



IGNORANCE IS *NOT* BLISS

Playing ostrich about officer misconduct doesn't make it go away



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. It was a brisk Virginia morning. Dressing quickly, your blogger rushed to the hotel conference center, eager to grab a good seat for what promised to be the most interesting panel at [NIJ's 2009 conference](#). Entitled "The View From the Street: Police Leaders Share Their Perspective on Urgent Research and Policy Issues Facing Law Enforcement in 2009 and Beyond," the session featured six police chiefs, among them the President of the [International Association of Chiefs of Police](#), Algonquin (Ill.) chief Russell Laine. Nashville chief Ronal W. Serpas, co-chair of the IACP Research Advisory Committee served as moderator.

Chief Serpas began by mentioning that in a recent survey, police chiefs identified their top three concerns as leadership, personnel management and -- one of your blogger's favorite topics -- ethics. Alas, after that promising start it took ninety minutes for ethics to come up again. Only moments before the session ended, a panelist mentioned that, by the way, "ethics and discipline, holding people accountable" were just as important as all the nuts-and-bolts concerns that had dominated the discussion. That conduct issues got such short shrift was somewhat surprising, as [in 1997 the IACP had itself stated](#) that "ethics is our greatest training and leadership need today and into the next century."

In September 2008 the IACP, in conjunction with NIJ, published the "National Law Enforcement Research Agenda" ([NLERA](#)). A representative survey of 1,000 IACP members yielded eight issues that police executives consider most worthy of research:

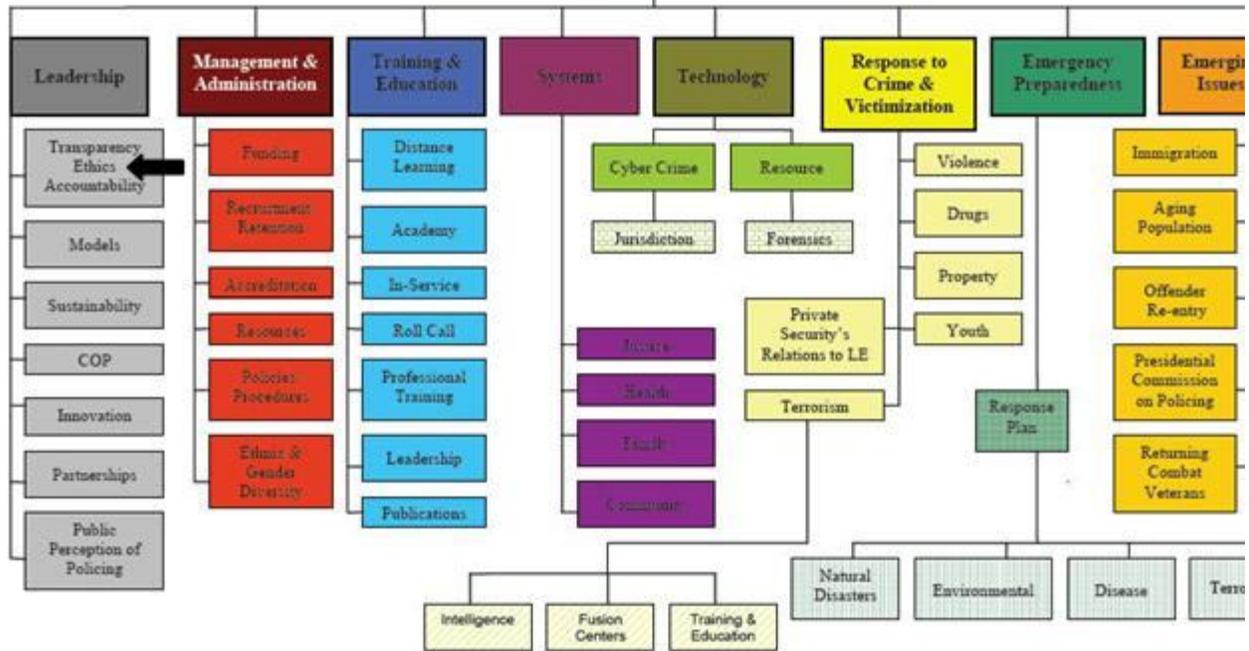
<u>Issue</u>	<u>Highest rated concerns</u>
Training	Officer safety, in-service training

Leadership	Supervisory skills, leadership training
Technology	Keeping current, finding money
Funding	Identifying resources, funding for specific needs
Staffing	Supervisor accountability, recruitment/retention
Crime response	Drugs, violence against women
Policies and procedures	Use of force, updating procedures
Intelligence and information	Strategies for sharing, system for sharing

Ethics is nowhere to be found. In fact, the only conduct-related concern is “use of force.” But once response data was incorporated into a formal agenda, things changed. Use of force went inexplicably AWOL, while ethics was mentioned -- once, in the “Leadership” category, shoved in between “transparency” and “accountability”. Ethics also came up twice in the text: near the end of



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the definition for leadership (“Finally, the chief is expected to set the standard for professionalism, accountability, and ethical conduct in his or her agency”), and in the middle of a massive to-do list (“How well does the Internal Affairs department function address the core issues of accountability, transparency, and ethics/integrity?”)

