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Police Impersonation: Pretenses and Predators

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Abstract Empirical research on police impersonation is rare. This research employs quantitative and qualitative methodologies on 2002–2010 police case files describing impersonation incidents from three police agencies to provide an understanding of the individual and situational constructs associated with police impersonation. Research objectives included: exploring incident characteristics, comparing incidents to national violent crime statistics; and identifying common themes. Results show that police impersonation incidents, offenders, and victims are unique, particularly when compared to national data. Qualitative analysis identified three major themes related to tactics, motivations, and typology. The research offers a framework for establishing policy recommendations.

Keywords Victimization · Policing · Law enforcement · Police impersonation · Typology

Despite the widespread attention given to policing and enormous body of research on criminal offending, research on police impersonation is rare. Media articles, though anecdotal, suggest that police impersonation may place community members at risk for easy victimization. These types of crimes can shake the public's confidence in law enforcement, particularly if victims believe that the event was a "legitimate" police action undertaken by a corrupt cop, though research directly related to victimization has yet to be conducted. The social ramifications, noted by Marx (2005), are numerous and often result in increased social anxiety and insecurity among the citizens. Other scholars have suggested, in addition to damaging the public's trust in authority and undermining the reputation of legitimate police officers,

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impersonators may threaten officers' ability to do their work effectively (Marx, 2005; Tyler, 2004).

This research is exploratory and employs a mixed-methodology approach to develop an initial understanding of police impersonation incidents, offenders, and victims. Quantitative and qualitative data provide a rich interpretation of the events that enhance our understanding of impersonation and add insight into common and unique contextual incidents including types of crimes, offender motivation, and victimization. The work also assists in developing policies to educate the public on how to avoid becoming victims. Further, these policies may assist legitimate law enforcement officers about ways to interact with the public that facilitate cooperation and gain trust.

Some criminology experts and police department representatives maintain that police impersonators are not dangerous and often represent mere pranks (Trugman, 1999; Van Natta, 2011). The minor criminal penalties associated with police impersonation suggest this viewpoint is common. Nonetheless, the minimization of these incidents is unwarranted because of the underlying social complexities and potential for individual harm. Police impersonators place citizens in a precarious conundrum that warrants both suspicion and trust toward officers. On the one hand, direct defiance of a police order is likely to aggravate a legitimate law enforcement agent. Assertive behavior by a citizen, on the other hand, may deter an impersonator or escalate violence. Distinguishing between real and phony officers can be difficult, and impersonators present themselves in numerous manners and commit a wide variety of crimes. Impersonators do more than just pretend to be a law enforcement officer. At times, impersonators engage in serious and wide ranging crimes including robbery, rape, and homicide.

Though exact estimates are unavailable, serious incidents of police impersonator have occurred. In July, 2011, a man dressed as a police officer wandered with little notice among a group of teens and young adults on the island of Utoya in Norway. The impersonator began shooting and killed at least 80 people. According to media reports, the shooter traveled on a ferry boat to the island posing as a police officer, saying he was there to do research in connection with the bombing blasts (BBC News Europe, 2011). One survivor noted: "I saw a policeman stand there with earplugs. He said, 'I'd like to gather everyone.' Then he ran in and started shooting at people" (Reuters, 2011).

Even less publicized events demonstrate how impersonation facilitates felonious assault. In August 1990 for example, eight year-old Jennifer Schuett was abducted from her bedroom night in Dickinson, Texas. When she tried to scream, the offender, Dennis Earl Bradford told her to be quiet, and reassured her that he was an undercover police officer (J. Schuett, personal communication, September 2010). He then raped Jennifer, slit her throat, and left her for dead on a fire ant mound in an overgrown field. More recently in Aurora, Colorado, two men wearing black police-type uniforms with utility belts and badges driving a white sedan with blue lights pulled a woman over and sexually assaulted her on the sidewalk (Denver Post, 2011). And in January of 2003, 20 year-old Lacy Miller of northern Colorado was abducted and murdered after being pulled over by a police impersonator using flashing red and blue lights placed on the dashboard of his Ford Expedition. Jason Clausen was arrested four days later and eventually pled guilty. He is currently incarcerated without the possibility of parole.

Clausen was no stranger to law enforcement (Coloradoan.com, n.d.). Two weeks before Lacy's death, sheriff's deputies responded to a report of a man repeatedly driving around a hotel building and wearing a ski mask. When police arrived shortly before 1:00 a.m. they found Clausen walking the hotel grounds with a bail bondsman badge, a ski mask stuffed in his left-front pocket, and a flashlight. Clausen had handcuffs and was armed with a .45-caliber semi-automatic handgun. In his vehicle, he had a .357 Magnum under the driver's seat and an AR 15 military-style rifle in the back. Later that same evening, an off-duty female police dispatcher was pulled over at 3:15 a.m. by a vehicle with a flashing red and blue strobe light. A young male, believed to be Clausen, emerged wearing a badge around his neck. The dispatcher reported that he ignored her questions about his name and agency affiliation. Instead he walked back to a sports utility vehicle, made a U-turn, and drove away.

