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MAX HUNTSMAN
INSPECTOR GENERAL

September 8, 2014

TO: SUPERVISOR DON KNABE, Chairman
SUPERVISOR GLORIA MOLINA
SUPERVISOR MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS
SUPERVISOR ZEV YAROSLAVSKY
SUPERVISOR MICHAEL D. ANTONOVICH

FROM: MAX HUNTSMAN
Inspector General

RE: REPORT BY THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL
A Preliminary Review of Sheriff Crime Statistic Reporting

On August 12, 2014, the Board of Supervisors instructed the Office of Inspector General to review and analyze a sample of the Sheriff's Department's closed cases and report back to the Board in 30 days on the accuracy of the Department's classification of the crimes reported in those cases.

Our review uncovered no reason to believe that Sheriff's Department employees are systematically reclassifying crime reports to either overreport or underreport crime rates for serious crimes.

We did find that simple assaults were often incorrectly classified as aggravated assaults. These errors took place during the initial classification of crimes by field deputies and watch sergeants. The Department was previously aware of this problem and has issued bulletins intended to correct it in the past. The problem appears to vary from station to station. Approximately half of our small sample of reported aggravated assaults in Century and Compton stations appeared actually to be simple assaults. We found no errors at the Marina Del Rey station. East Los Angeles, Lancaster and South L.A. misreported up to a third of their aggravated assaults.

We outline below the process of statistically coding crime reports, the type of sample cases we surveyed, the results of that survey and our observations about the quality control employed by the Department.

Overview

Recently the Los Angeles Times reported that a survey of Los Angeles Police Department crime data showed that the Los Angeles Police Department had been reclassifying crime reports in an inaccurate manner, thereby falsely underreporting serious crime.

Crime trends are reported to the general public and to the FBI. When law enforcement agencies report crime statistics to the FBI, they employ a coding system outlined by the Uniform Crime Reporting Program manual (UCR) published by the Department of Justice.

The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department designates a statistical code to each crime report that is incorporated as part of the Uniform Report Number, the identifying number that tracks the incident for most future purposes, including prosecution. That code characterizes the type of crime (e.g., robbery, burglary, assault) and sometimes the level or subcategory of the crime (e.g., armed robbery, simple or aggravated assault). The code is then entered into the Department's computer system and used to report crime statistics. The initial statistical coding is done by the deputy who writes the crime report but must be approved by the deputy's sergeant. After approval by the sergeant the report is processed and entered into a computerized system by secretarial staff. Later, a crime can be reclassified by a sergeant or detective through a process that requires a report and modifies the classification of the crime in the computer system.[1] When evaluating the accuracy of crime statistics it is important to consider all the points at which information can be developed. Leaving aside simple error, the three primary places statistics appear most susceptible to alteration are:

- Initial Classification
- Reclassification
- Reporting Statistics to the Public and Department of Justice

Anecdotally, initial classification appears to overreport the seriousness of crimes for two reasons. First, it is common practice in law enforcement to classify as felonies crimes which could be charged as either felonies or misdemeanors. Second, some of the UCR factors used in classifying crimes lend themselves to upward errors in classification when a judgment call must be made as to the seriousness of the injuries actually inflicted or the potential seriousness of the injuries that could be inflicted by an unconventional weapon.

Reclassification is generally done by supervisors in response to additional information or as part of an internal quality control program. This should theoretically improve the accuracy and consistency of statistical coding. Our initial review of a sample of 71 crime reports reclassified by the Department indicated that this is generally so. Moreover, reclassification is rare. It only took place with 1.4 % of the approximately 5,000 cases from which our sample was drawn.

Methodology

After the LAPD statistical coding problems were publicized, Sheriff's Department personnel began examining a sample of crime reports. The Department pulled the reports of 80 cases, 20

[1]The Sheriff's Department's computer system does not distinguish between changes that reclassify the level of a crime and changes that simply add additional categories. Also, it should be noted that 18 of the changes made in the sample period related to crimes reported in previous years. One can assume that a similar number of changes to crimes reported in our sample period should be expected in the future. Therefore, 71 seems the best number to use for analysis, rather than 53. Some such changes require a report and some do not. Of the 71 case reports reviewed by the OIG in which the classification of the crime was changed, only 2 contained a report documenting the change in classification. From the records available at this time we are unable to tell whether changes are being properly documented.

each from four stations – Compton, Century, South Los Angeles and East Los Angeles – which had reported significant decreases in overall crime rates. The cases were a random selection of non-aggravated assaults reported between July of 2013 and July of 2014. The Department determined that only two of these cases appeared to be initially misclassified. The Department also examined past audits and informed the OIG that some overreporting of assault statistics was an ongoing issue.

