

Police Corruption and Public Trust in Indonesia: Institutional Accountability and the Reform of Internal Oversight Mechanisms

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Abstract

Public trust in law enforcement institutions depends heavily on perceptions of integrity, fairness, and accountability. Allegations of bribery, abuse of authority, and misconduct within police institutions can undermine confidence in the justice system. This article examines institutional mechanisms for preventing and addressing police corruption in Indonesia. Using normative juridical and institutional analysis, the study evaluates internal disciplinary systems, external oversight, complaint mechanisms, and anti-corruption institutions. The article argues that internal oversight alone may face structural limitations when investigations involve institutional colleagues or senior officials. The study proposes a multi-layered accountability framework combining independent complaint mechanisms, transparent disciplinary procedures, external oversight, whistleblower protection, asset disclosure, and systematic integrity monitoring. Particular attention is given to the accessibility of complaint mechanisms for ordinary citizens who may lack legal resources. The article concludes that police anti-corruption reform requires not only stronger sanctions but also institutional structures capable of generating credible and independent accountability. Strengthening public participation and external oversight would contribute to restoring public confidence in Indonesian law enforcement institutions.

[Kepercayaan publik terhadap lembaga penegak hukum sangat bergantung pada persepsi integritas, keadilan, dan akuntabilitas. Tuduhan penyuapan,



penyalahgunaan wewenang, dan pelanggaran di dalam lembaga kepolisian dapat merusak kepercayaan terhadap sistem peradilan. Artikel ini mengkaji mekanisme kelembagaan untuk mencegah dan mengatasi korupsi kepolisian di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan analisis yuridis dan kelembagaan normatif, studi ini mengevaluasi sistem disiplin internal, pengawasan eksternal, mekanisme pengaduan, dan lembaga anti-korupsi. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa pengawasan internal saja mungkin menghadapi keterbatasan struktural ketika investigasi melibatkan kolega di dalam lembaga atau pejabat senior. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka akuntabilitas berlapis yang menggabungkan mekanisme pengaduan independen, prosedur disiplin yang transparan, pengawasan eksternal, perlindungan pelapor, pengungkapan aset, dan pemantauan integritas sistematis. Perhatian khusus diberikan pada aksesibilitas mekanisme pengaduan bagi warga biasa yang mungkin kekurangan sumber daya hukum. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa reformasi anti-korupsi kepolisian tidak hanya membutuhkan sanksi yang lebih kuat tetapi juga struktur kelembagaan yang mampu menghasilkan akuntabilitas yang kredibel dan independen. Penguatan partisipasi publik dan pengawasan eksternal akan berkontribusi pada pemulihan kepercayaan publik terhadap lembaga penegak hukum Indonesia.]

Keywords: Police corruption, law enforcement, institutional accountability, public trust, Indonesia

Introduction

Police institutions exercise some of the most intrusive powers available to the modern state. Police officers may stop, search, investigate, detain, use coercive force, and initiate criminal processes that can profoundly affect individual liberty and social reputation. Because these powers are exercised through daily interaction with citizens, public confidence in the police depends not only on the effectiveness of crime control but also on perceptions of fairness, honesty, and accountability. Police corruption consequently creates institutional harm that extends beyond the immediate financial or legal consequences of a particular act. Bribery, extortion, manipulation of investigations, abuse of authority, and preferential treatment may communicate to citizens that the application of law is negotiable and influenced by wealth, status, or personal relationships. Research on police legitimacy has consistently demonstrated that public cooperation depends heavily on whether citizens perceive police institutions as fair and procedurally just, rather than simply effective in controlling crime (Tyler 2004; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tankebe 2009).

