

# Small share of US police draw third of complaints in big cities

Chicago, New York and Philadelphia data show few misconduct claims bring disciplinary action

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Most of the 15,300 law enforcement agencies in the US do not make public their data about police complaints © Joshua Lott/The Washington Post/Getty

A subset of police officers in Chicago, New York and Philadelphia are prompting an outsized share of people's complaints about misconduct in those cities, according to a Financial Times data analysis, raising questions about the oversight of those facing multiple accusations.

Thousands of officers in each city received at least one complaint at some point since 2007. Of them, the 10 per cent of officers named most often generated about a third of all the complaints. The disproportionate result shows complaints are heavily concentrated among what some police

accountability advocates term “repeaters” — officers who rack up complaints from the public yet face little discipline.

Scrutiny of [police misconduct](#) has intensified since the murder of George Floyd a year ago by former Minneapolis police officer [Derek Chauvin](#), which sparked demonstrations around the world. Chauvin, convicted in April, had at least 17 complaints made against him during his 19-year career on the force, with one leading to disciplinary action.

The FT’s finding echoes what an independent commission found 30 years ago when it examined the Los Angeles Police Department following the Rodney King beating. The commission led by Warren Christopher, later US secretary of state, [determined](#) that among officers with complaints of excessive force or improper tactics, the 10 per cent with the most complaints generated almost 28 per cent of all complaints.

“I would reject the notion that it’s a few bad apples — it’s a larger subset than that — but it’s still a relatively small subset of the overall force,” said Jamie Kalven, a journalist and activist who sued to make Chicago’s police misconduct data public. “The patterns just jump out at you . . . You have individual officers who have an extraordinarily high level of complaints [in relation] to the force as a whole.”

John Miller, the New York Police Department’s deputy commissioner for public information, said complaints were allegations which might prove unfounded. He also noted that “about 90 per cent of NYPD officers go through their entire career without a single substantiated [Civilian Complaint Review Board] complaint or departmental charge”.

The Philadelphia Police Department, which released [a report](#) last week saying that less than 1 per cent of civilian allegations resulted in more than a reprimand, said it was “fully committed to improving current practices”.

The Chicago Police Department declined to comment.

## In several US cities, a small group of officers generate a disproportionate share of misconduct complaints

Distribution of civilian misconduct complaints, by decile



Data for Chicago and New York are from 2007 to 2017 and include only closed complaints

Data for Philadelphia are from April 2015 to March 2021 and include pending complaints

Sources: Invisible Institute (Chicago); New York Civil Liberties Union (New York); OpenDataPhilly and Sam Learner (Philadelphia)

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In Chicago and New York, advocates have fought years-long battles in the courts to force the cities' police departments to publicly release information about incidents where residents have formally accused officers of misconduct.

The Invisible Institute, which Kalven founded, and the New York Civil Liberties Union have used the complaint information to build separate online databases. The [Citizens Police Data Project](#) in Chicago stretches from 1988 to 2018 and includes complaints currently being investigated. The New York [database](#), expanded this month, includes records dating to 1985 but only for closed cases.

The FT analysed closed complaints in the Chicago and New York databases from 2007 to 2017, and all complaints for the past five years in Philadelphia. The Pennsylvania city has information available for fewer years but posts it [online](#) on a rolling basis.

The analysis found that in Chicago, a median of 13 complaints were filed against officers in the 10 per cent who received the most complaints out of all the officers who received at least one. The officers in the 10 per cent group were the source of 37 per cent of all complaints.

In New York, the same group had a median of seven complaints and received 32 per cent of all complaints. In Philadelphia, the median was five, while the group received 28 per cent of all complaints.

***If you're going to contact 'risky people' on a regular basis, you should eventually become really good at it without generating complaints***

***Robert Kane,  
Drexel University***

Most of the 15,300 law enforcement agencies in the US do not make data about police misconduct complaints publicly available. The lack of data makes it difficult to prove whether the same pattern appears in other cities, though researchers generally agree it [exists](#) in police departments in most large and medium-sized cities.

Christopher Dunn, legal director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, noted there is no comprehensive federal reporting even for incidents where police kill someone. News organisations and advocates have estimated that officers kill about 1,000 people a year in the US, but there is no official tally.

"The whole system of reporting and accountability at the federal level is essentially nonexistent," he said.

Miller, of the NYPD, said that while most officers do not have disciplinary records, "it is not uncommon for highly active officers to receive complaints, especially when they are active in crime fighting".