The OIG requested that the Department broaden its examination and allow us to review its work. The Department was fully cooperative and in every instance in which the OIG requested additional information the Department immediately provided the necessary staff to respond quickly and completely. The OIG requested: (1) to review the case reports already pulled, (2) that additional case reports be pulled for the original four stations and for two additional stations – Marina del Rey and Lancaster – and reviewed by OIG staff, (3) that OIG staff observe the process of selecting cases, and (4) that additional statistical information regarding the reclassifications of assaults be queried from the Department's computer system.

In total, the OIG reviewed 311 crime reports and statistical coding decisions. Each report was reviewed by Department personnel and then reviewed by at least two OIG personnel.[2] A total of 240 assault cases were pulled, 40 each from six stations. We chose to look at assaults – twenty non-aggravated assaults and twenty aggravated assaults[3] from each station – because assault crimes are a good barometer of crime trends in general and each assault report requires a coding decision: aggravated or simple.

Additionally, the Department's computer system was queried to learn how common reclassification is. Each of the 71 reports in which assaults were reclassified were examined.

Results

Our preliminary review of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department's reporting of crime statistics gives no indication that the Department has a problem similar to the reclassification and underreporting discovered at the Los Angeles Police Department. From approximately 5,000 reports from five stations of aggravated assault prepared by the Sheriff's Department during a period from July 2013 to April 2014, 62 reported aggravated assaults were reclassified, 52 as simple assaults, 9 as other crimes and 1 as an accident. In our judgment, 4 of those reclassifications appear to be incorrect but only 3 (4.8%) of the reclassifications involve a fundamental error over aggravated versus simple assault classification (Figure 1).

Of the other 238 cases of non-reclassified assaults reviewed by the OIG, in our judgment 42 were incorrectly classified and coded by the Department. Within that group, of the 120 simple

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[2] Personnel evaluating the classification of police reports were Inspector General Max Huntsman, Chief Deputy Daniel Baker, Assistant Inspector General Donald Pedersen, Assistant Inspector General Robert Miller, Deputy Inspector General Walter Katz, and Deputy Inspector General Bita Shasty. Don Pedersen has thirty years of experience as a police officer, including as a chief of police. Max Huntsman, Dan Baker, and Rob Miller are former deputy district attorneys. Bita Shasty is a former deputy public defender. Walter Katz is a former deputy public defender and former deputy alternate public defender.

[3] Our sample from Lancaster was only 18 aggravated assaults. Two crime reports were not initially coded as assaults.

assaults, we conclude that 4 of them were underreported, that is they should have been classified as aggravated rather than simple assaults (Figure 2). Of the 120 aggravated assaults, we conclude that 38 of them were overreported, that is they should have been coded as simple assaults rather than aggravated assaults (Figure 3).

Other Observations

According to the Unified Crime Reporting Program (UCR), an assault is defined as "an unlawful attack by one person upon another."

An Aggravated Assault is defined as "an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury. This type assault is usually accompanied by the use of a weapon or by means likely to produce death or great bodily harm". The UCR Program considers a weapon to be a commonly known weapon (a gun, knife, club etc.) or any other item which, although not usually thought of as a weapon, becomes one in the commission of a crime.

A Simple Assault includes all assaults which do not involve the use of a firearm, knife, cutting instrument, or other dangerous weapon and in which the victim did not sustain serous or aggravated injuries.

The UCR further says that careful consideration of the following factors should assist reporting agencies in in classifying assaults:

1. The type of weapon employed or the use of an object as a weapon.
2. The seriousness of the injury.
3. The intent of the assailant to cause serious injury.

Based on the above definitions there is some subjectivity in the manner in which they are reported. For example, according to the LASD Statistical Code Guide, when hands, fists or feet are used an assault should be classified as aggravated if there are broken bones, internal injuries, injuries requiring stitches or injuries requiring hospitalization, but as a simple assault when there is no injury or minor injury (bruising, minor cut etc.) not requiring hospitalization. It is not uncommon for a victim to refuse medical treatment even when it is obvious that their injuries require stitches. This sometimes results in the deputy making a judgment call as to how to classify the assault.

