

**SHOTS FIRED: DECODING THE SEQUENCING
OF OFFICER-INVOLVED SHOOTINGS
IN OKLAHOMA CITY**

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This study examines whether the disposition or perception of an officer-involved shooting may be correlated to the occurrence or non-occurrence of other officer-involved shootings within the same police department. The subject is examined based on the theoretical underpinnings of social learning theory and the copy-cat effect. Data on officer-involved shootings from the Oklahoma City Police Department has been gathered, coded, and analyzed to determine whether officer-involved shootings that result in criminal charges against the officer may inhibit other officers from shooting and whether lawful and heroic shootings may produce additional shootings. Analysis of the data reveals that the criminal charging of an officer following a shooting tends to have a chilling effect on future shootings, but that lawful and heroic shootings do not necessarily produce additional shootings. The data also reveals officer-involved shootings tend to occur in clusters with longer periods of time with no shootings between the clusters. These findings and others have important implications for police administrators.

INTRODUCTION

Officer-involved shootings have increasingly been a topic of interest to researchers. Most of the research has focused on officer-suspect characteristics, particularly race and situational factors (Phillips and Kim 2021). Absent from the literature however is any analysis on whether the disposition or perception of one officer-involved shooting may be correlated to the occurrence or non-occurrence of other officer-involved shootings. Can the occurrence of an officer-involved shooting make it more likely another officer will be involved in a shooting in the near future? What if the shooting saved someone's life or an officer was shot? Is there a copy-cat effect influencing officer-involved shootings? Does any correlation depend on the disposition of the criminal investigation into the shooting? Can the prosecution of an officer following a shooting make it less likely other officers will be involved in a shooting?

These questions form the basis of this study. They are explored within the context of the Oklahoma City Police Department (OCPD). OCPD offers an ideal test population. OCPD is not only local, but it is the largest law enforcement agency within the busiest district attorney's jurisdiction in Oklahoma. OCPD is diverse, is more transparent than most agencies in Oklahoma, and experiences multiple officer-involved shootings every year (OCPD 2022).

This study is an attempt to contribute to the growing body of officer-involved shooting research. It is an effort to offer police administrators new insight into officer-involved shootings so that they may improve the safety of officers and the community, limit shootings to only when they are necessary, and manage the aftermath of shootings in an informed and calculated manner, thereby minimizing the likelihood of additional shootings and the trauma associated with them.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two theoretical frameworks to evaluate how an officer-involved shooting affects the likelihood of other officers in the same department to shoot someone. The two frameworks are the social learning theory and the copy-cat effect.

Social learning theory offers a fitting theoretical framework to evaluate how dispositions or perceptions of officer-involved shootings affect the likelihood of other officers in the same department to shoot a suspect. Social learning theory has previously been used to evaluate police conduct (Chappell and Piquero 2004).

Social learning theory was developed by Ronald Akers. Social learning theory proposes that four variables function to shape attitudes toward social behavior: differential association, definitions, reinforcement, and modeling. The balance of these variables determines whether people will be prone to engage in conforming or deviant behavior (Akers 1977).

Differential association refers to interaction and identity with groups. Groups provide the environment in which people are exposed to definitions, reinforcement, and modeling. Definitions are norms, attitudes, or orientations about what is acceptable behavior. Definitions are shaped through imitation and reinforcement and can act as stimuli for other behaviors. The more a behavior is defined as positive, the more likely people are to engage in it. Reinforcement is the process whereby behavior is strengthened or weakened as a result of stimuli that follow behaviors. Behaviors are strengthened through reward and avoidance of punishment and are weakened by aversive stimuli and loss of reward. Finally, modeling is the process whereby behaviors are learned from others and then imitated (Akers 1977).

Social learning theory posits that behaviors are primarily influ-

enced by groups that control people's major sources of reinforcement, exposure to behavior models, and normative definitions. Friends and family tend to occupy strong sources, but so can work groups or colleagues. On balance for the same behavior, reinforcement is a greater influence than punishing contingencies and reinforcing-punishing contingencies for alternative behavior (Akers 1977).

The copy-cat effect offers another potentially valuable theoretical lens from which to evaluate whether an officer-involved shooting is likely to spur or inhibit additional shootings. The copy-cat effect is based in criminological theory but has also been identified in the occurrence of suicides, terrorism, product tampering, and other phenomenon. The term has been used to refer to imitative crime influenced by the media. Copy-cat crime can be motivated by real or fictional media. There is growing evidence that copy-cat crime is a real phenomenon exacerbated by the media (Helfgott 2015). Studies have found that 25% of offenders have reported that media or popular culture played some role in their crimes (Surette 2013).

Research on media effects on crime have focused on six concepts: catharsis, social learning, priming, arousal, desensitization, and cultivation and fear (Helfgott 2015). Of these concepts, all but catharsis provide a potential avenue to understanding possible correlations between officer-involved shootings. The social learning concept posits that media characters serve as role models and that when people see aggressive behavior get rewarded, they are more likely to imitate the aggressive behavior. The concept of priming provides that exposure to violent media images plants aggressive and violent cues in people's minds. In turn, these cues are more accessible during emotional states and increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior. The concept of arousal suggests that people become physiologically aroused when they view media violence and that arousal intensifies their emotional state. Desensitization postulates that the more violent media people consume, the more dulled their sensitivity to violence will become, thereby contrib-

uting to the likelihood of aggressive behavior. Finally, the concept of cultivation and fear recognizes that viewing violent media cultivates a particular social reality and induces high levels of fear that can persist for significant periods of time after exposure (Helfgott 2015).

