

Making Progress in the Chicago Police Department, 1862–2024

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Abstract: Claims to have made progress are a mainstay of organizational reputation management. However, confusing and contradictory performance expectations can make progress difficult to locate among a police department's priorities. A case study of the Chicago Police Department's front-facing pronouncements over more than a century and a half clarifies how a bureaucracy works, stretches, and repackages "progress" to resolve those confusions and contradictions. We find that progress claims featured more prominently and fervently during moments when the department had reason to believe its legitimacy was threatened. Within that general pattern, we also find specific patterns in the form that progress claims took. We observe the stable reliance on two techniques to gesture toward progress the police either promised to enact or that it claimed it had already delivered: the police *shifted goalposts* by cycling through inconsistent measures of favorable performance from one year to the next, and they *drummed crises* to dramatize the obstacles that favorable performance required them to overcome. By showing how both techniques reinforced one another, we clarify how a police department "makes" progress.

Keywords: policing; Chicago; progress; legitimacy; reputation management

Reproducibility Package: A memo describing the historical data, coding procedures, and analytic workflow used in this study is available here: <https://osf.io/hdfp6/overview>

'Progress' ... has not invariably been an unmixed blessing.

—O. W. Wilson (1951:144), Superintendent of the Chicago Police Department 1960–1967.

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CLAIMS to have made progress are a mainstay of organizational reputation management. However, core tendencies of policework can make progress altogether difficult to evaluate: problems tend to be under-specified, solutions tend to be over-determined, and role expectations tend to be ambiguous. O. W. Wilson warned these difficulties can make progress in policing seem tauntingly elusive or futile; with fitting confusion, he deemed progress a "not invariably unmixed blessing." Doing the work in a way that pleases one often means doing so in a way that bothers another; if it satisfies one goal then it may undermine another; and the critic always stands vigilant and ready to pounce. *How, then, does a police department make progress?*

Evaluations of progress ordinarily concentrate on whether performance satisfies organizational goals "in material fact." General work in this tradition typically treats performance indices and accountability instruments as benchmarks against which to assess bureaucratic service delivery (Carter, Day, and Klein 2002; De Bruijn 2003; Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan 2015). Within policing, scholars puzzle over

how vigorous democratic contestation has nonetheless left progress benchmarks curiously undisturbed for a century (Scott 2009; cf. Vollmer 1933); hence, O. W. Wilson's (1951:141) flat insistence in the meantime that assessing "effectiveness in the accomplishment of [police] purpose" will have to do. However, assessments that take progress benchmarks as given rarely render a favorable verdict. Stalled progress, we learn, is attributable to features of policy design (Edelman 2016; Feeley and Rubin 2000; Scott 2020), the ambiguous and contradictory missions that bureaucratic institutions purport to advance (Meyer and Zucker 1989; Selznick 1969; Wilson 2019), and mismatched priorities among the people who populate those institutions (Feeley and Sarat 1980; Lipsky 1983), to name a few explanations.

In this article, we instead advance a different approach to understanding bureaucratic progress. We contend that organizational actors make progress not only through the claims they advance about service delivery, but also by strategically working, stretching, and repackaging the meaning of progress itself. Stated more formally, progress is "made" in two overlapping senses: both by making *evaluative* claims (as if to make progress by persuading others of advancement toward a goal) and by making *reactive* claims (as if to make progress by crafting the symbolic significance of performance benchmarks). The former purports to index progress as a provable fact; the latter constructs progress as a discursive resource.

We develop this approach in the context of a case study of the Chicago Police Department (CPD) from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. To do so, we draw on annual reports the CPD published between 1862 and 2024 and, where relevant, supplementary materials published by adjacent organizations including the police union, the independent monitor, and assorted work-groups. The CPD's annual reports are particularly worthwhile records for studying the department's expressions of progress, but they capture in only a thin sense whether the claims they contain convey truths about material reality. However, they reveal in a thick sense how the police institution *purports to present itself*, whether in relation to its activities, value, or direction across more than a century and a half. We find the CPD's reputation management efforts fixed progress to a variety of changing meanings, and that it claimed progress with patterned fervor when it had good reason to believe its legitimacy was most threatened. Within long-term shifts, from conceptualizing progress as the nineteenth-century promotion of "watchful prudence" to the twenty-first-century proverbial delivery of better enforcement bang for taxpaying buck, we also observe year-on-year short-term shifts in the CPD's preferred indices of progress. Although the CPD *shifted goalposts* by cycling through inconsistent measures of favorable performance, we also find it *drummed crises* to dramatize obstacles that favorable performance required the CPD to overcome.

We contribute to scholarship on how police agencies manage professional status and accountability. First, we complicate expectations that progress is a straightforward organizational good. Instead, we show that legitimacy conditions a police department's delicate progress claims: while under-claimed progress calls competence into question, so too over-claimed progress threatens further investment. Second, we clarify how targets that an organization putatively chases perennially change while the form in which it claims progress remains remarkably stable. This "continuously discontinuous" construction of progress complicates expectations

that treat volatile benchmarks as a bug of organizational reputation management; we instead show that they can be a feature, and a powerfully enduring one at that. A third contribution locates these mechanisms in durable properties of organizational life, which complicates expectations that progress is unavoidably volatile. We instead find that the structure of progress claims remains resilient across different demands for organizational change, different circumstances that prompt those demands, and different organizational profiles responsible for meeting them. The pattern of progress claims we observe across more than a century and a half points, therefore, to core dynamics in how a police department “makes” progress.

Performance of Progress

Work on how measurement “performatively” constitutes the reality it purports to represent looms large for studying an organization’s claims to make progress. Over a long historical sweep, that literature theorizes how the development of social statistics since the nineteenth century enabled the state to know people through schemes of classification and categorization, all the better to intervene in their lives (Hacking 1982; Latour 2005; Rose 1999). In this account, just as the development of performance measurement empowered citizens to hold the state to account, it likewise also constituted a core governance practice that enabled the state to know and control its citizens better.

Claims to perform high-quality work mediate these two cross purposes of accountability and control. An organization’s claims to perform well on selected criteria can play up putative strengths while playing down weaknesses; if those criteria then settle into being taken for granted as appropriate measures of performance, they can harden expectations about the organization’s priorities. Examples abound of measures performing this mutually constitutive work between bureaucratic accountability and control: law school admissions officers prioritize targets that curry prestige, even when doing so cuts against their interpretations of academic promise (Espeland and Sauder 2016); non-governmental actors shift practice toward measures they understand are more likely to secure scarce funding (Merry 2016); teachers teach to tests, at the expense of their sense of self (Ball 2003); managers within firms flit between performance measures that balance profitability with identifying sites of intervention (Meyer 2003); public health officials shift success criteria from the alleviation of sickness to indices of coalition-building and infrastructure development (Seckinelgin 2007); the list continues. In these and other ways, organizational actors strategically maneuver through ambiguous or unstable goals to promote criteria on which performance can earn favorable assessment, sometimes at the “subversive” expense of whatever the measure may have sought to capture (Bevan and Hood 2006); in turn, organizational claims to have made progress often promise to represent a reality that they in fact performatively constitute.

A police department proves especially suitable for studying this kind of organizational performance. First, the formidable challenges that hinder progressive change in policing are well-known (Bayley 1994; Fogelson 1977; Wilson 2009; etc.). More recently, post-2014 calls for reform across the U.S. produced high-profile

commissions, institutional reviews, consent decrees, and dramatic groundswells of public support for “progressive” policing. However, more than a decade later, police departments have struggled to meet abiding calls for reform by signaling that progressive change is well underway. In part, this challenge stems from the fraught politics that swirl around policing, which prove difficult to channel into unified policy positions (Phelps 2024). At the same time, the police’s fragile and precarious legitimacy trades off against organizational autonomy and other closely guarded priorities: in one sense, efforts to strengthen accountability to the public can, through the manufactured “illusion” of public input, reinforce and legitimate the police (Cheng 2024); in another sense, political autonomy frees the police to acquire resources and stoke support irrespective of whether they deliver on their promises (Schrader 2026).

Second, a police department represents a suitable study site because its progress claims point in mixed theoretical directions. Take, for example, the expectation that as a bureaucracy becomes impervious to critique, the organizational priority to manage its reputation—such as by claiming to have performed well—will subside. Prior work affirms that expectation: Fogelson (1977:112, 239) traces the twentieth-century development of “a deep feeling of persecution and an extreme sensitivity to criticism” that hardened the police against what they deemed intrusive interferences. That hardening reinforced the police’s impression that the high quality of their work obviated further comment. Sweeping autonomy was one effect of the ensuing zeal to professionalize policing; as autonomy softened the stinging consequences of poor reputation management, so too the organizational obligation among police departments to claim they made progress withered (Felker-Kantor 2025; Schrader 2026).

Still, the police’s organizational imperative to claim they have made progress curiously lingers. That imperative places police departments in a bind: the police are damned if they *don’t* uphold the requirement to claim they deliver high-quality service. That requirement persists despite ebbs and flows in calls for reform that a department brooks, in support that it enjoys, and in the performance that it can in fact boast. Yet they are also damned if they *do* advance those claims. This latter point is delicate: The police must simultaneously convince the public that, “by reason of their efforts the problem they deal with is approaching solution,” yet they must also incompatibly claim “in the same breath” that “the problem is perhaps worse than ever (though through no fault of their own) and requires renewed and increased effort to keep it under control” (Becker 1963:157). Threats must be both uncontainable and exigent, yet also contained and at bay. Walking this discursive tightrope between competence and crisis requires the police to communicate, altogether incoherently, that progress is simultaneously assured yet precarious; well underway yet soon to materialize; hard-won yet lightly worn.

Accordingly, performance measurement’s constitutive power and its susceptibility to subversive gaming are well-documented in police departments. Writ small, police scholars warn that performance targets promote untoward behaviors such as under- or over-recording reported crimes, coaxing suspects to claim participation in unsolved crimes, and concentrating resources on crimes that are easier to solve, among others (Patrick 2022; see also Tiwana, Bass, and Farrell 2015 for an

overview). Writ large, such reactive behaviors stand in for a kind of occupational resistance against the modernizing push toward police accountability (Manning 2008). Among modernism's consequences is the switch to imagine progress as the hollow delivery of "outputs" that capture "what an organization *does*" (over which bureaucracies have considerable control) and the deprioritization of substantive "outcomes" that capture "what an organization *achieves*" (over which they may have little to none; Garland 1996:458–459; Jones, Newburn, and Smith 1994:Ch.4).