As a result of such tragedies, some states passed laws to increase penalties for convicted offenders. Miller's death led to the passage of Lacy's Law, which changed the penalties for police impersonation in Colorado. Lacy's Law makes impersonating a law enforcement officer a class 6 felony, formerly a class 1 misdemeanor, with jail time and a significant fine. The law also changed the penalty for using blue and/or red flashing light on the front of a non-authorized vehicle from a \$15 fine to one that carries possible jail time and a fine up to \$5,000. Penalties vary according to jurisdiction. Texas, for example, has enacted legislation making police impersonation a felony in the third degree. In other states, such as Ohio and California, the offense is considered a misdemeanor.

While the described cases may represent the worst examples, they emphasize police impersonation can result in serious criminal behavior. The actual number of police impersonator incidents nationwide is unknown and in many instances victims may be reluctant to report. Law enforcement agencies rarely collect the exact number of police impersonation cases reported and investigated. Marx (2005) noted in 1974 more than 1,200 crimes by police impersonators were reported in New York City. Trugman (1999) estimated that more than 1,000 cases are reported in the city annually. The increasing number of incidents prompted the New York Police Department to form a specific unit to investigate police impersonators (W. Bratton, personal communication, October 6, 2009). A special assembled unit in the Miami-Dade Police Department has identified almost 100 impersonator cases since its inception 4 years ago (Newsmax, 2011).

Background Literature

Empirical research examining impersonation is uncommon. One theme in extant research is the role of political and structural changes that created an environment for abuse of powers that targeted vulnerable populations (Gellately, 2000; Hurl-Eamon, 2005; Tyler, 2004). A historical account of 29 men who were caught impersonating law officers between 1685 and 1701 in London indicated that impersonators were secure in their assumed identities because many citizens expected officials to be corrupt (Hurl-Eamon, 2005). The majority of cases depicted involved a defendant using an official disguise to frighten victims in extortion schemes. In several cases, impostors expressed a willingness to ignore wrongdoing in exchange

for sexual favors. Gellately (2000) offered a rare historical investigation of police imposters in Nazi Germany. Using case files he described impersonators presenting themselves as members or officers in the Gestapo and concluded that selfish and egocentric men, boys and girls, driven by materialistic motives, impersonated the Nazi police. His review of these files showed that these imposters were more likely to target Jews who were viewed as a vulnerable population. Gellately argued that the structural changes in Germany after 1933 in preparation for war created conditions conducive for police imposters. These studies show that impersonators capitalize on increased regulation of civilian life, unchecked police powers, and vulnerable populations.

Researchers also noted the way police conduct their work facilitates an impersonators ability to operate. Marx (1980) argued that as police undercover work increased impersonation incidents rose as offenders tried to gain access to prostitutes and drugs. According to Marx, undercover police operations created easy opportunities for police impersonators when “a quickly flashed badge or card is all that is needed, not even a uniform” (p. 422). Marx (2005) also noted impersonation is akin to temporary identity theft, though the implications for “social order and trust in authority” increase the stakes (see also Tyler, 2004). The authoritarian persona of police officers establishes the ultimate power imbalance between offender and victim and provides an easy opportunity for motivated offenders. Hurl-Eamon (2005) found that all the victims in her study were “clearly intimidated by the threat of entanglement with the law” (p. 466).

Walckner's (2006) research focused on the psychological motivations of the offenders in his study of 50 police impersonation incidents using 25 police incident reports and 25 media accounts of known impersonators. His findings suggest that impersonators tend to be police enthusiasts, deviants, and offenders seeking material gain. In half of the incidents the police “wannabes” used a vehicle and in over one-third their cars were equipped with emergency lights. The 16 impersonators seeking money or goods were more likely to possess a “badge” and wear some type of police clothing; additionally, this group showed a higher incidence of weapon use and violence. The small number of deviant impersonators (six) identified precluded any definitive conclusion about their means and motives.

Methods

This research employs a mixed-methodology approach that allows for an enhanced exploration and description of police impersonation. Quantitative data provide an initial understanding of the nature of police impersonation incidents, offenders, and victims by comparing the impersonation incidents with incidents of overall reported violence. These comparisons identify how these events, offenders, and victims differ from or are similar to their “traditional” counterparts.¹ Qualitative data offer a rich interpretation of the events that enhance and add insight into common and unique contexts within a variety of incidents. The qualitative analysis identifies the nature,

¹ Overall violence includes attempted and completed rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated and simple assault. Reported indicates that these victimizations were reported to the police.

themes, and patterns of these impersonation incidents including a typology of offenders.

