

# Peer Group Aggressiveness and the Use of Coercion in Police–Suspect Encounters

John D. McCluskey, William Terrill & Eugene A. Paoline, III

*The aim of this paper is to add the dimension of police ‘peer group’ to our understanding of how officers exercise coercive power in day-to-day encounters with citizens. Using data from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods (PPN) collected in St Petersburg, Florida, we examine 1,458 police–suspect encounters to determine whether collective peer group attitudes towards aggressive patrol influences police use of force behavior. Analysis of the direct effect of peer groups’ attitudes toward aggressiveness on the use of force indicates it is not a significant predictor when officer, suspect, and situational characteristics are controlled. Models comparing officers across high and low aggressive peer groups, however, indicate that different factors are salient to the use of higher levels of force across those groups. The implications of these findings and future research are discussed.*

*Keywords:* Police Peer Groups; Aggressiveness; Police Coercion; Police–Citizen Encounters

## Introduction

The tumult of the 1960s generated much concern about police treatment of citizens, especially with respect to the use of force (National Advisory Commission, 1968, p. 304). Early ethnographic research on policing (Van Maanen, 1974; Westley, 1970) featured extensive treatment of police decision making and the use of coercion. Subsequent empirical studies documented the frequency of force used against citizens as well as various determinants of force (Reiss, 1971; Terrill & Mastrofski, 2002; Worden, 1996).

Contemporary interest in police coercion has been sparked by a series of incidents in numerous cities throughout the USA during the past decade. In Los Angeles, the

---

Correspondence to: John McCluskey, University of Texas–San Antonio, Department of Criminal Justice, 501 W. Durango Blvd, San Antonio, TX 78207, USA. Tel: +1 210 458 2687; Email: jmccuskey@utsa.edu

Rodney King beating, Rampart scandal, and other accounts of police use and abuse of force have garnered considerable interest (Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, 1991; Zimring, 2002). In New York, the Diallo and Louima cases grabbed national headlines, as did the fatal beating of Malice Green in Detroit (Worden & Catlin, 2002).

Over the years scholars have produced volumes of research aimed at trying to understand the nature and causes of police misconduct, especially as it relates to coercion (Geller & Toch, 1996). While news accounts and high profile cases tend toward the most egregious forms of force (e.g., deadly or excessive force), scholars have moved to examine how police use coercion in everyday police work (Terrill, 2001).<sup>1</sup> However, virtually absent from the literature on coercion are studies that consider *and* empirically examine the role of peer groups. In this paper we explore this void. More specifically, we propose that the influence of peer groups may offer a middle ground (i.e., between broadly based organizational explanations and more proximate situational and individual explanations) for explaining police coercion.

### **Explanations of Police Coercion**

Theoretical explanations borrowed from other academic traditions have been the foundation of much of the research on police behavior and decision making. This historical development has left the study of coercion, as a subset of police decisions, as a phenomenon with many potential explanations throughout this diverse literature. Fortunately, the literature has introduced three primary explanatory perspectives that serve as theoretical guides to understanding police coercion: organizational, situational, and individual.

Police scholars have considered the potential influence of organizational effects on police behavior (e.g., Mastrofski, Ritti, & Hoffmaster, 1987; Wilson, 1968). The seminal research and theorizing on organizations and police behavior can be traced to Wilson's (1968) typology of legalistic, watchman, and service departments. Wilson (1968) posited that styles of policing reflect organizational rules, regulations, standard operating procedures, incentives and disincentives, and administrative direction. In other words, a common vision becomes part of each officer's mind-set of how to handle the everyday aspects of police work. Accordingly, individual officers will handle similar incidents that occur at the street level in a consistent manner. Although the hypotheses regarding how police use coercive authority are somewhat vague, Wilson (1968, p. 190) indicated that 'legalistic' departments, in aggressively enforcing laws and patrolling, gave minority communities the sense that they were being harassed. He also noted that the officers in 'watchman' departments were particularly sensitive to challenges to their authority (1968, pp. 167–168). Both ideas suggest that these organization 'types' influence the use of coercion against citizens, countering the ideas set forth by police ethnographers that suggested officers use similar levels of coercion (i.e., high) as prescribed by the police culture (Westley, 1970).

A second theoretical perspective has generally been framed within a situational (or sociological) domain, where various situational aspects of the police–citizen encounter

have been used to explain police behavior (e.g., Bittner, 1970; Black, 1976; Smith & Visser, 1981; Terrill & Mastrofski, 2002). Donald Black (1976), for instance, posits that the application of punishment by legal agents can be explained in terms of various types of social space in which the subjects of control are located. According to Black, one's place in social space is defined by who one is and how one behaves. Black's theory predicts that the police will be more punitive, hence forceful, toward those with lower economic or marginal cultural status, such as the poor, minorities, and the young. Further, those who appear intoxicated, mentally deranged, disrespectful, resistant, or filled with anger or fear are placed in a negative 'normative space.' This means that they offend society's—and the police officer's—standards about proper behavior, or they appear to lack the requisite self-control and in either case are more deserving of police-applied control and punishment.

A third approach to the study of police behavior involves examining the role of individual (or psychological) factors (e.g., Brown, 1988; Muir, 1977; Worden, 1989). According to this approach, officer characteristics, experiences, views, and outlooks are posited to have an effect on police behavior. With respect to police coercion, this research simply asks whether there is something about particular officers that helps explain their behavior. For example, William Ker Muir (1977, pp. 3–4) created a fourfold typology, distinguishing officers based on their ability to develop passion (i.e., 'resolve the contradiction of achieving just ends with coercive means') and perspective (i.e., intellectually 'grasp the nature of human suffering'). Muir (1977) posited that varying levels of coercion would result based on differences in officer attitudinal styles. The supposition here is that individual characteristics of the officer (i.e., traits, experiences, attitudes) drive coercive behavior, rather than factors related to specific encounters (i.e., situational) or departmental policies, practices, or styles (i.e., organizational).

