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From Drunken Drivers to Prostitutes and Shoplifters: The Onset of the Great
Depression and Shifting Police Priorities in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1928-1934

Sarah J. Sweers

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Afflicted with a blunt headache, clouded memory, and a stiff back from a night spent in police custody, a bright bulb sparked in the eyes of a man arrested for drunken driving, cruelly reminding him of his recent indiscretion. He ascended the stairs, no doubt aided by an officer or two, from one of the two cells located in the basement of the four-storied police headquarters. As a crowning glory of administration success, the headquarters was built in 1892, on Crescent at Ottawa in the Northwest side of downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was the eighteenth of November, 1928, a Sunday, the morning after a Saturday night/early Sunday morning arrest in which he made the cut as one of the most dangerous catches from the three precincts, someone that needed to be booked and recorded for the sake of posterity. A middle-aged and slightly plump, white man peers back from the shot, clad in a rumpled suit, a mussed collar and his tie askew. His tensed jaw and apprehension conspicuously stared past the camera. The picture was taken, developed on site, and carefully pasted into a large sixteen by sixteen inch mug book, tautly bound by two, hefty iron bolts. The clerk or officer with exacting handwriting recorded the offender's name, the date of arrest, offense, age, their basic physical characteristics, marital status, birthplace, descent, arresting officer, their residence, and any identifying scars or markings. A small space remained for their still to be determined sentence.¹

But the story does not end here. This would be a rather mundane tale if this experience was this man's alone, but for our purposes it is not. On the night he was arrested, two men joined him, both charged with the same offense. In the previous three weeks the Grand Rapids Police Department arrested and booked fifteen men, thirteen of them for drunken driving. The next three weeks would look largely the same. 1928 ended with another trio of men booked on the thirtieth of December, and the New Year was ushered in with another drunken driving arrest,

¹ Police Department Arrest Book, October 1928-July 1934, Community Archives and Research Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

the first appearance of the pattern that marked the remainder of that year as well. All told, between October 1928 and December 1929, 240 of 585 offenders, or forty one percent of those arrested by the GRPD, were charged with drunken driving.

These men and a few women were, on the whole, a different sort of criminal. They did not fit the period profile of crime characterized by the heady, almost glamorized rum-runners, bootleggers, and imbibers of Prohibition. Concurrently, they were not the average criminal or at least what was expected. Most were middle-aged and married men, residing in the better sections of the city, and having no prior records. In the infrequent case the police department recorded their priors; it was often for additional drunken driving offenses.² The preponderance of drunken driving arrests combined with violations of the liquor law, another all-too-common offense; indicate the top priorities of the GRPD in the years before the Depression. However, this prominent pattern of drunken driving arrests did not continue at such a markedly high rate during the coming decade of the thirties. But on the other hand, drunken driving arrests did not entirely disappear. The onset of the Great Depression marshaled in a dramatic shift in the offenses of the handcuffed criminals lead up the double staircase of police headquarters.

Police departments, arrests, crime rates, and urban disorder appear extensively in the social history literature of the early twentieth century of the United States. Though widely studied by historians, exact crime rates and their implications remain incomplete, leaving room for the exploration of many intriguing disparities and omissions. Historians have not delved deeply into the nature and incidence of crime at the local level during Prohibition and the Great Depression, particularly as it affected and shaped the impressions of the average citizen. What people were actually arrested for uniquely represents police authority and shines light on public

² If those arrested with drunken driving had a prior (or later record as the arrest book was updated later in the decade), which was very unlikely, it was more often than not for drunken driving. This stands in comparison to those arrested for offenses like larceny and burglary who often boasted records of three or more offenses.

fears and concerns, revealing much about day-to-day life. Since no scholarly consensus on the actual rate of crime in the late 1920s and early 1930s, ample room exists to explore such interesting accounts of crime.

The recent scholarly interest in police developed out of the urban crisis of the 1960s. The emphasis on arrest rates emerged during the social history movement of the 1970s. Arrest rates were seen as a way to piece together the ordinary lives of urban residents.³ However, the ordinary resident remained absent from the sensationalized accounts of crime and disorder that dominated the news. These included numerous cases of gangland murders, trains full of unemployed men, and labor strikes by autoworkers and miners. Major newspapers like the *Chicago Daily Tribune* ran inflammatory front-page headlines screaming, “Crime Control is Chaotic, Police Admit” on the twelfth of November 1929.⁴ It is tempting based on both the primary and secondary literature, to view Prohibition and the Depression as an exceptionally criminally inclined time.

Scholarly forays exploring the incidence of crime and its links to both the national trends of Prohibition and the Depression have often found a marked decline in the number of people arrested over time. Eric Monkkonen conducted a study of twenty-three of the largest cities in the

³ Prior to the 1960s, Progressive era journalists kindled interest in policemen of bygone eras, particularly “frontier” days of cities. This was true in a rather large series of articles (published in the *Grand Rapids Herald*) propounding the hundreds of years of combined service of retiring policemen in Grand Rapids in the 1910s. Roger Lane, *Policing the City: Boston, 1822-1885* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); James F. Richardson, *The New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Gene E. Carte and Elaine H. Carte, *Police Reform in the United States: The Era of August Vollmer, 1905-1932* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Wilbur R. Miller, *Cops and Bobbies: Police Authority in New York and London, 1830-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Samuel Walker, *A Critical History of Police Reform: The Emergence of Professionalism* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1977); Robert M. Fogelson, *Big-City Police* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); and Eric H. Monkkonen, *Police in Urban America, 1860-1920* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Note that many of the monographs, six out of seven, bypass the 1920s and 1930s.