The copy-cat effect admittedly does not perfectly fit the subject of this study. The copy-cat effect was developed as a possible explanation for the commission of crime and was established at a time when the term “media” primarily referred to news programs on television, newspapers, or radio. Officer-involved shootings are generally not crimes (unless the officer is subsequently charged and convicted of an offense). Officer-involved shootings are also largely considered part of an officer’s lawful responsibilities, at least when presented with circumstances justifying deadly force and lawful force is used.

Despite these differences, there are three factors that make application of the copy-cat effect relevant to this study. First, officer-involved shootings arguably bear at least a superficial relationship to the commission of a crime. Shooting someone is a violent act and violent acts are generally prohibited by law. A shooting by a private citizen might be considered murder, while the same shooting, if done by an officer, might be considered justified. Officers are also subjected to criminal investigation after a shooting, the same as private citizens. Second, the concept of media influence has exploded since the inception of the copy-cat effect. Media is now all-consuming, more potent, and almost impossible to avoid, making it more likely to affect people, including police officers. Finally, there are certain characteristics in police work that match significant factors of concern in the copy-cat effect literature. Officers are constantly exposed to crime and violence, not just in the media, but in person, and they are often forced to respond with aggressive and controlling behavior to situations in the course of their responsibilities. Since researchers have found some association with these conditions and the commission of crimes (Helfgott

2015), studying the effects of these conditions on officers and their propensity to shoot someone offers potential value.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE OKLAHOMA CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT

OCPD has an authorized strength of 1,235 sworn police officers and 304 civilian employees. The command structure of sworn police officers includes in descending order the chief of police, five deputy chiefs, eleven majors, thirty-three captains, and 155 lieutenants. The remaining, non-supervisory sworn police officers are sergeants and officers (OCPD 2021, 5-7). Eighty-nine percent of the department's officers are male, and eleven percent are female. In 2021, the department received more than 1.1 million emergency calls and responded to nearly 4,288 violent crimes and 25,365 property crimes (OCPD 2022).

OFFICER-INVOLVED SHOOTING RESEARCH

Officer-involved shooting research has picked up in recent decades. The most common research subject has been a focus on the characteristics of the officers and persons they shoot, specifically the race of the participants. Results are mixed. A number of studies have found that race is not a determinative factor for determining whether officers will shoot a suspect (Phillips and Kim 2021). Other studies have found that white people are more likely to be shot than black people (Fryer 2019). On the other hand, some researchers have found that officers are quicker to shoot black people and show more restraint with white people (Durán and Loza 2017).

Researchers have also focused on the situational factors associated with officer-involved shootings, such as the presence of weapons and whether the suspect was aggressive or attacking the officer. Many researchers have found that the presence of a weapon is associated with an officer's decision to shoot and that attacking an officer is associated with getting shot by the officer (Shane et al.

2017; Worrall et al. 2018). Phillips and Kim (2021) found that situational factors are the driving force behind an officer's decision to shoot.

Neighborhood characteristics have also been the focus of studies. Some researchers have found that the violent crime rate was associated with an officer's decision to shoot (Jacobs and O'Brien 1998; Sorensen et al. 1993; Wheeler et al. 2018), although Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2017) found there was no association between police shootings and the murder rate, poverty level, violent crime rate, or percent of black people in the population.

Still other research has focused on individual officer characteristics and police shootings. Drawing on Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime, Donner et al. (2017) found a positive association between low self-control and police shootings. They also found that male officers, officers with a parent that was an officer, and officers with lower levels of education were more likely to be in a police shooting (Donner et al. 2017).

Researchers have yet to put the magnifying glass over how an officer-involved shooting itself might affect the likelihood of other officers in the same agency to shoot someone, making this study a novel endeavor.

POLICE DUTIES AND CULTURE

Attempting to understand how the occurrence of an officer-involved shooting may affect other officers in a department and the likelihood of other officers to shoot someone requires an understanding of the nature of police work and police culture. Policing is a unique occupation. Police officers are generally exposed to the worst of our society on a daily basis: poverty, neglect, recklessness, abuse, crime, hate, and death. At the same time, they are expected to be friendly, compassionate, forgiving, and restrained, even when under assault themselves. Police officers are given privileges not available to regular citizens. In the course of their

duties, they may be authorized to drive fast, take property, stop people, lock people up, and even shoot people. Police officers commonly operate independently with limited supervision (Chappell and Piquero 2004).

The nature of police duties and experiences tends to create an attitude of suspiciousness or distrust towards regular citizens (Ingram et al. 2018). At the same time, abuse of privileges and power that are experienced or made public work to undermine community trust in police. These forces isolate police officers from the rest of society and make them more likely to withdraw into the police culture for support and approval (Alpert and Dunham 1997). As officers spend more time with each other, it becomes more important for them to feel accepted by their peers (Chappell and Piquero 2004).

Another significant element of police culture is masculinity. Some researchers have suggested police work itself is a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity and that all police officers—male and female—are taught that dominant masculinity is necessary to perform the duties of an officer (Prokos and Padavic 2002). Officers normally avoid appearing weak or expressing more feminine emotions because they want to avoid any ridicule for not being a tough or macho officer (Farrell et al. 2020; Prokos and Padavic 2002).

Other attitudes traditionally shared by police officers include a preference for aggressive policing tactics, negative views of supervision, and an emphasis on law enforcement over service and order maintenance (Terrill et al. 2003).

