Criminal Justice Interns’ Observations of Misconduct: An Exploratory Study

W. T. Jordan, Ronald G. Burns, Laura E. Bedard and Tony A. Barringer

In an effort to explore criminal justice interns’ observations of misconduct and reporting patterns of their observations, a survey of criminal justice interns was conducted after their internships were completed. Students from four universities in the South (n = 463) were asked to participate. While only 2 percent of respondents reported observing illegal behavior by criminal justice agency personnel, over half of the respondents reported observing behavior they suspected was illegal; knew to be violations of department policy; or recognized as generally unprofessional behavior.

Introduction

Student internships are common practices in colleges and universities nationwide. The need for students to apply theoretical knowledge to a practical situation has been recognized by scholars for decades, and internships are one way to reach this goal. There is a body of observation-based research from which it can be predicted that student interns will observe misconduct during their field placement. Some forms of this misconduct may be rare. For example, estimates of police use of excessive force vary from less than one-half of 1 percent of citizen encounters (Worden 1995) to approximately 3 percent of criminal suspects encountered by the police (Adams 1995). Other forms of misconduct may be more common. Marquart (1986) observed 50 inmate beatings by guards during his stint as a participant observer. Examining less shocking events, Gould and Mastrofski (2004) used observational data to estimate that 30 percent of field searches by patrol officers are unconstitutional.

Concern over whether interns are being exposed to unethical or illegal behavior and, if so, whether they are prepared to handle these situations motivated this project. Three issues were addressed: how commonly student interns in criminal justice agencies observed or suspected misconduct by agency employees;
whether interns communicated these observations to others; and whether students are prepared through instruction to cope with troubling situations. This exploratory study involves analyses of survey responses from criminal justice interns from four different universities regarding their observations of misconduct and questionable behavior during their internship placements. Students were also asked whether they reported or discussed that information with others. The goal of this study was to document the need for attention to this area of criminal justice education and the practicality of future research.

Criminal Justice Internships and Ethics

Internships are a common element in criminal justice programs throughout the United States. It is estimated that 87 percent of criminal justice programs offer internship opportunities for their students, and 29–38 percent require internships (Southerland 2002; Stichman and Farkar 2005). Currently, it is not clear what students actually glean from the experience.

It is debatable whether the typical intern experiences "the successful integration of their academic experiences in college with their field experiences at the internship sites" as proposed by Reed and Carawan (1999:155). Many students simply view it as easy college credit (Miller 1990). Bedard (1998) notes that internships have no significant empirical evidence of their benefits but have simply been perpetuated through the years. Similarly, there has been no systematic attempt to collect data on interns reactions to unethical conduct.

Because criminology and criminal justice are in their infancy as disciplines, courses on ethics and philosophy are not commonly offered (Souryal 1998), and ethics is required in only an estimated 13 percent of criminal justice baccalaureate programs (Southerland 2002). There is a dearth in published literature on how ethics fits into criminal justice internships. Previous reports demonstrate an awareness of ethical issues by internship coordinators (Stichman and Farkar 2005), a police agency (Dale 1996), and a former intern (Schaefer 1996). However, the literature provides no evidence that student interns are systematically prepared to deal with suspicions of misconduct in their field placement.

Student preparation for reconciling unethical situations varies by program. Some internship coordinators specifically include ethical issues as part of the internship either through an orientation or through assigned readings and papers. Other programs rely on texts or workbooks to cover the topics of moral character, ethics, and integrity. Some colleges and universities rely on the agencies with whom interns are placed to cover ethical issues. Reliance on other sources does not, however, guarantee that students will receive clear instruction about the expectations or obligations that are placed on them to report misconduct.

Yeldell and Brown's (2001) internship manual provides no specific comments on internship ethics, although they discuss how agencies may reduce sexual harassment problems. On the other hand, Gordon, McBride, and Hyde (2004)
provide expanded coverage of the ethical issues and questionable circumstances faced by interns in their work. These authors view exposure to ethical dilemmas as part of the development process for professionals, and "one of the most important learning experiences in [an] internship" (Gordon and McBride 1984: 38). Gordon et al. (2004) and Gordon and McBride (2004) clearly view the faculty internship coordinator as having a central role in advising students on how to handle observed situations including excessive force, sleeping on duty, sexual harassment, "street justice," and other forms of unethical or illegal conduct. Their workbook and Instructor’s Guide underscores the balancing act that the uninitiated intern must perform in handling observations of misconduct, and learning to work within the parameters of ethical guidelines themselves.

