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Exit Strategy: An Exploration of Late-Stage Police Crime

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Abstract

There are no exhaustive statistics available on the crimes committed by law enforcement officers, and only a small number of studies provide specific data on police crimes. The purpose of the current study is to examine the character of police arrests known to the media. Cases were identified through a content analysis of news coverage using the internet-based Google[TM] News search engine and its Google News Alerts search tool. The study focuses on the crimes committed by experienced officers who are approaching retirement. The occurrence of these late-stage crimes presents a challenge to existing assumptions regarding the relationship between experience and various forms of police misconduct, and also provides an opportunity to examine a stage of the police career that has not been the subject of much research. The paper concludes with an identification of research and policy implications, and includes a discussion regarding how our data should be interpreted within the context of existing studies on police socialization and the production of misconduct.

Keywords: police crime, police misconduct, quantitative content analysis

Biographical Sketches

Philip Matthew Stinson, Sr., J.D., Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Criminal Justice Program at Bowling Green State University whose research interests include the study of police crime and police misconduct. His recent publications include articles in *Criminal Justice Policy Review* and *The Prison Journal*.

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Exit Strategy: An Exploration of Late-Stage Police Crime

Media accounts that portray the exploits of law-breaking cops are an affront to the image

of police as noble law enforcers. The narratives indicate that police officers commit an alarming

array of serious crimes including grand larceny, drug trafficking, driving while intoxicated,

domestic assault, and predatory sex offenses (see, e.g., Kappeler, Sluder, & Alpert, 1998). The

reports of several independent commissions on police misconduct echo these stories and

chronicle disturbing cases of systemic crime including police who rob liquor stores; police who

regularly "shakedown" drug dealers; and, an officer who snorts cocaine off the dashboard of his

police cruiser (Knapp Commission, 1972; Mollen Commission, 1994; Pennsylvania Crime

Commission, 1974). Most acts of police crime are less appalling than those exposed through

public investigations, but damage to both occupational integrity and police legitimacy can result

from far less serious forms of police crime, especially in cases where law-breaking officers are

not criminally prosecuted, convicted, or even administratively disciplined (Collins, 1998).

Despite the potential for negative fallout to both the occupation and the public image of

police, surprisingly little is known about the crimes committed by law enforcement officers.

There are no comprehensive statistics available on the phenomena, and no government entity

collects data on criminal arrests of police officers in the United States (Anechiarico & Jacobs,

1996; Barak, 1995; Kane, 2007). There have been very few studies that provide specific data on

the nature and prevalence of police crime. Reiss' (1971) classic field research found that officers

commonly engaged in on-duty crime, mostly bribe-taking and petty thefts; but, no other large-

scale observational studies attempt to determine the prevalence of police crime. Scholars have

instead been more likely to broach the topic within the context of more general studies on police

corruption or misconduct, concepts that are related but not mutually exclusive to the topic of

police crime (Fyfe & Kane, 2006). Some studies use officer surveys or quasi-experimental designs to assess police attitudes toward misconduct or to measure their propensity for criminal behavior under particular scenarios, but these methods are unlikely to produce valid data on actual police crime because cops will presumably maintain a "code of silence" or provide socially desirable responses to sensitive questions on whether they actually engage in criminal behavior (Fishman, 1978; Maguire & Mastrofski, 2000; Maguire & Uchida, 2000).

The lack of statistics on police crime should be troubling to police executives, researchers, policy makers, and the general public. First, more comprehensive data could be used to develop policies to deter police crimes and/or mitigate damage to police-community relations in their aftermath. Second, data on the correlates of police crime could provide information on the relationship between police crime and more general forms of police deviance including corruption, discrimination, and other forms of abuse. Third, an expansion of this line of research would provide information on the role of police culture and socialization processes in the production of police crime, particularly if these data include both on-duty and off-duty crimes committed over the course of the career. Scholars have yet to fully pursue these questions because we lack any sort of comprehensive statistics on the types of crime committed by police and when and how often they commit them.

The objective of the current study is to explore the nature and character of police crime in the United States through a content analysis of newspaper articles on officers arrested over a 36-month period, from January 2005 through December 2007. We define police crime as crimes committed by sworn law enforcement officers who are given the general powers of arrest at the time the offense was committed. These crimes can occur while the officer is either on-duty or off-duty, and include offenses committed by police employed by state, county, municipal, and/or

special law enforcement agencies. We present data on these cases in terms of the: a) arrested

officer, b) offense, c) his or her agency, c) victim characteristics, and d) case outcomes including

legal and/or employment-related dispositions.

The study includes data on crimes committed by officers at every career stage, but we are

particularly interested in what we refer to as "late-stage" police crime, or those crimes committed

by officers who are approaching retirement. Police scholars have traditionally focused on the

formative experiences that occur near the beginning of an officer's career, wherein the

expectations of "rookie" cops clash with on-the-job realities to promote cynicism, personal

anomia, and potential attachment to delinquent police subcultures. The literature suggests that

officers will tend to "get into trouble" earlier in their career rather than later, because problem

behaviors and misconduct presumably decline after officers adapt to the reality of police work

and become more firmly committed to the attainment of conventional occupational goals (C. J.

Harris, 2009, p. 202; Niederhoffer, 1967; Van Maanen, 1973).