The relationship between police corruption and public trust is especially important in democratic societies because law enforcement requires voluntary cooperation from citizens. Police agencies depend on witnesses, victims, community members, and civil society organizations to provide information and

report criminal activity. When citizens believe that officers may demand unofficial payments or protect powerful individuals, they may become reluctant to cooperate with formal institutions. Corruption can therefore generate a self-reinforcing cycle: declining trust reduces public cooperation, weaker cooperation makes law enforcement more difficult, institutional performance deteriorates, and citizens become increasingly skeptical about police legitimacy. Tankebe (2013) emphasizes that legitimacy is not simply an attribute claimed by state institutions but a relationship involving public judgments about authority. This perspective is particularly relevant to police reform because institutional statements regarding integrity have limited value if citizens lack confidence that complaints against officers will be investigated fairly.

In Indonesia, police accountability is legally structured through a combination of constitutional principles, statutory regulation, internal disciplinary mechanisms, professional ethics, judicial processes, external institutions, and anti-corruption law. Law No. 2 of 2002 concerning the Indonesian National Police establishes the basic institutional mandate of the *Kepolisian Negara Republik Indonesia* (Polri), while Government Regulation No. 2 of 2003 regulates disciplinary procedures for members of the police. Internal accountability also involves the Professional and Security Division, commonly known as Propam, which addresses professional conduct and internal discipline. However, the institutional design of internal oversight raises an enduring accountability problem: an organization is being asked to investigate and discipline its own members. Internal oversight can possess technical knowledge and access to information unavailable to external bodies, but it may also face conflicts of interest, organizational loyalty, hierarchical pressure, and public skepticism concerning impartiality (Prenzler and Ronken 2001; Prenzler 2009).

These structural tensions became particularly visible in Indonesian public debate following major cases involving police officers and allegations of serious misconduct. High-profile incidents have reinforced public concern that formal accountability mechanisms may not always operate independently, especially when cases involve senior personnel or institutional networks. Research on police accountability in Indonesia has similarly identified continuing challenges involving the effectiveness of internal supervision, the institutional position of external oversight bodies, public access to complaint mechanisms, and the implementation of ethical standards (Butt 2010; Lindsey 2018). The central challenge is therefore not simply whether Indonesia possesses institutions with formal oversight authority. Rather, the critical question is whether the institutional system creates accountability that is sufficiently independent, transparent, accessible, and credible from the perspective of citizens.

This article examines police corruption and institutional accountability in Indonesia through a descriptive-analytical and normative juridical approach. It argues that the prevention of police corruption requires a shift from a predominantly hierarchical model of internal discipline toward a multi-layered accountability

framework. Internal oversight should remain an essential component of institutional integrity, but it should operate alongside independent external monitoring, accessible public complaint mechanisms, transparent disciplinary procedures, whistleblower protection, asset disclosure, and systematic integrity monitoring. The article does not argue that every police misconduct case constitutes corruption or that external institutions should replace all forms of internal control. Instead, it examines how different accountability mechanisms can complement one another. Effective reform requires institutional specialization combined with checks against excessive concentration of investigative and disciplinary authority.

This study employs a normative juridical method combined with institutional and descriptive-analytical analysis. The normative juridical component examines the legal framework governing the Indonesian National Police, public service accountability, corruption prevention, disciplinary procedures, human rights, public information, and external supervision. The principal legal materials include the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia; Law No. 2 of 2002 concerning the Indonesian National Police; Law No. 31 of 1999 concerning the Eradication of Criminal Acts of Corruption, as amended by Law No. 20 of 2001; Law No. 19 of 2019 concerning the Second Amendment to Law No. 30 of 2002 concerning the Corruption Eradication Commission; Law No. 37 of 2008 concerning the Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia; Government Regulation No. 2 of 2003 concerning the Disciplinary Regulations for Members of the Indonesian National Police; and other relevant regulations concerning police professional ethics and public complaints.

The institutional analysis examines the interaction between internal police oversight and external accountability institutions. Particular attention is given to Propam, the National Police Commission, the Ombudsman, the National Commission on Human Rights, the Corruption Eradication Commission, the judiciary, and other mechanisms that may receive, investigate, or respond to complaints involving police conduct. The analysis distinguishes between disciplinary accountability, criminal accountability, administrative accountability, ethical accountability, and public accountability. This distinction is necessary because institutional misconduct can generate different forms of legal responsibility. A police officer may violate internal ethics without committing a criminal offense, while a corruption offense may require investigation under criminal law in addition to internal disciplinary action.