Data

This research uses data from 56 police case files originating from three metropolitan areas in the United States. Our approach using non-probability availability sampling is based on personal connections within agencies that expressed a willingness to provide data. Although we approached four agencies, one indicated that they had a lack of relevant incidents. Participating agencies were assured that identifying information about the departments and incidents would remain confidential. The three participating agencies come from two metropolitan areas. Agency A and Agency B are located in the western part of the United States in a metropolitan area with more than 2.5 million residents. Agency C is located in the South and operates in an area covering more than six million residents. The number of cases that came from each agency was positively associated with the size of the agency.²

Case files from involving adult perpetrated police impersonation cases were requested from each agency.³ Agencies identified impersonation cases based on the records made by officers. The impersonation events occurred from May, 2002 to February, 2010. The 56 incident files provide information on 63 offenders and 71 victims. There are more victims and offenders than incidents because some impersonation incidents involve multiple victims and multiple offenders. A total of 45 case files are used in the qualitative analysis and include the initial police report complete with details about the incident, suspect(s), and victim(s). Most files also include detailed detective notes outlining the investigation and information on the disposition of the case once it was presented to the District Attorney.⁴

There are several advantages to using police files to explore crimes. First, using case files is inexpensive. Second, they provide an extensive range of detailed information including characteristics of victims, witnesses, and offender. Third, the majority of cases include a great deal of written narratives. This includes statements by the victims, as well as investigative notes that offered information on the motives, tactics, and tools used by the offenders. Fourth, police files are not subject to certain errors associated with other data sources (e.g., media content). Finally, police case files offer benefits based on Sellin's (1931, p. 346) view that "the value of a crime for index purposes decreases as the distance from the crime itself in terms of procedures increase."

While police case files offer a unique opportunity to study impersonation, they are subject to well-documented criticisms (Black, 1980; Brownstein, 2000; Sherman & Glick, 1984). Case selection bias is problematic and only incidents that come to the attention of the police are included. The data may reflect errors or manipulation in record keeping (Sherman & Glick, 1984; Brownstein, 2000). Also, case files represent only those incidents in which the officer indicated "impersonation of a peace

² The number of officers employed by each agency is not reported to protect confidentiality.

³ Participating agencies did not want to share juvenile cases. Thus, our analyses only include cases of adults engaging in impersonation.

⁴ Some case files did not provide narratives from which qualitative analyses could be conducted.

officer” in the report. If an incident involved a police impersonator who committed an additional crime, it is possible that the initial police report may only make note of the traditional offense (e.g., robbery, assault). Finally, the data are limited based on the sampling strategy. Despite these limitations, these data provide an opportunity to explore, describe, and better understand police impersonation.

Measures

The quantitative analyses examine a number of variables focused on incident, offender, and victim characteristics. Incident characteristics include the number of victims, number of offenders, witnesses, average value of cash/items taken, weapon presence, location of incident, clearance, and injury to victim. Offender characteristics include gender, age, Hispanic origin, and race. Finally, victim characteristics include gender, race, Hispanic origin, age, number of victims per incident, and victim/offender relationship.

Quantitative Strategy

Quantitative analyses are conducted in two ways. First, descriptive statistics of incident, offender, and victim characteristics outlined. Second, these impersonation statistics are compared to statistics based on overall violent crimes (i.e., attempted and completed rape/sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault). Overall violence crime statistics come from 2002 to 2009 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data restricted to crimes reported to the police only. Data from 2002 to 2009 are selected as they most closely match the years of the police impersonation case files.⁵ This comparison with data from the NCVS offers an opportunity to ascertain if the nature of police impersonation is comparable to violence in general.⁶

Qualitative Strategy

Forty-five case narratives are aggregated and analyzed for major themes and content phrases. Eleven of the cases lacked sufficient details to be included in the analysis. The incident descriptions, witness statements, and investigative accounts were reviewed for reoccurring words/themes and coded for patterns using an open-ended approach (Berg, 2004). The data were first analyzed for general statements among categories of analogous events and then grouped into conceptual domains (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Schatzman & Strauss 1973). Selected quotes representative of the major themes are presented as examples. The objective of the qualitative analysis is to

⁵ 2010 NCVS data were not available at the time of this research.

⁶ Other data exist, but are not well suited for this comparison. First, the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) offers data on violent crimes that are reported to the police. These data, however, fail to offer the details available in the NCVS except for homicide. For example, there are no measures of incident characteristics, victim characteristics or offender characteristics in the UCR for any violence except homicide. Clearly, they are not well-suited for our purposes. The National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) is also an option. It does offer characteristics on incident, victim, and offender characteristics for non-fatal violence as does the NCVS. However, NIBRS suffers from poor coverage of the nation, especially larger jurisdictions (Addington & Rennison, 2008).

enhance the quantitative data through descriptive methods rather than engage in theory testing or development. The “immersion” approach provides a descriptive, in-depth narrative which assists in establishing a framework for future inductive, grounded theory development (Berg, 2004; Abrahamson, 1983; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings

Quantitative Findings

Incidents

Table 1 presents the descriptive characteristics of 56 police impersonation *incidents*. These incidents most often involve one victim (76%), one offender (91%), no witnesses (75%), no weapon (68%), and result in no injury to the victim (96%). Half of the impersonation cases do not result in the loss of any valuable items or cash. The mean value of lost cash and property for all cases totaled \$616 ($sd=2,748$; range = \$17,831). Although impersonation incidents occur most commonly on a highway/roadway/alley (45%), about one-fifth take place in/near the residence/home of the victim (20%). The highway/roadway/alley and in/near the residence/home of the victim makes up the majority of locations impersonation took place. Nonetheless “other” locations make up 34% of the cases. “Other” includes places such as in a government public building, a school/college, hotel/motel, bus terminal, bar, and in a park. Police impersonation incidents tend not to be cleared (46% of incidents were not cleared).