There are no existing studies on the occurrence of late-stage police crime, but a small

number of studies focus on the negative attitudes and behaviors of experienced officers and the

problems that some encounter during the transition to retirement. For example, Rafky (1975)

tested Niederhoffer's (1967) model of police cynicism and found significantly higher levels of

cynicism among high-ranking officers with 11-20 years of experience, and that the relationship

between years of service and cynicism was higher than expected for patrol officers with 16-20

years of experience. Regoli and his colleagues identified a spike in cynicism among police

chiefs with more than 15 years of experience, or during what they termed as the "demise" stage

of the career (Regoli, Culbertson, Crank, & Powell, 1990, p. 597). Boulin-Johnson (2000)

suggested a link between job burn-out and the perpetration of domestic violence among

experienced officers. Violanti (1992) described a "pre-retirement crisis" and the turmoil experienced by long-time cops who feel trapped in their jobs because of pension requirements. This line of research provides data on the generation of negative attitudes and behaviors among well-seasoned officers, factors that could also influence the production of police crime during late stages of the law enforcement career.

Prior Research

There are no comprehensive statistics on the nature and prevalence of crimes committed by police officers, so the existing literature does not include studies that describe police crime in terms of overall frequency, significant correlates, or the likelihood of sanctions. In the absence of empirical studies on these topics, our review covers two lines of related research including: a) the conceptualization of police crime, and b) the description and measurement of more general forms of police deviance. Studies on conceptualization can inform debates regarding the definition of police crime and the features that distinguish it from other forms of police deviance, while research that describes police corruption or official misconduct provides data on behaviors that sometimes—but not always—involve violations of the criminal law.

Conceptualizing Police Crime

Police scholars often consider crimes perpetrated by officers within broader studies focused on police corruption or misconduct, a situation that has promoted both conceptual confusion and a general reluctance among practitioners and policymakers to identify and deal with the specific problem of police crime (Reiss, 1978; Ross, 2001). Wilson (1963) defines police "criminality" as "illegally using public office for private gain without the inducement of a bribe," whereas acts of "corruption" *do* involve the acceptance of bribes (p. 190). He further distinguishes police criminality and corruption from brutality, which includes "mistreating

civilians or otherwise infringing their civil liberties" (p. 190). Punch (2000) distinguishes

"crimes committed by criminals in uniform" from acts of police misconduct, which involve

violations of administrative rules that are typically investigated and sanctioned internally by the

police organization (pp. 302-303). Ross (2001) provides a multi-dimensional taxonomy of

police crimes based in part on whether the act was: 1) violent, 2) motivated by profit, and/or 3)

perpetrated on behalf of the individual or the organization. Sherman (1978) focuses on

corruption as a form of organizational deviance, and does not distinguish between police

corruption and police crime.

    The different approaches to conceptualization have engendered debate, but have also

obscured the true nature and extent of police crimes, and arguably, efforts to mitigate the

problem. Scholars have tended to consider acts of law violation together with other forms of

police deviance that do not involve specific violations of the criminal law, as well as those whose

legal status as "crimes" tends to shift over time. The concept of bribery for example has

expanded since the 1960s to cover gifts and payments to public officials whether or not there was

intent to corrupt or a provable quid pro quo (Anechiarico & Jacobs, 1996, pp. 6-7). Thus,

definitions regarding what sorts of behavior constitute *police crime* become unreliable to the

degree that they incorporate acts whose legal status shifts with prevailing socio-legal norms. As

Fyfe & Kane (2006) point out, the various forms of police deviance are not mutually exclusive—

some forms of corruption and misconduct are police crime and all forms of police crime

constitute misconduct, however crimes that do not involve the misuse of authority cannot be

defined as acts of corruption (Fishman, 1978). The operative distinction among the various

forms of deviance is that *all* police crimes involve a violation of criminal statutes and are subject

to criminal prosecution, but not all acts of police corruption or misconduct violate criminal laws

(Wilson, 1963). A definition of police crime that targets specific law violations whether or not they constitute an abuse of authority would bring order to the debate and focus attention on behaviors that have thus far remained "invisible" to researchers in part because of conceptual confusion (Box, 1983; Jupp, Davies, & Francis, 1999; Kutnjak Ivkovic, 2005).

The conceptual issues beyond those related to distinguishing police crime from other forms of police deviance include the question of whether to consider both on and off-duty crimes. A number of researchers emphasize the occupational origins of police crime and focus on those acts that occur on-duty under the guise of police authority (Barker & Carter, 1994; Foster, 1966; Stoddard, 1968). Kappeler, Sluder and Alpert (1998) contend that many off-duty crimes should not be considered police crimes because they do not involve "some aspect of the occupational position" to carry them out (p. 21). Fyfe and Kane (2006) however make a compelling case for the inclusion of off-duty acts in their study of career-ending misconduct, an argument that also applies to the consideration of police crimes. First, the job provides officers unique criminal opportunities that can be taken advantage of either on- or off-duty. Second, police are more likely to engage in either on- or off-duty crimes in part because they believe their status as officers affords them some degree of immunity from prosecution. Third, most jurisdictions grant full enforcement powers to off-duty police and permit them to carry service weapons. This situation makes it difficult to "draw a bright line" between on-and off-duty police behavior, so much so that attempts to differentiate the two seem less productive than work focused on the measurement and study of police law-breaking whenever these violations occur (p. 22).

Data on Corruption & Other Forms of Police Deviance

Most of what we know about police corruption and other forms of police deviance is

from the investigations of independent commissions in the wake of police scandals including the

Knapp Commission (1972) report, the Pennsylvania Crime Commission (1974) report, and the

Mollen Commission (1994) report. These investigations were not designed to investigate police

crimes per se, but their findings in regard to corruption and other forms of misconduct shed some

light on the crimes committed by officers. The Knapp Commission acknowledged that bribe-

taking and petty thefts were pervasive. The investigation also identified small groups of officers

referred to as "meat-eaters" who "spend a good deal of their working hours aggressively seeking

out situations they can exploit for financial gain, including gambling, narcotics, and other serious

offenses" (Knapp Commission, 1972, p. 65). Twenty years later, the Mollen Commission

recognized a shift in the nature of corruption "primarily characterized by serious criminal

activity" closely associated with the drug trade, including wide-scale drug abuse and trafficking

among officers (Mollen Commission, 1994, p. 17). The trend was closely tied to an explosion of

crime opportunities provided by open-air markets for cocaine that sprouted during the early 90s.

