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Police whistleblowing: A systematic review of the likelihood (and the barriers and facilitators) of the willingness of police officers to report the misconduct of fellow officers

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Recent high-profile cases of police misconduct have revealed that officers were often aware of misconduct, but remained silent, compromising public trust in law enforcement. Here, we systematically review 'police whistleblowing' literature to identify barriers and facilitators to officers challenging misconduct.

Methodology: Employing PRISMA guidelines, we systematically reviewed 118 relevant papers, extracting data and coding key variables including who the 'target' of the research was; whether reporting practices were studied, and whether practical solutions were offered. A reflexive thematic analysis then assessed consensus among researchers within the literature.

Results: Five themes - 1) knowledge and rules, 2) consequences, 3) interpersonal relations, 4) responsibility, and 5) police culture and group relations – emerged as barriers and facilitators to whistleblowing. The review revealed relatively poorer representation of internal police reporting structures and limited practical solutions, with only 40 papers proposing strategies, predominantly centred on training and education.

Discussion: This review highlights methodological limitations in existing research, with an overreliance on survey methods and a dominant focus on the characteristics of individuals over the structural constraints of reporting. The positive impacts of whistleblowing on policing as an institution and the development of practical strategies to overcome officers' reluctance to report misconduct remain largely unexplored.

1. Introduction

1.1. Current problems with police whistleblowing

In contemporary society, the role of law enforcement agencies is increasingly scrutinised, particularly in the context of ethical conduct and accountability. High-profile incidents of police misconduct have not only drawn public attention but have also ignited a global discourse on the integrity of policing practices. In the UK, this issue has been brought into sharp focus by high-profile cases, including the death of Sarah Everard at the hands of Officer Wayne Couzens and the serial abuses by Officer David Carrick, highlighting serious concerns about internal accountability and the culture within police forces. These cases have not

only exposed the recurring nature of misconduct in police ranks but also highlighted a troubling pattern of silence within the force, even when faced with clear evidence of wrongdoing. Notably, Carrick faced multiple complaints and warnings without disciplinary action, while Couzens' exhibited behaviour that raised concerns among his colleagues before his final crime with which he was charged (Dodd & Sinmaz, 2023; Sinclair, 2021). These patterns of inaction and passive complicity among officers, despite awareness of misconduct, constitutes a breach of police professional standards and ethics (Donner, Maskály, Jennings, & Guzman, 2021; Home Office, 2018). Covering for corrupt officers leads to adverse consequences in public impressions of the police (Conti-Cook, 2019) further eroding public trust, which has fallen from 75% in 2020 to 53% in 2022 (Kirk, 2022).

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The erosion of public trust aligns with Tyler's (1990) procedural justice theory, which emphasises the need for legitimate, honest, and neutral policing procedures to enhance community compliance. Supporting this, Lai, Chu, Wu, Luo, and Lo (2022) demonstrates that perceptions of procedural justice strongly predict public view of police misconduct. Therefore, citizen awareness of unaddressed misconduct fosters the perception of unfair and biased policing, which in turn discourages public engagement and deepens the divide between the public and the police. This underscores the urgent need for policing reform, particularly in addressing unethical behaviour at all levels of the force.

The current focus on police conduct raises questions about why unethical behaviour persists and the reluctance of internal whistleblowing. Policing research has started to address these issues, exploring whether officers are willing to report misconduct, to whom, and what solutions researchers propose – but this literature remains fragmented. The current systematic review is the first of its kind to collate and synthesise existing research on police misconduct reporting. It aims to assess the propensity of officers to report problematic behaviour and to understand the factors influencing their decision to either report or remain silent. We begin by describing the key theories of police whistleblowing, the common barriers and facilitators to reporting and the practical implications of whistleblowing. Following PRISMA guidelines, we then systematically search three databases to extract empirical literature around whistleblowing in police organisations and provide a comprehensive taxonomy of potential barriers and facilitators to whistleblowing and the practical solutions offered by the literature to promote reporting.

1.2. Theories of police whistleblowing

In the research field of police ethics and accountability, several theories have been influential in understanding the dynamics of police whistleblowing, such as the theory of police integrity (Klockars, Kutnjak Ivković, Harver, & Haberfeld, 1997), organisational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987), and the rotten apple thesis (Punch, 2003). Police integrity emphasises officers resisting unethical behaviour that contradicts their role as law enforcement (Klockars, Kutnjak Ivković, & Haberfeld, 2007). Authors shifted focus to assessing police integrity, rather than directly evaluating police misconduct, in response to push back from police forces reluctant to openly discuss such matters (Klockars, Kutnjak Ivković, & Haberfeld, 2004). In 1994, Klockars and Kutnjak Ivković developed a measure based on the theory of police integrity, revealing reasons behind officer hesitation to report. The theory delineates four dimensions of police integrity: organisational rules, control mechanisms, code of silence, and societal influences (Klockars et al., 1997). The first dimension, organisational rules, stresses the importance of clear, well-communicated rules with zero tolerance for misconduct (Klockars & Kutnjak Ivković, 2004; Kutnjak Ivković & Haberfeld, 2015). The second dimension involves interventions for preventing and addressing corrupt behaviour, ensuring awareness among officers of the disciplinary measures in place (Klockars & Kutnjak Ivković, 2004; Kutnjak Ivković & Haberfeld, 2015). The third dimension addresses the code of silence, which is the implicit order between officers that they must show solidarity and remain silent against another's corrupt behaviour (Wu, 2023). The third dimension stipulates that an agency with high integrity would be less likely to acknowledge this code of silence, thus reducing the chances of unethical behaviours being overlooked or shielded (Klockars & Kutnjak Ivković, 2004; Kutnjak Ivković & Haberfeld, 2015). The fourth dimension explores how societal factors influence the police agency, suggesting that an organisation with high integrity aligns with societal values promoting morality and ethical conduct (Klockars & Kutnjak Ivković, 2004; Kutnjak Ivković & Haberfeld, 2015).

Organisational justice theory asserts that an employee's perception of fairness within the organisation influences behaviour (Quinton, Myhill, Bradford, Fildes, & Porter, 2015; Rupp & Thornton-Lugo, 2011). It includes distributive, procedural, informational, and interactional

justice (Colquitt et al., 2013; Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005). Procedural justice emphasises fairness in policing processes (Thibaut & Walker, 1978), distributive justice focuses on outcomes (Reynolds, Fitzgerald, & Hicks, 2018), and interactional and informational justice address how employees are respected and treated (Bies & Moag, 1986; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Organisational justice influences officers' identity and connection to the force (Blader & Tyler, 2009; Tyler & Blader, 2003), impacting commitment, work achievements, job perception, and reducing negative behaviours (Colquitt, 2008; Colquitt et al., 2001; Tyler & Blader, 2000). In policing, it can lead to both positive and negative officer conduct (Quinton et al., 2015). Negative experiences may result in perceptions of injustice, triggering a range of retaliatory behaviours, from minor actions to severe instances of misconduct (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2018; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011). Organisational justice influences police misconduct and may affect an officer's willingness to report deviant behaviour, contributing to increased complaints and negative perceptions of the force (Reynolds et al., 2018; Reynolds & Helfers, 2019).

The rotten apple thesis encompasses a set of explanations for police misconduct centred on corruption: the rotten apple, rotten barrel, rotten branches, and rotten orchard theories. The rotten apple theory attributes corruption to a minority of individuals, however, these few individuals run the risk of spreading corruption throughout the organisation, i.e., a few rotten apples spoil the barrel (Punch, 2000). The rotten barrel theory implicates the organisation itself stating that an organisation with a corrupt culture and subsequent practices will influence individual officer's behaviour (Herbert, 1998; Punch, 2000). The rotten branches theory posits corruption starting within police subunits, and the rotten orchard theory emphasises broader system failures in which unethical officers are bred (Punch, 2003). Lee, Lim, Moore, and Kim (2013) evaluated organisational aspects, specifically organisational tolerance, finding that overlooking misconduct enables its persistence relating to the rotten barrel and branches theories.

1.3. Pre-existing barriers and facilitators to reporting

Investigations into police reporting behaviour, guided by existing theoretical frameworks, have identified a range of barriers and facilitators that influence police whistleblowing. The perceived severity of misconduct is assumed to significantly impact an officers' willingness to report, with some studies suggesting that officers are more willing to blow the whistle when the behaviour is viewed as severe (Hickman, Piquero, Powell, & Greene, 2016). Contrastingly, Weisburd (2000) found that 50% of a sample of American officers believed their colleagues wouldn't report serious misconduct. Knowledge of rule violations and perceived discipline appropriateness also provide reasoning for officer reporting behaviour, as officers may hesitate to report if they believe the disciplinary actions are excessively harsh or disproportionate (Kutnjak Ivković & O'Connor Shelley, 2010). The fear of consequences, particularly retaliation by other officers, further complicates this dynamic. Studies by Skolnick (2002) and Cancino and Enriquez (2004) have documented instances of officers facing ostracism, denial of backup, and other forms of retaliation for whistleblowing, while fear of punishment for adhering to agency policy may explain why some officers choose not to report corruption.

