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Rural & Small-Town Police Crime: A National Scale Description and Comparison to Urban Places

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Abstract

Scholarship on police misconduct has almost exclusively focused on urban police working within large cities. This study utilizes media-based data to describe 2,592 arrests for crimes committed by rural and small-town police officers working in non-metropolitan counties across the United States. We compared these cases of police crime to those committed by officers working within more urbanized metropolitan counties. Findings demonstrate: 1) the dispersion of cases of police crime across a continuum of geographic places and types of police agencies including the most rural counties, and 2) significant differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan cases of police crime including both type of crime and organizational dispositions. The study contributes to the scholarly literature on police misconduct and the study of rural and small-town policing.

Keywords: *police crime, rural police crime, rural policing, small-town policing*

American policing confronts an immediate crisis of legitimacy. Recent public opinion polls demonstrate that most Americans do not trust law enforcement. About one-half of adults believe police violence against citizens is a "very serious" or "extremely serious" problem; and, roughly the same percentage of adults favors major changes to policing in the United States (Ortiz, 2020; Simkins, 2022; Stafford & Fingerhut, 2020). The crisis reflects waning public confidence in police and a growing reluctance among citizens to accept police authority and believe that law enforcement officers are honest and dedicated public servants. This most recent crisis gained momentum in the aftermath of the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, as well as several other highly questionable and violent police-citizen encounters that culminated in large-scale public protests following the death of George Floyd in 2020 (Burch et al., 2021; Pew Research Center, 2014). The situation establishes the significance of police misconduct as an important concern and makes clear the connection between the misdeeds of individual police officers and damage to the larger systems of law enforcement and criminal justice.

The major problem in the study of law enforcement misconduct has been the lack of official data. Governments generally do not collect or disseminate statistics on police misconduct. Much of what is known on the phenomenon has focused on urban police working within large cities. For example, the investigations of the Knapp Commission (1972), the Pennsylvania Crime Commission (1974), the Christopher Commission (1991), and the Mollen Commission (1994) focused on police misconduct and corruption in New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. The non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch published a high-profile investigation of police brutality and systems of police accountability within 14 of the largest American cities (Collins, 1998). Scholarship on police misconduct has almost exclusively focused on the misdeeds of urban police, particularly the New York City Police Department (NYPD) (see, e.g., Fyfe & Kane, 2006; Kane & White, 2013; Moskos, 2009; Rubinstein, 1973). Unfortunately, the body of existing knowledge on police misconduct does not generally include empirical data on law enforcement officers who work within small-town and rural jurisdictions who are most often employed by smaller police agencies in the United States.

The focus on misconduct perpetrated by urban rather than rural and small-town police is indicative of what

police scholars have identified as a clear "big city bias" across police scholarship including research on police organizations, officer behavior, and police-citizen interactions (Falcone et al., 2002; Liederbach & Frank, 2003; Maguire et al., 1997). This situation persists even though most police agencies in the United States can be classified as both relatively small in terms of the number of sworn officers and non-urban in terms of their jurisdictional boundaries. Of the 17,541 law enforcement agencies estimated to operate within the United States, more than 84 percent (or 14,878) employ less than 50 officers, and 40 percent of all agencies (or 7,055) employ nine or fewer full-time sworn officers (Gardner & Scott, 2022). Thus, we know very little about the misconduct of rural and small-town police due to both the absence of official data on police misconduct in general, as well as the big city bias within police scholarship that tends to ignore issues of concern to rural and small-town policing including officer misconduct.

Our study utilizes national scale data to describe the crimes committed by rural and small-town police officers. We also use these data to compare the crimes of rural and small-town police to those committed by urban police officers. Police crime is a specific form of police misconduct that involves the criminal arrest of police officers. We identify cases in which law enforcement officers have been arrested for any type of criminal offense(s). The occurrence of the criminal arrest distinguishes police crime from other forms of police misconduct and corruption that in many cases are not detected, investigated, and/or do not result in the criminal arrest of the police officer who perpetrates them.

Our database includes information on 16,563 cases of police crime from 2005-2018. These cases were identified using the Google News internet search engine and its Google Alerts search tool. The current study is specifically focused on the crimes committed by law enforcement officers within non-metro counties across the United States. We are aware of no national scale empirical studies that provide systematic data on the crimes perpetrated by non-metro police officers in the United States. The study contributes to the scholarly literature on both: 1) police misconduct generally, and 2) the study of rural and small-town policing.

The next section covers two lines of relevant research. First, we use prior literature to distinguish rural and small-town policing. This literature identifies a unique style of policing that is different in many respects to the style of policing practiced by officers working within large urban cities, a situation that may help to explain any apparent differences between the misconduct of rural and small-town and urban police. Second, we cover the limited number of existing studies specifically focused on rural and small-town police deviance and misconduct to describe what is already known about the phenomenon.

Distinguishing Rural and Small-Town Policing

One of the longstanding major themes within police research is the idea that officer behavior varies across different types of communities. Scholars recognize that community context influences police behavior and have emphasized the impact of a number of different factors including social context and the normative behavior of citizens, community demographics, the structural characteristics of cities and neighborhoods within them, political arrangements and leaders, and the characteristics of police organizations that in many ways reflect place characteristics in the United States (Banton, 1964; Crank, 1990; Liederbach & Travis, 2008; Riksheim & Chermak, 1993; Wilson, 1978). Findings from individual studies within these broad lines of research vary in terms of the extent to which community level variables have been found to influence police behavior, but most observers of American police accept that there is variation between local police departments across different types of communities in terms of how police officers behave.

More specific to our purposes is the issue of how rural and small-town community contexts may influence some core differences in police behavior across places. Weisheit et al. (2006) provide the seminal work in this line of research and a useful summary of the literature on rural and small-town police. They utilized the previous literature and a range of other methods including police surveys, focus groups, and interviews with justice officials to describe a unique rural style of policing that is distinguished in terms of at least three factors: 1) rural and small-town police perform a wider variety of tasks because these communities often lack other social service resources, 2) police-community relations in rural and small-town communities tends to be closer, more informal, and casual, and 3) smaller police agencies often found within rural and small-town jurisdictions are more concerned with crime prevention and community-oriented service activities than are urban police agencies.