The commissions collectively demonstrated a problem that went well beyond the usual

claim that police deviance is limited to a few "rotten pockets" of morally deficient cops, but their

findings supplied only limited information on the true nature and extent of crimes committed by

officers (Sherman, 1974, p. 7; Skogan & Frydl, 2004). The investigations documented some acts

of corruption and misconduct that did not involve violations of the criminal law, and obvious

problems exist in regard to generalizability since they chronicled the misbehavior of cops in only

a few jurisdictions. These shortcomings and the continued absence of any official statistics on

police crime lead into a review of studies that use other methods to explore police deviance and misconduct.

Researchers have used police agency records to study officer misconduct that in some cases includes specific violations of the criminal law. Fyfe and Kane (2006) (see also Kane & White, 2009) studied the career-ending misconduct of a sample of 1,543 New York City Police Department officers employed from 1975 through 1996. They identified eight separate categories of career-ending misconduct, and found that officers commonly engaged in several different types of profit-motivated crime including bribe-taking, grand larceny, insurance fraud, burglary, petit larceny, receiving stolen property and welfare fraud. Officers also engaged in a wide variety of crimes while they were off-duty, including domestic violence, driving while intoxicated, bar fights, and sexual offenses.

Fyfe and Kane (2006), Kane and White (2009), and Harris (2009) use agency records to demonstrate an inverse relationship between years of service and misconduct and other problem behaviors. These findings indicate that younger, less experienced officers tend to engage in more misconduct and/or receive more citizen complaints than do older, more experienced officers. Harris further describes a stable "experience-problem behavior curve," wherein officer misconduct peaks during the second and third years of service and then exhibits a much steadier and continued decline thereafter (p. 207). Harris' data cover the careers of officers who had "the potential to serve 11.5 to 14.5 years," a period that includes a "significant portion" of the career; but, one that specifically excludes the career stage that immediately precedes retirement. Fyfe and Kane (2006), Kane and White (2009), and Harris (2009) use data derived from the records of a single police agency, so questions remain in regard to generalizability. Still, their findings are consistent with the previous literature on police socialization that also suggests a stable inverse

relationship between officer age and/or experience and various forms of misconduct (see, e.g.,

Niederhoffer, 1967; Van Maanen, 1973).

Method

We sought to locate cases in which sworn law enforcement officers had been arrested for

one or more criminal offenses, including acts that occurred while the officer was either on or off-

duty. The primary information source was the internet-based Google News search engine and its

Google Alerts search tool. Google News is a computer-generated news site developed and

operated by Google that aggregates news articles from several thousand news sources (Google,

2008). Since its inception in 2002, Google News has been used by researchers to conduct

content analyses of news coverage on a variety of subjects including human trafficking (Denton,

2010), shaken baby syndrome (Lee, Barr, Catherine, & Wicks, 2007); medical research funding

(Hochman, Hochman, Bor, & McCormick, 2008); and, influenza infections among children (Ma,

et al., 2006). Google News is fast becoming the preferred method to conduct news-based content

analyses (Carlson, 2007).

Google designed the Google News search engine with the goal of including the

newspaper of record in each county within the United States (V. Boyapati, personal

communication, November 15, 2008). In addition to providing content to the Google News web

site using a series of automated algorithms that rank article relevance, the Google News search

engine can be used in conjunction with the Google Alerts tool to run automated daily searches

using a researcher's designated search query terms. News articles are accessible via Google

News for 30 days from the date of publication in the original news source (Galbraith, 2007). Our

data collection process occurred in real time on a daily basis beginning on January 1, 2005

through December 31, 2007.

Data Collection & Coding

The Google News search engine was used in conjunction with the Google Alerts tool to locate news articles. Searches were conducted using 48 different search terms. The Google Alert tool sends an automated email message that notifies the user whenever the daily search identifies a news article that matches the search terms. The automated alert contains a link to the URL for the designated news article. These articles were located and examined for relevancy, printed, and archived for subsequent coding and content analyses. Google News Alerts commonly identified articles that reported on events that occurred after an officer's arrest, including various court proceedings such as plea bargains, adjudications, appellate court orders, and/or the subsequent arrest(s) of the same officer(s) in different criminal cases. These articles provided additional data on the arrested officer(s), victim(s), the offense(s), and/or the disposition of the case.

After the universe of news reports was identified, we recorded case related information using a five page coding instrument that included 109 individual data fields. The data collection guidelines of the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) were adopted as the coding protocol for each of the NIBRS criminal offense categories (see United States Department of Justice, 2000, pp. 21-52).[1] Coding of content was completed by one of the authors. Additional procedures were undertaken to ensure the reliability of the data. One of the most widely accepted tests of reliability for content analyses is the percentage of agreement test, wherein the percentage of agreement among two or more coders is calculated (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). We employed a second coder to independently code a random sample of five percent of the total number of cases ($n = 106$). The overall level of simple agreement between

the two coders across the variables included in the present study (97.2%) established a degree of reliability well above what is generally considered "acceptable" (Riffe, et al., 2005, p. 147).

