

# Exploring the Relationship Between Experience and Problem Behaviors

## A Longitudinal Analysis of Officers From a Large Cohort

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This study explores the relationship between police officer experience and problem behaviors using longitudinal data gathered from a large cohort of officers. As extant research on problem behaviors has been cross-sectional and gathered for a limited number of years, little is known about the patterns of these behaviors over time. As there is no guidance in police research for examining these behaviors across experience, the criminal career paradigm is employed. Results suggest that although experience and problem behaviors are related in an orderly way in the aggregate, there is a substantial amount of variation in these behaviors across the police population. Implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** *problem officers; citizen complaints; police misconduct*

The police rely on their legitimacy with the public to perform their duties. Such legitimacy is embedded in the confidence citizens have in their local police, which is damaged when police behave poorly in their encounters with the public. Citizen complaints of police behavior are an important mechanism by which the police are held accountable, and increasingly administrators are recognizing that such complaints represent a weakening of the police's legitimacy with the public and are taking them seriously. The growing ease with which citizens can file complaints, the rise of civilian oversight of complaint systems, and the increasing use of early intervention (EI) systems are all examples of growing concern with police problem behaviors (Walker, 2005). Such behaviors include using unnecessary force, being rude or disrespectful to citizens, employing improper tactics, and so on. Although some of these behaviors may be severe enough to be labeled misconduct, they do not

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include acts of corruption, such as graft or selling narcotics, nor are they typically severe enough to result in career termination. They are, however, the types of acts that citizens frequently complain about; they are also the kinds of behaviors that are of concern to administrators, since they occur with some regularity, but are likely amenable to intervention without resorting to involuntary separation of officers from the agency.

Prior research regarding problem behaviors has focused attention on what are termed *problem officers*, who represent the small percentage of officers who are responsible for a disproportionate amount of citizen complaints. But such a narrow focus on problem officers is limiting, as this officer type is arbitrarily defined and examined cross-sectionally, thus considering only a short portion of their careers. What is currently lacking is an empirical examination of problem behaviors across all police officers and a means for doing so over the course of their careers. As a solution, this study employs the criminal career paradigm as a way to organize and examine problem behavior patterns as officers gain experience. Representing a first step in exploring problem behaviors at the aggregate level, this study employs longitudinal data from a large cohort of officers, and offers a unique opportunity to examine such behaviors over a significant portion of these officers' careers.

## **Background and Conceptual Framework**

There is a longstanding speculation in the policing literature that experience as an officer and problem behaviors are related over time. Although there is little empirical evidence exploring this relationship, police work is often described by scholars as a craft where officers learn in the field across years of experience, not in their training academies or in subsequent training seminars. Bayley and Bittner (1984) argued that the valuable lessons officers learn through the haphazard mechanism of individual experience concerns "the goals of policing—which are reasonable; tactics—which ones ensure achievement of different goals in varying circumstances; and presence—how to cultivate a career-sustaining personality" (p. 51). If accurate, then there will likely be a learning curve associated with police work that extends beyond the typical probationary period, and how long it takes officers to gain proficiency in their craft, and what stumbling blocks they encounter along the way, remains an interesting question.

Presumably, the more inexperienced officers are correspondingly more likely to engage in problematic police behaviors, as such officers have little mastery of their craft and have yet to find a style of policing that works for them. Some of the first observations of police work noted that younger officers are often gung ho, seeking to prove themselves to the more veteran officers by displaying command over citizens in encounters and demonstrating no hesitation in applying coercive authority. For example, Van Maanen (1974) noted that young officers' acceptance by their

peers relies on a rookie's willingness to get involved in real police work. He wrote that "while hot calls are relatively rare on a day-to-day basis, their occurrence signals a behavior test for the recruit. To pass, he must be willing to use his body as a weapon, to fight if necessary" (p. 94). Similarly, Hunt (1985) wrote that "new officers . . . learn that they will earn the respect of veteran coworkers not by observing legal niceties in using force, but by being 'aggressive' and using whatever force is necessary in a given situation" (p. 321). This notion of being aggressive involves using more force than allowed by law, and may also extend to providing street justice, typically in the form of a thumping, to citizens who challenge the authority of officers, and who are subsequently arrested on questionable charges such as resisting arrest (Van Maanen, 1978). Although more recent research has cast doubt on whether suspect disrespect increases the likelihood of police coercion (see Terrill & Mastrofski, 2002), less experienced officers may be more intolerant of what might be perceived as a lack of citizen respect, and thus may be more aggressive, both verbally and physically, than more experienced officers.

Others have noted that younger, less experienced officers are hungry and will do more to detect crime and criminals. For example, Friedrich's (1977) reanalysis of the Black-Reiss data found that less experienced officers do more to detect crime: They initiate more citizen contacts, do more active patrolling, and record more crime reports from citizens when compared to officers with more experience. In addition, Worden (1989), in his analysis of the Police Services Study, found that more experienced officers made fewer traffic and suspicion stops. Crank (1993) also found support for this hypothesis in his study of eight municipal police departments in Illinois. He found that police officers with more time in service are less likely to engage in order-maintenance or legalistic behaviors.

In their zeal to be crime fighters, perhaps less experienced officers overreact to many citizen encounters and perceive citizen behavior as threatening to their safety, resorting to force more quickly than seasoned officers (McElvain & Kposowa, 2004). It may also be that less experienced officers' proactive behavior, combined with less skill and tact than veteran officers, actually raises the likelihood of verbal or physical confrontation with citizens more generally. Length of service has been associated with the way in which officers react to citizens, with older, more experienced officers presenting a calmer demeanor when dealing with the public (Forst, Lucinovic, & Cox, 1977).