The descriptive-analytical dimension uses relevant scholarly literature on police corruption, procedural justice, institutional legitimacy, oversight, internal affairs, civilian review, whistleblowing, and comparative police accountability. The analysis is organized around four substantive questions. First, how does police corruption affect public trust and institutional legitimacy? Second, what are the strengths and structural limitations of internal police oversight? Third, how effectively do external oversight institutions and public complaint mechanisms complement internal accountability? Fourth, what institutional reforms could

strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts? This approach treats police corruption not only as a problem of individual criminal conduct but also as a problem of institutional design, incentives, information asymmetry, and public confidence.

Police Corruption as a Crisis of Institutional Legitimacy and Public Trust

Police corruption affects public trust because it directly challenges the principle that law should be applied according to public rules rather than private influence. When citizens believe that officers can be bribed, investigations manipulated, or legal protections selectively enforced, they may conclude that formal equality before the law is not realized in practice. This perception is particularly damaging because police institutions represent the state at the point where legal authority most visibly encounters ordinary citizens. A corrupt transaction involving a police officer may therefore be interpreted not simply as individual misconduct but as evidence concerning the moral character of the institution. Tyler (2004) argues that people are more likely to regard legal authorities as legitimate when they perceive procedures as neutral, respectful, and fair. Corruption fundamentally undermines these expectations because it introduces hidden criteria into official decision-making and transforms public authority into a potential source of private benefit.

Empirical research from Indonesia has demonstrated that police legitimacy is shaped by more than perceptions of crime control. Studies have identified procedural fairness, trustworthiness, community interaction, and perceptions of police integrity as important influences on public confidence (Bradford et al. 2015; Jackson et al. 2012). This is particularly relevant in contexts where citizens may have direct experiences with police services such as reporting crimes, obtaining assistance, participating in investigations, or resolving traffic-related matters. Everyday interactions can strongly influence broader institutional perceptions. If citizens encounter demands for unofficial payments or observe unequal treatment, the resulting distrust may persist even when formal institutional policies emphasize professionalism. Anti-corruption reform must therefore address routine institutional practices as well as exceptional high-profile scandals.

The effects of corruption also extend to police effectiveness. A police institution cannot enforce law efficiently when citizens believe cooperation may expose them to further risk or financial exploitation. Victims may avoid reporting crimes, witnesses may be unwilling to provide information, and communities may develop informal mechanisms for resolving disputes outside the legal system. Such consequences can weaken the state's capacity to maintain legal order and generate unequal access to justice. Research on police legitimacy suggests that trust encourages voluntary compliance and cooperation, while distrust increases the need for coercive enforcement (Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Jackson et al. 2012). Corruption therefore creates an institutional paradox: practices that provide short-

term private benefits to individual officers may reduce the long-term capacity of the organization to perform its public functions.

Public trust also depends on how institutions respond when misconduct becomes known. Citizens may recognize that no large organization can entirely prevent wrongdoing by individual members. However, public confidence is more likely to deteriorate when misconduct appears to be concealed, investigations lack transparency, or disciplinary consequences are perceived as inconsistent with the seriousness of the offense. The credibility of accountability therefore depends partly on institutional response. Transparent and independent investigation can demonstrate that the organization distinguishes institutional integrity from institutional loyalty, whereas opaque handling can create the impression that internal structures primarily exist to protect the organization. This distinction is particularly important in cases involving senior officials because hierarchical power may influence witnesses, investigators, and subordinates.