Understanding police cultural attitudes is particularly important because they have been found to be associated with certain officer behavior. For example, Terrill and Paoline (2015) found that officers that subscribe to a crime-fighter orientation of policing tend to receive more citizen complaints. Terrill et al. (2003) found that officers who relate to traditional police attitudes are more likely

to use higher levels of force. Alpert and Dunham (1997) found that officers collectively see little to no issue with accepting free meals, services, and discounts and consider it a fringe benefit of the job. And Worden (1996; 1989) found that officers' views towards citizens were related to improper force and traffic stops.

POLICE AUTHORITY TO SHOOT

Officer-involved shootings cannot be evaluated without consideration of the legal and policy restrictions that accompany them. The authority for a police officer to shoot a person is highly regulated by the law and in most cases department policy. The primary source of legal restrictions on officer shootings is the Fourth Amendment, made applicable to state and local police officers through the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. The United States Supreme Court began shaping the current constitutional standard for the use of deadly force in the 1985 case of *Tennessee v. Garner*. In *Garner*, the Court held officers may use deadly force when they have probable cause to believe that a suspect poses a threat of serious physical harm, either to the officers or others. 471 U.S. 1, 11-12. Since *Garner*, the Court has used the standards it established in *Graham v. Connor* to determine whether a particular use of deadly force complies with the Fourth Amendment. 490 U.S. 386 (1989). This test requires that an officer's force be objectively reasonable in light of the facts and circumstances. *Id.*, at 397. Different factors may be considered, such as the severity of the crime, whether the person posed an immediate threat, and whether the person was resisting or trying to escape. *Id.* at 396. The determination is a balancing test not capable of precise definition or mechanical application. *Id.* The test is objective—meaning an officer's intent or motivation is irrelevant. *Id.* at 397.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions this study attempts to answer are: (1) whether OCPD officers are less likely to shoot a suspect after a

fellow officer's shooting results in criminal charges filed against the officer, (2) whether OCPD officers are more likely to shoot a suspect after a fellow officer's shooting is found to be legally justified, and (3) whether OCPD officers are more likely to shoot a suspect after a fellow officer's shooting is perceived to be heroic.

For purposes of this study, references to "officers" refers to all sworn employees of all ranks, not the specific rank of officer, unless otherwise explained in context.

METHODOLOGY

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

The dependent variable in this study is the occurrence or non-occurrence of an OCPD officer-involved shooting after a fellow officer-involved shooting in OCPD. The dependent variable is operationalized through secondary data collection and coding.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The independent variables in this study are (1) fellow officer-involved shootings that result in criminal charges filed against the fellow officers, (2) fellow officer-involved shootings found to be legally justified, and (3) fellow officer-involved shootings perceived to be heroic. Independent variables are operationalized by identifying such incidents that meet the criteria from the data provided by OCPD.

For purposes of this study, officer-involved shootings are defined as incidents where at least one officer intentionally discharged a firearm towards a human being with the intention to shoot that human being. Excluded from this definition and study are incidents where officers unintentionally fired their firearm or where officers intentionally discharged their firearm at an animal, such as a vicious dog or injured wildlife, whether or not a human being was shot.

Determining which officer-involved shootings might be perceived as heroic is operationalized by identifying the shootings where the suspect fired shots at the officers and the officers were cleared of any criminal wrongdoing.

CONTROL VARIABLES

The control variables in this study are (1) gender, (2) rank, (3) time of shooting, (4) time since previous shooting in days, (5) time after a shooting until the next shooting in days, (6) shooting disposition, (7) whether an officer or others were in danger, (8) whether a suspect was armed with a gun, (9) whether a suspect fired shots at officers, (10) whether an officer was attempting to apprehend a known violent suspect or a suspect actively shooting prior to the involved officer's arrival at the scene, (11) whether a suspect died as a result of a shooting, (12) whether a suspect was hit by officer gunfire, (13) the number of officers involved in the shooting that fired shots, and (14) whether an officer was on or off duty at the time of the shooting. The control variables will be operationalized through secondary data collection and coding.

POPULATION

OCPD is the subject of this study. The population of the study is all sworn officers within OCPD from 2007 to 2021.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is a mixed-mode case study. It uses secondary data collection and voluntary interviews to examine the research questions. Secondary data on officer-involved shootings was collected from OCPD. The data collected included the information necessary to operationalize all of the control variables. Primary data were collected using select interviews. Separate interviews were conducted with Oklahoma City Chief of Police Wade Gourley, Deputy Chief Brian Jennings, and Deputy Chief Ron Bacy regarding the subject of this study.

DATA ANALYSIS

Secondary data obtained on past officer-involved shootings was collected, coded, entered into a spreadsheet, and subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis. Responses to the interviews were collected, coded, and analyzed using qualitative techniques. All data obtained was analyzed in an effort to build theories based on patterns or other information revealed and to answer the research questions.

FINDINGS

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

In the last fifteen years, from 2007 to 2021, OCPD had 142 officer-involved shooting incidents with 239 individual officers discharging their firearms. On average there was less than ten shootings a year. The most shootings occurred in 2014 and 2019 with fourteen shootings each year. The fewest shootings occurred in 2009 with only three shootings. Officer-involved shootings gradually increased from 2009 to 2014, fell by 2016, picked up by 2019, and have been on a decline ever since.

Officer-involved shootings occurred between the hours of midnight and 8 A.M. 30% of the time, during business hours (8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.) 26% of the time, and between the hours of 5:00 P.M. to midnight 41% of the time.¹ Shootings most often occurred during the 3:00 PM hour, with 11 shootings occurring during that hour. Shootings were the most infrequent during the 5:00 AM, 6:00 AM, and 2:00 PM hours, with only one shooting occurring during each of those hours in the past fifteen years. In general, shootings were infrequent throughout the morning, sharply picked up around 3:00 PM and then remained at a relatively high level until tapering off around 2:00 AM.