Dealing with misconduct is particularly problematic for interns for two reasons. First, they commonly will not have a strong grasp of the legal guidelines, agency policy, professional standards of conduct, or workplace subculture that shape moral perceptions in their new environment. Second, interns are commonly placed in an agency or line of work that they themselves aspire to enter upon graduation. Criminal justice agencies commonly use internships as recruiting tools (Dale 1996; Palmiotto 1984), which can make reporting unethical or illegal behavior problematic. Consequently, the pressures that interns face when confronted with questionable behavior and uncertainty regarding whether or not to report it are analogous to those faced by potential whistle-blowers. These include a “self-preservation ethos,” fear of personal safety, “a fear of social ostracism, loyalty to one’s organization and associates, belief in the company’s rationales for unethical or illegal activity, (and) denial that one knows enough or has the appropriate responsibility” (Friedrichs 2004:21).

Hesitancy to “make waves” by reporting questionable conduct of an employee would be a normal reaction given that students are aware of the potential that internships pose for future employment. To date, however, no study has documented the types of misbehavior students observe and whether or not they report it. This study seeks to fill that void in the literature.

Methodology

This exploratory research was designed to identify implications for internships and future study, and helps establish a baseline on ethical issues in criminal justice internship settings.

The students surveyed for this project are a convenience sample comprising all criminal justice interns from four universities in the South. Data were gathered over a 2-year period between the fall 2002 and summer 2004. Schools were chosen based on diversity of geography, and size and type of institution. One school is a research university with more than 20,000 students and over 1,000 criminal justice majors. Two schools are comprehensive universities with between 5,000 and 10,000 students and between 100 and 500 criminal justice
students. The fourth school is a masters-level institution with fewer than 2500 students and fewer than 100 criminal justice majors.

Such a sample design is appropriate for a proof of concept investigation such as this one. A similar cluster sample using random processes to select only four clusters (schools) would add no greater confidence for inference purposes, since random sampling depends on large numbers to reduce sampling error. More importantly in this case, inference is not the goal of the project. Rather, this work provides an initial search for empirical evidence of a phenomenon that has not been heretofore documented.

The four programs provide internship variations similar to the three models identified in Stichman and Farkar (2005). A three-semester credit hour internship is required in three of the programs (with additional elective internship hours available). One of those requires class meetings every 2 weeks and is similar to the more intensive social work model. The second and third programs do not require regular meetings and are typical of the part-time or “parallel program” model. An optional 15 credit hour internship at the fourth school is similar to the full immersion model. The number of work hours required to obtain 3 hr of credit ranges from 120 to 225. Daily or weekly logs are required in all four internships. Specific weekly assignments are included in one program. Final term papers are required in three schools; the fourth requires three papers throughout the term. Meetings with the internship director range from “as needed” to “every other week.” A final meeting or debriefing is required in two of the programs.

A brief mail survey that could be completed in 3–5 minutes was sent to all students who completed the internship course in the programs included in the study. The survey asked only essential questions to provide estimates of how often interns observe unethical behavior, who, if anyone, they informed regarding such behavior, and whether the student was prepared to deal with ethical issues in the workplace. Additional demographic variables were included for descriptive purposes (see Appendix A). Each student was mailed a survey with a postage-paid return envelope, a letter from their university internship coordinator or criminal justice professor, and a letter from the primary investigator explaining the study and outlining the process for data analysis. The students were informed of the voluntary nature of the survey and that their responses were anonymous. No identifying information was gathered on the survey form, and the forms were returned directly to the primary investigator, not to the student’s university or agency supervisor. Internship coordinators and agencies were not provided with the raw data and therefore could not identify the respondents or the agency in which the students interned.

Surveys were mailed to 463 students at a home address provided by their respective university. One hundred twenty five responses were received for a response rate of 27 percent. Because of the exploratory nature of the project, there were no follow-up mailings or additional measures to increase the response rate. It is not possible to determine whether the respondents self-selected themselves disproportionately from those who observed misconduct or those who did
not, so it is not possible to derive a valid rate of these observations. However, as noted below, it is possible to calculate a minimum rate of incidence for the sample. We were able to demonstrate that students observe potential misconduct on a regular, if not routine, basis and identify who they were likely to inform of their observations.

In addition to the variables from the survey itself, each case was assigned a geographic designator based on the postmark on the return envelope. Because the geographic areas served by the four universities overlap at points, it is not possible to absolutely match individual cases to particular schools. However, knowing that there is substantial regional residence for each program’s students allows us to examine variations by school in a gross way using the geographical proxy. Using this designator, response rates varied by school with a high of 79 percent and a low of 13 percent.

