

CORRUPTION PREVENTION CONCEPTS: SOCIAL CAPITAL



Australian Government
Australian Commission for
Law Enforcement Integrity

Efforts to gain or maintain social capital may contribute to increased corruption vulnerability within law enforcement agencies. The pursuit of social capital may be a motivator for officers to act corruptly and is a risk within the public service and law enforcement environment.

The Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity (ACLEI) has identified social capital motivators within the visa processing environment where favourable decisions have been sought on the granting of visas and observed similar social factors during investigations into serious and systemic law enforcement corruption.

This factsheet shares key risk areas ACLEI has observed during its investigations, as well as broader patterns and trends identified in similar environments both here and overseas.

What is Social Capital?

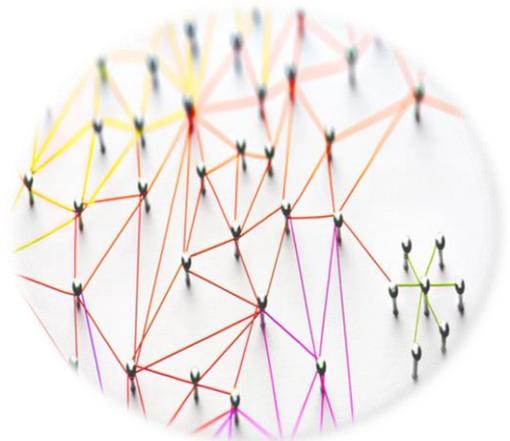
Social capital is often used to describe social motivators and cultural factors—such as shared beliefs, values, norms, obligations, memberships and institutions—that facilitate cooperation amongst individuals in social networks.¹ Corruption vulnerability may increase where personal values or group memberships of the law enforcement officer do not align with the organisation's professional standards.

In the context of corruption, ACLEI defines social capital as the non-monetary benefit and/or improved social standing that can be gained through corrupt conduct.²

Non-monetary benefits can include personal favours, social reward, ideological or moral satisfaction, improved reputation, and increased status or influence. Personal benefits received are often non-tangible and will depend on the type of relationship between the law enforcement officer and their network. Social capital motivators may be difficult to detect and more easily exploited by serious organised crime groups and other external parties. It is not a case of 'following the money'.

An individual may belong to multiple social networks, some essential to their individual identity, while others are more peripheral. The networks an individual belongs to can expose them to different or even opposing social or cultural norms. To adhere to these group norms an individual may alter their behaviour, beliefs or even moral values.³

In ideal circumstances, social capital can result in instances of reduced corruption and greater organisational cohesion. However, in some law enforcement environments the pursuit of social capital may increase the risk of corrupt conduct occurring.



¹ Bhandari, H. & Yasunobu, K. (2009). What is Social Capital? A Comprehensive Review of the Concept. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 37(3), pp. 480-510.

² Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity. (2019). *Glossary*. Available [here](#).

³ Jackson, D. and Köbis, N. (2018). *Anti-corruption through a social norms lens*. U4 – Anti-Corruption Resource Center.

What you need to know:

High risk area — gifts and benefits

Relationships built on reciprocity often result in strong feelings of personal obligation and can result in the targeted officer being at increased risk of coercion.

Reciprocity is driven by a feeling of obligation and the implied understanding that if an exchange—of money, goods or information—occurs between two parties the receiver will return the favour. Reciprocity norms can make individuals more susceptible to corruption, and more likely to sustain a corrupt relationship.⁴

A law enforcement officer may engage in a corrupt exchange in order to return the favour, even when they know it is corrupt conduct, because the norm of reciprocity is highly valued in certain cultures.⁵

External parties may seek to take advantage of social norms—such as gift-giving cultures and reciprocity—as a means to coerce or exploit officers.

High risk area — relationships and social networks

ACLEI investigations have uncovered the deliberate targeting of employees, particularly through the exploitation of existing relationships and social networks. External parties may look for access to law enforcement information through family connections, or cultural and social links (e.g. sporting and social clubs).

Immediate family members and close friends:

There are strong values and social norms associated with the obligation to help family and friends. An officer may find it difficult to refuse requests for information or assistance from external parties due to close family and friendship ties. Social capital in this form may also result in corrupt conduct such as nepotism or favouritism. An officer may receive a sense of moral satisfaction from helping those in their inner circle.

ACLEI has identified instances where law enforcement officers have given preferential treatment to family and friends during organisational recruitment processes or turned a blind eye to the illicit activities of immediate family members and close friends.