Out of the 239 officers that discharged their firearms, 97% of them were male and 3% were female. In 2021, females comprised ap-

¹ The time of the incident was not available for four shootings.

proximately 11% of all officers (OCPD 2022). Although female population percentages were not available for all fifteen years, their current percentage suggests they were less likely to be involved in an officer-involved shooting than their male colleagues. However, to more accurately determine if female officers were less likely to be involved in a shooting, consideration would have to be given to assignments, as not all assignments subject officers to situations where they may become involved in a shooting.

The appropriate district attorney cleared officers of criminal charges in 98% of the incidents, clearing 232 individual officers. Only three or 2% of the incidents resulted in criminal charges filed against officers. Out of these three incidents, two of them resulted in charges filed against one officer and one of the incidents resulted in charges filed against five officers. In total, seven officers were charged for their part in a shooting. All three of the incidents that resulted in criminal charges against officers occurred within the past five years. Two of them occurred within the past two years.

The vast majority of incidents involved a threat against the officers themselves. Only 7% of the incidents involved a threat to someone else. In 22% of the incidents, officers were either intentionally looking for a suspect based on a violent crime or knew they were headed to an incident where the suspect was firing or had just fired shots at someone. The suspects in officer-involved shootings had a firearm 62% of the time. Officers were shot at in 27% of the incidents. Officers were actually shot in 9% of the incidents. When officers were shot at, they were actually shot 33% of the time. No officers were killed as a result of the shootings, although one officer was critically injured, and several officers were saved by their bullet-proof vests.

The suspects in officer-involved shootings were killed in 49% of the incidents. In 25% of the incidents, the suspects were not hit by officer gunfire at all. Of the incidents where the suspects were hit by officer gunfire, the suspect died 65% of the time.

Looking at officer-involved shootings by month, November and December were the most active months with fifteen shootings each. The slowest months were April and June with seven shootings and eight shootings respectively. At the highest level, the Spring was the slowest time for shootings, with shootings picking up in the Summer, peaking in late Fall or Winter, and descending into the Spring.

SEQUENCING OBSERVATIONS

General Sequencing Observations

The shortest duration between two officer-involved shootings was zero days. Two shootings occurred on the same day. The longest duration between two shootings was 275 days. The average number of days between shootings was thirty-nine days. There were forty-seven instances of two shootings occurring within two weeks of each other, making it 66% likely that after any given OCPD officer-involved shooting another one will occur within the following two weeks. There were twenty-eight instances of two shootings that occurring within one week of each other, making it 39% likely that after any given OCPD shooting, another one will occur within the following week.

There was a total of eight separate periods where at least three shootings occurred within two weeks. On six occasions three shootings occurred within two weeks, on another occasion four shootings occurred within two weeks, and on one occasion five shootings occurred within two weeks. Looking at the first shooting that initiated each of these eight patterns, there are several commonalities (see Table 1). All of the first shootings were cleared by the district attorney and involved a threat to the officers themselves. In all but one of the first shootings, the suspect was armed with a gun (88%), in five of the first shootings shots were fired at the officers (63%), and most notably, in three of the first shootings officers were shot by the suspect's gunfire (38%). These factors were significantly more prevalent in first shootings that resulted in a pattern compared to shootings in general. Overall, only 62% of

Table 1. Shootings Initiating Pattern of at Least Three Shootings within Two Weeks

Characteristics of First Shooting in Two Week Period

Incidents with at Least 3 Shootings within 2 Weeks	Disposition	Officer Shot	Self/Other in Danger	Suspect Armed with Gun?		Fired at Officers	Officer Attempting to Apprehend Known Violent Suspect?		Fatality?	Suspect Hit?	Number of Officers
				Y	N		Y	N			
December 7, 15, 25, 2007	Cleared	N	Self	Y	N	Y	N	No	No	Yes	2
May 8, 15, 26, 2008	Cleared	Y	Self	Y	N	Y	N	No	No	No	2
October 18, 25, 28, 2012	Cleared	N	Self	Y	N	Y	N	No	No	No	1
August 18, 24, September 3, 2014	Cleared	N	Self	Y	Y	N	Y	No	No	No	1
February 25 (x2), March 1, 2018	Cleared	Y	Self	Y	N	Y	N	No	No	Yes	3
November 11, 19, 23, 2020	Cleared	Y	Self	Y	Y	Y	Y	Yes	Yes	Yes	9
August 26, September 9, 10, 15, 2019	Cleared	N	Self	Y	N	N	N	No	No	No	2
July 6, 12, 19, 22, 29, 2008	Cleared	N	Self	N	N	N	N	No	No	No	1

the incidents involved a suspect with a gun, officers were shot at only 27% of the time, and officers were shot only 9% of the time. In the first shootings that started a pattern, the likelihood of the suspect being armed with a gun was higher than the norm (42% increase), the likelihood of officers being fired at was significantly higher (133% increase), and the likelihood of officers being shot was exponentially higher (322% increase).

Shootings with Criminal Charges

Turning to incidents where officers were criminally charged after an officer-involved shooting, the first incident occurred on November 15, 2017. Sergeant Keith Sweeney fatally shot an unarmed, suicidal man who was holding a lighter while doused in lighter fluid (Elfrink 2019). The district attorney charged Sweeney with second degree murder shortly thereafter on December 6, 2017 (Hawkins 2017). Looking at the shootings that followed these events, there is not strong evidence that there was any type of chilling effect on other shootings. Twenty-six days elapsed after the Sweeney shooting before the next shooting, which was below average for time between shootings, and another shooting occurred on December 11, 2017, just days after the district attorney announced criminal charges. There was a longer than average period of time (forty-six days) following the December 11 shooting. But beginning on January 26, 2018, there were two shootings within one week of each other and starting on February 25, 2018, there were three shootings within four days. The average number of days between shootings for the periods of six months and one year after the Sweeney shooting and the announcement of charges against Sweeney remained about thirty, which is also below the average of thirty-nine days.

