Police Staffing Observatory
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

A POLICE PLANNER'S GUIDEBOOK FOR IMPROVING THE WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

Lessons from Research and Practice

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Institutional Partner Support

Workforce management is among the most important challenges police agencies face. For the approximately 17,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies employing more than 700,000 sworn officers, effective staffing is critical for providing quality service to communities, facilitating the well-being of officers and professional employees, and meeting performance objectives. Recruitment and retention are crucial for building strong, effective, quality workforces—as are allocation, work scheduling, deployment, selection, training, promotions, supervision, succession planning, leadership, culture, organizational learning, and still so much more. These are complex concepts that have multidimensional interactions and effects. Historically, practitioners have had few accessible, evidence-based resources to guide their workforce planning processes.

The Police Staffing Observatory (PSO), administered as part of the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice and drawing on nearly five dozen staffing experts from around the world, helps police organizations navigate and plan for their dynamic workforce challenges. Through its research, outreach, and collaboration with the local-global law enforcement community, the PSO helps bridge the gap between scientific rigor and the operational realities of policing. The PSO actively develops knowledge and resources, offering practitioners actionable lessons on creating and sustaining their workforces.

Like the PSO, our associations prioritize staffing, and we have worked diligently with our members to understand and address the workforce needs of the law enforcement community. With this in mind, we are pleased to be institutional partners of the PSO. Working together, we can create and share resources that advance workforce science in ways that provide practical value for police agencies in meeting their staffing needs. This report is just one example of our collaboration. It demonstrates the utility of academic-practitioner partnerships for addressing public safety needs and improving the police profession. We hope you find some helpful guidance in this resource, and we encourage you to avail yourself of the many others developed by the PSO.

With our greatest support,

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Preface

This guidebook aims to offer ideas, examples, and evidence-based lessons for police practitioners in managing their workforces. Considering staffing broadly from a systems perspective, it is the result of a unique researcher-practitioner partnership. Both police researchers and practitioners served as authors, editors, or both. The overall effort was the result of a unique multi-institutional collaboration between academia and the law enforcement community. This includes project and content development by the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory and New York University, and state perspectives, content review, and dissemination support offered by the Arizona Association of Chiefs of Police, Florida Police Chiefs Association, Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police, Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police, New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police, South Carolina Police Chiefs Association, Texas Police Chiefs Association, and Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police.

For additional workforce management resources as part of this researcher-practitioner collaboration, see:

Wilson, Jeremy M., & Rosa Rivera (2026). *Building Effective Police Recruitment Programs: Organizational, Unit, and Individual Considerations.* East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory.

Wilson, Jeremy M., Clifford A. Grammich, & Ethan Humphrey. (2026). *Police Recruitment: Prioritizing Tactics to Meet Agency Needs.* (2026). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory.

Wilson, Jeremy M., Clifford A. Grammich, & Ethan Humphrey. (2026). *Police Selection: Prioritizing Tactics to Meet Agency Needs.* East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory.

Wilson, Jeremy M., & Rosa Rivera (2026). *Police Retention: Prioritizing Tactics to Meet Agency Needs.* East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory.

Introduction

Contemporary police workforces face an array of staffing challenges. Among them: pressure from attrition outpacing recruitment, concern about the quality of staff and effectiveness of management, uncertainty about the number and type of staff needed and how they can most effectively be deployed, stress over how to prioritize resources to maximize the utility of staff, and how to plan strategically to meet the needs of the community.

The multifaceted nature of the staffing challenge calls for a systems approach to workforce management. Going beyond piecemeal solutions, a systems approach simultaneously considers the entire police staffing ecosystem, including strategy, workforce context, and the operational environment (Wilson and Grammich 2024). This entails not just determining how best to recruit, train, promote, and retain staff, but understanding the nature of the organizational workload, determining the most efficient ways to deploy staff and allocate resources, accounting for the performance objectives and workforce goals of agency leadership, and creating an effective culture to support staff and innovation.

