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Sexual assault by the thin blue line

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In recent months, the national conversation over police brutality has centered on shootings and instances of excessive force against unarmed citizens caught on camera. Sexual violence and misconduct by law enforcement agents against citizens have received less attention.

Last month, the Associated Press released a series of reports from a year-long investigative effort into sexual crimes and misconduct by law enforcement agencies around the country. The AP found that between 2009 and 2014, about 1,000 law enforcement officials lost their badges for rape, sodomy, sexual assault and possession of child pornography, as well as acts of sexual misconduct including having consensual sex while on the job. The reports said this figure is most likely an undercount, as not all states move to strip offending officers of their badges. According to Cato Institute reports in 2009 and 2011, sexual misconduct was the second most common complaint against police officers, with excessive force taking first place.

The AP report detailed some particularly shocking instances of serial sexual offenses by police, including the case of former Oklahoma City officer Daniel Holtzclaw, who was convicted last week of sex crimes, including four counts of first-degree rape, against 13 black women, ranging in age from 17 to 58. Mr. Holtzclaw threatened some of his victims with jail time if they did not agree to his sexual demands.

As with police violence, it is only a small percentage of law enforcement officers who engage in such heinous acts; the vast majority, who are honest and dedicated, would be well-served if the bad actors were better identified and dealt with. Sexual violence and misconduct committed by police officers traumatize victims and make communities distrustful of law enforcement. Abuses by officers, as well as the failure of police departments to properly investigate and remove offending officers, also undermine efforts to combat rape and sexual assault in society as a whole. Sexual violence and misconduct by law enforcement need to become critical parts of the national conversation around efforts to improve responsible policing.

A combination of conditions can enable abuse. Victims in many instances are seen as lacking credibility, because they are poor, young, using drugs or holding criminal records. Many victims, out of fear of retaliation from other officers, don't file reports. Loose laws, lax hiring procedures and long processes for decertification allow officers accused of sexual offenses to hop from one

job to another. About 20 states decertify an officer only in the event of a criminal conviction. Nine states told the AP they either did not decertify officers for misconduct or declined to provide information.

There are calls to require states to record and track decertified officers in a national database, but as it stands, the database is voluntary for states. It shouldn't be.