

Models of Internal and External Oversight of Police Discretion in the Prevention of Abuse of Power A Study at the North Sumatera Regional Police

Riki Andreas Simbolon, Henry Aspan, Fitri Rafianti

Abstract

Police discretion constitutes a strategic authority in criminal law enforcement that enables law enforcement officers to act flexibly in situations not fully governed by written law. However, the exercise of discretion that is not counterbalanced by an effective oversight system has the potential to give rise to abuse of power (abuse of power). This study aims to analyze the models of internal and external oversight of police discretion and to evaluate the effectiveness of such oversight mechanisms in preventing abuse of power within the North Sumatera Regional Police (Polda Sumatera Utara). This study employs normative legal research methodology, incorporating statutory, conceptual, and case approaches, supported by primary, secondary, and tertiary legal materials. The findings indicate that the existing oversight model remains partial and has yet to be systematically integrated, thereby creating oversight gaps in the practice of police discretion. Internal oversight is constrained by limitations in independence and enforcement consistency, while external oversight remains weak in terms of authority and follow-up effectiveness. Accordingly, this study proposes an integrative oversight model that combines internal and external oversight within a mutually complementary system framework, grounded in the principles of legality, accountability, and transparency. This model is expected to enhance oversight effectiveness and prevent the occurrence of abuse of power in criminal law enforcement, both at the regional and national levels.

Keywords: Police Discretion, Internal Oversight, External Oversight, Abuse of Power, Criminal Law Enforcement, Accountability

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3rd International Conference Epicentrum of Economic Global Framework (ICEEGLOF)

Theme: Cross-Sector and Cross-Disciplinary Strategies for Achieving the SDGS

<https://proceeding.pancabudi.ac.id/index.php/ICEEGLOF>

Introduction

Within the Indonesian criminal justice system, the Indonesian National Police (Kepolisian Negara Republik Indonesia) occupies a strategic position as the frontline institution in the law enforcement process, particularly through its investigative and preliminary investigative functions. In carrying out these functions, police officers are not solely bound by written legal norms; they are also granted a sphere of authority in the form of discretion that is, the freedom to act on the basis of professional judgment in concrete situations not fully regulated by statutory provisions. Police discretion is, in essence, an important instrument for ensuring the effectiveness of criminal law enforcement, particularly in confronting the complexity of rapidly evolving social dynamics.

Nevertheless, the existence of discretion is inseparable from the potential for deviation, particularly in the form of abuse of power (abuse of power). From the perspective of the rule of law, the uncontrolled exercise of discretion has the potential to erode the principles of legality, accountability, and the protection of human rights. It is therefore imperative that discretion be situated within a rigorous oversight framework, operating through both internal and external mechanisms. Internal oversight encompasses ethical, disciplinary, and professional supervision within the police institution, while external oversight is conducted by independent bodies, the judiciary, and public participation as a form of social control.

Empirically, the phenomenon of abuse of power by police officers remains a critical issue in the practice of law enforcement in Indonesia. Various studies have demonstrated that the weakness of oversight systems constitutes one of the primary factors leading to the frequent misuse or disproportionate application of discretion. In the national context, reports from public oversight institutions such as the Indonesian Ombudsman (Ombudsman Republik Indonesia) consistently identify the law enforcement sector as one of the areas with a relatively high volume of public complaints, particularly in relation to maladministration, lack of transparency, and misuse of authority.

This phenomenon is also clearly reflected at the local level, particularly within the North Sumatera Regional Police. Official data published in year-end reports indicate that throughout 2025, 661 personnel underwent internal violation proceedings, comprising 236 disciplinary violations, 364 violations of the code of ethics, and 61 personnel subjected to dishonorable discharge sanctions (PTDH). Furthermore, the number of dismissed personnel increased significantly by 165.2% compared to the previous year, which recorded only 23 personnel. These data reveal a trend of increasing internal violations that cannot be detached from the exercise of authority, including discretion, that does not consistently remain within the bounds of law and ethics.