How do these findings compare to incident characteristics describing overall violence in the United States? The results show that police impersonation incidents differ in several ways from overall violence that is reported to the police. First, reported impersonation incidents are *more* likely to involve one offender (91% and 76% respectively). Second, reported police impersonation is committed with no witnesses at percentages higher than is overall violence (75% and 65% respectively). Third, an important way in which impersonation and violence differs relates to injury to the victim. Overall reported violence results in both minor and serious injuries to the victim at percentages greater than impersonation incidents. About a quarter (27%) of overall violence victims and few impersonation victims (4%) are seriously injured during an incident. The same holds for minor injuries where no impersonation victims and 8% of reported overall violence sustained minor injuries. In contrast, impersonation incidents were equally as unlikely as overall violence to involve an offender with a weapon. Specifically, 68% of police impersonation incidents and 69% of overall violence involved an unarmed offender. Finally, a higher percentage of police impersonations occur on the highway/roadway/alley than do general violence incidents (45% and 20%, respectively).

Offenders

Most of the 63 police impersonators in our sample are male (87%), white (85%), non-Hispanic (68%) and about 31 years of age ($sd=8.6$ years). About half of the offenders

Table 1 Police impersonation and reported overall violent crime incidents

Variable names	Panel A: Police			Panel B: National Crime	
	Impersonation Sample			Victimization Survey	
	Count	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent	Valid Percent
Total incidents	56	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of victims	mean =1.28; sd=0.53			–	–
One	40	71.4	75.5	–	–
Two	11	19.6	20.8	–	–
Three	2	3.6	3.8	–	–
Missing data	3	5.4	–	–	–
Number of offenders	mean =1.13; sd=0.43				
One	51	91.1	91.1	73.8	75.9
Two or more	5	9.0	9.0	23.4	24.1
Don't know/missing data	0	0.0	0.0	2.7	–
Witnesses	mean =0.45; sd=1.04				
No witnesses	42	75.0	75.0	60.4	65.0
One or more	14	25.0	25.0	32.6	35.0
Unknown/missing	–	–	–	7.1	–
Average value of cash/items taken	mean =\$616.13; sd=\$2,748.27			mean =\$1,970.64; sd=\$7,332.99	
Weapon presence					
No weapon	25	44.6	67.6	62.4	69.1
Firearm	5	8.9	13.5	11.6	12.9
Knife/blunt object	1	1.8	2.7	7.3	8.0
Other	6	10.7	16.2	9.0	9.9
Unknown/missing	19	33.9	–	9.7	–
Location of Incident					
Highway/roadway/alley	25	44.6	44.6	20.6	20.6
In/near residence/home	12	21.4	21.4	36.9	36.9
Other	19	34.0	34.0	42.5	42.5
Clearance					
Not cleared	25	44.6	46.3	–	–
Cleared by arrest	18	32.1	33.3	–	–
Exceptionally Cleared	8	14.3	14.8	–	–
Referred	1	1.8	1.9	–	–
Unfounded	2	3.6	3.7	–	–
Unknown/missing	2	3.6	–	–	–
Injury to victim					
No injury	53	94.6	96.4	65.4	65.5
Serious injury	0	0.0	0.0	7.6	7.6

Table 1 (continued)

Variable names	Panel A: Police			Panel B: National Crime	
	Impersonation Sample			Victimization Survey	
	Count	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent	Valid Percent
Minor injury	2	3.6	3.6	26.8	26.9
Unknown/missing	1	1.8	–	0.2	–

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding

Number of offenders in the police impersonation data is measured at the interval level making a mean and standard deviation possible. In the NCVS it is not

Statistics are based on 56 incidents of police impersonation, and an unweighted n of 43,001, and weighted n of 135,884,950 victimizations in the NCVS

In the police impersonation data, statistics for witnesses are based on the number noted in police reports

In the NCVS, the statistics refer to bystanders based on the victim perceptions

are less than age 30. Police impersonators share some similarities with overall violence offenders, though many significant differences are noted. Both impersonators and overall violence offenders are more likely to be male than female. However, impersonators are far more likely to be male than were overall violence offenders. About three-quarters of all reported violent offenders (75%) in the NCVS are male compared to 87% in the impersonation data. Police impersonators are far more likely to be white than are general violent offenders from incidents reported to the police (85% and 54% respectively). And police impersonators are more likely to be older than overall violent crime offenders found in the NCVS. About four in ten (40%) of overall reported violent offenders are age 30 and older compared to almost half (46%) of police impersonators (Table 2).

