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NYC police again under scrutiny

NEW YORK (AP) — The year is 1972. A special city commission finds widespread corruption in the New York City Police Department after an honest police officer named Frank Serpico blows the whistle.

Reforms make headlines, Al Pacino plays Serpico in a Hollywood movie, but at least one official tries to temper the self-satisfaction.

"Twenty years from now there will be another police scandal," said Bronx District Attorney Burton Roberts.

Roberts had history to go on. Before 1972, the city had seen major police corruption upheavals about every 20 years dating back to 1894.

Now, like clockwork, New York City has another police scandal, another commission.

On Monday, the Mollen Commission — named for its head, Milton Mollen, a former deputy mayor and judge on the state Appeals Court — begins two weeks of public hearings. They are expected to provide the first detailed glimpse of the latest generation of corrupt officers, mainly men in scattered precincts who are accused of taking payoffs from drug dealers and, at times, of dealing drugs themselves.

Among the first witnesses is Michael Dowd, a former Brooklyn officer whose admission he led a ring of drug-dealing police prompted Mayor David Dinkins to form the commission last year.

What the Mollen Commission is finding, and what the Knapp Commission found before it in the early 1970s, is that corruption remains ingrained in police culture.

Among those officers who investigate what used to be called vice — gambling, prostitution and liquor violations — a few have always been willing to accept bribes, others eager to share the proceeds. Today, it's the riches offered by the narcotics trade that tempt officers.

Mollen follows a long line of reformers beginning with the Rev. Charles Parkhurst. In a sermon in 1892, Parkhurst labeled New York's finest "a lying, perjured, rum-soaked and libidinous lot."

A state investigation eventually concluded that city police officers were operating a racket to extort money from prostitutes and gamblers. The depart-

ment was reorganized under its new commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt.

Similar scandals struck the department in 1911, 1932 and 1951, each followed by more reform efforts.

In the early 1970s, the every-20-years curse returned as Serpico went public about police units collecting and divvying up bribes to overlook crimes. After the Knapp Commission investigations, the department sought to shield regular officers from temptation by prohibiting them from making vice arrests, a policy that eventually was abandoned.

Then last year, Dowd, three other officers and one retired officer were arrested and accused of extorting and stealing money and drugs from Brooklyn dealers, sometimes reselling the drugs on Long Island. Since then, similar allegations have popped up in other precincts.

Unlike past scandals, which mainly involved plainclothes units taking regular bribes, the new corruption allegedly involves uniformed patrol officers in poor neighborhoods who extort shop owners, take bribes to protect drug dealers and deal drugs themselves.

The yearlong probe by the Mollen Commission's staff of 20 investigators and attorneys focused on isolated pockets of corruption, Mollen said.

"It is our perception that the corruption is not systemic as it once was," he said.

The hearings also will likely deliver a harsh indictment against the department's Internal Affairs Division, which failed to crack down on Dowd despite getting reports of his activities for four years. He finally was arrested by Suffolk County police, on Long Island.

Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly, who also is scheduled to testify, admitted the department failed on the Dowd case and promised to overhaul the Internal Affairs Division.

But given corruption's tendency to resurface like a nasty virus, the commission members appear poised to recommend the city create a permanent outside monitor to make sure the country's largest police force polices itself.

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