Strengths & Limitations of the Data

The online news searches produced data on police crime that would be difficult or impossible to obtain using other methods. Officer surveys are not likely to uncover actual cases of police crime due to the sensitive and/or threatening nature of the topic. Studies based on agency records are limited in terms of generalizability, and researchers confront considerable obstacles in regard to access because departments are reluctant to expose these data to outside scrutiny. Our research compliments existing studies in the "newsmaking criminology" tradition (Barak, 1988, 1995). According to Barak (2007), newsmaking criminology "refers to the conscious efforts and activities of criminologists to interpret, influence or shape the representation of 'newsworthy' items about crime and justice" (p. 191). Studies in newsmaking criminology most commonly involve the analysis of news content to gain knowledge about the nature of crime-related media coverage, but news content can also provide valuable information on the nature of the criminal behavior that underlies the media coverage (e.g., Beard & Payne, 2005; Denton, 2010; Morris, 2010; Payne, Berg, & Sun, 2005; Payne & Gainey, 2003; Ross, 2000). For our purposes, the news reports provided an unparalleled amount of information on a very large number of crimes committed by police officers.

Google News also offers some clear advantages over other aggregated news databases (*e.g.* Dialog®, Factiva®, LexisNexis®) (Ferguson, 2005; Galbraith, 2007; Ojala, 2002). Google News incorporates Google's automated search algorithms that are the current industry standard. The Google News site crawls content from over 4,500 English language news sources and appears to be more likely to locate stories that have not been picked up by news wire services.

Google News offers more up-to-date stories since it crawls the internet every 15 minutes.

Finally, the search engine provides multiple links to related news content, so if a particular story

provides insufficient information it is relatively easy to locate more relevant news sources.

Google does not however provide a publicly-available list of news sources. Google defines the

source list as proprietary information that is kept confidential in order to protect the company's

competitive interests.

There are three primary limitations of these data. First, our research is limited by the

content and quality of information provided on each case. The amount of information on each

case varied, and data for some of the variables of interest were missing for some of the cases.

Second, it should be recognized that the data are limited to cases that involved an official arrest.

We do not have any data on cases of police crime that did not come to the attention of police, nor

do we have information on cases that did not result in an arrest. Third, it should be recognized

that these data are the result of a filtering process that includes the exercise of discretion by

media sources. Media sources exercise discretion in terms of both the types of stories covered

and the nature of the content devoted to particular stories (Carlson, 2007).

Results

The news search identified data on 2,119 criminal cases that involved the arrest of 1,746

sworn officers during the period of January 1, 2005 through December 31, 2007. Some of the

officers were arrested more than once, and some of the officers had multiple cases due to having

more than one victim. The arrested officers were employed by 1,047 state and local agencies

representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Table 1 provides data on the overall

nature and character of police crime including univariate descriptive statistics on the arrested

officers, the geographic region in which the offense occurred, and the most common types of

offenses. The vast majority of cases involved male officers (95%). Slightly less than one-half of

the crimes (46.9%) occurred while the officer was on-duty. Most of the arrested officers were

patrol and street-level personnel (81.7%), including nonsupervisory officers, sheriff's deputies,

state troopers, and criminal investigators. The remaining officers were line/field supervisors

(corporals, sergeants, lieutenants) (13.4%) or police managers (captains, majors, colonels, deputy

chiefs and chiefs) (4.9%). The crimes occurred across every region of the United States, but the

arrested officers were most commonly employed by agencies located in the South (43.3%).

<<< Insert Table 1 about here >>>

Table 1 also provides information on the most common offenses. The cases were

originally coded using 65 offense codes. The most common type of offense was official

misconduct ($n = 301$). The name applied to this offense varied by state and included offenses

such as official oppression and violation of oath. The various labels serve as a catch-all

mechanism to criminally charge police when the elements of a crime for the underlying offense

may or may not be charged separately. Simple assaults ($n = 277$) and aggravated assaults ($n =

236$) were also common. Driving under the influence was the third most common offense ($n =

261$). Many of the most common offenses were sex crimes including forcible fondling ($n = 185$),

forcible rape ($n = 118$), forcible sodomy ($n = 93$), and statutory rape ($n = 81$). Officers were also

commonly arrested for vice crimes, most often drug and/or narcotics violations ($n = 162$) and

weapons law violations ($n = 118$). Other notable offenses that were not among the fifteen most

common included kidnapping/abduction ($n = 65$), murder and nonnegligent manslaughter ($n =

61$), robbery ($n = 61$), burglary ($n = 58$), indecent exposure ($n = 41$), and prostitution ($n = 20$).

The remainder of this section is organized into two parts that correspond to our specific

research objective of identifying and distinguishing late-stage police crimes. The first part

provides data on the relationship between officer experience and police crime. We are

particularly interested in determining the degree to which officers engage in late-stage police

crime, or those crimes committed by officers who are approaching retirement. The latter part of

this section presents analyses intended to distinguish these late-stage crimes from other police

crimes. We determine significant differences between arrests for late-stage crimes and other

crimes in terms of several factors including officer characteristics, his or her agency, offense and

victim characteristics, and dispositional outcomes.

Officer Experience & Police Crime

Data on years of service ($M = 9.66$, $SD = 7.523$) were available for 1,434 of the 2,119

cases. Figure 1 graphs these cases in terms of the percentage of total cases of police crime by the

number of years of experience for the arrested officer. The figure provides a graphic

presentation of police crimes committed across the law enforcement career. Figure 1 shows that

cases of police crime peak at four years of service ($n = 110$, 7.7%) and decline thereafter. The

decline however is interrupted by spikes in crime during years nine ($n = 63$, 4.4%), ten ($n = 63$,

4.4%), 14 ($n = 60$, 4.2%), and 18 ($n = 52$, 3.6%). The data show a decline in police crime after

year four that is largely consistent with the previous literature on more general forms of

misconduct, but the spikes in crimes (and smaller bumps at 25, 27, 30, and 35 years of service)

committed much later in the career seem to contradict the notion of a stable experience-problem

behavior curve and steady declines in misconduct that continue until retirement. Overall, the

crimes committed by officers with 18 or more years of experience ($n = 250$) accounted for a

considerable portion (17.4%) of the total number of crimes for which data on experience were

available. The surprisingly large number of pre-retirement or late stage crimes led to further

analyses to identify whether these crimes differed from those committed earlier in the career in terms of a number of key variables.