The occupational culture of policing is identified as a key reason for officer reluctance to report their fellow officer. This culture, often intertwined with the code of silence, fosters loyalty among officers, discouraging them from reporting misconduct within their ingroup (McCartney & Parent, 2015). Research also suggests that exposure to this culture during and after police training contributes to reduced willingness to report (Donner & Maskály, 2022).

1.4. Practical implications of police whistleblowing

The literature on police whistleblowing has not only identified barriers and facilitators but also discussed practical implications and potential solutions to address officers' reluctance to report misconduct. Raines and Merenda (2022) explored the effectiveness of intervention training, incorporating the Ethical Policing is Courageous (EPIC) program into basic law enforcement training. This program encourages officers to be active bystanders, intervening when witnessing unethical behaviour. Their findings suggest that officers who underwent this training were more willing to report corrupt behaviour compared to those who did not. Another initiative, the Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE) program, trains officers not only to intervene but also on how to respond when being intervened upon (Mullin, 2020).

Training, seen as a means to reduce misconduct, has garnered support in various studies. For instance, Boateng, Makin, Abess, and Wu (2019) reported that 31% of Ghanaian officers believed that training and education could significantly reduce corruption. Policy implementation is another suggested solution. Rothwell and Baldwin (2007a) conducted a study involving 300 officers in Georgia, USA, which underscored the importance of policies mandating reporting. Such policies can clarify the obligation to report, reducing ambiguity and potentially increasing reporting rates. Additionally, legal frameworks like the Public Interest Disclosure Act (1998) in the UK (Gov.UK, 2020) and the Code of Ethics by the College of Policing (2014) seek to protect whistleblowers and underscore the duty to report unethical conduct.

In sum, the impact of police misconduct extends beyond individual incidents, eroding public trust and perceptions of security within the policing profession (Conti-Cook, 2019). Tyler's (1990) emphasis on the perception of police officers as fair and moral agents highlights the importance of addressing internal misconduct to maintain public cooperation and peace in police-citizen interactions. Theories such as police integrity provide a framework for promoting high ethical standards within law enforcement agencies (Klockars et al., 1997) and intervention trainings (e.g., Raines & Merenda, 2022) are advocated to improve officer's responsiveness to misconduct. However, the field lacks a comprehensive systematic review that critically examines the barriers and facilitators to reporting, and evaluates the practical solutions aimed at encouraging whistleblowing. This gap underlines the crucial need for the current study, which seeks to fill this void by providing a systematic analysis of these key aspects, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of police whistleblowing and its implications in contemporary policing.

1.5. Objectives

- To identify the levels of reporting structures within police forces, focusing on identifying both the targets of reports (who is likely to be reported) and the reporting channels (to whom officers are more likely to report).
- To identify the common reasons for reporting and for not reporting a fellow officer's misconduct.
- To identify the proposed solutions to combatting officer unwillingness to report misconduct.
- To critically assess gaps in the evidence and knowledge base surrounding police reporting police misconduct.

1.6. Primary research questions

1. What are the structure levels to police officers reporting a fellow officer's misconduct?
 - a. Who are police officer's likely to report?
 - b. To whom are police officers likely to report misconduct?
2. What effects a police officer's willingness to report a fellow officer's misconduct?
 - a. What are the barriers to reporting a fellow officer's misconduct?

- b. What are the facilitators to reporting a fellow officer's misconduct?
3. What solutions have been proposed to improve reporting behaviour?

2. Methodology

2.1. Protocol and registration

To assess the above objectives, a systematic review was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 checklist and framework (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) is a set of guidelines used in research to ensure transparent and comprehensive reporting of systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). Three initial stages were undertaken before the literature could be confirmed as suitable: (1) identifying all papers via a search through their titles, abstracts, and keywords, (2) briefly screening these papers for relevance via the eligibility criteria put forward, and then (3) reviewing the selected papers to assess their suitability for inclusion in the final analysis. This systematic review was pre-registered with the Open Science Framework (OSF): https://osf.io/8v9qp/?view_only=a1f25bd9d273489f93a0b037aa987494.

2.2. Eligibility criteria

2.2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

All studies assessing police misconduct and its reporting were included in the initial stages of the review. This broad scope was necessary to capture the full range of relevant research. For final inclusion, studies needed to specifically examine the reporting of police misconduct, focusing on how, when, and why officers report misconduct by their colleagues. This focus necessitated that the studies concentrate on the police either as an organisation or on individual officers, thereby excluding papers that primarily dealt with citizen involvement in police misconduct. To help negate the potential publication bias in this area of research, both published and unpublished studies were included (Lefebvre et al., 2022). Both quantitative and qualitative data were considered. No geographical or temporal limits were set, acknowledging that the issue of police misconduct spans decades and is a global concern. This unrestricted scope was intended to enhance the generalisability and representativeness of the review's findings. Only papers in the English language were included and papers were excluded if they were not accessible via Lancaster University's library catalogue.

2.3. Information sources

The databases used for this systematic review were multidisciplinary reflecting the diverse academic disciplines that have explored this topic including Psychology, Criminology, Sociology, and Policing. Three multidisciplinary databases were selected: Scopus, Web of Science, and Academic Search Ultimate. These databases were accessed between December of 2022 - January 2023.

2.4. Search strategy

A tailored search strategy was applied to all three databases. For instance, in Academic Search Ultimate, the use of the subject terms function allowed for the inclusion of alternative terms commonly used in the literature, such as 'police misconduct'. This strategy was refined based on preliminary scoping search and consultations with subject matter experts from the police. The initial search terms included a broad array of keywords relevant to the subject: 'police', 'police officer', 'police misconduct', 'police misbehaviour', 'police corruption', 'breach of duty', 'whistleblowing', and 'code of silence'. The term 'reporting' was deliberately excluded in favour of 'whistleblowing' to avoid an overwhelming number of irrelevant results (i.e., multiple papers which used the word 'reporting' for their results). Similarly, 'code of silence' was

included due to its specific relevance to police reporting behaviour. From this initial search in the databases, over 100,000 papers were returned which was not feasible for this and indicated that the search needed to be more specific. A review of these results led to the decision to remove 'police' and 'police officer' from the search terms, as these were generating a high number of irrelevant papers that focused on any papers that included police in the title. The final search terms, linked via the Boolean phrase 'OR', were 'police misconduct', 'police misbehaviour', 'police corruption', 'breach of duty', 'whistleblowing', and 'code of silence'. These terms were searched within the titles, abstracts, keywords, and author-selected keywords of the papers in each database. The search strategies for each of the three databases are as follows:

2.4.1. Scopus

"Police Misconduct OR "Police Misbehav*" OR "Police Corrupt*" OR "breach of dut*" OR "whistleblow*" OR "code of silence".

2.4.2. Academic search ultimate

DE "Police Misconduct" OR DE "Police Misbehav*" OR DE "Police Corrupt*" OR DE "breach of dut*" OR DE "whistleblow*" OR DE "code of silence".

OR TI "Police Misconduct" OR "Police Misbehav*" OR "Police Corrupt*" OR "breach of dut*" OR "whistleblow*" OR "code of silence".

OR AB "Police Misconduct" OR "Police Misbehav*" OR "Police Corrupt*" OR "breach of dut*" OR "whistleblow*" OR "code of silence".

2.4.3. Web of science

TS = ("Police Misconduct" OR "Police Misbehav*" OR "Police Corrupt*" OR "breach of dut*" OR "whistleblow*" OR "code of silence").

The effectiveness and accuracy of the search strategy were validated through a specific testing process. Five representative papers, identified from the initial scoping search and, determined as representative of the research aims were used as benchmarks. The efficiency of the search strategy across the different databases was ascertained by confirming the retrieval of all five papers in each database's search result. Across databases, all five papers were retrieved and thus, the search strategy was deemed effective.