Although critical literature unflatteringly casts performance measurement as inviting opportunism and drift, dismissal of performance measurement's significance would be foolhardy and simplistic. Neither their constitutive power nor their susceptibility to subversion disqualify performance claims as "merely false" indices of progress. Instead, prior work points toward three expectations about what such claims signify: first, performance measurement is never purely autonomous from what is being measured. Rather, organizational actors behave "reactively" to the criteria that they imagine form the basis of their assessment. Therefore, the metrics that prompt such reactive behaviors signal something important about what actors imagine qualifies as progress. The second insight shifts focus from the measurement itself to the claims that organizational actors advance about performance. Even if such claims couple only loosely to an organization's putatively "true" progress, those claims still matter as part of a broader strategy of reputation management. By extension, the third insight synthesizes the prior two: organizational actors reveal how they "make progress" in their choice of *which performance metric* they point to and *how they pitch their performance* on that metric.

"Progressive" Policing

Two challenges complicate efforts to study how a police department might make progress. First, progress is *conceptually* challenging to locate as a police priority. Ambivalence is partly to blame: intuitively, we might expect the police to claim their work improves society, since finding otherwise would seem altogether odd. However, those claims also reveal that progress sits uneasily among a police department's priorities, too. Namely, although a department must convincingly evidence progress in service delivery, it must also convincingly couch that progress in the context of struggles that only further support can ease (Becker 1963). Neither task, viewed in isolation, is controversial. A problem arises because good practice requires advancing both claims together. Failure to convince others that social problems in the department's charge are grave and exigent will call the department's value into question. At the same time, however, a failure to convince others that those problems are under control will also call into question that department's competence. A police department's legitimacy therefore depends on careful persuasion that progress is both assuredly afoot, yet also simultaneously precarious (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990).

Careful persuasion of this sort, much like policing's coercive functions, is central to the police's maintenance of order and control (Hall et al. 1978). A "policing machine" characterizes how the police hone that persuasive craft to impressive effect: they curate the story they tell about their work, the tellers responsible for

narrating it, the audiences to whom the story is addressed, and the channels through which audiences may reply (Cheng 2024). As the analysis below shows, that machine's political endgame extends well beyond securing broad-based support and legitimacy alone. Consistent with prior work on how public administrators manage organizational reputation, the CPD's persuasion games curry their own kind of political capital: the CPD plays rivalries off its peer institutions (Krause and Douglas 2005), fits progress to different audience segments (Maor 2020), and points fingers of blame to avoid accountability (Hood 2010). However, inconsistent with that prior work, we also find the police's progress claims blend the technical, moral, and procedural considerations that otherwise typify organizational reputation management (Carpenter 2014). That blend allows the CPD to shuffle responsibility from the police to the public, redirect attention from losses to wins, and manage expectations about the strains of delivering police service under conditions of perennial hardship.

With that said, progress also presents conceptual challenges that run deeper than strategic communications alone; those challenges also drive at the core of the police role. Consider, for example, the unenviable lot that falls to the police. On one hand, sub-optimal and inefficient delivery of service excites a disconsolate hue; unfair delivery stirs even worse. On the other hand, overlapping, confused, and conflicting instructions obscure which should prevail when messy reality pits those priorities against one another. Two features of policework account for this predicament. First, the political process formalizes rules for how, in principle, the police should enact the public's preferences; however, those rules offer incomplete guidance about how to behave in the specific circumstances the officer in fact encounters. That mismatch produces "dilemmas" inherent in public service for which the officer's street-level improvisations constitute imperfect solutions (Goldstein 1990; Lipsky 1983; Wilson 2019). Second, the police struggle to clarify and reconcile incompatible criteria of success: demands for expediency, efficacy, transparency, uniformity, and much else besides sit in friction with one another. Hence, a unifying theme of prior scholarship is that individual police officers brook intractable challenges that are core to their role and function: were the police to advance one objective successfully and against the odds, they would compromise on their advancement of another valued objective (Kahn et al. 1964; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2022; Newburn 2022). By implication, to the extent the police imagine their work in terms of "no-win" predicaments for which solutions are impossible, progress may be a non-starter.

Second, progress is *historically* challenging to locate as a police priority. "Progressive" policing confusingly fastens itself to many different moments and reinterpreted meanings. One use connotes developments associated with the Progressive Era, stretching across the first two decades of the twentieth century. Reform was this era's watchword and well-heeled elites its sentinels: among their many priorities, self-styled Progressives fixed their attentions on the identification of social problems, their newfound conviction about which of those problems were susceptible to solution, and their zealous faith that dramatic state intrusions into public and private life could deliver those solutions (Gould and Shah 2021; Wiebe 1967). Reform of the police was a "necessary precondition" (Mitrani 2013:157) to realize that

Progressive vision: bourgeois anxieties about disorderly agitation, moral decline, and machine politics prompted an expansive reinterpretation of the police role and professionalization of the force.

More recent invocations of progressive policing are far harder to disentangle (Phelps 2024). A brief selection of overlapping uses throughout the intervening century affirms the concept's polysemy: variously, they analogize contemporary developments to those associated with the Progressive Era; or they conflate progress with change toward "better" policing, howsoever construed; or, less frequently from within the police institution than from outside it, they fix progress to change in policing that fitfully tilts left-of-center. The "Progressive" adjective therefore attaches to a cornucopia of possible changes in policing, from the push to professionalize, to a break from putatively outdated practice, to rationalizing systems or delivering on a mandate, or indeed much else. Arguably, few proposed changes in policing fall squarely *outside* progressive policing's possible boundaries. This variety affirms that progress is an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie 1956), stuffed with all the baggage usually packed therein: among other properties, it is versatile, normatively fraught, and strategically useful. A police department's claims of progress are therefore not easy to pin down. At the same time, though—as with performance measurement, too—disqualifying progressive policing as "merely false" by dint of the contested uses to which it has been put is to misunderstand how the concept works. Rather, a critical appreciation of those contested uses should shift focus to how claims of progress performatively signal what a claimant might imagine the concept signifies.

On this point, the devil really is in the details: throughout U.S. history, confusingly different demands have *in fact* been made of large urban police departments. That variety can obscure which target a claim to progress purportedly chases. Although long term shifts in those different demands extending back to the Civil War can be hard to plot definitively, there is some support for a loose historiography that marks out three broad developments. The first is a gradual and uneven appeal for more bureaucratized and regulated enforcement (Fogelson 1977; Monkkonen 2004; Walker 1977). That appeal underpinned requests for change that stemmed both from growing distaste toward sweeping discretionary authority, and the creeping sense that parochial constabulary justice was unfit for the modern city's needs. A second development is an unceasing lurch between corruption and misconduct scandals on one hand and demands for reform on the other; yet, despite the vigorous demands those scandals sometimes stirred, rarely did they produce meaningful and lasting change (Lindberg 1998; Sherman 1978). This history of disappointment is predictably less conducive to progress-talk. A third development is the perennial demand for an increasingly sophisticated delivery of police service. By contrast with either of the prior two historical developments, this third one's technocratic bent wears progress more on its sleeve (Manning 1992; Willis, Mastrofski, and Weisburd 2007)—whether in relation to calls-for-service systems (Gillooly and Thacher 2024), community policing (Skogan 2006), intelligence-gathering techniques (Brodeur 2010), and other refinements. Regardless, all three sets of changes tasked officers with maneuvering through a dense thicket that, in time, dressed reputation management in claims of progress.

In sum, progress in policing is *conceptually* obscure because the police mandate's complexity mystifies the "right" solution to problems officers may be called upon to solve, and it is *historically* obscure because progress lends itself to continuous and strategic reinterpretation. Those properties make progress something of a moving target. In short temporal sweep, year-to-year shifts between different progress claims could signify fleeting historical forces: touting "this" success in one year before then touting "that" one the next year could performatively denote anything from a switch in organizational priorities, to an attempt to showcase strong performance or deflect from underwhelming performance, or maybe even something else. However, a longer temporal sweep can recast that instability differently. If patterns in a police department's claims of progress persist despite underlying material changes, then the department's approach is less a function of historically contingent forces than an expression of features found deep within the institution itself. In turn, a firmer sense of those features can speak directly to organizational studies' long-standing fascination with how bureaucratic actors participate in setting the institutional demands placed upon them (e.g., see Edelman 2016; Feeley and Rubin 2000; Koehler and Cheng 2023; etc.). Taking these challenges together, we study how a police department's claims performatively work, stretch, and repackage progress from 1862 to 2024.

Data and Methods

During the study period, U.S. Census estimates report Chicago's population swelling nearly tenfold from below 300,000 residents in 1870 to almost three million by 2020. Shortly after the Civil War, early commercial investment and hard-nosed municipal planning attracted large neighboring townships to incorporate into Chicago; consequently, the city's limits extended rapidly outward into the early-twentieth century and have remained broadly intact since. Different historiographical inflections give flavors of how the city transformed across a century and a half: Political histories emphasize antagonisms between capital and labor that shaped the earlier cityscape in ways that fueled, and then were overtaken by, the racial antagonisms that endured thereafter (Guglielmo 2003; Hirsch 2009; Spear 2018). Economic histories emphasize ambitious municipal investments in Chicago's infrastructure, punctuated by and in reaction to catastrophes, blue-ribbon conventions, and cultural stirrings besides (Bluestone 1991; Pacgya 2019; Smith 2019). And social histories emphasize immense dislocations that concentrated poverty, intensified divides within and between urban and suburban spaces, and foregrounded the city's (particularly racial) diversification (Algren 2011; Asbury 2003; etc.).