Victims

Turning next to the 71 victims of police impersonation, findings show that victims are about equally split between males and females (48% male), about equally split between Hispanics and non-Hispanics (52% and 48%, respectively), primarily white (84%), strangers to the offenders (94%), and about 31.1 years of age (sd=12.0 years). Victims of police impersonation are similar to victims from overall violence that has been reported to the police. First, victims of police impersonation are as likely to be female as are overall violent crime victims. Among the general population, about 49% of reported violence victims are female compared to 52% of impersonation victims. Second, the racial composition of each group of victims is somewhat similar. Similar percentages of victims are white (84% and 77%), and black (14% and 18%). And the mean age of each group of victims is similar. Impersonation victims are on average 31 years old while overall reported violence victims are 33 years old. Some

Table 2 Police impersonation and overall violent crime offenders

Variable names	Panel A: Police			Panel B: National Crime	
	Impersonation Sample			Victimization Survey	
	Count	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Total offenders	63	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Gender					
Male	54	85.7	87.1	73.9	75.2
Female	8	12.7	12.9	16.2	16.5
Other	–	–	–	8.2	8.3
Unknown/missing	1	1.6	–	1.7	–
Age	mean =31.4; sd=8.6			–	–
Under age 20	1	1.6	3.8	19.8	22.6
20–29	13	20.6	50.0	22.8	26.0
30 and older	12	19.0	46.2	35.2	40.1
Other	–	–	–	10.0	11.4
Unknown/missing	37	58.7	–	12.1	–
Hispanic origin					
Non Hispanic	28	44.4	68.3	–	–
Hispanic	13	20.6	31.7	–	–
Unknown/missing	22	34.9	–	–	–
		99.9	100.0		
Race					
White	49	77.8	84.5	51.8	54.0
Black/African American	9	14.3	15.5	25.9	27.0
Other	–	–	–	18.3	19.0
Unknown/missing	5	7.9	–	4.0	–

In the NCVS, offender's age is an ordinal level variable and as such a mean and standard deviation cannot be calculated. In the NCVS, the 'under age 20' category includes 20 year olds. Likewise, the 20–29 year category does not include 20 year olds. In the NCVS, the 'under age 20' category includes 20 year olds. Likewise, the 20–29 year category does not include 20 year olds. Other categories for offenders age race and gender refer to groups of offenders not sharing the characteristic of interest. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. Statistics are based on 63 offenders of police impersonation, and an unweighted n of 43,001, and weighted n of 135,884,950 victimizations in the NCVS

significant differences in the two groups of victims are evident. An enormous difference is revealed when comparing the Hispanic origin of impersonation victims to overall violent crime victims. About half of all impersonation victims are Hispanic (48%) compared to only 13% of overall reported violent crime victims. A second striking difference is that police impersonation is far more likely to be committed by a stranger than is overall violence that is reported to the police. Findings show that 94% of impersonation and 42% of overall violence is committed by a stranger (Table 3).

Table 3 Police impersonation and overall violent crime victims

Variable names	Panel A: Police			Panel B: National Crime	
	Impersonation Sample			Victimization Survey	
	Count	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent	Valid Percent
Total victims	71	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Gender					
Male	31	43.7	48.4	50.8	50.8
Female	33	46.5	51.6	49.2	49.2
Not applicable	7	9.9	–	–	–
Race					
White	53	74.6	84.1	76.6	76.6
Black/African American	9	12.7	14.3	17.6	17.6
Other	1	1.4	1.6	5.8	5.8
Not applicable/missing	8	11.3	–	–	–
Hispanic origin					
Non Hispanic	26	36.6	52.0	86.8	87.1
Hispanic	24	33.8	48.0	12.9	12.9
Not applicable/missing	21	29.6	–	0.4	–
Age	mean =31.1; sd=12.0			mean =32.7 sd=14.5	
Number of victims per incident					
One	40	56.3	75.5	–	–
Two	11	15.5	20.8	–	–
Three	2	2.8	3.8	–	–
Missing data	18	25.4	–	–	–
Victim/offender relationship					
Stranger	61	85.9	93.8	42.3	42.3
Friend	3	4.2	4.6	35.9	35.9
Family	0	0	0.0	7.2	7.2
Intimate partner	1	1.4	1.5	14.6	14.6
Unknown/missing	6	8.5	–	–	–

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. The “not applicable” category refers to incidents in which a group was the victim. Statistics are based on 71 victims of police impersonation, and an unweighted n of 43,001, and weighted n of 135,884,950 victimizations in the NCVS

Qualitative Findings

Three major themes emerge from the data. First, impersonation of a police officer is a non-complex task that requires little more than incidental tools, which are easily obtained. Second, the range of criminal incidents and offender needs vary according to motivation or goals. Third, a clear typology of offenders emerges from the incidents. Each of these is discussed in greater detail below.