The notion that rural and small-town police perform a wider variety of tasks than urban police is consistent within this line of research. For example, Decker (1979) and more recently Payne et al. (2005) found that rural police officers were expected to perform a wide range of services including inspecting disputed boundary lines, animal welfare checks, and dealing with unruly juveniles and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships among citizens. Flanagan (1985) found that citizens in small towns and rural places expect police to perform a wide range of activities, especially service activities. Marenin and Copus (1991) observed that police operating within remote Eskimo villages performed emergency medical services, search and rescue missions, and fire suppression activities. Liederbach and Frank (2003) observed police in

five small-town and rural jurisdictions in Ohio and identified situations that urban police would not usually be expected to spend time on including utility problems, parade escorts, vacation house checks, transporting citizens who were not in custody, and cows blocking traffic.

The prior literature also indicates that police-community relations in rural and small-town communities tends to be more informal and casual. The close social ties and consensus typical of these places seems to influence a high degree of familiarity not only among citizens, but between citizens and police officers (Benson, 1995; Weisheit et al., 1994). Observational studies that compare police activities and interactions across different types of communities indicate that police operating within suburban, small-town, and rural places are more likely than their urban counterparts to encounter citizens who reside or work within the jurisdiction, know them personally, and engage them in informal or casual conversations (Liederbach, 2007; Liederbach & Frank, 2003). The close personal ties between police and citizens in smaller and more rural communities seems to also influence the functional preferences of officers on patrol. For example, Teske (1982) found that small-town officers displayed a strong service orientation and were well-connected to the community. Meager (1985) found that officers working in small police agencies performed certain crime prevention activities (checking parks, patrolling school areas, surveying parking lots) more than police working in medium or large agencies. Surveys of small-town and rural police chiefs indicate that smaller agencies tend to focus more clearly on community-oriented programs that involve direct community participation and less so on reforms within the police organizational structure (Weisheit & Hawkins, 1997; Zhao & Thurman, 1997).

The central theme in much of the previous literature suggests that the work of small-town and rural police is at least in part shaped by the unique cultural, social, and demographic character of the jurisdictions within which they patrol. One limitation that is apparent within the literature as well as our review has been the tendency for police scholars to refer to small-town and rural police agencies and officers as a singular group, suggesting that policing in these places is analogous simply because these places and agencies are smaller and less urbanized than the big city agencies that have been the subject of most policing research. This tendency risks masking important differences *within* the category of rural and small-town agencies and officers, and police scholars interested in the study of rural places and small towns have yet to formulate more precise definitions that clearly distinguish these types of communities. Still, the dangers associated with grouping non-urban agencies and officers needs to be viewed within the context of more generalized problems within the scholarship involving the "big city bias" that has resulted in an almost complete absence of empirical data on the misconduct and crimes perpetrated by *any* police except those employed by the small handful of agencies that comprise the largest and most urbanized police departments in the United States.

Studies on Rural and Small-Town Police Deviance and Misconduct

Very little is known about the misconduct of police employed within rural and small-town jurisdictions, and most of what *is* known is derived from journalistic investigations rather than scholarly research (see, e.g., Abelson & Flores, 2022; Ives & Cramer, 2021). A very limited number of studies provide empirical data specific to law enforcement misconduct in non-urban places. Lopez and Thomas (2004) for example used data on police misconduct trials provided by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice to study variations in the national distribution of cases of police misconduct. They found that 30 percent of these cases involved officers employed by departments outside urban areas; however, the focus of the research was the geographic dispersion of police misconduct rather than differences between urban and rural locales.

Davis and Potter (1991) and Potter and Gaines (1992) used qualitative methods to identify and describe organized crime and police corruption in rural settings. They found that the operation of rural organized crime networks is often facilitated by police themselves, who maintain close personal ties to organized criminals operating within their jurisdiction and focused mainly on the production and delivery of illegal goods and services including the sale of black-market liquor, drugs, prostitution, and gambling. Organized criminals in rural jurisdictions depend on police corruption and some type of accommodation with local police that either participate in the crime network themselves and/or neglect to enforce these crimes. Corrupt police were found to overlook illegal activity, purposively lose evidence, provide inadequate court testimony, and/or make improper arrests to facilitate crime networks. These findings suggest potential relationships between various types of police misconduct, rural settings, and the occupational context of rural policing.

Weisheit et al. (1994) provide an overview of the conditions of rural crime and police work that may influence the perpetration of some forms of police misconduct including geographic isolation, availability of guns, economic conditions, and a rural social climate that is often characterized by a mistrust of government and outsiders. So too, there is a line of research dedicated to the identification of unique organizational and community stressors experienced by rural police. These stressors may ultimately shape how and why rural police may

perpetrate misconduct and crime. For example, Sandy and Devine (1978) identified multiple factors that may lead to job dissatisfaction among rural police including understaffing, low pay, lack of training and promotion opportunities, and on-the-job inactivity and boredom. Huey and Ricciardelli (2015) more recently investigated how rural police experience role strain and frustration as a result of these occupational stressors; and, Ricciardelli (2018) described how the occupational realities of rural policing shape officer perceptions of on-the-job risks. Role strain associated with a lack of opportunities to engage in meaningful law enforcement may also be a source of police misconduct and crime within rural places. Police corruption in rural places may also be a function of dense networks of relationships, wherein police develop long-standing personal relationships with local law breakers and criminal organizations.

More generally, rural and small-town police crime may be a function of the same place characteristics that promote a unique style of policing and/or organizational features that are indicative of small police agencies. Ponomarenko (2024) for example recently summarized the issue through an identification of conditions under which police misconduct may flourish within smaller agencies. She defines a set of "small agency problems" that are different than those of larger, more urban departments including 1) extreme resource constraints, and 2) the absence of sufficient legal and political accountability structures. Specific examples of these problems include the absence of any sort of internal organizational structures (e.g., internal affairs units) or data-driven "early warning systems" within smaller more rural agencies to identify problem-prone officers that are now commonplace among large urban police agencies (Walker, 2005). Police officers who engage in misconduct and crime within smaller and more rural agencies are also not likely to be scrutinized by any sort of high-profile government commission designed to illuminate and publicly condemn misconduct.

