

# The Landscape of Data Recording and Reporting for Use of Force and Violence Against Officer Incidents: Insights from Command Staff and Officer Interviews and Focus Groups in the U.S.

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## **Abstract:**

Reporting and recording police use of force (UOF) and violence against officer (VAO) incidents is critical to identify and address citizen and officer safety issues. However, nationwide, systematic and comprehensive data collection of UOF and VAO incidents is lacking. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with command staff and officers from 21 law enforcement agencies, participating in a larger national study, to understand agencies' reporting and recording processes for UOF and VAO incidents. Five themes were identified: 1) definitions of reportable UOF vary across agencies; 2) the UOF reporting and reviewing process is labor-intensive, but necessary for accuracy and accountability; 3) VAO reporting needs improvement; 4) most agencies lack effective processes to identify officers with high UOF rates; and 5) analysis of aggregate UOF data can be used to improve training and policies. Implications and action items to improve current UOF and VAO reporting and recording processes are discussed.

**Keywords:** use of force; violence against officers; reporting; training

## **• Introduction**

An estimated 53.8 million people were threatened with force or had nonfatal force used against them by the police in 2020.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, highly publicized events involving excessive use of

force (UOF), such as the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tyre Nichols, have triggered nationwide calls for change in policing and better police accountability. Unfortunately, existing data sources do not provide reliable national estimates of UOF.<sup>2</sup> A related, but less discussed issue, is the force used against officers and increasing rates of violence against officers (VAO). Data from 2021 shows 43,649 law enforcement officers were assaulted while on duty.<sup>3</sup> However, research on VAO is also limited by the lack of systematically collected national data<sup>4</sup> and may be undercounted.<sup>5</sup> As with police UOF data, VAO data is not standardized and typically not comparable across jurisdictions. Recent efforts have been made by the FBI and Bureau of Justice Statistics for more widespread record collection, however, these programs are limited by inconsistent and selective reporting.

A nationwide, systematic data collection effort is important for both agency decision-making and to understand the landscape at the regional/national level. Reliable UOF and VAO data are important tools that can help individual law enforcement agencies (LEAs) track, evaluate and improve policies and trainings to reduce use of excessive force and improve officer safety while considering each LEAs' unique needs and community contexts.<sup>6</sup> At the national/regional level, systematic data collection would improve the understanding of UOF and VAO with important implications for policy decision-making on a larger scale.

Despite the importance of these issues, current LEA data reporting processes are not well understood, in part due to an absence of qualitative research on the topic. Administrative data collected from LEAs is not reported uniformly across LEAs, with substantial variation in response rates and inconsistent measurement and definitions of force.<sup>2,7</sup> For example, UOF exists on a continuum that can range anywhere from officers' presence to empty-hand control to deadly force, making it difficult to standardize the definition and measurement of UOF.<sup>6,8</sup> LEAs' methods for collecting UOF data also vary, including a range of documentation and review requirements. There is also variation in record keeping, with less than half of LEAs storing UOF (37.0%) or VAO (40.4%) records in an electronically searchable database [citation blinded for review]. These variations in data reporting processes across LEAs pose challenges to the accuracy of UOF and VAO metrics at the national and regional levels and make regular ongoing analyses of these data impractical.

Considering what little is known about individual LEA reporting and recording processes, qualitative research on this topic is urgently needed. Therefore, the current study aims to explore current reporting and recording processes for UOF and VAO incidents. We also aim to understand how LEAs use UOF and VAO data to improve policy, training, and safety outcomes, as well as barriers and facilitators to UOF and VAO reporting and recording. To achieve these aims, we analyzed data from interviews and focus groups with command staff and officers from a range of LEAs.

- **Materials and Methods**

This study is part of a larger multi-method study collecting incident-level data regarding UOF and VAO cases, including officer-involved shootings (OIS), over 2015-2019. LEAs that were in at least the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile for OIS incidents in our national survey data and that had 100 or more

sworn full-time officers were eligible to participate in the current study, with 26 LEAs ultimately participating in the larger study.<sup>9</sup> To provide additional context to the incident data, interviews were conducted with command staff from 21 of these LEAs, and focus groups and interviews were conducted with police personnel directly connected with an OIS or UOF case involving a weapon from two LEAs. The 21 LEAs were from 11 different states in the Southeast (n=10), Midwest (n=2), and West (n=9). The LEAs served populations ranging from around 75,000 to over three million, with a mean population size of 529,482.

