

Police Use of Improper Force: A Systematic Review of the Evidence

Christopher J. Harris

University of Massachusetts–Lowell, Lowell, Massachusetts, USA

Abstract: This paper presents a systematic review of studies which consider the causes of police use of improper force, both in terms of which officers are more likely to use it, and against whom and under what conditions it occurs. The number of studies that do more than estimate the prevalence of improper force is small, and as such are reviewed in detail. What research there is suggests that situational factors have the most substantive impact on police use of improper force within police-citizen encounters, and that it is more likely to be employed by young, inexperienced, male officers across multiple encounters. Implications for research when police break the law and become offenders are discussed.

Keywords: improper force, excessive force, problem officer

Read any article regarding police use of force, and one invariably will see a quote or reference from Bittner's (1970) seminal work which argues that the police are best understood as a "mechanism for the distribution of non-negotiably coercive force employed in accordance of an intuitive grasp of situational exigencies" (p. 46). Indeed, many scholars agree with Bittner, citing the use of force as the core police role (Bayley, 1985; Klockars, 1985; Reiss, 1971). By implication then, the inappropriate use of coercive force can be seen as the central problem of police misconduct (Kerstetter, 1985). When officers use more force than is reasonable—when force is "misused" or "excessive" or any of the other litany of terms used to describe such an occurrence—trust between the police and the public is damaged, as the police themselves become offenders. Since the police rely on their legitimacy to effectively manage their tasks, the costs of incidents of police abuse of force are high. The police rely on citizens for reporting crime, providing information, and testifying in court.

Address correspondence to Christopher J. Harris, Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, 870 Broadway Street, 218 Mahoney Hall, Lowell, MA 01854, USA.
E-mail: christopher_harris@uml.edu

Actual or perceived misconduct on the part of the police is likely to reduce these cooperative behaviors on the part of citizens, thereby hindering police performance (Bayley, 2002; Decker, 1981).

What follows is a systematic review of the research on improper force.¹ Since others have already examined the prevalence of such phenomenon (Adams, 1996), this review focuses on studies which attempt to explain improper force, instead of estimating how often it occurs. I am particularly interested in not only how often improper force occurs, but what sorts of police officers are most likely to use it, and against whom and under what circumstances it most likely occurs. This review also focuses only upon less-than-lethal force, since detailed reviews of deadly force already exist (e.g., Fyfe, 1988), and such research has typically examined only instances where deadly force was employed—ignoring similar situations where no force or less-than-lethal force was used (Reiss, 1980).

REVIEWING THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

Traditionally, reviews of extant research rely upon the author's expertise in their field to identify key studies, assess their merits and weaknesses, and ultimately come to some conclusions about the status of the field and make recommendations for future empirical investigation. This process could be described more as an art rather than a science, as it is largely based on an author's skill in accomplishing the aforementioned activities. While this method is advantageous in terms of its flexibility, giving experts an opportunity to exert their opinion on key aspects of their field, one must remain cautious regarding personal bias—both in the studies chosen, and what is determined in the review (Johnson, De Li, & Larson, 2000). Moreover, since the traditional review is unstructured, it is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate it to determine if bias exists. This is of particular concern if the topic is controversial. Police use of improper force certainly falls into this realm, and thus a traditional review of this topic would certainly be open to the criticism of subjectivity.

A relatively new strategy called a systematic review (SR) employs a means for replicable reviews of research, thereby minimizing the opportunity for bias. What's more, the process is sufficiently simple to undertake, as it does not require extensive statistical or methodological expertise of other review mechanisms such a meta-analysis. In conducting a SR, stages of the

¹The term improper force is employed here to note that force used by the police can either be proper or improper. Improper force can include using force when none is necessary (*unnecessary force*) or using force in excess of what is reasonably required to counter a suspect's resistance (*excessive force*).

