



**National Network
For Safe Communities
at JOHN JAY COLLEGE**

Addressing the Few: Applying Focused Deterrence to Police Misconduct

ISSUE BRIEF

THE IMPACT OF POLICE MISCONDUCT

The costs of police misbehavior and misconduct are incalculable. A wide range of behaviors—from verbal abuse to fatal uses of force—have ripple effects far beyond direct harm, even when they are considered lawful. Misconduct creates distrust and fear, eroding relationships between police and communities. Public safety is compromised by a reduced willingness by the public to report crime or cooperate in police investigations.¹ The vicarious trauma caused by police misconduct has been found to worsen health outcomes, particularly for Black Americans.² Over the past decade, police misconduct lawsuits have cost cities and taxpayers over \$3.2 billion.³ Further, increased scrutiny by the public and media following recent high-profile incidents of police misconduct have been cited as a reason for difficulty retaining and recruiting new officers.⁴

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, better known as the Kerner Commission, identified police misconduct and practices as one of the primary causes of civil disorder during the 1960's.⁵ The beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers, captured on video and shared widely by national media in 1991, sparked civil unrest in Los Angeles following the acquittal of the officers involved. The devastating consequences included dozens of deaths.⁶ Since then, cell phones and social media have made it infinitely easier to capture and share police misconduct. The public protests and civil unrest that follow now often spread beyond the jurisdiction where the incident occurred, most notably following the murder

of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020.⁷ Each such incident further weakens perceptions of police legitimacy and traumatizes the public.

Despite decades of earnest efforts by police executives, policy makers, academics, and advocates, and though several U.S. states have taken steps to curb use of force, enhance the duty to intervene in and report misconduct, and make it easier to decertify officers since the death of George Floyd⁸, improving accountability structures remains an elusive goal. Research on police misconduct has revealed two important aspects of the problem. First, a significant amount of misconduct is driven by a small number of police officers. Second, misconduct is a learned behavior that is more likely to occur in a group context. Focused deterrence is a strategy that is built to address these same dynamics.

THE CONCENTRATION OF POLICE MISCONDUCT

The concentration of police misconduct refers to the disproportionate involvement of some officers in misconduct relative to their similarly situated peers. While longitudinal research suggest that at least one incident of misconduct is common for over 80% of police officers throughout their careers⁹, 5% of officers are responsible for 20% of citizen complaints.¹⁰ In Chicago, Illinois 4% of officers were involved in nearly 30% of complaints about use of force.¹¹ This same concentration extends to litigation payouts, as the top 1% of Chicago Police Department officers generate five times the number of payouts as the average officer.¹² An examination of eight different police departments across the United States suggests that this is a larger pattern.¹³

THE NETWORK SPREAD OF POLICE MISCONDUCT

As with any behavior, police misconduct is both learned and spread through social groups. Research suggests that associating with officers who have a history of misconduct increases that officer's own amount of misconduct.¹⁴ The same dynamic is also true for use of force complaints.¹⁵ However, recent research suggests that past misbehavior, individual proneness, and neighborhood context are more important than on-the-scene partner misbehavior.¹⁶ Police misconduct also tends to occur within specific assignments and roles within police departments, such as patrol.¹⁷ Groups of officers engaging in misconduct, such as those identified by research

from Chicago, are responsible for a disproportionate number of complaints, arrests, and firearm discharges.¹⁸ Within these groups, individual officers can facilitate misconduct by forming relationships with others involved in misconduct.¹⁹ While misconduct is more likely early on in an officer's career²⁰, it also manifests in later parts of an officer's career for those who remain on patrol.²¹ Both the concentration of misconduct and its network dynamics share similarities with those found in problems that focused deterrence has successfully addressed.

A FOCUSED APPROACH

The primary goal of all focused deterrence interventions is to reduce problem behavior by focusing available resources and attention on the small number of people responsible for a disproportionate amount of that behavior. Focused deterrence addresses problems through a combination of direct communication, support and outreach, and strategic sanctioning. Originating with Boston's Operation Ceasefire in 1996, the focused deterrence framework has been applied to a range of problems including group violence, intimate partner violence, prison violence, and drug markets. A review of 24 evaluations found that, when implemented with fidelity, focused deterrence strategies lead to significant reductions in those targeted behaviors.²²

THE COMMON THREAD

The research on police misconduct suggests that the problem is amenable to a focused deterrence approach, and that departments have the ability and information required to implement it. First, a disproportionate amount of misconduct is driven by a small number of identifiable officers in each police department. Second, misconduct is learned and spread through networks of officers. By concentrating resources on this small number of officers, leveraging opportunities for direct messaging and peer networks for preventive influence, and utilizing strategic responses, we believe it is possible to significantly reduce unwanted behavior.