- Data Collection

Between September 2022 and August 2023, we conducted 21 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with command staff or agency leadership with familiarity of UOF policies. We also conducted two interviews and one focus group with officers who used a weapon during a UOF incident. Participants were identified by command staff and the LEA points of contact for the incident data collection portion of the project and contacted directly via email to schedule the interview. The data collection instruments were developed and revised according to feedback from an expert panel. The command staff interview instrument included a set of questions about LEA's UOF and VAO reporting policies and procedures (see Appendix A). The officer interview/focus group instrument asked officers to describe the reporting process for the UOF case that they were involved in (see Appendix B). All interviews and focus groups were conducted remotely via Zoom and were approximately one-hour long. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to NVivo software for analysis.

- Analytical Procedure

To identify themes in the data related to UOF and VAO reporting practices, focus group and interview data were analyzed using a modified iterative categorization approach. Iterative categorization is a systematic approach for analyzing qualitative data, including two core stages of description followed by interpretation.<sup>10</sup> The research team first created a preliminary codebook based on a review of nine transcripts and the research questions. The lead author coded transcripts using the codebook in NVivo qualitative research software and exported excerpts for each code into separate Excel spreadsheets. Then, another team member independently created a label for each excerpt (i.e., a summary of the excerpt in relation to the code), with the lead author reviewing all labels for accuracy and completeness. Lastly, the research team identified consistencies and inconsistencies across these summaries, which are presented as themes in the results section, along with representative quotations.

## **Results**

The findings below describe five major themes identified during focus groups and interviews.

### Theme 1: Definitions of reportable UOF vary across LEAs.

Generally, for all LEAs interviewed, incidents involving use of weapons or injuries are recorded and tracked as UOF, and complaints of discomfort or pain alone typically do not warrant a UOF report (although often are recorded in incident reports). However, there is significant variation in definitions of reportable UOF across LEAs. Some LEAs stand out as having broader, more inclusive definitions of UOF than other LEAs.

*"[UOF includes] any time that we have to physically touch someone to make them go along with what we need them to do. Sometimes that's just grabbin' their arm, that's considered a reportable use of force with us. Anything that's resisted in any type of way. Even if that's a verbal resistance." – Command Staff*

Other LEAs advocated for higher thresholds for the definition of reportable UOF.

*"I think it is a good definition, a good working definition, because as we've seen in other areas of the country...where they are recording every display or threat of force, not actual use of force, that can become onerous for the agency, for the officers. They're spending more time collecting data. They're not actually doing the work that they're charged with doing, which is serving the public by reducing crime, disorder, all of those things."* – Command Staff

In particular, LEAs vary in how they categorize incidents involving handcuffing and displays of force. While routine handcuffing without resistance is typically not considered UOF, some participants noted that even minor resistance during handcuffing (e.g., verbal or passive resistance) can trigger a UOF report. Some LEAs track displays of force (e.g., pointing a firearm or taser) separately from UOF, while others do not track displays of force at all. Finally, some participants noted that their LEA's definition of UOF is ambiguous or open to supervisor discretion, which can lead to inconsistencies in UOF reporting.

*"I guess it's a broad term, when you say use of force... For, I would say, some agencies, if you put handcuffs on some people, that's considered a use of force. It just depends on the agency. Here, that's not considered a use of force."* – Command Staff

Theme 2: The UOF reporting and reviewing process is labor-intensive, but necessary for accuracy and accountability.

The UOF reporting process typically begins with the officer writing an incident report, and the supervisor conducting an onsite review and writing the UOF report. Then, all evidence (including body worn camera footage) and reports are reviewed through the chain of command, often including a combination of lieutenants, captains, majors, deputy chiefs, chiefs, Internal Affairs or Professional Standards, and training division representatives. Some LEAs also have UOF review boards that review select UOF cases. OISs typically undergo independent investigations. The UOF reporting process was consistently described as laborious and thorough, and the time required for documentation and review was mentioned as a challenge by nearly half of participants.

*"We are starting to run into some problems where an incident that maybe takes an hour and has now 7 hours of review on it. It's starting to have an effect on manpower and trying to stay ahead of these things."* – Command Staff

Yet, many participants described these challenges as necessary, because the thorough documentation and review process ensures accuracy, consistency, and accountability.

