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Author(s): Dennis P. Rosenbaum, Amie M. Schuck, Gary Cordner

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National Police Research Platform



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The National Police Research Platform: The Life Course of New Officers

Dennis P. Rosenbaum, Amie M. Schuck, and Gary Cordner

“The day the new recruit walks through the door of the police academy, he leaves society behind to enter a profession that does more than give him a job, it defines who he is. He will always be a cop.”

James Ahern, *Police in Trouble*, 1972

... one may well wonder how any group of men could perform the tasks required of policemen. The citizen expects police officers to have the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David, the strength of Samson, the patience of Job, the leadership of Moses, the kindness of the Good Samaritan, the faith of Daniel, the tolerance of the Carpenter of Nazareth, and, finally, an intimate knowledge of every branch of the natural, biological, and social sciences. If he had all of these, he might be a good policeman.

-August Vollmer, *The Police in Modern Society*, 1936

Purpose

The National Police Research Platform is funded by the National Institute of Justice to advance knowledge and practice in American policing through the systematic collection of data from police officers and police organizations. At the core of the Platform is a plan to follow the life course of new officers from their first day at the training academy until they leave the force. The Platform is designed to identify factors that influence officers over time, such as their background and personality characteristics, training experiences, peers, supervisors, job assignments and significant life events. Information on the life course of officers should be useful for guiding management and supervisory strategies pertaining to recruitment, training, retention, productivity, accountability and human services. At the street level, the data generated by the Platform should help enhance the health and welfare of young officers and increase the quality of police services to the community.

The National Police Research Platform

The National Police Research Platform was developed as a vehicle to continuously advance our knowledge of police organizations and their employees and to provide regular and timely feedback to police agencies and policy makers nationwide. In doing so, the Platform is expected to advance both the science of policing and evidence-based learning organizations. This project was supported by Award No. 2008-DN-BX-0005 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

The need for this information has never been greater. As the “baby boomers” retire in large numbers and our society becomes increasingly multi-cultural, the police workforce is rapidly changing in terms of gender, race/ethnicity and age. Management needs to understand the new cohort or “Generation Next” – who are these new recruits? What draws them to policing? What are their expectations? Are they cut out to handle the job? Can they cope adequately with the stress that the job inevitably brings, and will they be able to avoid the pitfalls of their predecessors? Will they stay and be part of the profession or leave after two years for a new career? These key questions beg for answers.

At a more basic human level, the stressors of police work need to be better understood. What takes some officers from being happy, healthy and optimistic to being cynical, pessimistic, angry, burned out and depressed? What takes some officers from having healthy relationships with friends and family to being emotionally distant, isolated, and unable to communicate with loved ones? Officers need skills not only for physical survival, but for what Gilmartin (2002) calls “emotional survival.” Both careers and personal lives are in jeopardy if young officers are not prepared for this line of work. The Platform will seek to identify the changes that occur in officers and the factors that contribute to these changes for preventative purposes. We hope to identify personal and environmental factors that can predict career course trajectories and behavioral outcomes such as work-life balance, work productivity, rule violations, risky behavior or accidents, the quality of police-citizen encounters, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization. The Platform should be able to

identify key periods where agency intervention might have the largest effects (e.g., recruitment, selection, training, probationary supervision). If evidence-based interventions are in place, these outcome measures should show improvement over time.

The Limits of Prior Research

When we turn to the research literature for insight about the developmental life course of police officers, we are left empty handed. Considerable research has been done assessing the impact of police strategies and tactics on crime and to a lesser extent on police attitudes, but change in the lives of police officers remains unexplored. Unlike studies of public health or the military, law enforcement personnel have not been followed over time. The bulk of quantitative studies of the police are cross-sectional surveys, at one point in time. Case studies and qualitative interviews have generally focused on a few individuals in one department at one point in time. This situation leaves a substantial void in our scientific knowledge of what police officers experience. Former and current police officers have been left with the burden of writing books about their experience. While these narratives and “war stories” provide rich insights into the world of policing, they cannot be easily generalized to persons beyond themselves. Aside from numerous anecdotes, we know very little about how police officers change and develop from being a rookie to being a two-year, five-year or 10-year veteran, nor do we know what factors are responsible for positive and/or negative trajectories over time. As part of the National Police Research Platform, we are conducting a prospective longitudinal study of officers that will hopefully answer questions that could not be answered by prior research.

Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Life of Police Officers

The longitudinal study of police recruits is guided by several complementary theories of human behavior; namely, developmental, ecological, organizational, victimization-stress, and life course theories. Each provides a unique perspective on change that is important.

Developmental theories. The Platform will examine stability and change within individuals as they development as human beings. Developmental criminology (Loeber & LeBlanc, 1990) and developmental crime prevention (Farrington & Welsh, 2007) provide relevant insights about

the stability of deviance and the predictable influence of childhood and adolescence factors. The Platform will look at officers' backgrounds to document basic risk and protective factors that may shape who they are and how they police, such as family, neighborhood and friendship patterns during their formative years. Their established views of right and wrong, of human nature, of how to resolve conflict between people, as well as their early bonding to conventional institutions of social control and support may explain their current behavior on the job. However, recent transitions in their lives as new police officers, such as marriage and job assignment, may contribute to internal changes within individuals (see life course theory below).

Ecological theories. The Platform also applies an ecological approach to understand how these officers are embedded in various social systems, from family and friends to work groups – what Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) calls the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Behavior is likely shaped by peer norms in the workplace, but also by the influences of parents, spouses, children and friends.

Organizational theories. A number of well-established organizational theories can help us understand how organizational dynamics within police agencies might affect individual employees (Roberg & Kuykendall, 1990; Cordner & Scarborough, 2007). For example, the classic “human relations” school of Douglas McGregor (Heil, Bennis, & Stephens, 2000) and the more recent procedural justice model by Tom Tyler (e.g., Tyler, Callahan, & Frost, 2007) suggest that officers' job performance, job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, and adherence to rules are likely to be influenced by whether the organization is able to meet their complex personal and professional growth needs and values (e.g., fairness, recognition, respect, voice). The quality of decision making and treatment of employees by management, such as disciplinary practices and supervisory responses, are critically important in shaping employees' views of the organization and their own behavior.

Victimization and stress theories. Policing is a psychologically stressful job and can affect individuals differently. Drawing on stress, victimization, and coping theories (see Taylor & Stanton, 2006), officers can be viewed as victims who experience an array of negative events – they face difficult and sometimes life-threatening situations; many work in punitive settings with uncertain futures; and with their changing work schedules, many struggle to balance work and family. So the

Platform team is very interested in studying the types of stress these young officers face and what strategies they employ to cope and adjust. Some coping styles will be more functional and healthy than others. The outcome can be a healthy lifestyle and a rewarding career or burnout, cynicism, troubled relationships and “beefs” on the job.

Life course theory. The life course perspective is an ideal framework for studying officers’ careers, especially for understanding the factors that may influence young adults. In the simplest sense, the life course refers to the path that an individual follows as he or she ages. This path, referred to as a trajectory, is defined by transitions and significant life events (Elders, 1985,1996). Examples of these for police officers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of the Life Course Framework for Officer Trajectories	
Transitions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving from civilian to recruit • Moving from recruit to officer • Moving from patrol to detective • Moving to a special unit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving to a supervisory position • Moving from the street to desk job • Moving back to street from desk job • Retiring from the force
Significant Life Events	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding new friends at the training academy • Getting hurt on the job • Receiving a commendation • Being disciplined • Getting a new police partner • Getting someone into treatment or away from an abuser • Having a child • Death of a loved one 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjusting to a new role and status • Being involved in a shooting • Being rejected by a peer group • Seeing a dead person or abused child • Saving someone’s life • Getting married • Getting divorced
Individual Characters	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographics • Personality • Exposure to trauma in childhood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligence • Family background
Social Context	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical time period

Further, the shape of the trajectory is influenced by individual characteristics, social context, the timing of important life events, and the influence of the trajectories of significant others, such as a spouse, a child, or co-workers. The life course framework is used by Platform researchers to help

identify critical events in the lives of young officers and aid in developing a better understanding of how their careers progress over time and why some experience more favorable outcomes than others. Consistent with what Sampson and Laub (1993) and others have observed in the longitudinal study of criminality, we expect to find both stability and change in the life course of police officers. We also expect that events in adult life, as well as the quality of relationships, will have a significant impact on individual trajectories, independent of developmental histories.