### **Officer Peer Groups: Exploring the Middle Ground**

Although each of the conceptual frameworks highlighted above has contributed to our understanding of police use of force, none has generated empirical exploration of the possibility that coercion varies according to the broader context of an officer's peer group. We argue that the peer group might work as a filter between organizational concerns on the one hand, and situational and individual street-level adaptations on the other.

The notion of peer influence generally fits with social interactionist perspectives on the use of coercion (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994, p. 209). Specifically, Goffman (1959) argues that social 'teams,' much like our conception of peer group, perform duties based on the expectation of team norms. As such, individual attitudes are quickly abandoned by actors once they assume a role on a team. The size of one's team in mid to large agencies is likely to exclude command staff from the team's day-to-day work and form norms around a common group or task at the street level.

Anecdotal evidence regarding the existence of peer group influences is present in the police literature. For example, Skolnick and Fyfe (1993) discuss particular instances

where rogue groups of police officers engaged in brutalizing behaviors in a serial fashion. The Special Investigations Services (SIS) unit in LAPD was documented as letting robbery suspects commit crimes so they could be 'caught in the act,' thus increasing the danger and thrill of the situations.<sup>2</sup>

The key question that remains is the mechanism by which peer groups influence officers' use of coercion. For example, the peer group may dictate appropriate methods for handling situations, cues to be considered when taking control, and the levels of coercion that are appropriate to use in encounters with suspects. Hunt (1985) offers the notion that the group will allow for 'normal' amounts of force to be used against citizens with aplomb. The most parsimonious interpretation of Hunt (1985) is that peer groups would have a direct effect on the level of force used against suspects, if other factors are held constant.

The peer group, in Goffman's (1959) parlance, represents the 'team' that the individual police officer participates in and this ensemble offers a context to structure action in situations with citizens. In the context of police–citizen encounters the peer group may specify what behaviors are appropriate for dealing with situations (Worden, 1996). For example, Cancino, who surveyed San Antonio, Texas police officers on use of force practices, found that 89% of the officers surveyed learned how to use physical force from peers (2001, p. 154). Since police organizations conduct their daily work through small groups of similarly situated line personnel, the study of these peer groups in municipal departments seems to be an overlooked gap in explaining decision making in general, and specifically in decisions to use force.

### **Officer Peer Groups, Coercion, and Social Ecology**

Another area that might have an impact on peer group levels of coercion is the social ecology where such groups are assigned. Although empirical support for neighborhood level effects on police use of force remains scant and mixed (see Terrill & Reising, 2003), researchers have found that social conditions where officers work influence police behavior. For instance, Terrill and Reising (2003), using Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPEN) data, found that officers were more likely to rely on coercive means in areas characterized with higher levels of social distress. Additionally, Kane (2002, p. 883) conducted a longitudinal study of police misconduct among New York City Police from 1975 to 1996, finding that officers who worked in socially disorganized communities were more likely to be involved in several forms of occupational misconduct (i.e., bribery, extortion, excessive force, abuses of authority, and administrative rule violation). This renewed interest in policing and social ecology suggests that efforts to explain the way in which officers or, in this case, groups of officers behave, must take into account important social conditions that exist in their primary work assignment (i.e., beat).

### **Officer Peer Groups and Aggressiveness**

One could argue that, consonant with theories of socialization or social learning (Bandura, 1973; Sutherland, 1947), exposure to definitions allows officers to 'learn' (or

be socialized to) the appropriate behaviors for distributing coercion among citizens.<sup>3</sup> This, however, continues to focus on the individual as the key to explaining force. An alternative mechanism is to measure group attitudes towards using force, or some proxy of that propensity, and to connect the group level to the individual. Here, one would seek peer group types to test whether they influence individuals' use of coercive tactics in encounters with citizens. We chose belief in the efficacy of aggressive patrol (i.e., aggressiveness) as the root of our theorizing about group attitudes since it has, at its core, the presentation of self as an offensive force against law breakers; and compared to other constructs as mentioned by Worden (1995), it holds the coercive power of police (aggression/taking the initiative) at its core.

The most critical assessment of police officer aggressiveness has been conducted by Brown (1988), who asserted that an officer's operational style is heavily influenced by his or her belief in aggressiveness. Brown defines aggressiveness as 'taking the initiative on the street to control crime and a preoccupation with order that legitimizes the use of illegal tactics' (p. 223).<sup>4</sup> Brown found that variation in officer aggressiveness resulted in differing levels of coercion over citizens, as the two officer styles that were aggressive (i.e., Old Style Crime Fighter and Clean Beat Crime Fighter) utilized more coercion than the styles that were not aggressive (i.e., Service and Professional) (pp. 225–237).

According to Brown (1988), the police culture is where aggressiveness is born, as officers respond to the dangers and hazards of police work (p. 85). Brown (1988) also contends that one's ability to utilize street-level discretion (i.e., operational style) is granted as long as officers are loyal to fellow occupational members. Somewhere between the occupational level of commitment (i.e., all officers or all organizational members) and the individual level is where the peer group operates, possibly demanding the same type of loyalty (or even more) on the street than what Brown (1988) hypothesized. We argue that groups that focus on aggressive policing tactics may vary from other peer groups that de-emphasize aggressive tactics in terms of their acceptance of 'normal' force levels. More succinctly, we hypothesize that officers embedded within peer groups that emphasize aggressive tactics will use higher levels of force in their contacts with the public, controlling for a number of situational and officer-based factors.