Although being gung ho and hungry are likely to earn a rookie a solid reputation among his or her peers, such behaviors are also likely to generate friction between these officers and the citizens they police. Research demonstrates that citizens tend to complain about police behaviors, such as using unnecessary force, being rude or disrespectful, and dissatisfactory performance of duties (Lersch, 2002). Such acts, although certainly less serious than other forms of misconduct, are important in that they damage the perceived legitimacy of police as a public institution, and may in fact impair the ability of the police to effectively accomplish their tasks in the long run (Bayley, 2002).

Although youth and inexperience have long been seen as contributors to problematic police behaviors, it is suspected that eventually inexperienced officers begin to adopt the lay low and don't make waves approach of their more veteran colleagues, while also improving in the core aspects of police work (Bayley & Bittner, 1984; Van Maanen, 1974). Meredith (1984) noted that the 3 to 4 years following rookies' closely supervised probationary period is the adolescent phase where officers are most likely to be a danger to themselves and others, but that if officers get past this phase, they become good officers. Part of this may be that officers are gradually socialized away from engaging in acts that may bring scrutiny and/or disciplinary acts against them, and become more concerned with safeguarding their career records to assist in future advancement. Thus, to the extent that most officers' careers are similar, one might expect to find officers displaying the greatest amount of problem behaviors early in their careers, but that these behaviors decline in frequency over time as officers begin to master their craft and develop a larger stake in their career.

Current research paints an incomplete picture of the relationship between experience and problem behaviors, largely due to a narrow focus on the most problematic officers. Generally, research investigating problem behaviors among police officers has noted in several departments that a small number of officers account for a disproportionate amount of citizen complaints filed (Walker & Bumphus, 1992). Such a group has been labeled *problem officers*, a group first noted by Goldstein (1977), but whose existence gained prominence among police administrators following the Christopher Commission's investigation of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) after the beating of Rodney King. The Commission noted that less than one half of 1% of the LAPD officers accounted for 15% of citizen complaints of excessive force or improper tactics, and noted that this disproportion could not be explained by assignment or arrest rates, implying these problem officers had a proclivity toward deviance (Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, 1991).

Two subsequent studies, one by Lersch and Mieczkowski (1996) and another by Brandl, Strohine, and Frank (2001), attempted to locate a problem officer group using citizen complaint data from two different police agencies. Specifically, Lersch and Mieczkowski used all citizen complaints filed for a 3-year period from a large police department in the southeastern United States. They define as problem officers those who received five or more complaints in the 3-year study period, and compare these officers to the other (nonproblem) officers who did not meet this criterion. Such an analysis reveals that the problem officers tended to be male, non-White, and younger with less experience. Similarly, Brandl et al. identified problem officers from citizen complaint data regarding excessive force for a single year in a large mid-Western police department. The authors compared officers who received three or more complaints in 1993 with those who had two or fewer complaints, and found that the problem officers are also likely to be male, young, and inexperienced.

Although this is a confirmation of this long suspected relationship between experience and problem behaviors, such cross-sectional research has important

limitations. First, the research relies on citizen complaints for a short time as the indicator of problem behaviors, which are imperfect for several reasons. A complaint filed by a citizen represents frustration rising from an officer's behavior but could easily be invalid if the citizen is uninformed of rules or departmental procedure. The complaint could also be false, filed by a citizen who was upset at being the subject of a police action, such as a search or arrest. Citizen complaints that are investigated and found to be valid have merit, but due to the strong evidentiary requirements, the number of sustained complaints is often low.

Complaints could also be an indicator of productivity. Lersch (2002) had speculated that highly productive officers are likely to have complaints filed against them due to their level of police work, without indicating a propensity for problem behaviors. In her 1-year study of citizen complaints from a large police department in the Southeast, Lersch (2002) found that measures of productivity were weakly to moderately correlated with citizen complaints. Productivity was negatively correlated with officer age and experience but positively correlated with officer complaints, indicating that as an officer grew in age and experience they were less productive but also less likely to receive complaints. However, it is unclear if younger, less experienced officers received complaints solely because of their productivity, or if the inexperienced officers were both productive and also tended to act poorly in their encounters with citizens. Terrill and McCluskey (2002) also addressed this issue, employing the Project on Policing Neighborhoods data and citizen complaints going back 5 years prior to observation. When comparing high-complaint (officers with a rate of 1 or more complaints a year) and low-complaint officers (those with a rate below 0.2 complaints a year), the authors found that officers with more citizen complaints of discourtesy and excessive force were likely to be productive but also more likely to use coercion in police-citizen encounters. This indicates that those officers identified as problems were indeed more productive than nonproblem officers but also were more likely to engage in some problem behaviors.

Second, the research focuses on arbitrarily defined problem officers, and only for a relatively short time period. There is little discussion on just what threshold should establish an officer as a problem (is it five complaints in 5 years? Six in 6 years?), and part of this limited consideration is due to a lack of knowledge about the patterns of problem behaviors more generally. It comes as little surprise, based on the above discussion, that officers who are young and inexperienced are selected as problem officers, as it is likely that this is when problem behaviors are at their peak. Yet, other important elements of the patterns of problem behaviors could also be investigated and would provide police administrators with a more comprehensive picture of how problem behaviors develop and change over time. For example, how many officers received citizen complaints during their career and, of those who did, how often did they occur? On average, when do problem behaviors begin for officers? About when do problem behaviors decline or cease? Such features require longitudinal data so that within-officer changes over time could be explored, and are

important in that they provide knowledge as to when administrators might target scarce intervention resources to combat problem behaviors.