Ponomarenko (2024) within her analyses of these "small agency problems" eventually laments that, "We may not be able to assess the actual prevalence of small agency harms" perpetrated by these officers (pg. 227). Indeed, the existing research thus far lacks any systematic national scale data on the actual perpetration of misconduct and crime among rural and small-town police officers including the types of crimes they commit, the degree to which they are sanctioned, and whether they differ from their more urban counterparts.

The current study uses a national sample of arrested law enforcement officers to address these gaps in the literature. These national-scale data include a nine-point variable that indicates the level of rurality for the county in which the arrested officer's agency was located. We initially use this variable to assess the extent to which police crime varies by level of rurality. We then recode this rurality measure as a binary variable that differentiates metro and nonmetro counties to determine whether nonmetro officers are more or less likely than metro officers to be arrested for a violence-related offense. Along with type of offense, we also assess whether nonmetro officers are more or less likely than metro officers to lose their job or to be convicted following an arrest for misconduct.

METHOD

Data for the present study were collected as part of a larger study on police crime. The larger study is designed to locate cases in which sworn law enforcement officers had been arrested for one or more criminal offenses, including acts that occurred while the officer was either on- or off-duty.[1] The primary source of these data was the internet-based Google News search engine and its Google Alerts search tool. Google News is a computer-generated news site that aggregates news articles from several thousand news sources. Google News has become the preferred method to conduct news-based content analyses. The Google News search engine can be used in conjunction with the Google Alerts tool to run automated searches using a researcher's designated search query terms.

Data Collection

A set of Google Alerts for 48 unique search terms was used to identify arrested law enforcement officers (Stinson, 2009). This automated service constantly searched for the designated search terms across the Google News search engine and sent an email alert when an article was detected with a matching search term. The email alerts contained a uniform resource locator for each identified article. The research team examined each article for the following criteria: 1) the arrested individual was employed as a sworn nonfederal law enforcement officer at the time of the arrest and/or at the time of the crime, 2) the individual was arrested for one or more criminal offenses, and 3) the arrest occurred on or after January 1, 2005, within the United States. If these criteria

[1] The study of police misconduct has been complicated by a debate on whether to consider acts committed while an officer is technically off duty. There are three primary arguments to include off-duty misconduct that are relevant to the research goals of our current study. First, police work provides unique criminal opportunities that can be taken advantage of either on or off duty. Second, police officers are more likely to engage in misconduct either on or off duty in part because they believe their status as officers protects them from criminal prosecution. Third, most jurisdictions including more rural jurisdictions grant full enforcement powers to off-duty police. For more detailed discussion on these points see e.g., Fyfe and Kane (2006) and Stinson et al. (2012).

were met, the researcher then manually searched for additional materials including other news articles, criminal court records, booking information, and other publicly available information about the arrested law enforcement officer. All information found about the criminal arrest was stored as digital images in an object-relational database. The sample ultimately included 16,563 criminal arrest cases of nonfederal sworn law enforcement officers from 2005-2018.

Content Analyses and Coding

Content analyses were conducted to identify and code over 270 variables on these arrest cases. Coding provided information on the arrested officer, employing agency, criminal offenses, case details, employment and criminal outcomes, and victim characteristics. The criminal arrest case was the primary unit of analysis for this project. Consequently, an individual officer may have multiple criminal arrest cases if their criminal actions involved multiple victims, multiple incidents, or multiple arrest dates.

The employing agency of the arrested law enforcement officer was identified and matched to the demographic information available from the Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies (CSLLEA) (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). This information included the geographic location of the agency and number of sworn officers employed by the agency. County-level Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) codes were used to uniquely identify county or county-equivalents (such as independent cities) throughout the United States (see U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). These codes were available through the CSSLEA for each employing agency based on the geographic location of the agency. Arrested officers who were employed by agencies that operate in multiple counties (or county equivalents) were coded by the location of their specific unit or precinct. The location of agencies which were not available through the CSLLEA were manually found by researchers and verified by the principal investigator prior to coding for geographic information.

Data from the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service were merged to the geographic information from the CSLLEA. These data included a nine-point continuum code which measured the rurality of the county (or county-equivalent). Table 1 displays the nine-point scale ranging from least rural (coded as 1) to most rural (coded as 9). These values were determined based on the population of the area, population density, and proximity to urban areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2003). This classification scheme of metropolitan and non-metropolitan counties was utilized as our measure of rurality.

Each criminal arrest case was also coded for several variables including information about the demographics of the officer, case details, offenses, and outcomes. Each case was classified by five types of police crime that are not mutually exclusive, and cases were classified into multiple crime types if appropriate. The five crime types were violence-related, sex-related, drug-related, alcohol-related, and/or profit motivated (see Stinson, 2009). Crime types were selected through the content analysis process based on the details of the case, rather than the official criminal offenses. This method allowed for the most accurate depiction of the behaviors because many offenses (such as official misconduct or disorderly conduct) describe vague actions. The employment and criminal outcomes of the cases were also coded through the content analysis process. These variables were often identified by official press releases, criminal court records, or decertification records.

Violence-related, a binary variable, serves as one outcome variable in our subsequent analyses because academic research and journalistic accounts are especially concerned with police officer misuse of force given the heightened public attention that often ensues from such incidents. Job loss and convicted also serve as dependent variables, or outcomes that address accountability for officer misconduct. *Job loss* is a binary variable coded one if an officer resigned or was terminated following their arrest, and convicted is also a dichotomous variable coded one if an officer was criminally convicted of their misconduct. *Nonmetro* (defined in Table 1) serves as our main independent variable, and we assess whether variability in our three outcomes is moderated by whether the misconduct occurred on or off duty. Our data analysis strategy isolates arrest cases for on duty misconduct, which has been the primary interest of past research on officer misconduct, while retaining the larger category of arrest cases for off-duty misconduct.

