

# Officer-Involved Shootings in Anchorage 1993–2013

Troy C. Payne

The fundamental difference between police and other service providers—social workers, doctors, and the like—is that the police are the only institution in society given a general grant of authority to use coercive force. This difference, which the policing scholar Egon Bittner first described in the 1970s, is key to understanding the police role in modern society. Yet the use of force is justifiably a controversial topic. Both the police and the public seek to better understand incidents in which force is used. This article is an excerpt of a UAA Justice Center report, *Officer-Involved Shootings in Anchorage 1993–2013*, published in December 2013 regarding officer-involved shootings by the Anchorage Police Department (APD) for the period January 1, 1993 through May 11, 2013. The full report is available at [http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/research/2010/1402.apd\\_ois/1402.01.officer\\_involved\\_shootings.html](http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/research/2010/1402.apd_ois/1402.01.officer_involved_shootings.html).

## Data Source and Limitations

Criminal investigation case files were provided by the Anchorage Police Department for all 45 officer-involved shootings January 1993 through May 11, 2013. One additional incident was still under investigation at the time of data collection and was excluded. An “officer-involved shooting” was defined as any incident in which a sworn employee of the Anchorage Police Department purposefully discharged any firearm with the intent of stopping a human being while acting under color of law. Firing at occupied vehicles was also included, when the intent was to stop a human being in the vehicle. Accidental discharges of firearms and discharge of firearms at animals were not included.

Data were limited to the information included in the criminal case file. This included transcribed statements from officers and witnesses, crime scene narratives written by investigating officers immediately after the incident, and lists of property entered into evidence. Some files included supplemental information such as transcripts of radio traffic and/or 911 dispatch transcripts. Criminal case files did not contain official

determinations regarding the incident—it is unknown from these files whether and to what extent officers may have been disciplined or retrained after a shooting.

These data have other limitations as well. Because there is no information on incidents that *could have* resulted in an officer-involved shooting but *did not*, these data cannot be used to explain why officer-involved shootings occur. Instead, these data can only be used to *describe* events in which an officer-involved shooting occurred. Readers should also bear in mind that the primary source for the data was transcripts of interviews with officers involved in the shooting incident. These interviews asked detailed questions regarding the sequence of events leading up to the shooting. When multiple officers are present during an incident, Anchorage Police Department policy requires that officers be interviewed separately. The sequence of events reported by officers was generally in agreement, with minor differences in memory or perception

