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The Importance of Not Looking the Other Way: Prehire On- and Off-the-Job Misbehavior Predicts Subsequent Police Misconduct

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This research addresses an often-overlooked opportunity for police reform: the predictive value of prehire misbehavior data for reducing posthire police misconduct. While most reform efforts focus on officers' actions after they are hired, our findings highlight the impact of rigorous screening before hire. We examined how specific prior employment and nonwork misbehaviors related to general occupational instability, trouble in previous law enforcement roles, prior temper problems and violence, and irresponsible behaviors predicted future misconduct among 6,075 police officers tracked over 5 years. Notably, some prehire behaviors significantly elevated risks of citizen complaints and misconduct-related lawsuits, with hazard ratios up to 14.59. Contrary to common assumptions, candidates with prior law enforcement experience showed increased liability, including excessive use of force, suggesting that this background does not inherently reduce misconduct risk. After identifying the strongest predictors of police misconduct, we also examined their relation to termination for cause and assessed how agency decision makers respond differently to prehire versus posthire misbehaviors. By integrating findings on the predictive value of specific prehire misbehaviors, we offer targeted, evidence-based guidance and actionable recommendations for police agencies and policymakers. This work provides a scientifically grounded foundation for effective and consistent police screening decisions, offering a framework for establishing long-overdue national police hiring standards.

Keywords: law enforcement, police, screening, hiring, misconduct

Police misconduct is impossible to ignore and has profound, lasting consequences for communities. In the United States, more than 30,000 officers lost licensure due to misconduct, including excessive use of force and sexual assault, between 2000 and 2021 (Vera, 2021). In England and Wales, over 2,000 officers were dismissed from service between 2018 and early 2024 for offenses such as abuse of power, sexual misconduct, and dishonesty (College of Policing, 2024). In New South Wales, Australia, more than 26,000 citizen complaints were filed over the past 5 years, with misconduct substantiated against 5,000 officers (McCallum, 2024).[1] In the last few years, heightened public awareness concerning police brutality has sparked worldwide protests and urgent demands for reform (e.g., calls to defund, restructure, and retrain police forces). Yet, amid these calls for reform, critical areas of police staffing, such as screening, hiring, and termination, remained largely overlooked, impeding the march toward meaningful change.

[1] While comparable statistics exist for other countries, global figures are often hampered by underreporting and the absence of centralized disciplinary tracking systems (Amnesty International, 2009; Peßler, 2013).

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Organizations often solicit concerning information about applicants to reduce counterproductive work behaviors (CWB). U.S. law enforcement agencies and screening psychologists in many jurisdictions take such inquiries further, probing early life experiences, past employment, prior law enforcement experience, and incidents of past off-duty misbehavior (driving records, domestic violence). Although such practices are prevalent, their criterion-related validity is rarely, if ever, examined, and evidence-based policy guidance is lacking.[2] Our research empirically examines and demonstrates the usefulness of considering police job applicants' prehire on- and off-duty misbehaviors as employment screens for reducing future police misconduct.

This study accomplishes two overarching objectives: First, we demonstrate opportunities to reduce police misconduct by systematically integrating prior misbehavior screens into employment decisions. To that end, we examine specific prior (i.e., preemployment) off-duty (Lyons et al., 2016) and prior employment misbehavior signals in predicting future misconduct using a large sample of police officer candidates with data collected "in situ." Second, we derive risk benchmarks for each prior misbehavior that portends police misconduct, guiding preemployment screening decisions and highlighting as-of-yet underutilized opportunities. Our ultimate goal is to inform law enforcement screening policies with empirical evidence that distinguishes among specific prehire misbehaviors in terms of their predictive value for future misconduct, thereby enabling more defensible, data-driven disqualification decisions.

In the following sections, we first highlight the breadth and impact of police misconduct. We then introduce the general theoretical framework guiding our study, grounded in Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime, and summarize findings from the broader crime, delinquency, and workplace counterproductivity literatures to situate our research. We next review research from adjacent fields, including police psychology and criminology, but conclude that their studies lack prescriptive, behaviorally specific empirical research to inform prehire screening decisions. We then review current law enforcement selection and screening practices in the United States, highlighting the absence of national standards and the resulting variability in hiring requirements and rigor across jurisdictions. We conclude that law enforcement screening suffers from two critical gaps: the lack of national standards and the lack of supporting prescriptive empirical research.

Breadth and Impact of Police Misconduct

Law enforcement officers hold a uniquely authoritative role, making potential misconduct especially damaging to communities and society. The authority they wield amplifies both the harm and the opportunity for serious misconduct, including excessive force, improper discharge of weapons, and misuse of police vehicles. Preventing such misconduct is critical, with growing recognition within law enforcement of the need for better screening and hiring practices (Sedensky & Merchant, 2015).

Police misconduct can be fatal. From 2015 to 2024, The Washington Post maintained a database of every person fatally shot by on-duty U.S. police officers (*Police Shootings Database, 2015–2024*, 2024). Fatal shootings have increased annually, reaching 1,175 in 2024. Black and young civilians are disproportionately affected; more than 60% of victims were younger than 40 years. Certainly, not all police shootings reflect misconduct, but the statistics raise serious concerns about excessive or inappropriate use of force. Of the 10,430 logged fatalities, 2,056 involved individuals with mental illness, 565 were unarmed, and 191 were children. Independent counts confirm similar numbers (*The Counted: People Killed by Police in the US*, 2016) and emphasize that fatalities reflect only part of the burden—45% of shootings in one analysis were nonfatal (Ward et al., 2024).

Police misconduct extends beyond violence to everyday abuses of authority. From 2009 to 2014, 550 U.S. officers were decertified for sexual assault alone (Sedensky & Merchant, 2015). Documented cases include assaults against minors, sex workers, and women, prompting scholars to conclude that "police work is conducive to various forms of sexual misconduct" (Stinson et al., 2020, p. 6). These egregious acts underscore the urgent need for intervention to mitigate the broad societal harms of police misconduct.

Societal Impact

Police misconduct inflicts profound harm on society, burdening communities with financial costs, eroding trust, and destabilizing the very foundations of public safety and societal stability.

Financial Harm. Victims of police misconduct often pursue financial settlements, which are funded by taxpayers. The Washington Post "collected data on nearly 40,000 payments at 25 of the nation's largest police and sheriff's departments within the past decade, documenting more than $3.2 billion spent to settle claims" (Alexander et al., 2022). In their investigation, they identified one specific Detroit officer who was involved in 10 different settled claims of excessive force, illegal arrest, or wrongful home searches, totaling $665,000. Most settlements named officers associated with multiple settlements (i.e., repeat offenders); for example, 72% of the $528 million paid in Chicago from 2010 to 2020 was associated with officers named in multiple payouts (Alexander et al., 2022; Rozema & Schanzenbach, 2019). Costly settlements related to police misconduct divert public funds from essential services like education and infrastructure, as well as proactive crime prevention and other community-oriented policing efforts. While the financial toll of these cases is indeed staggering and disappointing given unaddressed societal needs for such funding, the community impact is far more than monetary.

Decays in Trust and Effectiveness. Law enforcement misconduct has lasting consequences for individual civilians and community trust. Police perjury has been tied to wrongful convictions (Covey, 2012), and settlement data identify common allegations such as violence, illegal searches and seizures, civil rights violations, and false arrests as key drivers of public distrust (Alexander et al., 2022). Each incident erodes confidence in policing and shapes negative community attitudes (Weitzer, 2002). Public approval has declined: Only 35% of Americans consider the typical use of force as appropriate, and just 31% approve of how agencies hold officers accountable (Atske, 2020).

[2] Screening psychologists instead typically rely on subject matter expert judgments and content- and construct-related validation. Professional standards (American Educational Research Association et al., 2014; Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2018), principles of evidence-based HR practice (Pulakos, 2005), and legal requirements (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1978) describe the standards for empirically establishing reliability, validity, and freedom from bias in employment-related assessments.

This decline in legitimacy has concrete effects. In majority-Black neighborhoods, police violence leads to fewer 911 calls and less officer-initiated activity (Strom & Wire, 2024). As trust falters and legitimacy erodes, communities perceive bias, fear law enforcement, and become less willing to cooperate. This reduces crime reporting and fractures vital police–community partnerships (Decker et al., 2019; Desmond et al., 2016; Madon & Murphy, 2021; McCarthy et al., 2020). Some communities then turn to informal justice or vigilantism, which undermines social order and further strains relations (Haas et al., 2014). Negative encounters with police also harm residents' mental health and reduce quality of life (Bor et al., 2018).

In response to deteriorating community relations and increased reliance on informal justice, police forces often adopt a more militarized and insular stance. This response, shaped by a longstanding culture of "us versus them" (Boivin et al., 2020; Nhan, 2014), further deepens the divide (Doherty, 2016). Over time, this cycle of distrust can fuel unrest, polarize communities, and weaken the legitimacy on which effective policing depends.

Current Solutions

Growing awareness of police misconduct and its societal impact has spurred reform efforts aimed at improving oversight, accountability, and community safety through legislative action, procedural changes, and investment in community-based alternatives. Local ballot initiatives have banned tactics like stop-and-frisk and mandated release of body camera footage (Figgatt, 2020). Debates over qualified immunity have gained traction, with many advocating for its reform to enhance officer accountability (see Opinion of the Court in *Pearson v. Callahan, 555 U.S. 223*, 2009; see also Ray & Neily, 2021; Subramanian & Arzy, 2021). Training reforms have also advanced, with federal support for de-escalation programs (cf., *Law Enforcement De-Escalation Training Act of 2022, S.4003*, 2022) and targeted efforts to improve investigative practices (Shaw et al., 2017). Leading experts in law enforcement reform and accountability have highlighted educational efforts as crucial for transformational change (Ray & Neily, 2021).

A major policy shift granted the Criminal Justice Training Commission expanded power to decertify officers for misconduct (J. Brown, 2024; *S.B. 5051*, 2021), helping address gaps in accountability exacerbated by union contracts that allow or mandate destruction of disciplinary records (Joseph, 2016). In tandem, public calls for union contract reform have intensified (Ray & Neily, 2021; Subramanian & Arzy, 2021). Other efforts have emphasized reallocating police budgets to fund evidence-based community programs, such as supportive housing (e.g., Housing Matters, 2022) and crisis response teams with embedded behavioral health services (e.g., Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024). These shifts aim to reduce reliance on traditional policing while enhancing safety and accountability through community-based solutions.

Together, these interventions are intended to better support communities and increase police accountability. However, increased accountability is in part a reactive measure—addressing consequences (e.g., through officer discipline) rather than preventing them. To build better police forces, we must extend our perspective *beyond* how officers act after they are on the force (posthire) to consider who may join their ranks in the first place. Although largely overlooked in discussions of police reform, evidence-based screening and selection are vital strategies to curb police force misconduct.

Theoretical Framework and Empirical Context for Present Research

The literature on CWB highlights the importance of employee screening and selection in reducing misconduct (Mercado et al., 2018; Ones & Dilchert, 2013; Rotundo & Spector, 2010; Sackett & Wanek, 1996). Employee screening and selection work because individuals differ in self-control, socialization, and integrity and thus associated CWB (Gough, 1960; Marcus & Schuler, 2004; Ones et al., 2012; Van Iddekinge et al., 2019). Screening reduces the baseline risk for CWB among those hired.

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime posits that low self-control is the primary cause of criminal and analogous deviant behaviors. Individuals with low self-control are characterized as incautious, risk-seeking, and insensitive to others,[3] making them more prone to behaviors offering immediate gratification. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, individuals engage in crime because they do not consider the long-term consequences of their actions. Their theory emphasizes that self-control is shaped early in life through effective parenting and remains stable across the life course.[4] Importantly, counterproductive and criminal behaviors are seen as outcomes of enduring individual differences in self-control interacting with ubiquitous opportunities for deviance. Pratt and Cullen's (2000) meta-analysis of 21 studies and over 49,000 individuals tested this empirically and found that low self-control is a robust and consistent predictor of both crime and analogous behaviors, with effect sizes exceeding .20 across study designs and measures. Relations held even when controlling for variables from competing theories, including social learning, strain, and opportunity.

According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), low self-control remains consistent across situations and time, signaling a stable propensity to offend when opportunities arise. Criminals will offend in different ways at various points throughout their lives, displaying versatility in their offenses but stability in their propensity to offend. Similarly, individuals who have historically engaged in harmful or counterproductive actions should be more likely to engage in destructive behaviors on the job.

Research has shown that seemingly different deviant behaviors both within and across life domains (e.g., childhood delinquency, substance dependency, CWB) are often highly intercorrelated (Blazei et al., 2006; Krueger et al., 2005; Lyons et al., 2016; Ones & Viswesvaran, 2003; Roberts et al., 2007; Stanek et al., 2017). Many misbehaviors exhibited early in life have been established as valid predictors of later life delinquency and criminality. Adolescent delinquency relates to adult externalizing behaviors (Blazei et al., 2006). Childhood problem behaviors, stealing, lying, and truancy predict juvenile delinquency and recidivism (Loeber & Dishion, 1983). Childhood conduct problems predict workplace counterproductivity in young adulthood, suggesting that work misconduct

[3] Traits associated with low conscientiousness, low agreeableness, and low emotional stability (i.e., low socialization or meta-trait factor alpha; see Stanek & Ones, 2018).

[4] Recent meta-analytic evidence demonstrated that parental involvement is modestly but consistently associated with reduced delinquency (Barger et al., 2019).

is a context-specific antisocial behavior (Roberts et al., 2007). CWB also show meaningful temporal stability. A meta-analysis by Giordano and Ones (2021) found corrected rank-order correlations ranging from $\rho = .73$ over a 1-week interval to $\rho = .41$ across 3 years, underscoring CWB's persistence over time. Further supporting their temporal and contextual consistency, CWB have been shown to follow individuals across jobs. Using a longitudinal sample of over 1,200 individuals assessed at two time points roughly 10 years apart, Anderson et al. (2022) found that CWB measured during participants' mid-20s predicted CWB reported in their mid-30s, despite likely changes in employers and work contexts. The zero-order correlation between earlier and later CWB was $r = .33$, and this relation remained sizable even when controlling for cognitive ability and other individual differences. These findings underscore the stability of CWB across substantial time intervals and job transitions.