On the other hand, the high intensity of law enforcement operations in North Sumatera also reflects the complexity of policing duties. For instance, during Operation Kancil Toba 2025, the North Sumatera Regional Police successfully uncovered hundreds of criminal cases within a short period, demonstrating the high demands placed on the operational effectiveness of officers. This situation indirectly encourages the use of discretion as an instrument for expediting case handling. However, in the absence of adequate oversight, the exercise of discretion under conditions of operational pressure may in fact increase the risk of abuse of power.

These issues indicate an imbalance between the breadth of discretionary authority held by police officers and the effectiveness of the existing oversight system. Structurally oriented internal oversight frequently faces challenges in the form of conflicts of interest and limitations on independence, while external oversight continues to encounter obstacles in terms of information access, intervention authority, and the effectiveness of enforcing recommendations. As a result, oversight mechanisms that are intended to function as instruments of prevention have not yet been fully capable of controlling deviant discretionary practices.

From both academic and public policy perspectives, this situation underscores an urgent need to formulate a more integrative, systematic, and effective oversight model for controlling the exercise of police discretion. Research on models of internal and external oversight is important not only for strengthening the accountability system of police institutions, but also for ensuring legal certainty, protecting the rights of the public, and enhancing public trust in law enforcement agencies. In addition, this study holds strategic relevance in supporting the agenda of law enforcement reform in Indonesia, particularly in strengthening the principles of good governance and rule of law. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study is significant in examining in depth how models of internal and external oversight of police discretion can be constructed and optimized to prevent the occurrence of abuse of power, particularly within the North Sumatera Regional Police as the research locus representing local dynamics while simultaneously reflecting national issues. Accordingly, the research questions of this study are as follows:

1. How do the models of internal and external oversight of police discretion in criminal law enforcement operate in preventing the occurrence of abuse of power within the North Sumatera Regional Police?
2. How effective are the internal and external oversight mechanisms in controlling the exercise of police discretion, as this affects the optimization of abuse of power prevention at the North Sumatera Regional Police?

Literature Review

A. The Concept of Police Discretion in Criminal Law Enforcement

Police discretion refers to the authority granted to law enforcement officers to make decisions or take actions based on professional judgment in concrete situations not fully governed by written law. Within the doctrine of administrative law, the concept of discretion is rooted in the principle of *freies Ermessen*, which affords public officials a degree of freedom of action provided that they remain within the bounds of law and the general principles of good governance.

In criminal law enforcement, police discretion functions as an instrument of flexibility to bridge the limitations of positive law in confronting complex social dynamics. Discretion enables police officers to make rapid and effective decisions in specific circumstances, such as the termination of minor cases, the application of restorative justice, or the handling of emergency situations. Nevertheless, discretion is not an absolute authority; rather, it is a limited authority that must be subject to the principles of legality, proportionality, and accountability.

Contemporary literature affirms that without clear normative boundaries, discretion has the potential to generate legal uncertainty and to open space for the abuse of power. It is therefore essential that discretion be conceptualized as controlled discretion that is, authority governed through legal norms and effective oversight mechanisms.

B. Normative Boundaries of Police Discretion

The boundaries of police discretionary authority are theoretically and normatively determined by several key principles, namely:

1. The Legality Principle (Legality Principle)

Every act of discretion must have a legal basis and must not contravene statutory regulations.

2. The Proportionality Principle (Proportionality Principle)

Discretionary actions must be proportionate between the objective pursued and the consequences entailed.

3. The Necessity Principle (Necessity Principle)

Discretion may only be exercised when genuinely necessary under specific circumstances.

4. The Accountability Principle (Accountability Principle)

Every act of discretion must be legally, ethically, and administratively accountable.

In practice, these boundaries are frequently not comprehensively formulated within a single regulation but are instead dispersed across various police regulations and internal policies. This situation gives rise to normative fragmentation, which results in divergent interpretations and the potential for inconsistency in the application of discretion.

C. The Concept of Abuse of Power from a Legal Perspective

Abuse of power, or the misuse of authority, refers to the exercise of power that exceeds the limits of authority conferred by law or that is exercised in a manner inconsistent with the purpose for which the authority was granted. From the perspectives of criminal law and administrative law, abuse of power may be categorized as a legal violation where the elements of unlawfulness, harm to the public interest, and intentional or negligent conduct are present.