We also account for several control variables in our regression analyses. These variables include whether the officer was *male* (coded one) and whether the officer was a patrol officer, deputy, or trooper (*line officer*; coded one) rather than a detective or supervisor (coded zero) when arrested. Apart from these officer-level characteristics, we also account for two agency-level characteristics, regional context, and time. We differentiated whether an officer was employed at a *municipal*, *sheriff's*, or *other* (e.g., state police) law enforcement agency, and we also account for agency size with a measure of the *number of full-time officers* employed at the arrested officer's department. Regional context discerns whether an arrested officer was employed at an agency located in a *Northeast*, *Midwest*, *Southern*, or *Western* state, and we also include 14 dummy variables that account for the year (2005-2018) in which an officer was arrested. These variables adjust for possible variation in our three outcomes that is attributable to these officer, agency, regional, and

Table 1. Defining Rurality (N = 16,563)

	n	%
Urban/Rural Continuum County Code		
County in Metro Area of 1,000,000+ pop.	8,838	53.36
County in Metro Area of 250,000–1,000,000 pop.	3,411	20.59
County in Metro Area of fewer than 250,000 pop.	1,722	10.40
Nonmetro County with Urban pop. of 20,000+, Adjacent to Metro Area	791	4.78
Nonmetro County with Urban pop. of 20,000+, Not Adjacent to Metro Area	304	1.84
Nonmetro County with Urban pop. of 2,500–19,999, Adjacent to Metro Area	818	4.94
Nonmetro County with Urban pop. of 2,500–19,999, Not Adjacent to Metro Area	409	2.47
Nonmetro County Completely Rural or less than 2,500 urban pop., Adjacent to Metro Area	134	0.81
Nonmetro County Completely Rural or less than 2,500 urban pop., Not Adjacent to Metro Area	136	0.82
Level of Rurality		
Metro County	13,971	84.35
Nonmetro County	2,592	15.65

temporal factors. We also include certain incident-level characteristics when the outcome is job loss or conviction. We specifically model the five nonmutual crime types described above: *violence*, *sex*, *profit*, *drug*, and/or *alcohol* related.

Reliability

Intercoder reliability was examined to ensure consistency across coders. Coders were tasked with independent coding of a random sample of cases from the years 2005-2011. A Krippendorff's alpha coefficient was calculated across 195 variables of interest on a subset of 290 of the criminal arrest cases. This analytical measure is designed to indicate intercoder reliability and has been recognized as the standard reliability statistic for content analysis (Riffe et al., 2019). The Krippendorff's alpha coefficient (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.9153$) indicated a high level of intercoder reliability for the variables of interest for this study.

Strengths & Limitations of the Data

Data derived from the larger project provide an unparalleled amount of information on cases of police crime perpetrated by non-urban police officers including data on officer and victim demographics, offense type, officer duty status and rank, organizational characteristics and disciplinary actions, and legal case outcomes. Our method captures large amounts of information about police crime that are otherwise unavailable through other methods of data collection (Payne, 2013). We are aware of no such existing dataset concerning police crime in general or non-urban police crime specifically. Moreover, the utilization of news-based sources as a means to identify and study police misconduct has long been established within this line of scholarship (see, e.g., Kraska & Kappeler, 1995; Lawrence, 2000; Lersch & Feagin, 1996; Rabe-Hemp & Braithwaite, 2013; Ross, 2000; Stinson, 2020). The relative absence of official data on these phenomenon demands the utilization of other sources of data on police misconduct and crime, including news-based information.

There are some limitations to these data. First, we do not assume our methodology captures every arrest of a law enforcement officer. Second, we acknowledge that the data were filtered by the discretion of media organizations which limits both the types of news published and the extent of that coverage (Carlson, 2007). The news coverage of police crime and misconduct however has been reported to be consistent with official reports of the events in previous studies (Ready et al., 2008), a situation that suggests that law enforcement agencies are not particularly effective at controlling or limiting media accounts of police misconduct (Chermak et al., 2006). Third, our data do not include cases in which police perpetrate crimes that were not officially reported or do not result in the criminal arrest of the police officer. Fourth, our utilization of the dichotomous metro/nonmetro variable to distinguish communities risks masking important variations in police misconduct within these categories, including the wide variety of rural and small-town locales that are the focus of our research.

RESULTS

The news-based methodology identified a total of 16,563 cases involving the criminal arrest of a police officer(s) from 2005-2018. We identified 2,592 arrest cases involving non-metro police officers, or 15.65% of all arrest cases. The employing police agency made the arrest in roughly 28% of all the cases. The employing agency more commonly made the arrest in cases involving a metro police officer (30.47%) than a non-metro

Table 2. Police Crime Arrest Cases by Metro-Nonmetro and by Off-On Duty

	Off and On Duty			Off Duty		On Duty	
Variable	Total	Metro	Nonmet	Metro	Nonmet	Metro	Nonmet
Dependent							
Violence Related	0.520	0.525	0.494	0.561	0.552	0.465	0.414
Job Loss	0.624	0.607	0.715	0.525	0.642	0.748	0.815
Convicted	0.498	0.495	0.514	0.438	0.483	0.592	0.556
Independent							
Nonmetro	0.156	·	·	·	·	·	·
Control							
On Duty	0.378	0.369	0.424	·	·	·	·
Male Officer	0.937	0.934	0.952	0.922	0.949	0.954	0.955
Line Officer	0.755	0.763	0.712	0.780	0.753	0.734	0.656
Municipal Agency	0.687	0.708	0.572	0.712	0.603	0.701	0.530
Sheriff Agency	0.198	0.172	0.335	0.170	0.295	0.175	0.389
Other Agency	0.116	0.120	0.093	0.118	0.102	0.124	0.081
Northeast State	0.200	0.222	0.078	0.230	0.082	0.209	0.073
Midwest State	0.193	0.190	0.213	0.189	0.246	0.190	0.168
Southern State	0.450	0.432	0.552	0.425	0.501	0.443	0.621
Western State	0.157	0.157	0.157	0.156	0.170	0.159	0.138
Full-Time Officers (Mdn)	182	306	19	288	20	348	18
Sex Related	0.221	0.214	0.260	0.205	0.267	0.228	0.250
Profit Related	0.219	0.215	0.242	0.128	0.143	0.363	0.378
Drug Related	0.097	0.093	0.121	0.065	0.088	0.140	0.166
Alcohol Related	0.202	0.208	0.168	0.298	0.263	0.056	0.039
N	16,558	13,967	2,591	8,801	1,493	5,166	1,098

