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Research Brief One-Sheet No.1: Late-Stage Police Crime: Is it an Exit Strategy?

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Research Brief *One-Sheet* – No. 1

Late-Stage Police Crime: Is it an Exit Strategy?

Philip M. Stinson, Sr., John Liederbach, and Tina L. Freiburger

Background

The study focuses on crimes committed by experienced police officers who are approaching retirement. Police scholars have traditionally been interested in 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; but, the occurrence of "late-stage" misconduct committed by experienced police officers 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.

Methods

The study identifies cases in which sworn law enforcement officers had been arrested for one or more criminal offenses through content analyses of published newspaper articles. Data were collected as part of a larger study on police crime. Data are derived using the Google News™ search engine and Google Alerts™ email update service. The research team located and printed news article identified through these applications, examined them for relevancy, and archived them for subsequent coding and analyses.

Findings

The larger study on police crime identified 2,119 criminal cases that involved the arrest of 1,746 sworn officers during the period January 1, 2005 through December 31, 2007. Data on years of service were available for 1,434 of the cases. The data show that cases of police crime peak at 4 years of service and decline thereafter. The decline, however, is interrupted by spikes in crime during years 9, 10, 14, and 18 years of service. These spikes in crimes committed 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 crimes of experienced officers differed from those committed earlier in the police career. 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. 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. On the other hand, "late-stage" or experienced offenders were more likely to be convicted in criminal court, suggesting that law-breaking officers may become vulnerable to

more severe legal sanctions in cases where the organization fails to dispense punishment that is perceived to be adequate.

Implications

The occurrence of "late-stage" police 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 and executives often recognize how the nature of the job and occupational socialization shapes officer values and the street-level behavior of police, but this body of knowledge tends to focus on experiences that occur early rather than late in the career (*see, e.g., Van Maanen, 1975*). The transition to retirement, however, may be more problematic for some law enforcement officers than previously recognized in the literature. The findings of the current study suggest that some officers looking for an "exit strategy" late in their career might use criminal opportunities as an escape from a position and career that have become untenable.

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. These "early warning" systems 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. The majority of large police agencies provide counseling to retired officers, but few provide counseling and stress-management training to pre-retirement officers. 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.

References

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