In the context of policing, abuse of power is frequently associated with the disproportionate, discriminatory, or non-transparent exercise of discretion. This may encompass acts such as the termination of cases without a clear legal basis, selective criminalization, or the use of excessive force.

Empirical studies demonstrate that abuse of power frequently occurs as a result of weak oversight systems, low levels of officer integrity, and the absence of clear operational standards for the exercise of discretion. Accordingly, the prevention of abuse of power is highly dependent on the effectiveness of oversight systems capable of controlling officer conduct in both preventive and repressive capacities.

D. Internal Oversight within Police Institutions

Internal oversight refers to the control mechanisms carried out by the police institution itself through its existing organizational structure. Such oversight encompasses:

1. Ethical oversight through the professional code of ethics of the police
2. Disciplinary oversight through internal regulations
3. Performance oversight through evaluation systems and internal audits

Theoretically, internal oversight holds advantages in terms of information access and speed of handling, given its position within a single organizational system. However, internal oversight also has limitations, particularly with respect to the potential for conflicts of interest and a lack of independence.

In practice, the effectiveness of internal oversight is highly dependent on the integrity of leadership, the transparency of processes, and consistency in the enforcement of sanctions. In the absence of a strong institutional commitment, internal oversight tends to become formalistic and insufficiently capable of substantively preventing abuse of power.

E. External Oversight of Police Institutions

External oversight refers to the form of control exercised by parties outside the police institution, such as:

1. The Indonesian Ombudsman (Ombudsman Republik Indonesia)
2. The National Police Commission (Komisi Kepolisian Nasional/Kompolnas)
3. The judiciary
4. The public and the media

External oversight functions as a checks and balances mechanism to ensure that police conduct remains within the bounds of law and public accountability. The primary advantage of external oversight is its independence, which renders it more objective in evaluating officer conduct.

Nevertheless, external oversight also faces various constraints, including limitations on authority, access to internal information, and the weak implementation of recommendations. As a result, external oversight frequently operates in a reactive rather than preventive capacity.

F. An Integrative Model of Police Discretion Oversight

In the development of legal theory and public governance, the concept of an integrative oversight model has emerged that is, a synergy between internal and external oversight within a mutually complementary system. This model emphasizes that oversight effectiveness cannot be achieved through a single mechanism alone but instead requires coordination among various oversight actors.

This integrative model encompasses several key elements:

1. Standardization of discretion through clear standard operating procedures (SOPs)
2. Strengthening of the internal oversight system based on integrity and transparency
3. Optimization of the role of independent external oversight
4. Enhancement of public participation in social control
5. Utilization of information technology for transparency and accountability

This approach is considered capable of minimizing the potential for abuse of power while simultaneously enhancing public trust in police institutions.

Research Methodology

This study employs normative legal research (doctrinal legal research), focusing on the examination of legal norms, principles, and concepts pertaining to police discretion and the mechanisms of internal and external oversight in the prevention of abuse of power. This approach was selected because the issues under examination concern not merely empirical practice but also require an in-depth analysis of the legal constructs governing the boundaries of discretionary authority and the oversight system within the framework of the rule of law. Accordingly, this study is directed toward generating prescriptive arguments regarding an ideal and integrated oversight model for controlling the exercise of police discretion, particularly within the North Sumatera Regional Police.

The research approaches employed include the statutory approach (statute approach), the conceptual approach (conceptual approach), and the case approach (case approach). The statutory approach involves an examination of the various regulations governing police authority, criminal procedural law, and internal provisions relating to the exercise of discretion and oversight mechanisms. The conceptual approach is employed to analyze theoretical concepts such as discretion, abuse of power, accountability, and good governance that serve as the foundational basis for constructing the oversight model. Meanwhile, the case approach is employed to examine actual phenomena, particularly those relating to ethical violations, disciplinary infractions, and abuse of power within the North Sumatera Regional Police, thereby providing contextual relevance to the normative analysis conducted.