The purpose of this guidebook is to shed light on key aspects of the staffing system for developing and maintaining police workforces. While not exhaustive, it highlights a wide range of topics and how practitioners may think of them. For each topic it covers, the guidebook examines its importance, shares information known about it based on research and practice, and offers considerations and lessons regarding it. Each topic includes a Field Spotlight section, which provides a past or current example of an agency program related to the topic.

The guidebook has three sections. The first illustrates the current nature of the police staffing experience as characterized by law enforcement practitioners in different states. These offer field-based perspectives of the ongoing staffing challenge across the United States. The second are "quick hits," or short briefs, following a consistent format, on staffing issues related to recruitment, promotions, turnover and retention, workforce environment, and workforce planning. The final section are "deeper-dive discussions" on select aspects of workforce planning. These longer discussions are organized more organically, allowing greater depth and flexibility in exploring a topic.

This guidebook will be helpful for practitioners who oversee police staffing processes or who are responsible for their day-to-day implementation. It will be especially useful to those who are new to their roles or those who are looking for readily available ideas and lessons on specific workforce planning issues. It is designed to allow a reader to review it in its entirety or to identify and skip to the topics of most interest to them.

References

Wilson, Jeremy M., and Clifford A. Grammich. 2024. "Reframing the Police Staffing Challenge: A Systems Approach to Workforce Planning and Managing Workload Demand." *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 18: 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paae005.

Police Staffing from States' Perspectives

Florida

Davie Police Department

Chief Steven Kinsey

As you know, recruitment and retention is such a priority for all departments. And, of course, we are all competing for the same high-level, qualified recruits, which makes it very challenging. In Davie specifically, we have added thousands of dollars in bonuses for new recruits on top of what the state provides. Additionally, we have upped our social media / recruiting game and instituted a recruiting team and strategy. Now the entire department is a recruiting team, whether or not they are on a call, a traffic stop, patrolling, or a special event. We are seeing an influx of applications by empowering all of our personnel to "sell" the Davie Police Department and all the benefits of working here.

Ft. Walton Beach Police Department

Chief Robert Bage

I think one of the biggest things in recruitment and hiring is that we no longer get the numbers of applicants we once received, even though many Florida agencies are doing ok with staffing. We hire qualified people but no longer have the ability to hire people that are well above the qualification mark. It works out to be almost a one-to-one ratio. We have one qualified person; we have one position. We truly need to work on a nationwide marketing campaign to get more applicants to allow for more selective hiring. For 2025, the statewide average vacancy rate was 8.36 percent.

Punta Gorda Police Department

Chief Pam Smith

I think Florida is an attractive state for law enforcement because of the support we receive from our government and communities. Right now, Punta Gorda has one sworn vacancy and there is someone in the background process for the position. The difficulty for many of our agencies is that when surrounding jurisdictions raise their salaries, we struggle to keep up. That is when we lose officers who have not yet vested. You have to find other ways to retain those officers. In 2024, we changed our retirement back to 20 years from 25 years. We do not have the state retirement system, so it was easier to make this change. Having a 20-year retirement appeals to those looking for a second career so it has helped our recruitment. No one else in this area has that right now. Other than that, we try to keep our staff engaged as much as possible. We do our best to recognize them for their achievements and I personally send out a monthly update letting them know what is going on with the department, so they don't find out second hand. I also personally meet with a group of staff (that represent every area in the department) quarterly and get their input on safety concerns, equipment needs, changes they would like to see made, etc. This helps them feel that they have some say in what happens with their department and that ultimately improves morale.

Treasure Island Police Department

Chief John Barkley

The Treasure Island Police Department in Florida is authorized for 20 sworn officers. The department operates in Pinellas County, which has nearly one million permanent residents and includes thirteen other municipal law enforcement agencies ranging in size from very large departments to a few smaller agencies.

Treasure Island itself is a barrier-island tourist community with approximately 6,500 permanent residents. During peak tourist season, however, the population can increase to nearly 23,000 people. This seasonal population fluctuation creates unique policing demands for a relatively small agency.