Sweeney was convicted of second-degree murder on November 4, 2019 (Elfrink 2019). The duration between the officer-involved shootings following Sweeney's conviction produced mixed results as to a possible chilling effect. Eight days after the conviction there was another shooting. Although this shooting was followed

by an above-average period of forty-two days, the next two shootings were approximately two weeks apart. Significantly, however, there was an extremely long period (108 days) with no shootings following the shooting on January 22, 2020. This quiet period started approximately two and a half months after Sweeney's conviction. Moreover, after the next shooting on May 9, 2020, there was another exceptionally long period with no shootings (seventy-four days). While it is not clear whether these two longer quiet periods can be attributed to the conviction, the timing of them at least provides a basis for further inquiry.

The second incident with criminal charges filed on an officer occurred on November 23, 2020. Five officers fatally shot a juvenile that had robbed a store at gunpoint. The suspect climbed out a window of the store, dropped his firearm, and then began reaching into his back pocket, at which time officers fired their weapons. The district attorney charged all five officers with manslaughter on March 10, 2021 (Madani 2021). Charges are still pending. Although there was a shooting seventeen days after this announcement, the average number of days between shootings for the six months following the manslaughter announcement was fifty-two days, which is significantly higher than the overall average number of days following shootings. This indicates there may have been a chilling effect from the announcement of these charges.

The final and most recent incident with charges filed occurred on December 11, 2020. There, officers were attempting to persuade a suspect to put down a knife at the scene of a disturbance. After the suspect refused to put down the knife, and officers used a TASER and pepper spray on the suspect with little to no effect, the suspect began charging one officer with the knife. But the suspect sharply changed directions away from that officer by the time the officer that had been using the TASER fired three shots that hit the suspect in the back (Rankin 2021). This shooting was followed by a forty-three-day quiet period, a slightly longer period than average. The shooting officer was charged with manslaughter by the

district attorney on February 25, 2021, approximately two weeks before the district attorney also announced charges against the five officers from the November 23, 2020, shooting. Charges are still pending. The average number of days between shootings for the six months following the announcement was forty-one days, which is also slightly above average.

The final shooting of 2021 also provided a case of interest, not because of what the officer did, but because of what the officer did not do. This incident is also significant because it occurred shortly after and within the same year a total of six OCPD officers were criminally charged for shootings. On December 8, 2021, an officer responded to a disturbance at an apartment complex. The officer made contact with a suspect who was attempting to enter an apartment he did not live in. The suspect, who had his hand in his pocket when the officer approach him, pulled out a gun. The officer slowly backup up, told the suspect to put the gun down, and never drew his own firearm. The suspect started calling the officer a “rookie,” approached the officer with the gun and his hand back in his pocket, and told the officer “don’t do that.” The officer appeared to have his hand on his holster but had still not drawn his gun. The suspect drew his gun again, pointed it at the officer, and the officer told him “don’t shoot.” The suspect kept walking towards the officer, telling him “don’t do that” [presumably referring to the officer drawing his gun which he had still not done], all while gripping his gun with two hands and pointing it directly at the officer, who kept walking backwards. Eventually the officer tripped on stairs as he was walking backwards and at approximately the same time, he apparently managed to draw his gun and a shot was fired. It was not clear whether the shot was fired at the suspect. The suspect was not hit (Casiano 2021). Police officers are trained to have their firearms out and aimed at the threat anytime they face a threat of serious bodily injury to themselves, especially when confronting a suspect with a gun. It is apparent from the video of this incident that the officer did not want to shoot the suspect, despite risking his own life. The officer

is no longer employed by OCPD. Why did the officer not shoot? It cannot be ruled out that the recent criminal charges filed against OCPD officers had a part in the officer's hesitation.

Shootings Found Justified

Officer-involved shootings determined to be justified by the district attorney encompassed 139 out of the 142 incidents. While there were patterns that existed within the shootings found to be justified (discussed above), those patterns did not seem to be correlated with the mere fact the shootings were justified. The only trend that was identifiable regarding cleared shootings was that officers have only been criminally charged following a shooting in the past five years.

Shootings Perceived as Heroic

There were thirty-nine officer-involved shooting incidents that met the criteria of being heroic—incidents where shots were fired at officers and the officers were cleared of criminal charges. The average number of days following these shootings until the next shooting was forty-one, which is slightly above the overall average of thirty-nine. This evidence does not support the proposition that heroic shootings might inspire other officers to engage in a shooting in the near future. Perhaps more interesting is that the average number of days prior to the last shooting was fifty-one, which is well above average. This statistic suggests that longer periods without shootings tended to be followed by shootings that could be deemed heroic. Overall, getting shot at, by itself, did not necessarily result in a shorter duration before the next shooting. Remarkably, the longest duration between shootings in this whole study occurred after an officer was ambushed with an assault rifle and almost lost her life on August 29, 2010. That shooting was followed by 275 days without another shooting.

There were thirteen incidents where officers were shot by gunfire. Looking only at these officer-involved shootings, the overall average period of time following the shootings was forty-one

days, which is above average. This subset of data was significantly skewed, however, by the 275 days following the shooting on August 29, 2010. Taking away the longest (275 days) and shortest (zero days) period from this subset results in an average of twenty-one days following these shootings until the next. This number is well below the average, indicating there may be some correlation between officers getting shot and the next shooting occurring.