## **Methodology**

The present analysis draws on two data-sets from the POPN: systematic observation of patrol officers and in-person interviews of those officers. The data for this study were collected in St Petersburg, Florida during the summer of 1997. Patrol observation was conducted in 12 beats in St Petersburg, with the sample of beats that varied in terms of socioeconomic distress. Socioeconomic distress was measured as the sum of the percentages of families with children headed by a single female, the adult population that is unemployed, and the population below 50% of the poverty level—an index similar to one used by Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997). The sample excluded

those beats with the lowest socioeconomic distress; observations concentrate in areas where police–citizen interactions are most frequent.

Researchers accompanied officers throughout a matched sample of work shifts in each of the selected beats for a total of approximately 240 hours per beat.<sup>5</sup> Observers took brief field notes and spent the next day transcribing them into detailed accounts and coding them according to a pre-defined protocol. In addition to the data coded by the observers, the analysis includes additional data coded from the detailed accounts (to capture the sequencing of events within a police–citizen encounter).

Observers noted officers' encounters with the public.<sup>6</sup> An encounter was a face-to-face communication between officers and citizens that was more than a passing greeting. Observers recorded contact with approximately 5,500 citizens, with events ranging from less than a minute to several hours. The selection criteria used in the present analysis are based on those interactions with people whom police or other citizens present placed in the role of suspect (wrongdoers, peace disturbers, or persons for whom complaints were received). Overall, field observers recorded approximately 1,550 police–suspect encounters.

Data on officer characteristics and attitudes are taken from in-person interviews conducted in a private room by researchers who did not conduct field observations. The interviewers used a standardized instrument that captured a variety of background and work experiences as well as some broad attitudes concerning the police role. The interview consisted of a mix of questions posed by interviewers and checklists completed by respondents in the interviewers' presence (for greater detail, see Paoline, Myers, & Worden, 2000). Of the 246 officers assigned to SPPD's patrol division, 240 were interviewed, producing a completion rate of 98%. Interview data were then merged with observation data.

### *Method*

SPPD had developed an international reputation as a leader in the implementation of community policing, emphasizing 'problem solving' and 'geographic deployment' of officers and supervisors as its central features. This greatly assisted our ability in assigning officers to stable geographic and temporal shifts for that department, consonant with our conception of peer group. Hence, our final data-set consists of 1,458 cases that contain no missing data on officer surveys or from the observations made in the field. Approximately 100 police–suspect encounters were omitted from analysis due to missing data. An analysis of the missing cases indicates that they are not significantly different from those included in the analysis with respect to the levels of coercion used against citizens.

For this inquiry we consider a peer group to consist of all officers working the same shift and sector. This gives us both geographic and temporal foundations for the peer group concept. The limits we impose may be inadequately drawn in the sense that the peer group we identify is likely to consist of a larger and more heterogeneous cross section than it should in the ideal case (e.g., who officers identify as peers working other sectors and shifts). Nonetheless, we believe it is adequate for an initial examination of

the relative effects of peer group norms, within the context of aggressiveness, on the distribution of coercion in day-to-day encounters with citizens.

### **Model Variables**

Table 1 provides an overview of how variables were defined (including hypothesized relationships to force indicated with +, -, +/- signs denoting positive, negative, and undetermined directions of influence, respectively), while Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for each of the variables.

#### *Police Coercion*

We define coercion as acts that threaten or inflict physical harm on citizens and order different acts according to the amount of coercion exerted: none, verbal (commands and threats), physical restraint/search (handcuffing, firm grip, pat downs, and searches), and impact (pain compliance techniques, takedown maneuvers, strikes to the body with or without a weapon).<sup>7</sup> From least to most coercive, these levels reflect the amount of harm imposed on the suspect (for similar approaches on ranking force by severity see: Alpert & Dunham, 1997; Klinger, 1995; Terrill, 2001). For this analysis interest lies in the highest level of force used since the focus here is on how much force was ultimately applied so as to judge the impact of the various determinants on force generally, and officer peer group specifically.

#### *Individual and Peer Group Aggressiveness*

Following Brown (1988), we measured individual officer's orientation toward aggressive patrol with the following item: 'A good patrol officer is one who patrols aggressively by stopping cars, checking out people, running license checks, and so forth.' Officers were given ordered response categories of (1) strongly disagree, (2) somewhat disagree, (3) somewhat agree, and (4) strongly agree, to choose from.

To obtain the peer group measure each individual officer's score concerning his or her beliefs about aggressive patrol was taken and aggregated for patrol officers working the same area and shift. A total of 36 peer groups were identified in SPPD, with a range of 3–15 officers contributing attitudes to the aggregated measure. Since our primary objective was to link the 'aggressiveness' of the peer group to observed officer behaviors, we further restricted the number of groups by omitting five peer groups that provided no data on encounters with suspects. This process left us with 209 patrol officers occupying 31 separate observed peer groups.<sup>8</sup>

### **Control Variables**

A number of suspect characteristics and self-presentation measures (i.e., gender, race, age, wealth, alcohol/drug use, mental state, emotional state, demeanor, resistance, citizen conflict, weapon possession, strength of evidence, problem type, and arrest), as well