2.5. Study selection and data collection process

After searching, the references for all identified papers were downloaded and imported as RIS files into the reference management tool, Endnote 20 (The EndNote Team, 2013). In Endnote 20, the de-duplication strategy put forward by Bramer, Giustini, de Jonge, Holland, and Bekhuis (2016) was used to detect and remove duplicate articles across the three databases. After de-duplication, the papers were downloaded and imported into the screening programme, Rayyan.ai (Ouzzani, Hammady, Fedorowicz, & Elmagarmid, 2016). The titles and abstracts of the papers were first screened to remove papers that did not fit the research questions or the inclusion criteria. A second individual then reviewed a subset of these papers (25% equalling 3041 papers) whilst a blind was switched on to ensure that they were unaware of the first reviewer's decisions. Double screening was carried out to establish consistency with the reviewers' decisions. Once the papers were reviewed, the blind was turned off and any conflicts in decisions were resolved between reviewers. Papers excluded at this stage primarily involved whistleblowing in non-police professions, such as medicine, finance, and politics. Inter-rater reliability tests were also conducted at this stage of the review process in which will be discussed and presented later in this article.

The remaining papers underwent full article assessment. Again, a second reviewer was used to assess the inclusion and exclusion criteria against the full articles to prevent any papers being wrongfully excluded. Here, papers were removed if they did not assess officer's reporting misconduct.

Overall, 15,549 papers were found across the three selected

databases. Through EndNote 20 and Rayyan.ai, nearly 3400 duplicate papers were removed, leaving 12,172 papers. First, the titles and abstracts of all papers were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria which resulted in excluding 11,950 papers. 12 of the papers were not retrievable. The second round of screening took place in which the remaining papers were fully examined leaving 118 studies included (the references for all included papers can be found via the OSF link: https://osf.io/8v9qp/?view_only=a1f25bd9d273489f93a0b037aa987494). The full breakdown can be seen in the PRISMA flow diagram (Fig. 1) pictured below (Page et al., 2021). These papers ranged over two decades starting in 2000 with the last paper in this review published in 2022. Please refer to the supplementary materials for an in-depth view of the years of publications for the papers included in this review.

2.6. Risk of bias

Risk of bias was assessed for all the included studies to determine the level of bias and the authors level of transparency with their methodology and results. Based on the methods used by Belur, Agnew-Pauley, McGinley, and Tompson (2019) and the associated automated Excel tool they created, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Qualitative Checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2022), the Effective Public Health Practice Project Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies (Effective Public Health Practice Project, 2017), and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (Pluye et al., 2011) was used – for an in-depth explanation of the risk of bias process, please see supplementary materials. Following assessment, all the included studies received a rating of 'strong', 'moderate', and 'weak'. As can be seen in Fig. 2, 64 papers were moderate, 48 papers weak, and six papers were strong.

2.7. Analytical approach

The types of studies included in this systematic review are not homogenous and are instead a mixture of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods designs. Therefore, the use of meta-analysis would not be the best course of action (Deeks, Higgins, & Altman, 2022). Furthermore, since a systematic review has never been carried out for this topic of research, the extent of research out there needs to be established. Accordingly, a narrative synthesis approach was used to map categories and genres seen in the literature.

Our analytical approach to this systematic review were as follows. First, we were interested in mapping the presence and prevalence of the key facets to whistleblowing as outlined in our study objectives. The first outcome measure was the structure levels of reporting – i.e., does the study describe different levels of reporting. Within this outcome, we further noted whether the paper assessed willingness or unwillingness to report misconduct, who the officers reported this to, and who it was they reported was coded. To showcase the international scope of the literature, we also coded for the national context of which the papers' study took place. The next outcome measure was regarding reasons provided for and against reporting behaviour. Practical implications were then coded to see if researchers are providing solutions to issues within police whistleblowing.

The data was coded in Excel, where each outcome measure was recorded dichotomously (coded as 0 for absent or 1 for present) and R Studio was used to generate frequency descriptive statistics. Inter-rater reliability was also undertaken to assess whether these outcomes were recorded consistently across independent coders. Both reviewers independently coded 25 papers with aims of achieving moderate or above agreement levels. Gwet's AC1 (Gwet, 2014) was used with agreement levels: poor (<0), slight (0 to 0.20), fair (0.21 to 0.40), moderate (0.41 to 0.60), substantial (0.61 to 0.80) and almost perfect (0.81 to 1) (Landis & Koch, 1977). Inter-rater reliability was established for all variables ranging from substantial to almost perfect levels of agreement between coders. The full breakdown can be seen in Table 1.

A key motivation of the current work was to ascertain the

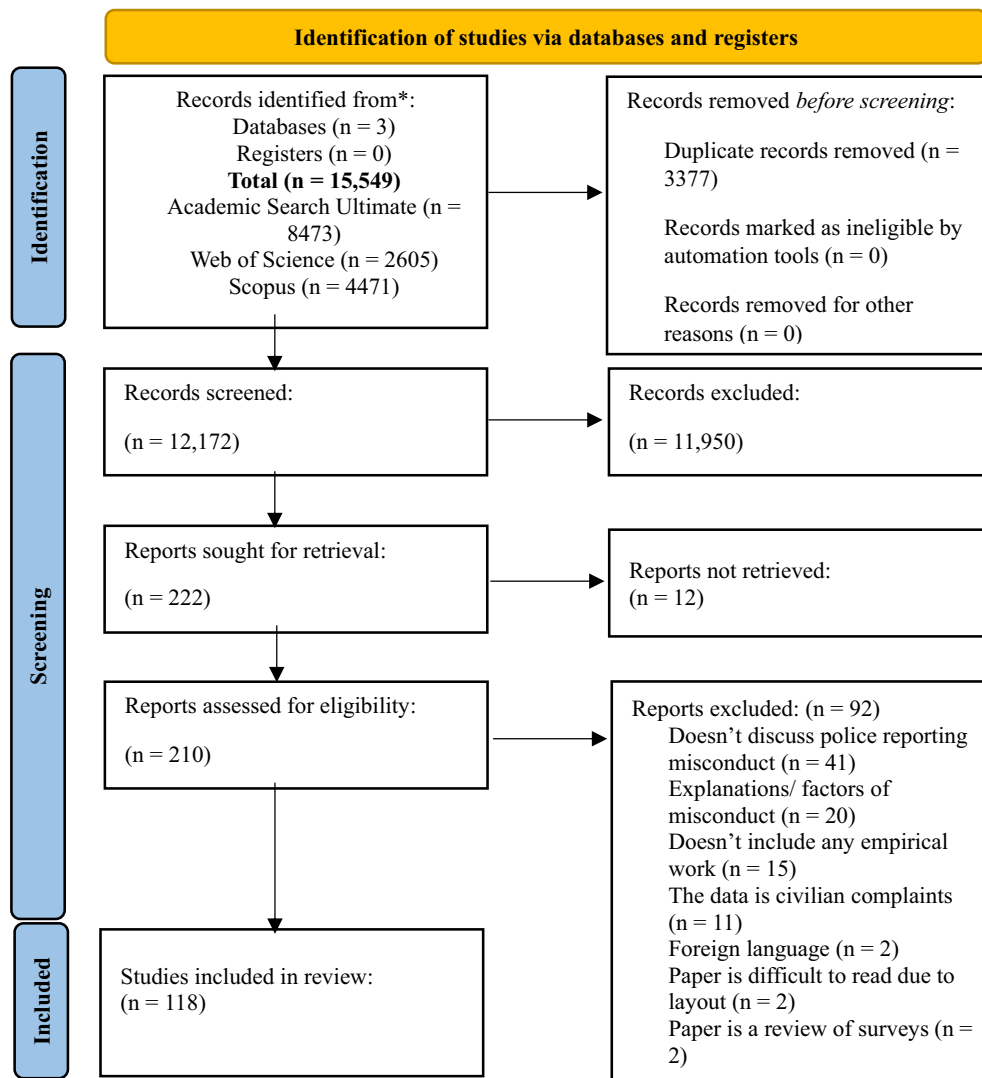


Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram to determine final sample for systematic review of police whistleblowing behaviour. Note. Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J. M., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S. E., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J. M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E. W., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S., McGuinness, L. A., ... Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ (Clinical research ed.)*, 372, n71. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>.

