated, was also arrested. In a 1991 press release in which he announced the hiring of the new Chief of Police Stanley Knox, Young explained that "an indictment is not a conviction ... they resulted from a sting operation that was a de facto entrapment and the chief got caught in a net" ("Mayoral Press Release"). This is similar to the earlier comments that attempted to mitigate the damage by directing it elsewhere and taking the blame away from the perpetrators. The mayor even went as far as to ensure the chief still received pay when suspended in light of his indictment.

The mayor, throughout these incidents, may have been placed in an impasse due to Hart being an official he appointed and the mayor being a politician above all else. Addressing police corruption as a mayor is difficult because there are certain aspects that one must have to tackle the subject properly. B.L. Garmire in *Local Government Police Management* explains that to handle police corruption, a police chief must have the ability to implement reforms and have political and administrative capabilities (Garmire). William Hart wouldn't have been able to do any of these because he was

the one indicted for corruption, but we can apply these same principles to Mayor Young since he was also in a position to influence change. Young was an effective enough leader to have won five mayoral elections. Despite the troubles of each of his tenures and pushback by White Detroiters who felt the man was racist, Young still managed to be reelected by decently large margins (Peterson 18A).

Garmire also said that they should have the media or local officials on their side, which Mayor Young often did not (Young 38). Garmire further explained that these reforms to rid departments of corruption could include speaking out and ensuring authority is held accountable or improving internal affairs. Mayor Young did not allow Hart or those arrested in “Operation Backbone” to take accountability because of his relation to them and the need to preserve his political career. It’s especially telling that Young had just faced re-election during the investigation into Hart. Detroit News columnist Pete Waldmeir explained that “the fact is that on November 7, Young was re-elected to a record fifth four-year term, so he can afford to stand behind Hart, right or wrong... The more pressure that’s applied, the more facts that are presented, the harder the Young team works to discredit the accusers” (Waldmeir 1B). This means that Young’s term during the Hart and “Operation Backbone” corruption cases was already somewhat secured for 2–4 years, and the man still willfully chose not to condemn them in both cases. This isn’t to say that coming forward and admitting that something went wrong with his appointee or niece isn’t damaging to one’s political career, but the impact of not is just as damaging to the Detroit Police Force and the public which they serve.

In this environment where the leaders and administration aren’t condemning corruption and those responsible, their subordinates won’t either. By willfully denying the existence of corruption on all levels, the DPD has undermined their officer’s confidence in their department and themselves. After the Hart trial began, one Detroit patrol officer explained,

“Morale already was low. This was just another blow to your self-esteem and to how people think of you” (Schaefer and Chelsey 6A). These cases negatively impact not only the public but also the officers and their ability to do their jobs.

With the department already subscribed to a specific culture with a hive mind and a strong sense of oneness, if the consensus held by those higher up doesn't denounce agency corruption, the trickle-down will be an environment prime for corruption and no accountability. We saw this in the case of the responses by the DPD in the disclosure of the publicized corruption case “Operation Backbone” and even regarding the indictment of former chief of police, William Hart. The comments presented are habitual ones made not long after the scandals came to light, so they don't account for feelings further down the line. Still, I argue these immediate reactions are even more relevant because they expose authentic thinking patterns without being bogged down by backlash or their peers' consensus. When it came to condemning corruption, it was not commonly done by those higher up like the mayor, chief of police, officers, and council members who only sought to minimize backlash or protect their peers and careers. Standing idly by in favor of preserving political power has made officials like Mayor Young complicit in protecting corruption in the DPD. Officers have been inflicted with these habits of prioritizing livelihood over civic duty. Although Detroit and the police department were brutalized with racism, there is little doubt that the environment present contributed to these cases of corruption. It is not a case of bad apples but rotten orchards producing rotten barrels. This system of police culture in Detroit and the scarceness of accountability resulted in an environment that allowed corruption to thrive. We must take notice of this culture to understand better how to ward off law enforcement corruption by accurately recognizing the causes.

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