Data Collection Methods

The sample currently includes more than 500 new officers drawn from two large departments in two states and many smaller departments from a third state. One additional large department will be added in the spring from a fourth state. This report provides a preview of findings from a sample of 227 recruits for which we have collected data on repeated measures before and after their recruit training. Respondents are split somewhat evenly between large and small agencies.

A variety of data-collection strategies are being used to gather information on new officers. For all officers, these include paper and pencil surveys, online journals and training-academy performance records. For some classes, these data will be supplemented with official records on job performance, videotaped scenarios, public-satisfaction surveys, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and ride-along observations.

Descriptive Findings

Table 2 presents demographic and background information for the new officers in the study. Most of the officers are white males who have some education beyond high school and have a friend or family member in law enforcement. There are, however, significant differences between the large and small departments. Larger departments have more gender and racial diversity and a greater percentage of officers with advanced degrees than do smaller departments. In contrast, smaller departments were more likely to have married officers, officers with military experience, and individuals who previously served as a sworn law enforcement officer.

Life Course status. From a life course perspective, the preliminary results indicate that new recruits are at different stages in their development to full adulthood. For example, looking at living

arrangements, one in four new officers is still living at home with parents, while one in three is married or living with their own families. Another 28 percent live alone or with friends. These are important arrangements that will likely change over time and may affect an individual’s adjustment to life as a police officer.

Table 2. New Officer Profile (N=283)		
	Large Departments	Small Departments
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	72%	95%
<i>Race and Ethnicity</i>		
African American	25%	2%
Hispanic	29%	2%
White	44%	93%
<i>Education</i>		
College degree or more	61%	26%
<i>Military Experience</i>		
Yes	17%	27%
<i>Prior Sworn Officer</i>		
Yes	11%	15%
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single	69%	43%
Married	20%	43%
<i>Living Arrangements</i>		
Alone	22%	16%
With spouse	22%	44%
With parents	24%	26%
<i>Family in Law Enforcement</i>		
Yes	44%	32%
<i>Friends in Law Enforcement</i>		
Yes	83%	89%

Justice and Empathy

Officers are not a “tabula rasa,” or blank slate, when they arrive at the training academy. They bring with them various attitudes and beliefs that they acquired while growing up in certain communities - views about people and their circumstances that may influence their approach to police work. For example, the Platform captures new officers’ views about fairness and justice in society and examines their tendency to show empathy for those less fortunate than themselves.

The results show that new officers are not all the same. As shown in Table 3, many officers believe that we live in a “just world” and that life is fair, but many do not, and a third group cannot decide. They are also split roughly into three groups on their views of whether historically marginalized groups -- minorities and women -- have been treated fairly by society. Whether these views on personal responsibility and empathy will affect the quality of their services is an empirical question for longitudinal research.

Table 3. Justice and Empathy for Others			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
“In life, people usually get what they deserve and deserve what they get”	30%	44%	26%
“Life is simply not fair for many people”	33%	32%	36%
“Overall, minorities have been mistreated by society”	25%	40%	35%
“Overall, women have been mistreated by society”	23%	40%	37%

Personality and Styles of Interacting

The Platform has measured core personality traits and dispositions that were acquired prior to joining the police force that may have bearing on their job performance. Early results show that new officers are very different from one another on factors such as risk taking, communication style, and emotional control. Table 4, for example, shows a sizable percent of officers are risk takers and unafraid of danger while others are more cautious and thoughtful. Whether one group or the other is better suited for police work has yet to be determined. Clearly, the law enforcement field wants a few good men and women willing to risk their lives, but police administrators (call them “risk managers”) also want officers who wear their seatbelts, wear their body armor, do not drive too fast, have few accidents, do not discharge their firearms unnecessarily, and do not generate citizen complaints and lawsuits.