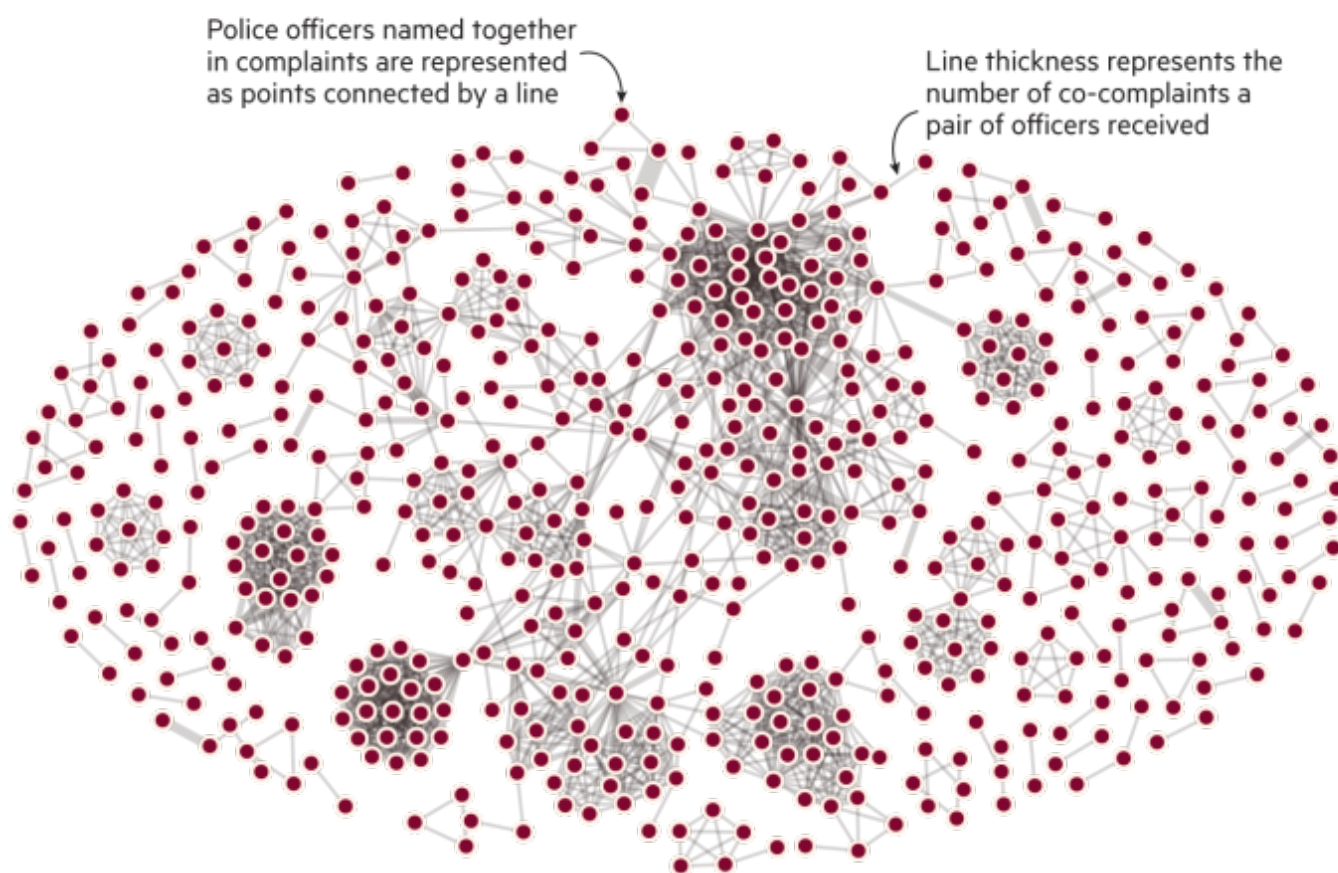
Robert Kane, head of Drexel University's criminology department, said arguing that complaints correlated with officers' contact with the public let police departments shed responsibility too easily.

"If you're going to contact 'risky people' on a regular basis, you should eventually become really good at it without generating complaints," he said.

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## Clusters of police misconduct

Officers from a single Chicago police district who have been named together in at least one civilian-facing misconduct complaint



Based on a visualisation of complaints in District 5 of Chicago between January 2010 and June 2016 in "The Network Structure of Police Misconduct" by George Wood, Daria Roithmayr and Andrew Papachristos (2019)

Sources: Invisible Institute; George Wood, Daria Roithmayr, Andrew Papachristos

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Some academics also have found that misconduct can spread.

Northwestern University sociologist Andrew Papachristos said his [research](#), with George Wood and Daria Roithmayr, suggested that officers with high levels of complaints could draw colleagues into "misconduct networks" —



groups of officers who are named together in several complaints.

“Deviance is a group behaviour,” he said. “The idea that it’s just ‘bad apples’ always forgets the rest of the analogy. Bad apples spoil the bunch.”

In all three cities, only a tiny portion of allegations resulted in disciplinary action. The impunity with which “repeaters” operated undermined public trust in the police, Kalven said. He added that when police departments declined to act on misconduct complaints, it transformed the actions of a subset into an institutional failure.

“To the extent that the government engages in willful ignorance,” Kalven said, “they are allowing things to go forward that will cause harm tomorrow.”

## **Methodology and sources**

Our analysis differs slightly from city to city. For Chicago, we used 2007-2017 police misconduct complaints data obtained by the [Invisible Institute](#) and included only civilian-facing complaints that were filed by citizens and closed over that period. For New York, we used 2007-2017 data obtained by the [New York Civil Liberties Union](#), which by default only includes closed complaints filed to and investigated by the city’s Civilian Complaint Review Board. For Philadelphia, we used 2015-early 2021 data from [OpenDataPhilly](#) and [Sam Learner](#) and included pending complaints as well as closed ones due to the shorter timeframe.

There can be more than one allegation in a given complaint. For example, an incident can have several allegations against multiple officers, and in New York and Philadelphia’s data, an incident can contain more than one allegation against the same police officer. We collapse allegations per officer under complaints in our analysis, so for complaints that name a given officer multiple times, we only count the officer once.