review design are specified, as are criteria for including or excluding various works. Once a population or sample of studies is identified, key aspects of the work are quantified and summed across reviewed studies as a numerical measure of their scientific rigor. The methodological rigor scale used in this article is identical to the scale used in the University of Maryland's report to the U.S. Congress in 1997 entitled *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't and What's Promising* (Sherman et al., 1997). The rigor scale was created in the interest of providing a standardized presentation of the quality of empirical research, particularly relating to crime prevention studies. According to the rigor scale, studies could be assigned a scientific methods score of 1 through 5. The scale is defined as follows: (1) a score of "1" indicates that the study found a correlation between a treatment program and a measure of crime or crime risk factors; (2) a score of "2" indicates that the study found a temporal sequence between the program and the crime or risk outcome clearly observed, or a comparison group was present without demonstrated comparability to the treatment group; (3) a score of "3" indicates that the study included a comparison between two or more units of analysis; (4) a score of "4" indicates that the study included a comparison between multiple units with and without the program, controlling for other factors, or a nonequivalent comparison group has only minor differences evident; and (5) a score of "5" indicates the study used random assignment and analysis of comparable units to program and comparison groups (Sherman et al., 1997). While this scale is not wholly applicable to the study of improper force, since such an enterprise cannot be subject to experimental conditions, it nevertheless provides some measure of scientific merit.

METHODS EMPLOYED IN SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

This review synthesizes the existing published empirical evidence on police use of improper force. In keeping with the established conventions of a SR, the stages of this review and the criteria for selecting eligible studies are described below.

Types of Studies

This review was limited to studies which attempt to explain police use of improper force. To be eligible, studies were required to provide an empirical framework within which to test hypotheses regarding police use of improper force, and not simply attempt to estimate its prevalence, although all the studies included herein do both. No definitional criteria were established for what constitutes improper force, since interest lies in how researchers operationalized this particular concept.

Search Strategies for Identifying Studies

To identify studies meeting the above criteria, the following search strategies were employed:

1. Searches of online databases
2. Searches of narrative and empirical reviews of the police use of force literature

All published studies were considered for this review, and each online database was searched from 1960 to 2006, although only studies published in English and which focused on police departments in the United States were considered.

The following databases were searched:

1. Criminal Justice Abstracts
2. National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) Abstracts
3. Sociological Abstracts
4. SocINDEX

The following terms were used to search the databases listed above:²

1. Police brutality
2. Police violence
3. Excessive force
4. Unnecessary force
5. Improper force
6. Illegitimate force
7. Abuse of force
8. Misuse of force

FINDINGS OF THE REVIEW

Study Selection

Searching online databases invariably produces a large number of citations that could potentially be included in an SR. The large list must be screened against the eligibility criteria to determine if studies are relevant to

²The terms wrongful, unjustified, and unauthorized force were also searched with no results.

the review. As a result, many studies are eliminated, leaving only a handful of relevant research for inclusion in the review.

Table 1 presents the results of each online database search, as well as the number of unique abstracts across the databases, since one cannot search SocINDEX and Sociological Abstracts simultaneously to avoid producing the same references, thus necessitating one to cross-reference each reference list to avoid duplicates. This strategy yielded 357 distinct abstracts using the first eight keywords, of which 42 were selected for closer review.³ The full article, book, or report upon which the abstract was based was obtained to determine if the research did indeed examine empirically the causes of improper use of force on the part of police. Only three eligible studies were identified and included in this review: Reiss's (1968) and Friedrich's (1980) analysis of the observational study undertaken in 1966 by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (Black and Reiss, 1967), and Worden's (1996) analysis of the Police Services Study (PSS) data.⁴ While this small number may appear surprising to some, it is the requirement that studies attempt to locate causes of police use of improper force that proves restrictive.⁵ The remaining 39 studies that were excluded examined only the prevalence of improper force (e.g., by examining citizen complaints, polling citizens, or surveying police officers), examined the prevalence or causes of citizens using force against the police, examined citizens' or officers' perceptions of improper force, etc.