Like many small and mid-sized police departments, recruitment and retention have historically been challenging. Competition for qualified candidates is significant due to the number of agencies nearby and the competitive pay structures offered throughout the county. Additionally, larger agencies in the region provide career opportunities and specialty assignments—such as aviation, SWAT, or specialized investigative units—that smaller departments cannot offer. As a result, younger officers who aspire to these types of assignments often view smaller agencies as stepping stones to larger departments.

Prior to changes in recruiting strategy, the Treasure Island Police Department frequently found itself recruiting simply to fill vacancies. Leadership recognized that some officers were using the department as an entry point before transitioning to other agencies. At the time, the department required a two-year employment agreement related to training costs, which served as a retention mechanism but did not necessarily address long-term recruitment challenges.

Approximately one year after I assumed the role of chief of police, the department's recruiter attended a regional job fair and reported a concerning trend: several recruits currently attending the police academy stated that they were unaware that Treasure Island had its own police department. This feedback highlighted a fundamental issue—not only with recruitment but with agency visibility.

In response, the department began developing a revised recruitment strategy. The first step was to clearly define the department's identity and determine what type of candidate would be the best fit for the organization and community. Leadership recognized that the department could not compete with larger agencies by promoting high-risk operations or specialized tactical units. Instead, the department focused on highlighting its strengths: community policing, proactive problem-solving, and policing in a community that is generally supportive of its officers.

The department shifted its messaging to emphasize communication skills, problem-solving ability, and proactive engagement with the public. Rather than promoting aspects of policing that were not representative of the agency's day-to-day operations, recruitment efforts focused on accurately portraying the nature of the job and the culture of the department.

Another component of the strategy involved modernizing equipment and appearance. The department updated its patrol fleet, transitioned to outer carriers, and ensured that officers were equipped with technology and equipment comparable to surrounding agencies. These changes were intended not only to remain competitive with neighboring departments but also to improve officer morale and organizational pride.

The department also incorporated current officers more directly into the recruiting process. Prospective candidates are now required to complete a ride-along with a randomly selected officer. Following the ride-along, the officer provides feedback to the recruiter regarding the candidate's communication skills, demeanor, and overall fit with the department's culture.

Visibility within the broader law enforcement community was another area of focus. The chief began regularly attending county-wide meetings, events, and professional gatherings to ensure the department was represented in regional discussions. Early in this process, several colleagues commented that they had rarely seen representation from the Treasure Island Police Department at such events. Over time, that perception changed as the agency became more consistently present.

Social media has also become an important component of the department's recruitment strategy. The department expanded its online presence to showcase officers, highlight community interactions, and communicate the agency's mission and culture. This increased visibility helped ensure that potential applicants were aware of the department and had a better understanding of what it was like to work there.

The results of these efforts have been noticeable. Whereas the department previously struggled to attract applicants, it now finds itself in a position where it can evaluate multiple qualified candidates for a single opening. At the time of this writing, the department has one vacancy and four candidates competing for the position.

From a leadership perspective, the shift in recruiting outcomes appears to be linked to several factors: improved organizational visibility, clearer messaging about departmental identity, modernization of equipment and appearance, and greater involvement of current officers in the recruiting process.

For a small agency operating in a competitive regional environment, these changes have allowed the department to move from simply filling positions to selecting candidates who best align with the department's culture and community policing philosophy.

Georgia

Gwinnett County Police Department: Streamlining the Hiring Process

Lt. Collin Flynn and Sgt. Austin Goehrig

The Gwinnett County (Georgia) Police Department has an authorized staffing level of 930 officers. In 2023, the department had 230 vacancies, equating to a 24.7 percent vacancy rate. To address this issue, the department initially established a goal to staff three academy classes of 40 officers each year. Since then, class sizes have increased to 60 officers. To accomplish this goal, the agency implemented enhanced recruiting initiatives as well as a streamlined testing and selection process.

At that time, investigators in the Background and Recruiting Unit were responsible for managing an applicant's file from the initial application through the final job offer. As a result, investigators were forced to divide their time across multiple stages of the process, which often resulted in longer hiring times.