Internal Oversight: Institutional Capacity and Structural Limitations

Internal oversight remains indispensable to police accountability because external institutions cannot observe all aspects of daily police behavior. Internal investigators possess specialized knowledge concerning police procedures, access to institutional records, and familiarity with operational structures. An effective internal system can therefore detect misconduct at an early stage, identify patterns across units, and respond more rapidly than external mechanisms. The existence of Propam reflects the recognition that police professionalism requires continuous internal monitoring rather than reliance solely on criminal prosecution after serious violations occur. Internal accountability also permits differentiated sanctions for conduct that may not satisfy the legal elements of a criminal offense but nevertheless violates professional standards or institutional ethics.

Government Regulation No. 2 of 2003 and relevant police regulations provide a framework for disciplinary responsibility, while professional ethics mechanisms seek to regulate the conduct of police officers according to institutional standards. However, the principal structural limitation of internal oversight is organizational proximity. Investigators may be required to examine colleagues, supervisors, or officers with whom they share professional relationships. This problem is not unique to Indonesia. Comparative research on police oversight has long recognized that internal affairs units can experience tensions between the objectives of accountability and organizational solidarity (Prenzler and Ronken 2001; Prenzler 2009). In hierarchical institutions, concerns may also arise when investigators must examine senior officers who possess substantial institutional influence. Formal independence within the same organization may therefore be insufficient to generate public confidence if citizens perceive that internal loyalty or career incentives can influence investigative outcomes.

A second limitation concerns transparency. Internal disciplinary processes may involve legitimate confidentiality considerations, particularly where investigations concern ongoing criminal proceedings, personal data, or operational security. Nevertheless, excessive secrecy can prevent citizens from understanding whether complaints have been addressed meaningfully. The absence of public information concerning the number of complaints, investigation stages, substantiated allegations, disciplinary outcomes, and sanctions can create uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of oversight. Accountability does not require public disclosure of every sensitive detail, but aggregate reporting and reasoned explanations of significant disciplinary decisions can strengthen institutional credibility. Transparency is particularly important where public trust is already weak because citizens require evidence that formal accountability procedures produce actual consequences.

Internal oversight also faces a potential conflict between individual and institutional accountability. Police organizations may seek to protect legitimate institutional interests, including operational effectiveness and public confidence. However, the desire to protect institutional reputation can sometimes create incentives to minimize public attention to misconduct. Such incentives are counterproductive in the long term. Research on organizational accountability demonstrates that attempts to conceal wrongdoing can cause greater reputational damage when misconduct later becomes publicly known (Miller 2006). An integrity-oriented police institution should therefore distinguish between protecting the reputation of the organization and protecting individual wrongdoing. In many circumstances, transparent acknowledgment and credible correction of misconduct are more effective for preserving institutional legitimacy than defensive secrecy.

Internal oversight is also more effective when it operates on the basis of systematic risk assessment rather than responding exclusively to individual complaints. Data concerning repeated allegations, unusual asset accumulation, frequent reassignment of problematic officers, complaint patterns, and units with unusually high integrity risks can be used to identify organizational vulnerabilities. This requires institutional willingness to treat integrity information as management data rather than merely as evidence in disciplinary cases. Early-warning systems can support preventive intervention, including training, supervision, reassignment, or financial investigation. Such mechanisms are especially important because police corruption often develops through repeated opportunities and networks rather than isolated acts.

External Oversight and the Accessibility of Public Accountability

The structural limitations of internal oversight create a strong justification for external accountability. Indonesia possesses several institutions with different but potentially complementary oversight functions. The National Police Commission, established under Law No. 2 of 2002 and further regulated by Presidential

Regulation No. 17 of 2011, has responsibilities related to national police policy and public input. The Ombudsman, under Law No. 37 of 2008, addresses alleged maladministration by public institutions. The National Commission on Human Rights may become relevant where police conduct affects protected rights, while the Corruption Eradication Commission can investigate corruption offenses falling within its legal authority. Judicial institutions and criminal procedure mechanisms provide additional avenues for accountability. The existence of multiple institutions demonstrates that police misconduct cannot be addressed through a single accountability mechanism.