Despite clear evidence that counterproductive behaviors are rooted in stable individual differences and persist across time and contexts, it remains an open question whether this knowledge is systematically applied in screening for high-stakes occupations such as policing. To what extent do agencies incorporate evidence-based principles to reduce misconduct risk?

Gaps in Law Enforcement Screening and Hiring

Lack of National Standards

In the United States, law enforcement applicants undergo extensive preemployment psychological testing (see, e.g., Spilberg & Corey, 2022). However, assessments and the rigor with which they are employed can vary drastically even within a single agency, not to mention across localities. Leaders at both state and national levels recognize the acute need to develop consistent standards for police hiring, which do not currently exist, and agreed upon the following recommendation regarding eligibility requirements:

> Any potential candidate with history of the following should be ineligible: Any form of extremism or demonstrated prejudice or bigotry, including in dress, jewelry, or tattoos; history of violence, including domestic violence convictions; serious criminal history, including felony convictions; and serious misuse of alcohol or illegal drugs. (Bureau of Justice Assistance and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2023, p. 4)

In each U.S. state, a formal body—often called Peace Officer Standards and Training Commissions—governs standards for law enforcement (Rau et al., 2021). Although every U.S. state maintains such a commission, their authority and standards vary immensely; whereas some involve heavy regulation of policing (e.g., setting officer and agency standards, investigating misconduct), others merely make recommendations to lawmakers and have no decertification authority (Rau et al., 2021; The Justice Collaboratory, 2023). Thus, policies from different precincts vary substantially on numerous factors, including how information relating to demographics, education, criminal background, and prior drug use is used in screening, among others. There is even greater variance in how agencies evaluate and use records for "lateral" applicants with prior law enforcement experience. A report by the Community Oriented Policing Services makes clear that although these records are typically available to hiring agencies, they are generally not reviewed or lack usefulness:

> An officer facing misconduct charges in one agency may be allowed to resign, and the investigation closed. This arrangement enables the officer to maintain state certification as he or she begins looking for other positions. Agencies that are eager to hire experienced, trained, and certified officers—and thus avoid the time and expense of conducting a complete background investigation and providing a full training program—may hire the officer, not knowing about the investigation or misconduct. In parts of St. Louis County, Missouri, for example, the practice is common enough that it has earned its own name: the "muni shuffle." (Morison, 2016, p. 21)

Ultimately, current practices in police assessments often fail to prevent candidates with prior misbehaviors (i.e., those with histories of violence or past employment trouble) from being hired. This lack of due diligence puts both communities and police agencies needlessly at risk. In this study, we demonstrate a powerful opportunity to reduce violence and other police misconduct by systematically integrating specific prior misbehavior information into employment screening decisions while also highlighting the extent to which these opportunities have not yet been exploited.

Lack of Supporting Prescriptive Empirical Research

To effectively screen candidates, law enforcement agencies need empirically grounded, behavior-specific benchmarks. Simply knowing that low self-control or past deviance predicts future misconduct does not offer sufficient guidance about which prehire misbehaviors are particularly egregious, which behaviors require further scrutiny, and which behaviors carry little predictive significance. Despite growing attention to police misconduct, a clear empirical gap remains regarding which specific preemployment misbehaviors predict subsequent officer misconduct and how that information can be used to guide screening decisions.

Most studies in the police psychology and criminal justice literatures focus on posthire behavior, such as peer influence (Simpson & Kirk, 2023), civilian complaints (Rozema & Schanzenbach, 2019), or internal posthire disciplinary outcomes as predictors (Cubitt et al., 2020). While these studies underscore the need to monitor misconduct after officers are hired, they do not address the critical upstream question of how misconduct risk can be screened out prehire. A small number of studies do consider preemployment factors (e.g., Kane & White, 2009; White & Kane, 2013), but these typically rely on composite indices (e.g., "criminal history" or "past employment problems"), are confined to single geographical locations or departments (e.g., New York Police Department), and focus solely on career-ending misconduct as the criterion, rather than examining which specific types of misconduct can be predicted and which specific preemployment misbehaviors are predictive. Others (e.g., Donner & Jennings, 2014; Greene et al., 2004) include relevant predictors but do so through bundled behavioral indicators or broad psychological constructs such as low self-control, limiting their utility for implementing widely applicable and transparent prehire misbehavior *screens* (e.g., "applicants with history of domestic violence should not be hired"). Still others offer theoretical frameworks or narrative reviews (e.g., Donner et al., 2021; Harris, 2016), which highlight the importance of risk identification but do not provide empirically grounded, actionable screening guidance.

The meta-analytic evidence among law enforcement officers is surprisingly sparse. The most comprehensive synthesis to date, conducted by Aamodt (2004), reports only three effect sizes linking

preemployment misbehavior to posthire misconduct: (a) receiving traffic tickets predicting later disciplinary problems ($\rho = .06$, $N = 3{,}530$, $k = 4$), (b) having a prior arrest record ($\rho = .05$, $N = 2{,}227$, $k = 3$), and (c) evidence of prior employment problems ($\rho = .12$, $N = 4{,}403$, $k = 5$). These predictors are limited by focusing only on traffic violations, arrest history, or vague job-related problems. Other potentially significant specific misbehaviors (e.g., domestic violence, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs [DUIs]) were not included. The small number of contributing studies and limited scope of predictors leave agencies with minimal empirical guidance for designing evidence-based preemployment screening protocols.

The widely accepted principle that past behavior predicts future misconduct is supported in the policing literature by studies using composite measures of low self-control, which typically include indicators like traffic violations, job dismissals, delinquent bills, marijuana use, and polygraph failure (e.g., Donner & Jennings, 2014). Although informative from a theoretical perspective and useful for broad *selection* purposes, these bundled indicators do not yield the misbehavior-specific risk estimates needed to inform specific *screening* decisions. Screening, unlike selection, requires identifying concrete exclusion criteria tied to elevated risk. In the absence of such evidence, agencies rely on heuristics that may exclude low-risk candidates or overlook high-risk ones. What is needed is research that moves beyond validating general deviance principles to provide actionable, item-level insights that can guide targeted, defensible screening benchmarks.

Prior research has not produced the kind of behaviorally specific, empirically validated benchmarks needed to inform specific prehire screens in law enforcement. Our study addresses this gap directly. Using a large, multiagency field sample of police applicants, we estimate longitudinal hazard ratios (HRs) for a wide range of disaggregated preemployment misbehaviors, linking them to multiple categories of verified posthire misconduct behaviors. In doing so, we provide police agencies with the specific evidence they need to develop targeted and effective screening processes that reduce misconduct and enhance public safety.

Prehire Misbehaviors for Law Enforcement Screening

Past as the Best Signal of Future Misconduct: Misbehaviors in Previous Jobs

Much of the occupational deviance literature has focused on the value of dispositional variables as latent predictors of misconduct, psychological signs that suggest a potential for involvement in counterproductive acts (Berry et al., 2007; Mount et al., 2006; Ones et al., 1993; Salgado, 2002). However, we are not limited to latent predictors. To predict other work criteria (e.g., task performance), the field of personnel psychology has long demonstrated the usefulness of highly relevant *behavioral samples*, currently inconsistently collected and/or sporadically used in the prediction of police misconduct.

More than 50 years ago, Wernimont and Campbell (1968) popularized the idea that individuals exhibit behavioral consistency, such that prior behaviors should serve as optimal signals for subsequent behaviors.[5] They posited that, in attempting to predict job performance, employers should try to match predictors, in the form of behavioral indicators, as closely as possible with the criterion. In the context of this study, prior misbehaviors in previous occupational contexts should function as effective predictors of future police misconduct. Thus, the first cluster of predictors we examine follows Wernimont and Campbell's advice, matching relevant specific behavioral indicators (prior occupational trouble and employment instability) to criteria of interest (misconduct as a law enforcement officer). Demotions, unfavorable terminations, frequent job changes, and warnings due to negligence in previous jobs signal erratic behavior, difficulty in maintaining personal discipline, and poor judgment. In addition, for individuals with a military employment record, disciplinary problems during their service may provide an especially relevant signal for potential police misconduct. Of particular predictive value are instances of unprofessional conduct within a highly structured setting where discipline is explicitly emphasized and enforced.

In addition to behavioral consistency, commensurability also plays a role (Steel et al., 2019). Here, commensurability refers to how closely the job-related demands and work contexts match in terms of their psychological and physical fidelity. The predictive strength of past misbehavior for future misconduct is likely to be higher in settings with high commensurability, where similar pressures, norms, and tasks create consistent contexts that can evoke comparable behaviors. As discussed above in regard to the "muni shuffle," many police officer candidates have prior work experience in law enforcement. Therefore, for those with prior law enforcement experience, we specifically examined the validity of prior trouble in law enforcement jobs (e.g., unjustified use of force, complaints regarding sexual harassment or racially offensive behavior, written reprimands or suspensions) in relation to later misconduct in future law enforcement jobs (e.g., use of force, formal citizen complaints). This category of prehire misbehaviors matches most closely with posthire misconduct behaviors. Unlike much of the prior research, which has primarily examined misconduct trajectories and interventions after hire, our study shifts the focus to prehire indicators in order to support evidence-based screening practices and the development of consistent hiring standards.

Nonwork Misbehavior History as Risk Signals

A signal is a direct, observable behavior that replicates or closely resembles the actual behavior to be predicted (Wernimont & Campbell, 1968). When predicting bad behavior, such signals need not be limited to prior workplace transgressions. Prior misbehaviors outside of work can also serve as meaningful predictors of future misconduct.

As described above, established linkages between prior nonwork misbehaviors (e.g., off-duty deviance; Lyons et al., 2016) and later on-the-job misconduct highlight the value of these prior actions as signals of potential future risks. Yet, the guidance offered in this literature often stops at broad recommendations like "Select those with fewer prior non-work misbehaviors." Such general advice fails to quantify the specific risks associated with different types of nonwork misbehavior, making it difficult to determine which should trigger concern in police employment screening. Given strong evidence

[5] Meehl (1954), whose work predated Wernimont and Campbell (1968), referred to this principle as "Meehl's Malignant Maxim": The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Past behavior and behaviorally relevant biographical details provide "a postmortem view of the development of an individual" (Owens, 1976, p. 150).

relating misbehavior and misconduct across different life domains, we identified two areas of prior nonwork behavioral signals relevant to police misconduct: prior temper problems and violence and prior irresponsible behavior.

Prior Temper Problems and Violence Signals. Whether verbal or physical, direct or indirect, aggressive behavior causes harm to other individuals (Berkowitz, 1993). Prior violence is an important predictor of future aggression and shows stability over time (Huesmann et al., 1984; Kokko & Pulkkinen, 2005; Olweus, 1979; Piquero et al., 2012). In the criminology literature, aggressive behaviors, history of antisocial behavior, and number of prior violent offenses predict recidivism among violent offenders (Katsiyannis et al., 2018; Swogger et al., 2015). The tendency to react aggressively to provocation is so well established that many consider it a stable psychological trait (Coccaro, Bergeman, et al., 1997; Coccaro, Berman, & Kavoussi, 1997). Indeed, life history measures of aggression have been developed and successfully used to predict risk of violence among psychiatric patients (e.g., Plutchik & van Praag, 1990). Fitness for duty evaluations among military recruits evaluate enduring history of fighting and problems with authority figures (G. L. Brown et al., 1979; Garb et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2022).

In fitness for duty evaluations for police, information gathered as part of personal history typically asks respondents to self-report their history of temper problems, altercations, and violent behavior (see Corey & Zelig, 2020; Johnson, Roberts, & Associates, Inc., 2006; Rostow & Davis, 2004). For preemployment evaluations, many states and jurisdictions have their own personal history forms with similar questions on aggression and violence (for some examples, see California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, 2024; Houston Police Department, 2019; North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standard Commission, 2024; Skagit County Sheriff's Department, 2019). Despite the widespread use of these forms, there is little evidence-based guidance on which personal history factors are most predictive of future misconduct, resulting in inconsistent application and a lack of standardization. Standardized, evidence-based practices are needed to ensure that this information is optimally used across jurisdictions.

Among prior acts of aggression and violence, some are perpetuated as part of domestic violence. There is good empirical evidence that domestic violence, rather than being a problem of isolated individual actions, is a marker for violent and abusive behavior over time (Hester & Westmarland, 2006). Examining a sample of 692 domestic violence perpetrators, Hester and Westmarland (2006) found that

> exactly half of the perpetrators were involved in at least one more domestic violence incident within the three year follow-up period (50%). Nearly one in five (18%) perpetrators who reoffended did so against a different partner to the one they were originally reported for. (p. 35)

As importantly, and of additional relevance to the present research, 34% of domestic abusers were "all around repeat offenders" (p. 35), having been arrested for offenses other than domestic violence. Other studies demonstrate a similar pattern: Perpetrators of domestic violence are likely to engage in other deviant and criminal behaviors, including but not limited to violent acts (e.g., theft, arson, substance use; Moffitt et al., 2000; Norwood et al., 2004). Accordingly, our investigation of prior temper problems and violence signals included domestic violence alongside temper problems and engaging in repeated physical altercations. Our aim was to identify the specific violence signals that carry the greatest risk for future police misconduct.

Prior Irresponsible Behavior Signals. Just as violence predicts future aggression, prior irresponsible behaviors, such as reckless driving, excessive alcohol use, DUI, poor credit, and unpaid alimony or child support, are signals for future irresponsibility and misconduct. Reckless driving involves speeding, using a phone while driving (without a hands-free system), violating traffic laws, changing lanes continuously or in an unsafe manner, and not yielding to pedestrians at crosswalks, among others (Hai et al., 2024). Investigations into accident registration systems and offender databases show that individuals who display risky traffic behavior exhibit substantially higher odds of not only traffic crime but also violent crime and vandalism (Junger et al., 2001). Police records likely underestimate these effects. Large-scale ($N > 43{,}000$) survey findings demonstrate links between reckless driving and a wide array of antisocial behaviors, including violence, property destruction, theft, and dishonesty, among others (Vaughn et al., 2011).