It is difficult to advocate for exploring these career behavior patterns though, as there has been little consideration of exactly how to do so. To some extent, criminologists have provided a solution in their research on crime and antisocial behavior. Similar to the research on problem officers, criminologists have noted the existence of career criminals—a small group of offenders who commit a disproportionate amount of crime. But unlike police research, criminologists have broadened consideration from their high-rate offenders to the careers of all types of criminals more generally. In doing so, they devised a way to organize and examine key elements of antisocial behaviors over time.

The prominence of characterizing criminal behavior in terms of a career framework largely began with the publications of Blumstein and his colleagues (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986). The criminal career itself is comprised of five elements: (a) onset, the beginning of one's criminal career; (b) frequency, the number of offenses that occur while an offender is active; (c) duration, the length of a criminal's career; and (d) desistance, the decline in offending that eventually leads to career termination. This model also implies that individuals come from two groups, criminals and noncriminals, which provide the final element of the criminal career: (e) participation, which is the percent of the population that is actively engaged in crime during some period, or who has ever engaged in crime.

To the extent that one can consider involvement in police problem behaviors under the concept of a career, the criminal career paradigm can aid in exploring patterns of these problem behaviors. It should be noted that this paradigm is not a theory of antisocial behavior but is a means of organizing and examining such behavior over time. Thus, applying such a career perspective to problem behaviors do not provide one with explanations of observed patterns, only a way to more closely examine them.

Nevertheless, such an approach could contribute to police research in several ways. First, it broadens consideration from a narrow focus on problem officers to problem behaviors more generally. This perspective gets away from deciding how many complaints an officer requires in  $x$  amount of years to be deemed a problem, and begins to encourage consideration of how officers differ in their overall problem behavior patterns across their career course. In addition, current cross-sectional research has only been able to examine participation and to a limited extent frequency but has yet to consider onset and desistance. In the problem officer research, one does not know if citizen complaints filed against officers are their first or last, and so when officers began their involvement in problem behaviors, and how long they continue, remains unknown.

Second, knowledge of the patterns of problematic behaviors can help to pinpoint more accurately the warning signs that indicate deviation from normal development. Specifically, one can discover what level of problem behavior is typical of officers, and how and when other officers deviate from the typical pattern. If problem officers

are truly the most problematic, they should exhibit an earlier onset, longer duration, and a greater number of problem behaviors than less problematic officers.

Third, such analyses would also provide knowledge about when to specifically target interventions. For example, if there is a place in officers' careers where problem behaviors peak, this suggests a critical period in which influential processes operate that facilitate that increase, directing researchers to more closely examine proximal causal mechanisms that prompted the behavior. It may also be that the various career elements have different etiologies, and so, for example, the reasons why onset of problem behaviors occurs may be different from the reasons why they are maintained.

In applying a career framework, one can begin by considering problem behaviors at the aggregate level. By way of analogy, criminologists have noted that age and crime are related in an orderly way in the aggregate, with mean offending rates slowly rising during childhood and into adolescence, peaking at age 18, and steadily declining thereafter (Farrington, 1986). Although the exact functioning of this age-crime curve has been the subject of much debate, it has prompted numerous theoretical and methodological advances, and it has been one of the most stable relationships in criminology (for a review, see Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003).

For reasons noted above, experience as a police officer and problem behaviors may also be related in an orderly way in the aggregate. If most officers get into trouble early, but then improve in their craft with field experience, one would expect the mean rates of problem behaviors to rise sharply in the early years of experience, quickly peak, and then steadily decline thereafter. Onset would therefore most likely be early, and a desistance point would come after officers exit their adolescent phase, past the 5th or 6th year of experience. Participation would generally be greatest during the early years of experience but increasingly less likely for officers with more experience.

The purpose of the research presented here is to address two general questions:

1. Does a relationship exist between experience and problem behaviors in the aggregate, and if so, does it appear similar to the pattern alluded to by police scholars?
2. What are the underlying career features of this aggregate relationship (i.e., onset, frequency, duration, desistance, and participation)?

Although this research is exploratory, the application of a career framework will begin to describe how incidents of problematic behavior are distributed across the police population over time.

## **Data and Methods**

### **Data**

The data utilized for this research were collected as part of an EI system project for a large police department in the northeastern United States.<sup>1</sup> Generally, these data



contain several indicators of police behavior for all sworn officers who were employed by this agency from January 1, 1987 through June 30, 2001.

### **The Late 1980s Cohort**

To maximize the advantages of the sample timeframe, officers who entered the police agency during the study period based on years of experience were selected and placed into a cohort. This cohort, which is termed the Late 1980s cohort, consists of officers who entered the agency between January 1, 1987 and December 31, 1990. These officers, by the end of the sample period, have the potential to serve 11.5 to 14.5 years, which is a significant portion of their career term given that officers can retire with a full pension after 20 years of service.<sup>2</sup>

The formation of this cohort was based largely on a need to examine officers from the start of their careers for as long a time as possible, with a sufficient number of cases for analysis. As all officers in the time period for which data were gathered were serving different portions of their career, one would be concerned that officers entering in varying time periods would be significantly different from each other. As such, only officers who began their careers during the timeframe were selected so they could be followed from the start of their careers until data collection ceased. This obviously leaves only the officers who entered between 1987 and 2001. The agency under study hired no officers in 1995, leaving an even number of preceding years ( $n = 8$ ) on which to divide in half based on the new decade of 1990. As there were no detectable cohort effects (i.e., no significant changes in training, hiring, or administrative practices) on which to separate officers who entered between 1987 and 1990, and there were a sufficiently large number of officers who entered during these years, it seemed reasonable to use this group. One could argue that each academy class is different and should be analyzed separately, but doing so leaves many smaller groups with insufficient numbers for analysis. Besides, the few pieces on police socialization suggest that what happens to officers when they first enter patrol has more profound effects on behavior, including problem behaviors, than variations in academy training such as instructor to student ratios, and so on (Neiderhoffer, 1967; Van Mannen, 1974).