**Results**

As noted earlier, universities were chosen that provided some variation in internship programs. All four internship coordinators reported that students received internship-specific ethics training via one or more methods: an orientation, a text/workbook, or agency personnel. However, intern respondents typically did not recall receiving that instruction and relatively small proportions recalled instructions about what they were expected to do about observations of misconduct.

The intern respondents were generally young (median age was 22), White (74 percent), and female (58 percent). As a group, they had little prior experience in criminal justice agencies. However, 14 had two or more years of full-time experience in criminal justice. An additional 19 had at least one year of part-time experience in criminal justice. Law-enforcement agencies collectively comprise the majority of placement locations (51 percent), while courts and law offices (including internships with judges, prosecutors, and indigent defenders) comprise the next largest group with 18 percent (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Intern placements by agency type (*N* = 125)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sheriff’s departments</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law office/courts</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State law enforcement</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local police</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal law enforcement</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State and federal prisons and probation and parole</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile justice agencies</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social service agencies</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other¹</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹"Other" includes such examples as medical examiners office, law-enforcement academy, private investigation, and legislative offices.
Students’ Observations of Misconduct

A substantial number of interns reported observing some form of misconduct by employees in a criminal justice agency (see Table 2). Respondents were asked to indicate if they had observed the listed behaviors, or if they suspected that they had observed it. Many interns do not yet have the knowledge to distinguish illegal conduct or conduct outside of agency policy, yet may still legitimately suspect that what they had observed was wrong. With no validity check on these observations, we cannot know that the conduct violated agency policy, law, or moral character standards. Observing suspected wrongdoing should be sufficient cause for the intern to discuss their observations with the employee, a supervisor, or the internship coordinator to, at a minimum, obtain some clarity. One would hope that the student would reflect on the incident to the extent that they would at least talk to a friend or peer. The issue of reporting suspected misconduct is further addressed below.

More than half of respondents (55 percent) reported observing at least one instance of conduct suspected or believed to be unethical. (This does not include instances of employees telling an intern not to talk about what they observed.) The conduct categories that are considered the most serious by the authors are those that have the potential for criminal or civil actions against the agency or employees involved: illegal conduct, conduct violating legal procedures, and biased activity. Over 23 percent of respondents reported observing behavior they believed or suspected fell into one of these categories.

Given the low response rate, we cannot be confident that these reports are applicable to the larger number of interns in the four programs. If we assume the worst case of self-selection, that those students most likely to have observed misconduct were also most likely to complete the survey, we would find that at least 1.5 percent of interns in this cohort observed or suspected criminal activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conduct Category</th>
<th>Yes—observed</th>
<th>Suspected</th>
<th>No—not observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illegal behavior(^2)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violation of legal procedures</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violation of dept. policy</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrespect, lack of courtesy, unprofessional behavior</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>toward citizen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unprofessional comments or behavior in a private setting</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biased investigation or enforcement activity</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer telling you to not to pass on something you heard</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or observed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)\(N = 124.\)  
\(^2\)\(N = 123.\)
3 percent observed or suspected extralegal procedures, and over 3.5 percent observed or suspected biased activity. Assuming that at least some of these observations are valid, there would seem to be a surprising number of misconduct incidents being witnessed by interns.

Percentages of such small magnitude are commonly disregarded, as these rates of misconduct may be in accord with the behavior of the general public. However, these reports are worthy of our attention considering the context of who is involved in the observations. Criminal justice agents modeling punishable acts in view of interns raises serious questions about official misconduct and the socialization of interns who may be future criminal justice agents. Willingness of criminal justice agents to perform unethical acts in front of one of every five student interns may evidence a sense of impunity that comes with repeated behaviors followed by limited, or no negative consequences.

Some of the conduct in question is not of a technical nature that requires specialized training or experience to recognize. It is specifically those kinds of qualitatively less serious (legally) forms of misconduct (disrespect to citizens and unprofessional private conduct) that interns report as most common. Nearly 20 percent of respondents reported observing disrespectful or unprofessional behavior toward a citizen, and 36 percent reported unprofessional comments in a private setting.

These forms of incivility raise questions about the socialization aspects of the internship experience. The validity of these observations is less questionable than reports of observed crimes or policy breeches, since college students would presumably have had sufficient life experience to recognize socially unacceptable rudeness or crassness. Admittedly, what passes as civility does vary between groups. “Police humor” is one example of a well-known, generally private behavior among police officers that may be viewed as unprofessional by the uninitiated. But public conduct that interns interpret as unprofessional behavior toward citizens, or biased activity, is not as easily explained away. If at most it raises questions about the quality of justice being dispensed, then at the very least it identifies a specific area of concern for internship coordinators about how interns are prepared to react to observations of field personnel.