Types and Tactics

The qualitative content analysis shows that police impersonators are engaging in vehicle pull-overs, knock and talks, and harassment. The most typical impersonator incident involves an offender driving an unmarked car who uses a spotlight or red and blue flashing lights for a pull-over (33%). The motivation behind this type of incident involves some thefts, though, in many cases, the impersonator was unable to complete the alleged act because of a suspicious citizen or the unfortunate fluke of pulling over a legitimate law enforcement official. In the cases of documented pull-overs only three resulted in a successful monetary theft. The following case scenario exemplifies a pull-over case of theft:

A woman was pulled over by a car with one red light on the roof of the car. The suspect stated: "I'm pulling you over because you were speeding." He then took the drivers license and registration to his vehicle. He returned in 5 minutes and asked her to step out of the car, handcuffed her, placed her in the backseat of his vehicle. The suspect searched her vehicle and then let her go. The victim's driver's license, social security card, and \$79.00 in cash were missing from her purse.

Thirteen percent of the cases involve knock and talk impersonations. The cases generally are motivated by attempts to gain entrance into a home for a variety of reasons. Most reports note that the victim hears a knock on the door and the impersonator saying "Metro Police" or merely "Police Officer." Suspects in a home invasion gained entrance simply by knocking and identifying themselves as "police." In one case, involving a domestic violence dispute the investigating detective noted:

The victim related that while inside his house he heard someone knocking at his front door saying "Police." When he answered the door his ex-girlfriend was holding a utility knife with the blade pointed at the victim. She stated, "I heard you sold your truck for \$1,500 and I came over here to jack you for your money." The victim picked up a mop handle to protect himself and his 4-year-old daughter and talked the suspect into dropping her weapon. He then put his mop handle down and the suspect picked it up and started after the victim. He and his daughter ran into his bedroom and shut the door. The suspect broke down the door and then hit the victim in the head with the mop. The suspect fled the scene.

In other cases (27%), the impersonators are seeking information or engaging in harassment. In several of the harassment cases, the police impersonator calls the victim, identifies themselves as an officer or detective, and gives a fake badge number to gain information. One collection agent, for example, claimed to be a detective and threatened to arrest the victim, who was behind on her car payments.

Tools and Symbols

In the majority of pull-over cases, offenders drive unmarked, white, Ford Crown Victoria vehicles. The Crown Victoria has been used by law enforcement agencies for over 30 years, though production stops in August 2011 and the new car of choice is the Dodge Charger. In eight of the 15 pull-over cases the offenders' cars are described as white, Crown Victorias. In one case, the preliminary investigation report noted that the

victim “was on his way home driving westbound when a white, Ford Crown Victoria pulled in behind him and turned on a spotlight and red and blue lights that were located in the top portion of the windshield. The victim pulled over for this vehicle because he thought it was a police vehicle.” In six cases the offenders drove relatively non-descript sedans or sport utility vehicles: a white Chevy Impala, a silver four door, a maroon newer model Chevrolet four-door, and a black sport utility vehicle. Accessories (e.g., sirens, lights, push bumpers) may be simple or elaborate. During the search of one Chevy Impala the officer wrote: “I went in the vehicle and saw a control panel that resembled a panel for controlling emergency lights and sirens. While trying to turn on the lights to verify the colors I hit a button that activated a siren under the hood.”

The tools used by police impersonators are simple and easily obtained. The uniforms donned by the impersonators rarely are elaborate. The clothing worn by the offender generally was described by victims as “a dark blue t-shirt with white lettering in the breast area,” “dark blue/black uniform with a gun belt and badge, or “dark blue pants, blue uniform shirt.” In the majority of cases, impersonators carried badges, wore patches, or carried police looking equipment (e.g., flashlight, Nextel cell phone, walkie-talkie).

Typology

Common Crooks In many cases, offenders are committing thefts and robberies in pull-overs and home invasions. These offenders are looking for a quick shake-down, which generally involves a low monetary yield. In many cases, the attempts are unsuccessful. One man claiming to be a police detective visited an auto repair store to have new tires and rims fitted for his Chevy truck. The invoice totaled \$1699.99, which the suspect stated was fine because the police department would pay for the purchase. The owner of the store became suspicious and contacted the police department. In a vehicle theft, the police impersonator approached two women in a parking lot and stated he was “looking for car prowlers.” He then asked for identification and used a Nextel phone and said: “I am out with two females. I am code-4.” After asking the women to step away from the car, he sat in the driver’s seat and fled.

Cop Wannabes The data reveal far fewer clear-cut police wannabe cases than expected ($n=7$), though in several pull-over cases the reasons behind the stop are unavailable. In some instances, it is clear that the enticement of policing, the lure of authority, and ego enhancement played a role in the incident. In one case, for example, a suspect was arrested for impersonating a police gang officer at a small college campus. The impersonator told students that he had seen the autopsy of their peer who had recently died. When confronted by a detective, he claimed he was in the process of becoming a police officer, though further investigation showed he was not enrolled in an academy. When questioned about his motives, he admitted to telling people he was a police officer to impress his girlfriend.