⁴ Other papers reported “Chicago Gangsters Run Up Death Toll,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 1930; “Crime Wave Starting,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1930; and some reported on the enormous threat by appeals to man’s best friend, “No Dog is Safe From Newest Racketeer, even police dogs are among the missing,” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 1930.

United States. He concluded that in the face of tremendous urban growth, immigration, and industrialization, per capita arrests declined between 1860 and 1920. Additionally he found that despite the long term historical trends linking economic depressions to increasing crime, the Great Depression presented a different case, noting “the relationship between economic hardship and crime changes, hardship producing more criminal offenses before this period, but producing fewer after the 1920s.”⁵ In a similar study on Los Angeles and twelve other major cities on drunkenness arrests, Monkkonen established that neither the arrival of Prohibition nor the onslaught of the Depression considerably affected the national trend of decreasing criminal rates.⁶ Later studies have demonstrated a decline in male and overall juvenile delinquency rates as unemployment rose and debunked apparent rises in the number of women arrested during the time.⁷

Later studies have come to challenge Monkkonen’s conclusions. The consensus being that crime during Prohibition and the Depression was at the very least a convoluted subject inapplicable to simple observations of increases or declines, inherently requiring more investigation. The efficacy of Prohibition within the confines of city limits has been found relatively futile. Even colloquial knowledge of speakeasies, bathtub gin, and gangster movies demonstrates that alcohol still flowed in the cities. And although Americans may have

⁵ Monkkonen, *Police in Urban America*; also see Eric H. Monkkonen, “Homicide in Los Angeles, 1827-2002,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36 (2005): 173 which posits another unexpected occurrence, finding compelling evidence that homicide rates were “lowest during the Depression.”

⁶ Eric H. Monkkonen, “Toward and Understanding of Urbanization: Drunk Arrests in Los Angeles,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 50 (1981): 240.

⁷ On male and juvenile delinquency see Bill McCarthy and John Hagan, “Gender, Delinquency, and the Great Depression: a Test of Power-Control Theory,” *Canadian Association of Sociology and Anthropology* 24 (1987): 153-177; on women’s arrests see Darrell J. Steffensmeier and Michael J. Cobb, “Sex Differences in Urban Arrest Patterns, 1934-1979,” *Social Problems* 29 (1981): 37-50.

consumed less alcohol per capita, partially due to its rising cost, people were still arrested for intoxication.⁸

At the same time, Prohibition violators filled both the precinct stations of local police including Grand Rapids, and violators comprised nearly one third of the 12,000 federal inmates.⁹ Recent literature adds to this view. Elizabeth Alice Clement's study of dating and prostitution documented the thousands of middle class women who inflated the ranks of casual, or occasional, prostitutes in New York City during the Depression. Jamie Schmidt Wagman supported this conclusion with an examination of St. Louis and its reformers' attempt to control and regulate this growing trade. Property crime as seen through the agent of increasing destitution rose considerably. A recent study of rural Iowa ran counter to the narrative established early in the field by Monkonen, offering a rise in suicide and a tidal wave of bank robberies.¹⁰ Given the limited scope of the literature on the incidence of crime during the Great Depression, the addition of these works and others like them can change the narrative significantly.

⁸ David Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1939: Decades of Promise and Pain* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 15-16. Just as there is ample disagreement regarding the incidence of crime during the Great Depression, the amount of alcohol consumed has also been debated. John C. Burnham builds a strong case against a decline in *Bad Habits: Drinking, Smoking, Taking Drugs, Gambling, Sexual Misbehavior and Swearing in American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

⁹ For Grand Rapids see "Grand Rapids' Disregard for Prohibition," Prohibition: Grand Rapids, Pamphlet and Article Files, Grand Rapids History and Special Collections Department, Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Kyvig, *Daily Life*, 1-2.

¹⁰ On the rise in prostitution see Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Jamie Schmidt Wagman, "Women Reformers Respond during the Depression: Battling St. Louis's Disease and Immorality," *Journal of Urban History* 35 (2009): 698-717; on property crime see James P. Huzel, "The Incidence of Crime in Vancouver During the Great Depression," *BC Studies* 69 (1986): 211-248; and Lisa L. Ossian, "Bandits, Mad Men, and Suicides: Fear, Anger, and Death in a Troubled Iowa Landscape, 1929-1933," *Agricultural History* 80 (2006): 296-311, follows an increase in rural crime.

Scholars have also emphasized the role that fear played in the perceived incidence of crime for those of the time.¹¹ Monkkonen complicated his own argument for a decrease in crime when examining the “widespread violation” of Prohibition from 1925 onward.¹² But the appearance of sensationalized stories and conflicting scholarly accounts indicates that the “crime wave” debate which started in 1934 is unlikely to cease in the foreseeable future.¹³ The real effect of both Prohibition and the Great Depression on crime remains muddled and still given, as it was some seventy-six years ago, to sensationalism.¹⁴

Historically, arrest rate scholarship leaves open the real meaning of arrest rates. The absence of this crucial distinction abounds in the relevant literature. The rise or fall of crime during Prohibition and the Depression, and the meaning of the arrests remain inexact. Police long possessed broad powers for arresting anyone deemed “suspicious.”¹⁵ Scholars have generally agreed on a common filtering process, for arrest data. A potential arrestee needed to first commit an offense of which the police were willing to sanction whether because of public pressure or institutional zeal. Then the offender needed to come to the attention of an officer on the beat, and the officer to obligingly make the arrest. Interestingly, an arrest did not automatically result in booking, and booking did not equal prosecution or for that matter, a guilty plea or affirmative verdict. Ultimately, the people in the arrest book do not comprise an exact

¹¹ Fear spawned community responses to crime, whether real or imagined, see Janis Appier, “‘We’re Blocking Youth’s Path to Crime’: The Los Angeles Coordinating Councils during the Great Depression,” *Journal of Urban History* 31 (2005): 190-218.