Table 1 lists the number of officers who reside in this cohort by year of entry into the police academy. About one third of the officers entered in 1987, another quarter in 1988, and the remaining two fifths are evenly divided between those officers entering in 1989 and 1990.

### **Dependent Variable**

The dependent variable representing problem behavior in this study are complaints filed by citizens. The database that includes this information is maintained by the agency's Internal Affairs Bureau and contains fields for the date of the incident,



**Table 1**  
**Cohort Members by Year of Entry**

Year of Entry	Early 1980s Cohort
1987	373
1988	305
1989	230
1990	230
	<i>N</i> = 1,138

the source of the complaint (citizen or police), the nature of the allegations, and the complaint's disposition.

The indicator of problem behaviors is limited to citizen complaints for several reasons, even though data are available on all personnel complaints. First, citizen complaints include a variety of behaviors that one would consider problematic: misapplication of force, harassment, threatening behavior, discourtesy toward citizens, failure to perform police duties, reckless driving, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Second, some research has demonstrated a positive association between officers' citizen complaint rates and their levels of problem behavior, suggesting that citizen complaints do have some degree of validity (McCluskey & Terrill, 2005). Third, complaints filed internally by other officers may exhibit different patterns than those filed by citizens across officer experience, and thus combining them might mask interesting variation across these indicators (Harris, 2007).

Even though all research investigating problem officers use citizen complaints as the dependent variable, one must still be concerned with the ease of the complaint process, as some of the variation in this indicator is a function of how readily citizens can file complaints. In the agency under study, there is, at least officially, no authorized discretion in the taking of citizen complaints. Any citizen complaint made is to be recorded and forwarded to the appropriate personnel for investigation.<sup>4</sup> As this agency takes citizen complaints by phone and in person at its various stations, this gives the personnel in these stations some control over complaints at intake. At the same time, this agency takes complaints anonymously, and does not require the citizen to sign a complaint document.<sup>5</sup> As long as the citizen provides enough information about the incident so that an officer (or officers) can be properly identified, an investigation into the allegation will occur. These two factors, taking anonymous complaints and not requiring citizens to sign a document, make the complaint process less burdensome to citizens when compared to more onerous complaint processes.

In the analyses of citizen complaints, all such complaints filed against officers are utilized. An alternative strategy would be to use only those citizen complaints where the facts substantiate the specific allegation(s) of problem behavior. However, such a strategy is limiting as previous research demonstrates that for the vast majority of cases, the only person witnessing an alleged behavior is the complainant (Walker,

2005). Such cases become “swearing contests” in which the officers and citizens allege their version of events is true, with these cases resulting in a complaint being unsubstantiated (i.e., there is no way to prove or disprove the allegation). Because most complaints here are unsubstantiated (only 18% of complaints were substantiated), limiting analyses to only substantiated complaints would leave one with even more severe misconduct, as cases that were substantiated presumably would be the most serious. This, by implication, does not take into account the impact of sanctions or penalties imposed for substantiated complaints.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there is the question of assignment. Most of the citizen complaints were filed against patrol officers (all of whom patrol alone), as investigative and supervisory positions carry with them less contact with the public in general. Still, the estimations presented below, and the substantive conclusions drawn from them, are very similar whether one restricts consideration to periods when officers served in patrol, or all officers in the cohort regardless of their assignment.<sup>7</sup> As such, the analyses consider all officers regardless of assignment, and are not limited to the time when officers only served as patrol officers.

## **Independent Variable**

The independent variable in this research is the year of experience for the officer. Years of experience were calculated based on an officer’s date of entry, and each citizen complaint was placed into a year of experience based on the date on which it was filed.<sup>8</sup> Thus, for each officer, the officer-complaint file tallies the total number of citizen complaints for each year of experience until the observation period ended or the officer left the agency.<sup>9</sup>

## **Analytic Strategy**

The analyses presented herein mirror those used by early criminal career researchers. First, the average rates of citizen complaints for the cohort across each year of experience are calculated and presented below. Second, participation rates are explored. This involves both estimating cumulative participation, which is the percentage of officers who have ever received a citizen complaint in their career, and the conditional initiation rates of officers, which is the fraction that  $x$  year of experience initiators represent of the total  $x$  year of experience officers who have not yet received a complaint.<sup>10</sup> Third, the average year of onset for the cohort is estimated, and the relationship between onset and average complaint rates is explored. Fourth, there are also the questions of how often officers engage in problem behaviors once they initiate and for how long. To estimate frequency, the example of Blumstein et al. (1986) is followed and the incidence of problem behaviors is estimated by removing the first complaint as a measure of onset—thus demonstrating an officer is active in problem behaviors—and the last complaint—marking a desistance point—to estimate the

number of years an officer was active. A complaint frequency rate is then calculated for these active officers by examining their remaining complaints across years active during the study period. Thus, only active officers have meaningful estimations of frequency, desistance, and duration.

This frequency calculation requires that officers labeled as active have at least three complaints across their career, which is problematic, given that officers with two or fewer complaints are not considered. If an officer has received only one complaint, they are active in problem behaviors, but because of incomplete career data, the officer has no demonstration of a desistance point. If an officer receives two complaints, his or her last year served is used as a desistance point but only if the officer left the agency before the study period ended.<sup>11</sup> The specter of false desistance looms, however, due to incomplete career data, as one might suspect complete career data would yield additional complaints to consider.