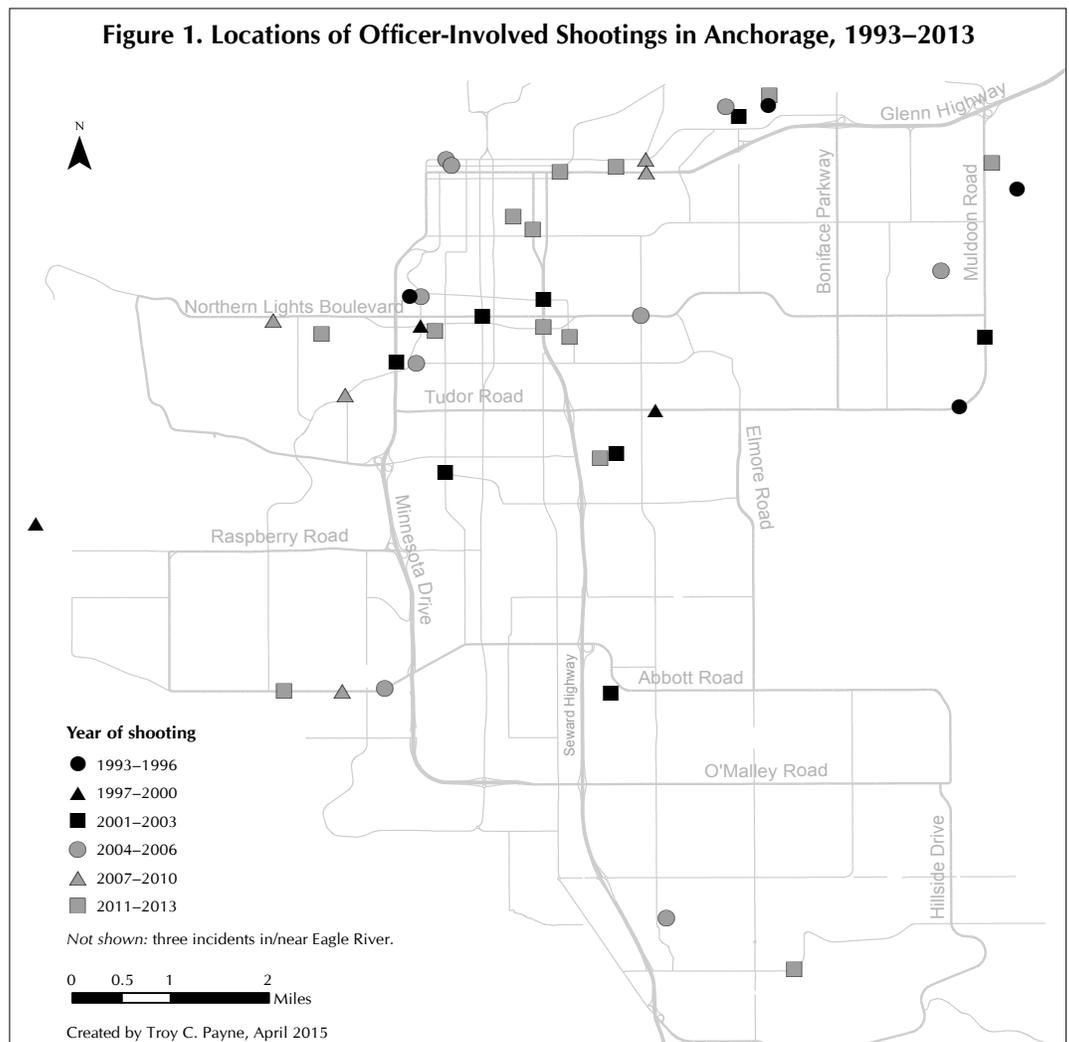
consistent with accounts of stressful events. In no case were the fundamental facts in dispute. Where non-police witnesses existed, their interview transcripts did not dispute the facts of the case.

## Shooting Incident Characteristics

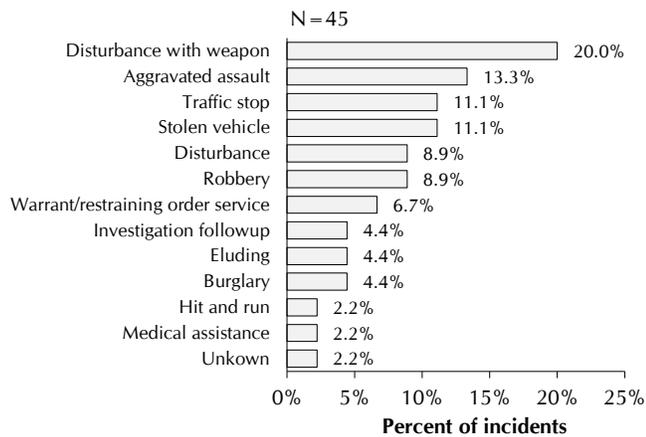
Officer-involved shootings are rare in Anchorage. The average is 2.14 shootings per year, ranging from zero to five shootings per year. Three incidents occurred north of Anchorage along the Glenn Highway. The remaining incidents are mapped in Figure 1.