**Table 1** Variable Descriptions

Variable	Hypothesized effect	Definition
<i>Dependent</i>		
Force	+	Highest level of force: 0 = none, 1 = verbal, 2 = restraint, 3 = impact
<i>Peer group</i>		
Aggressiveness	+	Composite measure of group attitudes toward aggressive patrol aggregated from shift and assignment
<i>Officer characteristics/attitudes</i>		
Aggressiveness	+	Four category measure of officer agreement with 'A good officer is one who patrols aggressively ...' (see Table 3)
Male	+	1 = male, 0 = female
Non-white	+/-	1 = non-white, 0 = white
Experience	-	Years of experience in department
<i>Suspect characteristics</i>		
Age	-	1 = 0-5 years, 2 = 6-12 years, 3 = 13-17 years, 4 = 18-20 years, 5 = 21-29 years, 6 = 30-44 years, 7 = 45-59 years, 8 = 60+
Non-white	+/-	1 = non-white, 0 = white
Male	+	1 = male, 0 = female
Lower class	-	1 = low, 0 = middle or above
<i>Suspect actions/presentation</i>		
Resistance	+	Level of suspect resistance: 1 = none, 2 = passive, 3 = verbal, 4 = defensive, 5 = active
<i>Suspect actions/presentation</i>		
Officer safety	+	1 = suspect has weapon, 0 = all other
Citizen conflict	+	Suspect in conflict with another citizen on scene: 1 = none, 2 = calm verbal, 3 = agitated verbal, 4 = threatened assault, 5 = assault
Disrespect	+	1 = suspect disrespectful to police in language or gesture, 0 = all other
Arrest	+	1 = suspect is arrested, 0 = not arrested
Evidence	+	Summative index (0-7) of the evidence of the target's or requester's violation of the law
Problem type	+	1 = problem involves morals violation, 0 = all other
Alcohol/drug	+	1 = suspect shows behavioral effects of drug/alcohol, 0 = all other
Emotion	+	1 = suspect displays a heightened state of emotion—fear or anger, 0 = all other
Mental illness	+	1 = suspect shows behavioral effects of mental impairment, 0 = all other
<i>Neighborhood disadvantage</i>		
High	+/-	1 = encounter occurs in high distress neighborhood, 0 = all other
Medium	+/-	1 = encounter occurs in medium distress neighborhood, 0 = all other
Low	+/-	1 = encounter occurs in low distress neighborhood, 0 = all other

**Table 2** Descriptive Statistics ( $N = 1,458$ )

Dependent variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std deviation
Force	0	3	0.72	0.79
<i>Peer group</i>				
Aggressiveness <sup>a</sup>	2	3.6	3.07	0.33
<i>Officer characteristics/attitudes</i>				
Aggressiveness	1	4	2.97	0.87
Male	0	1	0.84	0.36
Non-white	0	1	0.15	0.36
Experience	1	24	7.75	5.77
<i>Suspect characteristics</i>				
Age	1	8	5.38	1.38
Non-white	0	1	0.56	0.50
Male	0	1	0.69	0.46
Lower class	0	1	0.61	0.49
<i>Suspect actions/presentation</i>				
Resistance	1	5	1.17	0.59
Officer safety	0	1	0.02	0.12
Citizen conflict	1	5	1.12	0.54
Disrespect	0	1	0.12	0.32
Arrest	0	1	0.10	0.31
Evidence	0	7	1.50	1.80
Problem type	0	1	0.29	0.45
Alcohol/drug	0	1	0.23	0.42
Emotion	0	1	0.43	0.49
Mental illness	0	1	0.05	0.21
<i>Control variables</i>				
Public location	0	1	0.70	0.46
Proactive entry	0	1	0.41	0.49
Maximum number of police	1	17	2.09	1.38
Maximum number of citizens	1	100	3.80	5.37
<i>Neighborhood disadvantage</i>				
NEIGH1 (low disadvantage)	0	1	0.40	0.49
NEIGH2 (middle disadvantage)	0	1	0.36	0.48
NEIGH3 (high disadvantage)	0	1	0.22	0.41
NEIGHMC (missing cases)	0	1	0.02	0.14

<sup>a</sup>See Table 4 for distributions of group level aggressiveness.

as several officer attributes (i.e., gender, race, experience, attitude toward aggressiveness) are examined. Each of these measures have been previously hypothesized to influence the application of force (see Terrill & Mastrofski, 2002; Worden, 1996), and as such, are included here.

*Ecology*

A concentrated disadvantage measure, previously created by Reissig and Parks (2000), and based on the work of Sampson et al. (1997), was calculated for each neighborhood in which a police–suspect encounter occurred. The percent female headed households with children, percent persons below poverty level, percent under age 18, percent minority, and percent unemployed were used to create a weighted factor score (eigenvalue 3.47, factor loadings > 0.60). Inclusion of this variable is necessary to ensure that the peer measure is not diluted with potential ecological variations in officer use of coercion. This measure was subdivided into three dummy variables. NEIGH3 represents 321 encounters (22%) that occurred in the neighborhoods that were at the highest third of the disadvantage scale, NEIGH2 represents 524 (36%) encounters that occurred in the middle third of the distressed neighborhoods, and NEIGH1 represents 584 encounters (40%) in the neighborhoods with the lowest disadvantage. CONDISMC, is a variable that captures whether the neighborhood identifier was missing, which was true for 29 encounters (2%). NEIGH1 (lowest distress levels) is the excluded category in our analyses, such thereby serving as the reference category.

**Analysis and Findings**

To assess the direct effect of peer group influence, along with a number of various control measures, an ordered probit model was estimated using SPSS 11.0. The use of ordered probit was utilized (over other analytical techniques) based on the fact that the dependent measure in this analysis is ordinally ranked (Long, 1997).

Three separate estimated models are presented in Table 3. The models move from the most distal determinants of coercion to the most proximal determinants to examine the influence of peer groups on the use of coercion in everyday encounters with suspects. The first model uses peer group attitudes towards aggression as the sole predictor, and while the coefficient is significant, the relative explanatory power is extremely weak. Model II adds officer characteristics as determinants of force, and the power of peer group influence becomes non-significant. Interestingly, this model offers an insignificant level of improvement ( $\chi^2 = 7.1$ , 4 df,  $p > 0.05$ ) over model I.