## Results

### The Experience–Problem Behavior Curve

The first step is to determine whether at the aggregate level there exists an experience–problem behavior curve. The literature on problem behaviors seems to suggest that officers will tend to get into trouble early in their career, and so these behaviors, as measured by citizen complaints, will peak in the first few years of experience but will steadily decline thereafter. There is support for this hypothesis in these data. The aggregate curve for the Late 1980s cohort is presented in Figure 1.

When examining this figure, it is apparent that experience and problem behavior are related in an orderly way. What's more, this aggregate relationship does not substantively deviate when examining officer groups based on year of entry. The figure shows a peak in deviance early in officers' careers, specifically a sharp peak in the second and third year of experience, with a much steadier decline thereafter.<sup>12</sup>

### Participation

The cumulative participation of the cohort is 80.8%. So, roughly four fifths of the cohort received at least one citizen complaint sometime in their career. By implication, about one fifth of officers did not have a citizen complaint filed against them. Although cumulative participation appears to be quite high, one might suspect an even greater percentage of officers would have a complaint lodged against them had complete career data been available. Also, given the concerns with the validity of citizen complaints noted above, the large percentage of participation may not necessarily imply that problem behaviors are highly prevalent in this agency.

**Figure 1**  
**Average Citizen Complaints by Year of Experience for Late 1980s Cohort**

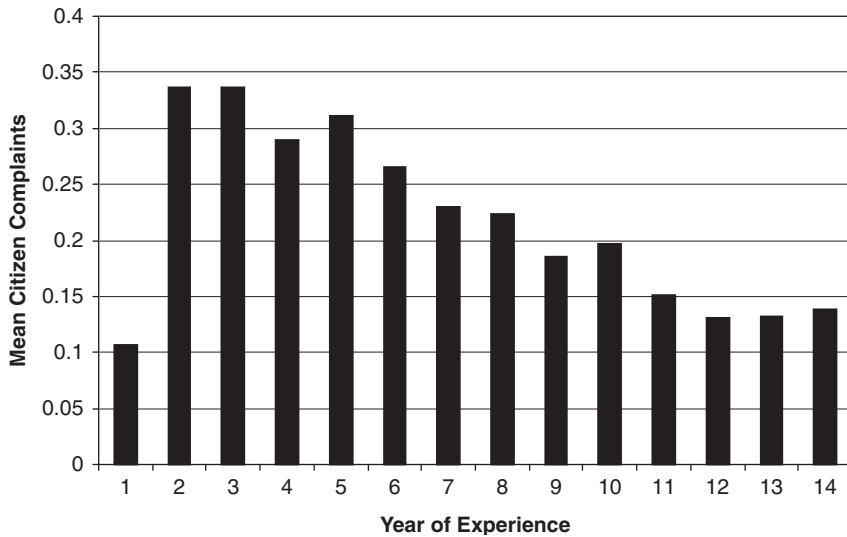
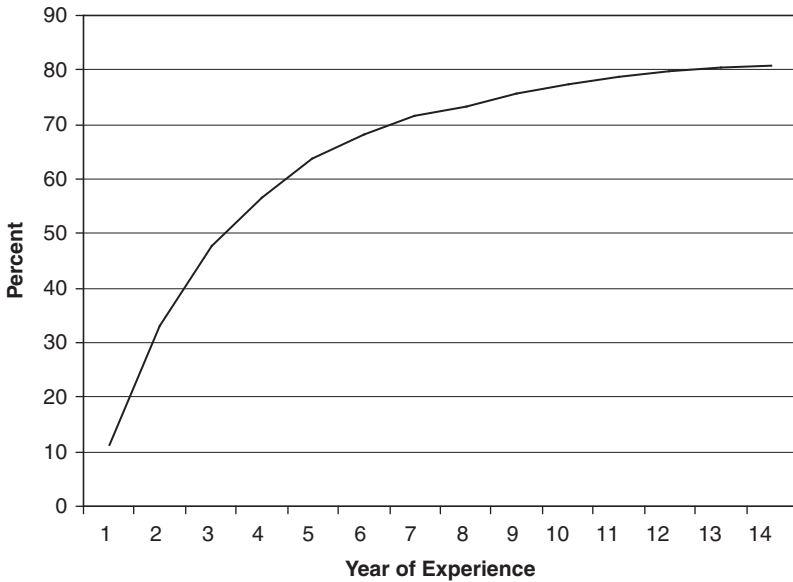


Figure 2 displays the cumulative participation of officers across years of experience. Thus, this figure displays the proportion of the cohort that ever received a complaint by each year of experience. As one can see, the prevalence increases sharply across the first 6 years of experience and begins to flatten out thereafter. Specifically, this cohort's cumulative participation for the first 2 years of experience is 32.9%; it increases to 68.3% by year 6, but then only increases to 75.6% by year 9, and slightly more to 80.8% by year 14.

Table 2 explores the conditional initiation rates of officers, which is the fraction that  $x$  year of experience initiators represent of the total  $x$  year of experience officers who have not yet received a complaint. When examining the conditional initiation rates for the cohort in the table, one can observe that past 6 years very few officers receive their first citizen complaint. In fact, the initiation rates match that of the aggregate curve, with these rates peaking early in officers' careers, and with a steadily decreasing number of initiators with each successive year following the peak. Although having complete career data is desirable, each additional year is unlikely to add to a significant increase in participation, as most officers are detected for problem behaviors early in their careers.

**Figure 2**  
**Prevalence of Citizen Complaints by Year of Experience**



## Onset

This idea is also supported when examining the average onset, which is presented in Table 3. As this distribution is skewed, median estimations are also presented. For the cohort, average onset for citizen complaints is the later part of the 3rd year of experience. This means that most officers obtain their first complaint around the point at which the experience–problem behavior curve peaks. Variation around this mean is rather large, but very few officers (about 15%) displayed an onset point past their 5th year of experience.

