

Incentives, not Motives or Training

I saw an infuriating video of police arresting a nurse who refused to draw a patients blood at their request.

Comments on Twitter included a lot of, “Why are police so nasty and brutish?”, and most responses were, “They need better training and to be nicer.”

Nope.

The incentive structure dictates the result. As Lord Acton said, power corrupts. Put a good man in a role that requires him to do bad to succeed, or turn a blind eye when others do, and either you’ll attract only bad men or good men will become bad.

Police misconduct is ubiquitous not because they lack training. It’s because they face no competition, have no threat of losing money or position, and don’t need to please customers.

Remember the notorious Stanford Prison Experiment?

Now imagine if the prisoners got to choose the guards among several groups? Of course, guards could choose whether they wish to offer services to the prisoners too. Guards would only get compensation and maintain their role if chosen. How would treatment change? Guards would be competing with each other for the most humane experience.

It’s not that complicated. Government services are always worse than everything else because they don’t have to earn customers money, they just take it. Incentives are powerful.