¹² Eric H. Monkkonen, “A Disorderly People? Urban Order in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Journal of American History* 68 (1981): 547.

¹³ For evidence of the continuing debate see William Searle, “The American National Police,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 169 (1934): 751-61; Claire Bond Potter, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men, and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men: Hoover’s FBI in Popular Culture* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983); and Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The Nineteen Thirties in America, September 2, 1929-September 3, 1939* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939).

¹⁴ Interest in criminals of the time continues, but in popular form and rarely with a strict eye for historical accuracy. See *Public Enemies*, DVD, directed by Michael Mann (2009, Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2009) as an example of the proclivity to alter historical events for no reason in particular.

¹⁵ Miller, *Cops and Bobbies*, 55.

count, but rather a sampling of the crimes and criminals known to the GRPD.¹⁶ This scholarly agreement on a filtering process pervading all levels of arrest data, however, does not fully explore the actual process of arrest or the effect of broader national trends on arrests at the precinct and city level. Such variable and wide-ranging evidence and open-ended literature led Monkkonen to suggest in later historiographical writings that there are only such trends as “arrest waves, not crime waves.”¹⁷

Further, a noticeable void in the literature concerns smaller cities. Much emphasis is placed on the police departments of New York, London, and Los Angeles. As a result we know something of their experiences with Prohibition and the Great Depression. Yet we know little or nothing on police departments of medium and smaller-sized cities like Grand Rapids.¹⁸ Larger and more general studies of crime of that era invariably include data from the twelve to twenty-one largest cities in the United States. As a result, there is an apparent gap in the applicability of the conclusions drawn by such work. There have been a few persuasive yet small-scale studies of medium and small cities in later years. Compellingly, many of these works contradict,

¹⁶ Concerns about physical arrests were all the more powerful before the time of patrol cars and personal police radios. To arrest an offender the police officer would be placed in a vulnerable situation, having to both protect himself and the person in his custody, often physically dragging him to the precinct station. The mood was heightened as most arrestees had friends nearby. For the process in relation to Jews in Los Angeles see N. Goldberg, “Jews in the Police Records of Los Angeles, 1933-1947,” *Western States Jewish History* 33 (2001): 257-286; a discussion of police willingness to sanction criminals can be found in Eugene J. Watts, “Police Priorities in Twentieth Century St. Louis,” *Journal of Social History* 14 (1981): 649-673; and “Police Responses to Crime and Disorder in Twentieth-Century St. Louis,” *Journal of American History* 70 (1983): 340-358.

¹⁷ Monkkonen, *Police in Urban America*, 71.

¹⁸ New York City and London are covered in Miller, *Cops and Bobbies*; Christopher Thale, “Assigned to Patrol: Neighborhoods, Police, and Changing Deployment Practices in New York City Before 1930,” *Journal of Social History* (Summer 2004): 1037-1064; and “The Informal World of Police Patrol: New York City in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Urban History* 33 92007): 183-216; Beth G. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). Los Angeles receives ample coverage in Janis Appier, N. Goldberg, and Monkkonen’s works previously mentioned, plus William H. Mullins, *The Depression and the Urban West Coast, 1929-1933: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). David Wolcott, “‘The Cop Will Get You’: The Police and Discretionary Juvenile Justice, 1890-1940,” *Journal of Social History* (Winter 2001): 349-371; Charles H. Trout, *Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and John P. Deeben, “‘To Protect and Serve’: The Records of the D.C. Metropolitan Police, 1861-1930,” *Genealogy Notes* (Spring 2008): 50-57, explore other large urban centers – Washington, D.C., Detroit, Boston, and Chicago.

challenge, or inject subtle nuances into the larger studies thus far produced. Finally, it is important to note, that very few of these narratives draw conclusions without the aid of valuable data sources like surviving arrest/mug books.¹⁹

The value of smaller studies and the exploitation of unique local sources are further buttressed by glaring problems with national-level data. A historian of crime statistics, Ghatak Saran, demonstrated that the U.S. lagged behind other Western European nations in the aggregation of crime statistics. After an early attempt to collect crime data in the 1850 Census, local practices of data collection differed widely and the absence of a uniform penal code produced chaos. Only after 1930 do we see any evidence of a semi-coherent data collection and standardized policy.²⁰ In light of such evidence, the omissions left by earlier scholars are understandable. Which is why further analysis of arrest books in small and medium sized cities is inherently valuable not only to the crime wave debate but also in understanding the meaning of arrests.

A microhistorical approach to crime in the late 1920s and early 1930s is preferable to the more general historical trends currently available and entirely useful in this realm given the state of the literature. Outside of the above-mentioned cases, prominent historians have ignored in-depth studies of smaller cities, in no doubt due to the scarcity of consistent evidence. A

¹⁹ Less prominent urban centers and rural areas such as rural Iowa; Muncie, Indiana; Fargo, North Dakota; St. Louis, Missouri; Canada; Baltimore, Maryland; and Memphis, Tennessee are explored in Jo Ann E. Argersinger, *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore: People and Government in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Roger Biles, *Memphis in the Great Depression* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986); Lisa L. Ossian, "Bandits, Mad Men, and Suicides: Fear, Anger, and Death in a Troubled Iowa Landscape, 1929-1933," *Agricultural History* 80 (2006): 296-311; Nancy Turner, "The Muncie Police Department: Origins to World War II (1893-1940)," *Indiana Social Studies Quarterly* 38 (1985): 71-90; David B. Danbom, "Fargo and the Great Depression," *North Dakota History* 66 (1999): 41-49; James W. Martens, "Young Man! When You're Low on your Dough: The depression and YMCA's Leisure Time League," *Alberta History* (Autumn 2004): 22-26; and Katrina Srigley, "'In case you hadn't noticed!': Race, Ethnicity, and Women's Wage-Earning in a Depression-Era City," *Labour/Le Travail* 55 (Spring 2005): 69-105. Many argue against the current historical narrative, especially Ossian who alleges historians have downplayed the number of suicides during the Depression.