There is also a small body of research on police excessive *use of* force, which is distinctive from police use of excessive force. Police excessive use of force involves circumstances in which force is used too frequently across encounters (Adams, 1996). Such research is important in that it can tell us something about

³The terms "use of force" and "police misconduct" were also searched using the databases listed in table 1, as the literature on improper force will invariably be tied to these larger bodies of research. The search produced 476 abstracts using "police use of force" and 368 using "police misconduct." Cross-referencing these large numbers of abstracts with each other and the other abstracts in table 1 to produce a total number of distinct abstracts would have been a very time consuming and difficult undertaking, and thus was not accomplished under this review.

⁴A study by Alpert, Dunham, and McDonald (2004) was excluded from this review, even though the authors examine instances where police used a level of force greater than suspect resistance. The authors labeled such instances as *dominant force*, and viewed it as a legitimate police tactic and not excessive force.

⁵Also of note is that some police scholars are reticent to separate uses of force into proper and improper categories. Some scholars who study force have argued that doing so is a subjective judgment and not subject to scientific inquiry (Alpert & Smith, 2000). While this is certainly overstated, since one could set forth a series of rules and procedures by which one can establish whether or not improper force was employed in a police-citizen encounter, the challenges are large and one would invariably be subjected to scrutiny and criticism. Still, the alternative is to argue that social science cannot contribute to understanding the central problem of police misconduct.

Table 1: Number of citations based on keywords search of listed databases.

Keyword	Criminal Justice Abstracts	NCJRS	Sociological Abstracts	SocINDEX	Unique Abstracts
Police brutality	129	538	155	344	121
Police violence	143	123	112	170	123
Excessive force	101	244	26	210	91
Unnecessary force	9	15	2	22	9
Improper force	0	3	0	1	3
Illegitimate force	1	2	3	2	3
Abuse of force	4	6	4	34	4
Misuse of force	3	9	8	1	3

the kind of officer who employs force too often, and as such is more likely to use it improperly. Therefore, such studies are included in a second review below.

Characteristics of Selected Studies

The three studies included in this first review have similar features. All three studies rely upon observations of police by a neutral third party who records information during police-citizen contacts as their primary methodology.⁶ Also, all three studies focus their analyses on police contacts with potential offenders, since these presumably carry with them the greatest potential for violence.

Table 2 summarizes the divergent features of the three studies. While Reiss and Friedrich rely upon the same data, Friedrich tests hypotheses from a larger number of theoretical frameworks. Worden follows suit, testing hypothesis from the same three areas as Friedrich, even though the authors differ in some of their terms for these theoretical traditions. The authors also differ in how they operationalize improper force, which accounts for the differences in prevalence estimated by Reiss and Friedrich. The last column in the table provides a quality score, which ranks the scientific rigor of these methodologies. Since all three studies are nonexperimental, rely on the observation of socially occurring phenomenon drawn from nonrepresentative samples, and cannot temporally establish police and citizen behaviors with encounters, their scores are low.

RESULTS OF SELECTED STUDIES

Prevalence of Improper Force

The prevalence of improper force was, for all three studies, very low. Friedrich, who employed a more exclusive definition of improper force to the

⁶For more information on this methodology, see Mastrofski et al. (1998).

Table 2: Summary of improper force studies.

Study	Location	Theoretical Framework	Outcome Measure	Prevalence of Improper Force	Quality Score
Reiss (1968)	Boston, Chicago, Washington DC	Situational	Reasonable/Improper Force ¹	2.4% of all police-suspect encounters	1
Friedrich (1980)	Boston, Chicago, Washington DC	Individual, Situational, Organizational	Reasonable Force/Excessive Force ²	1.8% of all police-suspect encounters	1
Worden (1996)	Rochester, NY, St. Louis, MO, St. Petersburg, FL	Psychological, Sociological, Organizational	Reasonable Force/Improper Force/No Force ³	1.3% of all police-suspect encounters	1

¹Force was deemed improper if (1) a police officer physically assaulted a citizen, then failed to make an arrest; (2) if the citizen being arrested did not, by word or deed, resist the police officer; (3) if the police officer, even though there was resistance to the arrest, could easily have restrained the citizen in other ways; (4) if a large number of policemen were present and could have assisted in subduing the citizen in the station, lockup, and in the interrogation rooms; (5) if an offender was handcuffed and made no attempt to flee or offer violent resistance; (6) if the citizen resisted arrest, but the use of force continued even after the citizen was subdued.