<< < Insert Figure 1 about here > >>

Distinguishing Late-Stage Police Crime

Bivariate chi square associations are reported in Table 2. Years of service is dichotomized into a binary variable where 0 = zero to 17 years of service at time of arrest, and 1 = 18 or more years of service at time of arrest. Table 2 shows that officers arrested with 18 or more years of service are significantly different from officers arrested with less experience in terms of several factors. For example, officers who were arrested with 18 or more years of service were less likely to be female than were officers arrested with 17 years of service or less. In terms of specific rank, officers arrested with 18 or more years of service were more likely to be administrators, line/field supervisors, or managers. Officers arrested with 17 years of experience or less were more likely to hold street-level positions that range from patrol through sergeant. In terms of agency characteristics, officers arrested with 18 or more years of service were more likely to be employed by a law enforcement agency located in the Northeastern or Western regions.

<< < Insert Table 2 about here > >>

Officers arrested with 18 or more years of service also differ from other arrested officers in terms of offense type, victim characteristics, and employment and legal outcomes. Table 2 shows that less experienced officers were more likely to commit violent crimes and more experienced officers were more likely to commit crimes for profit. For example, late-stage police criminals were more likely to be arrested for embezzlement and stolen property, while police criminals with less experience were more likely to be arrested for aggravated assault,

robbery, and other violent offenses. In terms of victims, officers arrested with 18 years or more

of service were more likely to have victims who are a relative or intimate partner. The victims of

officers with 17 years of service or less were more likely to be casual acquaintances or strangers.

Findings in regard to victim characteristics should be interpreted with caution given the existence

of missing data. News articles frequently omit information on victims to protect their privacy.

Officers with 17 or less years of service seem to experience more severe organizational

outcomes than late-stage police criminals. For example, officers arrested with 18 years or more

of service were more likely to resign as a result of their arrest than were officers arrested with 17

or less years of service. Late-stage police criminals were also more likely to be demoted in rank

(while keeping their jobs) than were officers arrested with 17 or less years of service. In

contrast, officers with 17 or less years of service were more likely to be terminated (i.e., fired)

from their law enforcement jobs than were officers arrested with 18 or more years of service.

The outcome disparities reverse however in cases that involve criminal trials or guilty pleas. The

conviction rate among officers who were arrested with 18 or more years of service was 89.1

percent, while the conviction rate for officers who were arrested with 17 years or less of service

was 77.5 percent.

Additional analyses were conducted to further investigate the relationship between years

of service and the employment outcomes for police criminals. Specifically, a multinomial

logistic regression model was used to determine the influence of a number of independent

variables on employment outcomes. The dependent variable is a trichotomous measure that

distinguishes between officers who were suspended ($n = 647$), resigned ($n = 270$), or terminated

($n = 265$).[2] Several officer, offense, and agency variables were included in the multivariate

analysis. The main independent variable of interest, years of service, was included as a

dichotomous measure to distinguish between officers with 17 or fewer years of service (coded 0)

and officers with 18 or more years of service (coded 1). Officer gender was included with

females coded as 0 and males coded as 1. Rank of the officer was included as a dichotomous

measure with managers/supervisors coded as 0 and patrol officers coded as 1. To control for

offense characteristics, two dichotomous measures were used to account for offenses that were

profit-motivated and offenses that were committed in an official capacity. For type of offense,

five dummy variables were also created for sex offenses, non-sex related personal offenses,

property offenses, drug offenses, and other offenses. Personal offenses were left out of the

analysis as the reference category. Department variables including agency type and geographic

region were also controlled in the analysis.

The descriptive statistics of the independent variables for officers that were suspended,

resigned, or terminated are presented in Table 3. Suspension was the most common outcome for

both officers with 17 years of service or fewer and those with 18-plus years of service. Bivariate

correlations computed for each of the independent variables revealed that none of the variables

were highly correlated with each other. Variance inflation factors were also computed for each

of the variables. All the variance inflation factors were below 4. Thus, it was determined that

collinearity is not an issue in the model (Mertler & Vannatta, 2002).

<<< Insert Table 3 about here >>>

The results of the multinomial logistic regression are reported in Table 4. In the model,

suspension was left out as the reference category for the dependent variable. Therefore, the

results are interpreted as the odds of an officer resigning as opposed to being suspended and an

officer being terminated as opposed to being suspended. Table 4 reveals that the coefficient for

years of service was positive and significant ($b = .470$, $p < .05$), indicating that officers with 18

or more years of service were significantly more likely to resign as opposed to being suspended

than officers with 17 or fewer years of experience. The odds of officers resigning instead of

being suspended increased for profit-motivated offenses ($b = .595$, $p < .05$), sex-related offenses

($b = .760$, $p < .001$) and those that occurred in an official capacity ($b = .346$, $p < .05$).

In examining the odds of termination as opposed to suspension, the model indicates that

the odds of being terminated rather than suspended was significantly less for those with 18 or

more years of service ($b = -.967$, $p < .001$) than for those with 17 or fewer years of service.

Examination of the other variables indicates that termination was significantly more likely than

suspension for patrol officers ($b = .524$, $p < .05$), those who committed sex offenses ($b = 1. 112$,

$p < .001$), and those whose offenses were profit-motivated ($b = .890$, $p < .001$). Those who

committed drug-related offenses were significantly less likely to be terminated than suspended (b

$= -1.009$, $p < .001$). In regard to department characteristics, officers employed by agencies in the

Northeast were significantly less likely to be terminated as opposed to suspended than those

located in the South ($b = -1.285$, $p < .001$) and officers employed in state agencies ($b = -1.016$, p

$< .05$) and county departments ($b = -1.125$, $p < .05$) were significantly less likely to be

terminated as opposed to suspended than were municipal officers.