INTERVIEWS

Chief Wade Gourley, Deputy Chief Brian Jennings, and Deputy Chief Ron Bacy take officer-involved shootings very seriously. Chief Gourley goes to every single officer-involved shooting, no matter the day or time, and speaks with and provides support to the involved officers. The chiefs explained that officer-involved shootings can evoke different thoughts and perceptions in officers. Following officer-involved shootings, many officers think to themselves, “this could happen to me” (Bacy 2002). Although officers want to help each other out in these situations and want to be there for their partners, many officers are relieved they were not involved (Gourley 2022). Officer-involved shootings are traumatic events for officers. Officers tend to feel bad for the involved officers. They know that the involved officers will be subjected to an endless barrage of negative and stressful consequences, even under the best of circumstances when a shooting is completely justified: criminal investigation, criminal interview, possibility of criminal charges, media scrutiny, activist criticism, administrative leave, getting sued, and leaving their partners short of help during administrative leave, which can last for extended periods of time (Jennings 2022). Chief Gourley (2022) sees the weight of these circumstances on officers.

The chiefs recognized there are factors that might inhibit officers from shooting a suspect. Foremost among those factors is a fear of criminal prosecution (Bacy 2022; Gourley 2022; Jennings 2022). It is a real factor that weighs heavy on officers’ minds, particularly in the past couple years. Fear of criminal prosecution can cause

anxiety in officers and result in hesitation in critical moments (Bacy 2022). Chief Gourley (2022) did not think it was merely a coincidence that the department has experienced unprecedented mass resignations and retirements in the past two years.

Deputy Chief Bacy (2022) did not believe an officer-involved shooting that results in criminal charges against an officer will necessarily have an inhibiting effect on future shootings. Rather he argued the filing of criminal charges is more likely to have such an effect when officers do not perceive the involved officer's conduct to have been criminal or at least not clearly criminal (Bacy 2022). Deputy Chief Bacy (2022) did not recognize any inhibiting effects following the Sweeney shooting. However, he observed inhibiting effects following the two more recent shootings that resulted in criminal charges against officers (Bacy 2022).

While historically some officers may have seen an officer-involved shooting as a badge of honor (Jennings 2022), the chiefs were adamant that in the current environment no officers want to be involved in a shooting, not even a shooting that might be perceived as heroic (Bacy 2022; Gourley 2022; Jennings 2022).

This is not to say that officers do not learn from officer-involved shootings. Officers are learning from other shootings more than ever (Jennings 2022). After significant events and shootings, OCPD officers are now debriefing and discussing what worked and what didn't work (Bacy 2022). Body-worn cameras are capturing details of shootings that were not traditionally available. Police administrators are now able to dissect shootings, both the good and the bad, and share those videos and lessons learned with all officers (Jennings 2022). Chief Gourley (2022) also established the Reality-Based Training Unit, which recreates many of the shootings and puts other officers through the scenarios.

The chiefs explained there are also many factors beyond officers' control that also affect the occurrence and frequency of officer-in-

involved shootings. Chief Gourley (2022) pointed out that a number of social issues can have an effect on the occurrence of shootings. Mental health, easy access to firearms, poverty, recently relaxed drug laws, and loosening of criminal penalties are factors at play in Oklahoma that can affect the occurrence of shootings (Gourley 2022). Deputy Chief Jennings (2022) has observed a recent increase in violence and aggressiveness directed at officers. Deputy Chief Bacy (2022) has found criminals to have become more emboldened lately and sees the lack of accountability in the judicial system as a contributing factor. Deputy Chief Bacy (2022) also suggested perhaps all the attention that shootings receive in social media might influence or inspire other suspects to engage in similar bold behavior.

Regardless of the complexities involved, the chiefs appreciate the trauma involved in officer-involved shootings and strive to prevent shootings to the extent possible and provide the degree of support and resources necessary to keep officers healthy in body and mind (Bacy 2022; Gourley 2022; Jennings 2022).

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study yielded some unexpected yet interesting patterns in OCPD officer-involved shootings. OCPD officer-involved shootings tend to occur in clusters within a relatively short period of time with longer intervals in between the clusters. This pattern was generally consistent across the entire fifteen years studied. Despite an overall average of thirty-nine days between officer-involved shootings, every time there was a shooting, there was a 66% chance another one would occur within the following two weeks and there was a 39% chance another one would occur within the following week. There were also eight separate sequences of officer-involved shootings where at least three shootings occurred within two weeks, with one sequence of five shootings occurring within two weeks. There was a strong correlation between the shooting that started each of these eight sequences and shootings where the suspect had a gun, the suspect fired shots

at officers, and officers were hit by gunfire. Determining why these patterns occurred will be a far more challenging task than it was to find them. The questions presented in this study offer a starting point.

SHOOTINGS WITH CRIMINAL CHARGES

There is fair evidence that OCPD officers were less likely to become involved in a shooting following an officer-involved shooting where criminal charges were filed against the officer. Although the sequencing of shootings following the Sweeney shooting, the filing of criminal charges against him in 2017, and his subsequent conviction in 2019 produced mixed results, the subsequent shootings and the criminal charging of the six other officers did appear to have such effect. In the six months following the announcement of criminal charges against the five officers that shot the armed robbery suspect, the average number of days between shootings was fifty-two days, which is significantly higher than the overall average number of days between shootings. The shooting of the suspect that had been running towards an officer with a knife, but was shot in the back, was followed by a forty-three-day quiet period, which was also a longer period than average, and in the six months following the announcement of criminal charges against him, the average number of days between shootings was forty-one days, which was also above average. Moreover, within months following these events, an officer was in a situation where he would have been justified in shooting a suspect, had the time and opportunity to do so, yet did not do so. Finally, the OCPD chiefs were adamant that the criminal charging of the six most recent officers has produced anxiety in many officers and in some cases hesitation in critical circumstances. Through their interaction and conversations with their officers, the chiefs know these events are something that weighs heavy on officers' minds (Bacy 2022; Gourley 2022).