Under the revised system, investigators are assigned to one of two roles, either Phase I or Phase II. Phase I investigators oversee applicants from the initial application through the conditional job offer. To facilitate this, the department hosts 12 to 14 hiring events a year, with one-half of these being held outside of Georgia. This phase includes orientation, completion of the background booklet, a physical ability test, and an oral board interview. Candidates can typically complete the orientation and testing process within 1½ to two hours.

As part of this process, the background booklet, which was traditionally sent to applicants and had to be printed and returned, was transferred to a Docusign format. With the new system, applicants can complete and submit the form electronically from a phone or computer. This change has led to an increase in the number of applicants who successfully complete the background booklet.

Walk-in candidates are accepted at each of the events. If they do not have anything prepared prior to their arrival, it may take 4 to 5 hours to complete the process. In some cases, walk-in candidates can run through the various testing procedures and submit their background information later. Applicants who successfully complete these steps are immediately provided with a conditional job offer and are then assigned to a Phase II investigator.

Phase II investigators are responsible for conducting a thorough background investigation, as well as a medical exam and psychological evaluation. Upon successful completion of these requirements, applicants are extended a final job offer. This restructuring allows investigators to focus on a narrower scope of responsibilities, which improved overall efficiency and reduced processing times. As a result, applicants have been able to move through the hiring process much more quickly. As soon as a candidate is offered a final job offer, they are immediately brought on board. During this time, newly hired individuals are assigned to assist in a variety of locations within the department such as evidence, fleet, training, and dispatch. In addition, they are required to do physical training as well as a couple of ride-alongs (if time permits). They are also provided with additional training to help them identify what to expect when they attend the academy.

Once assigned to an academy class, each candidate must complete 20-week basic academy training followed by a 12-week field training program. The officers must also complete a 24-month probationary period.

Brookhaven Police Department: Leadership, Culture, and Retention

Chief Brandon Gurley

The Brookhaven Police Department (BPD) has approached the national staffing challenge from a different perspective. Rather than focusing primarily on recruitment incentives, the department has prioritized leadership development, organizational culture, and employee engagement as the primary drivers of retention. This strategy has resulted in consistently low turnover rates and a stable, high-performing workforce in a highly competitive law enforcement labor market.

Like many agencies across Georgia and the nation, Brookhaven has experienced the broader challenges impacting policing, including reduced applicant pools, increased competition from neighboring jurisdictions, and changing expectations among newer generations of officers. Instead of attempting to outpace surrounding agencies through compensation alone, BPD made a deliberate decision to invest internally in its people. The department recognized that culture and leadership are the most sustainable tools available to retain personnel over time.

At the core of Brookhaven's approach is a comprehensive leadership development framework that begins early in an officer's career and continues through the executive level. Leadership is treated as a learned and practiced skill rather than something that is assumed with rank. Supervisors and command staff are trained to lead with purpose, focusing on communication, accountability, and emotional intelligence as essential components of effective leadership.

A key component of this strategy has been the integration of executive coaching and emotional intelligence development into the department's leadership model. Through structured coaching and professional development, leaders gain a better understanding of their own leadership styles and how their behavior influences others. They are encouraged to adapt their approach based on the needs of their teams. This has created a leadership culture that is more self-aware, more flexible, and better equipped to manage the demands of modern policing.

The department has also emphasized empathy as a core leadership competency. Brookhaven has reinforced the idea that the way leaders interact with their personnel directly impacts morale, engagement, and long-term commitment. Leaders are expected to communicate clearly, provide consistent feedback, and demonstrate a genuine investment in the well-being and professional growth of their employees. This approach has strengthened trust within the organization and fostered a shared sense of purpose.

Transparency and inclusion are also central to Brookhaven's culture. Personnel at all levels are given opportunities to provide input on departmental initiatives, equipment needs, and operational decisions. Regular communication from leadership ensures that employees understand both what

decisions are being made and the reasoning behind them. This has increased organizational buy-in and created an environment where employees feel valued and heard.

Brookhaven has also taken steps to address one of the most common retention challenges in mid-sized agencies, which is limited career growth opportunities. The department has expanded access to training, encouraged participation in specialized assignments, and created pathways for professional development. These efforts allow officers to grow within the organization without needing to leave for advancement. By investing in both technical skills and interpersonal development, BPD has prepared its personnel for future leadership roles while increasing job satisfaction.