*"You're getting three people all looking at every individual use of force and looking for discrepancies. I think it—as much as sometimes I am not thrilled about how much time it takes to get through the pile of uses of forces that end up on the desk, I do think that that amount of redundancy and thoroughness is ultimately a good thing for our agency."* – Command Staff

Theme 3: VAO reporting needs improvement.

In most LEAs, VAO is recorded within UOF reports, because participants noted that VAO typically leads to a UOF. However, instances of VAO that do not result in a UOF are often overlooked in the current VAO reporting process.

*"For example, an officer gets assaulted, but they're able to just turn the person around and put them in handcuffs afterward, right after getting punched in the face... It wouldn't have it in the database, and there's no way we would be able to run a report to know the*

*number count or instances of that happening.” – Command Staff*

Charges brought against the subject (e.g., assault on an officer) are usually documented in an incident report. However, participants noted that extracting information about VAO from incident reports is difficult, further limiting the ability to count or analyze the frequency of officer assaults.

*“We track injuries to our officers, but we don’t track how often they’re assaulted... it would definitely not be an easy task [to count how often officers are assaulted].” – Command Staff*

Several participants acknowledged that their LEA’s current VAO reporting process needs improvement.

*“I didn’t really even realize that we had a hole in the area of violence on officers. I guess we could be failing in that or behind the curve as far as violence against officers... That’s just lost in translation with the paperwork.” – Command Staff*

#### Theme 4: Most LEAs lack effective processes to identify officers with high UOF rates.

Most LEAs use early warning systems that alert when an officer reaches an arbitrary number of UOFs in a certain time period, which leads to supervisor and/or Internal Affairs review of the officer in question. For example, an officer with three UOF reports in a six-month period may be flagged for review. Participants described this process as problematic because it does not account for officers’ assignment areas (e.g., working in a high crime district, population size). Although LEAs may subjectively consider district conditions during their review, the current process may cause psychological burden among officers who work in high-risk districts.

*“It doesn’t really make sense to just average them all together. Then, people who are in worse areas get basically screwed. Not that that automatically means that you’re gonna get fired or anything, but it’s just nobody likes being under the microscope ... It’s just one more thing that just tacks on, and it’s in the back of your mind.” – Officer Interview*

One participant touted the benefits of their LEA’s new specialized software that allows the LEA to monitor and compare officers. It provides a more accurate assessment of an officer’s performance, considering factors such as crime rates in their assigned areas.

*“It’s a very useful tool, it’s a big change from what we used to use... We were comparing apples with oranges. Now that we have [software name removed to protect agency identity], we are able to compare officers on the same team at a glance in a certain time frame, or we can compare all the day shift teams across the city at a glance, so we can make better comparisons to see if somebody is an outlier sticking out.” – Command Staff*

#### Theme 5: Analysis of aggregate UOF data can be used to improve training and policies.

Some LEAs conduct analysis of aggregate UOF data, such as by examining trends across all UOF incidents over time, to identify opportunities to improve officer training or policies and procedures. There was variation in the frequency of analysis (e.g., monthly, yearly) and who conducts analyses (e.g., Internal Affairs, an independent consultant).

*“[The UOF Committee assesses if there are] patterns and trends that we can impact now to prevent future violations of policy, or can we improve the practices that we employ today... Based on some of the new programs we’ve put into place, we’ve having more citizen contact, making more arrests, but they’re resulting in less uses of force.” – Command Staff*

Participants identified the following specific examples of how analysis of aggregate UOF data has been used to improve officer training and policies at their LEA.

- Analyses highlighted a rise in officer hand injuries due to an over-reliance on strikes, so the LEA shifted their defensive tactics training to focus on alternative techniques.
- Analyses showed that a GPS application that officers can attach to the back of a suspect's car during a pursuit is less effective during winter, likely because snow does not allow the application to stick to the car.
- Analyses showed an increase in incidents with individuals with mental health disorders, so the LEA implemented the Crisis Intervention Team program, which trains officers to better interact with such individuals.
- Through analysis of UOF data, an LEA determined the proper distance for conducted energy device deployment, that pepper spray is typically not effective, and that baton strikes are not effective in confined spaces. This information informed officer training.

## **Discussion**

This study explored the current UOF and VAO reporting and recording processes at 21 LEAs across the U.S. We found that definitions of reportable UOF vary across LEAs, labor-intensive UOF reporting processes help ensure accuracy and accountability, and analysis of aggregate UOF data can be used to improve training and policies. However, we also observed that current VAO reporting processes and processes to identify individual officers with high UOF rates need improvement.