Also of interest is the onset for the subset of active officers. The onset point for active officers, that is, those officers with three or more citizen complaints in their career, is earlier when compared to all officers with at least one citizen complaint. This may imply that officers with a greater number of citizen complaints exhibit their problem behaviors earlier in their careers. Thus, an early onset may be an important risk factor in determining which officers are more likely to be problematic throughout their career. This idea is further explored below when examining the frequency of problem behaviors below.

**Table 2**  
**Conditional Initiation Rates of Citizen Complaints**

Year of Experience	Citizen Complaints	Year of Experience	Citizen Complaints
1	.11	8	.06
2	.24	9	.08
3	.22	10	.08
4	.17	11	.05
5	.16	12	.06
6	.13	13	.03
7	.10	14	.01

*N* = 1,138

**Table 3**  
**Onset for Entire Cohort and Active Officers Only**

	<i>M</i>	Median	<i>SD</i>
All officers <i>N</i> = 1,138	3.9	3.0	2.8
Active only <i>n</i> = 480	2.9	2.0	1.9

## Frequency

There is also the question of how often officers engage in problem behaviors once they initiate, and for how long. Table 4 presents the frequency distribution of the total citizen complaints filed against the officers in this cohort. There were a total of 3,070 citizen complaints filed against the 1,138 officers in the cohort, but complaints were not evenly distributed across this population. When examining citizen complaints, 19.2% of all the officers have zero complaints, 40.2% have one or two, and 40.6% have three or more. This means that for a majority of officers, the requirement of three citizen complaints to calculate frequency is not applicable, and thus is an inappropriate statistic. This also demonstrates that for those officers who do receive citizen complaints, their complaint total will be low, even across the course of many years. In fact, although some officers do receive as many as 10 complaints in their career (and in two cases in this cohort, as many as 17), the vast majority of officers who do have complaints obtain less than four. The requirement of at least three personnel complaints to calculate frequency limits the number of officers available for analysis by more than one half.

Table 5 further explores the relationship between year of onset and the average number of citizen complaints received by officers for each onset year. As can be seen, officers demonstrating an earlier year of onset are indeed more likely to receive

**Table 4**  
**Frequency Distribution of Citizen Complaints**

Number of Complaints	Number of Officers	Percent of Officers
0	219	19.2
1	242	21.3
2	215	18.9
3	137	12.0
4	109	9.6
5-9	185	16.3
10-14	25	2.2
15+	6	0.6
<i>N</i> = 3,070	<i>N</i> = 1,138	
<i>M</i> = 2.7		
Median = 2.0		
<i>SD</i> = 2.7		

**Table 5**  
**Citizen Complaints by Year of Onset**

Year of Onset	Mean Number of Complaints	Number of officers
1	4.2	129
2	4.1	245
3	3.7	169
4	3.1	101
5	2.5	80
6	2.5	53
7	1.6	37
8	1.2	21
9	1.6	25
10	1.2	21
11	1.2	13
12	1.4	14
13	1.3	8
14	1.7	3

a larger number of citizen complaints on average than officers exhibiting a later onset date. Part of this variation between year of onset and accumulation of complaints is due to length of observation, as those who begin their problem behaviors earlier have more time to accumulate complaints. Still, the table demonstrates a clear tendency of early starters to engage in more problematic behaviors. This is interesting in that it parallels the criminal career research, which demonstrates that individuals with an early age of onset tend to commit crimes at higher rates than those with a later age of onset (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2007).



**Table 6**  
**Average Career Elements for Active Officers**

Measures	<i>M</i>	Median	<i>SD</i>
Onset	2.9	2.0	1.9
Frequency	0.52	4.0	4.0
Duration	6.7	7.0	3.0
Desistance	9.6	10.0	3.0
<i>N</i> = 480			

Given these frequency estimations, and the estimations of participation, one can see that although many officers engage in problem behaviors, those who do participate do so at relatively low rates. In fact, most officers receive only one or two citizen complaints during the study period, if they receive any. However, the few officers who do receive multiple citizen complaints still do not typically exceed more than one complaint per year on average. In fact, only about 2% of officers had an average frequency rate of one or more citizen complaints a year when active. Still, consistent with previous research, a small percentage of officers do account for a disproportionate amount of citizen complaints during the study period—the top 10% of officers with complaints account for about two fifths of all complaints.<sup>13</sup>

### **Career Characteristics of Active Officers**

Table 6 presents the career characteristics of active officers, and thus includes measures of duration and desistance. As can be seen from the table, active officers in this cohort received their last citizen complaint near the middle of their 9th year of experience and, subtracting the average year of onset, gives officers an average duration of just over 6.5 years. Given that active officers have an average frequency of .52 complaints per year while active, they will attain on average of about 3.5 complaints total in the time they are active. There is a significant amount of variation around these career features, indicating that active officers may substantively differ in their involvement in problem behaviors over time. This also suggests that the problem/nonproblem officer dichotomy used in prior research may not adequately capture this important variation.

## **Discussion**

The finding of an experience–problem behavior curve at the aggregate level, with a sharp rise in problem behaviors early in officers' careers and a steady decline thereafter, is a significant one. Such a pattern has been alluded to in the policing literature,

but research has yet to establish such a pattern using longitudinal data covering within-officer change. If this finding is replicated elsewhere, it could represent a stable relationship in the realm of police misconduct across various agencies, and knowledge of the features underlying this relationship could assist in both theory development about problem behaviors and new means to more effectively combat them.