As the cityscape transformed across more than a century and a half, so too did policework. Figure 1 shows the historical outlines that affected these twin transformations. A focused analysis of whether and how those transformations figured in the CPD's presentations of self appears in the analysis below; meanwhile, we note the CPD played an important role not only in the development of a penal sensibility about the proper objects and techniques of police intervention in general; it moreover played an important role in fielding requests, on one hand, from a growing class of stakeholders to deliver competent service while, on the other hand, having to position itself strategically to petition for the resources, authorities, and

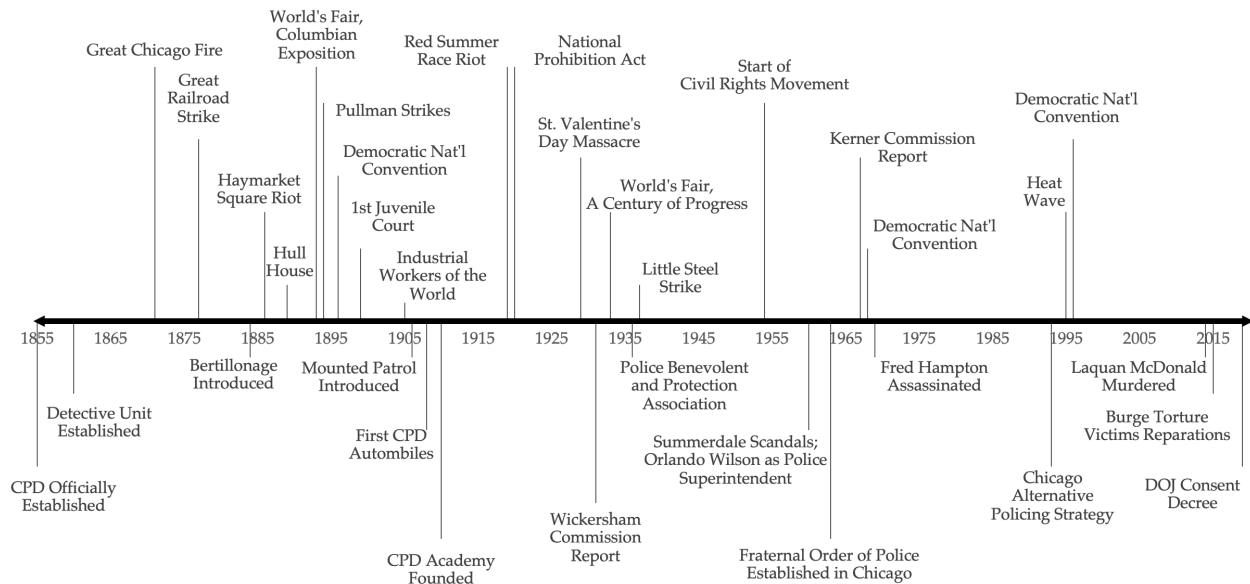


Figure 1: Timeline of selected Chicago and CPD events, 1855 to present. Developments beyond the CPD appear above the line; developments from within the CPD appear below the line.

legitimacy it required. Examining claims of progress in the context of transformations in Chicago policing thus promises rich insights for understanding the police institution beyond Chicago alone.

We analyzed two sets of archival materials. The core set comprises 142 annual reports from the CPD extending across 162 years from the first report in 1862 to 2024.¹ At face value, the annual reports retrospectively document operations and accomplishments from the prior twelve months. Reports narrativized major events and the department's reactions to those events, they quantified a selection of policework's metrics, and they cataloged the department's state of affairs. At the same time, the reports also set out a prospective vision for the CPD's future, a manifesto of promises on which it hoped to deliver, an outline of its ongoing initiatives and continuing priorities, and a wish-list of items the CPD insisted would improve performance. Annual reports therefore varied from being administratively tedious and ponderously detailed human resources documents to elegantly slick and eminently legible public relations texts. Information within the reports was nonstandardized: benchmarks introduced in one year disappeared or shifted in the next, presentation styles changed from hand-drawn figures to actuarial analysis to glossy visuals, and page lengths ranged from one up to hundreds. Both prospective and retrospective functions underpin the reports' specific purpose as reputation management devices, even though in most senses the annual reports of the 1860s appear unrecognizable from those of the 2020s.

Underneath that aesthetic discontinuity lies a rich sociological continuity. Namely, throughout the sampled period, reports operated as reputation management instruments that suit them uniquely well to an analysis of how the CPD sought to convey that the department was making progress. First, the annual reports are published on an organization's behalf and in that organization's proverbial "voice." Since we

focus on the department's expressions of progress, it follows that annual reports qualify as a worthwhile data source from which to "hear" that voice: internally, departments set and follow pre-publication procedures to authorize the content that appears in a report; externally, a report constitutes a mainstay of a department's reputation management strategy (Law 2001; Monkkonen 1979; Timmerman 1929). Second, annual reports can be unusually extensive in temporal coverage. Indeed, annual reports are readily retrievable extending to some of the CPD's early years.

The reports' explicit audience shifted over time. Until 1871, the reports were published in the *Chicago Tribune* and ostensibly aimed at a wide readership. From 1875 through the early-twentieth century, the reports were addressed to the City Council, the mayor, or both. Between 1913 and 1992, the reports were primarily addressed to the mayor, though by the 1960s their less structured format and use of photographs signaled growing attention to a wider public audience. The 1966 annual report was even explicitly addressed to the mayor and "the citizens of Chicago." Since 1993, formal addressees have disappeared entirely, replaced by the superintendent's message written in inclusive language to all Chicagoans, indicating that the reports are now designed as much for the public at large as they are for a specific governing body.

We supplemented the core archive of annual reports with further materials that contextualized and thickened the analysis. This supplementary set of materials contained either further expressions of progress or clues about how the CPD thought about its work. It included bulletins and digests, union newsletters, periodicals, and public relations pamphlets authored by volunteer associations and community groups with varying degrees of affiliation to the CPD; where suitable, we also referred to high-profile oversight reports and inquiries.² We prioritized the annual reports since the supplementary materials promised a less continuous archive, and their authorship by actors adjacent to, but not always within, the CPD meant that their role—if any—among the CPD's assorted reputation management instruments was much harder to place.

Analysis proceeded in two main stages—first for the core archive of annual reports, and then for the supplementary materials. In each stage, we iterated between open exploration of the texts and structured comparison, during which we developed a codebook that captured claims of progress. Codes identified the topics of progress claims (e.g., crime control, efficiency, public relations), their evaluative tone (e.g., competence, crisis, and defensiveness), their mode of address (e.g., preferred target audiences) and their narrative techniques (e.g., statistical evidence, moral appeals, and technological innovation). Table 1 shows examples of each code's contents.

As the analysis unfolded, we combined flexible coding with abductive analysis (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Abductive reasoning emphasizes the interplay between data and theory: rather than testing predefined hypotheses or inductively listing themes, we treated surprises and inconsistencies in the data as invitations to update expectations. Therefore, although we did not set out to find progress, nonetheless it soon arose as the best fitted concept to explain how seemingly incompatible claims of competence and crisis, both of which endured throughout the sample, might in fact reinforce one another. We refined our codebook and

Table 1: Example codes.

Index Codes	Line-by-Line Codes	Example
Crime and Disorder	<p>Crime: successful crime prevention or control.</p> <p>Disorder: successful disorder maintenance.</p>	<p>In 2019, CPD's exhaustive crime-fighting efforts resulted in significant improvements across several major categories. Murders fell below 500, reaching their lowest level since 2015; shootings were at their lowest level since 2014. Robberies, burglaries, and motor vehicle thefts all hit twenty-year lows. [2019:5]</p> <p>The number of arrests for drunkenness appears to be constantly lessening each year. . . The decrease in [lodgers' applications] conveys the encouraging information that the hordes of tramps and destitute people who traveled from place to place a year or two ago are rapidly disappearing, and have with the revival of business engaged in legitimate and useful employment. [1879:26]</p>
Relations	<p>Police-community relations: developing or strengthening relations with community members.</p> <p>Impressions of support: third-party celebration of the CPD's contributions.</p>	<p>Foremost was the continued success of the Community Gang Control Program which deals with the channeling of youngsters, who may be susceptible to gang recruitment, into positive activities prior to gang inducement. . . . The thrust of the program is the involvement of the community. [1986:7]</p> <p>Operation Crime-Stop completed another successful year, with nearly 3,500 arrests directly attributed to citizen's help . . . Since its inception in April 1964, Crime-Stop has led to more than 7,800 arrests. More than 900,000 crime-stoppers participated in this citizen-police cooperative venture, which continued to receive national and international attention. . . . Even the butcher, baker and candlestick maker joined operation Crime-Stop. [1966:7-8]</p>
Advancements	<p>New officers or offices: appointment of new units or establishment of new authorities.</p> <p>Material acquisitions: procurement of logistical and operational assets and hardware.</p> <p>Policing techniques: development and delivery of a claimed innovation in policework.</p>	<p>During the year, more effort was expended in modernizing, refurbishing and retooling the department than ever before in its history. . . . The department's strength was bolstered, as never before, by strong recruiting drives designed to attract vigorous, intelligent men to meet the new challenges the coming year had to offer. [1961:1]</p> <p>The feeling of doubt as to a Ford [car] being suited to policework has been removed. The repeated requests from all Commanding Officers for additional Fords in their respective districts prove the efficiency of this type of patrol service. [1925:19]</p> <p>After 30 years of operating under the same basic policing strategy, the Department has embarked on a sweeping and historic change in the way we provide police services to the people of Chicago . . . It is a change that takes the best elements of our traditional model of policing—energetic enforcement of the law, rapid response to emergencies, and thorough investigative work—and combines them with new, more proactive approaches to preventing crime and disorder in our neighborhoods. [1994:4]</p>

Table 1: (Continued)

Index Codes	Line-by-Line Codes	Example
Threat	<p>Preoccupation with death and safety: calling attention to the danger of police work.</p> <p>Creating urgency: calling attention to the CPD's under preparation.</p>	<p>I respectfully call your attention to the three police officers who lost their lives in the performance of their duty. ... This is a decided decrease from the ten who were killed in the previous year, yet it is with deep regret that I report these three, and hope that this list will decrease steadily until its entire elimination. [1935:9]</p> <p>I can think of no greater urgency than to rid our streets of gangs, guns, and drugs. These interrelated problems represent the greatest threat to our present safety, and to the future of our children. Recently in Chicago, a 12-year-old gang "wanna-be" shot and killed two other boys, hoping to impress local gang leaders. ... We have become accustomed to such incidents, and we are no longer surprised when we hear about them. But we must not compound the tragedy of these incidents by responding with complacency. [1997:5]</p>
Underinvestment	<p>Expressed need: requests for investment.</p> <p>Comparative heuristics: contrasting CPD resources against those in peer police departments.</p>	<p>It will no doubt be claimed that the annual report of the Superintendent of Police is always made the occasion for recommending an increase of the police force. This, it appears, has been so, but it also appears to have been the rule of late to largely reduce the force whenever an increase was asked for. [1878:14]</p> <p>With reference to the duties performed by the Police in this and other American cities ... New York, one policeman to each 490 inhabitants and 29 arrests to each policeman annually; Philadelphia has one policeman to each 560 inhabitants and 29 arrests to each policeman; ... Chicago has one policeman to each 1,050 inhabitants and the average number of arrests for each man last year was sixty. These statistics do not show that Chicago is worse than those other cities, but that fewer men do the work. [1883:22]</p>
Folk Theories	<p>The public: concern about lack of public support.</p> <p>Peer institutions: concern about incompetence among other institutions of governance.</p> <p>Police role: concern about the difficulties of police work.</p>	<p>The high crime rate of 1966 was apparent throughout the city and it continued well beyond the period of demonstrations and other disturbances. Of the city's 21 police districts, 15 experienced increases in major crimes. ... It can only be concluded from these statistics that civil disturbances such as these not only nourish an attitude conducive to criminal behavior but that the attitude continues even after the disturbances have ended. [1966:4]</p> <p>If the courts for any cause are more considerate of the defendants than they are of their victims, the work of the police is neutralized, the community suffers, and the officers are unjustly blamed for conditions for which others are largely responsible. [1904:9]</p> <p>People generally expect more from a policeman than they reasonably should, and they are not aware of the extra burdens in this direction that are placed on the force, and most of which extra duties are in excess of the regular police duties. There is no other department of the city government of which so much is expected, and none for which generally so little is done. Neither is there any department where the conduct of employees is so much scrutinized, for upon the slightest mistake made by one of them the whole police force is more or less subjected to censure. [1878:17]</p>