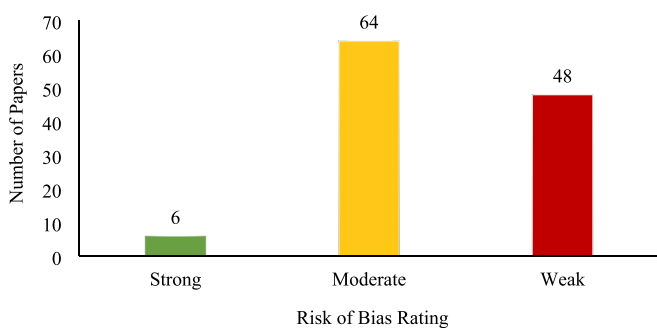


Fig. 2. Bar chart exhibiting the number of papers with a strong, moderate, or weak RoB.

explanations given by the literature as to why individuals do and do not report misconduct behaviour. To examine this further, we applied an established approach that has been used in multiple papers in multiple domains. For instance, a paper by Shafi and Mallinson (2023) appearing in the *Housing and Society Journal* utilised the reflexive thematic analysis process by Braun and Clarke (2012) when carrying out their

scoping review on the impact of technology in homes in enhancing the independence for elderly people and those with disabilities. This approach has also been used with law enforcement to specifically assess the interoperability of emergency services within the UK (Power, Alcock, Philpot, & Levine, 2023). Therefore, we applied a reflexive thematic analysis to identify, code, and analyse common themes to the reasons for reporting behaviour across the 118 papers (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Within this process, themes do not have to be pre-defined and instead develop through grouping codes that display commonality between them (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The six steps of reflective thematic analysis were followed in which an inductive and deductive approach was taken and pre-existing and new themes were identified and assessed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To ensure consistency in these themes, we applied 'investigator triangulation' (Denzin, 2017) in which three authors convened together, refined the emergent themes, and reached consensus regarding which studies were illustrative examples of these themes.

3. Results

First, to map the prevalence of the key outcome variables to

Table 1
Inter-rater reliability of binary review codes.

Measure	N of decisions	% Agreement	Gwet's AC1	SE	95% CI	p	Landis-Koch
Misconduct Reported of	50	100.00%	1.00	0.00	[1, 1]	< 0.001	Almost perfect
Reported Misconduct	50	96.00%	0.95	0.05	[0.85, 1]	< 0.001	Almost perfect
Misconduct Reported to	50	80.00%	0.76	0.10	[0.57, 0.97]	< 0.001	Substantial
Not Reported Misconduct	50	76.00%	0.65	0.15	[0.33, 0.96]	< 0.001	Substantial
Practical Implications Presented	50	80.00%	0.60	0.16	[0.27, 0.94]	< 0.001	Substantial

Note. Gwet's AC1 for binary measures.

whistleblowing, we present the descriptive statistics of who the officers reported, who they reported to, the papers' assessments of willingness or unwillingness to report misconduct, and whether practical implications were presented. Then, descriptive statistics of the national context of the papers will be presented. Next, the results of the reflexive thematic analysis regarding the potential barriers and facilitators of officer whistleblowing will be presented. Finally, we present the practical implications mentioned in the literature, including their prevalence and examples.

3.1. Who is reported and who do they report to?

The data showed that the most common focus of concern about misconduct was a frontline (beat or street) officer with 113 papers. The next common category to be reported was supervisors with 28 papers. In two papers each, managers and sergeants were mentioned with senior officers, anti-corruption officers, and administrators mentioned in one paper each. However, it should be noted that this was partly constrained by the dominant measurement tool in this line of research. For instance, 88 out of 118 papers included the measurement of police integrity in which had officers answer questions relating to 11 hypothetical vignette scenarios. Questions about officers or supervisors were built into the structure of these scenarios.

In terms of a concern with how reporting might be done, of the 118 papers, 85 papers did not record or ask about who misconduct would be reported to. Of the 33 papers that did, superiors were the most likely to have a police misconduct complaint reported to them (15 papers). Specialised departments, featuring the Internal Affairs Department and the Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission were discussed in 14 papers. This Commission is a specialised body that regulates and enforces discipline (Collins, 2004) whilst the IAD investigates misconduct allegations. Six papers referred to reporting to the Organisation with five papers stating that officers preferred reporting directly to other officers including the officer who committed the misconduct. Furthermore, four papers recalled officers using a confidential reporting hotline. One paper referred to reporting to a Line Manager, which is either another officer or member of the policing staff that has manager responsibility over said officer (Legislation.gov.uk, 2008).

3.2. High level variables

Table 2 showcases the descriptive statistics of the key facets of whistleblowing per the objectives of this study. The table below exhibits the frequency of papers that display each of the listed variables – the willingness to report misconduct, the unwillingness to report misconduct, whether both willingness and unwillingness to report was assessed, and whether practical implications were given.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics of coded variables.

Variable	N	n display	% display
Willingness to Report Misconduct	118	106	89.9%
Unwillingness to Report Misconduct	118	76	64.4%
Willingness and Unwillingness to Report	118	64	54.2%
Practical Implications Given	118	40	33.9%

3.3. National context

Fig. 3 displays the frequency of papers published per country. As depicted in Fig. 3, the USA are leading with 42 of the papers containing an American sample. The next most popular country for research on police whistleblowing is Croatia with 11 papers.

3.4. Reflexive thematic analysis: Reasons for reporting

Among the 118 papers included in the review, 106 provided insights into the reasons behind the officers' whistleblowing behaviour. The reflexive thematic analysis identified five key overarching themes representing the main barriers and facilitators to police whistleblowing. These themes are: (1). 'Knowledge and Rules', (2). 'Consequences', (3). 'Interpersonal Relations', (4). 'Responsibility', and (5). 'Police Culture and Group Relations'. The themes and subthemes are discussed below and shown in Fig. 4 with definitions and examples provided.

3.4.1. Knowledge and rules

This theme relates to an officer's understanding of the rules within their force and their knowledge of the disciplinary actions that should be taken against unethical officers. It aligns with the theory of police integrity's emphasis on official rules and control mechanisms (Klockars et al., 1997). Within this theme, five different subthemes were identified: 1. 'Perceptions of Seriousness of Misconduct', 2. 'Knowledge of Violation of Rules', 3. 'Disciplinary Fairness', 4. 'Knowledge on How to Report', and 5. 'Policy Requirements'.

3.4.1.1. *Perceptions of seriousness of misconduct.* This subtheme, referenced in 82 papers, explores how an officer's perception of the severity of misconduct influences their decision to report. The prevailing view, supported by a substantial body of research, is that the seriousness with which an officer regards different acts of corruption strongly impacts their likelihood of reporting it. This is exemplified in the work of Cheloukhine, Kutnjak Ivković, Haq, and Habersfeld (2015) who assessed police integrity in Russia by asking officers about the seriousness of hypothetical scenarios and their willingness to report. They found that actions perceived as more serious were more likely to be reported. Similarly, Kutnjak Ivković, Cajner Mraović, and Borovec (2016) surveying Croatian police officers, found that scenarios perceived as less serious, such as accepting gifts from citizens, were less likely to be reported as misconduct. This pattern suggests that officers' decisions to report misconduct are significantly influenced by their assessment of the severity of the offense. Lesser offenses tend to be underreported, indicating a threshold of seriousness that prompts officers to take action.

3.4.1.2. *Knowledge of violation of rules.* This subtheme focuses on how an officer's understanding of what constitutes a violation of their agency's rules influences their decision to report misconduct. The 23 papers addressing this theme present mixed findings, highlighting its role as both a barrier and facilitator of reporting behaviour. Some studies find a reluctance to report even when officers recognise a violation of agency rules. Cheloukhine et al. (2015) found that officers were more unwilling to report misconduct if they deemed that it went against the regulations of their organisation. Similarly, Kutnjak Ivković

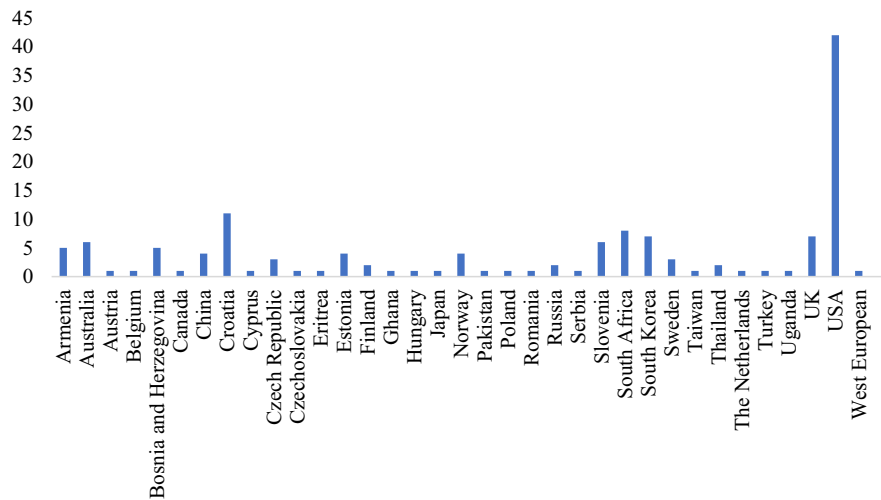


Fig. 3. A bar chart showing the number of papers on police whistleblowing per country.