Note: All variables are dichotomous $(0, 1)$ measures except for the number of full-time officers. For these binary variables, the listed value represents the proportion of applicable cases coded 1.
Abbreviations: Mdn = median.

police officer (16.9%). Roughly one-half of the arrest cases involving non-metro police were violence-related (1,173 or 48.9%). In terms of the remaining categories in our typology, 625 non-metro cases were sex-related, 582 cases were profit-motivated, 406 cases were alcohol-related, and 296 cases were drug-related. The *most common* most serious offense charged in the non-metro arrest cases was simple assault ($n = 281$), followed by driving under the influence ($n = 238$), aggravated assault ($n = 129$), drug/narcotic violations ($n = 125$), forcible fondling ($n = 125$), and forcible rape ($n = 119$). Other noteworthy offenses charged in non-metro cases included murder and non-negligent manslaughter ($n = 39$), civil rights violations ($n = 59$), burglary/breaking and entering ($n = 56$), statutory rape ($n = 56$), forcible sodomy ($n = 46$), and robbery ($n = 12$). The remainder of this section proceeds in three parts. First, we present descriptive results based on our nine-point rurality variable. Second, we present logistic regression models, and finally we provide supplemental analyses to assess the robustness of the regression results.

Descriptive Results

Table 1 displays each category of the nine-point rurality variable, and it also indicates how many arrest cases are represented in each category as well as the percent of total cases found in each category. This measure once again was scored based on the county in which the arrested officer's department was located. As mentioned, we collapsed each metro category into a single group and did the same for each nonmetro category, resulting in a metro-nonmetro binary measure that serves as the main independent variable in our subsequent descriptive and regression analyses.

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics for this binary variable and our three dependent variables of violence-related, job loss, and convicted. Five fewer cases are represented in Table 2 than in Table 1 due to missing data. These missing cases are also excluded from the regression analyses. These statistics are first displayed for the total sample and then displayed by metro-nonmetro status and by whether the officer's misconduct occurred on or off duty. The on-off duty measure serves as a moderator variable in subsequent regression analyses that test for a possible interaction effect between

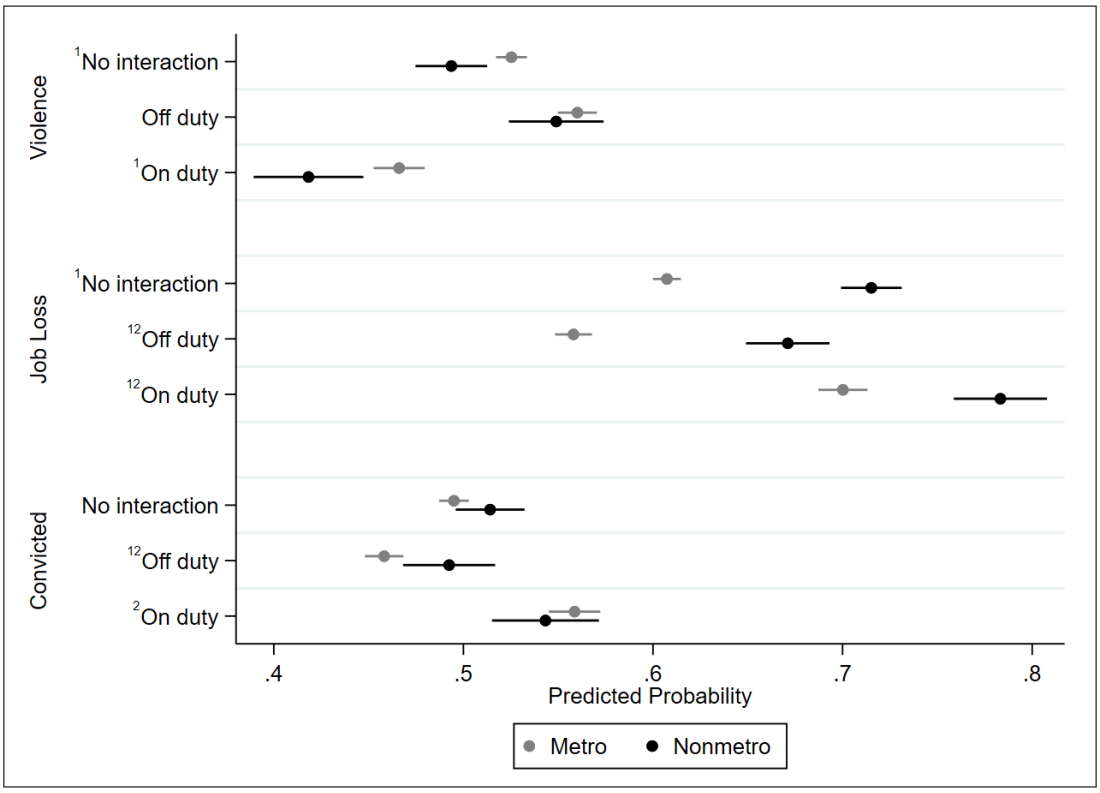
Table 3. Binary Logistic Regression Models Regressing Violence, Job Loss, and Convicted on Independent, Interaction, and Control Variables ($N = 16{,}558$)