²⁰ Saran, Ghatak, "'The Whole Extent of the Evil': Origin of Crime Statistics in the United States, 1880-1930," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 21 (2008): 30-54.

microhistory will also allow for a thorough examination of potential causes and trends within the data thereby providing a useful glimpse at what crime meant as experienced by the average citizen over time. Medium and small cities may not exhibit the alluring appeal of organized crime and the droves of arrests experienced by larger cities. The scale of such activities found in an arrest book from a medium-sized city, however, does not impugn its importance and can greatly increase the understanding of the effects of wide national trends on ordinary citizens.

Accordingly, this essay argues that through an examination of arrest records, the transitional period between Prohibition-era policing and the Great Depression alters not only police priorities and types of crime recorded, but also reveals a gauge of the economic downturn's impact on the city. The obvious shift from alcohol-related offenses to property crimes is readily apparent, but obscures the more pervasive influence of the Depression on women and minority groups. Arrests for prostitution, violence against women and the family, reoccurring ethnic groups, discernable offender neighborhoods, and youth-oriented crime demonstrate the invidious nature of the transition more pointedly. These subtle changes reveal the corrosive impact of the economic crisis and its growing impact on the people of Grand Rapids.

In 1920, *The Survey* magazine selected the city of Grand Rapids as an alternative test case in lieu of costly nationwide survey to determine the effects of the elimination of alcohol. Grand Rapids had enacted Prohibition measures fully two years before the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment.²¹ Chosen for its “fairly wide variety of industrial employment,”

²¹ See Bruce Tap, “‘The Evils of Intemperance Are Universally Conceded’: The Temperance Debate in Early Grand Rapids,” *Michigan Historical Review* 19 (1993): 17-45. Even before 1916, Grand Rapids experienced early temperance movements. In 1851 the Michigan legislature passed a complex system of regulations crafted to monitor liquor sales. Each dispenser was required to give bond to the local city or authority in case damages due to alcohol use were incurred. Early enthusiasm for Prohibition faded in antebellum Grand Rapids pursuant to the national trend. Prohibition's falling out was primarily attributed to difficulties in enforcement, a trend seen again in the 1920s.

Winthrop Lane, a writer who often employed sociological journalistic techniques, found Grand Rapids “a friendly, well-conditioned, representative, mid-western community.” Grand Rapids was selected to explore the effects of “a year without unemployment, without starvation wages and without drink.”²²

The article spun out a litany of glowing Grand Rapidian achievements made in the absence of the evils of intoxicating liquor. Wholesale liquor houses had gone entirely out of business, often turning into banal soda drink factories. Wages had risen, providing the average household with higher levels of prosperity. Employment became steadier and year round. Absenteeism on the job decreased. The moral outlook of the community proved higher than ever before. The front porch and the garden sprouted as centers of social interaction, as the corner saloons faded into memory.²³ But above all, the touted achievement of early Prohibition in Grand Rapids was a presumed reduction in crime. Lane observed:

Prohibition has all but emptied the county jail. The county farm has run down for lack of prison labor. The police force has been greatly reduced. The withdrawal of liquor from the dance and social halls has been almost halved in the two years which prohibition has been in effect. Intoxication, rowdyism, vagrancy are most conspicuous among the crime diminished in number.²⁴

Lane’s interpretation of Grand Rapids and thusly the nation’s perspective on Grand Rapids undoubtedly resulted in skewed perceptions. After all, the article was published in 1920, with the undeniably purpose of ‘selling’ Prohibition to a skeptical public. At the time a number of legal challenges weakened Prohibition. Ohio had fought implementation of the 18th Amendment though the Crabbe Act and then the Supreme Court case of *Hawk v. Smith*.

²² Winthrop D. Lane, “The Freedom of a City: A Year in Grand Rapids without Unemployment, Low Wages and Drink,” *The Survey* (November 6, 1920): 183-187.

²³ Temperance advocates throughout U.S. history cited appalling increases in crime, mental illness, and family abuse commonly caused by the unrestricted, excessive, and widespread use of alcohol. See W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

²⁴ Lane, “The Freedom of a City,” 187.