The legal materials employed in this study consist of primary, secondary, and tertiary legal sources. Primary legal materials include relevant statutory provisions, such as the provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code (Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Acara Pidana), the legislation governing the Indonesian National Police, and internal police regulations relating to discretion and oversight. Secondary legal materials encompass academic literature in the form of books, nationally and internationally accredited journal articles, prior research findings, and reports from oversight bodies such as the Ombudsman and the National Police Commission addressing oversight practices and abuse of power. Tertiary legal materials are utilized as supplementary references, such as legal dictionaries and encyclopaedias for clarifying the terminology and concepts employed in the study.

The collection of legal materials was conducted through library research (library research) by consulting a wide range of credible academic sources, including electronic journal databases, university repositories, and official publications of state institutions and media relevant to the phenomena under investigation. The data obtained were subsequently analyzed qualitatively using the prescriptive-analytical method, whereby legal norms are interpreted through grammatical, systematic, and teleological interpretation in order to assess the alignment between existing norms and the practice of police discretion.

Furthermore, the analysis was conducted comprehensively by connecting normative findings with prevailing empirical phenomena, with a view to identifying structural and normative weaknesses in the internal and external oversight mechanisms. From the results of this analysis, the study formulates an integrative oversight model that combines the strengths of internal and external oversight within a mutually complementary system framework. This model is expected to make both theoretical and practical contributions to strengthening the accountability of police discretion and to preventing the occurrence of abuse of power, particularly within the North Sumatera Regional Police, while remaining applicable in the national context.

Results

A. Models of Internal and External Oversight of Police Discretion in the Prevention of Abuse of Power

Based on the results of the normative analysis, the oversight model for police discretion in Indonesia, and particularly within the North Sumatera Regional Police, has not yet been established as an integrated and comprehensive system. The existing oversight remains partial in nature, with internal and external oversight operating separately without adequate systematic coordination. This finding is consistent with the observations in the research background, which indicate an increase in ethical and disciplinary violations among officers, suggesting that the oversight system governing the exercise of authority, including discretion, has not yet functioned optimally.

Internal oversight is structurally implemented through mechanisms of the code of ethics, discipline, and performance supervision within the police institution. Theoretically, as elaborated in the literature review, internal oversight holds advantages in terms of information access and the speed of violation handling. However, in practice, the effectiveness of internal oversight is frequently constrained by the potential for conflicts of interest and an organizational culture that tends to be institution-protective. This has resulted in internal oversight not yet being fully capable of functioning as an effective preventive instrument against the misuse of discretion.

On the other hand, external oversight conducted by bodies such as the Ombudsman, the National Police Commission (Kopolnas), and the judiciary possesses an independent and objective character. External oversight functions as a control mechanism to ensure that police conduct remains within the bounds of law and the principles of public accountability. Nevertheless, as analyzed through the conceptual and case approaches, external oversight continues to face limitations in authority, access to information, and the weak enforceability of the recommendations it issues. As a result, external oversight tends to operate reactively and has yet to function optimally as an early prevention mechanism.

Based on these findings, this study constructs an integrative oversight model as a conceptual solution. This model positions internal and external oversight within a mutually complementary system framework (complementary system). Within this model, internal oversight serves as the first line control, operating preventively through the standardization of procedures and the strengthening of officer integrity, while external oversight functions as the second line control, ensuring accountability and transparency through independent control mechanisms. This integrative oversight model is constructed on the following principles:

1. Synchronization of discretion regulations and operational standards
2. Strengthening of transparency in every discretionary act
3. Openness of information access for external oversight bodies
4. Enhancement of public participation in oversight
5. Utilization of technology as an instrument of control and documentation

Accordingly, this model is not solely oriented toward enforcement following violations; it also emphasizes the preventive dimension (preventive control) of the exercise of police discretion.

B. Effectiveness of Internal and External Oversight Mechanisms in Controlling Police Discretion

Based on the results of the analysis, the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms governing police discretion within the North Sumatera Regional Police continues to face various obstacles, both from normative and structural perspectives. This is reflected in the persistently high incidence of disciplinary and code of ethics violations, indicating that the existing oversight mechanisms have not yet been able to optimally control the exercise of officer authority.

From a normative perspective, as elaborated in the literature review, one of the primary factors affecting oversight effectiveness is the absence of comprehensive regulation concerning the boundaries of police discretion. Fragmented regulation allows officers a wide scope for interpretation in exercising discretion, making it difficult to establish objective standards for assessing whether a particular act constitutes a legitimate exercise of discretion or an abuse of power.