	Violence			Job Loss			Convicted		
Variable	Coef	SE	p	Coef	SE	p	Coef	SE	p
Panel A. Without interaction terms									
A1. Without controls									
Nonmetro	−0.126	0.043	0.003	0.483	0.047	0.000	0.075	0.043	0.078
A2. With controls									
Nonmetro	−0.086	0.045	0.054	0.297	0.052	0.000	−0.032	0.047	0.495
On duty	−0.412	0.033	0.000	0.697	0.040	0.000	0.411	0.037	0.000
Male	0.586	0.066	0.000	0.073	0.070	0.297	0.265	0.070	0.000
Line officer	0.471	0.037	0.000	−0.089	0.042	0.032	−0.097	0.039	0.012
Municipal		reference			reference			reference	
Sheriff	−0.070	0.042	0.095	0.167	0.048	0.000	0.038	0.044	0.387
Other	−0.058	0.051	0.250	−0.219	0.055	0.000	0.129	0.053	0.014
Full-time sworn	0.000	0.000	0.096	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Northeast state		reference			reference			reference	
Midwest state	−0.186	0.053	0.000	0.078	0.058	0.177	0.498	0.055	0.000
Southern state	−0.047	0.046	0.308	0.063	0.050	0.213	−0.412	0.048	0.000
Western state	0.136	0.056	0.015	0.126	0.062	0.043	0.204	0.058	0.000
Violence related	·	·		0.260	0.044	0.000	0.048	0.041	0.242
Sex related	·	·		1.635	0.053	0.000	1.189	0.044	0.000
Profit related	·	·		1.175	0.058	0.000	0.925	0.052	0.000
Drug related	·	·		0.986	0.074	0.000	0.755	0.061	0.000
Alcohol related	·	·		−0.157	0.050	0.002	0.302	0.049	0.000
Year dummies		Yes			Yes			Yes	
Panel B. With interaction terms									
B1. Without controls									
Nonmetro	−0.034	0.056	0.534	0.483	0.058	0.000	0.180	0.056	0.001
On duty	−0.382	0.035	0.000	0.988	0.038	0.000	0.619	0.036	0.000
Nonmetro ∗ on duty	−0.169	0.087	0.053	−0.092	0.102	0.368	−0.326	0.087	0.000
B2. With controls									
Nonmetro	−0.023	0.058	0.685	0.317	0.063	0.000	0.059	0.060	0.323
On duty	−0.387	0.036	0.000	0.706	0.043	0.000	0.448	0.040	0.000
Nonmetro ∗ on duty	−0.152	0.089	0.087	−0.061	0.108	0.571	−0.222	0.092	0.016
Control variables		Yes			Yes			Yes	
Year dummies		Yes			Yes			Yes	

Note: Panels A and B each present findings from six regression models, so 12 models total are represented in table.

this variable and whether an arrest involved an officer employed in a metro or nonmetro county. Among the total sample, the descriptive findings for the dependent variables indicate that more than one half of the cases involved a violence-related offense (52%), that the officer resigned or was terminated (job loss) in roughly 62% of the cases, and that in nearly one half of the cases the officer was convicted (49%). The prevalence of an arrest for a violence-related offense changes only modestly when the data are disaggregated by metro-nonmetro status. Approximately 52% of metro officers were arrested for such an offense, or the same prevalence found among all cases, whereas a slightly *smaller* percentage of nonmetro officers (49%) were arrested for violence. A modest difference is also found with the conviction outcome in that the prevalence of conviction following arrest was slightly *smaller* among metro officers (49%) than among nonmetro officers (51%). With job loss, however, there is a more pronounced difference in the occurrence of this outcome between officers employed in metro and nonmetro counties. Roughly 60% of metro officers resigned or were terminated following their arrest, or a clearly smaller percentage than the 70% of nonmetro officers who resigned or were terminated following their arrest.

Table 2 further disaggregates the data based on whether the officer's misconduct occurred on or off duty to initially assess whether this variable moderates the prevalence of our outcome measures among metro and



Note: Predicted probabilities for no interaction generated from the A2 regression models in Table 3, and predicted probabilities for off duty and on duty generated from the B2 regression models in Table 3.

[1]Significant ($p < .05$) difference in the predicted probability for metro and nonmetro officers (test of first difference).

[2]Significant ($p < .05$) difference in the off and on duty differences in the predicted probability for metro and nonmetro officers (test of second difference).

[12]Test of first and second difference both significant ($p < .05$).

Figure 1. Predicted Probabilities of Violence, Job Loss, and Convicted ($N = 16{,}558$)

nonmetro officers. These findings indicate that nonmetro officers were less likely overall to be arrested for a violence-related offense due mainly to the lower prevalence of such misconduct among on-duty cases. Roughly 41% of on-duty cases involving a nonmetro officer were violence-related compared to nearly 47% of on-duty cases involving a metro officer. These findings further indicate that while nonmetro officers were more likely than metro officers to resign or be terminated regardless of whether their misconduct occurred on or off duty, this metro-nonmetro difference was less pronounced among on-duty (roughly a 7% difference) than off-duty (roughly a 12% difference) cases. In contrast, the metro-nonmetro difference in the prevalence of conviction was similar in magnitude among the on- and off-duty cases, though nonmetro officers were *less likely* than metro officers to be convicted of misconduct in on-duty cases whereas the reverse was true in off-duty cases. These descriptive findings collectively suggest that the difference between metro and nonmetro officers in the prevalence of certain outcomes, such as whether an officer was arrested for a violence-related offense or was convicted, is indeed more pronounced when the on-off duty status of the misconduct is considered.

The subsequent regression analyses formally test whether differences observed in Table 2 by metro-nonmetro and by on-off duty status remain after accounting for the control variables. Descriptive statistics for these control variables, such as the gender of the officer, are also displayed in Table 2. These descriptive findings indicate that perhaps as expected the nonmetro officers represented in the data were more likely than metro officers to be a sheriff's deputy, employed in the south, and employed at a smaller agency.

Regression Results

Table 3 presents coefficients from logistic regression models that first regressed each binary dependent variable on nonmetro only then on nonmetro and the control variables. These logit coefficients are displayed in Panel A. Consistent with the descriptive findings, these estimates indicate that relative to metro officers, nonmetro officers were less likely to be arrested for a violence-related of-

fense (−.126) as well as more likely to lose their job (.483) and be convicted (.075), though the association between nonmetro and conviction was not significant ($p > .05$). The magnitude of these relationships was generally mitigated after modeling the control (e.g., gender and region) and year dummy variables, but the empirical association between nonmetro and job loss (.297) remained statistically significant ($p < .05$). The logit estimates for the control variables indicate that the on-duty variable is significantly related to each outcome, specifically arrests for on-duty misconduct were less likely to involve violence but more likely to result in job loss and conviction than arrests for off-duty misconduct. The findings also indicate that the general nature of the misconduct offense, especially whether it was sex or profit related, was strongly associated with job loss and conviction.