Other than for these pitifully brief mentions, the IACP’s research agenda for the 21st. century literally ignores officer behavior. That seems an awfully shallow approach. Given the occasionally tragic consequences of even the best police work, law enforcement executives desperately need to know what makes cops cross the line, and why. If you don’t believe that studying the causes of misconduct is all that important, here are some recent examples that’ll curl your hair:

Two Hollywood (Fla.) police officers, a sergeant, a CSO and a civilian are being investigated for allegedly [falsifying an arrest report](#) to cover up a car wreck.

A [Federal monitor](#) spent nearly a *decade* supervising LAPD's adherence to the provisions of the [Rampart](#) consent decree.

A just-released [Minnesota investigative report](#) accuses members of a defunct Minneapolis gang strike force of appropriating seized valuables for their own use.

A recent, high-profile arrest in Cambridge not only brought an officer's [truthfulness](#) into question but precipitated a [major inquiry](#) into police-community relations.

The Orange County (Calif.) Sheriff's Department faces a [Federal inquiry](#) about jailhouse abuses that could lead to the imposition of a Rampart-like monitoring scheme.

At least [fourteen Customs and Border Protection agents](#) have been arrested so far this year for taking bribes from drug traffickers.

Cuyahoga County's long-serving Sheriff resigned after a newspaper reporter [exposed alleged misdeeds](#) ranging from working only one day a week to giving donors rich contracts.

Five Birmingham police officers were fired for [kicking and beating a suspect](#) with a club and fists after a 22-minute pursuit. Their acts are under Federal investigation.

Orange County's (Calif.) D.A. openly accused several sheriff's deputies of [lying on the stand](#) to keep a colleague from being convicted for misusing a Taser.

A [recent report](#) by the California Attorney General slammed the Maywood Police Department for hiring unqualified cops, illegally detaining citizens and using excessive force.

An L.A. County deputy sheriff was [charged with perjury](#) for falsely testifying about the circumstances that led him to arrest a suspected drug dealer.

[FBI agents are investigating twelve Philadelphia officers](#) for knowingly using false information from an informant to secure numerous search warrants.

In Bellaire (Tex.) a police officer was arrested for needlessly shooting and killing a man who was mistakenly thought to be driving a stolen car.

LAPD officers have been [awarded multi-million dollar jury verdicts](#) against the City for alleged discrimination and sexual harassment by colleagues and superiors.

Montague County's (Tex.) former Sheriff, nine guards and four inmates were indicted for turning a jail into an "[animal house](#)" of drugs and sex.

[Hundreds of felony cases were dismissed](#) because Louisville cops failed to attend court hearings. Many missed their appearances on purpose; few were disciplined.

Tenaha (Tex.) police and prosecutors are accused of [coercing black citizens](#) driving through town to turn over cash and valuables on pain of being prosecuted for money laundering.

The St. Louis (Mo.) D.A. [dropped 47 cases and is reviewing 986 convictions](#) after a cop confessed that he and his partner planted evidence and stole money from a drug dealer.

Several LAPD officers face a [civil rights investigation](#) for allegedly lying on the stand. One was recorded advising a colleague to be "creative" on the arrest report.

Orange County's (Calif.) ex-Sheriff, Mike Carona, faces six years in Federal prison after his [conviction for jury tampering](#).

These episodes, which were culled from [news clips](#) posted in Police Issues between January 2009 and the present, constitute only a small fraction of the instances reported in the media. No, we're not claiming that policing is hopelessly awash in evildoing. But burying our heads in the sand -- and that's what IACP's proposed research agenda amounts to -- is precisely the wrong approach. However uncomfortable honest self-assessment might be, there is a pressing need to dispassionately study why cops cross the line. Yet given the short shrift accorded to ethics and misconduct at the NIJ Conference (the chief's panel wasn't the only "violation"), whether anything can be accomplished through the present system seems questionable.

Well, this concludes our posts about the 2009 NIJ Conference. We hope that you've found the series useful!