However, Lane's sweeping claims on the relationship between Prohibition and a reduction in crime are compelling. Yet Lane's account adds little to our understanding of the city's enforcement of Prohibition decrees. Did Prohibition alter the GRPD's offense targets? Lane's account, instead, tells us that the source of crime in the city was alcohol, a perspective in line with the views of progressive reformers. If alcohol went away, so would many alcohol-related offenses, and therefore crime would be drastically reduced.²⁵

The Grand Rapids Police Department of the late 1920s and early 1930s was quite advanced for a medium-sized city due to historical several factors. In 1856, the city had a population of about 7,000. This number would inflate during holidays and other slow times for the lumber industry. Lumbermen from all corners of West Michigan and beyond would find their way to one of the many saloons, barrooms, and grogshops in Grand Rapids and the outlying communities. Retired police recalled that "liquor flowed as freely as water" and their work required, quite simply, brute force to remove the occupationally strong, imbibed men in the early days of the city's police force. As a response, the then village of Grand Rapids' councilmen appointed five full time constables to the streets.²⁶

Over time and past the "frontier" days, no doubt in part due to the influx of emigrants from New York and other New England locations with reformist orientations, the community mellowed.²⁷ It was not long before Grand Rapids became known as a quiet and friendly Dutch city, with a conservative outlook. There was a vast change in both demographics the city grew

²⁵ Regarding the progressive perceptions of alcohol see Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), Richard F. Hamm, *Shaping the 18th Amendment: Temperance Reforms, Legal Culture, and the Polity, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), and John Kobler, *Ardent Spirits: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973).

²⁶ Ralph E. Johnson, "Three Stalwarts of Police Force Were on Duty When Lumber Was King Around Grand Rapids," *Grand Rapids Herald*, December 17, 1916.

²⁷ Ernest B. Fischer, *Grand Rapids and Kent County: Historical Account of their Progress from First Settlement to Present* (Chicago: Robert C. Law, 1918), 124.

exponentially and police operations, moving decidedly away from “frontier rowdyism.”²⁸ The GRPD encountered new problems, instituting a new class of officers – traffic cops (although it took some time for the Department to integrate motor vehicles into their force). Early traffic cops in the 1910s braved the “nerve-racking” frontier of the turn-of-the-century street corner and directed the traffic flow of new drivers and new pedestrians, opting for younger and younger men as the stresses took their toll on the department.²⁹

Grand Rapids instituted the first motorized patrol vehicle in 1911, and a squadron of motorcycle officers by 1918. The success of these motorcycled officers in patrolling the outlying districts of the city gained major acclaim from cities around the country. The Superintendent of Police, A.A. Carroll boasted “Grand Rapids is known throughout the country as the best police protected city in the United States.”³⁰ In 1924, the GRPD began a police training school that in thirty days promised to craft a professional, respectable force of able-bodied men.³¹ The GRPD’s place among ‘professional’ police pioneers (at least in terms of their organizational ethos) solidified when their early adoption of the Bertillion system of criminal identification led to the city’s early adoption of mug shots. The Bertillion system relied on biometrics, actual physical measurements in order to identify criminals.³²

The men of the GRPD of the late 1920s were riding a technological and morale-boosting high. Their ‘successful’ experience with Prohibition, automobiles, and criminal identification

²⁸ Floyd H. Corliss, “Eighteen Police Veterans Have Total Service Record of More Than 600 Years,” *Grand Rapids Herald*, December 9, 1928.

²⁹ John M. Kelly, “Oh Yes, He’s a Happy Guy,” *Grand Rapids Herald*, March 31, 1918. Of the six men who died while on duty, two died while directing traffic and three died on motorcycle patrols, demonstrating the inherent danger of the job, see “The Honor Roll: 14 Officers have died while on duty,” *Grand Rapids Press*, November 18, 1986.

³⁰ “‘Flying Patrol,’ Defenders of City’s Peace,” *Herald*, June 30, 1918.

³¹ W.H. Harvest, “Wiser Guardianship of Public Weal Made Possible by School for Police,” *Herald*, April 14, 1927.

³² Henry T.F. Rhodes, *Alphonse Bertillon: Father of Scientific Detection* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1956).

made them a model police force. However the boastful newspaper claims and national magazine stories presented only part of the story. Oral histories conducted in the 1970s presented a different take on the GRPD's bout with Prohibition. 'Home brew' proliferated among ethnic neighborhoods, each retaining independent and self-sufficient distribution methods. In general, recalled Inspector Frank Brean, the police stayed away from the neighborhoods (the centers of production and distribution). Instead the GRPD had the duty to:

Keep the weekend drunk off the street... If a policeman were to see a drunk staggering home, it was his responsibility to see that no harm come to him. You see, if anyone saw an officer neglect to arrest and get the drunk off the street, the policeman could be reported in the case of any accident. The precinct stations were filled with drunks sleeping off their weekend binges. Many times the same guy would be arrested weekend after weekend.³³

These histories attest that the policemen on the beat were truly public figures, their actions critiqued, inspected, and highly visible to those he patrolled. The focal point of these officers, from their own accounts years after Prohibition, was dealing with the drunks and liquor law violators who filled their cells. These arrests dominated public and introspective feelings toward the institution. Not long after its implementation, the officers patrolling the streets of Grand Rapids found Prohibition "simply unenforceable" and so they did not enter ethnic neighborhoods where liquor was produced, and they understood that evidentiary support for their charges were weak.³⁴ Given the challenges facing the GRPD, they focused on the most visible offenders, a trend that bolstered by their beliefs in organizational superiority, would continue throughout the decade and into the next.

³³ "Grand Rapids' Disregard for Prohibition," Paper in Prohibition vertical file, Grand Rapids History and Special Collections Department, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, Michigan. (more in the citation)

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

The main listing of Prohibition offenders, complete with their mug shots, is the arrest book, with listings running from October 1928 to July 1934.³⁵ This source provided the most complete police records for those years, which coincide with national Prohibition and the onset of the Great Depression. It recorded the offender's name and aliases, their arrest date, offense, sentence, residence, priors, and arresting officer. The entry also included various physical descriptions – height and weight, eyes and hair color, complexion, physical build – along with their marriage status. Grand Rapids' records included a field for the arrestee's birthplace and descent. Few offender birthplaces were coded in any source of such vintage. Accordingly, many researchers have relied upon surnames to tentatively surmise place of descent.³⁶ The offenses found in the book range from murder and manslaughter to vagrancy and stolen property.³⁷

Table 1. Arrests: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1928-1934

Year	Number of Arrests^a	Average Number of Arrests Per Month	Change
1928 ^b	100	50	
1929	484	40	-10
1930	537	45	+5
1931	379	32	-13
1932	228	19	-13
1933	329	27	+8
1934 ^c	223	32	+5
Total	2280		

Source: Author compiled data from Police Department Arrest Book, Community Archives and Research Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

^a Number of arrests appearing the arrest book for the given year.