In the agency under study, participation was generally high, with the vast majority of officers receiving a citizen complaint sometime in their career. Although this indicates a large prevalence of problem behaviors, the frequency of such behaviors was low, with most officers receiving only one or two complaints, even over a lengthy observation period. Given the difficulty and complexity of policing a free society, this is likely welcomed news for administrators. What's more, the high volume of participation could be taken to mean the overall level of problem behaviors across the police population is quite large, but given the low accumulation of complaints could also be taken to represent the myriad of other influences on citizen complaints noted previously. It is difficult to know exactly, as citizen complaints could both over- and underrepresent the amount of problem behaviors.

Even though frequency was rather low, even for officers deemed active in problem behaviors, there was a systematic, negative relationship between onset and frequency. Specifically, although average onset was in the latter half of the 3rd year of experience, officers who had an early onset did accumulate a larger number of citizen complaints on average across the study period. Although partially due to observation length, as those who attain a complaint earlier have a longer period with which to obtain more complaints, there is a clear pattern of those with an earlier onset to engage in a greater number of problem behaviors. This would be expected if citizen complaints do indeed measure some propensity for involvement in problem behaviors, as one might reasonably expect more problematic officers to engage in these behaviors early and often when compared to less problematic officers.

Finally, for active officers, the desistance point came during the middle of the 6th year of experience, with career lengths lasting on average just under 10 years. Given the average frequency, the typical active officer career begins in the 3rd year, continues for 6.5 years, and ends in the middle of the 9th year of experience. During this time the average active officer will accumulate an average of 3.5 citizen complaints. Although this average demonstrates a relatively short involvement in problem behaviors with a low degree of frequency, there is quite a bit of variation around these average career features. This implies that there is a continuum of problem behaviors, extending from officers with a relatively limited involvement in problem behaviors to officers who are involved in problem behaviors early, often, and for a greater portion of their career.

These career features have implications for problem officer research. Problem officers are typically selected when participation in problem behaviors are at their peak, but this is also a time when variation in the likelihood of continuity in problem behaviors is also at its peak. This implies that the group of officers who are

selected as problems may or may not continue in their deviance. If problem officers are truly the most problematic, they should display an early onset, high frequency, and long duration in problem behaviors. Officers selected because they obtained, for example, three complaints in a year may continue to accumulate complaints, but it is also likely, given the wide variation in officer frequency and duration, that they will desist after their brief involvement during their early years on the job. In short, a number of officers in the problem officer group identified by current research may not be problem officers at all, in the sense that some of these officers may exhibit a high frequency for a short time period but desist quickly thereafter, and thus have only a limited involvement in problem behaviors. This also implies that if a problem officer group does exist, it will be very small and difficult to identify early when the overall level of participation in problem behaviors is at their peak. Prospective identification of problem officers based on citizen complaints may be extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible.

For administrators, this also implies that officers flagged by an EI system because they exceeded some established threshold of citizen complaints may or may not continue to be problematic, even in the absence of some intervention. Any EI system which uses citizen complaints is also likely to flag officers when overall participation in problem behaviors are at their peak, and thus may capture officers whose overall career in problem behaviors may be short lived. The predictive accuracy of EI systems has never been established, and the career features of officers seems to suggest that many may be flagged for intervention when they will desist shortly even without administrative aid (Worden, McGreevy, Catlin-Dorn, Harris, & Schlieff, 2003).

Of course, these data are not without their limitations. As noted earlier, citizen complaints are a far from perfect indicator of problem behavior. What's more, citizen complaints may have further problems when considering them from a career perspective. For example, in accounting for the general decline of citizen complaints over time, it may be that officers get better at avoiding citizen complaints as they gain experience. That is, officers learn who can be the target of disrespect, excessive force, and the like without a great likelihood of complaint. Another explanation for this decline over time may be that the range of problem behaviors that are captured using citizen complaints is not broad enough to detect other problem behaviors officers manifest later in their careers. For example, earlier on officers may be inappropriately proactive and earn the ire of citizens who complain, but later may curtail their proactivity and instead engage in other acts of misconduct, such as avoiding police work (e.g., abusing sick leave) or engaging in economically based misconduct such as graft.

Also, to the extent that productivity and citizen complaints are related, this curve may be driven by causes other than problem behaviors in police-citizen encounters. One might imagine that the relationship between experience and productivity looks similar to the experience-problem behavior curve in the aggregate, but again, it is difficult to discern whether the most active officers receive citizen complaints due to their enforcement activity, or whether the most active officers are both productive and problematic.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, data was not available for the entire careers of officers, making estimations of career length, desistance, and frequency of active officers biased, presuming that such officers with additional career data would have additional complaints to consider, thereby increasing duration and delaying desistance estimates. The strength of these estimations, however, is that they do consider the years when officers are most at risk for complaints. As noted above, complete career data is unlikely to substantively alter the career estimations of problem behaviors presented herein, but one must nevertheless note that false desistance remains an issue. One might suspect that officers near retirement, or those who have a guaranteed pension, may increase their level of problem behaviors as they move into the twilight of their careers and have less of a stake in their future.

## Conclusion

Two important conclusions emerge from these analyses. First, experience and problem behavior appear to be related in an orderly way. Problem behaviors peak quickly and early in officers' careers and begin a steady decline thereafter. It is likely this curve represents difficulties officers have in mastering the craft of policing early on, but with a growing in skill and stake in their future career as they gain experience. The exact timing of the career features, however, need further investigation and explanation, particularly why onset is during the 3rd year of experience (extant research suggests it should be earlier), and why the curve seems to drop past the 5th or 6th year of experience.

Second, persistent problem behaviors are infrequent. Although most officers will receive a citizen complaint sometime in their career, few will obtain multiple complaints. The extent to which this pattern is due to the careful screening of applicants, routine supervision already established within the agency, the sanctions (both formal and informal) officers experience following a citizen complaint, changes in assignment, measurement error, or a combination thereof remains unknown. As in criminal career research, police scholarship should become concerned not only with what works in terms of combating problem behaviors but also with how career events and interventions may differentially effect the onset, persistence, and desistance of these behaviors.