The final model includes suspect actions and self-presentation, which are the most proximate predictors of coercion against citizens. These predictors, similar to previous research conducted by Terrill and Mastrofski (2002), are responsible for explaining much of how police use force in encounters with suspects. With respect to suspect characteristics, youthful and male suspects were more likely, holding other determinants constant, to encounter higher levels of force compared with their female and older counterparts. Further, with the exception of suspects displaying signs of apparent mental illness, those exhibiting any indication of lack of self-control (alcohol/drug use or elevated emotions) were more likely to receive higher levels of force. Not surprisingly, suspects who were arrested or had more evidence of wrongdoing assembled

**Table 3** Models of Police Coercion and Peer Influence (*n* = 1,458)

	Model I		Model II		Model III	
	Estimate	Std error	Estimate	Std error	Estimate	Std error
<i>Peer group</i>						
Aggressiveness	0.21*	0.09	0.15	0.10	-0.04	0.10
<i>Officer characteristics/attitudes</i>						
Aggressiveness			0.06*	0.04	0.02	0.04
Male			0.01	0.09	0.11	0.09
Non-white			0.09	0.09	0.02	0.09
Experience			-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
<i>Suspect characteristics</i>						
Age					-0.06*	0.02
Non-white					0.08	0.07
Male					0.20*	0.07
Lower class status					0.09	0.07
<i>Suspect actions/presentation</i>						
Resistance					0.39*	0.06
Officer safety					0.41*	0.24
Citizen conflict					0.20*	0.06
Disrespect					0.12	0.11
Arrest					1.56*	0.11
Evidence					0.05*	0.02
Problem type					0.29*	0.07
Alcohol/drug					0.33*	0.08
Emotion					0.15*	0.07
Mental illness					0.03	0.15
<i>Control variables</i>						
Public location					0.27*	0.07
Proactive entry					0.21*	0.07
Maximum number of citizens					0.01	0.01
Maximum number of police					-0.02	0.03
<i>Neighborhood disadvantage</i>						
NEIGH2 (middle disadvantage)					0.14*	0.08
NEIGH3 (high disadvantage)					0.01	0.09
NEIGHMC (missing cases)					0.19	0.23
Chi-square	5.2*	1 df	12.3*	5 df	482.1*	26 df
Nagelkerke pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.004		0.01		0.32	

\**p* < 0.05 one-tailed test.

against them were more likely to have higher levels of police coercion. In addition, suspects who resisted police, were in conflict with other citizens, presented an officer safety issue, or were involved in a morals problem were more likely to receive higher levels of coercion by the police.

Taken together the models indicate that the most proximate determinants of higher levels of force used against suspects are the actions that suspects take, or their 'presentation of self' in encounters with police. Similarly, suspect characteristics such as sex and age (but not race and class) also play an important role in predicting the highest level of force used in an encounter. The most distal determinants hypothesized to affect the use of force, peer group aggressiveness and officer characteristics, offer little explanatory power. These results suggest that police respond to the situation as presented to them, but this does not necessarily eliminate peer group aggressiveness as an explanation of police coercion. One might consider interactive models comparing officers in peer groups with the highest attitudes toward aggressive patrol (i.e., most favorably disposed toward aggressiveness) against those with the lowest attitudes toward aggressive patrol (i.e., least favorably disposed toward aggressiveness). The models tested thus far assume the simple direct relationship between peer group attitudes and the highest level of force used by the observed officer. A more plausible relationship is one where peer group attitudes condition officer responses to stimuli such as disrespectful suspects.

Paternoster, Brame, Mazzerolle, and Piquero (1998) suggest an interactive modeling of relationships through the use of *z*-score comparisons. To accomplish this we first split our sample into those officers that occupied the two lowest quintiles of peer group attitudes towards aggressive patrol (less than 2.9 group score,  $n = 414$  suspects) and the two highest quintiles (greater than 3.1,  $n = 834$  suspects), essentially eliminating seven peer groups that had aggregated aggressive patrol attitude scores of 3, the modal category of that measure.

Modeling these two groups separately required collapsing the dependent variable categories of impact and restraining force together since too few observations of impact force were available in the split sample. Such collapsing of categories is less problematic for ordered probit models, since the distance between intervals is not necessarily equal, and this amounted to assigning 22 cases from impact force to restraining force. Thus, the dependent variable becomes a three category variable of (0) no force, (1) verbal force, and (2) any physical force.<sup>9</sup>

When the models are compared using the strategy outlined by Paternoster et al. (1998), we find that seven of 25 coefficient comparisons are significant (if one uses the more liberal two-tailed standard of  $z > 1.64$ ,  $p < 0.10$ , cut-off; four *z*-scores are above the more conservative two-tailed level,  $z > 1.96$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

As seen in Table 4, six of these contrasts are suspect based either in terms of legal status (arrested and those with greater evidence amassed against them), social status (gender and class), or the manner in which the suspect presents him or herself (disrespectful and emotional). Interestingly, the individual officer's experience level is also a significant contrast in these models, indicating that there is an interaction between officer experience and the peer group, which affects the highest level of force.