The ways in which officers interact with other people would seem to be critically important for determining their success on the streets. Arguably, officers need to feel comfortable talking to people, to not be too shy, to be able to balance talking and listening, and to be able to influence or

control a conversation. Table 5 shows considerable variation among officers in their communication styles and their confidence in social settings. Between one quarter and one half like to do the talking and like to take charge in social situations. But 39 percent expressed distaste for talking – they prefer action instead.

Table 4. Predisposition to Risk Taking			
Risky Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
“A sensible person avoids activities that are dangerous”	28.3%	40.4%	31.4%
“I would like to try parachute jumping”	51.1%	15.1%	33.8%
“When I go on a trip I like to plan my route and timetable fairly carefully”	38.8%	38.8%	22.3%

Table 5. Communication Style		
	Agree	Disagree
“I like to be in control of the conversation”	26%	67%
“When I am with my friends I do most of the talking”	32%	62%
“I like to take charge in social situations”	56%	41%
“I like action, not talking”	39%	54%

In social situations some officers will express their feelings and some will not, and they seem willing to tell us where they fall. As shown in Table 6, four in 10 admit that they don’t hide their feelings from people and three in 10 are able to express their anger. Whether or not these are winning attributes in police work remains to be seen.

Table 6. Emotional Expression and Control		
	Agree	Disagree
“I don’t hide my feelings or emotions from people”	41%	49%
“When I am angry, people know it”	30%	65%

Aggressiveness: Causes and Changes

Aggressiveness during encounters with the public is another factor where new officers differ from one another. Aggressiveness can also be a double-edge sword. We may learn, for example, that

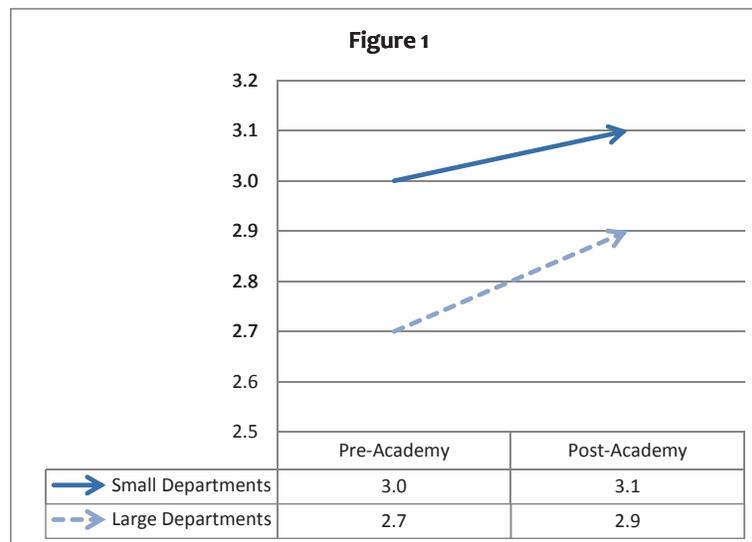
aggressive officers make more arrests but also run the risk of getting in trouble because of negative interactions with citizens. Here we explored the factors that contribute to aggressiveness and whether this tendency changes over time. Using the eight items listed in Table 7, an Aggressiveness Scale was created, which was designed to capture both verbal and physical aggressiveness.

Table 7. Officer Aggressiveness Scale*
• It is ok to be rude when someone is rude to you.
• Being respectful is nearly impossible when you are dealing with a gang member.
• Officers can't be expected to keep their emotions in check when people are disrespectful.
• In certain areas of the city, it is more useful for an officer to be aggressive than to be courteous.
• Police officers are often in situations where it is more appropriate to use physical force than to keep on talking to a person.
• Some people can only be brought to reason the hard, physical way.
• Sometimes forceful police actions are very educational for civilians.
• If officers don't show that they are physically tough, they will be seen as weak.
*Higher scores indicate more aggressiveness (1=strongly disagree ... 5=strongly agree)

In the first phase of analysis, we tried to understand why some officers are more aggressiveness than others (see Table 8). The results suggest that department size and being exposed to violence in childhood (measured as how often they saw various types of violence before they turned 18, from 1=never to 4=often) were related to levels of aggressiveness.