^b Data represents two months of 1928, as data before October 26, 1928 is unavailable.

^c Data represents seven months of 1934, as data after July 19, 1934 is unavailable.

³⁵ The arrest books started in the late teens and continued into the 1930s. However, only two books survived (one was known at the outset of this project). The fourth book, and the source of this essay's data, was pulled from a dumpster upon the demolition of the old City Hall in 1969. It was later returned to the City and found its way to the Community Archives and Research Center.

³⁶ Monkkonen, "Homicide," 176.

³⁷ In total there are 157 different offenses present in the book for the 2,280 offenders.

Those arrested and actually booked made it into the arrest book. In 1930, Grand Rapids had a population of 168,592 persons.³⁸ The number of arrests in Table 1 does not clearly indicate a dramatic rise in offenders between 1928 and 1934. What we can see is that 1928, the last year before the Stock Market Crash, averaged the highest number of arrests per month. Arrests generally decline until 1933 when, once again, the arrest rate starts to rise. In understanding these numbers, it is essential to take resources into consideration. Conceivably, the police could have arrested only a finite number of people. During these years, the size of the police force remained fairly constant – between 150 and 175 officers.³⁹

Table 2. Liquor-Related Offense Arrests: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1928-1934

Year	Drunken Driving	Violation of Liquor Law	Assorted Liquor and Drunk Offenses ^a	Total Number of Liquor-Related Arrests	Percentage of Total Arrests
1928 ^b	57	14	1	72	.72
1929	174	38	1	213	.44
1930	165	37	1	203	.38
1931	65	58	1	124	.33
1932	1	2	1	4	.02
1933	2	7	3	12	.04
1934 ^c	1	6	4	11	.05
Total	465	162	12	639	
Percentage of Total Arrests	.20	.7	.005	.28	

Source: Author compiled data from Police Department Arrest Book, Community Archives and Research Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

^a Assorted liquor violations include “transporting liquor,” “liquor,” “violation of Prohibition Law,” and “selling beer or liquor without a license.” Assorted drunk offenses include simply “drunk” and “drunk and disorderly” for the arrestee’s offense.

^b Data represents two months of 1928, as data before October 26, 1928 is unavailable.

^c Data represents seven months of 1934, as data after July 19, 1934 is unavailable.

³⁸ “Historical Census Browser,” University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/>.

³⁹ The number of arrests were new arrests or at least new to the arrest book records of the GRPD. Many offenders’ records featured additional offenses (often related) occurring either before 1928 or after 1934 in the record section of their arrest entry. This indicates that the earlier books were available to the clerks that physically wrote the record of arrest next to the offender’s most recent “mug.”

Even the briefest survey of the arrest book's contents demonstrates the frequency of alcohol-related offenses in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The first pages of the arrest book feature drunken drivers followed by drunken drivers with a few violators of the liquor law thrown in for variety. As evidenced in Table 2 it is clear that liquor-related arrests were part and parcel of the GRPD's efforts in 1928. 72 percent of arrests made in the last two months of 1928 were for liquor-related offenses. As a percentage of total arrests, liquor-related offenses decreases dramatically from 1928 to 1934. The sharpest of these came between 1931 and 1932 when the total number of arrests dropped from 124 to only 4, a decline of 97 percent. Even including later years, liquor-related offenses accounted for 28 percent of arrests.

The slow-rolling start to the Great Depression, highlighted by the Stock Market Crash October 1929, disrupted the GRPD's policing patterns. Though the downturn of 1929-1930 was initially similar in magnitude to previous recessions it would not remain so.⁴⁰ In 1931 the contraction "changed in character" with a series of banking panics that spread internationally. The bank failures coincided with lows in the business cycle and panic set in. The rock bottom of the Depression was reached by March 1933. With FDR's inauguration came the bank holiday and the downward curve flattened.⁴¹

Grand Rapids felt the Depression intensely as the downturn coincided with the ongoing decline of the furniture industry. The decade ushered in high rates of unemployment and generalized anxiety. To counter the crisis, Grand Rapids, City Manager George Welsh initiated a program that drew national attention. In late 1932, Grand Rapids started issuing municipal scrip. Scrip was earned completing city jobs, such as shoveling snow, sweeping streets and

⁴⁰ Ben S. Bernanke, "Nonmonetary Effects of the Financial Crisis in the Propagation of the Great Depression," *American Economic Review* 73 (1983): 257-76.

⁴¹ Milton Friedman and Anna J. Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

could be redeemed at city-run stores for grocery items. These city welfare programs required one year of residence and despite efforts were rather limited in scope. Despite these and other efforts, residents still went without.⁴²

Along with the trend of arresting ‘visible’ crimes like drunken driving, during the Depression, with all of its requisite uncertainty and anxiety, the GRPD stuck with what it knew. Except no longer did the department, and the nation at large for that matter, have the understanding of crime that came with Prohibition, namely that an attack on liquor would diminish many other social ills. Now the department was forced to tackle crimes that reflected social ills, and more importantly, threats to the prescribed order.