Other nonwork misbehaviors also increase the likelihood of misconduct. Alcohol consumption is causally associated with increased violence (Bye, 2007). Excessive drinking specifically (i.e., binge drinking) relates to impaired productivity at work, absenteeism, motor vehicle crashes, and crime, among other societal tolls (e.g., health care costs, mortality; Bouchery et al., 2011; Plant et al., 2002). Arguing that conviction for DUI constitutes a turning point in the employment and social lives of men, Oksanen et al. (2015) reported that the first drunk-driving conviction "constitutes a significant life event that appears to increase the likelihood of financial problems" (p. 471). Further, a large proportion of individuals with repeated DUI convictions also exhibited non-substance-related crimes (e.g., an estimated 40% also committed crimes against property and/or people; LaBrie et al., 2007).

A history of financial problems has also been investigated as a signal for CWB (Oppler et al., 2008). However, findings differ based on operationalization. Oppler et al. (2008) assessed financial history concerns dichotomously (whether or not persons had experienced bankruptcy, tax liens, legal judgments regarding debt, or delinquency). Employees with these indicators of financial irresponsibility were more likely to engage in CWB. When credit scores constituted the measure, Bernerth et al. (2012) demonstrated strong positive relations with task performance but trivial to null relations with production deviance and personal aggression. In this research, we examined both having a bad credit history and being in arrears on alimony or child support payments in predicting police misconduct. We were motivated to investigate these misbehaviors because, while they currently operate as barriers to law enforcement employment, their role in explaining misconduct is not well understood (Bernerth et al., 2012; Bureau of Justice Assistance and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2023; Thørrisen et al., 2019).

Summary of Research Objectives

Research in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology has found that deviance and counterproductivity form "syndromes" that generalize across both life stages (Roberts et al., 2007) and life domains (Lyons et al., 2012, 2016). Misbehaviors and misconduct in different areas of life are strongly and positively correlated (Marcus & Schuler, 2004), reflecting a broader counterproductive syndrome with a common etiology (Blazei et al., 2006; Krueger et al., 2002; Roberts et al., 2007; Stanek et al., 2017). The research presented in this

article aimed to advance understanding of which specific prehire misbehaviors signal elevated risk for different forms of police misconduct, with the goal of developing empirically grounded screen-out recommendations for law enforcement hiring. Such information is typically gathered from police job applicants themselves or captured as part of background investigations. However, there is no standard set of misbehavior signals used by different agencies or background investigators. Worse, the information gathered is typically qualitatively evaluated based on agency and background investigator experiences, rather than empirical benchmarks. We do not yet know which prior misbehaviors have strong predictive value and which do not. Our research addresses this critical gap, showing which past misbehaviors matter most in predicting future police misconduct and providing an evidentiary basis to strengthen police screening practices.

We organize our examination of specific prehire misbehaviors in four major areas: *prior occupational trouble and employment instability* (e.g., being demoted or terminated for cause, job hopping), *prior trouble in law enforcement jobs* (e.g., racism, sexism, unwarranted use of force), *prior temper problems and violence* (e.g., demonstrating temper problems, physical altercations, perpetrating domestic abuse), and *prior irresponsible behaviors* (e.g., excessive alcohol consumption, DUI, financial irresponsibility). Using a longitudinal database where officers were followed over a period of up to 5 years, we examine the predictive usefulness of each misbehavior for different criterion categories of police officer misconduct: *interpersonal misconduct and violence* (e.g., sexual or racially offensive behaviors, excessive use of force, inappropriate use of weapons), *property damage or misuse* (e.g., intentional damage of official property, misuse of official vehicles, and at-fault motor vehicle accidents), *conduct and competence concerns* (e.g., procedural, conduct, knowledge mistakes), and outcomes of police misconduct (i.e., *record of professional misconduct* such as written reprimands or suspensions, citizen complaints regarding unprofessional conduct, being arrested for or charged with misdemeanors or felonies).

After identifying the most hazardous predictors of police misconduct, we then examine whether these same prehire misbehaviors predict termination for cause. We also contrast how agency decision makers respond to posthire misconduct versus prehire misbehaviors. Perhaps most importantly, we consolidate our findings into a set of evidence-based recommendations for improving police screening and hiring practices. This work ultimately aimed to deliver scientifically grounded guidance for effective decision making in police screening and provide a foundation for developing national standards that are long overdue.

Method

Sample

This study used an archival database with deidentified information from 8,539 candidates for law enforcement positions across more than 150 municipal, county, state, and federal agencies in the United States. After receiving conditional job offers, candidates underwent hiring suitability evaluations conducted by a psychological service provider contracted by the agencies. Data on candidates' prior (i.e., prehire) misbehavior were obtained at this time.

Of the 8,539 candidates evaluated, 6,075 were onboarded by the respective agencies, and their misconduct was tracked at several points in time for several years posthire. During this period, 1,686 employees left their respective departments for a variety of reasons, ranging from voluntary (e.g., accepting another job) to involuntary (e.g., termination for cause). We provide more detailed information on termination reasons below as they constitute an outcome examined. Detailed characteristics for the total sample and subgroups are provided in Table 1.

Transparency and Openness

An early, small subsample ($N = 1,799$) was used by Dilchert et al. (2007) to examine the relation between cognitive ability and CWB. The present study draws on a substantially expanded data set ($N = 8,539$) and includes longitudinal data on individual incidents of police misconduct that were not available for the earlier study.

The study protocol was reviewed and determined to be exempt from further institutional review board review or oversight (Elon University Institutional Review Board No. 21005); the study design was not preregistered. We adhered to the *Journal of Applied Psychology* methodological checklist. Data were analyzed using SPSS Versions 29.0.1.0 and 31.0.0.0. Additional materials for this study are available online on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/b4qkj/). This research used data with strict access limitations due to the extraordinarily sensitive nature of the information. The data set was made available to the authors by the psychological service provider contracted by the law enforcement agencies. The authors do not have permission to share data or code with third parties. However, researchers interested in obtaining the data set can request access by contacting the data provider.[6]

Measures

Prehire Misbehaviors

Candidates' prehire misbehavior data were collected using a standardized background questionnaire that assesses personal and employment history data (Davis & Rostow, 2005). These behaviors and indicators are assessed in a "yes/no" checklist format (i.e., candidates are asked whether they have ever engaged in the behavior in question or have ever experienced a certain event/incident) and then reviewed and confirmed in a standardized follow-up interview. Table 2 lists all prior misbehavior items. As described in the introduction, to structure the presentation of results, we grouped items into four clusters based on their content representing prior occupational trouble and misbehaviors and prior nonwork misbehaviors. These four clusters align with distinct, theoretically supported content-based facets of self-control deficits (occupational maladjustment, law enforcement–specific integrity problems, violence propensity, and general irresponsibility) while reflecting the broader underlying propensity toward rule-breaking and poor self-regulation. From a practice perspective, each cluster maps onto different investigative domains in background checks and draws on different data sources, facilitating systematic screening.

Misbehavior signals from previous jobs were subgrouped into the following two clusters: *prior occupational trouble and employment instability* (five items): This cluster reflects negative outcomes in past employment that are likely due to poor performance, negligence,

[6] Matrix Inc., 740 Colonial Drive, Baton Rouge, LA 70806. Email: info@matrixinc.cc

Table 1
Sample Description

Variable	Total sample (N = 8,539)	Hired (n = 6,075)	Separated (n = 1,686)
	Descriptive statistics, M (SD)		
Age at application, years	30.3 (9.1)	30.1 (8.7)	30.0 (9.1)
Education, years	13.3 (2.0)	13.4 (2.00)	13.1 (2.0)
	Frequencies, n (%)		
Sex			
Male	7,284 (85.3)	5,161 (85.0)	1,387 (82.3)
Female	1,255 (14.7)	914 (15.0)	299 (17.7)
Race			
White	6,275 (73.5)	4,524 (74.5)	1,136 (67.4)
Black	2,099 (24.6)	1,435 (23.6)	514 (30.5)
Hispanic	97 (1.1)	64 (1.1)	25 (1.5)
Asian	25 (0.3)	20 (0.3)	4 (0.2)
Other	43 (0.5)	32 (0.5)	7 (0.4)
Agency type applied to			
Municipal	5,179 (60.7)	3,485 (57.4)	1,075 (63.8)
State	2,037 (23.9)	1,790 (29.5)	333 (19.8)
Parish/county	1,293 (15.1)	785 (12.9)	267 (15.8)
Federal	30 (0.4)	15 (0.2)	11 (0.7)
Previously worked in LE			
Yes	4,632 (54.2)	3,340 (55.0)	885 (52.7)
No	3,907 (45.8)	2,735 (45.0)	801 (47.5)
Military service			
Yes	2,302 (27.0)	1,664 (27.4)	471 (27.9)
No	6,237 (73.0)	4,411 (72.6)	1,215 (72.1)
Posthire misconduct data available			
One report (M = 10 months)		6,075 (100.0)	1,686 (100.0)
Two reports (M = 24 months)		2,537 (41.8)	197 (11.7)
Three reports (M = 44 months)		1,192 (19.6)	46 (2.7)
Four reports (M = 53 months)		20 (0.3)	5 (0.3)
Five reports		1 (0.0)	

Note. For posthire misconduct reports, M in parentheses indicates the average time into officers' tenure at which these reports were captured by the hiring agencies. LE = law enforcement.

erratic behavior, and difficulty in maintaining personal discipline (e.g., being demoted or terminated for cause) and employment instability (recent job hopping); *prior trouble in law enforcement jobs* (four items): For candidates who had previously worked in other law enforcement roles (54% of the total sample), these items assessed whether they had received complaints about misconduct (racism, sexism, use of force) in their prior roles, as well as written reprimands or being referred to a fitness-for-duty evaluation.[7]

Prior nonwork misbehavior signals were subgrouped into the following two clusters: *prior temper problems and violence* (four items): These items assessed history of temper problems and physical altercations, as well as outcomes, such as receiving a citation for domestic violence; *prior irresponsible behaviors* (five items): This final cluster comprises signals of irresponsible behaviors in the personal domain, such as excessive alcohol consumption and having financial trouble (e.g., being in arrears on alimony or child support payments, having a bad credit rating), as well as moving violations or driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Base rates for all items are presented in Table 2 (see also the Analyses and Results section). The additional online material includes information on associations among misbehaviors (see Table S1 for relative risks (RRs) and Table S2 for joint frequencies: https://osf.io/b4qkj/).

Police Misconduct

As part of agreements with the psychological screening provider, posthire misconduct data for employees, as well as information on separations and terminations, were reported by agency chiefs based on their review of organizational records, using a standardized reporting form (Davis & Rostow, 2008). For employees who stayed with their agency over the long term, the form was completed repeatedly (typically after 1, 2, and 4 years posthire; sample sizes for the respective follow-ups are presented in Table 1). Similar to prior (prehire) misbehavior, items are captured in a "yes/no" format (i.e., whether a behavior was displayed or an incident occurred). The items (presented in Table 3) can be grouped into four thematic categories of misconduct:

Interpersonal misconduct and violence (four items): This category mostly comprises formal records of officers receiving citizen complaints regarding interpersonal misconduct (sexual or racially

[7] In law enforcement, referrals to a fitness-for-duty evaluation signify concerns about an officer's capability to perform their duties safely and effectively. This can be triggered by observed behavioral or performance issues or incidents suggesting potential impairment in judgment, emotional stability, or physical health. Repeated evaluations may indicate ongoing doubts about the officer's suitability, stability, or resilience in high-stress situations, signaling potential risk factors for misconduct, compromised safety, or diminished job performance.

Table 2
Base Rates of Prior (Prehire) Misbehavior Indicators

Misbehavior category/item	*N*	n_{event}	BR %	95% CI	*SD*
Prior occupational trouble and employment instability	8,539	3,478	40.7	[39.7, 41.8]	0.49
Received employer warning due to negligence	8,468	1,391	16.4	[15.6, 17.2]	0.37
Was demoted while employed	8,468	287	3.4	[3.0, 3.8]	0.18
Terminated under unfavorable conditions	8,469	1,563	18.5	[17.6, 19.3]	0.39
Held more than three jobs in past 2 years	8,539	1,274	14.9	[14.2, 15.7]	0.36
Disciplinary problems in the military	2,310	538	23.3	[21.6, 25.0]	0.42
Prior trouble in law enforcement jobs	4,656	1,030	22.1	[20.9, 23.3]	0.42
Was found to have engaged in unjustified use of force	2,916	27	0.9	[0.6, 1.3]	0.10
Received complaints regarding use of force	4,573	297	6.5	[5.8, 7.2]	0.25
Received complaints regarding racially offensive behavior	4,573	36	0.8	[0.5, 1.0]	0.09
Received complaints regarding sexual harassment	4,574	48	1.0	[0.8, 1.3]	0.10
Received written reprimands and suspension or was referred to FFDE	4,107	817	19.9	[18.7, 21.1]	0.40
Prior temper problems and violence	8,471	1,371	16.2	[15.4, 17.0]	0.37
History of temper problems	8,453	949	11.2	[10.6, 11.9]	0.32
History of multiple physical altercations	8,451	394	4.7	[4.2, 5.1]	0.21
History of violent behavior directed to self or others	8,450	207	2.4	[2.1, 2.8]	0.16
Received citation for family/domestic violence	8,468	79	0.9	[0.7, 1.1]	0.10
Prior irresponsible behaviors	8,524	5,328	62.5	[61.5, 63.5]	0.48
Has (or has had) bad credit	8,450	2,754	32.6	[31.6, 33.6]	0.47
In arrears on alimony or child support	2,970	178	6.0	[5.1, 6.8]	0.24
Received moving violations in last 5 years	8,488	3,471	40.9	[39.8, 41.9]	0.49
Has been given a DUI	8,519	399	4.7	[4.2, 5.1]	0.21
Consumes more than 18 oz. of alcohol per week[a]	6,363	41	0.6	[0.4, 0.8]	0.08

Note. Different sample sizes across items are due to the fact that some items (e.g., prior employment, military service, financial responsibility for former spouse/children, consuming alcohol) did not apply to all candidates. That is, analyses were conducted on subsets of individuals for whom the item is relevant (e.g., divorced individuals for whom alimony payments are applicable). Base rates for categories (in italics) indicate the proportion of employees who have an event on at least one indicator in that category. Standard deviation is calculated as $\sqrt{BR(1-BR)}$. N = sample size; n_{event} = number of candidates who reported the behavior indicator; BR = base rate; CI = 95% confidence interval for BR; FFDE = fitness-for-duty evaluation; DUI = driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
[a] Refers to ounces of pure alcohol; 18 oz. is equivalent to 30 U.S. standard drinks (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2024). Candidate's responses to the alcohol question on the written background questionnaire were verified by trained interviewers in a standardized follow-up interview.

offensive behaviors, excessive use of force) as well as reports on inappropriate use of weapons. *Property damage or misuse* (three items): This category assesses intentionally damaging official property, the misuse of official vehicles, and at-fault motor vehicle accidents. *Conduct and competence concerns* (four items): For this category, mistakes (procedural, conduct,[8] and knowledge) that officers have been found to frequently make on-the-job are reported. In addition, an item assessing undesirable off-duty conduct is included. *Record of professional misconduct* (four items): This final category comprises indicators that should be considered more distal outcomes of police misconduct, such as being named in a lawsuit for police misconduct, receiving written reprimands and citizen complaints regarding unprofessional conduct, and being arrested for or charged with misdemeanors or felonies. Base rates for all misconduct incidents are presented in Table 3 (see also the Analyses and Results section). The additional online material includes information on associations among misconduct types (see Table S3 for RRs and Table S4 for joint frequencies: https://osf.io/b4qkj/).