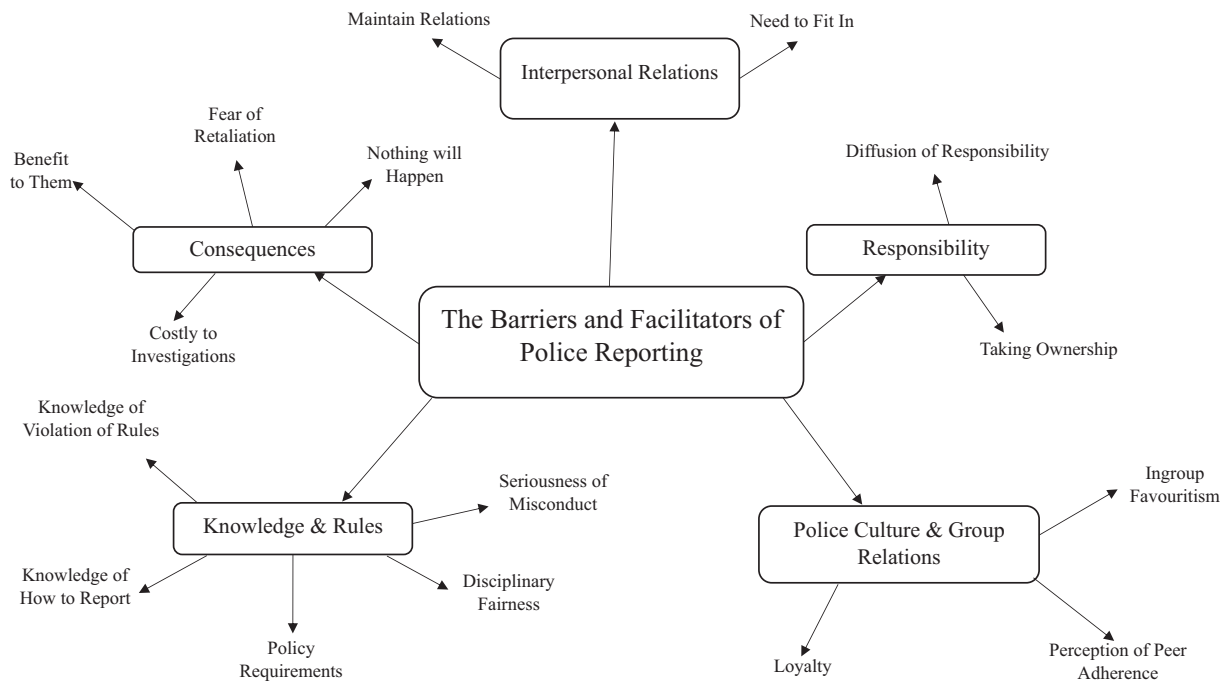


Fig. 4. The barriers and facilitators of police reporting.

and Khechumyan (2013) observed in their study of Armenian police that when faced with a scenario involving both a violation of organisational rules and the law (theft from a crime scene), officers' willingness to report was only moderately above the midpoint of the response scale. Tasdoven and Kaya (2014) noted a similar trend in the Turkish police force, where officers preferred adhering to the code of silence over reporting known rule violations. Conversely, other studies found increased reporting willingness when officers clearly perceived behaviour as violating agency rules. In their study conducted in South Africa, Kutnjak Ivković and Sauerman (2013) observed that officers demonstrated a higher propensity to report misconduct in all the scenarios in which officer actions represented violations of agency rules. This pattern was similarly reflected in a study by Kutnjak Ivković et al. (2016) in the United States, which found that officers who recognised certain behaviours as rule violations were notably more likely to engage in reporting compared to their counterparts who did not identify these violations. Porter and Prenzler (2016) further highlighted how a lack of

understanding of agency policies could impede officers' willingness to report. In their study of Australian officers, scenarios with the least consensus on rule violations corresponded with a greater unwillingness to report, suggesting that uncertainty or ignorance about what constitutes a rule violation can be a significant barrier to reporting. These findings collectively underscore the complexity of how knowledge of rules and their violations play into whistleblowing behaviour. While clear recognition of rule violations can facilitate reporting, mixed perceptions, or lack of awareness about what constitutes a violation can significantly hinder the whistleblowing process.

3.4.1.3. *Disciplinary fairness.* The notion of disciplinary fairness was referred to in 42 papers. Disciplinary fairness refers to the officer's perceptions of the appropriateness and equity of the disciplinary actions applied to officers who commit misconduct (Kutnjak Ivković & O'Connor Shelley, 2010). Research by Kutnjak Ivković et al. (2016), involving a survey with 604 U.S. officers, revealed that perceptions of overly harsh

disciplining of corrupt officers deterred reporting. Similarly, a study by [Dutzer, Mujanović, and Kutnjak Ivković \(2021\)](#), linking police integrity with education and adherence to the code of silence, found that officers were reluctant to report misconduct when they perceived the expected discipline as excessively punitive. These findings indicate that the perception of disciplinary actions as overly harsh can act as a barrier to whistleblowing.

The perception of disciplinary leniency also impacts reporting behaviour, but with conflicting findings. [Kääriäinen, Lintonen, Laitinen, and Pollock \(2008\)](#), examining the effectiveness of survey methods in police misconduct studies, found that officers were more inclined to report misconduct when they viewed expected disciplinary action as lenient, suggesting that perceived leniency might encourage reporting. However, a contrasting perspective was provided by [Kutnjak Ivković and O'Connor Shelley \(2010\)](#) in their study of Czech officers. They observed that in scenarios where discipline was seen as too lenient, officers were less likely to report, aligning with the simple deterrence model in which the officers weigh the costs of reporting with the costs of breaking the code ([Kutnjak Ivković & Klockars, 1998](#)). This finding suggests that when disciplinary actions are perceived as insufficient, officers may refrain from reporting, as the potential repercussions of breaking the code of silence may seem to outweigh the benefits of reporting the infraction.

3.4.1.4. Knowledge of how to report. Much less studied, but potentially important, was work on whether officers knew how to report. [Sweeting and Cole \(2022\)](#) examined officers' perceptions of police sexual misconduct cases and their consequent willingness to report such incidents. A notable finding emerged when officers, who either expressed reluctance to report or were uncertain about it, were asked to elucidate their reasons. Among the themes developed from these responses, a significant one highlighted by three different officers was the uncertainty surrounding the reporting mechanism itself.

3.4.1.5. Policy requirements. Another less studied but perhaps significant factor influencing officers' willingness to report misconduct is the presence of mandatory policies requiring the reporting of observed corruption. [Rothwell and Baldwin \(2007a\)](#) noted that having a mandatory policy to report corruption was associated with officer willingness to report misconduct for all scenarios except those that involve felonies. This indicates that having a requirement to whistleblow tended to facilitate reporting misconduct for officers.

3.4.2. Consequences

This theme represents the possible repercussions for officers who choose to report. This was divided into four subthemes, three of which represent negative consequences to reporting whilst one represents positive repercussions. These are 1. 'Fear of Retaliation', 2. 'Nothing Will Happen', 3. 'Too Costly to Investigations', and 4. 'Benefit to the Officer'.

3.4.2.1. Fear of retaliation. Fear of retaliation for reporting a fellow officer appeared in 15 papers. The fear that the officer themselves would face punishment not only from other officers but also from the organisation itself, motivated officers to turn a blind eye to corrupt behaviour. For instance, [Constantinou \(2020\)](#) assessed Cypriot officers via a survey evaluating officer reactions to police corruption and found that 13.3% of officers chose not to combat corruption out of fear of repercussions. When elaborating on their responses, one officer stated that he was afraid to report a supervisor because "if you report the incidents your name might be revealed to him and then your career will go down the river" (p. 745). [Sweeting, Cole, and Hills \(2022\)](#) identified common themes to reasons for not reporting officer sexual misconduct, with one directly referring to fear of retaliation – 'force won't protect me: participants feel reporting will have an adverse outcome on them personally' (p.291). Within this, officers expressed concerns about adverse

personal outcomes and potential career implications if their reporting behaviour became public knowledge.

However, it is not only the potential of retaliation, but also experiences of retaliation or the knowledge of such that feeds into this fear of reporting. [D'Souza, Weitzer, and Brunson \(2019\)](#) provided insight into officer's experiences of retaliatory behaviours in four U.S. departments. One detective recounted incidents of ostracism (pictures of cheese left on his desk and a deceased rat placed on his car), ignored requests for backup, and denied transfer requests after reporting misconduct, ultimately leading to his departure from the profession. Similarly, [Wieslander \(2019\)](#) highlighted an instance where an officer's critical opinions resulted in salary reduction by a supervisor for having "too many opinions" (p.317), further illustrating the role of higher management in retaliatory actions. These incidents suggest that officers are aware of the corruption but the cost that it may have to their careers enforces the view that is not worth dealing with the ramifications of following the rules.