Table 3. Arrests of Women: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1928-1934

Year	Number of Arrests	Percentage of Total Arrests^a
1928 ^b	9	.09
1929	37	.08
1930	61	.11
1931	43	.11
1932	27	.12
1933	55	.17
1934 ^c	33	.15
Total	265	
Percentage of Total Arrests	.12	

Source: Author compiled data from Police Department Arrest Book, Community Archives and Research Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

^aTotal arrests include both men and women.

^bData represents two months of 1928, as data before October 26, 1928 is unavailable.

^cData represents seven months of 1934, as data after July 19, 1934 is unavailable.

Women factored differently into the GRPD’s worldview with the onset of the Great Depression. Arrests of women nearly doubled as the Depression came to affect the citizens of

⁴² Gordon L. Olson, *A Grand Rapids Sampler* (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Historical Commission, 1992), 155-56; and Neil M. Clark, “A City Where Every Man Has a Job,” *America* (January 1932): 28-31.

Grand Rapids, although still remaining a distinct minority in comparison to male arrests (see Table 3). The effect of the Depression on women is also seen in an examination of the marital status of women. Table 4 does not provide obvious evidence to suggest a dramatic rise in the number of prostitutes arrested by the GRPD. Instead the rate is fairly constant throughout the years covered, and the changing marital statuses of the women profiled suggest the changing nature of the trade. In 1929 out of the six prostitutes arrested, four were single, one was married, and one divorced. By 1933 out of the nine women arrested on charges of prostitution, six were

Table 4. Women Soliciting to Prostitution Arrests: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1928-1934

Year	Total
1929	6
1930	13
1931	10
1932	6
1933	9
1934 ^a	2
<i>Married</i>	26
<i>Widowed/Divorced</i>	4
<i>Single</i>	16
Total	46

Source: Author compiled data from Police Department Arrest Book, Community Archives and Research Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

^a Data represents seven months of 1934, as data after July 19, 1934 is unavailable.

married, two single, and one widowed. When the prostitutes moved out the known ‘red light’ districts of the city and into the poorer and even working and lower middle class districts, the GRPD responded to the perceived threat to social order and arrested these women representing new and threatening signs of growing economic desperation and uncertainty.⁴³

The most significant effect of the onset of the Depression on women was the rise in the number of shoplifting arrests. Between 1929 and 1933 the rate of female shoplifters quadrupled,

⁴³ The economic status of these women is derived from their residences as recorded in the addresses provided in the arrest book.

as seen in Table 5. Sixty-one, or twenty-three percent, of the total 265 women arrested by the GRPD between 1928 and 1934 were arrested for this offense. And similar to the later rates of prostitution, over time, married women accounted for more and more of those arrested. Also like prostitution, shoplifting showcases the desperation of many in Grand Rapids as the Depression's effects became pronounced across the country.

Table 5. Shoplifting Arrests of Women: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1928-1934

Year	Total
1928 ^a	1
1929	5
1930	4
1931	11
1932	7
1933	21
1934 ^b	12
<i>Married</i>	33
<i>Widowed/Divorced</i>	14
<i>Single</i>	14
Total	61

Source: Author compiled data from Police Department Arrest Book, Community Archives and Research Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

^a Data represents two months of 1928, as data before October 26, 1928 is unavailable.

^b Data represents seven months of 1934, as data after July 19, 1934 is unavailable.

Violence against women and acts against the family are represented in the anti-family offenses in Table 6.⁴⁴ These offenses nearly tripled between 1929 and 1932/1933 as a percentage of total arrests. Family offenses attest to the perceived and therefore real threat that the family structure was disintegrating. Charges of “non support” and “desertion” against men indicate the desperate economic conditions. Sexual offenses bear out the chaos, and again, the

⁴⁴ Violence against women in this case may not be parallel to our modern sensibility of the phrase, namely domestic violence. These figures do not include any accounts of battering or spousal abuse, as none were reported for the time period. But there were also cases of rape and assault. However, the cases of assault against women are problematic in the data. Men simply were not arrested for assault against women. There was not an indication in their offense if the assault had been of a man or a woman, a stranger or a spouse.

breakdown of social mores.⁴⁵ The police, in turn, directed their limited resources to the arrest of these offenders who committed obvious and socially destructive crimes.

Perusing just the first thirty or forty pages of the arrest book would not draw attention to much offender diversity. In fact the first case stands out quite apparently, breaking the mold. The offenders were a cohabitating couple arrested for “lewd and lascivious cohabitation” comprised a white woman and an Asian man. This case stands out among most for 1928 to

Table 6. Offenses Against the Family Arrests: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1928-1934

Year	Family Offenses ^a	Sexual Offenses (other than Prostitution) ^b	Total	Percentage of Total Arrests
1928 ^c	1	5	6	.06
1929	8	21	29	.06
1930	20	13	33	.06
1931	11	17	28	.07
1932	16	24	40	.18
1933	16	35	51	.16
1934 ^d	9	12	21	.10
Total	81	127	208	
Percentage of Total Arrests	.04	.06	.09	

Source: Author compiled data from Police Department Arrest Book, Community Archives and Research Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

^a Family offenses includes “bastardy,” “lewd and lascivious cohabitation,” “adultery,” “non support,” “desertion,” “bigamy,” and “polygamy.”

^b Sexual offenses includes “indecent liberties,” “statutory rape,” “indecent exposure,” “gross lewdness,” and “contributing to the delinquency of a minor.”

^c Data represents two months of 1928, as data before October 26, 1928 is unavailable.

^d Data represents seven months of 1934, as data after July 19, 1934 is unavailable.