Analyses and Results

Base Rates of Prehire Misbehaviors and Posthire Misconduct

We first summarize base rates of reported prehire misbehaviors among police applicants. We then present base rates for posthire police misconduct behaviors, offering agencies an overview of the prevalence of these specific types of misbehaviors and misconduct.

Base Rates for Prehire Misbehaviors

Base rates for reported prehire misbehaviors are presented in Table 2. Prehire, 40.7% of the sample exhibited at least one instance of prior occupational trouble or employment instability, 22.1% had at least one issue in previous law enforcement roles, 16.2% had a history of prior temper problems and violence, and 62.5% displayed at least one form of irresponsible behavior.

In examining each misbehavior cluster in more detail, we found that the most prevalent signals of prior occupational trouble and employment instability were terminations under unfavorable conditions (18.5%) and employer warnings for negligence (16.4%). Additionally, 14.9% of the sample held more than three jobs in the past 2 years. Disciplinary problems in the military, relevant only to those with military experience, appeared in 23.3% of that subgroup.

There were 4,656 candidates with previous law enforcement experience. For prior trouble in law enforcement roles, the most

[8] In law enforcement, a conduct mistake typically refers to errors or lapses in professional behavior that breach agency policies or standards, though they may not rise to the level of formal disciplinary problems or criminal activity. Examples of conduct mistakes include failing to follow proper procedures, violating codes of conduct, displaying unprofessional behavior, or neglecting protocols that ensure safety and accountability.

Table 3
Base Rates of Posthire Police Misconduct Indicators

Misconduct category/item	*N*	n_{event}	BR %	95% CI	*SD*
Interpersonal misconduct and violence	6,075	421	6.9	[6.3, 7.6]	0.25
Has this officer been formally accused of any inappropriate sexual behavior, sexual harassment, sexual indiscretions, or sexually offensive conduct?	6,075	130	2.1	[1.8, 2.5]	0.15
Has this officer been formally accused of any racially offensive conduct, behavior, or verbalizations?	6,075	91	1.5	[1.2, 1.8]	0.12
Has this officer ever demonstrated inappropriate use of any weapon (ASP, chemical spray, firearm, etc.)?	6,075	66	1.1	[0.8, 1.3]	0.10
Has this officer received any formal citizen complaints regarding excessive use of force?	6,075	237	3.9	[3.4, 4.4]	0.19
Property damage or misuse	6,075	779	12.8	[12.0, 13.7]	0.33
Has this officer been involved in any on-duty or off-duty at-fault motor vehicle accidents?	6,075	566	9.3	[8.6, 10.0]	0.29
Has this officer been responsible for intentional damage to or destruction of official property?	6,075	259	4.3	[3.8, 4.8]	0.20
Has this officer misused official vehicles (incorrect use of emergency lights, speeding, recklessness, unnecessary pursuit, unauthorized passenger, unauthorized use, etc.)?	6,075	242	4.0	[3.5, 4.5]	0.20
Conduct and competence concerns	6,075	2,984	49.1	[47.9, 50.4]	0.50
Has this officer ever demonstrated undesirable off-duty conduct?	6,075	330	5.4	[4.9, 6.0]	0.23
What kind(s) of mistake(s) does this officer make often?—conduct mistakes	6,075	579	9.5	[8.8, 10.3]	0.29
What kind(s) of mistake(s) does this officer make often?—procedural mistakes	6,075	1,501	24.7	[23.6, 25.8]	0.43
What kind(s) of mistake(s) does this officer make often?—knowledge mistakes	6,075	2,006	33.0	[31.8, 34.2]	0.47
Record of professional misconduct	6,075	1,182	19.5	[18.5, 20.5]	0.40
Has this officer been sued (or have claims been filed) in any lawsuit for sustained misconduct in connection with police work since being with your agency?	6,075	84	1.4	[1.1, 1.7]	0.12
Has this officer received any formal citizen complaints regarding unprofessional conduct?	6,075	593	9.8	[9.0, 10.5]	0.30
Has this officer received any written reprimands or suspensions by his or her superiors?	6,075	863	14.2	[13.3, 15.1]	0.35
Has this officer been detained, arrested, or charged for any misdemeanor or felony offense?	6,075	105	1.7	[1.4, 2.1]	0.13

Note. Base rates for categories (in italics) indicate the proportion of employees who have an event on at least one indicator in that category. Standard deviation is calculated as $\sqrt{BR(1-BR)}$. *N* = sample size; n_{event} = number of candidates for whom the posthire misconduct behavior was reported by their respective agency; BR = base rate; CI = 95% confidence interval for BR.

common issue was receiving written reprimands, suspensions, or referrals for fitness-for-duty reevaluations (19.9%), with complaints related to use of force also notable at 6.5%. Complaints regarding sexual harassment (1.0%) and racially offensive behavior (0.8%) were exceedingly rare.

For prior temper problems and violence, temper issues were the most frequent (11.1%), followed by multiple physical altercations (4.7%) and violent behavior directed at self or others (2.4%), while citations for family or domestic violence were least common at 0.9%. For prior irresponsible behaviors, moving violations in the last 5 years were the most prevalent (40.9%), followed by bad credit (32.6%). Less frequent signals included arrears on alimony or child support (6.0%), DUI records (4.7%), and excessive alcohol consumption (0.6%).

Base Rates for Posthire Misconduct

Base rates for posthire misconduct are presented in Table 3. Among the 6,075 hired officers, 6.9% exhibited at least one instance of interpersonal misconduct and violence, 12.8% had at least one incident of property damage or misuse, 49.1% had conduct and competence concerns, and 19.5% had at least one professional misconduct record.

In examining each misconduct cluster in more detail, among interpersonal misconduct and violence indicators, formal complaints regarding excessive use of force were the most prevalent (3.9%), followed by accusations of sexual harassment (2.1%), racially offensive conduct (1.5%), and inappropriate use of weapons (1.1%). Within the property damage or misuse category, involvement in at-fault motor vehicle accidents was the most prevalent (9.3%), followed by intentional damage to official property (4.3%) and misuse of official vehicles (4.0%), which includes reckless driving, unauthorized passenger transport, or policy-violating personal use.

Conduct and competence concerns were the most frequently reported incidents. One third of officers showed recurring knowledge-based errors, one fourth made procedural mistakes, and nearly 10% committed conduct violations. Additionally, over 5% were reported by superiors for problematic off-duty behavior. These infractions led to various documented outcomes. In the record of professional misconduct category, 14.2% of officers received written reprimands or suspensions. Formal citizen complaints of unprofessional conduct were recorded for 9.8%. Among the most serious consequences, 1.4% were sued in court for sustained misconduct posthire, and 1.7% were detained, arrested, or charged with a crime.

Predicting Police Misconduct From Prehire Misbehaviors

Next, we investigated how the incidence of risk factors (i.e., prehire misbehavior signals) among law enforcement candidates impacts the likelihood and timing of posthire officer misconduct. We employed survival analysis, a technique with roots in medical research (Bradburn et al., 2003) that has gained widespread adoption in social sciences, particularly for analyzing longitudinal data on misconduct and criminal behavior (see, e.g., Walsh, 2013; Walters & Crawford, 2014). This analytical approach has proven valuable, including in research on police and military misconduct (e.g., Booth-Kewley et al., 2010; White & Kane, 2013), as it simultaneously considers both whether an event occurred and the time until its occurrence. In the context of such work, some individuals will engage in posthire misconduct during an observation period, while others will "survive" (i.e., not engage in negative behavior). Thus, both time-to-event (in this case, police misconduct) and whether an event occurred are combined for a single criterion variable.

Specifically, we used Cox proportional hazard regression (Cox, 1972; see Hosmer et al., 2008, ch. 3, for a detailed treatment) to examine how candidates' prior personal and professional misbehaviors predicted different types of posthire officer misconduct over a period of several years. That is, we evaluated the extent to which each prehire misbehavior predicted posthire misconduct over time. Hazard ratios quantify the relative risk of misconduct between officers with and without specific prehire risk factors (see below for additional details).

Cox regression is particularly appropriate for studying misconduct data because it effectively handles cases where the outcome of interest does not occur during the observation period. In Cox regression, such cases are "censored" (coded as 0), indicating survival throughout the observation period without a critical event. The method's ability to incorporate both censored cases and cases lost during observation (e.g., officers who separated from their agency before any misconduct), as well as different timing of observations across subjects, enhances the analytical power and comprehensiveness of the approach.

The archival data set described above contained dichotomous information (coded 0/1) for both prehire misbehavior (reported in standardized personal history questionnaires; see Table 2) and posthire officer misconduct (see Table 3). The time-to-event measure was calculated in months from hire date to misconduct report date.

Cox regression generates main effect coefficients (B) representing the log relative risk of prior misbehavior on posthire misconduct, along with tests of statistical significance. For practical interpretation, we focus on the exponentiated coefficients (e^B, HRs), which express the change in risk associated with specific prehire misbehaviors or events. HRs above 1.00 indicate increased risk; for instance, an HR of 1.50 would suggest that individuals with a specific prehire misbehavior are 50% more likely to engage in a particular posthire misconduct.[9] HRs less than 1.00 indicated decreased risk.

We conducted Cox regression analyses to compute HRs for each pairing of prehire misbehavior and posthire misconduct. Associated HRs ranged from 0.16 to 14.59. Overall, 15 of the 19 unique prehire misbehaviors related to officer misconduct to a *significant* extent (i.e., confidence intervals (CIs) for e^B excluded 1.00). Across all analyses, the median HR was 1.19 ($M = 1.45$). These values indicate that, on average, the prehire misbehaviors we examined are associated with a moderate increase in the risk of posthire misconduct. A mean HR of 1.45 suggests a 45% higher risk of misconduct for candidates with certain prehire misbehaviors, and the median HR of 1.19 reflects that most risk increases are modest. However, there was substantial variation across HRs ($SD = 1.35$), which means that some prehire misbehaviors exhibited much stronger predictive power than others. For police screening, these findings suggest that while prehire risk factors do provide valuable insights, their potency varies. A targeted focus on the most predictive indicators could help improve screening practices, allowing agencies to prioritize those risk factors most likely to impact future conduct.

Figure 1 provides a heatmap of all HRs for prehire misbehaviors predicting posthire misconduct, visually highlighting which specific behaviors represent the highest liability for future misconduct. By using color gradients to represent HR magnitudes, the heatmap allows quick identification of the most potent predictors. Additional online Tables S5–S8 at https://osf.io/b4qkj/ provide all HRs and their associated 95% CIs. We also computed and report HRs for the content-based clusters of misbehaviors previously described. These HRs indicate the increased risk of posthire misconduct when candidates exhibit any misbehavior within a given domain. However, we emphasize that the individual misbehavior indicators remain the primary focus of our analyses, as they provide more precise risk assessment than the broader groupings. The cluster-based analyses are presented as supplemental information to address questions about multivariate patterns across content domains.

