

Making a Police Officer: Police Quality After the Spoils System in the Urban U.S.

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Abstract

This paper presents new data on the careers of men who became police officers in urban police forces across medium and large cities in the United States between 1880 and 1940. This data is drawn from the rosters of annual police reports and individuals are then matched forwards and backwards to their decennial Census records, where available. In this paper we firstly create a measure of turnover among police amid changing political regimes (changes in the mayor's office) and assess whether turnover decreased with the advent of merit systems. We then document the extent to which those police forces were representative of the populations that they served. Finally, we explore how the background and quality of police officers changed with the introduction of civil service hiring systems across cities and years and we will also test whether this translated into improved or more efficient public service provision. We use information about their previous occupations and those of their fathers to inform this question. This research informs policy design, especially for developing countries today, in how to develop appropriate and effective public jobs hiring systems and ways to provide public goods.

Today, many developing countries are experimenting with public policy changes including the introduction of civil service and merit hiring systems in their various levels of government. Intuitively most people would expect that this system is fairer than the previous patronage system where new hires, firing and promotion was determined by politicians and political considerations, with a consequently high rate of turnover in public jobs. One might assume that any move away from this “spoils system” would select better public servants who would deliver public goods more efficiently,

while perhaps leading to a reduction in the representativeness of the government workforce relative to the population served (see Ujhelyi 2014 for a theoretical examination of this question).

The United States moved towards merit systems from 1883 onwards, when the Pendleton Act instituted them for various categories of federal jobs and when New York state also enacted its first law of this type. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a time of much policy experimentation, as part of the progressive era. This period saw merit systems spread to state and city governments at varying rates, sometimes because cities desired these measures themselves, but often because decisions were made at the state level which created obligations for municipalities. By 1915 204 police forces around the country had introduced some form of civil service hiring rules (Miller, 2012). Were these policies beneficial in terms of improving the quality of the government workforce and of the public services which they provided? Using the historical period can help us and policymakers to understand the likely effects of these policies, supplementing the recent interest in this question using data from less-developed countries, such as in Colonnelli et al (2020).

This paper uses data on urban police forces to look at the question of how civil service systems impacted the public sector more generally. We are compiling a record of when cities switched to civil service systems for their police forces, using sources including the Census of the Civil Service Assembly from 1937 (some cities did not have such a system by 1930, but most larger cities did). Police officer names were gleaned from rosters that appeared in most annual police reports of mid-sized and larger cities between 1880 and 1930. This information was combined and matched to individual records from the decennial Census for any available years where matches could be made, using a combination of automated and manual methods. The ideal dataset provides a profile of the police career of each officer and follows them in the Census, allowing us to measure their family

characteristics, house value/rent, and wage and education level in 1940, as well as occupational outcomes for any sons residing with the officers. It further matches officers back to their childhood homes, facilitating identification of father's occupation, and this in turn may allow us to identify brothers and follow them over time, measuring their occupational outcomes too. A subset of this data focusing mainly on the police themselves is used for this paper.

The police roster data will firstly be used to measure turnover in police forces over the full period 1880 to 1930 and to assess whether turnover was reduced with the introduction of the civil service across cities and years. Along with this, we will document the representativeness of forces, again checking for any change after a civil service reform. We then develop a measure of the background or quality of each officer—we use either their previous occupation, which is sometimes listed in the official rosters and sometimes available from their matched Census records; or where no previous occupation can be found, we use the father's occupation. We examine how the quality or profile of officers changed over time as civil service systems were introduced. Other work (Gray, 2020) has compiled a dataset on urban crime during this period, and these measures will be used to assess how these reforms affected the outcomes of criminal justice in the U.S. We believe that these various approaches will build a comprehensive picture of the impact of these long-lasting legal changes in the functioning of the U.S. government.

This work will complement other recent contributions on the effects of historical civil service reforms (Ornaghi, 2016) and other work which has focused on different occupations (political office and teachers respectively in these examples) to understand the determinants of occupational choice and their implications for service provision (Thompson et al 2019; Dal Bo et al 2017 and Jacinto and Gershenson 2019).

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