maintained narrative memos alongside the formal coding process to capture cross-cutting ideas and historical developments that did not fit neatly into any single code. Finally, we integrated insights from both archives into a comparative framework that traced when, how, and why the CPD claimed to be “making progress.” This iterative, abductive approach enabled us to move between description and explanation—to identify recurring rhetorical patterns while also theorizing what those patterns reveal about how a police department makes progress.

Making Progress

Progress featured ubiquitously throughout the CPD’s reputation management efforts. In its annual reports, the CPD regularly invoked progress to pitch all manner of developments and qualities that it saw fit to celebrate. Those invocations burnished the CPD’s identity (“The Chicago Police Department—where progress never ceases” [1964:4]³), lauded its outputs (from the “progressive” redistribution of assignments that strengthened patrol [1932:7] to the recruitment of women officers [S2000.4:5]), and praised its outcomes (from “the homicide detail continued its progress toward the solving of homicides” [1950:18] to “progressively” reaching goals of reducing violent crime [S2004.1:2]). In fact, very little of the CPD’s work fell outside the bounds of progress. Shooting drill performance qualified for designation as progress [1915:56; 1922:71; S1929.9:3], as did the CPD’s efforts toward the “juvenile control and rehabilitation of problem-ridden teenagers” [1955:57], as did initiatives seeking to increase transparency and accountability [2017:5].

Although a plethora of activities and accomplishments earned the CPD’s favorable designation, use of the word “progress” itself ebbed and flowed. It occurred most frequently during the decades leading up to and including the Progressive Era, whereupon it then reappeared sparingly, if at all, but for two episodes: first during the late-1950s to mid-1970s, and then once again during the final decade in our sample. Broadly, those shifts recast claims of progress from the nineteenth-century preservation of urban tranquility and girding of moral conscience to the twentieth-century assurances of due process, fairness, and proportionality to the twenty-first-century warrants of trust, safety, and respect.

Tellingly, the three periods when progress featured most prominently overlap with the years during which missing reports concentrate: across the first period, reports are missing from 1863–1866, 1880, 1882, 1884, 1921, and 1927; in the second period, from 1959–1960 and 1962–1963; and in the third period, from 2011–2016. Materials contained in the supplementary archive contextualized this overlap as more than mere coincidence. During years when the CPD declined to produce an annual report, supplementary materials course thick with institutional anxieties. Crime control figures prominently among the department’s worries, since those years coincide with broad periods when Chicago witnessed its steepest violence “spikes” in 1920–1925, 1966–1970, 1987–1992, and 2016 (Vargas et al. 2022). Within that consistency, there is telling variation in what concerns gripped the CPD’s attention: until the Progressive Era’s end, anxieties turned on the public’s limp support: “there should be an immediate change in the mental attitude of the public toward the policeman. . . . I wish I could reach every citizen of Chicago with an

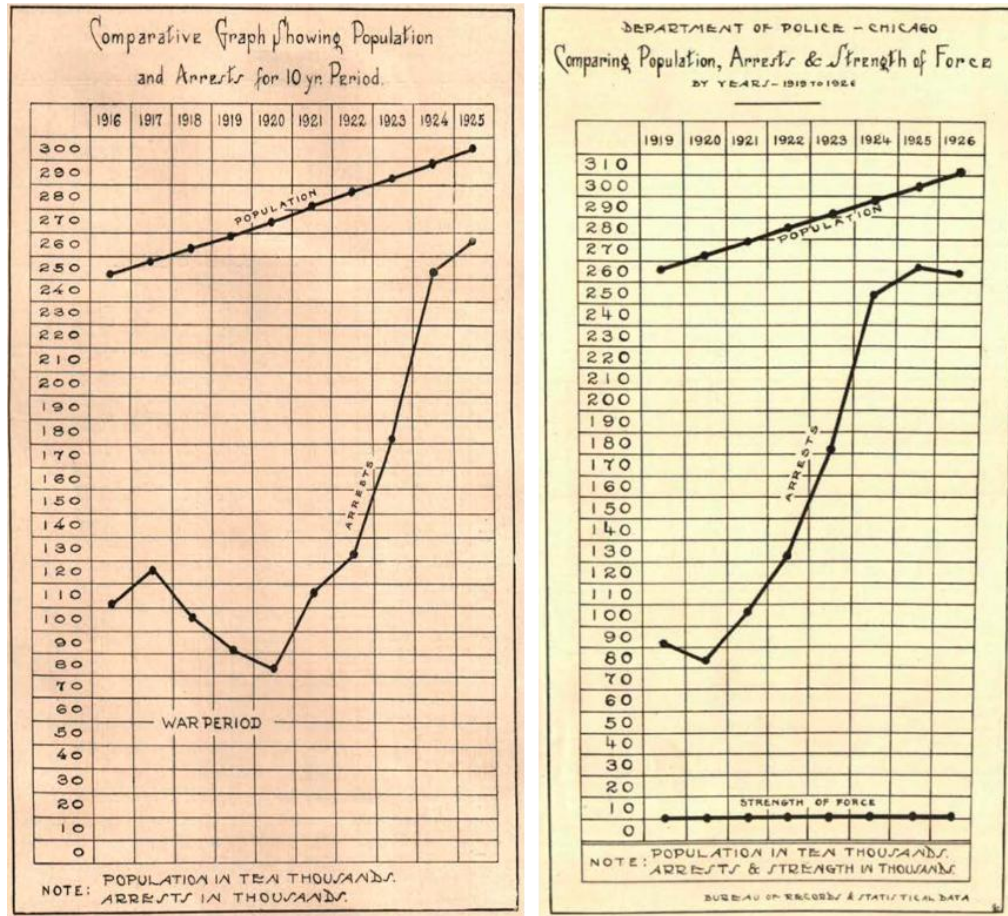
appeal to look at a policeman in that way. He is not a ‘copper,’ to run away from, to traduce, to malign, at every opportunity. . . . We can get a lot more, a lot better service from the policeman if we think more of him” [S1921.9:7]. Throughout the years that spanned Civil Rights, anxieties turned toward threats to officer integrity. Lengthy write-ups that sprawled across multiple issues instructed officers among a newsletter’s readership to register complaints of officer wrongdoing and how to file misconduct suits with the Internal Investigation Division [S1960.8:1–2; S1960.9:2, 4]. And in the most recent decade, thin-blue-line anxieties prevail about vindictive “anti-police movement” antagonism [S2015.9:5], overbearing “Task Force [sic]” scrutiny [S2016.5:6], and “beyond desperate” personnel shortfalls [S2016.9:6]. A sense of threats to legitimacy therefore runs through the periods when the CPD invoked progress most prominently and explicitly.

However, single-minded focus on explicit invocations of the word “progress” paints a naïvely incomplete picture of the concept’s ubiquity in the CPD’s presentations of self. In fact, progress appeared far more abundantly in the form of implicit claims. Like their explicit counterparts, these implicit claims also ranged widely in the topics they communicated, but they moreover ranged widely in *how implicitly* they conveyed the CPD’s insistence that it had made progress. Sometimes, progress was a straightforward inference from how the CPD sought to present information, such as in its plentiful characterizations of successful crime prevention and order maintenance (throughout the entire sample), or its strengthened ties to the community (primarily from the late-1940s onward), or its streamlined internal operations (haltingly throughout the twentieth century). In those instances, the reports clearly sought to manage the CPD’s reputation favorably.

At other times, more implicit communications of progress required closer interpretive work to locate. For example, an enduring and frequent progress claim touted the successful maintenance of essential police functions despite the department’s resources being spread unsustainably thin. Those claims were often implicit, even if they varied in their subtlety: after an illustration in the 1925 report linked Chicago’s swelling post-war population to an abrupt increase in arrests, apparently to little avail, the flattening arrest rate appearing in the CPD’s 1926 report risked underselling policework’s multi-year ardors. The chart was promptly amended to include a new data series indicating stable “strength of force,” all the better to communicate value amid thinning investment (Figure 2A). Later reports made a similar point, albeit less deftly. In 1964, for example, the department’s tabulation of its strength foregrounded the disparity between “authorized” and “actual” personnel (Figure 2B). Neither report narrativized the implied argument that further investment was due, nor indeed did other reports explicate arguments the CPD deemed self-explanatory, but the argument was clear all the same.

Acknowledging the CPD’s reliance on implicature fills in the incomplete picture that an otherwise-narrow focus on explicit communication alone might misleadingly suggest. Setting implicit and explicit claims alongside one another reveals not only ebbs and flows in the extent to which progress figured in the CPD’s presentations, but also two key features of *how* the CPD claimed to make progress. Figure 3, which visualizes years during which the CPD invoked various claims of competence and crisis, illustrates these two sets of findings.