As noted, the results indicate that two legal factors are more likely to direct the highest level of force for those in the 'low' aggressive patrol peer groups. Specifically, arrest and evidence appear to be weighed significantly differently by this group in terms of being more powerful predictors of the highest level of force used in encounters with

**Table 4** Comparisons of Force Use across Peer Groups

	High aggressive patrol group ( <i>n</i> = 834)		Low aggressive patrol group ( <i>n</i> = 414)		z-Score comparison
	Estimate	Std error	Estimate	Std error	
<i>Officer characteristics/attitudes</i>					
Aggressiveness	0.10*	0.05	-0.05	0.08	1.54
Male	0.03	0.17	0.01	0.15	0.08
Non-white	0.16	0.18	-0.06	0.22	0.75
Experience	-0.02*	0.01	0.01	0.01	-1.69 <sup>b</sup>
<i>Suspect characteristics</i>					
Age	-0.03	0.03	-0.11*	0.05	1.32
Non-white	0.1	0.09	-0.03	0.14	0.66
Male	0.24*	0.10	-0.07	0.14	1.87 <sup>b</sup>
Lower class status	0.13	0.09	-0.22	0.14	2.17 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Suspect actions/presentation</i>					
Resistance	0.24*	0.09	0.42*	0.15	-1.08
Officer safety	1.18*	0.42	0.28	0.50	1.35
Citizen conflict	0.25*	0.09	0.11	0.12	0.95
Disrespect	0.15	0.14	-0.44*	0.24	2.12 <sup>a</sup>
Arrest	1.58*	0.15	2.38*	0.28	-2.52 <sup>a</sup>
Evidence	0.02	0.03	0.16*	0.04	-3.19 <sup>a</sup>
Problem type	0.37*	0.10	0.30*	0.15	0.42
Alcohol/drug	0.24*	0.11	0.51*	0.18	-1.36
Emotion	0.03	0.09	0.36*	0.14	-1.82 <sup>b</sup>
Mental illness	-0.02	0.21	0.33	0.32	-0.92
<i>Control variables</i>					
Public location	0.35*	0.10	0.13	0.14	1.26
Proactive entry	0.28*	0.09	0.11	0.14	0.95
Maximum number of citizens	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.01	1.22
Maximum number of police	-0.02	0.03	0.00	0.05	-0.34
<i>Neighborhood disadvantage</i>					
NEIGH2 (middle disadvantage)	0.23*	0.10	0.19	0.18	0.20
NEIGH3 (high disadvantage)	0.02	0.12	0.20	0.18	-0.84
NEIGHMC (missing cases)	0.42	0.30	-0.12	0.42	-1.04
Chi-square	253.19*	25 df	170.61*	25 df	
Nagelkerke pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.31		0.40		

\**p* < 0.05 one-tailed test.<sup>a</sup>*p* < 0.05 two-tailed test.<sup>b</sup>*p* < 0.10 two-tailed test.

suspects. The converse was true with respect to the influence of the suspect's social status. In encounters involving officers in the 'high' aggressive patrol group, male and lower class suspects were significantly more likely to have higher levels of force used against them compared with similarly situated suspects who encounter officers in the 'low' aggressive patrol peer group.

With respect to the differential findings for suspect self-presentation, we find that encounters involving 'low' aggressive patrol peer group officers are likely to result in significantly less force when confronted with a disrespectful suspect as compared with encounters that are embedded in 'high' aggressive patrol peer groups. However, the opposite is true for suspects exhibiting higher emotions. Those emotional suspects encountered by 'low' aggressive patrol peer groups experience significantly more force than similar suspects that encounter officers within 'high' aggressive patrol peer groups. These contrasts indicate significantly different approaches to these stimuli across the two groups. Finally, officers that are more experienced use lower force levels in the high aggressive peer groups. This could indicate that experience inoculates one from peer group definitions of 'normal' situations.

These findings are suggestive that the search for direct effects of police peer groups on behavior is unlikely to explain a great deal when compared with situational aspects of police–suspect encounters. The examination of interactive models, however, indicates that a fruitful search for how police interpret their encounters and formulate responses to disrespectful, male, lower class, emotional, and arrested suspects or those against whom which more evidence is amassed, is conditioned by group membership. This is consistent with the work of Hunt (1985) who claimed that police learn what force is 'normal.' Applied here, we observe groups applying 'going rates' to stimuli in a different fashion. Skolnick and Fyfe (1993) noted that 'us versus them' attitudes can be generated by over-zealous organizational units operating in legalistic frameworks. To the extent that officer membership in peer groups with higher collective support of aggressive patrol tactics enhances the level of force used on, for example, suspects with lower class status, supports those concerns.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to add to a long line of research on police coercion by examining the role of officer peer group as a middle ground between broadly based organizational explanations and more proximate situational and individual explanations. The findings reported here suggest that the role of the peer group, in explaining the use of coercion, has complex interactions with other factors. When we examine the direct effect of peer group aggressiveness on police coercion, we find that the peer group exerts little influence compared to key suspect actions and characteristics. This comes as no surprise, as situational factors have historically been the strongest predictors of police behavior in general (Riksheim & Chermak, 1993). However, we also find that when we refine our analytical models, by examining interaction effects among the most and least aggressive peer groups, peer group influence does seem to matter. More specifically, peer group influence differentially affects the application of force based on the degree

to which the peer group views aggressiveness. Officers working within peer groups that place a higher value on aggressiveness are more likely to base their decisions on extralegal factors (i.e., the suspect's gender, class, and demeanor), while officers embedded within peer groups that place a lower value on aggressiveness are more likely to base their decisions on legal factors (i.e., whether an arrest is made and the degree of evidence present). This suggests that the influence of one's peer group is not so much a direct one, but one that interacts with theoretically relevant situational factors.

While the present findings provide a glimpse into how the peer group may influence police decision making, we are left with potentially more questions than answers. That officers from high aggressive peer groups take into consideration more extralegal factors compared to low aggressive groups when using force tells us little about the appropriateness of force since we only distinguish among the highest level of force used. As a result, these findings can only be tentatively considered as a negative impact for high groups and a positive impact for low groups. However, most police administrators would undoubtedly contend that extralegal factors, such as gender, class, and demeanor, should not come into play when police make force decisions. It would, therefore, be interesting to know the extent to which high and low aggressive peer groups use varying levels of force, inappropriate force, or excessive levels of force. Future research should include examinations of positive and negative impacts of peer group influence with respect to the appropriateness of force.