3.4.2.2. Nothing will happen. The second most prevalent reason for officers' reluctance to report misconduct, as identified in nine papers, is their lack of confidence in the response or outcome following their report. This subtheme encompasses officers' scepticism about whether their whistleblowing actions will lead to any meaningful consequences or changes. [Constantinou's \(2020\)](#) study highlighted this with 19.1% of surveyed Cypriot officers stating that they did not report misconduct as they concluded that nothing would happen if they were to. This pessimistic outlook is not limited to a lack of expected punishment but extends to a general scepticism about the efficacy of reporting in combating corruption ([Park & Blenkinsopp, 2009](#)). [Sweeting and Cole \(2022\)](#) demonstrated failures in following through on discipline by evaluating focus group responses on police trainer's abilities to determine and handle cases of sexual misconduct with new recruits. One trainer noted that when another trainer had been reported for sexual misconduct, they were simply moved to a different force. This scepticism, as noted by [Park and Blenkinsopp \(2009\)](#) and [Newham \(2004\)](#), fosters a pessimistic outlook among officers. When they believe that reporting misconduct will not lead to significant outcomes, either in terms of punishment or addressing the root issue, it naturally leads to a reluctance to engage in whistleblowing. This mindset can significantly impede efforts to foster a culture of accountability and integrity within police forces.

3.4.2.3. Too costly to investigations. One interesting variant of the costs of whistleblowing was reported by [Loyens \(2013\)](#). Loyens reports that some officers, in particular detectives, may be reluctant to report misconduct by other officers because it could impede current investigations. Because detectives were evaluated on metrics like the speed with which they concluded investigations – reporting misconduct by other officers would introduce significant delay – which would undermine their own performance statistics. Accordingly, officers may prefer to stay silent and overlook misconduct to prevent any delays to investigations, and interference from management.

3.4.2.4. Benefit to the officer. A lesser-discussed but significant aspect of police whistleblowing is the potential benefit it may offer to the reporting officer. This theme is addressed in one paper, highlighting how whistleblowing can sometimes be perceived as advantageous within the police force. [Loyens \(2013\)](#) conducted a study that applied the grid group cultural theory to understand officer reporting behaviour. This theory, based on the work of [Hood \(1998\)](#), uses two dimensions to categorise social behaviour: the 'grid' dimension, which focuses on the influence of rules and regulations, and the 'group' dimension, which centres on the influence of the social groups. Within this framework, four cultural types emerge depending on the levels of grid and group: fatalism, individualism, hierarchy, and egalitarianism, each implying a

different style of reporting misconduct. In the context of an individualistic reporting style, characterised by self-management and competition in ambitious environments, one officer in Loyens' study reported a highly unmotivated colleague to appear more enthusiastic and remain in favour with their superior. This case illustrates how the potential for positive personal outcomes, such as improved perception by supervisors, can motivate an officer to engage in whistleblowing.

3.4.3. Interpersonal relations

Interpersonal relations refer to the interactions and relationships between individuals. Within this theme, two subthemes were identified: 1. 'The Need to Fit In' and 2. 'Maintaining Relations'.

3.4.3.1. The need to fit in. Ekenvall (2002) identified the need to fit in as a reason for officer's whistleblowing decisions. In a survey of Swedish police officers assessing their tolerance towards police misconduct, researchers referred to two differing organised reactions by officers for reporting misconduct: agency image and ego defence. Regarding the latter, the authors stated that officer's responses reflected their desire to present themselves in a preferable way to their colleagues driven by their need to fit in (Lippa, 1994). Officers demonstrated such in their responses to how they believed their fellow colleagues would react to misconduct. They tended to overstate their willingness to report as higher than their fellow colleagues exhibiting this ego defence approach by officers. By indicating that they would be more proactive in reporting than their colleagues showcases their want to portray themselves in a better light to fit in with what they believe superiors will want to see.

3.4.3.2. Maintaining relations. The need to remain in good relations with other officers appeared as reasoning for not reporting in four papers. It encompasses both the reluctance to report misconduct due to concerns about future cooperation and the decision to report as a means of preserving honour and respect among peers. Loyens (2013) referred to the individualistic style of nonreporting in which officers stated they would not report corruption as help from said colleague may be needed in the future, and reporting may prevent this. As a result, officers believed that misconduct should be reported by the guilty officer themselves and so remain silent to ensure that if they need assistance at a later date, they will receive it. In contrast, Donner, Maskaly, and Fridell (2016) found that the need to maintain relationships provided reasoning for supervisors' decision to report their fellow colleagues. Supervisors indicated that by not engaging in or reporting misconduct, they could avoid being viewed dishonourably by their colleagues, thereby preserving established relationships based on mutual respect and integrity. These studies collectively suggest that the dynamics of maintaining relationships significantly influence officers' decisions regarding whistleblowing. Whether it is the reluctance to report in order to preserve future working relationships or the decision to report to maintain honour and respect, the desire to maintain positive interpersonal relations is a key factor in shaping officers' responses to witnessing misconduct.

3.4.4. Responsibility

The theme of responsibility refers to the obligation, or lack thereof, that the officers feel they have towards reporting misconduct. This theme was divided into two subthemes: 1. 'Diffusion of Responsibility' and 2. 'Taking Ownership for their Role to Report'.

3.4.4.1. Diffusion of responsibility. The diffusion of responsibility is the idea that, within a group context, the person may believe that someone else will take the responsibility of reporting and therefore, will not themselves report (Guerin, 2011). Sweeting et al. (2022) identified a recurrent theme titled 'not my responsibility', where participants believed that the onus of reporting should fall on others. This theme was noted 41 times in their study, indicating its prevalence among officers.

Responses varied, with some officers believing that the individual who committed the misconduct should address it themselves, while others, who had only heard about the misconduct second hand, assumed that those directly involved would take the responsibility to report. This line of thinking by officers delays the actual reporting of the misconduct and subsequently, the ability of agencies to discipline such behaviour.

3.4.4.2. Taking ownership for their role to report. This subtheme focuses on the officers' feeling of personal responsibility that they may have to report unethical behaviour. One paper by Schafer and Martinelli (2008) evaluating supervisor responses to police misconduct found that supervisors were more willing to report the misconduct of others compared to frontline officers. This difference in willingness to report was further accentuated by supervisors' perceptions of their colleagues' likelihood to report. Supervisors often believed that other officers, especially those not in supervisory roles, would be less likely to report misconduct compared to themselves. The study highlights a critical aspect of the role of supervisors in policing – they often perceive a heightened sense of responsibility to report misconduct. This perception is likely rooted in their leadership position and the inherent expectations associated with it. The findings suggests that supervisors, by virtue of their role, are more likely to take ownership of their responsibility to report corruption, which consequently leads to a higher frequency of reporting within this group.

3.4.5. Police culture and group relations

Police culture and group relations refer to the dynamics and interactions that occur within a group context as well as the police's occupational culture that perpetuates the notion of the code of silence. Within this, there are three subthemes that encompass this and are known as: 1. 'Perception of Peer Adherence to Code', 2. 'Loyalty to Others', and 3. 'Ingroup Favouritism'.

3.4.5.1. Perception of peer adherence to code. This subtheme, referenced in 19 papers, explores how officers' perceptions of their peers' attitudes and actions towards reporting misconduct influence their own reporting decisions. Kutnjak Ivković et al. (2020) conducted a comparative study across five countries, analysing the code of silence in policing. They found that officers who perceived their colleagues as likely to report misconduct were themselves more inclined to report. This perception was identified as a significant predictor of whistleblowing, suggesting that officers often base their reporting decisions on their assessment of their peer's behaviour. This furthers previous work by Kutnjak Ivković et al. (2016) again assessing code of silence in police agencies across the U.S., which also emphasised the role of colleagues' willingness to report in shaping an officers' decision to engage in whistleblowing. Conversely, a survey study by Huberts, Lamboo, and Punch (2003) evaluating police integrity in the Netherlands and the USA found that officers often viewed their peers as less willing to report the misconduct. This suggests an awareness among officers of a prevalent code of silence culture within their forces, yet an individual willingness to break this norm. Therefore, knowledge of what other members of the force would do in relation to misconduct witnessed, provided a barrier and a facilitator for officers' own whistleblowing behaviour.