Over two-thirds (71%) of the 45 officer-involved shooting incidents were subsequent to a citizen call for service; the balance were proactive incidents by officers, usually a traffic stop. The most common reason police were on the scene was a disturbance with a weapon, followed by aggravated assaults and traffic stops. Figure 2 shows

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**Figure 2. Reason Officer Was On Scene in Officer-Involved Shootings in Anchorage, 1993–2013**



Source of data: *Officer-Involved Shootings in Anchorage 1993–2013* by Troy C. Payne (2013). ([http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/research/2010/1402.apd\\_ois/1402.01.officer\\_involved\\_shootings.html](http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/research/2010/1402.apd_ois/1402.01.officer_involved_shootings.html)).

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the distribution of call types across the 45 incidents.

**Weapon Use by Citizens**

A weapon was used by a citizen in every incident. The most common weapon type was a gun (21 of 45 incidents, 46.7%). Nearly as common was a vehicle, with 18 incidents (40%). In three cases, citizens had a weapon that was visually similar to but was not a firearm, such as a BB or pellet gun. In the remaining three cases, a knife or blunt object was used.

**Injuries to Citizens, Officers, and Bystanders**

There were 48 citizens involved in the 45 shootings. Most citizens (75%) sustained some type of injury during the encounter. The most common type of injury was one or more gunshot wounds, with 17 citizens (35%) suffering fatal wounds and 15 citizens (31%) with non-fatal gunshot wounds. Officers directly injured bystanders in one incident, where passengers in a vehicle that was fired on by officers were grazed by bullets. In two other incidents, citizens caused injury to bystanders during the police-citizen encounter, both as the result of vehicle collisions during the citizens’ attempt to flee the police.

There were a total of 77 officers directly involved in the 45 shooting incidents. Of those, six (8%) sustained an injury. Half of those injuries were non-fatal gunshot wounds. The remaining three injuries were lacerations and contusions.

**Number of Shots Fired by Police**

It was not always possible to determine the exact number of shots fired by the police due to multiple factors. First, the Anchorage Police Department allows officers to carry personally-owned weapons while on duty. These weapons have differing magazine capacities. Even when officers carry department-issued weapons, the number of rounds in each magazine can

vary. Officers have the choice of several Glock pistols in varying calibers and magazine capacities for duty use. Department policy further allows officers to carry less-than-fully-loaded magazines because some weapon systems provide more reliable function when less than fully loaded. Officers are also trained to change magazines when it is safe to do so (a “tac load”) leading to multiple magazines used in a single incident. Together, these circumstances make it impossible to determine the number of rounds fired by simply subtracting the number of remaining rounds entered into evidence from the full magazine capacity.

We are instead limited to officer interview transcripts to count the number of shots fired. This measure provides an estimate. In this analysis, we use the highest estimate of shots fired, corroborated with other information in the file such as interviews with other officers on the scene and the list of property entered into evidence.

An estimated total of 275 shots were fired by 77 officers in the 45 incidents (Figure 3). There was considerable variation in the number of shots fired. In nearly half of the incidents, fewer than four shots were fired. Only three incidents had more than 15 shots fired by police.

**Officer and Citizen Characteristics**

The average age of the 77 officers involved was 36.5 years (Figure 4). Officers were typically mid-career, with an average of 8.7 years of experience with the Anchorage Police Department at the time of the shooting. Citizens were typically younger—over half (53.2%) of the involved citizens were younger than 30 years.

Two-thirds of the officers involved were

assigned to patrol at the time of the shooting, with another 13 percent being either part of a dedicated Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) or dual patrol/SWAT assignment. Two officers were off-duty at the time of the shooting; one officer was in the last phase of field training at the time of the incident.

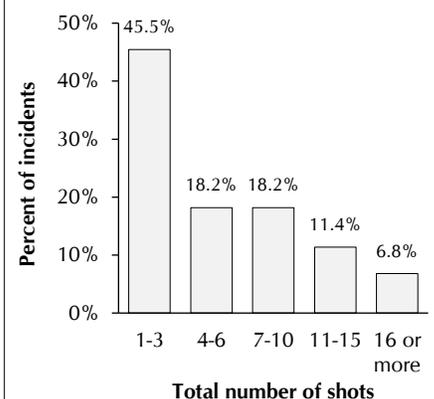
Seventy-five percent of officers involved in shooting incidents were white (58 officers). In 2013, 84.3 percent of the department’s sworn employees were white (Figure 5). Three of the 77 officers involved in the incidents (3.8%) were female; in 2013, 13.9 percent of the department’s sworn employees were female.