A)



B)

PERSONNEL STRENGTH 1964*

AUTHORIZED AND ACTUAL STRENGTH OF MAJOR UNITS

	Exempt	Cap-tains	Lieu-tenants	Ser-geants	Detec-tives	Youth Officers	Patrol-men	Other Sworn	Cross-ing Guards	Civilians	Total
DEPARTMENT	auth 69	77	245	1,032	1,205	181	7,215	291	1,396	1,660	13,371
TOTAL	act 69	71	244	1,039	1,179	173	7,128	278	1,398	1,529	13,108
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT	auth 8	4	8	24	47	2	87	2		254	436
	act 8	3	8	36	37	2	87	2		235	418
BUREAU OF FIELD SERVICES	auth 50	72	204	841	1,061	178	6,604	64	1,396	408	10,878
	act 50	67	205	839	1,051	170	6,515	54	1,398	351	10,700
BUREAU OF STAFF SERVICES	auth 6	1	14	85	8	1	369	221		972	1,677
	act 6	1	13	87	8	1	367	218		918	1,619
BUREAU OF INSPECTIONAL SERVICES	auth 5		19	82	89		155	4		26	380
	act 5		18	77	83		159	4		25	371

Figure 2: Implicit representations of competence, 1925 and 1926 (A) and 1964 (B). Narrative interpretation of the relationship between Chicago’s growing population and the CPD’s arrests accompanied neither illustration in Panel A, nor the relationship between “authorized” and “actual” strength in Panel B, but the argument they conveyed about the CPD’s delivery of service despite growing burdens—while implicit—is plain. Sources: [1925:24; 1926:13; 1964:5].

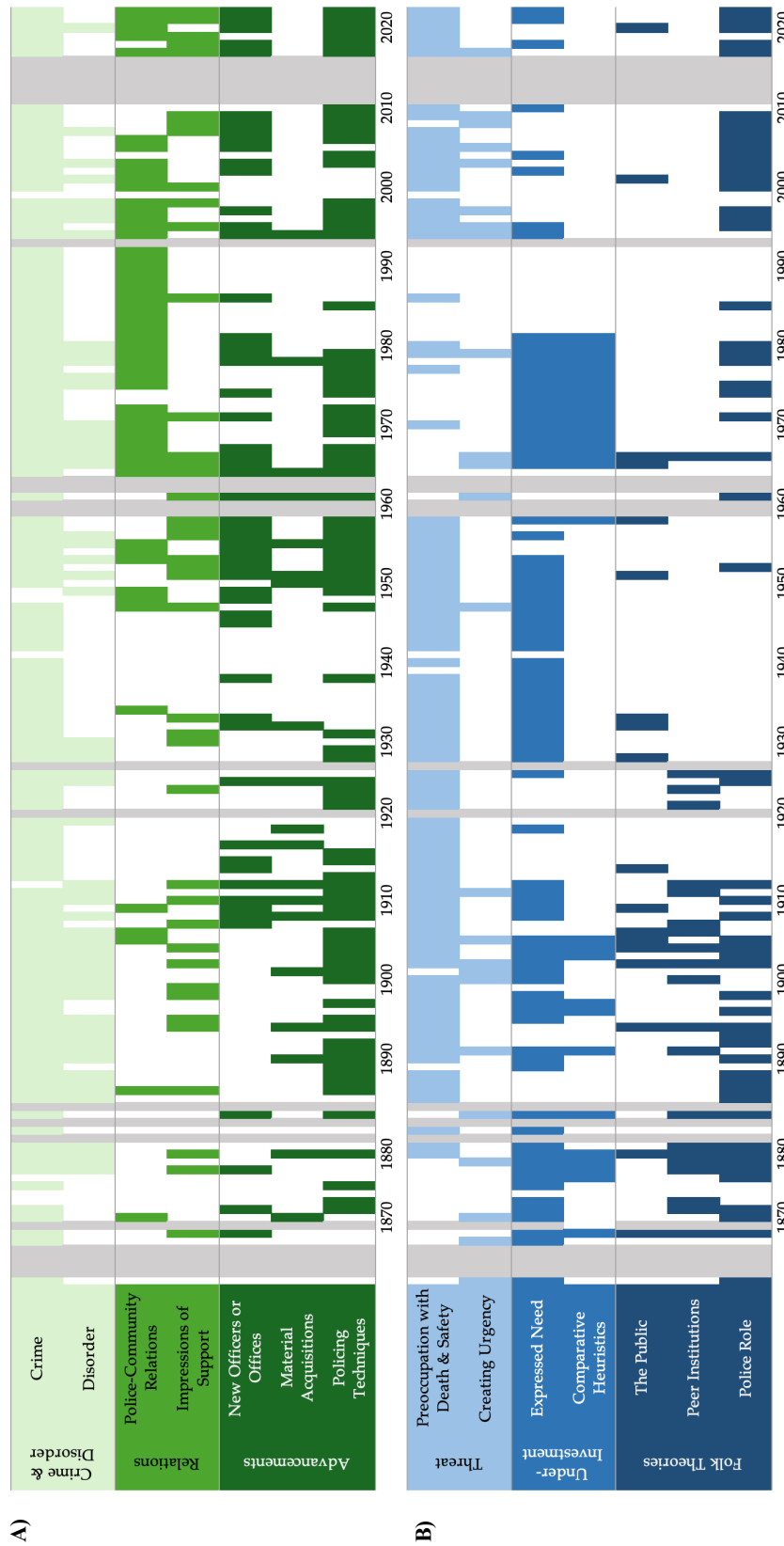


Figure 3: Construction of competence and crisis in the Chicago Police Department, 1862–2024. Shaded areas indicate years during which the CPD invoked the corresponding claim of competence (Panel A) or crisis (Panel B) in its annual report. Vertical grey areas indicate missing data or years during which the CPD declined to produce an annual report.

First, Figure 3A shows patterns we characterize as *shifting the goalposts*. Goalpost shifting consisted of playing up wins and playing down losses to sustain a narrative of continued competence. For example, in a nearly uninterrupted stretch extending from the Civil War to the present, the CPD praised its performance on *Crime and Disorder* indices. The CPD pointed most persistently toward crime control success as the preferred competence benchmark—and within that persistence, the CPD preferred to point toward specifically *violent* crime. Disorder also figures prominently, albeit consistently so until the 1910s and then inconsistently thereafter. Regardless, the construction of successful *Crime and Disorder* performance remained constant enough to suggest the CPD had the matter in hand irrespective of year-on-year fluctuations. Goalpost shifting underpinned this constancy, by strategically recasting data's inferential value to vest authority in data when performance appeared to improve, and dismissing those data when performance appeared to suffer. At a granular level, selected years illustrate this point:

- **1929:** Amid efforts to process 56 percent more arrests and summonses in 1929 than in the previous year [1929:11], the CPD cautioned against narrow-minded misinterpretation of unflattering data: “your attention is respectfully invited to some of the more important activities of the year not necessarily indicated in the statistical sections. . . The outstanding feature is the reduction of felonious homicides by 19.5%; also a reduction of 12.5% in fatal automobile accidents in the face of a higher per capita percentage of fatalities throughout the country and an increase in the number of automobiles in use” [1929:4].
- **1930:** The following year, the CPD confidently discounted unfavorable arrest data by pointing instead to the likelihood of securing convictions at subsequent stages of the criminal process: “The work accomplished [by the CPD] speaks for itself, and a comparison of the number of arrests made last year with those of previous years would be misleading unless read understandably. Effective policework cannot be gauged by the number of arrests” [1930:6].
- **1931:** A steep and unmentioned rise in all felonies but rape the following year [1931:30,34] meant that praise for the CPD's crime control prompted refocusing on clearances instead: “As shown by the number of criminal offenses that are being cleared up and the number of convictions obtained on criminal charges, the Department is functioning very effectively” [1931:6].
- **1932:** Transition to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting system complicated data collection by imposing new recording practices half-way through 1932. The CPD opted to disclose only the FBI-compliant crime data from the final six months of the year [1932:8], which yielded impressively favorable, if somewhat implausible, crime declines across every category [1932:13-15].
- **1933:** “Gratifying decreases” [1933:8] in crime in 1933 prompted the CPD to “report a general reduction in the entire list of reportable major offenses” [1934:9]. Murder increased because it “is an uncontrollable offense,” as did petty larceny because it “undoubtedly can be traced to the depression” [1939:8], even if the theory did not extend to other acquisitive crime. Gone were the CPD's misgivings about arrest data's inferential value or clearance

data's superiority and gone was the need to credit or discredit performance measures.

Figure 3A shows that the CPD also shifted goalposts by churning between different indices of favorable performance. Beyond pointing to *Crime and Disorder* alone, the CPD also pointed to improved *Relations* stemming from outreach initiatives such as community policing boards and supportive praise for the CPD's contributions from assorted stakeholders. Neither is particularly prominent until the late-1950s, but police-community relations figure consistently and forcefully in the CPD's claims of strong performance thereafter. The CPD also touted *Advancements* in the form of specific new offices or officers such as the recruitment of women officers [1893] or more general expansions in personnel [1961], material acquisitions such as new vehicles [1908] and the walkie-talkie [1952], and policing techniques such as bertillonage [1884] and community policing [1994]. *Advancement* claims appeared more sporadically than claimed competence on other measures, but they featured as a staple of the CPD's claim of pioneering status throughout the police profession more broadly. And although *Crime and Disorder* remained the CPD's preferred progress benchmark, the CPD gestured toward *Relations* and *Advancements*, too. Continued churn between different performance indices also enabled the CPD to shift goalposts persistently: almost no two consecutive years contained the same configuration of competence claims. At a granular level once again, hewing even to homicide alone illustrates the point:

- **2005:** The CPD triumphantly took *Crime and Disorder* credit when the homicide rate decreased in 2005: "We had much to be proud of in 2005. There were 126 days in which no one was murdered in Chicago, a 23.5 percent increase over the 102 murder-free days in 2004. . . . our anti-violence strategies reduced overall index crime by 6.0 percent and violent crime by 2.2 percent" [2005:6].
- **2006:** When homicide ticked up in 2006, the report folded homicide into a broader violent crime decline and shifted focus to *Relations* successes: "in an average month in 2006, we held 248 meetings in which 55,106 Chicagoans partnered with police officers from their beat to identify, prioritize, and solve neighborhood crime and disorder problems" [2006:8].
- **2007:** The following year, a welcome 6.2 percent homicide decline prompted reversion to *Crime and Disorder* performance and, in turn, license for the CPD to claim credit once more: "Together, we have made significant progress in the fight against gangs, guns, and drugs and we have set even higher crime fighting goals. . ." [2007:6].
- **2008:** When homicide increased in 2008, the CPD's claims of competent performance shifted away from homicide once again, and this time toward promises about future *Advancements*: "We will realize [our] vision through our efforts to address gangs, guns and drugs, which remain a scourge. . . We will continue to make these problems the focus of our crime-fighting strategies, which include additional personnel. . . And we will continue to develop new, adaptive strategies to keep ahead of those who perpetrate crime" [2008:12].

