

Don't Say Nuthin

In some neighborhoods there exists a subculture of people who think that being a witness to a crime, and then telling the police what you know about it is somehow not a noble act. It was being cool when asked by a cop, "Did you see anything?" to respond by saying, "I didn't see nuthin." There was a whole movement built around this distorted notion that you were being honorable by **not** telling the police what you knew about a crime. In some cities there was even merchandise—shirts and hats—being sold that promoted the "no snitching" model. Cops would roll up to the scene of a murder or assault where 20-30 people were gathered, and not one would admit to having seen it occur, or who may have been responsible.

The idea that it is virtuous to withhold information from the police has its roots with the Mafia. However, through the years this "code of silence" has been adopted by simple street thugs and jailbirds. The fallacy of course is that more often than not someone will provide the necessary information. The only thing that not being forthright creates is the possibility of being charged with a crime for not cooperating.



As frustrating as this practice is, and as despicable as the people are that embrace it, we sometimes see the same thing happening in our own subculture, that of the police. In our world it's know as "The Blue Code of Silence," "The Blue Wall of Silence" or "The Thin Blue Line." And not unlike the criminal element, our distorted code of silence appears whenever an officer witnesses a colleague violate a department policy or a law. Curiously there are distinctions drawn on what is acceptable behavior.

For instance, if there is an allegation of police brutality on the part of an officer(s), any colleague that may have been a witness may feel obligated to shield that officer from any criminal exposure. On the other hand, if a colleague is seen doing something in which they acquire something, e.g., taking a bottle of whiskey from a store, or pocketing some money during a raid, then that behavior is seen as the type that bears no dishonor in reporting it to supervisors.

In the year 2000 the International Association of Chiefs of Police reported the [findings](#) of a study done by [The National Institute of Ethics](#). The study group consisted of over 3,700 officers and recruits in the academy from 42 different states. Some of us may be shocked by results; others may say that the results aren't anything new. Nevertheless, here are just a few of the highlights:

Responses from recruits:

- 79% of respondents agreed that a Code of Silence does exist
- 52% said that the code did not bother them
- 24% said the code was more justified involving excessive force on an abusive citizen
- 46% said they would not report another officer for having sex on duty
- 23% said they would not report a colleague for regularly smoking marijuana off duty

Responses from officers:

- 46% had witnessed misconduct by another but failed to report it
- 73% of individuals pressuring officers not to report misconduct were leaders
- 8% of officers withholding information about police misconduct were upper admin types
- Average age of officer covering up first time incident was—31.4 yrs
- Average years of experience of officer covering up first time incident—8.2 yrs
- Excessive use of force was the most common incident in the code

Some conclusions drawn from this study:

- The code results in other unethical behavior
- It's a natural occurrence, therefore attempts to eradicate it will be futile
- Whistle blowers are generally not supported by the administration
- Ethical dilemma simulation training is an effective way to combat and educate

Facing ethical problems has always been a problem in law enforcement. So many dynamics are involved with making the right choices that it seems to sometimes be a struggle that can never be overcome. Education is certainly a key to eradicating this stigma; it has to be at every level of the department, not just the guys and gals on the street.

One thing I know—the decision to compromise one's integrity is not an easy one. It's viewed as the classic battle between good vs. evil. I don't know that any one of us can truthfully say that they haven't done something which they've later regretted. We all make bad choices sometimes; we all have to pay the consequences. If you surround yourself with those of high moral character, people that are sincere and truthful, your choices become much easier to make. If you get in bed with the devil, expect to get burnt.

Stay safe brothers and sisters!

Links: <http://www.aele.org/loscode2000.html>
<http://www.ethicsinstitute.com/>