²Force was deemed improper if it was not used to either effect an arrest or in self defense.

³Force was deemed improper if an officer appeared to be "kicking ass" according to observers.

Black-Reiss data, found that in the nearly 1,600 incidents of police-citizen encounters that involved suspects, force was used in only 79 cases, or 5.1% of the time. Of that 5.1%, force was used reasonably in 3.3% of the suspect encounters, and was improper in 28 cases, or 1.8% of the time. Reiss, using a more inclusive definition for improper force, found 37 cases in which force was used improperly.⁷ Worden, employing the PSS data, found officers used reasonable force in 2.3% of all encounters involving suspects, and used improper force in 1.3% of all encounters involving suspects.

Overall it appears that force generally was found to be a rare occurrence, even when considering only those police-citizen encounters that involved suspects, which presumably carry with them the highest probability of a use of force incident. However, somewhat troubling is that two studies found incidents of improper force to represent a substantial proportion of the incidents that involved any kind of force. Both Friedrich and Worden find that of all the uses of force observed in encounters with suspects, over one-third involve improper force.⁸

Effects of Individual/Psychological Variables

Both Friedrich and Worden include as independent variables various measures of officer characteristics and attitudes. Friedrich's study includes a measure of the officer's attitude toward their job and attitudes toward blacks.⁹ The study also includes the officer's length of service and whether the observed two-man patrol team was all white, all black, or of mixed race. Worden's study includes data regarding the officer's attitude toward citizens and attitude toward using force, along with the officer's education.

Each of these studies finds only weak effects for these variables. For Friedrich, length of service did not have a discernable effect on improper force, nor did attitude toward the job. White patrol teams comprised a greater percentage of improper force incidents than mixed or black patrol teams. Those

⁷Here we begin to see the challenges in deciding if force is proper or improper. Alternatively, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (1967), using a panel of experts to review the Black-Reiss data, counts only 20 instances of improper force.

⁸Unfortunately, Reiss does not provide the reader with the number of times force was used, so one cannot determine the proportion of force employed in encounters with suspects that was improper. If one employs Friedrich's numbers ($n = 79$), since both analyses rely on identical data, nearly half (48%) of all use of force incidents in the Black-Reiss data would have involved improper force based on Reiss's criteria.

⁹Officers' attitudes toward blacks were only included for white police officers and asked only about black citizens, not black officers.

white officers who expressed a very negative view of blacks comprised the greatest percentage of those using improper force when compared to those with slightly negative or neutral/positive views of blacks.¹⁰

Worden's study found that officers' attitudes toward citizens have a significant effect on improper force, with officers who have a more negative attitude toward citizens being more likely to use it. Officers' attitudes toward use of force did not have a significant effect on their likelihood of using either kind of force.¹¹ Education had no impact on improper force. Overall, psychological variables contributed marginally to explaining use of either reasonable or improper force, contributing to 3–4% of the variation in the dependent variable.

Effects of Situational/Sociological Variables

All three studies explore the effect of situational variables on improper force. Reiss examines the demeanor of the suspect; the location of the use of improper force; the gender, race, and class of the suspect; the suspect's sobriety; as well as the number of officers and citizens present during the encounter. Based on the 37 identified cases of improper force, Reiss notes that 37% of improper force situations occurred in police-controlled settings such as the patrol car or the precinct station. Two of the three most severe cases of improper force, where suspects were injured so badly as to require hospitalization, occurred in the police lockup. Additionally, bystanders were present in three-fourths of improper force incidents, but in only one did the group empathize with the suspect and threaten to report the officer. In over half of the use of improper force cases other officers were present who did not participate in the incident.