3.4.5.2. Loyalty to others. This subtheme examines how loyalty within the police force, often as a consequence of the code of silence, influences officers' willingness to report misconduct. This aspect was covered in six papers, reflecting on both the protective and inhibitive nature of loyalty in whistleblowing contexts. This prospective aspect of loyalty was shown in a study by Klockars et al. (2007), involving focus groups in three U.S. police agencies. Here, an older male officer responded to a scenario involving verbal abuse of a citizen by suggesting that he would not report it, implying a strategy of feigning ignorance as a form of loyalty. Andreescu, Keeling, Voinic, and Tonea (2012) explored

reporting behaviour and attitudes towards police corruption among male and female students in a Romanian police academy. Their findings highlighted the complexities of loyalty in a predominantly male force, especially for female officers. The study indicated that deviating from the loyalty norm could have adverse consequences, potentially restricting officers' ability to challenge corrupt behaviour. Rajakaruna, Henry, and Scott (2015) investigated the willingness of officers to use a confidential reporting line. Their study queried whether officers perceived using such a line as an act of disloyalty. Interestingly, their findings contrasted with the above examples, as most officers did not view reporting through a confidential line as disloyal. This suggests that the confidentiality provided by such mechanisms may reduce concerns about being perceived as disloyal.

3.4.5.3. Ingroup favouritism. The concept of ingroup favouritism, explored in six papers, considers the tendency of officers to preferentially support their own group (i.e., fellow officers) over others, often leading to the downplaying of unethical behaviour within their ranks (Everett, Faber, & Crockett, 2015). Brewer (2022) conducted an analysis of reddit forum posts featuring discussions on police misconduct between fellow officers. They found that the majority of officers believed that terminating an officer for one act of unethical conduct is absurd as most officers are moral and honest. This view was accompanied by a tendency to minimise misconduct of ingroup members, rationalising that rules cannot always be strictly adhered to and that everyone is prone to making mistakes. Sweeting et al. (2022) documented how officers often trivialised fellow officer misconduct in their explanations for not reporting. This minimisation was evident in responses that characterised misconduct as mere jokes or misunderstandings, with such justifications appearing 349 times in their data. Some officers (16 in total) doubted the veracity of the evidence presented, stating that there is a lot of gossip that circles the force. These findings highlight a significant barrier to effective whistleblowing within police forces: the inclination of officers to favour their fellow colleagues, even in the face of corrupt behaviour. This ingroup favouritism not only undermines the seriousness of misconduct but also challenges the integrity of the reporting process.

3.5. Practical implications

In assessing the extent to which the research offers practical implications, we documented solutions derived from empirical results. Overall, 40 papers proposed practical implications for addressing issues in police whistleblowing, which we categorise as follows.

3.5.1. Improving training and education

The most referenced practical implication was in relation to improving the training and education of police employees, as cited in 21 papers. In terms of training, the consensus tended to be providing officers with an ethics focused training program. For instance, Donner and Maskály (2022) advocate for integrating ethics and integrity into training programs from the onset of an officers' career at the police academy. This approach aims to instil ethical behaviour in officers and enhance their propensity to report misconduct. Addressing misconceptions about the disciplinary actions within the force is another key educational focus. Kutnjak Ivković et al. (2016) emphasise the need to educate officers on the actual disciplinary processes and the reasoning behind them. Many officers' reluctance to report misconduct stems from misunderstandings about appropriate and expected discipline. Correcting these misconceptions is crucial for improving officers' perceptions and understanding of why certain disciplinary actions are necessary.

3.5.1.1. Re-evaluate and alter supervision. Changing the tactics that supervisors enact or the requirements for being in a managerial position, were suggested in seven papers. Rothwell and Baldwin (2007b) argued

that the training and knowledge typically associated with supervisory roles, particularly regarding organisational policies and ethics, should be extended to all officers. Also, Lim and Sloan (2016) recommended that those in supervisory positions should have a higher level of education, such as a degree, and several years' experience before they can be hired in these positions.

3.5.2. Enforcement

3.5.2.1. Re-evaluate and enforce policies. A focus on modifying or effectively implementing policies to foster better whistleblowing behaviour was evident in seven papers. For example, Donner, Maskály, and Thompson (2018) highlighted the importance of reducing adherence to the code of silence by improving organisational attitudes and job satisfaction. They proposed incorporating elements of organisational justice theory – such as procedural, distributive, and interactional justice – into policy decisions made by police forces. Also, Kuo (2018) advocated for the establishment of “zero tolerance” policies for any forms of misconduct whilst Rothwell and Baldwin (2007a) argued that mandatory reporting policies could significantly enhance whistleblowing practices.

3.5.2.2. Re-evaluate and enforce discipline. This suggestion to modify disciplinary strategies to encourage reporting behaviour was highlighted in seven papers. This approach involves both addressing misconduct within the organisation and implementing measures to encourage ethical reporting. Donner and Maskály (2022) proposed that forces should not only deal with the appropriate cases of misconduct within the organisation but should also pass cases to prosecutors if a criminal act has been committed. Also, Klockars et al. (2007) stated that simply ignoring and not reporting misconduct when it is witnessed should be subject to disciplinary action. They also suggest that officers who do whistleblow should receive a reward, thus incentivising whistleblowing and setting a positive example for others.

3.5.3. Workforce design

3.5.3.1. Screening of police candidates. Four papers referred to improving or adjusting the screening of potential candidates prior to offering them a policing role. Donner et al. (2016) recommended prioritising candidates who already possess strong prosocial social bonds, both with other officers and with people in general. Such candidates are seen as more likely to contribute positively to the police force's culture. Additionally, Donner, Maskály, Popovich, and Thompson (2020) explored the associations between self-control and the code of silence and suggested that candidates exhibiting high levels of self-control, awareness of their surroundings, and good composure should be preferred in the hiring process.

3.5.3.2. Increase the female demographics. Another practical implication advised by Andreescu et al. (2012) is the introduction of more female police officers. Their study on gender differences in perceptions of police misconduct found that female officers were more inclined to report misconduct compared to their male counterparts. This finding leads to the recommendation of increasing the number of female officers in police forces, potentially enhancing the overall propensity for ethical reporting within the organisation.

3.5.4. Procedural change

3.5.4.1. Provide different ways to report or target misconduct. Four papers highlighted the importance of offering alternative ways of reporting or addressing misconduct to enhance whistleblowing effectiveness. Rajakaruna et al. (2015) proposed that introducing confidential hotlines improves whistleblowing by providing officers with an anonymous way

of reporting their fellow officers and reducing the possibility of retaliation. Additionally, Raines (2005) suggested that in some situations, counselling for officers involved in misconduct might be a more suitable response than formal reporting. This approach can provide a supportive avenue to address underlying issues without immediately resorting to punitive measures.

3.5.4.2. Introduce early warning systems. The concept of an early warning system, as proposed by Micucci and Gomme (2005), offers a proactive approach to combatting police misconduct. Early warning systems are strategies directed by data that allow agencies to identify suspect officers and impose interventions to prevent police misconduct from occurring (Alpert & Walker, 2000). This involves identifying officers via a pattern of troublesome behaviour or complaints that did not require conventional discipline, implementing interventions such as extra training or counselling if warranted, and then observing the outcome of such interventions (Alpert & Walker, 2000).

3.5.4.3. Improve complaint-handling procedures. Enhancing the process of handling complaints was a key suggestion by Porter, Prenzler, and Hine (2015). Specifically, they drew attention to the recent attempts in Australia to introduce more procedural fairness in the complaint-handling system to improve whistleblowing. By ensuring that complaint procedures are fair, transparent, and effective, the likelihood of officers reporting misconduct can be significantly increased. This approach underscores the importance of a trustworthy and efficient complaint-handling process in encouraging officers to come forward with reports of misconduct.

3.5.5. Culture change

3.5.5.1. Police culture. Three papers emphasised the need to address and change the current policing culture. Pagon and Lobnikar (2000) stress the importance of bringing awareness to the entrenched police culture, including the code of silence, both among officers and throughout the organisation. In Rothwell and Baldwin's (2007a) paper addressing ethical climates, they propose that moving from processes and approaches that promote a competitive climate to a more collaborative environment will curate a more friendly police culture and encourage officer whistleblowing. Acknowledging and altering the current issues surrounding police culture permits a potential occupational change in the perceptions of police misconduct and officer willingness to whistleblow.

3.5.5.2. Improve relations between officers. Two papers propose that fostering better relationships among officers can contribute to a more conducive environment for reporting misconduct. Kutnjak Ivković and Khechumyan (2013) suggested that cultivating good relationships within the entire force, rather than just within small groups, could help reduce the stigma of being labelled a "snitch". Improving overall relations among officers might create a more supportive atmosphere where reporting misconduct is viewed as a responsible and respected action, rather than a betrayal.

3.5.5.3. Transparency with the public. Having citizens informed on current ongoings within the police has been offered to improve accountability within the police. For example, Lobnikar and Meško (2015) advocated for the implementation of Sunshine Laws, similar to those in the USA, which require police agencies to maintain a certain level of transparency with the public. By mandating openness in operations and decision-making processes, these laws can act as a deterrent to covering police misconduct, thus promoting greater accountability within the police agencies.