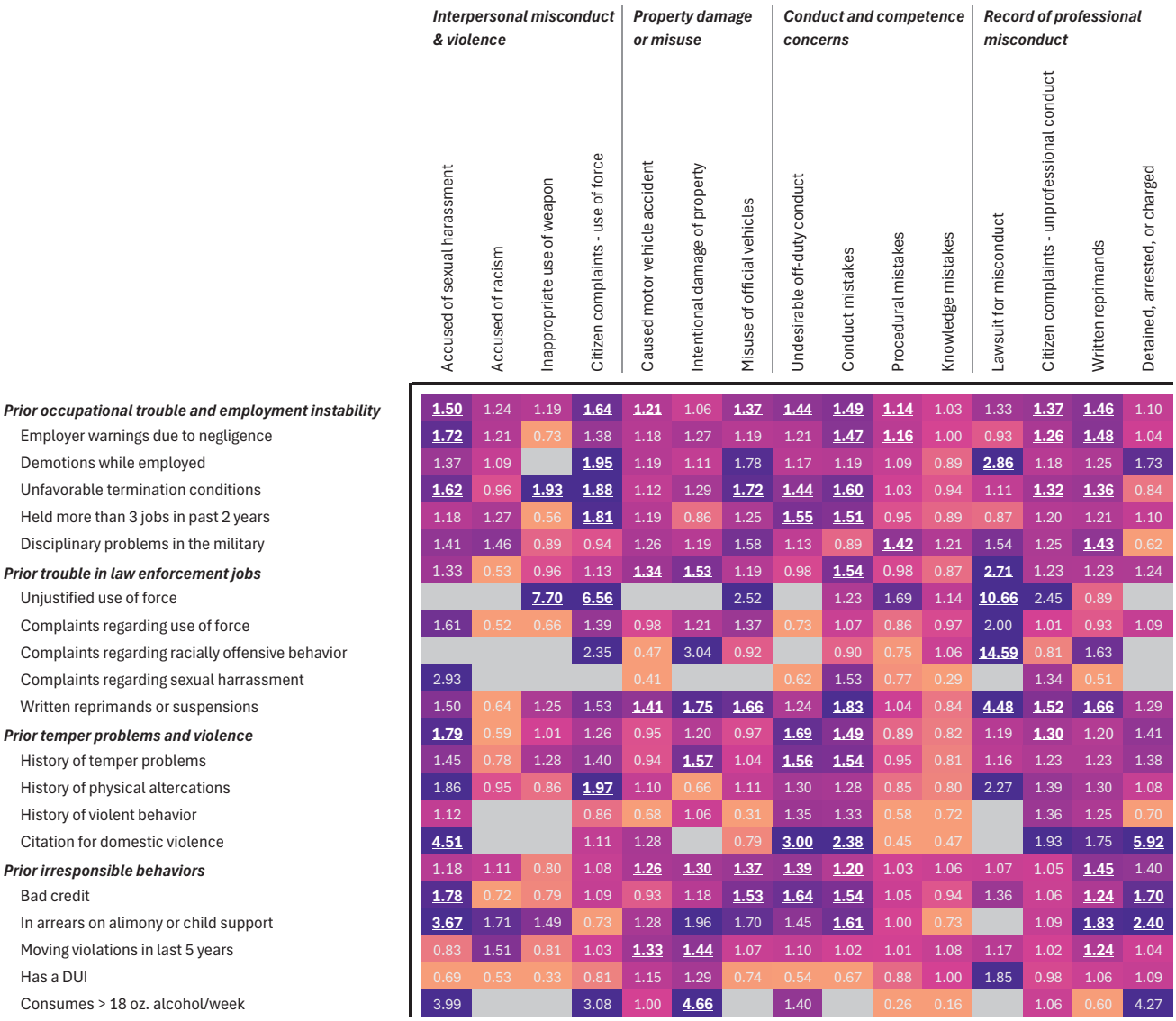
Before presenting results for predictors within each cluster, we introduce a tiering system developed for this study both to address the impact of data sparsity on HR estimates and to facilitate the translation of results into screening recommendations. During peer review, concerns were raised that some large HRs could be artifacts of sparse data, that is, instances where both the prehire misbehavior and the misconduct outcome occurred infrequently, leading to small joint frequencies and unstable model estimates. To address this, we systematically examined the joint base rates for every predictor–criterion pair, reviewing individual cell counts (see additional online Table S9: https://osf.io/b4qkj/), and model convergence. All HRs are reported in Figure 1. Table 4 summarizes and highlights those prehire predictors that will be most impactful in applied settings due to their base rates, pervasively elevated HRs, or exceptionally strong effects for specific misconduct types. This table thus summarizes the most important results from this study and provides tiered, evidence-based guidance for using prehire misbehavior signals for screening candidates for law enforcement roles.

Indicators with base rates above 10%, that exhibited three or more substantive relations with acceptable cell counts (>30 cases), and with no extreme distributional imbalance (e.g., >95% of cases in a single cell) were classified as Tier 1 "population screening" signals. These predictors met minimum case-count thresholds, yielded stable HR estimates with acceptable CIs for multiple misconduct outcomes, and are suitable for systematic use in large-scale applicant screening.

[9] HRs can range from 0 to infinity. HRs close to 1 (e.g., 1.1 or 0.9) suggest minimal risk difference, while HRs between 1.2 and 1.5 indicate a moderate increase in risk (i.e., between 20% and 50%). HRs above 2 can be considered substantial, particularly for important outcomes where a two-fold relative risk has important practical consequences.

Figure 1

Heatmap: Hazard Ratios for Prehire Misbehaviors Predicting Posthire Misconduct



Note. Values represent hazard ratios (e^B). Underlined values indicate that the corresponding 95% confidence interval excluded 1.00. Cell shading is calibrated based on the magnitude of hazard ratios, ranging from 0.73 (*10th percentile of effect sizes*; *coral*) to 1.00 (*no effect*; *fuchsia*) to 1.85 (*90th percentile of effect sizes*; *violet*). Gray shaded cells indicate relations where hazard ratios cannot be computed because coefficients did not converge due to low base rates. DUI = driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Indicators with low base rates that, when combined with rare outcomes, yielded small cell counts yet still produced several significant HRs were classified as Tier 2 "critical red flag" signals. These predictors often produced very large HRs but with wide CIs, sometimes spanning orders of magnitude, reflecting the statistical instability inherent in sparse-data contexts. For example, unjustified use of force ($n = 27$) and complaints regarding racially offensive behavior ($n = 36$) triggered nonconvergent models for some outcomes (noted with "†" in supplemental tables: https://osf.io/b4qkj/) but strongly related to conceptually linked outcomes and thus might warrant categorical exclusion of candidates. Tier 1 population screening signals provide statistically robust, generalizable findings for policy. Tier 2 critical red flag indicators are reported despite sparse data because of their powerful liability implications. Generally, we advise readers to interpret analyses based on individual cell counts less than five with extreme caution for policy decisions. Next, we describe the noteworthy findings for each prehire misbehavior signal cluster.

Misbehaviors in Previous Jobs

Of the individual prehire indicators that displayed significant HRs, 58% were prior occupational history misbehaviors, either in law enforcement or nonlaw enforcement roles.

Table 4

Summary of Prehire Misbehaviors With Significant Prognostic Power and Resulting Recommendations

Prehire misbehavior	Base rate %	Predictive value in data set	No. of significantly raised HR for misconduct	Signal usefulness	Recommendation for law enforcement hiring
Tier 1 indicators					
Written reprimands or suspensions[a]	19.90	Large HR and pervasive prediction	7	Essential for decision making	Must be used in hiring decisions
Unfavorable termination conditions	18.50	Pervasive prediction	8	Strongly considered indicators	Strongly consider in hiring
Bad credit	32.60	Pervasive prediction	6	Strongly considered indicators	Strongly consider in hiring
Employer warnings due to negligence	16.40	Pervasive prediction	5	Strongly considered indicators	Strongly consider in hiring
Moving violations in last 5 years	40.90	Notable prediction	3	Supplemental indicators	Consider alongside other signals for comprehensive assessment
Held more than three jobs in past 2 years	14.90	Notable prediction	3	Supplemental indicators	Consider alongside other signals for comprehensive assessment
History of temper problems	11.10	Notable prediction	3	Supplemental indicators	Consider alongside other signals for comprehensive assessment
Tier 2 indicators					
Citation for domestic violence	0.90	Large HR and pervasive prediction	4	Rare, high-risk indicators	Should not be overlooked; high-risk red flag
In arrears on alimony or child support	6.00	Large HR and pervasive prediction	4	Rare, high-risk indicators	Should not be overlooked; high-risk red flag
Unjustified use of force[a]	0.90	Large HR and notable prediction	3	Rare, high-risk indicators	Should not be overlooked; high-risk red flag
Demotions while employed	3.40	Large HR and notable prediction	2	Rare, high-risk indicators	Should not be overlooked; high-risk red flag
Complaints regarding racially offensive behavior[a]	0.80	Large HR	1	Rare, high-risk indicators	Should not be overlooked; high-risk red flag
History of multiple physical altercations	4.70	Some prediction	1	Supplemental indicators	Consider alongside other signals for comprehensive assessment

Note. Tier classifications are based on base rate thresholds and statistical stability criteria described in the Results section. Tier 1 = high-prevalence indicators with adequate counts across predictor–outcome cells and several statistically stable effects; recommended for systematic population screening. Tier 2 = low-prevalence but high-severity indicators; recommended for automatic exclusion when present despite sparse data and wider confidence intervals. See additional online Table S9 for joint frequencies and Tables S5–S8 for full results and confidence intervals at https://osf.io/b4qkj/. HR = hazard ratio.

[a] Prehire misbehavior indicators based on experience in prior law enforcement jobs (applicable only to candidates with prior law enforcement background).

Prior Occupational Trouble and Employment Instability. Four signals in this category (warnings due to negligence, demotions, unfavorable termination conditions, and holding more than three jobs in the past 2 years) robustly and significantly increased the probability that an officer engaged in misconduct posthire, especially in the categories of conduct and competence concerns, record of professional misconduct, and interpersonal misconduct and violence.

Tier 1 population screening signals in this category included *prior employer warnings due to negligence* (base rate = 16.4% among candidates; see Table 3), *unfavorable termination conditions* (18.5%), and *frequent recent job changes* (>3 in 2 years; 14.9%).

Prior *employer warnings due to negligence* signaled broad risk: These candidates were 72% more likely to be accused of sexual harassment (HR = 1.72), 48% more likely to receive written reprimands (HR = 1.48), 47% more likely to make conduct-related mistakes (HR = 1.47), and 26% more likely to receive citizen complaints for unprofessional conduct (HR = 1.26; see Figure 1). These patterns point to elevated hazard for both interpersonal and performance-based misconduct.

Previous *unfavorable terminations* also predicted broad posthire risk: These candidates were 93% more likely to have findings of inappropriate weapon use, 88% more likely to face excessive force complaints, 72% more likely to misuse official vehicles, 62% more likely to be accused of sexual harassment, and 44% more likely to exhibit off-duty misconduct.

Frequent recent job changes (more than three in the past 2 years) signaled moderate misconduct risk: Such candidates were 81% more likely to face use-of-force complaints, 55% more likely to engage in off-duty misconduct, and 51% more likely to make conduct-related mistakes.

There was one Tier 2 critical red flag in this category: *prior demotions* (base rate = 3.4%), which flagged serious future difficulties with authority and professional conduct. These individuals were 186% more likely to be sued for misconduct and 95% more likely to receive citizen complaints for use of force. Although sparse data resulted in wide CIs for these estimates, the severity of the behavior supports its use as an automatic disqualifier. The remaining indicator in this category, *disciplinary problems in the military*, was a weaker prehire signal but still predicted increased risk for procedural mistakes and written reprimands.

When the five indicators in this category were combined into a single variable, the presence of any one signal was associated with higher risks for posthire misconduct. Elevated hazards were observed across all domains, with the strongest associations for outcomes in the categories record of professional misconduct (e.g., receiving written reprimands; HR = 1.46, 95% CI [1.27, 1.67]) and interpersonal misconduct and violence (e.g., citizen complaints regarding use of force; HR = 1.64, CI [1.26, 2.13]). Cluster- and item-level HRs are displayed in Figure 1 and reported alongside their respective CIs in the additional online materials (Table S5: https://osf.io/b4qkj/). The findings indicate that encountering even one of these occupational trouble or instability indicators prior to hire substantially increases the likelihood of later police misconduct.

Prior Trouble in Law Enforcement Jobs. This group of indicators assessed trouble in prior employment but was focused specifically on law enforcement jobs: reports of unjustified use of force in those prior roles, civilian complaints of offensive behaviors, and receiving reprimands or suspensions.

One item from this category showed a high base rate and pervasive prediction and thus fell into Tier 1 population screening signals: prior *reprimands or suspensions* in a law enforcement job (base rate = 19.90%), which indicated broad, elevated future misconduct risk. These candidates were 348% more likely to be sued for sustained misconduct, 83% more likely to commit frequent conduct mistakes, 75% more likely to cause intentional property damage, 66% more likely to misuse official vehicles or receive written reprimands, 52% more likely to receive citizen complaints for unprofessional conduct, and 41% more likely to cause motor vehicle accidents.

Tier 2 critical red flags, rare but severe, were confirmed history of *unjustified use of force* (base rate = 0.9%) and prior *complaints regarding racially offensive behavior* (base rate = 0.8%). A confirmed history of unjustified use of force was a powerful warning sign for serious future misconduct. Candidates with such records were 966% more likely to be sued for misconduct, 670% more likely to engage in inappropriate weapon use, and 556% more likely to draw citizen complaints for use of force. These exceptionally large HRs underscore the importance of prior unjustified use of force as a rare red flag for candidates at risk for severe posthire misconduct.

Prior complaints regarding racially offensive behavior indicated a 1,359% greater likelihood of being named in a lawsuit for sustained misconduct (HR = 14.59). Although these latter two predictors have less robust estimates due to sparse data (i.e., lack precision in their estimated HRs), their seriousness and liability implications justify treating them as automatic exclusion criteria for candidates. The remaining indicators (complaints regarding use of force and sexual harassment) did not rise to the level of useful predictors of posthire misconduct (CIs for all HRs included 1.0).

When the five indicators in this category were combined into a single variable, elevated hazards were observed across multiple domains, with the strongest associations for lawsuits for misconduct (HR = 2.71, CI [1.42, 5.15]) and conduct mistakes (HR = 1.54, CI [1.20, 1.98]). All HRs and CIs are reported in the additional online materials (Table S6: https://osf.io/b4qkj/).

Nonwork Misbehavior History as Risk Signals

Although slightly fewer liability predictions emerged in the nonwork domain, these were nonetheless powerful and diverse.

Prior Temper Problems and Violence. This category included severe prehire behaviors such as persistent temper problems, a history of multiple physical altercations, and citations for domestic violence. Despite their seriousness, these indicators had nontrivial base rates, ranging from 0.9% to 11.2% among candidates.

Tier 1 population screening signals included a documented *history of temper problems* (base rate = 11.1%), which predicted an over 50% increase in frequent conduct mistakes, undesirable off-duty conduct, and intentional property damage. These indicators met stability thresholds for model estimation and thus should be applied systematically in screening.