Relating to the suspects' characteristics, 39% of improper force cases involve open defiance of police authority, so it appears that demeanor plays a role in these instances.¹² Also, 27% of the improper force cases involved a suspect who was intoxicated. Surprisingly, the rate of improper force for whites was twice that of blacks—so while race played a role, it was not in the expected direction. Class and gender, however, appeared to matter more so

¹⁰Officers with neutral/positive views of blacks had no observed incidents of improper force.

¹¹In the model examining just the impact of the psychological variables, officers' attitudes toward the use of force was statistically significant at the .10 level using a one-tailed test (Worden, 1996, p. 41).

¹²I have excluded from these studies discussion of suspect resistance on improper force, as later studies have argued that suspect resistance is an illegal act and should be differentiated from the notion of an antagonistic demeanor, which includes legally permissible behaviors (Klinger, 1994).

than race. All the victims of improper force were males from the lower class.¹³

Findings from both Friedrich and Worden support Reiss's implicit argument that situational factors are vital in understanding improper force. Friedrich examined 11 situational variables, and most of these result in differences between the percentages of instances where either reasonable or improper force was used. Specifically, both reasonable and improper force is more likely when a suspect is involved in a serious offense, is antagonistic toward the police or appears agitated, and also when drunk. The characteristics of the suspect are also relevant, with black citizens accounting for greater percentages of those experiencing reasonable force, while white citizens account for greater percentages of those experiencing improper force. Lower-class suspects account for greater percentages of both reasonable and improper force when compared to middle- and upper-class suspects.¹⁴ Finally, the visibility of the incident also appears to matter; generally, increasing number of either citizens or officers increases the percentage of incidents of either type of force.

Worden's findings largely corroborate Friedrich's results. Whether reasonable or improper, force was more likely in incidents that involve serious (i.e., violent) crime, and against suspects who were male, black, drunk, and antagonistic with the police (Worden 1996, p. 37). Two variables had an impact on improper, but not reasonable, force. Improper force was more likely if the encounter involved a car chase, and was also more likely with increasingly greater numbers of officers at the scene.¹⁵

Effects of Organizational Variables

Both Friedrich and Worden employed various organizational variables to test their effect on police improper force, but neither author finds an effect of any organizational variable on the use of improper force. Friedrich's characterization of the three departments of Boston, Chicago, and Washington DC did not correspond to the expected ranking of these three departments on the percentage of improper force employed within these organizations. Worden's model included three departmental variables of bureaucratization, the priority the police executives place on crime fighting, and the collective attitudes of

¹³The class measurement used by Reiss was an observer characterization of the suspect as either white collar or blue collar (Friedrich, 1980, note 12).

¹⁴The class measurement used by Friedrich was a compound measure of the observer's estimate of the citizen's income and their characterization of the citizen's speech.

¹⁵Worden notes that incidents where force is used may be those to which other officers are likely to respond, meaning that the number of officers at the scene may be an effect rather than a cause of improper force.

patrol officers, but none of these organizational variables had a significant effect on improper force. In addition, these three variables had only a modest effect in terms of increasing the explanatory power of the model over the one which included only the situational factors mentioned previously.

EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE

Another corollary body of research to explaining improper force is the examination of the excessive use of force. This research is based on the findings in citizen complaint data that a small percentage of officers account for a disproportionate amount of citizen complaints, particularly related to excessive force (Walker & Bumphus, 1992). These officers have been termed “complaint-prone,” “violence-prone,” or more generally “problem officers” in the literature (Toch, 1996).¹⁶ So while this research does not examine the causes of improper force within police-citizen encounters, it can help discern the types of officers most at risk of using improper force too frequently *across* multiple encounters. As such, this research focuses almost exclusively on the demographic and background characteristics of these problem officers.