Social learning theory provides a possible explanation for the decrease in frequency of shootings following shootings where

charges are filed against officers. Social learning theory suggests that reinforcement is a variable that can affect an officer's decision to not shoot a suspect (Akers 1977). The lack of reward following a criminal shooting and the negative consequences associated with facing criminal charges can weaken the likelihood other officers will engage in a shooting (Akers 1977).

Given the totality of the circumstances here and the marked decrease in officer-involved shootings following the shootings with criminal charges against officers, it cannot be ruled out the filing of criminal charges caused officers to engage in fewer shootings in the aftermath.

SHOOTINGS FOUND JUSTIFIED

Unlike officer-involved shootings that resulted in criminal charges, there is no evidence that a finding that a shooting was legally justified had any impact on the likelihood of other officers being involved in a shooting themselves. To start, only three out of the 142 incidents resulted in charges filed against officers. Almost the entire pool of data consisted of incidents where the officer was cleared of criminal wrongdoing, leaving few instances of comparison. Basically, a cleared shooting was the norm. The only trend overall was that the incidents where officers were criminally charged occurred more recently (in the past five years). This is not to say that such shootings cannot influence officers or that it is impossible to obtain data that could speak to this question. Perhaps a survey of officers might provide insight or perhaps OCPD officer-involved shootings could be compared with other departments. It also cannot be said that there were no patterns following the cleared shootings. As discussed above, there is overwhelming evidence that shootings tended to occur within a relatively short period of time with longer durations between the clusters. Nonetheless, based on the data collected in this study, the data did not in itself prove a shooting found legally justified affected the likelihood of other shootings to follow.

SHOOTINGS PERCEIVED AS HEROIC

The copy-cat effect provides a basis that could ostensibly support the proposition that when a heroic officer-involved shooting occurs, other officers may aspire to do the same. Applying the copy-cat effect in this context, the theory assumes that when officers see another officer get rewarded for engaging in a heroic shooting, they are more likely to imitate that behavior themselves. The copy-cat effect also suggests that the constant exposure to violence that comes with the job of a police officer can place aggressive and violent cues in the minds of officers and can dull their sensitivity to violence, thereby making them more prone to violent behavior (Helfgott 2015).

Similarly, social learning theory suggests that reinforcement is a variable that can affect an officer's decision to shoot a suspect. Applying social learning theory in this context proposes that norms and attitudes can act as stimuli for engaging in a shooting (Akers 1977). As peer influence is one of the most profound pressures operating in police departments (Chappell and Piquero 2004), being "tough" and "aggressive" are attitudes traditionally shared by officers (Farrell et al. 2020; Terrill et al. 2003; Prokos and Padavic 2002), and shooting someone while getting shot at might be the pinnacle of heroics, it is reasonable to hypothesize that after a heroic shooting other officers might aspire to do the same themselves. The more a shooting is defined as positive and the more an officer is rewarded following a shooting, the more likely other officers will be to participate in a shooting themselves (Akers 1977).

Despite these theories, the data collected in this study provide little evidence that officers were more likely to be involved in a shooting following a fellow officer's shooting that could be perceived as heroic. The average number of days following these shootings until the next shooting was forty-one days, which is slightly above the fifteen-year average of thirty-nine days. Even incidents where officers were actually shot were not followed by a shorter-than-average duration before the next shooting. Although, taking away

the longest (275 days) and shortest (zero days) period from this subset, the average number of days following a shooting where an officer was shot was twenty-one days, which is significantly lower than the fifteen-year average of thirty-nine days.

The input from the chiefs further signified that officers are probably not any more likely to be involved in a shooting merely because of the occurrence of a heroic officer-involved shooting. The chiefs described all the negative consequences that follow from shootings, even heroic shootings, and emphasized how cognizant officers are of these consequences (Bacy 2022; Gourley 2022; Jennings 2022). While the chiefs could not speak to the attitudes of officers in the past, they were clear that the officers of today do not want to be in a shooting and the fear of criminal prosecution is foremost on officers' minds (Bacy 2022).

OTHER FACTORS

This study evaluated officer-involved shootings mostly in the form of data and drew conclusions from that data using quantitative and qualitative research methods. However, officer-involved shootings are not just numbers or formulas. They are the product of interactions between human beings and involve a highly complex culmination of factors, some incapable of objectification, and many of which are beyond the control of officers.

Consideration must be given to what society asks of officers. Society, through our governing institutions, has charged police officers with a duty to protect their community. The United States is a particularly violent western country (World Population Review 2022). There are more firearms than people in the United States and firearms are readily available (Bloomberg 2022). Oklahoma is no exception. Given the duties bestowed upon officers and the characteristics of the environment in which they operate, it should hardly come as a surprise that officers will come into contact with individuals who are threatening the lives of others or the officers themselves. This is what society has asked of officers and the oc-

currence of officer-involved shootings is an unavoidable product of this request.

