

Disciplined cops stay on duty, data shows

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Disciplined cops stay on duty, data shows

By Matthew Doig, Sarasota Herald-Tribune | 03.15.2012



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1 comment

I've always considered the response to a big data request a fair indicator of how good the story might be:

"Why do you want this? Nobody's ever asked for that before." Nice.

"It's impossible to get this to you and even if we could, you wouldn't understand it." Even better.

"Screw the public records law. You'll need a court order." I'm drooling into my keyboard.

But I've had to rethink that philosophy following publication of "[Unfit for Duty](#)," our nine-day series on how state and local officials handle serious incidents of misconduct by Florida's law enforcement officers. Just about everything in the series is based on information gleaned from two large databases provided by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the agency responsible for the certification of the state's corps of officers. The data helped us expose stunning incidents of criminal behavior that failed to cost officers their badges, secret agreements that allowed officers to resign so their misconduct could be hidden and a system plagued by problems at every level.

The cost for this font of dysfunction: Nothing. FDLE forked it over willingly, no whining or arguments necessary. They also provided a fresh batch of each database shortly before publication, again free of charge.

Even in Florida, where our generous public records law is rivaled only by the state's bankruptcy protections for its ability to produce scoundrels and good copy, this was rare. A few years back, our paper took on a similar project involving the state's Department of Education, and they pitched a fit and tried to bill us \$20,000. We only got their data down to a reasonable price once it was clear we were ready to go to court.

My colleague, cops reporter Anthony Cormier, learned about the FDLE data after poking into the background of an officer from another part of the state who was under consideration for a job with a local agency. Cormier discovered the officer had unsavory incidents in his personnel file, and after some pointed questions to the police chief about the officer's past, he was dropped as a candidate.

But Cormier figured the officer would get a job at another agency, and he wondered how any officer with such a dirty personnel jacket could still be allowed to wear a badge. He started making phone calls and learned about the state's certification process. When he was told the state maintains a database that tracks officer misconduct cases, Cormier promptly requested and received it.

Cormier is comfortable using Microsoft Excel but is still learning Access, the format of the FDLE data. I agreed to help him out with the data analysis to see if there was anything worth turning into a story.

There were two different databases to work with. The first tracked the serious incidents of misconduct that are sent to state officials after the incident has been found to have occurred by local internal affairs detectives. That database contained five different tables that were easily connected with queries linking common columns, such as a person ID number, a complaint number or an offense code. For the most part, this database gave us every officer that had ever been in trouble on the state

level, the nature of their offense, where they worked when the offense occurred, when the case was opened and closed and the punishment administered, if any.

Ultimately, I merged all the tables together to create a master lookup table with roughly 22,000 cases. About 8,000 of those cases contained no information in the offense category, and before creating the final master table, I had to scrap a couple thousand cases where the dates of the case were blank – an indication that a case was never opened because the offense was not serious enough.

Besides those minor issues, this was the cleanest database I'd ever seen. Normally you get into something like that and expect to spend hours, if not days, identifying the flaws and getting everything standardized. I expected to have to go through the offense category and change "snorted blow out of stripper's belly button" to something more analysis-friendly, like "Cocaine." In this case, nothing like that was necessary.

The same was true of the second database, which tracked officer certification and included four tables of information. Essentially a glorified Rolodex, the tables could be linked through queries to provide the employment and personal information (like name and DOB) for more than 210,000 former and active law enforcement officers. The information showed every agency where the officer worked, the date they were hired, the date they left, why they left (including for misconduct) and the status of their certificate.

Once again, no clean up was required. "Miami Beach Police Department" was always listed in that way, not occasionally as "Miami Bch PD" or "MBPD." In addition, the certification database included the same "Person Number" column found in the misconduct database. I was able to query the certification database to get an agency-by-agency count of officers, and then link it to the misconduct database to determine the percentage of officers at each agency with a misconduct case. That analysis turned into a story on how smaller agencies have become a dumping ground for problem officers.

After establishing that the databases worked properly, we needed to find out if the

information they contained held true in the real world.

The level of detail on each officer and each case made nearly any useful question possible, but I started the analysis with the most obvious: Which officers are getting in the most trouble, and what did they do? A query on that master table I'd created – asking for a count on person number and then sorting from most to least – gave up the answers.

There were about 60 officers who had at least four cases sent to state officials, and many of them were still active officers. It seemed like a lot. After all, the officers in this database weren't there because they had mouthed off to a supervisor or showed up late for a shift. They were there because fellow officers had found them guilty of serious misconduct on the level of perjury, drugs, violence or theft.

The query on the misconduct data showed German Bosque had been referred to state officials seven times – more than any other officer – for multiple assaults, perjury and cocaine possession. The employment data showed he was an active officer. I figured we were getting false positives. Obviously, something was wrong with the data.

We filed a public records request with Bosque's employer, the Opa-Locka Police Department, and received his personnel file. The paper records confirmed what we'd seen in the data, and gave us even more. Bosque had been the subject of 40 internal affairs investigations, had been fired five times and arrested three times. There was nothing wrong with the data. Obviously, there was something wrong with the system. We had our story.

Cormier called up one of the state officials with oversight of the disciplinary process and asked how it was possible that an officer could face decertification seven different times and still be wearing a badge.

It's not possible, the official told him. He suggested that we had used the data wrong.

Cormier gave him an ID number so he could look up Bosque's records. His response to what he saw: "Holy shit."

Months later, Cormier and I went to Tallahassee to interview state officials and present them with our findings. I credited them for building such a useful database, but wondered why they never analyzed it themselves. Every flaw we'd identified came through an analysis of their data. For example, they didn't know, until we told them, that a sheriff's office had not referred a case to them in over two decades, a clear violation of the reporting laws. A simple query involving the agency name field and the case opened date field would have told them the same thing.

So I asked the head of the agency, "Why aren't you guys analyzing your own data?"

"Nobody asked us to do it," he said.

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