Table 3 presents the results of the online database search using two additional keywords. The systematic review identified 11 abstracts related to this topic, of which 4 were chosen for closer scrutiny. Of these, 2 studies were deemed relevant to the inclusion criteria listed above; namely, they tell us something about what kinds of officers are likely to use force excessively. Studies that reported the number of problem officers, but did not attempt to determine if they were systematically different in terms of their personal characteristics from the nonproblem officers, were excluded. These studies are Lersch and Mieczkowski (1996) and Brandl, Strohshine, and Frank (2001).

Table 3: Number of citations based on keywords search of listed databases.

	Criminal Justice Abstracts	NCJRS	Sociological Abstracts	SocINDEX	Unique Abstracts
Problem officers	8	13	1	23	8
Citizen complaints	103	280	16	256	103

¹⁶Walker (2005) prefers to employ what he believes is the more value-neutral term of “officers with behavioral problems.” I use the term problem officer since it is more commonly used in the literature, but it is not intended as a means to stigmatize these officers. In fact, my own research has led me to question whether problem officers actually exist as currently conceptualized (Harris, 2005).

Characteristics of Selected Studies

Table 4 summarizes the content of these two studies. Both rely on data from citizen complaints, although Brandl et al. focuses solely upon complaints regarding excessive force, and only for one year. Both also find that their small percentage of problem officers, even though operationalized differently, account for a disproportionate amount of citizen complaints. This corresponds well to other studies that have examined such data (Walker & Bumphus, 1992). The last column reports the quality score of these two studies. Since both compare two groups across theoretically relevant variables, they receive a score of three.

Results of Selected Studies

The two studies presented here are fairly similar, and have consistent results. Lersch and Mieczkowski separated officers into groups of “repeat offenders,” those officers who received five or more citizen complaints during the study period, and “nonrepeat offenders,” those officers who received fewer than five complaints. When examining the differences in race, gender, age, and tenure of the repeat versus the nonrepeat offender group, the repeat group was found to be comprised of a greater number of males who were both younger and less experienced than their nonrepeat offender colleagues. The authors were also able to examine the characteristics of the complaint, and found that the repeat offenders were more likely to be accused of both violent and nonviolent harassment of citizens than nonrepeat officers, and that such complaints were more likely to be the result of a proactive contact. Such a finding lead Lersch and Mieczkowski to caution that the repeat offenders may in fact be productive officers, and that citizen complaints may be more a consequence of productivity, rather than an indicator of police misconduct.¹⁷

In a similar vein, Brandl et al. (2001) selected a random sample of 200 officers with two or fewer complaints of excessive force (who they called the low-complaint officers) and selected all 200 officers who had three or more complaints of excessive force (who they deemed the high-complaint officers). The authors were able to compare the low- and high-complaint officers on a number of background characteristics such as gender, race, education, age, and length of service, as well as job assignment and arrest activity. Such comparisons show that the high-complaint officers were significantly younger,

¹⁷Two studies, Lersch (2002) and Terrill and McCluskey (2002) have found support for the hypothesis that the more productive officers are more likely to have citizen complaints filed against them, and thus be characterized as problem officers. The latter study, however, also found problem officers to have significantly higher rates of force, suggesting that problem officers might be more productive—but also more prone to use force—than nonproblem officers.

Table 4: Summary of excessive use of force studies.

Study	Data	Problem Officer Criteria	Prevalence of Misconduct	Problem Officer Characteristics	Quality Score
Lersch and Mieczkowski (1996)	All citizen complaints for a three-year period (1991-1994)	Five or more citizen complaints during study period (7.3% of all officers)	35.3% of all citizen complaints	Male, younger, inexperienced	3
Brandl et al. (2001)	All excessive force citizen complaints for a one-year period (1993)	Three or more citizen complaints during study period (10% of all officers)	25% of all citizen complaints	Younger, inexperienced, more active, assigned to high crime areas	3