<<< Insert Table 4 about here >>>

Discussion

Police crimes have thus far escaped large-scale empirical scrutiny, but they *are*

intrinsically newsworthy events. Police crimes defy public images of the scrupulous law

enforcement officer and media outlets know that stories about law-breaking cops invariably

attract the attention of readers, particularly if the crimes are committed by local police (Roebuck

& Barker, 1974). We sought to capitalize on the newsworthy character of these events through a

content analysis of news stories on law-breaking cops. Some points of discussion emerge from the data.

Our findings concerning the relationship between police crime and experience are in some respects consistent with those of previous studies focused on other forms of misconduct (Fyfe & Kane, 2006; C. J. Harris, 2009; Kane & White, 2009). We observed an inverse relationship between experience and police crime characterized by a spike during years four and five and a precipitous decline into the mid-career years. This finding suggests that the production of police crime may be influenced by some of the same factors that tend to produce more frequent acts of other types of misconduct among less experienced officers. The general notion of an inverse relationship between misconduct and experience also roughly corresponds to assertions made in the classic scholarship on police socialization, whereby length of service influences how officers approach the job (Langworthy & Travis, 2003). Police recruits often experience a reality shock during their initial years on the street that tends to increase cynicism and decrease job satisfaction (Lundman, 1980; Niederhoffer, 1967; Van Maanen, 1973, 1975). Officers gradually become socialized as they progress in their careers, and problem behaviors presumably subside as they come to terms with on-the-job realities and adopt a "don't make waves" perspective (Van Maanen, 1975).

While our research generally supports long-held notions regarding the relationship between experience and problem behaviors among officers, the current study also produced data on police crime that can be used to inform ongoing debates on the phenomenon. The news searches uncovered a surprisingly large number of crimes committed during the late-stage of the law enforcement career. Almost one in every five criminal cases involved officers with 18 or more years of experience, and some of those crimes were committed by officers on the cusp of

retirement (see Figure 1). Similar to existing studies on police misconduct, we identified an

inverse relationship between experience and police crime; however, the nature of these

relationships appears to be driven by the very large number of offenses that occur early in the

career, so much so that the effects of these early offenses may be masking important patterns of

crime and misconduct that occur much later in the career. At the least, the number of late-stage

crimes identified in the current study suggests the need for more data on the misconduct of well-

seasoned officers, and perhaps further scrutiny regarding the stability of the experience-problem

behavior curve. Harris' (2009) data for example includes officers who had the potential to serve

up to 11.5 to 14.5 years, a time-frame that would have failed to uncover at least 29 percent ($n =$

417) of the cases in our study for which data on officer experience were available.

Crimes that occur later in the career also appear to be significantly different from those

that occur earlier in terms of several important dimensions. Some of these differences are clearly

tied to the position and opportunities afforded to officers who have spent a considerable portion

of their lives in the profession. For example, late-stage offenders were more likely to be

supervisors and/or administrators, and they were more likely to commit crimes that were

motivated by profit. Late-stage offenders were also distinguished in terms of employment

outcomes. They were significantly less likely to be terminated as opposed to suspended than

were less experienced officers. This finding could signal reluctance on the part of the

organization to deny a pension and impose the most severe penalties against cops who have

"paid their dues." Cases that involved late-stage offenders were also significantly more likely to

end in resignation as opposed to suspension than were the cases of less experienced officers.

The organization may permit well-seasoned cops to quietly resign in lieu of suspension and

ultimate dismissal in order to protect organizational integrity (Roebuck & Barker, 1974).

Resignation may also be viewed as an attractive option to well-seasoned cops when the alternative is a lengthy suspension and an embarrassing internal investigation.

On the other hand, late-stage offenders were more likely to be convicted in criminal court, suggesting that law-breaking cops may become vulnerable to more severe legal sanctions in cases where the organization fails to dispense punishment that is perceived to be adequate or "fair." The convictions of late-stage offenders may also be related to the fact that they were more likely to commit white-collar or profit-motivated offenses. Previous studies on the sanctioning of white-collar offenders suggest that they may be subjected to harsher penalties in cases that are associated with their professional roles (Shaw & Skolnick, 1996).

Of course, only a small percentage of cops will ever be arrested for a criminal offense, and scholars generally agree that most police are honest and law-abiding (Skogan & Frydl, 2004; United States Government Accounting Office, 1998). We believe our data show that police crimes are not uncommon, and that existing assumptions about how rarely these offenses occur should at least be questioned given the previous lack of data on actual police crimes. Still, the proposition that only a small cadre of "rotten apples" engage in police crime raises legitimate questions about the implications of our study for scholars and police executives; points that are perhaps best approached through an explanation of our title phrase. Within the context of business and industry, the term "exit strategy" commonly refers to the means by which corporate executives remove themselves from an unfavorable business position. We use the term here to highlight the observed incidence of late-stage crimes; *but also*, to suggest more broadly that the transition to retirement may be more problematic than has been depicted in the existing scholarship. For some, this transition may be more accurately described as an escape from a position and a career that has become untenable. Findings on police crimes per se' augment data

on the relationship between experience and misconduct, but the occurrence of late-stage crimes

also points to the need for more research and policies directed toward understanding more

general problems that typically occur later in the career or during the transition to retirement.

Research & Policy Implications

The occurrence of late-stage crimes suggests the need for more studies on the

mechanisms that influence the behavior of experienced police officers, especially those on the

cusp of retirement. Police scholars recognize how the nature of the job and occupational

socialization shapes officer values and the street-level behavior of cops, but this body of work

tends to focus on experiences that occur early rather than late in the career. For example, the

most-widely recognized literature on police socialization highlights the shared experiences of

police recruits, academy training, and the reality shock experienced by probationary officers

(Bennett, 1984; R. N. Harris, 1973; Thistlewaite & Woolredge, 2010; Van Maanen, 1973, 1975).