However, the presence of many institutions may also create fragmentation. Citizens may not know which body has authority to receive a particular complaint or may be required to navigate several procedures. An ordinary person experiencing alleged police extortion may not distinguish between a disciplinary violation, maladministration, criminal corruption, or human rights violation. A complex accountability system can therefore become inaccessible precisely to those citizens who lack legal knowledge or financial resources. Research on access to justice emphasizes that formal legal rights are insufficient when institutional procedures are difficult to understand or require substantial resources to navigate (Rhode 2004). Police accountability should consequently include an integrated complaint gateway capable of receiving reports and directing them to the appropriate institution without requiring complainants to determine legal jurisdiction in advance.

External oversight is most credible when oversight bodies possess sufficient independence, investigative capacity, access to information, and authority to produce consequences. Civilian review mechanisms that can only receive complaints but cannot access relevant documents or influence outcomes may provide limited accountability. Comparative research suggests that independent oversight is strengthened when external bodies can conduct investigations, monitor internal processes, require institutional responses, and publish findings (Goldsmith 2005; Walker 2005). Indonesia's reform agenda should therefore consider not only whether external oversight institutions formally exist but also whether their institutional authority is sufficient to overcome information asymmetry. Police institutions often control the records, witnesses, and operational information necessary to investigate alleged misconduct, giving them a structural informational advantage over external bodies.

Public complaint mechanisms should also be designed around accessibility. Citizens may be reluctant to report police corruption because they fear retaliation, lack evidence, or do not believe that their complaint will produce meaningful action. Digital reporting can reduce some practical barriers, but online systems should not replace face-to-face and community-based channels, particularly for citizens with limited digital access. Complaint mechanisms should provide clear information concerning confidentiality, investigation stages, possible outcomes, and protection against retaliation. Complainants should receive acknowledgment

and periodic updates. The absence of feedback can reinforce public perceptions that reporting is ineffective even when an investigation has actually occurred.

Whistleblower protection is especially important when the complainant is a police officer or public employee. Internal witnesses may possess direct information concerning corruption but face substantial professional and personal risks when reporting senior colleagues. A multi-layered accountability framework should therefore permit confidential reporting to independent bodies outside the ordinary chain of command. Protection should include safeguards against retaliation, arbitrary reassignment, career disadvantage, or harassment. International research has demonstrated that whistleblowing systems are effective only when institutions create confidence that reporting will be treated seriously and that whistleblowers will not bear disproportionate personal costs (Near and Miceli 1995; Vandekerckhove and Lewis 2012).

Toward a Multi-Layered Accountability Framework

The first reform priority should be the development of a clear accountability architecture connecting internal and external oversight. Internal investigations should not automatically exclude external monitoring, particularly in cases involving senior officers, allegations of systemic corruption, repeated public complaints, or substantial public interest. A referral mechanism should establish criteria for cases requiring independent external scrutiny. This would preserve the operational advantages of internal investigation while reducing the risk that institutional proximity undermines credibility. The objective is not to presume that internal investigators act improperly but to recognize that public confidence requires institutional safeguards against real or perceived conflicts of interest.

The second priority should be greater transparency concerning disciplinary accountability. Polri should publish standardized periodic information concerning complaints, investigation outcomes, categories of misconduct, disciplinary sanctions, processing times, and institutional reforms adopted in response to recurring problems. Privacy and due-process rights should be protected, particularly in unresolved cases, but aggregate transparency can demonstrate whether internal mechanisms are functioning. Significant completed cases involving serious public interest should also receive reasoned public explanations. Transparency should not be understood as a public relations strategy; its function is to allow citizens to evaluate institutional performance. Research on accountability and corruption indicates that information produces stronger effects when it can be linked to identifiable consequences and institutional responses (Lindstedt and Naurin 2010).

