

Study finds police misconduct 'hotspots' across Florida

July 30 2024



Researchers measured the relative harm of criminal offenses committed by a subset of 1,103 particularly deviant police officers. Credit: Alex Dolce, Florida Atlantic University

Not all police misconduct is the same. Misconduct can range from offenses like homicide and sexual assault to seemingly minor infractions

such as accepting free coffee from the public. Exactly what qualifies as police misconduct varies locally, and the response to this behavior is typically handled internally by law enforcement.

The absence of a commonly accepted framework to assess and interpret police misconduct remains a complex and contentious issue. Moreover, progress in researching this area is hindered by the limited access to law enforcement data, which is closely guarded.

Using official data from 241 law enforcement agencies in 67 counties in Florida, researchers from Florida Atlantic University assessed the prevalence and nature of police misconduct and discipline from 2012 to 2023. They also measured the relative harm of criminal offenses committed by a subset of 1,103 particularly deviant police officers. Data was obtained from Florida's Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission, which publicly released a searchable online database in July 2022 of Florida law enforcement discipline cases available.

Results of the study, published in the [Journal of Criminal Justice](#), identified 24 categories of police misconduct ranging from assault/battery to weapons offenses, manslaughter, homicide, extortion and false statement/perjury (lying under oath). Statewide, the most considerable incidence of police misconduct offenses was related to officer failure to report and perjury, followed closely by sexual-related crimes. Drug and alcohol-related offenses also were prevalent misconduct categories and overrepresented in the dataset.

Using the Pareto principle (80/20 rule), researchers analyzed how incidents and harm cluster within specific categories. The Pareto principle indicates that roughly 80% of outcomes arise from 20% of causes.

Researchers applied Florida's sentencing rules and a harm index to score

the severity of each crime, identified those with the greatest impact, and differentiated between career-ending and non-career-ending misconduct incidents. Unlike previous studies that focused on individual [police departments](#), this study included police departments, sheriff's offices, prisons and probation centers.

Findings show that about 30% of counties account for 80% of all police misconduct incidents in Florida, while only 23% of counties account for 80% of the total harm inflicted.

"Police misconduct causes harm to police departments, communities and individual victims. However, before our study, the relative and differential impacts of different types of police misconduct remained largely unexplored," said Lisa M. Dario, Ph.D., senior author and an associate professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, within FAU's College of Social Work and Criminal Justice.

During the study period, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement predominantly issued revocations of officer certifications in 42% of disciplinary cases, making it the most common outcome. Dismissals of cases were rare, occurring in only 6.5% of instances.

Approximately 30% of cases resulted in officers being suspended or put on probation. Notably, about 60% of police misconduct cases handled by the state led to career-ending consequences for the officers involved, differing from prior research.

Disparities in disciplinary outcomes were stark. As an example, sexual offenses against minors were always career-ending at the state level, though sexual offenses against adult victims such as domestic violence only ended an officer's career about 73% of the time. DUI and excessive force offenses received career-ending discipline in less than half of all cases.

Findings show that several counties in Florida, including Leon, Gadsden, Bay, Hardee, Madison, and Bradford, showed the highest rates of police misconduct incidents. For instance, Leon County reported 22.90 incidents per 100,000 people, the highest among all counties. Gadsden County followed with 15.97 incidents per 100,000 people.

In contrast, counties like Martin, Charlotte, Sumter, Lake, Highlands, and Nassau reported fewer than two incidents per 100,000 people. A Pareto chart illustrated the distribution of these incidents across counties, showing that Miami-Dade had the most incidents, followed by Leon, Duval, Hillsborough and Bay counties, which together accounted for about 80% of all incidents.

Miami-Dade County comprised 14% of all total relative harm in Florida. This is twice as much as the next most harmful county, Broward, which comprised 7% of total relative harm. Gadsden County indicates disparities between incident rates and harm scores, with a high incident rate (15.97) but a low relative harm score (1%).

"This pattern we observed aligns with the Pareto principle, indicating that a small number of counties contribute significantly to the overall number of police misconduct incidents in Florida, while others contribute minimally," said Dario. "Miami-Dade County consistently ranked highest in both metrics, underscoring its critical role in state-wide law enforcement and harm mitigation efforts."

The novel approach used in this study moves beyond traditional administrative perspectives that primarily focus on procedural violations, offering a fresh lens through which to evaluate the consequences and implications of police misconduct.

"In recent years, police departments have become increasingly interested in fostering perceptions of legitimacy in their communities," said Dario.

"A more nuanced understanding of the impact of police misconduct and harm indexing can help by serving as a new point of intervention for police-community relations. It also encourages law enforcement to focus on the harm caused by certain types of misconduct instead of the common practice of treating all [misconduct](#) as similarly harmful."

Study co-authors are Gabriel T. Cesar, Ph.D., an assistant professor; Kristina Jalbert, a graduate student; and Frank de la Torre, J.D., associate dean and instructor, all within FAU's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

More information: Lisa M. Dario et al, Quantifying the impact: From prevalence to harm in evaluating police misconduct, *Journal of Criminal Justice* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2024.102229](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2024.102229)

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

Citation: Study finds police misconduct 'hotspots' across Florida (2024, July 30) retrieved 30 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-police-misconduct-hotspots-florida.html>

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