4. Discussion

This systematic review aimed to assess and consolidate primary evidence on police whistleblowing research, with four main goals: 1) identify reporting structure levels, focusing on who is likely to be reported and to whom, 2) recognise barriers and facilitators for officers reporting colleagues, 3) identify proposed solutions to combat officer unwillingness to report misconduct, and 4) identify gaps in the literature.

The literature indicates that studies mostly focus on the unethical conduct of junior ranks. The primary focus for whistleblowing research is officers within forces, followed by supervisors. This may in part be an artefact of the dominant measurement instrument in the field – 'the police integrity survey' (used in 88 out of 118 papers). This instrument presents a set of scenarios which are limited to officer (and occasionally supervisor) malpractice. One consequence is that we know considerably less about responses to malpractice that might be committed by more senior ranks than we do about junior ranks.

Our review also reveals that researchers are more interested in the motivations of individual officers (who are potential whistleblowers) than they are in the role of policing structures themselves. Despite asking about whether officers would be prepared to whistleblow – the studies vary rarely ask about who they would report misconduct to. Eighty-five papers in our corpus did not ask or specify who would be reported to in cases of misconduct within the force. Once again, this myopia can (in part) be attributed to the commonly used police integrity survey (found in 88 out of 118 papers), which focuses on assessing willingness to report without asking who the report would be directed to. This knowledge gap in respect of reporting processes is important to note. For example, Wright's (2010) study on UK officers indicated a preference for reporting to supervisors or trusted colleagues over an anonymous line due to confidentiality concerns. At the same time, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP, 2019) emphasise reporting to supervisors as soon as possible. Further research is required to better understand this dimension of whistleblowing behaviour.

One potential mechanism for challenging police malpractice that is completely absent in this literature is peer-to-peer intervention. We recovered no studies that explore the possibility or benefits of more informal peer challenges (as opposed to more formal reporting of malpractice). Given the developments of training initiatives for peer intervention in policing (like ABLE (Georgetown Law, 2021) or EPIC (NOPD, 2023)) this is another area where the whistleblowing research field can benefit by engaging with a wider literature.

Our narrative synthesis revealed five key themes influencing officer whistleblowing behaviour: (1) knowledge and rules, (2) consequences, (3) interpersonal relations, (4) responsibility, and (5) police culture and group relations. Notably, the theme of knowledge and rules emerged as the most prominent, indicating that a lack of such knowledge made officers more hesitant to report misconduct. The role of rules in whistleblowing was a little more complex. Clearly, being certain that a behaviour transgressed the rules was important in the first instance. Officer perceptions of the seriousness of misconduct and adherence to policy requirements significantly influence their willingness to report fellow officers. However, alongside the formal rules there was also the importance of informal rules of fairness. Officers cited unfairness in the application of the rules of punishment as a reason NOT to report malpractice. If there was a sense that the punishment would not fit the crime for which the officers would be charged – then there was a reluctance to engage with the system. This delicate balance between the rules of transgression and the proportionality of punishment is another key dimension to better understanding the dynamics of whistleblowing.

One interesting approach to enhancing whistleblowing would be for police forces to consider implementing policies that make reporting obligatory. By doing this, it may take the onus of the decision away from officers and make them feel they are not being disloyal for reporting. However, the impact of this kind of legislative approach, and the

potential for unintended consequences, has not yet been explored in the literature.

The review also identified a range of personal and interpersonal costs for whistleblowing that act as inhibitors to action. Fear of retaliation, or loss of relationships, or collective punishment by the group were the most notable of these. The response to these challenges recognises the importance of addressing the cultural norms in policing that prioritise solidarity and discourage whistleblowing. The pervasive occupational subculture emphasising silence among officers inhibits reporting. To enhance whistleblowing behaviour, a cultural shift is essential, reframing reporting as beneficial to the team rather than a potential impediment.

Despite this recognition, there was almost no research which tried to explore how whistleblowing could be framed positively for both the individual or the group. With the exception of the paper by Loyens (2013) – which explored the positive potential for individual advancement through being prepared to whistleblow – there were no other studies which centred on the positive potential of challenging misconduct. More specifically, there were no papers that examined how positive rather than negative group values could be affirmed by challenging misconduct. Nor were there attempts to explore ways in which the power of group norms, or social identity values, could be drawn upon to reject behaviours by individuals who transgressed. There is a well-developed literature in the social psychology of group processes – and how they can be harnessed to challenge negative behaviour within the group (e.g., Levine, Lowe, Best, & Heim, 2012; Stott, Hutchison, & Drury, 2001) – which police whistleblowing literature could benefit from engagement.

Further to this, our review highlighted the prevalence of US samples within the police whistleblowing literature. As was seen in Fig. 3, the number of papers found to either take place or have a sample from the United States was largely above the next country involved in the review. Consequently, the subsequent literature within police whistleblowing heavily relies on the studies and results found within the US. As such, further consideration should be given to assessing police whistleblowing in other countries, specifically those within a non-Westernised region.

Finally, our review reveals a rather limited repertoire of practical recommendations for how to increase the likelihood that police officers will challenge the transgressions of fellow officers. Out of the forty papers suggesting solutions, training and education consistently emerge as key recommendations. Researchers advocate for improved education on force policies, discipline, and ethics, emphasising the need for organisations to incorporate interventions and ethics training. Given that the body of knowledge about what actually works is rather limited (as this review reveals) it's not clear whether we can have confidence in the effectiveness of what is actually being taught. Moreover, it is clear that there are important gaps in the theoretical approach to this question. In particular, we have knowledge deficits in respect of the impact of reporting structures on willingness to report; on the balance between the application of formal rules and informal rules of fairness/ proportionality; and on how we can counteract the negative power of group processes (like cultures of silence/ ingroup favouritism) by harnessing the power of the group to promote positive policing values.

Moving beyond recommendations for training and education, we also identify a small repertoire of recommendations related to the greater use of enforcement; suggestions for changes to the workforce through personnel selection procedures; changes to existing policies and procedures; and exhortations for culture change in police forces. We note that these recommendations are not associated with any information about the practical utility or evaluation of each approach.

The systematic review also identified some key important technical limitations within this literature. The research in this field, as highlighted within our risk of bias assessment, suffers from sample design flaws. An example of such includes the incorporation of only one treatment group without a control condition which meant that researchers were unable to prevent the possibility of selection bias or

introduce blinding procedures to ensure rigour. Confounds were also difficult to assess as researchers often failed to record demographic data (often for the reasons of wanting to preserve participant anonymity or reassure participants they were protected from retaliation). Difficulties with access to the full sample of police officers also meant that researchers were often unable to use randomisation properly in their research designs. These methodological weaknesses, and the subsequent high level of biases appointed to a large proportion of the studies, suggests that the true effects of the results may be potentially over or underestimated (NHMRC, 2019). However, due to the constraints with using and accessing police samples, some of the processes that ensure scientific rigour of experiments are difficult to action. To improve on the quality and effectiveness of the research in this field, we need to persuade police officers and police forces that it is in their interest to take part in co-constructed research that will result in more impactful and evidence-based research policies in the future.

Overall, the literature also suffers from the problem of data recycling, in which researchers published multiple papers using the same dataset, also known as overlapping, duplicate or redundant publications (Johnson, 2006). One explanation for this might be the limited availability of officer samples or the overreliance of the use of the police integrity measure. This is further highlighted in the vast number of papers retrieved and presented in this review from a single author – Kutnjak Ivković. For a full list of the authors found through the systematic search, please see supplementary materials. Kutnjak Ivković was one of the authors involved in the construction of the measurement of police integrity. Thus, the overreliance of such a measure in the police whistleblowing literature and the dependence in this area of research on the published works by Kutnjak Ivković further exacerbates the problem of data recycling. Despite these weaknesses, our review retained all studies, including those with a high likelihood of bias, in order to give a complete overview of the literature.

In conclusion, our systematic review reveals a field that is over-reliant on a particular measurement instrument (the police integrity scale), has significant gaps in the knowledge base, and has a limited repertoire of practical recommendations to make. Going forward, we need to broaden the methodological base by incorporating real-life data to enhance the reliability and validity of police whistleblowing research (Tracy, 2010). We also need to explore how we can borrow from knowledge in the wider social psychology of bystander intervention to help refine our approach to police whistleblowing. Finally, we need to devote more time and resources not only to the practical design of interventions to increase the willingness of officers to challenge other officers' malpractice – but also the evaluation of what works.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Olivia Elizabeth Vere Taylor: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Richard Philpot:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Oliver Fitton:**

Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Zoë Walington:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Mark Levine:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

The data that supports the findings of this study is available via the following link: https://osf.io/8v9qp/?view_only=a1f25bd9d273489f93a0b037aa987494.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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