- **2009:** Homicide's decrease in 2009 once again licensed the CPD to revert back to *Crime and Disorder*, to point directly to homicide once again, and to claim credit for the results: "Through strong partnerships and strategic policing, we ended 2009 with very good statistical results. While there was a significant decrease in the number of homicides, we have more work to do. As anyone would agree, any murder is one too many" [2009:8].

Goalpost shifting was neither an idiosyncratic feature of the CPD's claims to have controlled homicide, nor was it concentrated in these five years alone. On the contrary, it featured persistently throughout the CPD's history and in reference to all manner of performance measures listed above as indices of competence. However, persistent goalpost shifting can introduce risks. Among other problems, it can threaten the persuasiveness of one year's claimed successes when claiming in the next that entirely different successes "truly" matter. The problem can worsen further when shifting the goalposts back, in a subsequent year, to a recently discarded performance measure. That problem presses as forcefully when shifting goalposts within *Crime and Disorder* indices alone as when shifting goalposts between *Crime and Disorder*, *Relations*, and *Advancements*.

The CPD managed such risks by counter-balancing its changing claims of competence with a second set of claims that we characterize as *drumming crises*. Crisis drumming communicated significance in the obstacles that favorable performance required the CPD to overcome. Doing so rested on three sets of claims, as shown in Figure 3B. First, the CPD persistently foregrounded *Threats* in the form of dangers endemic to policework, typically consisting of cautions about officer mortality and urgent concerns like imminent crime waves. Threat claims stressed the CPD's sense of the dangers core to policework (Sierra-Arévalo 2019; Skolnick 1966), and moreover, they did so with extensive historical reach. Second, themes of *Underinvestment* recurred either in the form of repeatedly expressed need for more personnel or comparative heuristics that contrasted the CPD's threadbare resources against those lavished upon more comfortably supported departments in peer jurisdictions. Underinvestment claims appeared consistently until the 1970s before they then became much more sporadic. And third, the CPD espoused *Folk Theories* that lamented the public's underappreciation of policework's value, inveighed against peer institutions such as the courts for dropping the enforcement ball that the CPD had passed, or deplored the beleaguered police officer's due. Folk theories featured most prominently in the early decades and became sparse from the Progressive Era's end until they reappeared during Civil Rights.

Setting goalpost shifting alongside crisis drumming constituted the CPD's efforts to claim it was making progress. We now show a century and a half of constancy in the CPD's reliance on those techniques. Contrary to expectations that would benchmark progress against unstable demands for organizational change, or the circumstances that prompted those demands, or the organizational profiles responsible for meeting them, the constancy we observe instead suggests that features internal to the CPD best explain how a police department "makes" progress.

From “Watchful Prudence” to the Consent Decree

For much of the nineteenth century, the CPD conceptualized progress as the successful exercise of “watchful prudence” over “known . . . disreputables” [1894:6]. Urban disorder, especially in the form of industrial agitation and ethnoracial dislocation, were test cases in which to prove the value not only of Chicago’s new police department but also of centralized police power as such. Until the turn of the century, officers of predominantly Irish and German descent enforced bourgeois sensibilities of order, repressed radical agitations, and enacted the partisan whims of machine politics (Mitrani 2013). The force of that partisanship, in particular, tended to land rather on the nose: mayoral elections, for example, often triggered the unceremonious termination of large fractions of the CPD’s ranks, to be replaced with officers more inclined toward a new incumbent’s will (Lindberg 1998). Although the introduction of civil service regulations in 1895 ended that ritual, the problems of machine politics proved stubborn to dislodge.

Good policework during these years therefore pinned the new urban peace to statecraft itself through two overlapping projects: first, the CPD imagined progress in terms of an increasingly strained maintenance of order over a recalcitrant public. For example, the CPD characterized protestors at Haymarket as “fiendish” and “cowardly” confederates of the “enemy” [1886:21–22]; quieter times hardly blunted the CPD’s resentments, such as when it attributed officer misconduct to a regrettable, if unavoidable, consequence of working with “the kind of people with whom they are constantly brought in contact” [1902:12], a people whose “civic conscience is usually dormant” [S1921.1:7]. Second, the CPD imagined progress in terms of selling its value to a public that was in many cases either unfamiliar with, or resistant to, the new police’s intrusive authority. It characterized city officials as tight-fisted bureaucrats oblivious to policework’s needs, colleagues in the courts and prison systems as amateurishly incompetent, and the public as “carping critics” [1903:10] unappreciative of policework’s value.

Both projects reinforced one another to constitute crisis. Taken together, the twin challenges of upholding unattainable standards while fending off public scorn cemented the CPD’s conviction that progress was altogether out-of-reach, such that “If we consider for a moment a policeman’s position, we shall find his duties scarcely less numerous than the stars. . . There is no other department of the city government of which so much is expected, and none for which generally so little is done” [1878:14–17]. That conviction underpinned many of the CPD’s reassurances during this period that personal virtues of competence, most notably “fidelity, bravery and heroic conduct” [1886:22] were common among its officers. The CPD thus pitched leadership and public virtue as constituting competent policework, and it presented the putative limitlessness of tasks that officers undertook as obvious evidence of those virtues at work. Hence, the CPD exhaustively cataloged its doings: menial details about the lamp-posts that officers relit, the culverts they unclogged, and the horse manure they shoveled appeared beside the summed value of stolen property returned, homicides prevented, and weapons confiscated. Yet despite the CPD’s efforts, “universal cooperation of the general public” was rarely forthcoming [1906:98], and appreciation of policework’s ardors was rarely satisfactory.

Chicago's nineteenth-century residents would have recognized much about the CPD of the early decades of the twentieth century, the issues the department chose to enforce, and how it chose to enforce them. All three would have been familiar: The CPD continued to stoke political tensions, intensify ethnoracial frictions, inflame riots, and stir corruption scandals (Balto 2019). Meanwhile, the 21st Amendment barely disturbed new complicities officers forged with organized crime during Prohibition. Yet the new century marked important differences, too, as city governance unfurled new ways of seeing justice done (Platt 2009; Willrich 2003). Disenchanted industrialists at Chicago's Association of Commerce established the city's Crime Commission in 1919 where, under professionalization's banner, they mobilized alongside fellow Progressives against the inefficiencies and corruptions that had gripped the CPD since its inception. The Commission's industrial sympathies were core to its mobilization strategy: when it empaneled the *Citizen's Police Committee* to calculate the proper distribution of police presence, the resulting report [S1931:259,268] called for a 269 percent expansion of uniformed personnel, not counting further expansions throughout the CPD, by insisting on the need for four times as much patrol in commercial than residential areas. In short order, the CPD became better kitted and its personnel more credentialed; it became less demographically matched to the populations it policed, and relatedly less sympathetic to the welfarist bent that might otherwise have been expected of the institution in earlier decades; it was among the pioneers of key technical advancements in policework; and even chronically unflattering assessments of the department did little to dent its (sometimes plausible) self-impression of leadership among the country's large urban police departments (Monkkonen 2004).

After the 1920s, the CPD's progress claims became more implicit than had been the case throughout the prior half-century. Reports shortened, and information became patchier. Narrative interpretation became rare, and outdated references to the department's competence at "removing temptation" and "increasing vigilance" [1951:22] dwindled as a new policing regime took hold (Agee 2018). Numerical tables proliferated, especially in relation to traffic and automobile incidents. Amid those changes, the CPD also conceptualized progress rather differently, too. For example, alongside new "accident investigation" squads [1932:6] and "police commando" units [1956:6], the establishment of specialist enforcement desks including the Vagrancy Bureau and Red Squad consolidated energies that had already been in use for decades. Formalization of these efforts, and celebration of their crime preventive benefits, marked the CPD's increasingly confident presentations of self as a pioneer in policing techniques. Technological developments figured more prominently (whether in the form of the walkie-talkie [1955:12] or the "sniperscope" night vision device [S1946.7:9]), as did tidier book-keeping [1955:15] or streamlined operations and more efficient distribution of personnel [1937:9; 1953:45]. The result was a recurrent insistence that the CPD's value, beyond order maintenance and crime prevention, extended to boosting the police profession's status, strengthening partnerships with civic institutions, and elevating Chicago's profile on the world stage.

As the CPD approached the 1960s, progress once again surfaced more prominently. At least as far as the CPD's impression of itself was concerned, O. W.

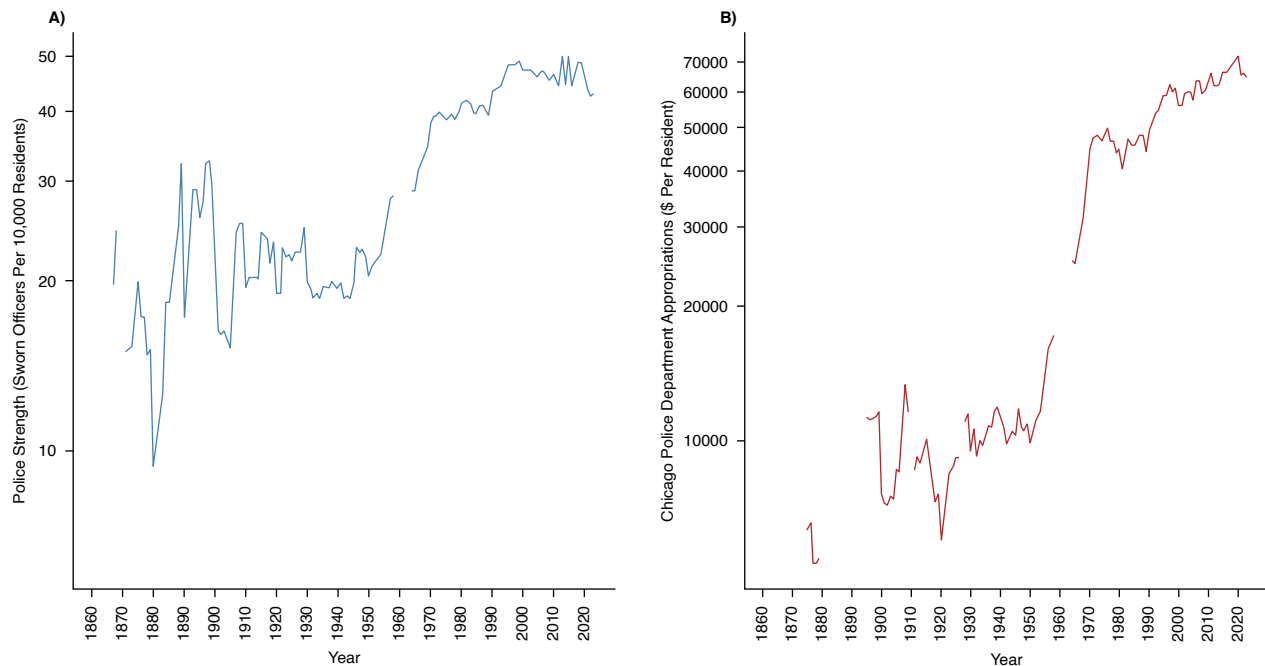


Figure 4: Sworn officers per 10,000 residents (A) and population-adjusted appropriations to the Chicago Police Department (B), 1862–2024. Y-axes are logged to visualize rates of change; dollars in Panel B are inflation-adjusted to 2023 Consumer Price Indices and use conversion factors from Sahr (2004) to calculate pre-1913 inflation values. *Sources:* Authors’ calculations based on CPD annual reports, FBI Uniform Crime Reports, US Census.