Conclusion

The Office of Inspector General's preliminary review shows only four instances of inaccurate *reclassification* of assault crime statistics. Since reclassification is rare, this represents less than 0.01% inaccurate coding of cases in general. Initial classification of assaults significantly overreport simple assaults as aggravated assaults.

However, it is critical to note that a comprehensive audit and analysis was not conducted.

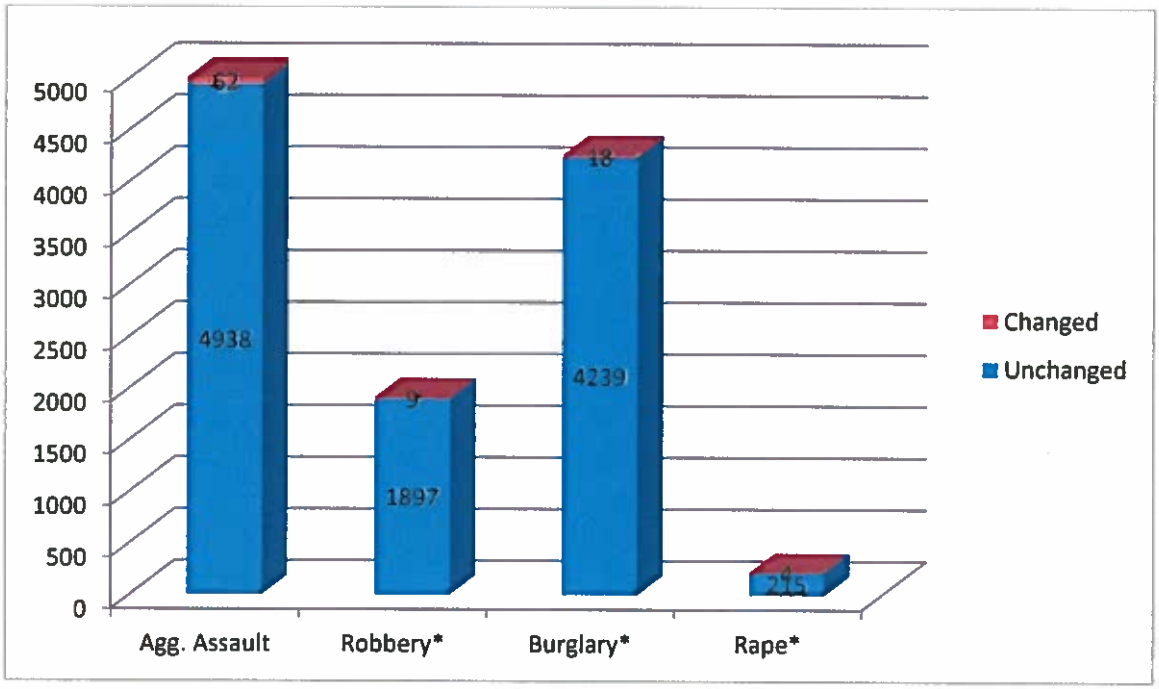

Figure 1 Comparison: Category Changes from Initial Classification