**Mental Illness and Drug Use**

Citizen mental illness and drug use were difficult to evaluate from the available files. The files did not include detailed information on the physical and mental health history of citizens. It is possible that citizens were using drugs or met diagnostic criteria for mental illness at the time of the incident but were not identified as such in the available data.

Even so, there was clear evidence of alcohol or drug use (or both) for nearly half (22) of the 48 citizens, while mental illness was noted for 10 citizens. Depression and suicidal ideation were the most common mental health issues reported, with 8 citizens either described as suicidal by family, or reported by officers to have told/asked officers to shoot during the encounter. Officers were typically unaware of the mental health history of citizens before arriving on the scene (or this awareness was not noted in the interview transcripts and reports).

**Figure 3. Estimated Number of Shots Fired by Police Officers in Officer-Involved Shootings in Anchorage, 1993–2013**



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### Warrants, Suspicion of Other Crimes, and Criminal Histories of Citizens

Half of the citizens in officer-involved shooting incidents had active warrants or were suspected of crimes that occurred before the incident that led to the shooting. Often, these suspected crimes were the reason for the initial police call for service. Seven (14.6%) of the citizens had an active warrant for a previous crime. Over two-thirds (69.9%) of citizens had at least one earlier conviction for a crime prior to the incident.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Inviting the UAA Justice Center to conduct this analysis was part of a larger effort within the Anchorage Police Department to examine officer-involved shooting incidents for areas where policy, practice, and training could be improved. In fact, while the case file review was ongoing for this project, APD changed its policy regarding firing at vehicles when the vehicle is the only weapon. Current APD policy now discourages firing on vehicles. Concurrent with this change, officers were trained in additional techniques to stop vehicles effectively and to avoid situations where firing on a vehicle is necessary.

The Anchorage Police Department granted full access to complete criminal investigation files on each officer-involved shooting incident from 1993–2013 (Internal Affairs and personnel records were not made available to the researchers). The Anchorage Police Department gained valuable insight about these incidents for training and officer safety purposes. In addition, allowing access to researchers from outside the department gave the community assurances that the criminal investigation files were summarized accurately.

Three limitations of this data collection should be reiterated. First, the information included here and in the full report is limited to incidents during which an officer purposefully discharged a firearm at a human being. Not included are incidents where an officer *could have but did not* discharge a firearm. The data can therefore be used to describe officer-involved shooting incidents in Anchorage but cannot explain

those events. Second, the data source is police officer reports and interview transcripts of officers and witnesses. Not all incidents had civilian witnesses. Where civilian witnesses were present, none of the basic facts of the incident were in dispute. Interviews with officers also showed no instances where the basic facts of the incident were in dispute. Still, the point of view contained in these reports is generally that of the police officers involved in the incident and of APD officers investigating the incident.

Even with these limitations, we can read across the data collected to describe the “typical” officer-involved shooting in Anchorage over the past 20 years. Officers were called to the scene due to a disturbance or aggravated assault. The majority of officers had more than five years of law enforcement experience. Most incidents involved one citizen and three or fewer officers. The citizen possessed a weapon, most often a

firearm or a vehicle. Officers discharged their firearms between one and three times. The citizens sustained one or more gunshot wounds, while officers were not injured. Half of the citizens involved were suspected of crimes other than those committed during the police-citizen encounter that led to the shooting, and most citizens had at least one prior conviction.

This collaboration with Anchorage Police Department has provided a first look at the characteristics of incidents where APD officers use one particular type of force. Starting in January 2014, APD began collecting substantially more data regarding *all* types of use of force incidents. The Justice Center plans to collaborate with APD to analyze these expanded data in the future.

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