The **National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College** supports cities to implement and advance proven strategies to reduce violence and improve public safety, minimize arrest and incarceration, strengthen communities, and improve relationships between law enforcement and communities.

John Jay College of Criminal Justice | 524 W. 59th St., Ste. 1140B, New York, NY 10019 | Learn more at nnscommunities.org

-
- ¹ Desmond, Matthew, Papachristos, Andrew V., and Kirk, David S. "Police Violence and Citizen Crime Reporting in the Black Community." *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 15 (2016): 857-876.
 - ² Bor, Jacob, Venkataramani, Atheendar S., Williams, David R., and Tsai, Alexander C. "Police Killings and Their Spillover Effects on the Mental Health of Black Americans: A Population-Based, Quasi-Experimental Study." *The Lancet* 392, (2018): 302-310.
 - ³ "Police Misconduct Cost Taxpayers Over \$3.2 Billion in Settlements." The Crime Report. March 9, 2022. <https://thecrimereport.org/2022/03/09/police-misconduct-cost-taxpayers-over-3-2-billion-in-settlements/>.
 - ⁴ https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/11-2022/recruitment_retention.html
 - ⁵ Kerner Commission. 1968. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. Washington: Government Printing Office.
 - ⁶ [cite]
 - ⁷ <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/06/26/protests-damage-overtime-costs-denver/>
 - ⁸ Subramanian, Ram, and Arzy, Leily. "State Policing Reforms Since George Floyd's Murder." Brennan Center for Justice. May 21, 2021. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/state-policing-reforms-george-floyds-murder>.
 - ⁹ Harris, Christopher J. "Exploring the Relationship between Experience and Problem Behaviors." *Police Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (June 2009): 192-213.
 - ¹⁰ Harris, Christopher J. "Problem Officers? Analyzing Problem Behavior Patterns from a Large Cohort." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, no.2 (2010): 216-225.
 - ¹¹ Ouellet, Marie, Hashimi, Sadaf, Gravel, Jason, and Papachristos, Andrew V. "Network Exposure and Excessive Use of Force: Investigating the Social Transmission of Police Misconduct." *Criminology & Public Policy* 18, no. 3 (2019): 675-704.
 - ¹² Rozema, Kyle, and Schanzenbach, Max. "Good Cop, Bad Cop: Using Civilian Allegations to Predict Police Misconduct." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 11, no.2 (2019): 225-268.
 - ¹³ Terrill, William, and Ingram, Jason R. "Citizen Complaints against the Police: An Eight City Examination." *Police Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (2016): 150-179.
 - ¹⁴ Quispe-Torreblanca, Edika G., and Stewart, Neil. "Causal Peer Effects in Police Misconduct." *Nature Human Behaviour* 3, no. 8 (2019): 797-807.
 - ¹⁵ Ouellet, Hashimi, Gravel, and Papachristos "Network Exposure and Excessive Use of Force: Investigating the Social Transmission of Police Misconduct".
 - ¹⁶ Simpson, Cohen R., and David S. Kirk. "Is Police Misconduct Contagious? Non-trivial Null Findings from Dallas, Texas." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 39, (2023):425-463.

-
- ¹⁷ Cubitt, Timothy I. "Using Network Analytics to Improve Targeted Disruption of Police Misconduct." *Police Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2021): 24-53.
- ¹⁸ Jain, Akshay, Sinclair, Rajiv, and Papachristos, Andrew V. "Identifying Misconduct-Committing Officer Crews in the Chicago Police Department." *PLoS ONE* 17, no. 5 (2022): 1-21.
- ¹⁹ Cubitt, Timothy I. "Using Network Analytics to Improve Targeted Disruption of Police Misconduct".
- ²⁰ Wood, George, Roithmayr, Daria, and Papachristos, Andrew V. "The Network Structure of Police Misconduct." *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5, (2019): 1-18.
- ²¹ Harris, Christopher. "Problem behaviors in later portions of officers' careers." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 34, no. 1 (2011): 135-152.
- ²² Braga, Anthony A., Weisburd, David, and Turchan, Brandon. "Focused Deterrence Strategies Effects on Crime: A Systematic Review." *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 15, no. 3 (2019): 1-65.