To improve nationwide data on UOF, LEAs must adopt a standard definition of UOF. Our findings suggested that LEAs must strike a balance between capturing all important data and reducing officer reporting burden when developing their UOF definitions. Others have reported inconsistent measurement and definitions of force across LEAs,<sup>2,7</sup> likely because it is difficult to reach consensus and convince LEAs to make changes to their current definitions. A federal grant program is needed to encourage LEAs to implement a common UOF definition, including funding to make necessary changes to data collection processes.

Relatedly, LEAs must balance the burden of having multiple layers of review and thorough documentation requirements with ensuring consistency, accuracy, and accountability. Paperwork and administrative processes are a major source of organizational stress among officers, and LEAs should consider ways to reduce redundancy in their current processes.<sup>11</sup> For example, there may be diminishing returns for each additional staff member who reviews a UOF report, and LEAs should think critically about the optimal number of reviews for each incident.

Similar to prior research,<sup>4,5</sup> we found that VAO reporting is insufficient. VAO reporting is important for identifying and addressing officer safety issues, as well as providing context to UOF statistics, as these incidents are often linked. At a minimum, all LEAs should record and report VAO data to LEOKA, the FBI's database that tracks officers killed and assaulted. To note, reporting requirements may have changed in the transition to the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). Another area in need of improvement is identification of individual officers with high UOF rates. Our findings highlighted the unfairness of comparing UOF among officers that work in higher- versus lower-risk districts, so LEAs should consider adopting early intervention tools that adjust for officers' assignment areas and other factors in real-time.

Lastly, our findings highlighted how analysis of aggregate UOF and VAO data can be used to improve training and policies. LEAs should consider hiring analysts to improve data collection and utilization of collected data. Data analysts could help LEAs identify modifiable risk and protective factors for early intervention and training improvement opportunities, as well as

compare LEA data with national benchmarks for similar size, type, and region. National benchmarks by LEA size, type, and region will be published in the near future from findings from the [survey name blinded for review].

Limitations of this study include lack of generalizability with only 21 LEAs, particularly to smaller LEAs, LEAs with fewer OISs, and LEAs in the Northeast and Southwest. In addition, five LEAs in the larger study opted not to participate in the qualitative portion, which could introduce participation bias. We also only conducted two interviews and one focus group with officers, so further research from the officer perspective is still needed.

Despite these limitations, this study fills an important gap in understanding about current UOF and VAO reporting and recording processes. The findings and action items highlighted in this study can be used to improve such processes, ultimately improving both citizen and officer safety in the future. Officer UOF and VAO are complex problems that are enduring. However, like other public health problems where progress has been made (e.g., seatbelts saving lives), for advances to be achieved we will need better data as outlined in this paper.

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### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Relevant Command Staff Interview Instrument Questions

- How is a reportable use of force incident defined in your agency?
- Can you walk through an example of how a UOF incident is typically reported in your agency?
- What do you do with the collective information of all UOF in your agency?
  - Does your agency identify officers with high UOF rates or citizen complaints? If so, are there intervention policies in place for these officers?
  - How do you use the results of UOF data analysis?
- Are VAO incidents reported and recorded differently than UOF cases? How so?
- Have there been any changes in the system for reporting UOF or VAO incidents during your tenure at the agency?
- Have there been any issues or challenges with your agency’s UOF or VAO incident reporting systems that you encountered or any complaints about using these reporting processes?
- What are some of the practices regarding UOF/VAO reporting that your agency is doing well that you think other agencies should adopt as well?

### Appendix B: Relevant Officer Interview/Focus Group Instrument Questions

- [In reference to the OIS or VAO/UOF case involving a weapon that the officer was directly connected with] What was the reporting process and follow-up within your agency after the incident?
- What is your typical procedure for reporting an OIS case? Do you feel like you have technical support to report cases as directed, if you need it?
- Do you feel like the incident reporting form is designed to capture enough details of what happened? The UOF reporting form?
- Have you ever gotten feedback from your supervisor or the leadership that there was insufficient detail in a report you submitted?
- Are you concerned that any confidential information in the report might be leaked out to

the public?

- What would make it easier for you to document and report VAO, UOF and OIS cases?  
Do you have any suggestions to improve the reporting system?