1930. Additionally, race plays an important role in several categories of offenses that increased as the Depression strengthened. This is true for those arrested for vagrancy and gambling.

Although most gambling arrests (33 out of 36) occurred before 1931, the propensity of the GRPD to arrest large groups of African Americans is remarkable. On December 14, 1929, two

⁴⁵ See Lizabeth Cohen’s *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

groups of African Americans were arrested, one of six and another of five. Over the course of the next two years, five more groups of African Americans appeared in the arrest book.⁴⁶ By 1931, the only gambling arrests came for three Mexicans booked in May 23, 1931. The GRPD clearly demonstrated a degree of racial profiling when all of these arrests were for minority groups in the community. The in-group arrest is compelling and especially apparent with gambling. From this it is apparent that minority community offenses were deemed more threatening and more visible and disproportionately arrested by the GRPD.

With the onset of the Great Depression, there came a noticeable rise in the number of men arrested for vagrancy on the streets of Grand Rapids. The first case appeared in April 1930 and the rate per year steadily increased in 1931, 1932, and 1933. Out of the eleven men arrested for vagrancy in the arrest book, nine were African American. Again, as was the case with drunken driving, prostitution, and gambling, another obvious crime came to dominate the emphasis of the GRPD, although this offense (along with gambling) took on a specific racial overtone. While gambling was considered a vice offense and closely associated with drinking and drinking establishments, the appearance of vagrancy cases reflected the growing anxiety and economic slump of the people of Grand Rapids and of the country at large.

Neighborhoods, and the geographical clues present in the arrest book, suggest a connection between police efforts and particular offense arrests. Early in the book before the onset of the Depression, drunken drivers originated from all over Grand Rapids and the

⁴⁶ It is compelling to note that the classification of African Americans changed significantly over the course of the arrest book. African Americans first appeared as “Am” (for the descent category), then there are a few cases in which they are officially referred to with a derogatory “n” word, and finally receive the classification of “Negro.” With the onset of national Immigration Quota Laws, first in 1924, the federal government decreed that nationality or descent meant country of birth for those from European countries only. An American citizen of European descent received the classification of “American” while “colored” people were designation (regardless of their place of birth) by their race only. The “Am” (or American” classification for Negroes could no longer be used when that classification applied to Americans of European descent only. Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern American* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 21, 25-31.

surrounding areas. This was due to the unique visibility and portability of the crime. In this case, the offender literally came to the police in traffic areas downtown. The violators of the liquor law came from three groups. One lived between Cherry, Franklin, Jefferson Streets, and the river. The second group lived between 4th, Shawmut, Milwaukee, and the river. And the third group hailed from the northeast section of north Grand Rapids, east of Fairview. For all three of these areas, violation of the liquor law was virtually the only crime committed. This was not the case, however, with the crimes that came to the attention of the GRPD during the Depression. Again and again, the same addresses are repeated in the later data. There are even many offenders with addresses on the same street and the same buildings. The visibility of the crime and the discernable socio-economic status of the offenders played an increased role in arrests as the 1930s pressed on.

The final demonstration of the transition of the Great Depression and its effect on Grand Rapids can be seen in the incidence of youthful or youth-related crimes. That said it is difficult to fairly describe the incidence of youth crime in Grand Rapids. Juvenile Court and subsequent arrest records were covered separately from the adult arrest books. However, the arrest book does contain several records where the age of the offender is crossed out. In one record it is obvious that fifteen was crossed out and an eighteen written instead.⁴⁷

Beyond what cannot be conclusively proven there is the appearance of several youth-related crimes. Several such as larceny of a bicycle, larceny of coal, and larceny of a coat plainly evidence crimes of need. As do the cases of youthful shoplifting, for example one record indicated that milk was the only item stolen. In addition to these crimes, seventeen-year-old boys frequently appear in pairs committing motor vehicle theft. The average age of those

⁴⁷ All the cases in which the age of the offender is crossed out, are replaced by age 18. This may indicate malfeasance on the part of the Department to streamline sentencing. And, although not a reliable or exacting source, the faces of some of the young men indicate ages well below the age of 18.

charged with “auto theft” was twenty-one and a half years, much lower than the average age for all criminals in the arrest book. This form of “youthful rebellion” played into community fears that a generation was coming of age in a chaotic world where the old rules of society did not apply.⁴⁸ Auto theft was approached with a uniquely cavalier, even “casual attitude.” Boys took unattended cars, and committed a highly visible crime with a group of their friends, often riding around busy downtown areas and eventually abandoning the car when they grew tired. The LAPD and the GRPD treated the crime very seriously due to public pressure as vehicle ownership expanded beyond the reach of only the elite, Michigan’s rate of car ownership was even higher than Los Angeles’ at the time.⁴⁹

Even a cursory survey of the data available via the arrest book is surprising. Given that it is limited in scope, there is no real smoking gun pointing to an increase or decrease in overall crime. Only data from late 1928 to early 1934 is available. Despite the brevity of these dates, the time period is an important one that provides a glimpse at life, albeit criminal, before and after the onset of the Depression. Even with the limited data, the arrest book shows that the economic downturn had a real and ascertainable effect on the city and the GRPD. Arrests for prostitution, crimes against the family, racial targeting, geographical concentration, and the appearance of youthful crime demonstrate the odious nature of the transition from Prohibition to the Great Depression. Investigation of similar existing sources from around the country will provide a fuller account of the onset of the Great Depression and its effects on ordinary Americans, and increase the national applicability of local history.

⁴⁸ Appier, 196-7.

⁴⁹ Wolcott, 358.