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LIARS FIGURE

Pressured by Compstat, police commanders cook the books



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Who would have thought? In response to a [questionnaire](#) more than one-hundred retired NYPD officers with ranks of captain and above said that crime reports were routinely fudged to minimize the number of Part I offenses that had to be reported to the FBI. Dodges ranged from tweaking thefts so that losses fell under \$1,000 to encouraging victims of violence to minimize what took place, thus holding down the number of aggravated assaults.

Conducted with the assistance of the command officers' union, the survey forms the basis of "Unveiling Compstat: The Naked Truth." A forthcoming book by criminal justice professors John Eterno and Eli B. Silverman, it asserts that the deception was driven by weekly Compstat sessions where headquarters staff mercilessly grilled precinct commanders over crime in their districts.

As might be expected, NYPD reacted angrily. Pointing to other studies that affirmed the accuracy of the department's stats, officials suggested that those surveyed either weren't in a position to know whether the books were being cooked or were simply passing on rumors about the same incident. Professor Eterno, who retired from NYPD's crime analysis section before becoming an academic, poo-pooed that notion. "Those people in the Compstat era felt enormous pressure to downgrade index crime, which determines the crime rate, and at the same time they felt less pressure to maintain the integrity of the crime statistics."

It's not the first time that NYPD has found itself in the cross-hairs of a crime reporting controversy. In 2005 it successfully [fought off attempts](#) by a city investigative commission to look into alleged tinkering with the stats. More recently,

the department admitted that such “manipulation” led to the removal of three district commanders. What’s more, an NYPD officer on suspension for other reasons recently [accused his precinct](#), including a Lieutenant known as “The Shredder” of systematically reducing felonies to misdemeanors and refusing to take crime reports.

Several victims backed up his account. One told reporters that he was bloodied in a street robbery but all officers did was take a “lost property” report. Another, an elderly man, complained that police refused to believe his home was burglarized because of a lack of “evidence.”

There’s no doubt that Compstat sessions can unnerve police commanders, placing them on the hot seat over deep-rooted social problems that cops can’t hope to influence. And while the steep downward trend in crime that got underway in the nineties has seemingly leveled off, Compstat brooks no such excuses. Crime must keep going down, or else.

Exaggerating accomplishments isn’t a problem only in the Big Apple. A 2009 report by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement attributed [chronic under-reporting by Miami police](#) to “a self-imposed pressure that certain [officers] felt as a result of the implementation of Compstat.” One of the examples cited was a carjacking that police downgraded to an “information report.”

Miami police chief (and Compstat booster) John Timoney rejected the findings out of hand. That impolitic response probably cost him his job. Timoney joined ex-Detroit police chief [James Barren](#), who was fired last year after DPD and the medical examiner got caught [classifying homicides as self-defense and suicide](#). A Dallas newspaper investigation revealed that police were reporting only half the crimes called for by FBI guidelines. Dallas hasn’t counted being beat with a pipe as an [aggravated assault](#) since 2007; to keep from counting unfounded vehicle break-ins it’s also supposedly [stopped reporting real ones](#). Meanwhile [Baltimore police](#) have been classifying shootings with multiple victims as a single crime. Just like NYPD, they’ve also jiggled the value of stolen property to keep incidents from reaching the felony threshold.

Lying about stats to look good is nothing new. Speaking at a [2009 conference](#) of criminal justice journalists a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* described a [scandal](#) uncovered by his paper more than a decade ago. “The phony stats were known for many years. Aggravated assaults were easily changed to simple assaults...Precinct commanders used to joke about this, but behind those statistics are real victims.”

Of course, there have always been pressures to show improvement. Yet in the charged, accusatory atmosphere of Compstat, where numbers are king, officers may

feel that they have little choice but to dissemble. Indeed, complaints by commanders that they were being ridiculed in public led NYPD to [bar outsiders](#) from attending Compstat meetings. (Of course, the meetings didn't stop.)

Camden's abysmal finances and sky-high crime rate led the State to place the Attorney General in charge of the police. Compstat was promptly installed. During one of the tense meetings that the police union called "[nightmares](#)", the AG's representative challenged a 25-year police veteran to explain why an undercover squad arrested only one person in four days:

"Let me ask you this. You've been a police officer for quite some time. Does that [only one arrest] sound right?"

"No, sir."

"No, it doesn't. It doesn't," the AG's man self-righteously concluded.

What the inquisitor didn't ask, probably because he didn't know any better, was the obvious: Was it a major arrest? Did it require intensive investigation? Was the suspect a particularly desirable target?

Amplified by the widespread embrace of Compstat, pressures to reach numerical objectives have displaced worthy goals and turned cops into liars. Cooking the books has also brought assumptions about crime trends into question. Long considered the world's premier source of crime data, the UCR can't be any more trustworthy than its weakest link, the police. Considering what's been happening around the U.S., that's not a reassuring notion.