While past police researchers have speculated and hypothesized about the relevance of officer peer groups (e.g., Brown, 1988), and this present study offers an initial empirical examination, future research should continue to refine and test different measures of peer groups across other forms of discretionary behavior (e.g., arrest, problem solving, mediation, etc.). Our measure relied on aggressive attitudes among same shift and sector peers, but it may be fruitful to explore other peer group operationalizations. For example, officers themselves could be used to identify influential peers that might exist in a police department (e.g., Bayley & Garafolo, 1989). We might find that officers who work in other sectors/shifts (who might have been transferred) or of varying rank might be part of one's peer group that was not captured in the present study.

The generalizability of this research to smaller departments (which predominate policing in the USA) as well as to police in other countries must also be addressed. First, with respect to small departments, one might argue that those with less than 25 officers may in fact work like an intact peer group. Although, contrary to our claims about these larger departments, management level officers would likely play key roles in the group. With respect to police behavior in other countries, we note that our dependent variable is coercion. The exercise of coercion is a common tool in the occupation 'police,' wherever that profession is practiced (Bittner, 1970). We would argue that peer influences on coercion are likely to be observed in police departments internationally. That is, however, a testable hypothesis that will require research in countries with different policing traditions and culture(s).

In terms of police policies and practices, the research reported here indicates that officer decision making is shaped, in some way, by peer group attitudes. Police administrators who want to implement policies on the street or change certain behaviors

should be aware of such influences and/or impediments. Past researchers have noted that a major obstacle to police reform is the monolithic police culture, which focuses more on the occupational and organizational levels of explanation (Dean, 1995). Those who have expressed interest in implementing more contemporary community policing philosophies have noted that one must ‘win the hearts and minds’ of individual officers who resist such change (Skogan & Hartnett, 1997, chap. 4). It may be that the way to affect change in a police organization is through small groups rather than more global organizational levels or at the individual micro level.

### Acknowledgements

This manuscript is based on data from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods, directed by Stephen D. Mastrofski, Roger B. Parks, Albert J. Reiss, Jr., and Robert E. Worden. The project was supported by Grant No. 95-IJ-CX-0071 by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the US Department of Justice.

### Notes

- [1] The terms *coercion* and *force* are used interchangeably throughout the paper to mean both verbal and physical forms of force (see Terrill & Mastrofski, 2002).
- [2] While this example suggests that inappropriate police behavior takes place among peer groups, there are also potential positive attributes of such groups. For example, to the extent that police officers are taught how to deal with the daily pressures and strains of policing (Van Maanen, 1974), the immediate peer group may be responsible for such socialization.
- [3] This is an elaboration on the mechanism that Hunt (1985, p. 321) discusses. We merely note that police peers may have a hand in teaching each other what situations and cues warrant increases in coercion and that the learning process may be similar to that described by learning theorists. One caveat that must be raised is that ‘birds of a feather may flock together.’ More precisely, peer groups may be an artifact of selection bias. Aggressive-oriented officers may be more apt to be assigned or seek assignment with like-minded individuals. That hypothesis is not testable with these data, but this is an alternative to the hypothesis that these actions are learned within the group.
- [4] The other dimension that Brown used to assess one’s operational style was belief in selectivity (i.e., officers who believe all laws should be enforced vs. those who believe that felonies are only worth pursuing) (1988, p. 223). Whereas aggressiveness is more closely linked to behavioral manifestations of coercion against *citizens*, selectivity has more to do with the handling and prioritizing of *cases*. As such, the current study borrows from Brown’s work only that which relates most directly to our dependent variable.
- [5] Prior to beginning fieldwork, a team of observers (field researchers) underwent an intensive four-month training program. As part of the program, observers were trained extensively on Systematic Social Observation (SSO) (for a detailed description of POPN see Mastrofski et al., 1998). Observers were a combination of undergraduate and graduate students from Michigan State University and the State University of New York at Albany who took a semester long class specifically on SSO. Observers also pre-tested the protocol in the field while conducting five training rides with a local department willing to permit observation. In addition to the training received at the home universities, observers conducted a training ride once arriving

on site to acclimate them to the city, beat boundaries, and the organizational structure of the department.

- [6] Officers received assurances of confidentiality. In only one-half of 1% of the encounters did observers detect evidence suggesting that officers had changed their behavior because of the researcher's presence. Far more common were instances where the observed police behavior could have been cause for disciplinary action, which has also been noted in previous field studies of patrol officers (Reiss, 1968). Typically, observers reported cordial relations with police during ride-a-longs. Only 12% of their observation sessions began with a negative officer attitude about the observer's presence, dropping to 2% by the end of the session.
- [7] In terms of verbal force, a command was defined as a statement by an officer that was in the form of an order (e.g., 'wait right here,' 'drop the knife,' 'leave now,' etc.); threats involved a command followed by an explicit or implicit intended consequence for not complying (e.g., 'drop the knife or you are going to get maced,' 'if I have to tell you again you are going in,' etc.). For physical restraint, pat downs were defined as instances when an officer physically touched a suspect as part of a cursory search; a firm grip included an officer grabbing a suspect in a forceful manner with a tight grip; and handcuffing involved placing restraints on a suspect's wrists. Finally, for impact methods, pain compliance techniques were defined as holds that cause pain to a specific body part (e.g., hammerlock, wristlock, finger grip, carotid control, and bar arm control); takedown maneuvers included instances when suspects were thrown, pushed, or shoved to the ground, against a wall, against a car or any other surface (leg sweeps also included); strikes with the body included hitting a suspect with the hands, fists, feet, legs, or any other part of the body (e.g., slapping, punching, kicking); and strikes with an external weapon included the use of any item that was not part of the body (e.g., flashlights, batons, police radios, stun guns, macing).
- [8] The mean aggressiveness score for the 31 peer groups was 2.97 (on a four-point scale), with a standard deviation of 0.41. Moreover, three surveys missing on the aggressiveness item were scored at the mean level for all officers in St Petersburg for the final measure of peer group aggressiveness. Several other strategies including excluding those cases were used, and all resulted in substantially similar peer group scores.
- [9] Comparisons between ordered probit models presented in Table 3, which use four category coding and three category dependent variables indicate that there are minimal differences between the two conceptualizations of force. Thus, the comparisons made between groups on the altered dependent variable are further justifiable.