Interns Reporting Behavior

A total of 74 students observed or suspected some form of misconduct listed in the survey. Yet, only 55 students reported or discussed the incident with anyone. Discussion with multiple parties was common. Interns were most likely to share information pertaining to the incident with individuals who were least likely to be in a position to investigate or intervene: other students, interns, and family, and friends (see Table 3).

Only 30 students (41 percent) reported suspected misconduct to an authority figure (i.e., individuals in a position to intervene, including internship directors or agency employees uninvolved in the questionable incident), either formally
or informally. Two interns discussed their observations with the employee who was observed, but not an authority figure. An additional 23 students informally discussed their observations with another intern or student, family, friends, or some other person. Twenty-five percent of the interns who observed or suspected questionable activities did not discuss it with anyone.

One might assume that student non-reporters would have observed the least serious forms of conduct measured by the survey. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Of the seven students observing or suspecting criminal conduct by an agency employee, three did not report it or discuss it with any authority figure. Only one formally reported it, in this case to the internship director. Three others discussed it informally, one each with an agency supervisor, the internship director, and another agency employee. Since the survey was not designed to match reporting behavior to each form of conduct observed, we cannot be confident that even when an intern reports discussing an incident that it was the most serious violation that was discussed.

Discussion and Conclusions

The data clearly indicate that some criminal justice interns observed activity they believed or suspected was some violation of law, policy, ethics, or moral character. The data further demonstrate that these interns engage in a wide variety of reporting mechanisms, but a substantial amount of misconduct is not reported. These results suggest several implications for future research and practice in criminal justice internships.

To be sure, this area of inquiry is worthwhile and should be followed up with further research. Future research should take several issues into consideration. The low response rate for this survey was not surprising considering that no follow-up strategies were used to increase responses (Heberlein and Baumgartner 1978; Rea and Parker 1992); however, the response rate was sufficient for

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**Table 3** Percentage of intern observers who reported the conduct

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formally reported</th>
<th>Informally reported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency official</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship director</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency supervisor</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency employee</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship director</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed employee</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other student</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family or friend</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1N = 74.

²Two of these three cases evidently were reported to agency officials based on the respondents’ written descriptions.
the purpose of this exploratory study. Future research should utilize strategies that include follow-up procedures designed to enhance response rates (e.g., Dillman 1978) or that imbed data collection in student assignments.

Sampling should be extended to a larger cross-section of schools. The willing participation of intern coordinators is essential to conduct this type of project. At a minimum, they must be willing to obtain and share contact information for interns and shepherd the project through a human-subjects review on their campuses.

A longer survey format, follow-up questionnaires, and interviews would generate more detailed information about observed incidents, reporting behaviors, and the outcomes of the reports. Complete descriptions of the incidents students observed will allow more informed assessments of whether the conduct was in fact unethical.

If further research supports these initial findings, internship coordinators should review their approach to preparing students prior to their internship. In particular, coordinators need to emphasize to students how to identify and handle observations of actual and potential misconduct. Sensitizing interns to the potential of unethical conduct should help them to critically evaluate their own field observations. Coordinators may consider imbedding discussions of questionable conduct into the internship activities, for instance, through required reports, logs, class meetings, or debriefings. Face-to-face reflection activities may have an advantage over written reflection in this regard. Reed and Carawan (1999) highlight the benefits of a weekly seminar in which students can discuss issues arising at their placement site. Internships that include regular meetings with the coordinator allow probing of the circumstances surrounding the incident for greater clarification of the issues involved. Class meetings will allow that investigatory process to proceed in such a way that other students learn from each other’s experiences.

Internship coordinators should pay attention to reports of misconduct and be aware of patterns of reports from placement sites. In some cases, the coordinator may report patterns of problems to the agency and, in extreme cases, may refuse to place interns in agencies whose employees have demonstrated a continuing pattern of ethically questionable conduct.

Proactively urging students to ask questions of employees or to report questionable conduct to the internship coordinator or agency supervisor will emphasize that it is okay to question what is observed in order to seek a better understanding of how criminal justice professionals operate within the professional and legal boundaries of their job. It sends a message of openness to help counteract what might be perceived as a traditionally closed organization.