ACLEI investigations identified an officer who conducted unauthorised checks on departmental systems at the request of an immediate family member. The officer did this in order to increase the standing and reputation of the family within the local community. ACLEI established that non-monetary benefits were the primary motivator to undertake unauthorised checks.

External relationships and loyalties:

Individuals with associations to groups whose beliefs and norms do not align with the professional standards of the organisation may be more susceptible to compromise. If the beliefs, norms or values of the group conflict with the officer's law enforcement responsibilities, a perception of loyalty to the group or community may outweigh personal loyalties to the agency.

High risk area — workplace subculture

Workplace Relationships and Loyalties:

Social capital is essential for law enforcement agencies because officers who know, and trust each other are more likely to work together towards shared organisational goals.⁶ However, the nature of law enforcement work can create an intense internal group loyalty and norms which may lead to underreporting of corrupt conduct engaged in by colleagues.⁷ A group of individually corrupt employees may act collectively to make sure that corrupt conduct is not detected.⁸

⁴ Rusch, J. (2016). *The Social Psychology of Corruption*. Paper presented at the 2016 OECD Integrity Forum.

⁵ Harris, D. (2007). *Bonding Social Capital and Corruption: A Cross-National Empirical Analysis*. Department of Land Economy, University of Cambridge.

⁶ Sahin, I. (2010). *Organizational Social Capital and Perceived Performance of Drug Law Enforcement Departments: A Case Study in Turkey*. Ph.D, Doctoral Program in Public Affairs, University of Central Florida.

⁷ McCafferty et al. (1998); Coady, T. (2000). *Violence and Police Culture*. Melbourne University Publishers: Melbourne; Lawson, C. (2011). *The ideal cop in 2011* – Association for Women in Psychology Conference; White & Robinson. (2014); Workman-Stark. (2017).

⁸ Jancsics, D. (2019). *Border Corruption*. *Public Integrity*, 21(4), pp.406-419.

Over time, local social norms emerge, and these 'new' norms can give rise to corrupt practices even though many individuals within the group may have strong views that the conduct is unethical or wrong.⁹ Law enforcement officers may choose to adhere to group norms rather than risk peer punishment or exclusion for nonconformity.

ACLEI Case Study Example

ACLEI investigations uncovered long term collusion between a small number of officers at Sydney International Airport who had privileged access to a secure environment, law enforcement databases, and manipulated rosters to improve their chances of facilitating drug importations.

The investigation found that several of the individuals in the network shared some common demographics, including school links, age and community ties. The officers' peripheral social networks also extended to friends who were active members in organised crime groups.

Additionally, a 'currency of favours' existed in the work environment between border staff that allowed the officers to engage a wider circle of colleagues in their activities without them becoming aware.¹⁰

What should you do?

For Agencies:

- Law enforcement officers should never expect to receive additional benefits for doing what they are paid to do. Agencies should have clear internal policies and procedures around gifts and benefits.
- Actively promote integrity expectations – if the values of anticorruption are shared by employees within an organisation, it is more likely to result in overall compliance.
- Regular staff rotation may be successful in limiting an officer's opportunity to develop exclusive internal networks and subcultures forming amongst remotely located staff members.
- Support proactive integrity reporting – ensure officers understand how declarations will be managed.
- Identify, assess and treat the unique risks within your operational environment to manage corruption vulnerability.

For managers:

- Know your staff – seek to understand what motivates them to act and look out for changes in patterns of behaviour.
- Reinforce the integrity standards of the agency and model preferred behaviour.
- Encourage staff to declare early any potential conflicts of interest.
- Foster an environment where your team are empowered to ask questions, seek advice and raise concerns — they are best placed to know if something is going on with a colleague.

For employees:

- Understand the value of the information and access you hold.
- Be aware — the ties that bind may also blind. You may find yourself in a situation where someone in your social network is seeking favours or information for improper reasons.
- Flex your ethical decision making muscles — mentally practice how you will respond to improper approaches by associates, colleagues, friends or family.
- Don't self-manage risk — if someone in your social network does approach you for favours or information, act early and report it to your agency.

Further information

- ACLEI case study: [use of position for illicit purposes](#)

⁹ Jackson, D. and Köbis, N. (2018). *Anti-corruption through a social norms lens*. U4 – Anti-Corruption Resource Center.

¹⁰ Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity. (2019). *Case Study 3 – Use of position for illicit purposes*. Available [here](#).



Australian Government
**Australian Commission for
Law Enforcement Integrity**

Report corruption at:
aclei.gov.au