Looking at changes in aggressiveness over time we see that the officers reported more aggressiveness after completing the academy training than before they entered the academy (see Figure 1). Officers in smaller departments reported higher levels of aggressiveness when they started training; however, officers in the larger departments had a greater increase in their aggressiveness over time. As a consequence, at the end of recruit training aggressiveness levels were similar for officers from small and large departments.

Table 8. Predictors of Officer Pre-Academy Aggressiveness	
	Officer Aggressiveness
Age	No effect
Education	No effect
Race and ethnicity	No effect
Married	No effect
Military experience	No effect
Prior sworn officer	No effect
Family in law enforcement	No effect
In small department	+ Increases
Exposure to violence in childhood	+ Increases



Ethics

At the pillars of law enforcement are a set of ethical principles that are expected to guide the conduct of new officers and provide public legitimacy for the institution they represent. Honesty and integrity in their daily behavior and fair application of the law are core values in the profession. New recruits were given a list of possible ethical violations by police officers and, in each case, they were asked to rate the seriousness of the violation on a four-point scale from “not at all serious” to “very serious.” The violations varied in seriousness. As shown in Table 9,

officers' evaluation of the seriousness of minor ethical violations decreased after attending the training academy, as did their evaluations of ethical issues related to covering for their peers. In general, the drop was more pronounced for officers in larger departments than in smaller departments. Thus, police solidarity appears to begin at the training academy before recruits hit the streets. Apparently, officers get the message that they need to hang together and protect one another. This can be a positive disposition, such as coming to the rescue of an officer who is in trouble on the street or showing cohesion as an organization or workgroup. But as history shows, solidarity can also strengthen the "code of silence" or encourage a culture of misbehavior that is difficult to monitor from the outside.

Table 9. Ethics Questions -- How serious do you consider ... * (N=225)				
	Large Departments		Small Departments	
	Pre-Academy	Post-Academy	Pre-Academy	Post-Academy
Accepting free coffee or food from a restaurant.	2.8	↓-.6	2.2	↓-.2
Exaggerating facts to obtain a warrant.	3.8	No change	3.8	No change
Lying to a supervisor to protect a fellow officer.	3.9	↓-.2	3.8	No change
Covering up an incident of drunk driving by a fellow officer.	3.9	↓-.3	3.9	↓-.1
Inventing an informant for search warrant when you know the guy is dirty.	3.9	No change	3.8	No change
Dropping a suspect off in a bad part of town to put that person at risk.	3.9	↓-.3	3.9	↓-.3

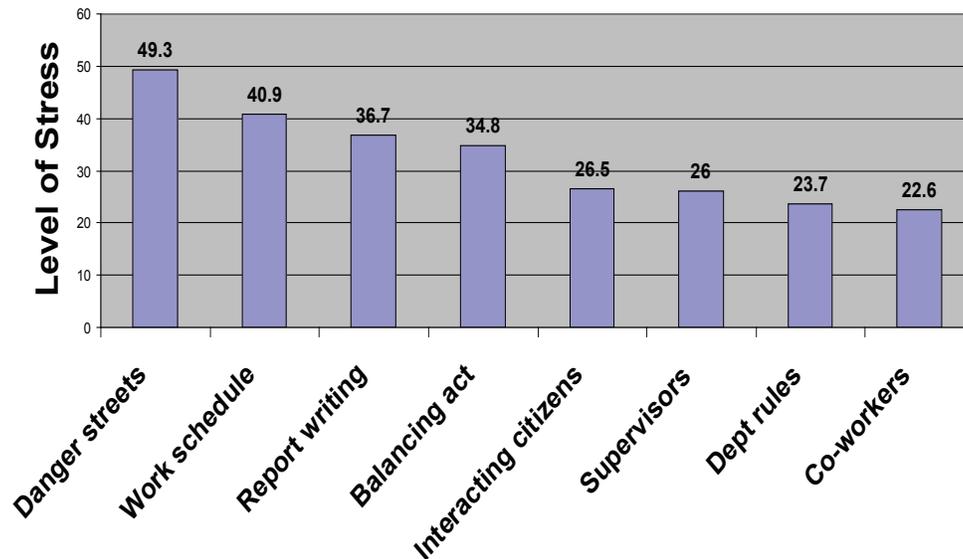
*Higher scores indicate a more serious rating of the behavior (1=not at all serious to 4=very serious)