Future research should attempt to replicate these results by examining the career elements of problem behaviors in other agencies. If the experience–problem behavior curve is found in other agencies, it could represent a relatively stable relationship in policing, and one police administrators could use in targeting limited resources to combat these behaviors and potentially increase the accuracy of EI systems. If an agency's problem behavior elements of onset, frequency, desistance, duration, and participation are known in the aggregate, it provides a baseline for detecting officers who might deviate from this normal pattern, indicating a need for intervention. If this proves unsuccessful, police administrators and scholars could borrow the risk factor

approach that is now prevalent in research on criminal careers as a means of understanding which officers are likely to be problems (see Hickman, Piquero, & Greene, 2004). Also, given that a nontrivial number of officers had no citizen complaints filed against them, it would be interesting to know how these officers are different—are they especially skilled at their craft or skilled at avoiding complaints?

Research on problem officers could also be enhanced by employing career elements in defining and operationalizing this officer type, and also by broadening consideration to multiple types of officers who exhibit problem behaviors. If problem officers are truly the most problematic, their problem behaviors should have an earlier onset, a greater frequency of these behaviors while active, and a longer duration (and hence a later desistance point) than less problematic officers. Criminologists have already designed methods for determining if distinct patterns of behavior, called trajectories, underlie the aggregate relationship between age and crime (see Nagin, 2005), and police scholars could employ these methods to determine if distinct patterns underlie the aggregate relationship between experience and problem behaviors. This would allow researchers to examine varying groups of officers who follow similar career paths in problem behaviors, and would lead researchers away from the problem and nonproblem officer dichotomy, allowing exploration of varying degrees of problematic behaviors. Such an approach could spurn new ideas about how problem behaviors take shape and what might cause them to change, for better or worse, over time. In short, applying a career perspective to problem behaviors would likely enhance theory about these behaviors, and could also spurn new approaches for dealing with them.

## Notes

1. As part of the agreement between the research team and the police agency under study, the agency can only be referred to in these terms, and no additional identifying characteristics can be provided.

2. Officers averaged 12 years of experience with a standard deviation of 2.4 years.

3. One might also be interested in specific types of citizen complaints. The data do provide information on complaint types, of which there are over 50, but these were devised and categorized by the person responsible for maintaining these data, and as such do not contain definitions or criteria by which these types are determined. The agency at the time of the study was working on developing specific complaint types and developing procedures to categorize them, and as such it is suspected that the present categories lack validity. For those interested, just under half of all citizen complaints in the cohort were accounted for by five categories: (a) improper police action (14.5%), (b) unprofessional conduct (10.8%), (c) excessive force (9.2%), (d) negligence (8.9%), and (e) service (8.9%), but again, these are not well defined. None of the remaining categories accounted for more than 4% of the citizen complaints filed, and most account for 1% or less. Also, this agency did record who investigated the complaint, which is determined by a 4-point severity scale, but most of these data (85%) were missing from the computerized records, and thus the research team does not know if these complaints were investigated by a Sergeant, a higher-ranking supervisor, or an Internal Affairs investigator.

4. The agency that is the host of this research takes citizen complaints in person, by mail, by phone, by fax, and via e-mail from the agency's Web site.

5. Some police agencies have required citizens to sign legal documents stating that their complaint are valid, and if it is found not to be so, they can be the subject of legal action for registering a false complaint. It is suspected that this requirement is instituted to dissuade citizens from filing complaints.

6. The agency during this study period did have an Early Intervention (EI) system in place. The research team knew which officers were selected by the EI system for intervention, but results presented herein were identical whether those selected for intervention ( $n = 45$ ) were included or excluded from the analyses.

7. This is likely because the majority of officers were not promoted until their 10th year of experience or after. Very few officers were promoted before or during their 6th year.

8. Some complaints were missing a filing date, so it was estimated based on the ordinary time lag between receipt of a complaint and the date that reports are either due or are received.

9. Information was available on the date when all officers left this agency, and as such the data can distinguish between observation periods where an officer received zero citizen complaints and observation periods after an officer left the agency. The data exclude officers who did not serve past their probationary period.

10. For example, in a cohort of 1,000 officers, if 200 have received a complaint by their 1st year of experience and 100 more begin their career in their 2nd year of experience, then the initiation rate of the officers in their second year is  $100/1000 = .10$  and their conditional initiation rate is  $100/(1,000 - 200) = .12$ .

11. This allowed retention of only a handful of addition cases. The results when using these cases compared to results using only officers with three or more complaints are virtually identical.

12. The sharp increase between year 1 and 2 is likely due to the 6 months of academy training officers attend during their 1st year and the 60 working days officers spend with a Field Training Officer after the academy. Even though a few officers managed to have citizen complaints filed against them while in the academy, their exposure to the public is limited and therefore complaints unlikely.

13. One might suspect that the most problematic officers share the same, or a limited number of very active assignments. The agency collects no data on officers' geographic assignment history, except for their current assignment. The citizen complaint data does contain information on where the officer was stationed at the time of the complaint, but this paints an incomplete picture of an officer's assignment history. An examination of assignment was conducted for 61 officers with the highest complaint rates, which reveals these officers averaged 4.5 different assignments during the data collection period, but no assignment or small group of assignments are significantly overrepresented. This indicates that the most problematic officers manage to obtain citizen complaints across a number of different assignments.

14. Penal law arrest data were available for officers who entered in 1987. The year to year correlations of arrest data to citizen complaints across experience were often statistically significant but also very weak, never exceeding a peak of .23 during year four.

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