Wilson’s appointment in 1960 as Superintendent marked an important milestone. A learned former dean who was keen to whip policing’s prestige (Koehler 2015), Wilson interpreted his new role’s priorities as if managing the CPD’s bruised reputation warranted no less attention than the more prosaic stuff of policework itself. That interpretation was not misjudged. Wilson’s efforts placed him at the vanguard of police reformers who, “unlike their predecessors [in the 1920s], were driven not so much by their distaste for deviant behavior, machine politics, administrative efficiency, and criminal activity as by their concern about the low status of the big-city police” (Fogelson 1977:146). To elevate that status, Wilson took aim at what he deemed the public’s unfair criticism directed at the police and misplaced sympathy for criminals; he might have been willing to countenance either as proper a century or even a half-century earlier, but neither seemed tolerable considering the progress that, in his view, the police institution had surely made since.

Wilson’s gambit mostly worked, but the results were overdetermined. After an early period of nineteenth-century instability, municipal investment in the CPD swelled the force’s presence fivefold (Figure 4A) and its purse sevenfold (Figure 4B⁴); the department benefited from the steepest injections during Wilson’s tenure, which predated comparable enrichment among peer departments in neighboring cities by almost a decade. Across a timespan extending almost to the department’s birth, the CPD was rarely penalized with restricted investment for either poor standing or

lackluster performance. On the contrary, the department almost unrelentingly benefited from strengthening patrol presence and surging finances, and it capitalized on that largesse more under Wilson than any other Superintendent before or since.

A measure of congratulation may therefore have been in order. Hence, in a retrospective that memorialized the CPD's centenary, the 1955 report contrasted the "disturbances and disasters" that characterized the department's "turbulent" early years against the "ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF PROGRESS" [1955:6–7, emphasis in original] that had ensued. In fact, starting in the 1960s, the CPD's rhetorical stance took on rather a new gloss: the 1964 report mused that "progress is not a goal unto itself. Rather it is a continuing process and its own reward. Let progress never stop. For us it must not stop" [1964:22]. The theme persisted for years, such that consecutive crime declines merited designation as progress without further qualification [1972:3].

Although the CPD's progress claims during the 1960s appear more as public relations posturing than in prior years, it would be wrong to mistake that posturing as idle. Throughout this period, the reports regularly touched on the confluence of three historical currents that instead hint at the deep significance of progress in the CPD's reputation management strategy: first, legacies of more than a century of scandals continued to frustrate efforts to earn the approval, especially from Chicago's residents, that the CPD imagined it was due. Although the reports are predictably silent about the CPD's various scandals, the humiliations those scandals engendered subtextually haunt the reports: for example, the wounds of an 1855 riot took an entire century to heal before it became the only one earning mention throughout the archive in the CPD's centennial memorial in 1955. Second, Wilson's appointment as Superintendent underwrote a rare détente between senior officers and the frontlines. The ink never dried on that slip: Wilson's support for a new Internal Affairs department—an unavoidable move under the circumstances to signal his commitment to distancing the CPD from its scandal-tarnished prior years—promptly quashed whatever goodwill his conciliatory reputation might have brought among the rank and file. And third, the reports clumsily tiptoe around the CPD's struggles to manage Civil Rights disorders. For example, the catastrophic 1968 Democratic National Convention's sole mention is in a footnote that accounts for the single-year quadrupling of personnel-hours allocated to "disturbances" [1968:19]. Although the reports memory-holed the Wilkins-Clark Commission's excoriating *Search and Destroy* report on the CPD's collusion in Fred Hampton's assassination, some stable—if hollow—markers of progress do emerge during this period, such as when the CPD pointed to Civil Rights training [1961:5; 1964:2], and new patrol configurations that mixed white and non-white officers as preparing the CPD better for the delivery of "impartiality and restraint" [1965:15].

From the early 1970s until the mid-2010s, progress continued to feature ubiquitously but implicitly before it then explicitly reappeared once more during the sample's final decade. With increasing vigor throughout the most recent half-century, the CPD constructed progress as the proverbial delivery of better enforcement bang for taxpaying buck. That construction took two prongs: first, culminating eventually in community policing, requests for more personnel—which had been a century-long mainstay of the reports—were replaced with praise for the promising effects of shrewdly redistributed patrol presence. Second, community relations

assumed totemic significance: the CPD meticulously enumerated outreach meetings as proxies of “empowerment” and “partnership” [2002:5; see also 1997:5–6], “Community Services” activities overtook calls for police service [1987:12], and the CPD wrote as if a wholesale transformation was afoot:

After 30 years of operating under the same basic policing strategy, the Department has embarked on a sweeping and historic change in the way we provide police services to the people of Chicago. It is a change necessitated by the dramatic changes taking place in society—changes in the causes of crime, the nature of crime, and the resources for dealing with crime. It is a change that takes the best elements of our traditional model of policing—energetic enforcement of the law, rapid response to emergencies, and thorough investigative work—and combines them with new, more proactive approaches to preventing crime and disorder in our neighborhoods. It is a change that makes the community and other government agencies active partners with the police in the fight against crime. [1994:4]

The CPD’s enthusiastic characterizations contrasted against the disfavor in which large fractions of the city’s residents held the force (Hagan, McCarthy, and Herda 2022; Skogan 2009). That persisting mismatch inspired some resentment (“Only time will tell whether the news media will finally file away its footage of the 1968 convention and quit viewing today’s Chicago Police Department in the context of those images” [1996:5]), and it pressed with increasing force until 2017, when the CPD resumed publication of annual reports after a seven-year hiatus.

The CPD rationalized the choice to resume production of the reports as part of a self-conscious push toward transparency [2017:5]. From the 2017 report until the last in the sample, the CPD’s claims of sustained progress are more circumspect than those appearing in any prior report:

Throughout the year, police departments across the United States—including CPD—continued to face questions from communities about their roles and actions. The department listened to these concerns expressed by residents in Chicago communities and continued to advance its comprehensive plan of change while endeavoring to communicate with the public more systematically about the changes at CPD. Across the entire department, change is occurring. . . [2017:8]

The CPD’s circumspection makes sense. When reports resumed production in 2017, the CPD was charged to satisfy 797 indices of compliance before the consent decree was to be lifted. An online dashboard advertises the CPD’s ongoing efforts to comply with the expectations set out in that decree, ranging from substantive priorities including “Use of Force” and “Community Policing” to operational priorities like “Recruitment, Hiring & Promotion” and “Training” (Figure 5). Nominally, the dashboard underpins efforts to hold the CPD accountable and to ensure the department delivers on its promise of progress. True enough, at the last review the independent monitoring team tasked with reviewing the CPD’s compliance with the consent decree rendered an ambivalent verdict. “Many entities and CPD divisions

CONSENT DECREE COMPLIANCE DASHBOARD

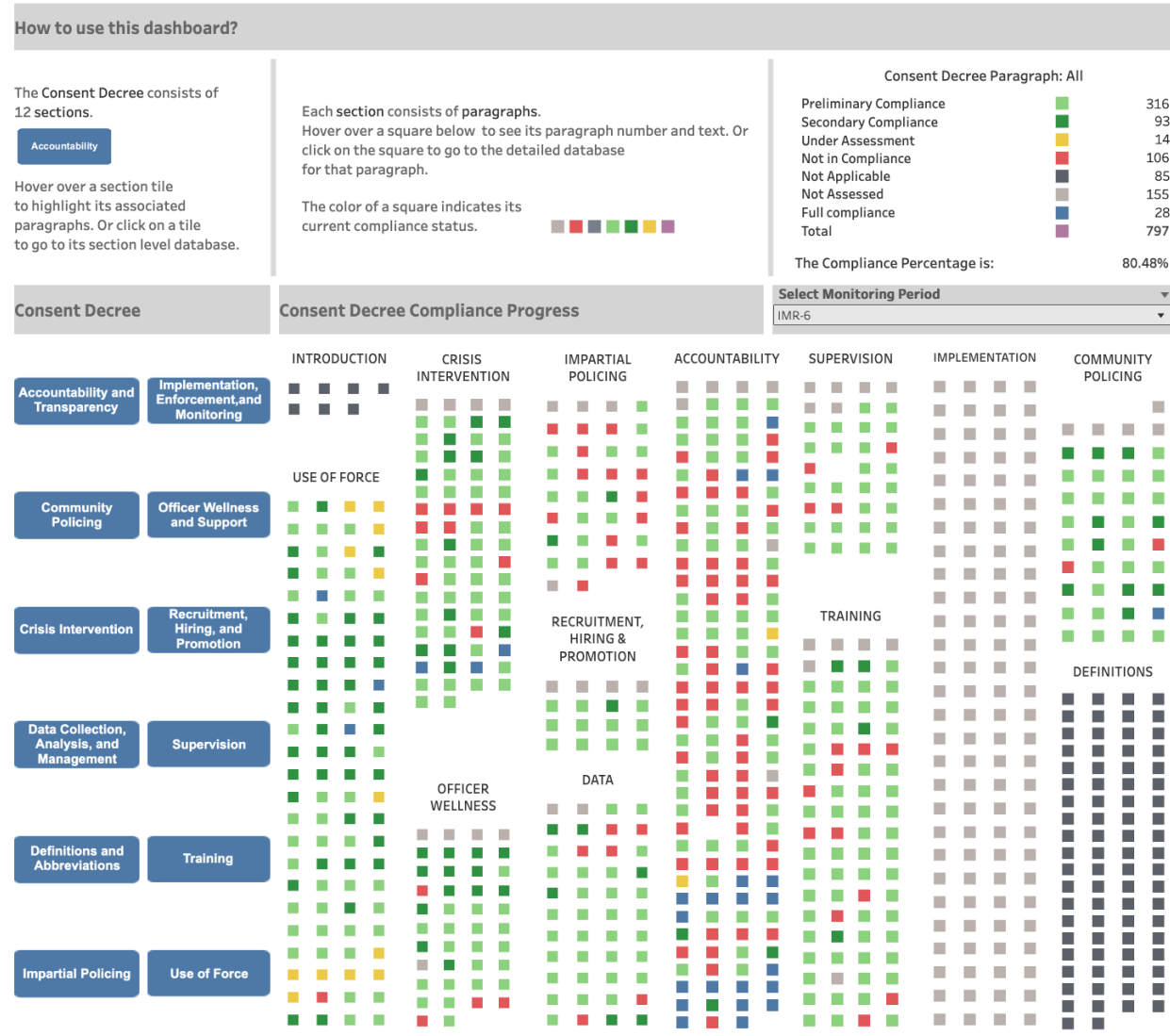


Figure 5: Chicago Police Department’s Consent Decree Compliance Dashboard. Color-coded squares signify the independent monitoring team’s assessments of CPD compliance with each of the consent decree’s 797 outcome criteria. *Source:* Chicago Police (2026).

have demonstrated progress,” the team noted [S2022:4], while it also cautioned that “the city and its entities have reached full compliance with comparatively few monitorable paragraphs.”