less experienced, assigned to the highest crime areas, and made twice as many index arrests—and nearly three times as many total arrests—than the low-complaint officers. Males were also overrepresented among the high-complaint officers, although this difference was not statistically significant. These findings lend weight to Lersch and Mieczkowski's suggestion that officers who are the most productive may also be those most at risk for citizen complaints.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review attempts to discern the causes of improper force on the part of police and identify the characteristics of both the victims of such force and the officers who perpetrate this problematic behavior. Overall it appears, using the police-citizen encounter as the unit of analysis, that improper force is largely determined by situational characteristics. The seriousness of the offense and the behavior of the suspect appear to have a substantively large impact on how the police behave in comparison to an officer's personal beliefs and characteristics, or their organizational environment.¹⁸ Still, that victims of improper force appear more likely to be those who are antagonistic, intoxicated, lower class (as per Friedrich's findings), or black (as per Worden's findings) is certainly cause for concern as it suggests that not only do police use force more often than is required, or use it improperly in a nontrivial number of encounters, but that improper force is more often directed at certain kinds of people. One must of course temper the strength of these conclusions because they are based on a very limited number of studies whose scientific rigor is rather low. Even if the studies mentioned above were without important caveats (and certainly they are not¹⁹), more research would be required before definite conclusions could be drawn about what we know with modest confidence regarding the causes of improper force. More recent and detailed research examining police-citizen encounters is giving attention to the interplay between police and citizen actions, particularly with regard to quantifying the levels of force officers employ in relation to a suspect's resistance (Alpert & Dunham, 1997, 2004; Garner, Schade, Hepburn, & Buchanan, 1995; Klinger, 1995; Terill, 2001, 2005). Such research, while beyond the scope of

¹⁸This is not to suggest that attitudinal or organizational factors do not have an effect on police use of improper force, as such factors may bear a more complex relationship than previous research can determine. For example, Worden (1996, p. 47) suggests that the effects of attitudes on an officer's propensities to use force may be interactive rather than additive.

¹⁹See Alpert and Smith (2000) and Klockars (1996) for a critique of improper force studies.

this review, could be employed as means to enhance future investigations into improper force.

With regard to police, it appears that across multiple encounters officers who are male and relatively young and inexperienced are more likely to engage in improper force. While the sex of the officer and their age or length of service was not found to impact improper force when observing police-suspect encounters, such research did not generate many use of force encounters, nor did it generate multiple use of force encounters for individual officers over time. Considering citizen complaints over the course (albeit of a very limited part) of an officer's career does find that some officers are more problematic, accounting for a disproportionate amount of misconduct when compared to other officers, and this tells us something about the typical "repeat offender" who employs force too frequently, and thus is the ideal target for interventions. Again, as above, these conclusions are based on a very small number of studies, and more research is clearly needed before we can clearly distinguish problem officers from nonproblem officers with any degree of confidence (Harris, 2005).

The implications for the findings that officers have been found to use improper force, or resort to force too frequently across encounters, are troubling. Those who have negative encounters with the police, such as victims of improper force, are likely to have less satisfaction with police generally and view the police with less legitimacy. When this occurs, people are less trusting in the police and are less likely to call the police to report crime, provide information to the police, and testify in court (Decker, 1981). This alienation of the citizenry in the aggregate and over time is likely to harm law enforcement's ability to control crime, as the police are fully dependent on citizens to provide information to solve crimes (Goldstein, 1990). As more recent crime prevention studies have demonstrated, police efforts to improve safety and deter crime are vastly enhanced by community assistance, and by implication are hindered if community members are uncooperative and police are forced to rely on traditional, and less effective, police methods (Sherman et al., 1997).

Also, and perhaps more importantly, when police use force improperly they increase the likelihood that their encounters with the public will result in hostility and violence, as the police themselves become offenders. As Bayley (2002) observes in a recent commentary, "When police act beyond the law, they lose their moral authority. This creates a tragically reinforcing cycle: Abuse by the police intensifies public suspicion and hostility towards the police; suspicion and hostility are expressed as sullenness and disrespect; this prompts the police to exert their authority more explicitly, perhaps more forcefully, which begins the cycle all over again" (p.143). To the extent that this observation is correct, the costs of employing improper force on suspects, and perhaps more often against certain types of suspects, are very high indeed, and are likely to outweigh any justification police can provide.

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