Tier 2 critical red flags in this category were a prehire *history of multiple physical altercations* (base rate = 4.7%), which predicted a 97% greater likelihood of citizen complaints for use of force (HR = 1.97), and having a *citation for domestic violence*. Although rare (base rate = 0.9%), the latter was the strongest single predictor in this cluster: Officers with such history were nearly six times more likely to be detained, arrested, or charged with a crime posthire (HR = 5.92), over four times more likely to be accused of sexual harassment

(HR = 4.51), three times more likely to engage in off-duty misconduct (HR = 3.00), and more than twice as likely to make frequent conduct mistakes (HR = 2.38). The small number of cases limits the statistical precision of these HRs (i.e., CIs are wider), yet the gravity of this conduct and the broad liability it portends make it an important factor for use in police screening. The remaining item in this category (history of violent behavior directed at self and others) did not rise to the level of a useful predictor on its own.

When the misbehaviors in this category were combined into a single variable indicating whether any had occurred, the strongest domain-specific associations were for interpersonal misconduct and violence (HR = 1.79 for being accused of sexual harassment; CI [1.16, 2.75]) and conduct and competence (HR = 1.69 for undesirable off-duty conduct, CI [1.28, 2.23]). All HRs and CIs are reported in the additional online materials (Table S7: https://osf.io/b4qkj/).

Prior Irresponsible Behavior. The final category of misbehaviors included signals of irresponsible behaviors from candidates' personal lives. One surprising exception (DUIs) notwithstanding, all examined items exhibited useful relations to posthire officer misconduct. Collectively, these predictors related to all clusters of on-the-job misbehavior, though the most frequently forecasted outcomes were those associated with professional misconduct.

Tier 1 population screening signals included poor credit history (reported by more than 30% of candidates) and recent motor vehicle moving violations (40.9%). *Bad credit* was the most pervasive predictor across domains: Although HRs were not the largest in magnitude, this relatively common indicator still predicted elevated risk for multiple forms of misconduct. Candidates with bad credit were 24%–78% more likely to receive written reprimands or suspensions, misuse official vehicles, make frequent conduct mistakes, engage in undesirable off-duty conduct, be accused of sexual harassment, or be detained, arrested, or charged with a crime. *Motor vehicle moving violations* also showed predictive value, with officers 33% more likely to cause accidents and 44% more likely to intentionally damage property posthire.

Among Tier 2 critical red flags from this category, *being in arrears on alimony or child support*—an indicator of serious financial irresponsibility—was a rare (base rate = 6.0%) but strong predictor. These candidates were 267% more likely to be accused of sexual harassment, 140% more likely to be criminally detained or arrested, 83% more likely to receive written reprimands, and 61% more likely to make frequent conduct mistakes. The remaining two indicators in this category (having a DUI and excessive alcohol consumption) did not rise to the level of useful or robust predictors, in part due to their extreme rarity among the candidate pool.

When all indicators in this category were combined into a single variable, the presence of one or more signals indicated elevated hazard for records of professional misconduct and property damage and misuse in particular. All HRs and CIs are reported in the additional online materials (Table S8: https://osf.io/b4qkj/).

Is Recruiting From Law Enforcement and Military Backgrounds Helpful in Reducing Posthire Misconduct?

Given agencies' emphasis on prior relevant experience, we also investigated its relationship with subsequent misconduct and whether prior law enforcement or military experience actually represents protective factors (possibly because these candidates had already been screened for their prior roles) or liabilities.[10]

More than half the officers in our sample had previous law enforcement experience. Table 5 reports the effect of prior law enforcement experience on posthire misconduct. In this context, "likelihood" represents the proportion of candidates in each group who engaged in specific misconduct, with RR calculated as the ratio between these proportions. For 11 of 15 misconduct indicators, such experience did not reduce but rather slightly elevated the risk of misconduct (average RR = 1.19). Though many effects were modest with CIs including 1.00, a pattern emerged: Officers with prior law enforcement work faced higher risks of citizen complaints regarding unprofessional conduct, sexual harassment, and excessive force. They were also more likely to be found to have used a weapon inappropriately and to have misused official vehicles. Across these specific incidents, risk increased by 47% for those with law enforcement backgrounds (all CIs excluded 1.00).

A similar analysis of military experience (based on the smaller subsample of 1,664 officers who had previously served in the military compared with 4,411 who did not) yielded comparable findings (also reported in Table 5). Prior service corresponded with elevated risk across all 15 misconduct outcomes (average RR = 1.30). While liability was again only mildly elevated, CIs indicated robust relations for some outcomes, most notably accusations of racism and lawsuits for sustained misconduct (RR = 1.90 and 1.89, respectively).

How Well Is Prehire Misbehavior Information Used?

After documenting the value of prehire misbehavior signals for predicting posthire officer misconduct, we examined to what degree this information influences agencies' hiring decisions. Given the lack of national standards in law enforcement screening, any available prehire misbehavior information may be used at the discretion of individual agencies.

We analyzed whether hiring outcomes varied based on candidates' reported history of misconduct. Table 6 presents both direct comparisons between groups (likelihood of being hired for those with and without specific incidents) and corresponding RR with CIs. If prior infractions systematically influenced hiring decisions, we would expect lower success rates for candidates in the former group and risk ratios below 1.00.

While this pattern emerged for 15 of 19 prehire indicators, the impact on hiring probability was minimal (average RR = 0.95). In other words, disclosing any negative incident in prehire screening reduced hiring chances by only 5% on average. None of the CIs for individual risk ratios excluded 1.00, suggesting these prehire signals had an insignificant influence on agencies' screening decisions.

Seeing that hiring agencies were hardly using prehire misbehavior information in screening decisions, one question that emerged was whether they were insensitive to misbehavior in general or whether they were specifically not using prehire information optimally. Therefore, we next examined the links between posthire misconduct and terminations.

[10] Because prior law enforcement and military experience were relatively common in our sample, analyses for these predictors did not face the sparse-data limitations observed for some low-prevalence prehire misbehaviors.

Table 5
Likelihood of Posthire Misconduct Based on Prior Law Enforcement and Military Experience

		Prior law enforcement experience			Prior military experience		
Prior experience	Misconduct category/item	Likelihood %	RR	95% CI	Likelihood %	RR	95% CI
yes	*Interpersonal misconduct and violence*	8	1.30	[1.06, 1.59]	8	1.28	[1.03, 1.58]
no		6			6		
yes	Accused of sexual harassment	3	1.60	[1.11, 2.31]	3	1.36	[0.94, 1.96]
no		2			2		
yes	Accused of racism	1	0.80	[0.53, 1.21]	2	1.90	[1.25, 2.89]
no		2			1		
yes	Inappropriate use of weapon	1	1.88	[1.11, 3.19]	1	1.42	[0.85, 2.36]
no		1			1		
yes	Citizen complaints - use of force	4	1.34	[1.02, 1.75]	4	1.16	[0.87, 1.53]
no		3			4		
yes	*Property damage or misuse*	13	1.11	[0.96, 1.30]	15	1.19	[1.01, 1.41]
no		12			12		
yes	Caused motor vehicle accident	9	0.98	[0.82, 1.16]	11	1.28	[1.06, 1.54]
no		9			9		
yes	Intentional damage of property	4	1.08	[0.84, 1.38]	5	1.27	[0.97, 1.66]
no		4			4		
yes	Misuse of official vehicles	4	1.31	[1.01, 1.71]	4	1.01	[0.76, 1.35]
no		3			4		
yes	*Conduct and competence concerns*	50	1.03	[0.93, 1.14]	52	1.07	[0.96, 1.20]
no		48			48		
yes	Undesirable off-duty conduct	6	1.18	[0.94, 1.48]	7	1.31	[1.03, 1.66]
no		5			5		
yes	Conduct mistakes	10	1.15	[0.97, 1.37]	11	1.17	[0.97, 1.41]
no		9			9		
yes	Procedural mistakes	26	1.10	[0.98, 1.24]	26	1.10	[0.97, 1.25]
no		23			24		
yes	Knowledge mistakes	32	0.94	[0.85, 1.05]	35	1.07	[0.95, 1.21]
no		34			32		
yes	*Record of professional misconduct*	20	1.05	[0.92, 1.19]	22	1.21	[1.06, 1.39]
no		19			18		
yes	Lawsuit for misconduct	1	1.15	[0.74, 1.78]	2	1.89	[1.22, 2.93]
no		1			1		
yes	Citizen complaints - unprof. conduct	11	1.21	[1.02, 1.44]	12	1.27	[1.06, 1.52]
no		9			9		
yes	Written reprimands	14	0.98	[0.84, 1.13]	16	1.15	[0.98, 1.35]
no		14			14		
yes	Detained, arrested, or charged	2	1.09	[0.74, 1.61]	2	1.11	[0.73, 1.70]
no		2			2		

Note. For prior law enforcement experience: total N = 6,075 ($n_{\text{prior LE experience}}$ = 3,340, $n_{\text{no LE experience}}$ = 2,734). For prior military experience: total N = 6,075 ($n_{\text{military experience}}$ = 1,664, $n_{\text{no military experience}}$ = 4,411). Cell shading is calibrated based on the magnitude of relative risk, ranging from 0.80 (*lowest effect*; *coral*) to 1.00 (*no effect*; *fuchsia*) to 1.90 (*highest effect*; *violet*). RR = relative risk; CI = 95% confidence interval for RR; LE = law enforcement. See the online article for the color version of this table.

How Well Is Posthire Misconduct Reflected in Terminations?

The database distinguished between voluntary separations and terminations for cause. The latter only included officers terminated for one of the following reasons: failure to comply with department regulations, insubordination, excessive citizen complaints, corruption/criminal conduct, neglect of duty, or absenteeism.

Agencies demonstrated more decisive action regarding misconduct after hiring. Results in Table 7 reveal that every misconduct indicator except knowledge mistakes substantially elevated termination risk. The average RR across all 19 indicators was 6.23. Property damage or misuse infractions showed weaker associations, though most still substantially increased termination probability. The strongest predictors included sexual harassment and officers being detained, arrested, or charged for a crime (both increasing risk over 12-fold), along with undesirable off-duty conduct and on-the-job conduct violations (RRs = 13.63, respectively). Notably, agencies appear to weigh off-duty behavior seriously once candidates are hired, taking decisive action against officers whose conduct compromised their job performance or departmental reputation. This contrasts sharply with the minimal impact of prehire off-duty misbehavior during screening, despite its demonstrated relationship with future performance, as discussed above.

Table 6
Likelihood of Officers Being Hired Based on Reported Prehire Misbehavior Incidents

Misbehavior category/ item	Occurred/ reported	Hired by agency (n = 6,075)		
		Likelihood %	RR	95% CI
Prior occupational trouble and employment instability	Yes	68	0.94	[0.85, 1.03]
	No	73		
Employer warnings due to negligence	Yes	69	0.97	[0.86, 1.10]
	No	71		
Demotions while employed	Yes	70	0.99	[0.77, 1.28]
	No	71		
Unfavorable termination conditions	Yes	68	0.95	[0.85, 1.07]
	No	72		
Held more than 3 jobs in past 2 years	Yes	62	0.86	[0.76, 0.97]
	No	73		
Disciplinary problems in the military	Yes	72	0.99	[0.80, 1.23]
	No	72		
Prior trouble in law enforcement jobs	Yes	72	1.00	[0.86, 1.17]
	No	72		
Unjustified use of force	Yes	63	0.89	[0.41, 1.95]
	No	71		
Complaints regarding use of force	Yes	74	1.03	[0.79, 1.34]
	No	72		
Complaints regarding racially offensive behavior	Yes	67	0.93	[0.46, 1.86]
	No	72		
Complaints regarding sexual harrassment	Yes	73	1.01	[0.53, 1.92]
	No	72		
Written reprimands or suspensions	Yes	72	1.05	[0.89, 1.25]
	No	69		
Prior temper problems and violence	Yes	67	0.93	[0.82, 1.06]
	No	72		
History of temper problems	Yes	68	0.95	[0.82, 1.10]
	No	71		
History of physical altercations	Yes	67	0.94	[0.76, 1.17]
	No	71		
History of violent behavior	Yes	66	0.93	[0.69, 1.24]
	No	71		
Citation for domestic violence	Yes	62	0.87	[0.55, 1.38]
	No	71		
Prior irresponsible behaviors	Yes	69	0.92	[0.83, 1.01]
	No	75		
Bad credit	Yes	65	0.89	[0.80, 0.98]
	No	74		
In arrears on alimony or child support	Yes	68	0.96	[0.69, 1.32]
	No	71		
Moving violations in last 5 years	Yes	69	0.95	[0.87, 1.05]
	No	72		
Has a DUI	Yes	71	1.00	[0.80, 1.24]
	No	71		
Consumes > than 18 oz. alcohol/week	Yes	68	0.96	[0.50, 1.85]
	No	71		

Note. For categories (in italics), results are for any event in that category. RR = relative risk; CI = 95% confidence interval for RR; DUI = driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. See the online article for the color version of this table.

Post Hoc Analysis: Is There Evidence of Differential Treatment by Race in Police Hiring and Firing?

Recent studies (Stroube, 2021; Walter et al., 2021) underscore the need to consider how race may moderate organizational responses to misconduct. These studies suggest that, even when behavioral histories are similar, Black officers may be more likely than White officers to face formal disciplinary consequences, raising important questions about fairness and equity in the interpretation and use of misconduct data.

We conducted a series of post hoc analyses to examine potential Black–White differences at multiple stages in our data set.[11] The full results associated with these analyses are reported in the additional

[11] We thank an anonymous reviewer for the suggestion to shed light on this issue using the data from the present study.