## References

- Alpert, G. P., & Dunham, R. G. (1997). *The force factor: Measuring police use of force relative to suspect resistance*. Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum.
- Bandura, A. (1973). *Aggression: A social learning analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bayley, D. H., & Garafolo, J. (1989). The management of violence by police patrol officers. *Criminology*, 27, 1–23.
- Bittner, E. (1970). *The functions of police in modern society*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.
- Black, D. J. (1976). *The behavior of law*. New York: Academic Press.
- Brown, M. K. (1988). *Working the street: Police discretion and the dilemmas of reform*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Cancino, J. M. (2001). Walking among giants 50 years later: An exploratory analysis of patrol officer use of violence. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 24, 144–161.
- Dean, G. (1995). Police reform: Rethinking operational policing. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 23, 337–347.

- Geller, W. A., & Toch, H. (Eds.). (1996). *Police violence*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Hunt, J. (1985). Police accounts of normal force. *Urban Life*, 13, 315–341.
- Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department. (1991). *Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department*. Los Angeles: International Creative Management.
- Kane, R. J. (2002). The social ecology of police misconduct. *Criminology*, 40, 867–896.
- Klinger, D. A. (1995). The micro-structure of nonlethal force: Baseline data from an observational study. *Criminal Justice Review*, 20, 169–186.
- Long, J. S. (1997). *Regression models for categorical and limited dependent variables*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mastrofski, S. D., Parks, R. B., Reiss, A. J., Jr., Worden, R. E., DeJong, C. D., Snipes, J. B., et al. (1998). *Systematic observation of public police: Applying field research methods to policy issues*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.
- Mastrofski, S. D., Ritti, R. R., & Hoffmaster, D. (1987). Organizational determinants of police discretion: The case of drinking-driving. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 15, 387–402.
- Muir, W. K., Jr. (1977). *Police: Street corner politicians*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. (1968). *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, New York Times Edition. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.
- Paoline, E. A., III, Myers, S. M., & Worden, R. E. (2000). Police culture, individualism, and community policing: Evidence from two police departments. *Justice Quarterly*, 17, 575–605.
- Paternoster, R., Brame, R., Mazzerolle, P., & Piquero, A. (1998). Using the correct statistical test for the equality of regression coefficients. *Criminology*, 36, 859–866.
- Reisig, M. R., & Parks, R. B. (2000). Experience, quality of life, and neighborhood context: A hierarchical analysis of satisfaction with the police. *Justice Quarterly*, 17, 607–630.
- Reiss, A. J., Jr. (1968). Police brutality—Answers to key questions. *Trans-action*, 5, 10–19.
- Reiss, A. J., Jr. (1971). *The police and the public*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Riksheim, E. C., & Chermak, S. M. (1993). Causes of police behavior revisited *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 21, 353–382.
- Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. J., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, 27, 918–924.
- Skogan, W. G., & Hartnett, S. M. (1997). *Community policing, Chicago style*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skolnick, J. H., & Fyfe, J. J. (1993). *Above the law: Police and the excessive use of force*. New York: Free Press.
- Smith, D. A., & Visher, C. A. (1981). Street-level justice: Situational determinants of police arrest decisions. *Social Problems*, 9, 167–177.
- Sutherland, E. H. (1947). *Principles of criminology*. Chicago: J. B. Lippincott.
- Tedeschi, J. T., & Felson, R. B. (1994). *Violence, aggression, & coercive actions*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Terrill, W. (2001). *Police coercion: Application of the force continuum*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing.
- Terrill, W., & Mastrofski, S. D. (2002). Situational and officer-based determinants of police coercion. *Justice Quarterly*, 19, 215–248.
- Terrill, W., & Reisig, M. D. (2003). Neighborhood context and police use of force. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 40, 291–321.
- Van Maanen, J. (1974). Working the street: A developmental view of police behavior. In H. Jacob (Ed.), *The potential for reform of criminal justice* (pp. 83–130). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Westley, W. A. (1970). *Violence and the police: A sociological study of law, custom, and morality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wilson, J. Q. (1968). *Varieties of police behavior: The management of law and order in eight communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Worden, R. E. (1989). Situational and attitudinal explanations of police behavior: A theoretical reappraisal and empirical assessment. *Law and Society Review*, 23, 667–711.
- Worden, R. E. (1995). Police officers' belief systems: A framework for analysis. *American Journal of Police*, 14, 49–81.
- Worden, R. E. (1996). The 'causes' of police brutality: Theory and evidence on police use of force. In W. A. Geller & H. Toch (Eds.), *Police violence* (pp. 23–51). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Worden, R. E., & Catlin, S. E. (2002). The use and abuse of force by police. In K. M. Lersch (Ed.), *Policing and misconduct* (pp. 85–120). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Zimring, F. E. (2002, July 12). Train an impartial eye on police behavior; Departments should routinely use videotape. *The Los Angeles Times*, Metro 15.

Copyright of Police Practice & Research is the property of Routledge, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.