

Understanding Assaults on the Police: A Systematic Review on the Strength, Limitations, and Future of National Data Sources for Empirical Research

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Background

Police violence has become a critical public policy issue, yet prior research has noted that there are numerous limitations and gaps in national data sources commonly utilized in this area of research. While there have been concerted efforts to capture national data on crime rates, police use of force, and other key outcomes, problems with national data capturing assaults have persisted. Thus, more work needs to be done understand the current status of national data and its ability to monitor and research assaults on police officers.

To this end, this project seeks conduct a systematic review of the literature to address two research questions:

- What are the most common data sources utilized in quantitative research of police assaults?
- What are the relative strengths and limitations of each of these data sources?

By addressing these questions, this project is designed to not only establish the most common data sources in this research area but evaluate the accuracy, reliability, and comprehensiveness of each source. The study will provide useful recommendations for the improvement of data collection practices by establishing potential biases, gaps, and inconsistencies that could distort perceptions of violence against law enforcement officers. Further, it will illuminate opportunities to improve the state of police assault data and facilitate translational policing research.

Methods

Following the search protocol specified by the Campbell Collaboration, a systematic literature review was conducted to identify relevant research. The following criteria were utilized when selecting studies for inclusion in this review:

- Nature of the Measure:** Studies examining intentional physical assaults of on-duty sworn law enforcement officers. This would exclude studies that did not differentiate between assaults and injuries caused by traffic crashes, inadvertent exposure to illness or toxins, and other non-deliberate causes and non-physical assaults of officers (e.g., citizen resistance, citizen demeanor, verbal assaults, etc.). Further, it excludes studies of assaults on correctional officers, military police, or private security.
- National Datasets:** Eligible studies must consist of a national sample of officer assaults in the United States. This could include samples from multiple law enforcement agencies from at least two states or attempts to capture reflect incidents from multiple states. Further, the data source must reflect longitudinal reporting or data collection. As the intent of this study is to understand ongoing or long-term national datasets, these data samples should reflect central repositories of data that could reflect national trends and patterns in assaults. This criterion would exclude single-jurisdiction or single-state studies and single-wave surveys of law enforcement officers or agencies.
- Evaluation Design:** Any study reporting quantitative measures of police assaults was eligible. This includes both studies reporting descriptive statistics on police assaults and studies predicting an outcome measure relevant to police assaults using bivariate or multivariate techniques.
- Timeframe:** While there have been attempts to track line-of-duty deaths of police officers nationally since 1937, the Uniform Crime Reporting system's first attempt to create a national data source for fatal and non-fatal assaults began in 1960. This review only considers studies of police assaults from 1960 to 2024 to privilege modern data collection efforts, which also capture the historical development of national police assault data sources.
- Publication Language:** Finally, studies were eligible if they were published in English.

A series of search strategies were utilized to identify eligible studies. First, keyword searches were performed in seven electronic bibliographic databases. These keywords included Boolean searches for “assaults on the police”, “police assaults”, “homicides of law enforcement”, and numerous other variations. Following a rigorous screening process, a review of referenced studies and forward citation searches were performed on studies meeting the inclusion criteria.



Figure 1. A framed photograph of West York Police Officer Andrew Duarte at a memorial after he was killed in the line of duty during an active shooter incident.

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Figure 2. Lafayette officer injured on-duty cheered as he leaves hospital after a month.

Anticipated Results

- The findings of this systematic review are expected to provide a comprehensive assessment of national data sources on police assaults, identifying both their strengths and limitations. While the study screening and coding are still in progress, the review has documented the use of several national data sources:
 - Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA)
 - Officer Down Memorial Page (ODMP)
 - Uniform Crime Report's Supplemental Homicide Report (SHR)
 - National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS),
 - Gun Violence Archive (GVA)
 - National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)
- LEOKA and ODMP are among the most utilized data sources, but the use of NIBRS and GVA has increased in recent years.
- It is anticipated that the study will reveal inconsistencies in data collection methods, reporting standards, and definitional criteria across different sources, which may contribute to challenges in accurately measuring the prevalence, risk factors, and consequences of police assaults. For example, prior research utilizing LEOKA and NIBRS has noted that inconsistent and inaccurate reporting across agencies, and over time, severely curtails the generalizability and reliability of research drawing from these sources. Meanwhile, more recently developed data sources, such as GVA and ODMP, employ alternative data collection methods that may provide more comprehensive data. However, GVA and ODMP focus on only a narrow subset of all police assaults, as they restrict their collection efforts to firearm assaults and fatal assaults, respectively.
- Finally, the coding procedure will identify the suitability of each data source for various research purposes by identifying their unique features. Select variables, such as officer and citizen demographic information, may facilitate research into the situational determinants of assaults, whereas detailed geographic information can enable spatial analyses of assaults. Further still, the consistency and comprehensiveness of each data source will impact their appropriateness for trend analysis, cross-jurisdictional comparisons, and policy evaluation.
- Ultimately, the anticipated results will emphasize the need for methodological advancements and enhanced data collection strategies to support translational policing research. These findings may inform policy recommendations aimed at strengthening national data systems, thereby improving the capacity of researchers and policymakers to analyze and address police assaults effectively.

Conclusion

This systematic review intends to fill a major gap in the research concerning assaults on the police by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of national data sources. The result reveals how, while LEOKA and ODMP have dominated the field historically, the NIBRS and GVA sources are gaining attention, yielding new insights into the complexities surrounding assaults against police officers. Nevertheless, inconsistencies in data collection, reporting standards, and definitional criteria across sources remain significant challenges. These inconsistencies compromise the ability to measure the true prevalence and risk factors of police assaults, which impedes the process of developing effective policies. This study also shows the importance of quality data collection practices, emphasizing the value of variables such as officer demographics and geographic data for deeper and more effective analyses. Though not an exhaustive review, this systematic review stresses the need for improvements in methodology and data collection strategies to improve the quality of national data on police assaults. By addressing these gaps, researchers and policymakers can better understand and address the challenges of policing, which would have potential benefits for officer safety, recruitment, and retention.