In some cases, the wannabe police impersonators use the fake identity to gain an edge in a confrontation by asserting their authority. One suspect pulled a badge and identified himself as a constable at a movie theater, after telling a man to get off the cell phone or there would be trouble. In a similar case, an accused impersonator involved in a dispute in a store parking lot claimed to be an off-duty officer to gain leverage in the argument. In several instances, the impersonators are exerting

authority by merely pulling over victims to threaten them with tickets or arrest. In one case, for example, the impersonator stopped a young lady and required that she perform a “sobriety test,” which involved walking heel to toe and reciting the alphabet.

Uncommon Compulsions In several of the cases, the impersonators engage in inexplicable actions, often related to deviant or sexual needs. A victim (with two children) reported that a guy walking down the street came-up and said: “I need all of you to get in a line because I am a police officer. I need your name, number, and address.” The suspect grabbed at two of the victims and then unzipped his pants and started to open his belt saying “You want some dick?” The victims walked away. In the most serious case, the suspect drove an unmarked car with flashing red and blue lights. After he pulled over the victim, he asked to search his car and then handcuffed and sodomized the man. The victim decided not to talk to the police about the incident. At the time the investigation was closed, the suspect had not been apprehended.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research shows the importance of uncovering the nature, means, and methods of police impersonators. The individual victimization and potential for long-term social harm, noted by Marx (2005), may undermine the authority and legitimacy of law enforcement (Tyler, 2004), and put the public at greater risk. According to Felson (2006), by adopting the policing persona impersonators are unlikely to face resistance. Consequently, the actions of a police impersonator can tarnish public perception by encouraging views that law enforcement agencies often are engaging in misconduct. First, though impersonators are unassociated with legitimate policing efforts, unreported cases may further erode community connections with law enforcement (Tyler, 2004). Second, guilt by association may result in stronger beliefs by the public that somehow legitimate officers and agencies are connected to these illegal endeavors. Overgeneralizations by community members about the inherent nature of police as a corrupt profession are likely to decrease support for officers on the street.

The results indicate that in general, police impersonators, depending on the type of offense, may be easily deterred. In vehicle pull-over cases, most impersonators fled when the targeted victim was on the phone with 911 verifying the legitimacy of the stop. Additionally, potential victims who questioned the legitimacy of the stop and challenged the fake officer tended to avoid further victimization. Ironically, several impersonators in our sample were apprehended because they had the bad fortune to pull over an off-duty police officers or security related personnel. Our findings indicate the need to better educate the public (as well as officers) that the practice of confirming that they are being pulled over by a legitimate officer is a reasonable action. An officer should be trained that confirmation on the part of the citizen is not an affront to law enforcement.

Public education is essential to decreasing victimization, though in many respects, the average citizen is caught in a catch-22. The findings in the current study suggests

that it is unrealistic to expect the average citizen to defy an indirect or direct order to pull-over a vehicle, open-up a door, or hand over a wallet. In many jurisdictions, people are encouraged to drive to a seemingly safe area, though legitimate officers may see any uncooperative behavior as challenging their authority and may escalate hostilities in a routine stop. The “tricky offender” likely uses this knowledge of law enforcement to his or her advantage. Law enforcement training on the modus operandi of police impersonators can help officers understand why a citizen might be suspicious of an immediate pull-over or to opening their door to someone banging and yelling “Open up! Police!” Widespread training and education is important as local and national law enforcement officials face a precarious situation in which the public must trust police, though unbridled faith in law enforcement may backfire. Scherer (2005) noted, for example, that under certain circumstances terrorists may pose as authorities to gain access to secure areas.

Further, the role of fear of terrorism and out-groups or vulnerable populations in the public plays into the hands of impersonators must be addressed. Following 9/11, public fear has increased and greater regulation of civilian life has grown. Gellately's (2000) work indicated that increasing regulation of civilian life such as is being seen now in a post-9/11 world creates conditions conducive for police imposters. More evidence of this was recently seen during the shooting in Norway. It continues to be important that *all* members of the public understand their right to question the legitimacy of an officer without repercussion. And law enforcement needs to understand the public's need to do so.

Particularly interesting are the disproportionate number of Hispanics victims in the sample. These findings are similar to existing historical research on impersonation against vulnerable population. Previous research shows that in general Hispanics are less likely to contact the police than non-Hispanic whites (Khashu, Busch & Latif, 2005; Menjivar & Bejarano, 2004; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993; Walker, Spohn, & Delone, 2004; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004; 2005). If as research suggests, Hispanics are less likely to contact police, then why do they compose about half of the victim sample? Do impersonators target Hispanics with the hope that there is less chance of apprehension? Or is the high proportion of Hispanic victims a function of behavior of non-Hispanics? That is, are non-Hispanics less likely to share this aspect of the crime with police? Or are police less likely to note this for non-Hispanics in reports? Or perhaps these findings reflect the geographic regions from which the case files were obtained. Additional agencies from areas other than the South and the West may offer a different outcome in terms of Hispanics. Nonetheless, this finding does indicate that in some areas at least, the possibility that Hispanics are being targeted exists. This research cannot answer these questions, but indicates the need for additional exploration.