The consent decree’s indices and the monitoring team’s assessment of the CPD’s compliance cast in relief the challenges of assessing whether a police department makes progress. Those challenges underscored cautions issued before the consent decree even took effect not to over-estimate the decree’s promise. However, it was those same challenges that inspired the consent decree in the first instance: as if to anticipate the finding that the CPD cycles between favorable performance measures,

the decree's formal expectation was that independent imposition of performance metrics would cuff the CPD's ability to shift the goalposts in its efforts to convey that it was making good. The consent decree is therefore emblematic of a much longer touse, which extends far back in time to the CPD's earliest years, about how to evaluate police progress.

Discussion and Conclusion

The manner in which the CPD sought to "make" progress across 162 years bore out three implications. First, the CPD's progress claims were *persistent*, even if those claims did not always appear close to the surface. Digging for subtext revealed a pattern: increased fervor in the CPD's invocations of progress coincided with historical moments during which the department had sound reason to believe its legitimacy was precarious. Among other challenges, the CPD struggled until the Progressive Era's end to make a case for the new urban police to an unfamiliar and resistant public; from the late-1950s to the early-1970s, high-profile and poorly managed policework undercut efforts to shed the CPD's legacies of scandal; and post-2014 scrutiny carried mistrust between Chicago's residents, City Hall, and the police. By contrast, in other years the CPD's progress claims—while still observable—were more muted. Although reliance on annual reports limits what can be said about the material realities of crime and policing as such, these long term patterns bear only loose resemblance to the CPD's technical delivery of policework's "deliverables"; instead, they affirm that progress talk functions as one possible counter-mobilization strategy during moments of perceived threat to institutional legitimacy (Espeland and Sauder 2016; Koehler and Cheng 2023; Merry 2016; Selznick 1953; etc.).

Indeed, the CPD's competence claims persistently gestured to its wins on *Crime and Disorder*, *Relations* or *Advancements*. However, the CPD's progress claims also teem with rhetorical moves that, at face value, puzzlingly read less as self-defense than as self-sabotage. Across the period we cover, the CPD's crisis claims rued the department's unreadiness, dependence on meagre support, and futile charge: it bemoaned under-preparation for an impending crime wave [1961] or grumbled that it was haplessly reliant on miserly City Hall bureaucracy ("it . . . appears to have been the rule of late to largely reduce the force whenever an increase was asked for" [1878:14]), or it plaintively blamed the public for its depravity ("too many of these parasites still infest the community" [1906:98]), or it stressed the beleaguered officer's lot ("law enforcement has been coached to compartmentalize and not show vulnerability on the job. Science tells us this is impossible and damaging" [2021:34]).

A more critical reading recasts the CPD's nominally self-sabotaging claims into self-defense. Understanding why exposes two further implications: progress claims were *inconsistent* in the *short* term, yet they were also *consistent* in the *long* term. This "continuously discontinuous" pattern reflects how a police department's claims of progress mediate between successes it might claim in supposed fact on one hand, and those it imagines it ought to be seen to chase on the other. Since neither of these assessments are stable, a police department frequently cycles through inconsistent performance measures when attesting to the substantive value of its work. Although a police department may flit from one year to the next between

inconsistent claims of progress, enduring challenges endemic to policework produce consistent reputation management strategies observable across longer time frames in the form that progress claims took.

To illustrate, the CPD's efforts to manage its reputation consisted of regularly cycling through a wide array of measures of favorable performance, which we characterize as *goalpost shifting*. In the short term, goalpost shifting is indistinguishable from standard deflection and evasion techniques or from good faith, if abrupt, changes in organizational priorities. Yet the CPD's consistent cycling between measures of favorable performance across more than 160 years hints that something deeper might be at work than mere change in police priorities or personnel. For one thing, organizational priorities tend to be too sticky to show up as change from year-to-year; moreover, they certainly do not change from *every-year-to-every-year* at that. And for another, even though deflection and evasion could plausibly account for some cycling between different measures of favorable performance, its consistency across so protracted a period strains the suggestion that individual whim could be so tidily patterned across many different generations of office-holders. Instead, a more plausible account locates goalpost shifting within organizational features of the CPD itself.

Although specification of which conditions will give rise to goalpost shifting lies beyond this article's scope, the practice seems more likely among organizations displaying two features. First, where an organization's mandate is complex, imprecise or contestable, actors enjoy a greater variety of plausibly acceptable performance metrics they can move between and cover behind as they deem fit. Second, where accountability and oversight are more internalized, actors within an organization enjoy greater leeway to determine what qualifies as the yardsticks against which to assess performance. This second feature presupposes the first: perennial contestation over what qualifies as satisfactory police service allowed the CPD to maneuver toward performance measures it imagined would earn favor and then shift the goalposts to different metrics when doing so made sense. The same might also be said of appealing to different constituents, too, as the CPD did by cycling through different audiences to whom it addressed its reports. The compliance dashboard proves instructive as a case in point: nominally, the independent imposition of compliance indices might have constrained the CPD from shifting goalposts in its claims to have made progress on the consent decree. The abundance of almost 800 indices, however, provided more than enough room for the CPD to move, and the long-run effect has been the consent decree's incorporation into the broader repertoire of devices that allow the CPD to make progress.

In principle, goalpost shifting can draw attention toward favorable performance and away from unfavorable performance. However, its long-term cost is argumentative instability. That cost can be steep: upholding inconsistent standards eventually leaves stakeholders adrift in their efforts to evaluate performance (Meyer 2003). The CPD's claims were vulnerable to this very risk. Across the entire period, almost no two consecutive years displayed a consistent appeal to the same performance measures. On the contrary, the CPD often pitched back and forth between competence claims whose persuasiveness required discrediting performance indices in one year that it would then credit the next year. The CPD managed that instability by communicating significance in the obstacles that favorable performance required it to

overcome—it *drummed crises*. Crisis drumming bore the trappings of self-sabotage, but its coincidence alongside competence claims recasts their symbolic value into self-defense. Underpreparation for an imminent crime wave becomes pride in coping amid strain; reliance on miserly bureaucracy becomes urgent cause to invest; blaming a depraved public becomes a call for civic virtue; and beleaguering for the officer's lot becomes admiration for the public servant's gallantry.

For the CPD, therefore, "making" progress consists of claiming *both* competence *and* crisis. This ambivalence recontextualizes an enduring motif in police historiography that stresses the centrality of scandal and reform to a police department's legitimacy (Bayley 1994; Bowling, Reiner, and Sheptycki 2019; Fogelson 1977; Sherman 1978; etc.). Unlike that work, which tends to concentrate on the effects of either scandal's notoriety or reform's esteem on a police department, the CPD couched its work in terms of the *simultaneous* construction of both good times and bad; furthermore, it has *always* couched its work in that ambivalent way. Although squaring these historiographies is also beyond this article's scope, both could be compatible with one another. For example, it is entirely possible that at one level, public regard may view a police department "either" favorably "or" unfavorably while, at another level, those working within the police department understand their work as making progress through both competence and crisis alike.

The jarring possibility that public regard could be quite so mismatched to a police department's impression of itself sharpens rather than blunts the importance of historicizing a police department's claims that it is making progress. Since legitimacy is, after all, broadly relational (Schoon 2022)—even if obliquely so (Martin and Bradford 2021)—a complete account of progressive policing will require switching focus from the signal the police transmit to the one the public received. Our analysis of the CPD's reputation management efforts across 162 years has been silent about who, if anyone, heard its progress claims; what they might have done in reaction to those claims; and what material realities of crime, policework, or otherwise might have grounded progress claims when justifiable or checked them when false. Those silences may well leave some readers dissatisfied. However, if our analysis of the CPD's front-stage reputation management efforts spurs further work on the back-stage production of those claims, or even their public reception, then maybe that could count as progress, too.

Notes

- 1 Twenty reports were either missing or—more frequently—the CPD declined to produce one. Between 1972 and 1985, *Department Statistical Summaries* replaced the reports. Reports were discontinued in 2010 (the 2011 report never received the Superintendent's formal authorization) and resumed in 2017 (*Chicago Cop* 2026; Reyes 2016). We analyze the substantive significance of this missingness below.
- 2 We coded texts selected from among the following series: *Main 13* (which was published from 1921 to 1923), *Police 13-13* (1923 to 1938), *The Chicago Police Digest* (1940 to 1959), *Chicago Police Newsletter* (1960 to 1963), *Chicago Police Star* (1963 to 2005), the *Chicago Crime Commission* (which has operated since 1919 and published periodicals and reports in the interim), and the *Independent Monitoring Team* (which produced semi-annual reports since the consent decree took effect in 2019).

- 3 Square brackets denote citation to the core archive. “S” within the square brackets denotes citation to the supplementary archive, with a decimal denoting month where suitable.
- 4 Chicago’s police budget is notoriously arcane, chiefly because City Hall’s appropriations to the department account for widely varying fractions of a byzantine mix of grant funds and sundry injections (Witzburg & Richardson 2023). Under the circumstances, Figure 4B displays “appropriations” as the most reliably documented and broadly valid estimate of the CPD’s consistently growing budget.

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