Stressors on the Job

The Platform gives considerable attention to stressors that new police officers face given that veteran officers frequently talk about the emotional toll of the job. Five months after leaving the training academy, we gave new officers from one of the large departments an opportunity to tell us how stressful they found eight different aspects of their job, using

a 101-point scale from 0 (no stress) to 100 (high stress). As shown in Figure 2, the potential for danger on the streets received the highest rating at 49.3, followed by working odd hours, reporting writing, balancing work and other commitments, interacting with citizens, getting along with supervisors, following department rules and getting along with co-workers.

Figure 2

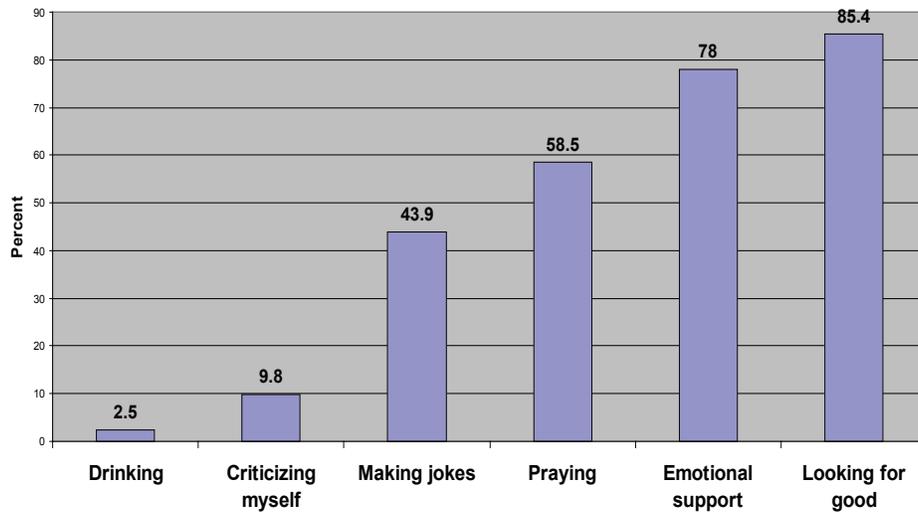


Coping Strategies

Research on coping with stress reveals that individuals employ many different coping strategies – some more functional and helpful than others for alleviating stress. We are beginning to learn about how different officers cope with stressors in this profession. Figure 3 shows a few examples selected from a much larger pool of items. The bars indicate the percentage of officers who said they used this approach for coping with stress a “medium amount” or “a lot” during their time at the training academy, which was viewed as a stressful experience by most.

Fortunately, strategies that are considered unhealthy, such as drinking or being self-critical, were not widely used (or at least admitted). But it is clear that making jokes about it (44 percent), praying or meditating (58 percent), getting emotional support from others (78 percent) were popular coping tools. The most popular approach (at 85 percent) was looking for something good in the pain and suffering. By following new officers over time, we hope to learn whether any of these coping strategies (as well as others) is functional and helps officers adjust to their new world of policing.

Figure 3



Conclusions and Implications

The longitudinal study of new police officers has been successful at gaining the full cooperation of both agency-wide and statewide training academies and achieving high levels of participation among recruits while they are at the training academy. Rates of participation declined after officers leave the training academy. Incentives have been helpful, but additional resources are needed to introduce more conventional tracking and follow-up procedures.

This study has been successful at field testing several hundred new measures of police perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors. We are pleased with the variability of responses to survey questions. New officers express a wide variety of attitudes, beliefs, and styles of interpersonal communication. Some of these may predict future success, while others will turn out to be unimportant. Only longitudinal tracking over several years, combined with theoretical guidance, will provide the answers.

Additional validation work is underway and will continue in Phase 2 as we expand the sample and refine the measurement plan. For example, additional data from training academy evaluations, FTO evaluations and agency records will be used to validate self-reports in at least one large city. Furthermore, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and ride-along observations with selected new officers will allow us to document the experiences of individual officers (including women and minorities) to see how they are adjusting to the police culture and organizational pressures.

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