Increased penalties, such as those adopted in Colorado, may help to deter future offenders. In many states, police impersonation is a petty offense. In New York, for example, the fine is \$100.00 (generally less than a parking ticket) and not more than 60 days in jail for the unlawful use of uniforms or emblems (Scherer, 2005). In most jurisdictions, impersonation offenses result in a misdemeanor with a fine of up to \$2,500 and up to a year in jail. This work suggests that impersonation is not a benign event. For example, the finding that impersonators are armed in percentages similar to those of general violence offenders indicates the danger these offender present. The findings also reveal the value of property lost to these events may be significant.

As is the case with all research, this work has limitations. First, the relatively small availability sample from only three agencies limits generalizability. Further, the work is limited by what may be record keeping issues in police agencies. For instance, the cases include a small number of sexual assaults. Does this accurately reflect that sexual assault by an impersonator is rare? Or does it reflect that police may fail to note the impersonation portion of an incident in lieu of the more serious crimes?

Future research on police impersonation is warranted. First, research focused on the nature and extent of impersonation using other data is justified. Triangulation enhances our understanding of this issue. For instance, a content analysis of media coverage could better illuminate the extent and nature of impersonation, but also the role (if any) that moral panic plays in media reports. Second, future research should closely examine definitional and recording issues surrounding police impersonation. As our findings indicate, impersonation encompasses a variety of behaviors. Qualitative interviews with police officers and law enforcement agencies may offer insight into when and how consistently an incident is recorded as an impersonation. These qualitative interviews may shed light on our findings related to clearance. Are our higher than expected clearance rate anomalous or representative of police impersonation in general? Further, additional investigations may consider if definitions, recording, and clearance rates differ by agency or incident type. Finally, additional qualitative work in the form of offender interviews could shed substantial light on the dynamics of these incidents. For example, the role, if any, of drug and alcohol used by the offenders could be ascertained. In addition, the narratives in our case files indicated the possibility of mental health issues by some perpetrators. Offender interviews should ascertain the role that these elements play in police impersonation.

Our work also indicates the need for future theoretical work. Given the unusual nature of police impersonation, there is no specific theory that addresses the behavior. Routine Activities theory, for example, argues that the convergence in space and time of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians increases the risk of criminal incidents (Cohen & Felson, 1979). In police impersonator cases the three actors of interest (i.e., guardian, offender, and victim) become muddled. That is, the motivated offender takes on the *appearance* of the capable guardian and alters the role of others. Potential capable guardians may believe what they are witnessing is in fact a legitimate policing action and not a criminal offense. In sum, during a police impersonation incident, the motivated offender becomes an “incapable guardian.” Offenders no longer need to worry about target suitability because a badge, gun, and uniform negate any consideration of physical resistance by the victim. All are suitable targets—even so-called capable guardians. Further, the use of a disguise as a legitimate officer facilitates the convergence with victims as the impersonators can move through space without restriction.

A stronger theoretical explanation is found in Felson's (2006) work on crime and nature. In his classic tome, Felson described the role of Mullerian mimicry in understanding criminal behavior. Müllerian mimicry is a process through which separate species develop similar warning signals to deter would-be attackers (Kapan, 2001). For instance, specific butterfly species grow to mimic the color pattern (i.e., warning coloration) of distasteful species to reduce the threat of attack from common predators (Kapan, 2001). In a strange reversal of this strategy police impersonators use the attire, tools, and techniques of legitimate law enforcement officers to reduce

the threat of attack or apprehension. In other words, police impersonators are criminals who take on the “coloration” of legitimate law enforcement officers for protection as successful predators. In this clever reversal, the offending is mimicking the “good-guy.”

According to Felson (2006), impersonation serves three purposes. First, by distinguishing themselves as law enforcement officers, impersonators scare off would-be enemies. Second, using these tools, impersonators are able to get victims to comply with their wishes. Third, the actions of impersonators discourage bystanders from interfering. The “tricky” offender, according to Felson, uses aggressive mimicry to close-in on unsuspecting prey by imitating something desirable, that is, copying “legal behavior in order to carry out illegal acts” (p. 256).

While Mullerian mimicry offers some insight in to predatory behavior, the current research made no attempt at theory testing. Rather the work is exploratory—designed to examine the nature of the crime, offenders, and victims (see e.g., Jacques & Wright, 2008). The identification of real and perceived problems associated with police impersonators provides a foundation for future theoretical research.

Arguably, the opportunities for police impersonation are increasing in many areas as offenders become more sophisticated and targets abound. In California and Colorado, police impersonators are robbing medical marijuana shops. Local police agencies along the front range of Colorado note that the explosive growth of these clinics provides a perfect opportunity for these offenders. The rewards of a marijuana dispensary robbery are twofold: money and drugs. Further, based on the findings of Gellately (2000), structural changes that lead to increasing regulation of civilian life and greater police powers may create an environment that facilitates the operation of police impersonators. These opportunities indicate that the list of crimes aided by impersonating a law enforcement officer is extensive and likely to increase in the future.

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