***Figures provided by the Department but not reviewed by the OIG**

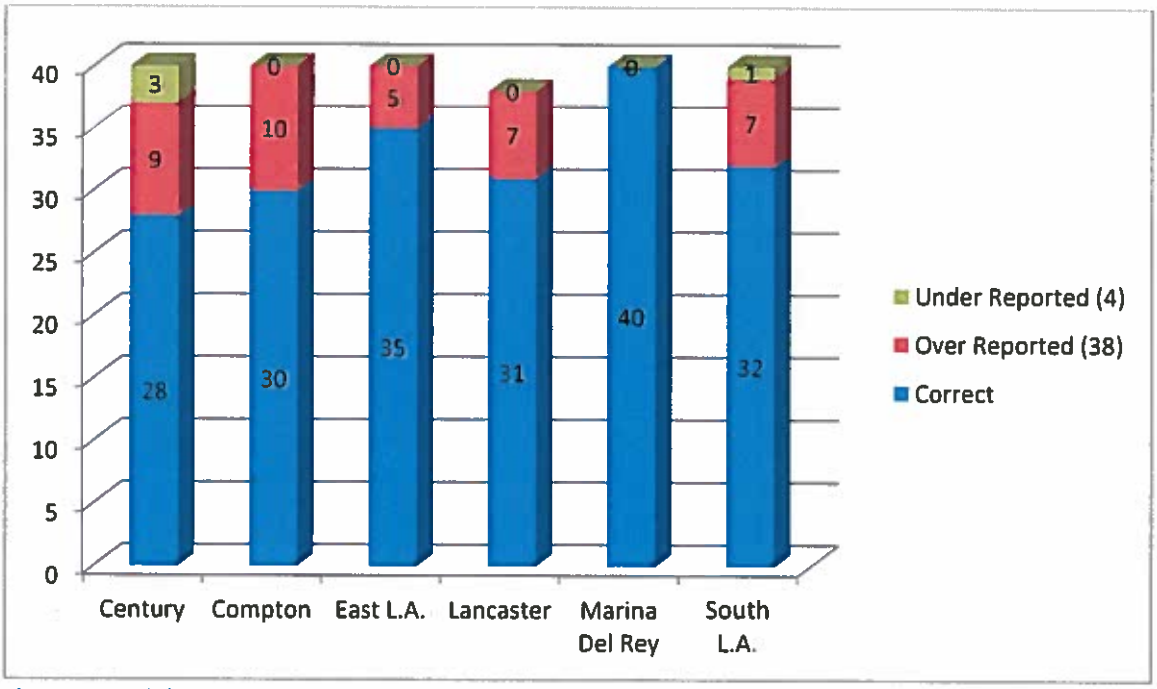

Figure 2 Initial classifications of all Assaults

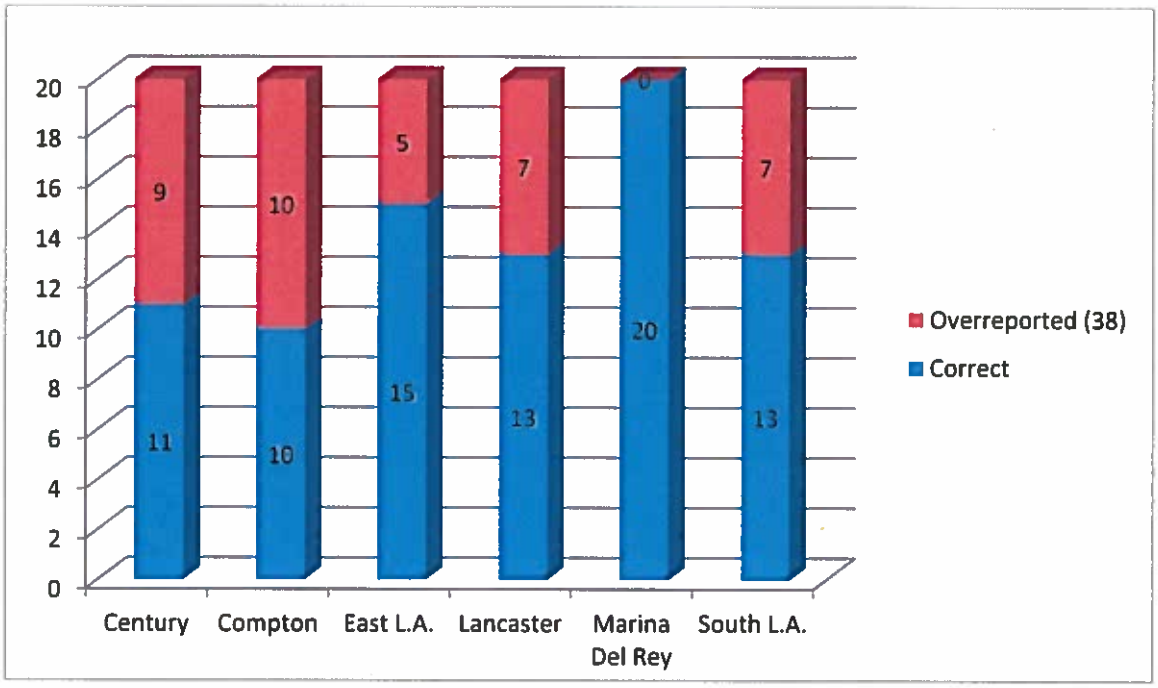

Figure 3 Initial classifications of Aggravated Assaults

If you have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (213) 974-6100.

c: John Scott, Sheriff

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Chief Executive Officer

Sachi A. Hamai, Executive Officer
Board of Supervisors

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