The study of these experiences remains critical to understanding how recruits become police

officers and the prevalence of early-career misconduct, but the focus on early career experiences

has left gaps in our knowledge regarding the ongoing impact of socialization processes on

experienced cops. Research focused on more experienced cops could explain law violations and

other types of misconduct on the part of well-seasoned officers who are far-removed from the

academy and presumably no longer shocked by the realities of the job.

Additional research on more experienced officers should also inform policy. Police

agencies need to both recognize the possibility of problem-behaviors among long-time

employees and develop programs that anticipate the issues that commonly emerge late in the

career or during the transition to retirement. Some agencies for example have implemented

comprehensive personnel assessment systems that collect a wide range of data and have the

means to address a broad range of problems, most commonly misconduct related to the use of

force and citizen complaints (Alpert & Walker, 2000; Walker, 2005; Walker, Alpert, & Kenney,

2000). These "early warning" systems (Walker, 2005, pp. 104-107) could also be used to

identify officers with a propensity for criminal behavior, but we are not aware of any that

incorporate specific data on length of service to identify and select officers for intervention.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) may provide a more promising avenue toward

addressing pre-retirement issues. These programs typically provide personal and job-related

counseling services to officers. The pre-retirement phase of the career often produces feelings of

fear, insecurity, and practical concerns that could be related to the commission of late-stage

misconduct and crime. The existing literature points to the need for practical assistance in four

primary areas: 1) the long-term build-up of police stressors, 2) psychological problems related to

the loss of identity, 3) family adjustments, and 4) the need for financial planning (Finn & Tomz,

1996; Swanson, Territo, & Taylor, 2008; Violanti, 1992, 2004). The majority of large police

agencies provide counseling to retired officers, but few provide counseling and stress-

management training to pre-retirement officers (Finn & Tomz, 1996). The further

implementation of these types of programs needs to become a priority as the cohort of baby-

boomer officers approaches this final but critical stage of the law enforcement career.

Notes

[1]Several non-NIBRS offense categories were added to our coding instrument during a pilot study

when we noticed many cases where officers were arrested for offenses that are not included in

the NIBRS. The non-NIBRS offense categories are: indecent exposure; online solicitation of a

child; civil rights violations (criminal); destroying or tampering with evidence; false

reports/statements and perjury; hit and run; obstructing justice; official misconduct, official

oppression, and violation of oath; and, restraining order violations.

[2]Cases that were missing data for the outcome measure ($n = 509$) or for years of service ($n =$

421) were excluded from the analysis in Table 3. Only the most severe type of sanction was

recorded for the analyses in Table 3. For example, some officers were initially suspended and

then later terminated. In these cases, the officer was classified by the ultimate sanction of

termination. Due to the small number of officers who were demoted ($n = 7$), an additional

outcome to account for these cases could not be estimated. These cases were removed from the

analysis. The final sample for the analysis in Table 3 contained 1,182 cases.

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Table 1. The Police Crimes ($N = 2,119$)

|	n	%
Officer Characteristics		
Male Officer	2,014	95.0
On-Duty	993	46.9
Duty Status		
Patrol & Street-Level	1,731	81.7
Line/Field Supervisor	284	13.4
Management	104	4.9
Agency Characteristics		
Type		
Municipal Agency	1,532	72.3
Sheriff's Dept.	321	15.1
State Agency (primary)	104	4.9
County Agency	93	4.4
Special Agency	69	3.3
Region		
Northeast	488	23.0
Midwest	442	20.9
South	918	43.3
West	271	12.8
Most Common Offenses		
Official Misconduct	301	14.2
Simple Assault	277	13.1
Driving Under the Influence	261	12.3
Aggravated Assault	236	11.1
Forcible Fondling	185	8.7
Drug/Narcotic Violation	162	7.6
Intimidation	140	6.6
False Report/Statement/Perjury	120	5.7
Forcible Rape	118	5.6
Weapons Law Violation	118	5.6
Forcible Sodomy	93	4.4
Statutory Rape	81	3.8
Obstructing Justice	80	3.8
Civil Rights Violation	76	3.6
False Pretenses	72	3.4

Table 2. Years of Service Bivariate Associations (N = 1,434)

	n	X^2	df	p	V
Officer Characteristics					
Gender	1,434	7.430	1	.006	.072
Rank by Org. Function	1,434	144.705	2	<.001	.318
Rank (dichotomous)	1,434	85.869	1	<.001	.245
Agency Characteristics					
Geographic Region	1,434	8.356	3	.039	.076
Geographic Divisions	1,434	31.599	8	<.001	.148
Offense Characteristics					
Aggravated Assault	1,434	6.642	1	.010	.068
Embezzlement	1,434	8.949	8	.003	.079
Robbery	1,434	7.668	1	.006	.073
Stolen Property Offenses	1,434	8.142	1	.004	.075
Violence-Related	1,434	6.434	1	.011	.067
Victim Characteristics					
Age (categorical)	487	16.120	8	.041	.182
Relationship (dichotomous)	969	4.435	1	.035	.068
Outcomes					
Termination	1,434	25.815	1	<.001	.134
Resignation	1,434	16.366	1	<.001	.107
Demotion	1,434	10.606	1	.001	.086
Criminal Case Disposition	456	6.197	1	.013	.113

Table 3. Employment Outcomes Descriptive Statistics (N = 1,182)