From an internal perspective, oversight effectiveness is highly dependent on the consistency of code of ethics and disciplinary enforcement. However, in practice, internal oversight continues to tend toward a predominantly administrative character and has not yet fully engaged the substantive dimension of the exercise of discretion. Furthermore, organizational culture and corps solidarity also influence the objectivity of the oversight process, potentially weakening the internal control function.

Meanwhile, from an external perspective, the limited authority of oversight bodies to impose direct sanctions for violations constitutes the principal obstacle to enhancing oversight effectiveness. Recommendations issued by external oversight bodies are not always followed by concrete action, thereby diminishing the efficacy of the oversight function. In addition, limited access to information also impedes the oversight process, particularly in cases involving the exercise of discretion in a non-transparent manner.

In this context, oversight effectiveness is significantly influenced by the degree of integration between internal and external mechanisms. This lack of integration results in a control gap (control gap) that creates the possibility for abuse of power. Accordingly, there is a need to strengthen coordination and integration between the two oversight mechanisms.

Based on the prescriptive analysis, the optimization of oversight effectiveness may be achieved through several strategic measures, namely:

1. Reformulation of police discretion regulations that are more definitive and measurable
2. Strengthening of the independence and professionalism of internal oversight
3. Enhancement of the authority and capacity of external oversight bodies
4. Integration of an information technology-based oversight system
5. Enhancement of transparency and public participation

Through the implementation of these measures, it is anticipated that the oversight mechanisms governing police discretion will function more effectively in preventing the occurrence of abuse of power. Furthermore, the strengthening of the oversight system is expected to contribute to the enhancement of public trust in police institutions and to the realization of fairer and more accountable law enforcement.

Conclusion [Times New Roman – 12 pt]

Based on the research findings and discussion, it may be concluded that the oversight model governing the exercise of police discretion in criminal law enforcement within the North Sumatera Regional Police has not yet been established in an integrative and systematic manner. Internal oversight, implemented through ethical, disciplinary, and organizational structural mechanisms, fundamentally occupies a strategic position as the (first line control); however, in practice, it continues to face constraints in the form of potential conflicts of interest, limitations on independence, and a tendency toward formalism in the enforcement of rules. Meanwhile, external oversight conducted by independent bodies and through public control possesses strengths in terms of objectivity and accountability, but has not yet operated optimally due to limitations in authority, information access, and the weak enforceability of recommendations.

These conditions indicate that the absence of synergy between internal and external oversight has created a (control gap) that potentially opens space for the occurrence of abuse of power in the exercise of police discretion.

Consistently with this finding, the effectiveness of internal and external oversight mechanisms in controlling the exercise of police discretion has also not yet been optimal in preventing abuse of power. From a normative perspective, the regulation of discretion boundaries remains fragmented and has not yet provided clear and measurable operational standards, thereby creating space for subjectivity in practice. From a structural perspective, internal oversight has not yet been fully capable of carrying out its preventive function in a substantive manner, while external oversight tends to be reactive and is not always followed by effective action. As a result, the optimal prevention of abuse of power has not been fully achieved, as reflected in the continued presence of ethical and disciplinary violations within the police institution.

Based on these conclusions, this study recommends the need to reformulate the police discretion oversight model through an integrative approach that combines the strengths of internal and external oversight within a mutually complementary system. From a normative perspective, there is a need to strengthen regulations that explicitly establish the limits, indicators, and procedures for the exercise of police discretion so as to align with the principles of legality, proportionality, and accountability. From an institutional perspective, internal oversight must be strengthened through enhanced independence, professionalism, and consistency in the enforcement of the code of ethics, while external oversight must be supported by expanded authority, greater openness of information access, and a strengthened follow-up mechanism for recommendations. In addition, the integration of an information technology-based oversight system, the enhancement of transparency, and public participation are also essential elements in constructing an effective oversight system. Accordingly, an integrated oversight model is expected to control the exercise of police discretion in a more accountable and preventive manner, and to contribute to the realization of just and abuse of power-free law enforcement within the North Sumatera Regional Police as well as at the national level.

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