Agency supervisors should consider debriefing interns at the end of their internship. Asking interns about conduct they did not understand, or that was troublesome to them will enhance their education and could provide hints about problematic employee conduct. Kennedy (1993) and Schaeffer (1996) agree interviews between the intern and agency supervisor or management enhance internship practices.
Continued research in this area and related changes to internship administration should improve the educational experience of criminal justice students, particularly with regard to their handling of ethical challenges. Van Maanen (1983) distinguishes the "choice" stage from the "introduction" stage of becoming a police officer. The internship blurs the line between these stages for criminal justice students. It provides them with an observational learning experience in which they are exposed to the subculture, war stories, and activity of criminal justice personnel, while still in the choice stage. Observed misconduct may affect students’ perceptions of agencies and careers, potentially repulsing otherwise qualified applicants, or attracting applicants with proclivities to misconduct themselves. Because of the potential for long-term harm as well as long-term gain, it is important that criminal justice faculty take a more serious look at the kinds of misbehavior interns may be facing, and how those observations are handled.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments, and Texas A&M University–Texarkana, College of Health and Behavioral Sciences, and Dr. Jo Kahler, Dean, for providing support for the survey and data entry. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November 17, 2005, Toronto, Ontario.

References


Appendix A. Survey of Criminal Justice Interns

Please complete both sides of the survey and return in the enclosed stamped/ addressed envelope.

1. What kind of agency did you intern with? (circle the best response)
   
   A. Local Police Department  
   B. Sheriff's Department  
   C. State Law Enforcement agency  
   D. Local Jail  
   E. Juvenile Detention Center  
   F. State Prison  
   G. Local/State Probation/Parole  
   H. Federal Probation/Parole  
   I. Federal Law Enforcement agency  
   J. Federal Prison  
   K. A Social Service Agency  
   L. Other  
   
2. Have you had ethics training prior to the internship? Mark all that apply.
   
   A. No. (If "No," skip #3 and go to #4.)  
   B. Yes—included in a regular ethics textbook or workbook  
   C. Yes—included in orientation by intern director  
   D. Yes—ethical expectations covered by agency personnel  
   E. Yes—covered in internship textbook or workbook  
   F. Yes—included in research methods course  
   
3. If "yes" to any of the above, were any of these instructional modules focused specifically on ethics during an internship? Mark all that apply.
   
   A. No.  
   B. Yes—included in a regular ethics class  
   C. Yes—included in research methods class  
   D. Yes—included in orientation by intern director  
   E. Yes—covered in internship textbook or workbook  
   F. Yes—ethical expectations covered by agency personnel  
   G. Yes—Other:  
   
4. Were you instructed on how you should handle observations of misconduct?
   
   A. Yes—by the university internship director  
   B. Yes—by the agency internship coordinator or other employee  
   C. No  
   
Did you observe, or suspect that you observed, any agency personnel engage in any activity of the following? Circle "yes," “suspected,” or “no” for each behavior.

5. Illegal behavior  
   
   Yes  
   Suspected  
   No  

6. Violation of legal procedures  
   
   Yes  
   Suspected  
   No
7. Violation of department policy
   Yes  Suspected  No

8. Disrespect, lack of appropriate courtesy, or unprofessional behavior toward a citizen
   Yes  Suspected  No

9. Unprofessional comments or behavior in a private setting (not around citizens)
   Yes  Suspected  No

10. Biased investigation or enforcement activity
    Yes  Suspected  No

11. An officer telling you that something you heard or observed was not to be passed on to a third part (e.g., “This doesn’t leave the car.” or “This is just between us.”)
    Yes  Suspected  No

If “No” to all of the above, go to item #14.

12. Did you formally report any of the observed conduct to anyone?
    A. agency official
    B. internship director
    C. other __________

13. Did you informally discuss any of the observed conduct with anyone?
    A. agency supervisor or official
    B. another agency employee
    C. intern director
    D. the employee in question
    E. another intern or student
    F. a friend or family member
    G. other __________

Social/Education Variables
14. Your Age? ______
15. Your Sex? Male Female
16. Your Race? ___________

Work experience
17. Years of previous full-time work experience in criminal justice field? ______
18. Years of previous part-time work experience in criminal justice field? ______
19. Years of other previous full-time work experience (non-CJ)? ______
20. Years of other previous part-time work experience (non-CJ)? ______

Thank you for completing this survey.
Please place this sheet in the stamped envelope and mail it.
If you have questions in the future or wish to contact Dr. Jordan, his email, phone number, and address are included on the cover letter that you can keep for future reference.