	Suspended		Resigned		Terminated	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Years of Service						
0-17 Years	537	83.0	201	74.4	248	93.6
18 + Years	110	17.0	69	25.6	17	6.4
Gender						
Female	41	6.3	9	3.3	8	3.0
Male	606	93.7	261	96.7	257	97.0
Rank						
Manager/Supervisor	121	18.7	64	23.7	31	11.7
Patrol	526	81.3	206	76.3	234	88.3
Motivation						
Not Profit Motivated	492	76.0	187	69.3	193	72.8
Profit Motivated	155	24.0	83	30.7	72	27.2
Offense Circumstances						
Not Official Capacity	344	53.2	112	41.5	124	46.8
Official Capacity	303	46.8	158	58.5	141	53.2
Offense Type						
Personal (reference)	245	37.9	76	28.2	87	32.8
Property	91	14.1	47	17.4	38	14.3
Drug Related	52	8.0	19	7.0	9	3.4
Sex Related	132	20.4	81	30.0	106	40.0
Other Offense	127	19.6	47	17.4	25	9.4
Agency Type						
Municipal (reference)	470	72.6	193	71.5	195	73.6
State Agency (primary)	40	6.2	18	6.7	6	2.3
Sheriff's Dept.	83	12.8	41	15.2	51	19.2
County Agency	32	4.9	12	4.4	8	1.9
Special Agency	22	3.4	6	2.2	8	3.0
Region						
South (reference)	244	37.7	105	38.9	131	49.4
Northeast	190	29.4	61	22.6	31	11.7
Midwest	126	19.5	51	18.9	53	20.0
West	87	13.4	53	19.6	50	18.9

Table 4. Employment Outcomes Multinomial Logistic Regression Analysis ($N = 1,182$)								
	Resigned Rather than Suspended ($n = 270$)				Terminated Rather than Suspended ($n = 265$)			
	b	p	SE	Exp (B)	b	p	SE	Exp (B)
Years of Service	.470	.014	.192	1.600	-.967	.001	.288	.380
Gender	-.463	.233	.388	.629	-.726	.080	.415	.484
Rank	-.031	.875	.194	.970	.524	.026	.236	1.689
Profit Motivated	.595	.011	.233	1.810	.890	<.001	.251	2.435
Official Capacity	.346	.027	.157	1.410	.093	.567	.163	1.098
Property	.011	.969	.273	1.010	-.313	.275	.287	.731
Drug Related	-.074	.815	.316	.929	-1.009	.013	.406	.365
Sex Related	.760	<.001	.204	2.140	1.112	<.001	.202	3.039
Other Offense	.147	.496	.217	1.160	-.444	.088	.260	.641
State Agency (primary)	.049	.871	.305	1.050	-1.016	.027	.458	.362
Sheriff's Dept.	.108	.622	.219	1.110	.298	.163	.214	1.347
County Agency	-.082	.822	.366	.921	-1.125	.027	.507	.325
Special Agency	-.578	.230	.482	.561	-.473	.291	.447	.623
Northeast	-.388	.051	.199	.678	-1.285	<.001	.235	.277
Midwest	-.013	.951	.212	.987	-.194	.356	.210	.824
West	.330	.133	.220	1.390	-.011	.961	.224	.989
Constant	-1.437	<.001	.261		-1.307	<.001	.290	
Nagelkerke R^2	.144							
Cox and Snell R^2	.166							
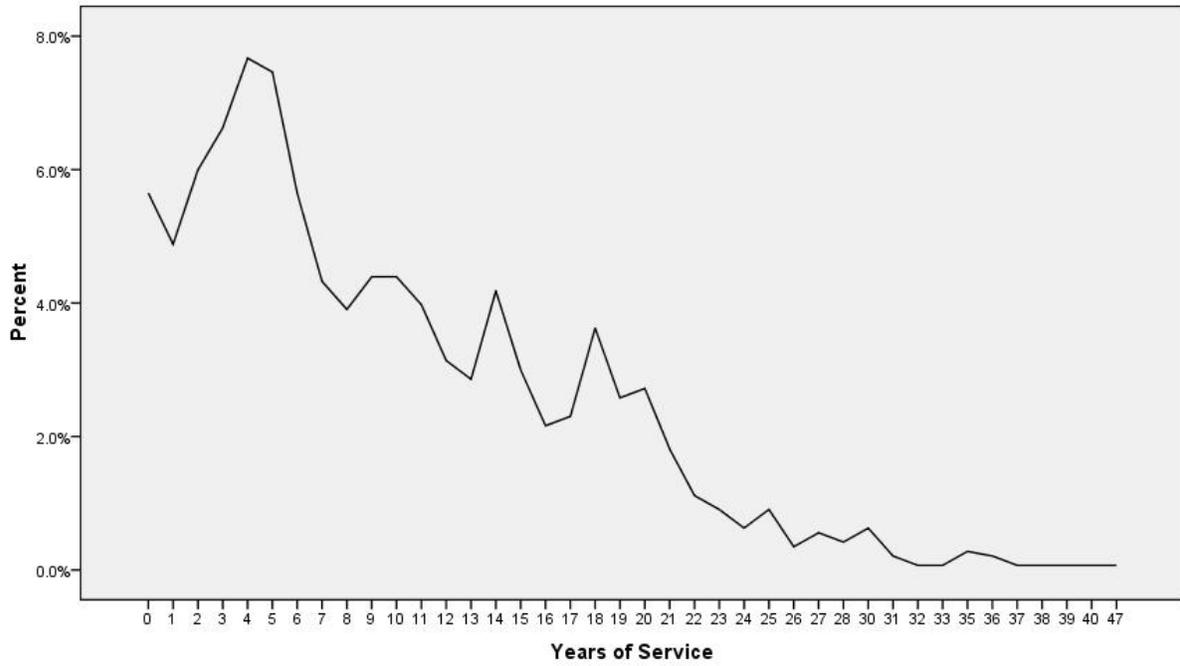
Figure 1. Police crime arrests across the life course of law enforcement officers' careers.