Table 7
Likelihood of Termination for Cause Based on Posthire Misconduct Incidents

Misconduct category/ item	Occurred/ observed	Termination for cause (n = 346)		
		Likelihood %	RR	95% CI
Interpersonal misconduct and violence	Yes	30	7.78	[6.07, 9.97]
	No	4		
Accused of sexual harassment	Yes	58	12.86	[8.89, 18.62]
	No	5		
Accused of racism	Yes	21	3.82	[2.28, 6.41]
	No	5		
Inappropriate use of weapon	Yes	32	5.88	[3.46, 9.99]
	No	5		
Citizen complaints - use of force	Yes	19	3.68	[2.61, 5.19]
	No	5		
Property damage or misuse	Yes	11	2.35	[1.83, 3.03]
	No	5		
Caused motor vehicle accident	Yes	7	1.31	[0.93, 1.83]
	No	6		
Intentional damage of property	Yes	15	2.77	[1.93, 3.98]
	No	5		
Misuse of official vehicles	Yes	24	4.85	[3.53, 6.67]
	No	5		
Conduct and competence concerns	Yes	10	6.42	[4.71, 8.75]
	No	2		
Undesirable off-duty conduct	Yes	46	13.63	[10.52, 17.67]
	No	3		
Conduct mistakes	Yes	35	13.63	[10.74, 17.30]
	No	3		
Procedural mistakes	Yes	11	2.98	[2.39, 3.71]
	No	4		
Knowledge mistakes	Yes	6	1.00	[0.79, 1.25]
	No	6		
Record of professional misconduct	Yes	19	8.10	[6.41, 10.22]
	No	2		
Lawsuit for misconduct	Yes	19	3.46	[1.98, 6.02]
	No	6		
Citizen complaints - unprofessional conduct	Yes	21	5.16	[4.06, 6.55]
	No	4		
Written reprimands	Yes	20	5.76	[4.60, 7.22]
	No	3		
Detained, arrested, or charged	Yes	60	12.65	[8.41, 19.03]
	No	5		

Note. For categories (in italics), results are for any event in that category. RR = relative risk; CI = 95% confidence interval for RR. See the online article for the color version of this table.

online materials (Tables S10–S13: https://osf.io/b4qkj/). First, we found that Black and White officers did not significantly differ in their overall records of posthire misconduct (see additional online Table S10: https://osf.io/b4qkj/). The sole exception was the category of "conduct and competency concerns," which was significantly more common among White officers.

Turning to prehire misbehaviors, we observed a few significant differences in prehire misbehavior rates (see additional online Table S11: https://osf.io/b4qkj/). Specifically, Black candidates were more likely than White candidates to report the following behaviors: being demoted while employed, being terminated under unfavorable conditions, having held more than three jobs in the past 2 years, receiving a citation for family or domestic violence, having bad credit, being in arrears on alimony or child support, and receiving moving violations in the past 5 years. White candidates, by contrast, reported higher base rates for complaints related to racially offensive behavior, a history of temper problems, and prior DUI charges. Thus, prehire misbehavior histories differed across groups. However, these differences were not uniformly in one direction.

We then examined whether these differences translated into disparities in hiring or termination decisions. Although hiring rates for Black candidates were slightly lower overall (68.4% for Blacks, 72.1% for Whites, 95% CIs not overlapping), the RRs for being hired associated with specific prehire misbehaviors were statistically indistinguishable between Black and White applicants (for all 19

misbehaviors; see additional online Table S12: https://osf.io/b4qkj/). That is, when misbehavior was reported, it had comparable consequences for both groups: The odds of being hired in response to misbehavior flags did not vary by race. These findings indicate that while the prevalence of some prehire misbehaviors differed across groups, the signals themselves were applied similarly in hiring decisions. We conclude that when misbehavior data were used in screening decisions, the predictive signal was applied consistently for both racial groups.

For terminations for cause, differences between Black and White officers were not statistically different (7.0% for Blacks, 5.3% for Whites, 95% CIs overlapping). Furthermore, when evaluating whether posthire misconduct translated into termination, RR again did not differ significantly (for all 15 misconduct items; see additional online Table S13: https://osf.io/b4qkj/). Posthire misconduct incidents were associated with similar odds of termination for cause for both groups.

Discussion

By identifying specific prehire misbehaviors that predict future misconduct in law enforcement jobs, this research offers a data-driven foundation for improving police applicant screening practices. Drawing on a large archival data set tracking police applicants through several years of their employment, we were able to answer important questions, providing insight and guidance to law enforcement agencies and highlighting areas of opportunity for impactful national guidelines.

Base rates associated with reported prehire misbehaviors among law enforcement job candidates were commensurate with severity of behavior. For example, the majority displayed some form of irresponsible behavior, whereas a smaller but still sizable subset had a record of violent behavior. Domestic violence, racially offensive conduct, and unjustified use of force were the least prevalent. The base rates reported in Table 2 likely reflect a lower bound estimate of actual prehire misbehavior. They are base rates of behaviors that applicants are willing to disclose in a high-stakes hiring context. Underreporting is a valid concern. However, we view these base rates of self-reported misbehaviors as informative for several reasons. First, even under conditions of likely minimization, the prevalence of admitted misbehavior is nontrivial. Second, these self-reports still predicted later misconduct with useful effect sizes. Third, these data were collected in situ, from actual job applicants as part of their application material, and thus, any relations derived from these data are realistic estimates of their utility in similar screening processes. From an applied perspective, the prehire misbehavior base rate benchmarks presented here thus provide valuable context for understanding the distribution of disclosed risk indicators within police applicant pools, even if they underestimate the true prevalence of these misbehaviors. From a practical standpoint, agencies are better served by having access to these benchmarks, imperfect as they may be, than by operating without them—or by assuming that applicants will only disclose trivial misbehaviors that have no value for screening.

A comparable pattern was observed for posthire misconduct. Many officers exhibited conduct and competence concerns, and a sizable portion engaged in property damage or misuse. The category of misconduct that poses the most severe consequences to communities—interpersonal misconduct—was less common but still showed a meaningful number of formal complaints. Police misconduct information was collected not from a public reporting database but was shared confidentially by agencies with the assessment provider only for internal research purposes. While this increases the credibility of these data, agencies may nonetheless have incentives to suppress or recode misconduct to avoid reputational damage or legal exposure.

Overall, the dual potential underreporting of prehire misbehaviors by candidates and posthire misconduct by agencies likely attenuated the HRs reported in this research, suggesting that the predictive relationships we report are conservative estimates. This is a well-known effect in the literature on personality predictors of CWB (e.g., Ones et al., 1993; Sackett et al., 1989). Future research should explore the use of alternative or supplemental data sources to mitigate these limitations and encourage more transparent documentation practices in the specific context of law enforcement. With more extensive and complete predictor and criterion information, it may be possible to uncover the full range of predictive relations between prehire misbehavior and subsequent police misconduct. Yet, even the conservative estimates reported here offer actionable insights that should inform police hiring and accountability systems.

Evidence-Based Screening Recommendations for Law Enforcement

Using Prehire Misbehavior Signals to Reduce Police Misconduct

Screening police applicants should start with the basics. The recommendations in Table 4 are empirically grounded as they account for both the base rates and predictive value of each prehire misbehavior within the data at hand. Tier 1 population screening signals are statistically stable predictors with base rates above 10% and adequate counts across predictor–outcome combinations. "Written reprimands or suspensions" in prior law enforcement employment stands out as essential for decision making, given frequent occurrence and significant association with future misconduct. The use of such high-prevalence indicators that reliably predict future misconduct should be mandatory in the screening process of any agency. While using these criteria may lead to larger numbers of applicants being excluded, this approach would result in the onboarding of candidates less likely to be involved in misconduct once hired. For example, although 20% of applicants with prior law enforcement experience (9.6% of the total candidate pool) may have a record of written reprimands or suspensions in prior employment, these indicators carry high HRs for various forms of misconduct. Consequently, hiring agencies may need to expand the size of their applicant pools to facilitate rigorous screening. This basic principle underscores the importance of casting a wide net in police hiring, allowing for a more selective and evidence-based process that prioritizes avoidance of police misconduct.

Other Tier 1 signals like "unfavorable termination conditions," "bad credit," and "employer warnings due to negligence," which also show substantial prevalence and pervasive predictive value, are strongly recommended for consideration in screening decisions. Items with moderate prevalence and moderate predictive value, such as recent moving violations, frequent job changes, and temper

problems, should be considered in conjunction with other risk factors to provide a fuller assessment of candidates' liabilities. Although these indicators are not as potent as the highest risk signals, their inclusion improves the robustness of screening decisions, particularly when they co-occur with other risk factors.

Finally, for screening police applicants, rare but high-risk signals should not be overlooked. Tier 2 critical red flags are indicators with very low base rates (often <5%) that, when combined with rare outcomes, may yield sparse data or wide CIs. Despite this statistical instability, they carry such severe liability implications that they should not be overlooked in screening candidates. These include "citation for domestic violence," "in arrears on alimony or child support," "unjustified use of force," "prior demotions," "complaints regarding racially offensive behavior," and "history of multiple physical altercations." Although infrequent in applicant pools, these signals are exceptionally valuable when present: Encountering any one of them signals a markedly elevated risk for serious future misconduct. Consequently, hiring agencies are well-advised to prioritize these rare yet potent indicators, implementing policies that ensure that applicants who exhibit them are screened out—they are strong disqualifiers for police work. This tiered approach enables agencies to make highly informed decisions that leverage the predictive strength of these prehire misbehaviors.

In this context, it is important to emphasize why our research focuses on bivariate relations between prehire misbehaviors and posthire misconduct. Our goal was to identify specific misbehaviors that can be prioritized for applicant screening. Employing a multivariate model in the context of police screening would imply a compensatory decision-making framework, in which the presence of one type of serious misbehavior could be offset by the absence of others. This interpretation is inconsistent with both the aims of our study (e.g., identifying screen-out misbehaviors) and the practical realities of law enforcement hiring. To illustrate: A multivariate approach might statistically weigh multiple predictors simultaneously, producing a scenario in which a candidate with a documented history of prehire domestic violence would appear "less risky" if they had no record of job-related irresponsibility (e.g., no prior terminations or reprimands). Such a model would effectively treat different forms of misbehavior as fungible, allowing one severe form to be "compensated for" by a clean(er) record in other areas. This logic should be rejected. From a public safety and organizational risk perspective, certain behaviors, especially those involving violence, dishonesty, or abuse of authority, should not be neutralized by absences of other misbehaviors.

A noncompensatory approach is more aligned with the ethical, organizational, and societal stakes involved in police hiring. In such a model, the presence of a single disqualifying behavior, such as acts of aggression or chronic insubordination, can and should independently raise serious concerns, regardless of other strengths in a candidate's background. Law enforcement agencies do not merely optimize for overall candidate fit or performance; they are charged with safeguarding the public trust and minimizing risk of harm. This is especially true because this type of information is typically collected in the *screening*, not the *selection* stage of the hiring process (i.e., it is collected after a compensatory system considering factors such as experience, normal-range personality, and physical fitness has already resulted in a conditional job offer). Unlike general employee selection contexts where compensatory models are often, if not always, appropriate, in this screening phase, the consequences of overlooking any one high-risk behavior can be severe and irreversible.

In addition, we must anticipate that agencies may have limited access to a full and evenly populated profile of an applicant's prehire misbehaviors. Instead, they may uncover only a single documented prehire misbehavior, either via candidate admission or as part of a background investigation. The critical question is not how this behavior stacks up in a multivariate profile, but whether that specific signal, standing alone, justifies action (be it increased scrutiny, caution, or disqualification). Our analyses directly support this kind of decision making, enabling practitioners to understand the specific, stand-alone predictive value of each misbehavior type. This approach mirrors how such data are often encountered and evaluated in practice: piecemeal, fragmented, and stand-alone. By grounding our analysis in this reality, we aimed to maximize the relevance and usability of our findings for those charged with protecting public safety through effective and responsible personnel screening decisions.

In summary, our goal was to provide evidence that supports a structured, behavior-by-behavior evaluation process, where each form of misbehavior is judged on its own merits for whether it justifies closer scrutiny or disqualification. This ensures clarity, transparency, and consistency in hiring decisions while avoiding the ethically problematic and operationally risky assumptions of compensatory reasoning in this context. For completeness, we also examined composite indicators for each content category in a survival model, coding whether any indicator in that category was present. These composites yielded HRs that were consistently elevated across misconduct categories, with the strongest domain-specific effects often paralleling those observed for individual high-risk indicators. This convergence reinforces that predictive value is not confined to isolated misbehaviors; rather, entire behavioral domains, when signaled by any constituent indicator, carry heightened risk. The composites allow agencies that prefer a broader, category-level decision rule to see associated HRs. However, we believe that these composites should not replace the valuable item-level bivariate HRs that form the core of our recommendations.

To help agencies, screening psychologists, and the general public better understand and use the predictive information that resulted from this study, we created an interactive web tool. The tool helps explore the risks associated with each prehire misbehavior, visually illustrates the connections to posthire misconduct, and translates effect sizes into easily interpretable increases in risk. A static view of the tool is presented in additional online Figure S1 at https://osf.io/b4qkj/, and the interactive version is available at https://workpsy.ch/tools/PoliceScreening. The website also contains descriptions of each prehire risk factor.

Although the primary objective of police screening system design must be validity (ensuring the selection of capable and trustworthy officers), it is worth noting that such systems can also yield substantial financial savings for agencies and, by extension, taxpayers. To illustrate this, we conducted a utility analysis focused on a quantifiable misconduct outcome for which undisputed cost data were available.[12] Using settlement figures from 2022 to 2024, we estimated that an agency such as the New York City Police Department could save over half a million dollars in civil settlements *per hiring cohort* by screening out candidates with a history of written reprimands in

[12] We thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging this additional analysis.

prior law enforcement roles. Details of this analysis are provided in additional online Appendix S1 at https://osf.io/b4qkj/. Importantly, these figures are highly conservative, as they do not include litigation costs and are based on a single prehire indicator (as well as a single cohort of officers). The overall utility of a more comprehensive screening system, aligned with our recommendations, would likely be orders of magnitude greater, pointing to a profound opportunity for both cost avoidance and restoration of public trust.

Reconsidering Use of Prior Police and Military Experience in Police Hiring

It is typically assumed that past work experience is predictive of job performance. However, meta-analytic research has cast doubt on the criterion-related validity of prehire work experience (Van Iddekinge et al., 2019), with the authors concluding that "the types of prehire experience measures organizations currently use to screen job applicants generally are poor predictors of future performance and turnover" (p. 571). It is not known whether prehire experience is related to CWB. In this study, we examined whether prior law enforcement employment or military service experience is predictive of police misconduct by comparing the risk of misconduct among those with and without such experience.

