

Police officers' exposure to peers accused of misconduct shapes their subsequent behavior

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A new Northwestern University study investigated how Chicago police officers' exposure to peers who had been accused of misconduct shaped their involvement in subsequent excessive force cases.

"We found that officers who were involved in complaints related to this type of force were more likely to work with officers with a history of such behaviors, suggesting that officers' peers may serve as social conduits through which misconduct is learned and transmitted," said Andrew V. Papachristos, senior author of the study and professor of sociology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern and faculty fellow at the University's Institute for Policy Research.

Researchers examined the records of more than 8,000 Chicago police officers named in multiple complaints from 2007 to 2015 to determine the role played by social networks in officers' misconduct.

Prior research on this topic has analyzed individual or departmental factors that may be associated with police officers' problematic behaviors.

This study is one of the first to analyze police officers' work networks—specifically, their involvement with other officers in misconduct complaints—to determine how misconduct may be socially transmitted across deviant officers.

The study classified complaints as use of force if they entailed [excessive force](#) (use of a firearm, use of a conductive energy device) or unnecessary physical contact, or if they involved an act that resulted in injury or death.

The researchers found that [police officers](#) who had a greater proportion of colleagues previously named in use-of-force complaints were more likely to be named in subsequent use-of-force complaints.

"These findings held even after controlling for officers' characteristics and for the opportunity of being named in future use-of-force complaints," said Papachristos, also director of the Northwestern

Neighborhood & Network Initiative.

The study's authors suggest that exposure to such behavior in their networks may lessen officers' perceptions of the risks associated with engaging in misconduct. Thus, not only do officers learn patterns of deviance from their colleagues, but the networks in which they associate with those colleagues alter their perceptions of the risks connected to misconduct, normalizing behaviors that otherwise would be considered deviant or against training and regulations.

The authors recommend that [police departments](#) consider how assigning officers with histories of using force excessively affects the behavior of other officers.

"Temporarily removing officers named in complaints of this kind from the field until problematic behaviors are addressed might limit the negative consequences of exposure," Papachristos said.

The authors acknowledge the study's limitations.

First, the number of complaints analyzed likely underestimates the full scope of deviant behavior in a police department because of under-reporting. Second, because the researchers did not have information on officers' beats or other geographic assignments, they could not determine whether complaints varied based on assignments to different kinds of neighborhoods (e.g., high-crime areas). Third, the study captured officers' networks of others involved in prior misconduct, so it likely underestimated the broader social structure in which they operated by emphasizing only relationships with a potentially negative influence. And finally, the study's findings are based on one agency, the Chicago Police Department, so they cannot be applied to other police departments.

"Network exposure and excessive use of force: Investigating the social

transmission of police misconduct" will publish Aug. 1 in the journal *Criminology & Public Policy*. In addition to Papachristos, co-authors include Marie Quellet, Georgia State University; Sadaf Hashimi, Rutgers University; and Jason Gravel, University of Pennsylvania Injury Science Center.

'Misconduct networks'

In another related working paper, Papachristos and co-authors George Wood of Northwestern and Daria Roithmayr of the University of Southern California Gould School of Law, recreate police "misconduct networks"—defining the demographics of misconduct and examining what contributes to misconduct such as gender, race and age/tenure.

"Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways from our 'Network Structure' study is the concentration of misconduct is a major feature of [police networks](#)," Papachristos said. "The modal number of civilian complaints is zero and average is something like 1.3. This means that, on average, cops get less than two complaints over a 10-year period. And less than 3% of all officers are named in about 27% of all complaints."

Additional findings of "The Network Structure of Police Misconduct" include:

- Officers receiving complaints tend to be males, 25 to 45 years old
- 76% of officers named in at least one civilian [complaint](#) have been co-named alongside another officer
- Pairing more experienced officers with less experienced officers makes them less likely to engage in [misconduct](#)

The researchers said there are actionable steps to improve complaints, including:

- Pay attention to staffing for officers assigned to high-crime communities (race, gender and age); civilians prefer "mixed race" pairings of officers
- Increase the percentage of officers from underrepresented groups

More information: Marie Ouellet et al, Network exposure and excessive use of force, *Criminology & Public Policy* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9133.12459](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12459)

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