The law pertaining to use of force also serves as a significant factor in the occurrence of officer-involved shootings. Officers are only legally authorized to use deadly force in particular circumstances. The United States Supreme Court has held that officers may use deadly force when it is objectively reasonable to believe that a suspect poses a threat of serious physical harm, either to the officers or others. *Tennessee v. Garner*, 471 U.S. 1, 11-12; *Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 386, 395-9 (1989). While this is a simple notion on its face, officers are held accountable for all of the cases within their respective jurisdictions that have applied this standard to particular fact patterns. In the unique situations officers often find themselves, it is not always easy to understand what is lawful and what is not. Even judges don't always agree on the lawfulness of shootings. Yet officers are held to the legal standards nonetheless, and they are often required to make a decision in a split second in circumstances that are "tense, uncertain, and rapidly unfolding." *Graham*, at 396-97.

The performance of a behavior—in this case shooting a suspect—also depends upon officers' actual control over their performance of the behavior. Skills and abilities can override intentions and prevent a shooting from occurring (Ajzen 1991). All police officers at OCPD receive the training necessary to use a firearm in dynamic circumstances and must pass a minimum threshold, although not all officers will equally excel at the task. Further, not all officers will perform in an actual shooting as they might perform in training. Police officers are human beings. They experience fear, anxiety, stress, and the physiological effects of these emotions, such as an adrenalin rush, the same as anyone, although some officers are able to control these emotions and effects better than others. These factors can affect the occurrence and outcome of officer-involved shootings.

In addition, there are also a number of employment factors that can play into the likelihood of an officer shooting a suspect. Not all areas in a jurisdiction experience the same type of crime and social issues. Some areas are significantly more violent than others. Officers that work in districts that have higher violent crime rates may be more likely to engage in a situation requiring deadly force (Jacobs and O'Brien 1998; Sorensen et al. 1993; Wheeler et al. 2018). Moreover, not all officers share the same eagerness to go after the most violent criminals. Officers' thirst for proactive policing can also play into their likelihood of being involved in a shooting. Officers that just take burglary and collision reports all day are less likely to be in a shooting than officers who are searching for suspects with outstanding warrants for violent offenses.

Finally, possibly the single-most important factor in officer-involved shootings is the suspects themselves. This factor involves opportunity and lies almost entirely out of the control of officers. In the vast majority of incidents, it is the suspects that chose to commit crimes, to arm themselves with guns and knives, or to attack or endanger officers and others. Without the initial actions of the suspect, those shootings would almost certainly not have occurred.

CONCLUSION

Officer-involved shootings have been subjected to increased scrutiny in recent years. Learning as much as possible about these occurrences and the aftereffects is a challenging yet critical task for police administrators. Officer-involved shootings are traumatic events for officers, involved families, and communities. It is the responsibility of police administrators to prevent the occurrence of officer-involved shootings, to the extent possible, and to provide an informed response when they do occur. Understanding how the disposition or perception of officer-involved shootings might affect the occurrence of additional shootings is one step in that direction.

This study established evidence that officers were less likely to shoot a suspect after a fellow officer's shooting resulted in criminal charges filed against the officer. There is a marked reduced frequency of officer-involved shootings following the two most recent incidents where officers were criminally charged. These findings are supported by the experience and observations of the chiefs and by the body-worn camera video of the incident where the officer failed to draw his firearm and shoot a suspect that pointed a gun directly at him. On the other hand, there is little to no evidence that officers were more likely to shoot a suspect after a fellow officer's shooting was found to be legally justified or could have been perceived as heroic.

Furthermore, there is clear evidence that OCPD officer-involved shootings tended to occur in clusters within a relatively short period of time with longer intervals between the clusters. There were eight separate clusters where at least three officer-involved shootings occurred within two weeks. In one of those clusters, five shootings occurred within two weeks. Officer-involved shootings where the suspect had a gun, the suspect fired shots at officers, or officers were hit by gunfire were more likely to initiate a cluster, especially the clusters where three or more shootings occurred within two weeks.

This study looked at officer-involved shootings in an innovative way. It produced some interesting and promising results. As with many case studies, it resulted in more questions than answers. Still, the results of this study established that this endeavor is worth further pursuit.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has provided some insight into whether the disposition and perception of officer-involved shootings may have some effect on the frequency of future officer-involved shootings in OCPD. However, it has only scratched the surface. To verify the findings and determine what they mean for police administrators

will require further research.

First, future studies must include primary data collected from the officers who are currently working in the field. Although the data here told a story and the chiefs provided valuable insight, input from the officers must be factored in. After all, they are the ones that are determining when to shoot a suspect and they are the ones directly involved in and most affected by shootings. Surveys and interviews should be used to attempt to explore officer attitudes.

Second, additional focus must be given to understanding why the officer-involved shootings tended to occur in clusters. Why does this phenomenon occur? Perhaps the occurrence of certain shootings and the attention they get in the media inspires other suspects or suicidal persons to imitate the behavior. This study found that the copy-cat effect did not have a strong influence on the officers themselves. But maybe it does have an influence on suspects.

Finally, future studies should expand beyond OCPD. Chief Gourley (2022) suggested that officer-involved shootings from other agencies that occur near Oklahoma City might also have an effect on officers. These incidents should be identified, incorporated into the timeline and data, and then analyzed.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

I was a sworn officer with the Oklahoma City Police Department from 2009 to 2021. I spent five years in patrol assigned to the Will

Rogers Division, five years in the Planning and Research Unit, and the final two years as Executive Officer to the Chief of Police. In 2021, I left the department for an Assistant Municipal Counselor position in the Oklahoma City Municipal Counselor's Office. In my final two years with the department, I worked closely with Chief Wade Gourley, Deputy Chief Brian Jennings, and Deputy Chief Ron Bacy. Otherwise, I have no interest—financial or otherwise—to declare with this work.

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