While prior law enforcement experience is often assumed to be a positive sign of qualification for similar roles, this study shows it may *increase* risk for certain types of misconduct. Agencies should not rely on past law enforcement experience as a proxy for suitability. There is value in carefully evaluating candidates with law enforcement backgrounds, especially because prehire misbehaviors in prior jobs were predictive of future misconduct. Similarly, although military service is often associated with discipline and respect for authority, our findings indicate elevated risks for a few types of misconduct, including accusations of racism and misconduct-related lawsuits (e.g., those with prior military experience were nearly two times more likely to be accused of racism compared to those without a military background). Prior law enforcement or military experience does not inherently confer lower risk. Hiring policies must be adjusted to reflect the fact that "relevant experience" should not replace thorough, empirically supported evaluations of each candidate's misbehavior history and specific risk factors.

Priorities to Address Current Gaps in Law Enforcement Hiring

In addressing critical gaps in police hiring practices, agencies need to prioritize the effective use of prehire misbehavior data. Findings presented in this research, based on data from more than 150 police agencies, indicate that hiring practices fail to use this information meaningfully. Although the data consistently confirmed the predictive power of prehire misbehavior signals for posthire misconduct, our findings showed that agencies do not fully use this information when making hiring decisions. Specifically, we found only a minimal decrease in hiring probability for candidates with reported prehire misbehaviors, suggesting a serious gap. Shockingly, candidates with severe prehire incidents, such as unjustified use of force or domestic violence, faced only marginally lower odds of being hired or, in some cases, were even slightly more likely to be hired.

To address these shortcomings, agencies should implement policies that prioritize the systematic use of prehire misbehavior data that this research has shown to relate to posthire misconduct. The importance of establishing clear, evidence-based standards that decrease the likelihood of hiring candidates with significant red flags cannot be overstated. Screening processes should be structured to give appropriate weight to documented histories of severe misconduct, such as citations for domestic violence and unjustified use of force, ensuring that these risk factors consistently reduce hiring chances.

Further, agencies must reevaluate the discretionary latitude of decision makers (background investigators and agency chiefs/hiring managers) in their selection processes. Without structured policies and algorithmic decision making (see Kuncel et al., 2013, 2014) mandating the rejection of candidates with specific prehire misbehaviors, agencies risk perpetuating cycles of misconduct within their ranks. The prioritization of data-driven, risk-sensitive hiring practices would help close existing gaps and foster a more accountable force.

Improving Termination for Cause Practices in Law Enforcement

Our findings indicate that while police departments are generally far more responsive to officer misconduct after hiring than during the screening process, there remains room for refining and standardizing termination for cause practices as well. Notably, we found that most types of posthire misconduct substantially increased the likelihood of involuntary separation, with an average RR of 6.23 across misconduct indicators. This means that officers with a record of professional misconduct are more than six times more likely to be terminated, underscoring agencies' recognition of the need to address misconduct when it occurs.

However, the severity of misconduct matters significantly in termination decisions. Certain behaviors, including sexual harassment and criminal actions, increased termination risk by more than 12-fold, reflecting the high stakes of these types of misconduct. Other strong misconduct predictors of terminations, such as frequent conduct violations and undesirable off-duty misbehavior, further highlight the importance of addressing behaviors that undermine public trust and police reputation.

To improve termination practices, agencies should establish a clear, evidence-based, tiered system of policies that prioritize the dismissal of officers engaging in high-risk misconduct, both on and off duty. This should involve implementing consistent protocols for evaluating and acting on serious infractions first, ensuring that the public (and public trust) is protected by holding accountable those officers who compromise department standards.

To develop such policies, future scientific work in this area should first assemble the universe of behaviors constituting misconduct across agencies. Recognizing that our study captured only a sampling of these indicators, developing a comprehensive catalog is a first step in developing a tiered system of responses, including terminations for cause. Using techniques akin to those used in critical incident studies (cf. Flanagan, 1954), these misconduct behaviors could then be content analyzed using contemporary tools that can handle their large volume (e.g., Natural Language Processing, artifical intelligence, see Wang et al., 2024). Each misconduct incident could be scaled in terms of its predictive value for future police misconduct, its immediacy and severity of threat to the public, and its impact on public trust and law

enforcement credibility. A system like this is not just about disciplining an individual officer who perpetrates misconduct. Rather, in alignment with law enforcement's fundamental societal role, it serves to safeguard the public and rebuild community trust through rigorous, empirically grounded accountability measures.

Implications for Psychologists

This research laid the groundwork for applied psychological research to advance law enforcement screening and selection. It also presents opportunities for psychologists involved in police assessments and hiring.

Future Research to Advance Police Screening and Selection

The prehire misbehaviors we examined were limited to those available in the archival data set, yet similar data are routinely gathered by other agencies across the country and possibly worldwide. These vast data sources should be tapped not only to replicate the present findings but also to expand the types of misbehaviors examined. This is no small task; research grants may be essential to initiate and sustain what is largely a massive archival effort, enabling future predictive and longitudinal studies to be conducted.

We only examined one element in police screening (prehire misbehaviors gathered via standardized history questionnaires). But police screening and selection across the United States can use a combination of elements, including cognitive (Hirsh et al., 1986) and noncognitive selection tests (Butcher et al., 2018; Front et al., 2024; Ones et al., 1993), interviews (Landy, 1976), background checks (Bradford, 1998; Cochrane et al., 2003), and psychological assessments (Ones et al., 2004; Spilberg & Corey, 2022). Multivariate investigations into the joint and incremental validities of these methods alongside prehire screening misbehavior checklists will determine their combined effectiveness in reducing officer misconduct.

Future research should also explore the optimal ordering of these screening and selection elements to maximize predictive validity while controlling costs and reducing lags in the hiring process. Identifying an efficient sequence, prioritizing the most predictive yet cost-effective assessments first, and expediting the process via algorithmic decision making would streamline hiring processes and conserve resources without compromising the quality of candidate selection.

Practice Implications for Psychologists

Different types of applied psychologists contribute to law enforcement hiring, though their roles and influence vary. I-O psychologists are well-positioned to design and evaluate selection and screening systems, including validating measures (e.g., cognitive and integrity tests, structured interviews), designing multiple hurdle systems, advising on cut scores, and evaluating outcomes such as job performance and misconduct. They can also advise on compliance with legal, ethical, and professional standards (e.g., examining and adjusting systems to minimize adverse impact per Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines, making modifications to procedures as part of reasonable accommodations). Yet, despite their expertise, I-O psychologists are rarely involved in law enforcement hiring, often due to limited awareness or access to I-O expertise within agencies, entrenched practices, or budget constraints. Increasing I-O psychologist involvement would enhance the scientific rigor and effectiveness of personnel screening systems, potentially reducing bias and improving candidate quality.

By contrast, clinical psychologists are routinely involved in police hiring through postoffer psychological evaluations. These assessments, classified as medical exams, can result in job offer withdrawal and typically involve testing for psychopathology, clinical interviews, and written evaluations. The International Association for Chiefs of Police's Police Psychological Services Section provides detailed guidelines for these evaluations, focusing on traits such as impulse control, stress tolerance, and ethical judgment (Police Psychological Services Section, 2020). These guidelines emphasize consistent, defensible preemployment evaluations but overlook behavioral risk assessment and lack discussion of empirically supported prehire indicators. Moreover, psychological evaluations occur too late in the hiring process and are often the most expensive stage. Given the high validity and low cost, misbehavior indicators that can be legally assessed preoffer should be collected earlier to reduce posthire misconduct risk and improve downstream efficiency, including fewer failed evaluations at the clinical stage.

Background investigators also play a key role, reviewing candidates' criminal, employment, financial, and personal histories. Early self-report or third-party data on validated misbehaviors would align with their work, allowing confirmation of disclosures rather than late-stage discovery. This approach would remove high-risk candidates earlier and reduce the burden on more costly later stages.

While best practices in personnel *selection* typically advise against basing decisions on single items, this caution is less relevant for specific behavioral indicators. Certain prehire misbehaviors, such as domestic violence citations, racially offensive conduct, or unjustified use of force, are rare, unambiguous, and strongly predictive, as we showed in this study. Meehl's (1954) concept of "broken leg" cues supports acting on such data points. Meta-analytic research in personality and I-O psychology also supports the validity and stability of single-item predictors for rare, meaningful behaviors (Mõttus et al., 2019). Matthews et al. (2022) similarly showed that single-item measures can yield acceptable reliability and validity in organizational settings, especially for constructs that are conceptually narrow or straightforward to define. These findings support the utility of prevalidated, single-item behavior checks as efficient *screening* tools. Such tools would enhance the predictive precision and practical utility of law enforcement hiring systems.

Public Policy Implications for Hiring Standards in Law Enforcement

In the United States, law enforcement agencies employ inconsistent preemployment psychological and background assessments, often without clear guidance on interpreting collected data for hiring decisions. Despite calls from key stakeholders, including the U.S. Attorney General, to develop national standards, such policies remain unbinding, leaving discretion to local agencies, which results in significant variability in hiring practices, timelines, and effectiveness. Additionally, issues like the "muni shuffle," where officers with past misconduct simply transfer between departments, highlight gaps in screening practices. This study underscored the need for a standardized approach that systematically includes prior misbehavior as a predictive factor in police screening,

demonstrating its potential to improve public safety and reduce police misconduct.

There are several steps that can be taken at the national level to standardize law enforcement screening and selection protocols. Consistent and evidence-based processes across jurisdictions require national empirical benchmarks sampling the whole gamut of potential prehire misbehaviors and an investigation of their predictive value. Such data gathering and analysis are urgently needed and should be undertaken without delay. Even with the limited set of signals we investigated, we were able to identify several potent predictors. Given the societal urgency to control police misconduct, standardized prehire misbehavior checklists can be designed using the prevalidated items we investigated. Their use early in the screening process can—and, in our professional opinion, should—be mandated at the state or national levels. In addition to gathering these prehire misbehavior data, agencies should be asked to *act on* prehire misbehaviors that show potent, pervasive prediction, especially if they are typically rare: They are major red flags that should no longer be ignored. Legislative initiatives may be warranted.

Certain prehire misbehaviors can be legally mandated as disqualifying factors in hiring decisions (see Table 4). Similar legal mandates are enforced to uphold standards in other high-stakes jobs. For instance, in health care, laws prohibit individuals with certain criminal convictions, such as serious drug offenses, from practicing in sensitive medical positions to protect patients (Klazema, 2023). In financial services, federal regulations bar candidates with convictions for financial crimes from roles that involve managing client funds, thereby reducing the risk of financial misconduct (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, 2019).

To be sure, there are some prehire indicators that will need careful consideration. To illustrate, we found that having a poor credit history was pervasively predictive of several types of misconduct. However, we also know that use of credit scores can increase adverse impact of selection processes against some minority groups (Bernerth, 2012; Volpone et al., 2015). Society must balance the benefits of reducing incidents like police sexual misconduct, misuse of official vehicles, undesirable off-duty behavior, conduct mistakes, written reprimands, and arrests or criminal charges with the critical need for a diverse police force that reflects the community it serves. To achieve a societally agreed-upon balance, additional national debate and eventual governmental guidance on the use of credit histories in hiring will be essential.

Data are clear that prior law enforcement or military experience does not reduce, and may even increase, the risk of certain types of police misconduct. National standards should mandate comprehensive screening and federal and state personnel record reviews for all candidates from law enforcement or military backgrounds. Currently, some—but not all—U.S. states mandate reviewing this information in background checks.[13] However, considering personnel records from other agencies should not have to wait until that late in the hiring process. For applicants without law enforcement or military backgrounds, prior employers should be legally free to share employment misbehavior information with police agencies without fear that they may be sued by candidates for defamation.[14]

Relatedly, to enhance transparency and accountability in police hiring, national policy should prohibit the deletion of disciplinary records. Current agreements with police unions and fraternal organizations that allow for or mandate the erasure of such data undermine the integrity of hiring processes. Research links police union practices to increased misconduct, often by reducing disciplinary consequences and weakening transparency (Rad et al., 2023). Making disciplinary record deletion illegal would ensure that complete and accurate background information remains available for informed hiring decisions and misconduct information remains available for termination decisions in the future.

Conclusions

This study provided specific, novel, and actionable insights regarding which prehire misbehavior indicators predict police misconduct. Rather than treating past misbehavior as a general proxy for low self-control or counterproductivity, our study empirically quantified the predictive value of specific prehire misbehaviors at the item level for distinct forms of police misconduct over a 5-year period, identifying high-risk indicators that merit use in screening decisions. We further offered empirical benchmarks that translate these findings into practical guidance. By identifying which behaviors are both prevalent enough to matter and predictive enough to act on, our results will help agencies prioritize high-value indicators and strengthen the rigor of their police applicant screening processes.

Importantly, our data allowed us to compare how deviance signals are treated before and after hire, revealing a troubling organizational asymmetry: Many prehire misbehaviors are disregarded at hiring, even though the types of misconduct they foreshadow (such as excessive use of force) serve as grounds for termination once they occur. This asymmetry highlights both a missed opportunity and a practical mandate for reform.

With the specific evidence-based recommendations we provided, this research offers a tailored, empirically supported framework that can transform how agencies approach candidate screening in law enforcement. It can also inform the development of structured assessments targeting prehire misbehaviors in other high-stakes jobs where detection of risk is critical (e.g., pilots, air traffic controllers, biosafety personnel, security-cleared professionals). National and state legislation should support science-backed prehire screening reform. Public safety demands that agencies rely on evidence-based indicators of risk at the point of hire, rather than waiting for misconduct to occur.

[13] For example, California Penal Code §832.12 requires that hiring agencies review personnel files (or separately maintained disciplinary files) of officers who are applying at a new agency for records of investigations of any misconduct.

[14] Again, some state law leads the way in this regard but is often limited to background investigations, not early-stage selection processes. For example, California Government Code §1031.1 specifies that employers are legally obligated to disclose specific relevant information for use in law enforcement background investigations. However, not all agencies legally enforce such disclosure in cases where past employers refuse to share the information requested (California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, 2022).

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