Panel B in Table 3 displays select coefficients from logistic regression models that are identical to the models represented in Panel A except that an interaction term between nonmetro and on-duty variables was also included. Only the estimates for the main and interaction effects are displayed from these models given the coefficients for the control variables remained largely unchanged. For the violence-related outcome, the coefficient for the interaction between the nonmetro and on-duty variables is negative in the regression model estimated with (−.152) and without (−.169) the control variables. These negative coefficients indicate that the metro-nonmetro difference in the violence-related outcome was more pronounced, though not significant ($p > .05$), among arrests for on-duty misconduct. The interaction term in the job loss models is also not significant, suggesting that nonmetro officers' greater likelihood of job loss (as shown in Panel A) was not conditional on whether the misconduct occurred on or off duty. For the conviction outcome, however, the interaction term between the nonmetro and on-duty variables is significant ($p < .05$). This finding is largely due to the nonmetro variable's positive association with conviction among off-duty cases but a negative association with conviction among on-duty cases.

Figure 1 displays predicted probabilities and 95% confidence intervals generated from the logistic regression models that included the control variables in Table 3. This figure more clearly conveys the association between nonmetro and each outcome measure after adjusting for the control variables. The "no interaction" probabilities were generated from the models without interaction terms, whereas the "off duty" and "on duty" probabilities were generated from the models that included these terms. These probabilities show that for violence the metro-nonmetro difference was more pronounced among on-duty cases, that for job loss a clear metro-nonmetro distinction existed among both on- and off-duty cases, and that for conviction the metro-nonmetro differences was more prominent for off duty cases. Figure 1 also indicates whether the first ($\Pr_{\text{nonmetro}} - \Pr_{\text{metro}}$) and second ([on duty ($\Pr_{\text{nonmetro}} - \Pr_{\text{metro}}$)] − [off duty ($\Pr_{\text{nonmetro}} - \Pr_{\text{metro}}$)]) differences observed with these predicted probabilities are statistically significant ($p < .05$). Mize (2019) recommends directly testing for significant differences in predicted probabilities rather than relying on the regression estimates (in Table 3) or nonoverlapping confidence intervals (in Figure 1) to make this determination. For instance, Figure 1 indicates that the (first) difference in average predicted probability of job loss for metro (.60) and nonmetro (.71) officers is statistically significant overall and when considered by whether the misconduct occurred on or off duty. The (second) difference in these on-off duty probabilities for metro and nonmetro officers is also statistically significant.

Supplemental Results

We also performed additional analyses to assess the robustness of our regression findings. More specifically, we re-estimated our regression models after further restricting the sample based on certain characteristics of the officers or their departments. We first restricted the sample to line officers employed at a municipal or sheriff's department. This removed detectives and supervisors from the sample as well as officers employed at state, regional, or county (non-sheriff) police agencies. The removal of these cases resulted in a more homogeneous sample (n = 11,009) that is likely more consistent with whom the public envisions when the police are referenced. Most research on police behavior has also focused on patrol officers employed at municipal or sheriffs' (local) agencies. We also ran a second set of regression analyses in which we only focused on *metro* officers employed at the *largest* law enforcement agencies (i.e., 1,000 or more full-time officers) and *nonmetro* officers employed at the *smallest* law enforcement agencies (i.e., 24 or fewer full-time officers; n = 5,938). This sample thus removed metro officers employed at smaller departments such as suburban agencies, and nonmetro officers employed at larger departments such as a county-level sheriff's office. Here too the remaining cases more likely adhere to the public image of metro (urban) and nonmetro (rural) police officers, and prior academic and nonacademic accounts of policing in these disparate settings often focus on some of the largest and smallest police agencies.

The findings from these supplemental analyses are presented in Appendix A. The estimates for nonmetro and the nonmetro ∗ on duty interaction term are consistent with the estimates for these variables in Table 3. In general, the direction of the relationship between each of these variables and the applicable outcome re-

mains the same, but the magnitude of these relationships tends to increase as you move from the original sample ($n = 16{,}563$) to the smallest sample ($n = 5{,}938$) composed of only officers employed at large or small departments. Our general conclusions therefore remain unaffected by the composition of the sample.

DISCUSSION

The relationship between Americans and their system of policing has been fractured; citizens increasingly question the integrity of police officers and doubt the legitimacy of the entire institution of law enforcement. The source of division lies within the context of recent high-profile acts of police violence that shocked the collective conscience and led to calls for reform (Fisher & Rouse, 2022; Subramanian & Arzy, 2021). Yet, scholars dedicated to understanding the problem have been hampered by the scarcity of official data on where, why, and how often police perpetrate various forms of misconduct. Our research utilizes media-based sources to identify and describe over 16,500 cases in which police officers were arrested for committing crimes. The data lead to some points of discussion.

The most conspicuous point involves the observed dispersion of arrest cases across places and types of organizations. There are no previous national-scale studies on the crimes committed by police officers that distinguishes them in terms of any urban-rural continuum. One publicly available database indicates that there are roughly 1,200 criminal arrest cases of police officers each year, and previously published research on police crimes has focused on describing types of police crime rather than the degree to which these crimes are committed by urban or rural officers (Stinson, 2024; Stinson et al., 2016). Our contribution to this literature specifically involves data that breaks down police crimes in terms of whether they were committed by officers employed by metro or non-metro agencies.

More than one-half of the cases in our study (8,838 or 53%) involved police working within the largest metro counties, a fact that reflects upon existing scholarship and the spotlight on big-city police. We also however identified 2,592 cases of crime that occurred within counties identified by the US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service as non-metro, including 270 cases within rural counties of less than 2,500 population both adjacent and not adjacent to a metro area ($n = 134$ and 136 respectively). In other words, we found that police officers perpetrated hundreds of crimes including those involving serious inter-personal violence within the most rural counties in the United States. Police misconduct and crime occurs with some regularity across the entire continuum of places and agencies. The prior body of research on police misconduct, taken as a whole, simply does not reflect this reality, a situation that makes our call for more published research on the misconduct of rural and small-town police necessary as well as rather obvious.

More complicated points of discussion involve observed differences between metro and non-metro cases of police crime. Cases that involved a police perpetrator employed by a non-metro agency were significantly more likely to result in job loss than those that involved officers that were employed by a metro agency. The relationship between non-metro agencies and job loss is quite pronounced regardless of whether the crimes occurred on or off-duty, though the magnitude of the relationship is more pronounced in the case of off-duty police crimes. Our data cannot directly explain this finding, but we speculate based on the existing literature that job loss among non-metro police is the result of a complex inter-play involving 1) police-community relations in rural places and small-towns, 2) administrative structures common within smaller police agencies, and 3) the relative absence of police unions among rural and small-town agencies.