The third priority should be proactive integrity monitoring. Police anti-corruption systems should identify high-risk positions and transactions rather than waiting exclusively for complaints. Officers working in areas involving licensing, investigation, detention, evidence management, procurement, or substantial

discretionary authority may face different integrity risks. Risk-based monitoring could combine complaint data, lifestyle indicators, unexplained asset changes where legally reviewable, repeated allegations, and unusual financial or operational patterns. Asset and wealth-reporting mechanisms are particularly relevant for senior officials and public officials subject to statutory disclosure obligations. Law No. 28 of 1999 concerning Clean and Corruption-Free State Administration provides an important legal foundation for accountability and ethical governance, while financial disclosure can assist institutions in identifying discrepancies requiring further examination.

The fourth priority should be the reform of public complaint access. A national police accountability portal should provide a single, accessible entry point through which citizens can submit complaints and receive information concerning appropriate referral. The system should use plain language, permit anonymous preliminary reporting where legally appropriate, and provide clear protections for vulnerable complainants. Physical reporting channels should remain available through independent institutions and community-based assistance. Complaint accessibility is particularly important in a geographically large country such as Indonesia because centralized procedures may disadvantage citizens in remote areas. Local legal aid organizations and civil society groups can therefore play an important role in supporting complainants and monitoring institutional responses.

The fifth priority should be independent evaluation and public participation. Police institutions should periodically undergo integrity assessments involving external academics, civil society organizations, community representatives, and relevant oversight institutions. Public participation should not mean direct interference with individual criminal investigations. Rather, it should involve structured evaluation of institutional patterns, complaint accessibility, disciplinary outcomes, and integrity risks. Community participation can provide information that internal indicators may not capture, particularly regarding routine interactions between citizens and police officers. Comparative research on democratic policing suggests that accountability is strengthened when police institutions remain responsive to the communities they serve rather than functioning as closed bureaucratic organizations (Goldsmith 2005; Walker 2005).

Finally, reform should connect sanctions with institutional learning. Punishment is essential for serious corruption and misconduct, but an accountability system should also identify the organizational conditions that permitted wrongdoing. When repeated misconduct emerges from a particular unit or process, institutions should investigate supervision, incentives, workload, discretion, and reporting failures. A purely individual approach may punish one officer while leaving the underlying risk unchanged. Institutional accountability therefore requires a distinction between responsibility for misconduct and responsibility for preventing recurrence. Police reform will be more credible when disciplinary outcomes are accompanied by demonstrable changes in procedures, supervision, and transparency.

Conclusion

Police corruption represents a profound challenge to public trust because it undermines the principle that law enforcement authority should be exercised according to public rules rather than private interests. The consequences extend beyond financial loss or individual criminal responsibility. Bribery, extortion, abuse of authority, and other forms of misconduct can reduce public willingness to cooperate with police institutions, weaken perceptions of procedural justice, and diminish the legitimacy of the broader criminal justice system. Public confidence depends not only on whether corruption occurs but also on whether citizens believe that institutions respond credibly when misconduct is discovered.

Indonesia has established important mechanisms for police accountability through internal discipline, Propam, external oversight institutions, anti-corruption law, public administration mechanisms, and judicial processes. Internal oversight remains essential because it provides technical knowledge and access to institutional information. Nevertheless, structural limitations arise when an institution investigates its own members, particularly in cases involving senior officers, organizational networks, or allegations with significant public consequences. External oversight is therefore necessary not simply as an additional layer of bureaucracy but as a mechanism capable of strengthening the credibility and independence of accountability.

A sustainable reform agenda should consequently develop a multi-layered accountability framework combining internal investigation, independent external oversight, transparent disciplinary reporting, accessible complaint mechanisms, whistleblower protection, asset and integrity monitoring, and structured public participation. Stronger sanctions alone will not restore trust if citizens continue to perceive accountability as opaque or institutionally compromised. The central objective should be to create institutional conditions in which corruption is more difficult to conceal, complaints are easier to submit, investigations are independently scrutinized, and misconduct produces meaningful consequences. By strengthening both internal integrity and external accountability, Indonesia can improve police legitimacy and reinforce public confidence in law enforcement as an institution of democratic governance.

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