One of the main themes underscored in our review of the literature is that community context influences styles of local policing, specifically the close-knit social ties found within smaller communities where police are more likely to be considered part of the community and share local community values. These contextual features may also influence public and organizational reactions to police crimes, particularly in cases where an officer is arrested for the perpetration of crimes that violate shared community norms, or what Weisheit et al. define as "community-condemned" types of police misconduct (2006, pp. 141-143). Residents of rural and small-town communities may as a result perceive these types of police crime as a much "bigger deal" than residents of large cities, resulting in heightened community pressure upon the local police chief to "do something" and ultimately terminate the rogue police officer.

Job loss among non-metro police is also probably associated with the kinds of administrative structures common within small police agencies. These organizations tend to be less structurally differentiated, and local police chiefs should be able to exercise more direct line-level supervision and discipline over officers under their administrative control. Ponomarenko (2024) for example contrasts the complex "byzantine" organizational structures of big city agencies with the comparatively simple structures of small agencies that make them "easier for chiefs to control" (2024, pp. 247-248). Sanders (2008) likewise concludes that poorly performing non-urban officers seem "easy to recognize and not difficult to fire" based on her interviews with small agency chiefs (2008, p. 143). Finally, police employee organizations or unions typically do not exist among rural and small-town agen-

cies. Police unions have commonly been characterized within the scholarship as an obstacle to the imposition of disciplinary procedures including termination. Levin (2020) for example provides a comprehensive summary of the prior literature on what he labels the "obstructionist critique" commonly leveled at police unions that frustrate organizational attempts to discipline officers (2020, pp. 1340-1346).

Aside from job loss, we also found that the crimes of non-metro police officers were significantly less likely to be violence-related than the crimes of metro police. This association is specific to on-duty misconduct (See Figure 1). Rates of crime overall and specific rates of violent crime are consistently lower in rural than urban areas, including rates of murder, robbery, rape, and aggravated assault (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.; Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2000). There are however no prior systematic examinations of the criminal violence perpetrated specifically by police in rural places and small towns. Weisheit et al. (2006, pp. 140-141) speculate on differences between rural and urban police concerning the perpetration of on-duty criminal violence:

> Regarding excessive force, the rural officer is more likely to know the offender personally, as well as his friends and family. This may shape the psychology of using force, and it may make the officer more vulnerable to retribution, since the individual is also likely to know where the officer lives and something about his or her daily routine.

The speculation is consistent with our finding that rates of violence-related police crime are lower among non-metro police, or at least in the cases of those working within the most rural and close-knit jurisdictions. More broadly, the types of crimes committed by police may be influenced by any number of community level variables that have yet to be tested among samples of non-metro police such as population density, heterogeneity, socioeconomic status, or the availability of criminal opportunities. The influence of community-level factors on police crime may also depend on the characteristics of potential victims, particularly within non-metro areas. Rogue police officers in rural places and small towns for example may specifically target strangers to the area, or even residents that are in some ways marginalized or that they define as "troublemakers." These are situations in which close personal ties do not exist between police and potential victims, and the normative values that are believed to regulate police-citizen interactions breakdown or do not exist (Ponomarenko, 2024; Weisheit et al., 2006).

In the longer view, there is a need for more and better data on the misconduct of rural and small-town police. Prior studies in this line of research focus almost exclusively on big city police. We conducted a nationwide systematic study of police crimes that occurred in non-metro areas, so our analytical strategy to ultimately split the data into groups of metro and non-metro cases reflects our contribution to closing this enormous hole in the prior literature. However, our grouping of non-metro places into a singular category suggests that these places are analogous simply because they are much less urbanized than the large cities that have been spotlighted in the previous literature. The broader scholarship focused on the sociology of rural places and small towns demonstrates otherwise, and our dichotomous measure of metro/non-metro communities presumably masked important differences in the crimes of police within the category of non-metro places (see, e.g., Castle, 1993; Nelson & Nguyen, 2023). The work of and criminal opportunities afforded to a sheriff's deputy in rural Kansas is different from an Ohio officer working in a non-metro county located within a short drive from Cincinnati or Cleveland. Scholars interested in expanding the scholarship on the misconduct of rural and small-town police should strive to incorporate measures that reflect this diversity among non-metro places.

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APPENDIX A

Supplemental Regression Analyses

	Violence			Job Loss			Convicted		
Variable	Coef	SE	p	Coef	SE	p	Coef	SE	p
Panel A. Line officers employed at a municipal or sheriff's agency (N = 11,009)									
A1. Without interaction terms									
Nonmetro	−0.107	0.055	0.052	0.327	0.064	0.000	−0.092	0.058	0.115
Control variables		Yes			Yes			Yes	
Year dummies		Yes			Yes			Yes	
A2. With interaction terms									
Nonmetro	−0.010	0.070	0.886	0.328	0.076	0.000	0.026	0.073	0.725
On duty	−0.261	0.044	0.000	0.681	0.053	0.000	0.460	0.049	0.000
Nonmetro * on duty	−0.251	0.112	0.025	−0.002	0.137	0.988	−0.305	0.117	0.009
Control variables		Yes			Yes			Yes	
Year dummies		Yes			Yes			Yes	
Panel B. Metro employed at large agency or nonmetro employed at small agency (N = 5,938)									
B1. Without interaction terms									
Nonmetro	−0.169	0.064	0.008	0.665	0.074	0.000	−0.139	0.068	0.041
Control variables		Yes			Yes			Yes	
Year dummies		Yes			Yes			Yes	
B2. With interaction terms									
Nonmetro	−0.005	0.084	0.955	0.709	0.090	0.000	0.074	0.088	0.399
On duty	−0.383	0.063	0.000	0.823	0.073	0.000	0.475	0.070	0.000
Nonmetro * on duty	−0.384	0.124	0.002	−0.126	0.148	0.394	−0.493	0.129	0.000
Control variables		Yes			Yes			Yes	
Year dummies		Yes			Yes			Yes	