The impact of this leadership-focused strategy on retention has been significant. While many agencies continue to experience high turnover and staffing instability, Brookhaven has maintained a stable workforce with comparatively low attrition. When employees do leave, it is often for reasons outside the department's control, such as relocation or unique personal opportunities, rather than dissatisfaction with leadership or organizational culture.

In addition to retention, the department has seen higher levels of employee engagement and commitment. Officers are more likely to remain with an organization when they feel supported by their supervisors, connected to the mission, and confident in leadership. This stability has strengthened operational effectiveness, as experienced personnel remain in place, institutional knowledge is preserved, and team cohesion continues to grow.

Brookhaven's experience reinforces an important lesson for agencies across the profession. Compensation and incentives remain important, but they are not sufficient on their own to solve staffing challenges. Long-term retention is driven by leadership quality, organizational culture, and the daily experiences of employees. Agencies that invest in developing strong, emotionally intelligent leaders are better positioned to retain their workforce and sustain performance over time.

In a profession where agencies are competing for a limited pool of qualified candidates, Brookhaven has demonstrated that a strong internal culture can be a defining advantage. By focusing on leadership, communication, and employee engagement, the department has created an organization where employees choose to stay because they feel valued, supported, and connected to the work they do.

Michigan

Chief Ron Wiles (Ret.) and Chief Bryan Ergang (Ret.), Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police

Police staffing continues to be one of the most significant challenges facing law enforcement agencies across Michigan. While this issue is not unique to our state, the impacts are real and felt daily in communities of every size. In January 2006, Michigan had 21,025 sworn police officers. As of January 2026, that number has declined to 18,803 officers. That represents a loss of more than 2,200 officers over the past two decades, a reduction that has placed increased strain on agencies, officers, and the communities they serve.

This decline did not happen overnight, and the causes are multifaceted. Like much of the country, Michigan experienced a wave of retirements, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of intense scrutiny and uncertainty surrounding the profession. At the same time, fewer individuals were entering law enforcement.

These staffing shortages have had real operational consequences. Agencies are relying more heavily on overtime to maintain minimum staffing levels, which places additional stress on officers and their families. Investigative caseloads have increased, proactive enforcement has been reduced in some areas, and specialized assignments have been consolidated. Smaller and mid-sized agencies, which make up most departments in Michigan, have been particularly impacted. These agencies frequently lack the financial resources to compete with larger jurisdictions offering higher starting salaries or signing bonuses, creating an environment where agencies must compete with one another for a limited pool of qualified candidates.

Retention has also emerged as a major challenge. Officers increasingly move between agencies seeking improved compensation, schedules, or career opportunities. While this movement can benefit individual officers, it creates instability for agencies and communities. Departments invest significant time and resources in hiring and training officers, only to see them leave for neighboring jurisdictions. This cycle places additional pressure on agencies already operating below authorized staffing levels.

Despite these challenges, there are clear signs of progress, and Michigan has taken steps to address the staffing crisis. One of the most important developments has been the creation and continued funding of the Public Safety Academy Assistance Grants. Funded through an appropriation by the Michigan Legislature and now in its third year, this program has been the single most important tool in helping agencies recruit and hire qualified candidates. The grants pay for academy tuition and a portion of the candidate's salary while they attend the police academy. This reduces the financial burden on both the candidate and the agency, allowing departments to hire individuals who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to pursue a law enforcement career.

This investment has had a direct and positive impact. For many agencies, particularly smaller departments, the cost of sponsoring a recruit through the academy has been a significant barrier to

hiring. By removing that barrier, the program has accelerated hiring and expanded the pool of qualified candidates entering the profession.

The results of these efforts are encouraging. Police academies across Michigan are currently full, with qualified candidates actively training and preparing to serve their communities. This represents an important turning point. After years of declining numbers, we are now seeing renewed interest in the profession. However, it is important to recognize that hiring and training new officers is only part of the solution. It takes time for recruits to complete the academy, complete field training, and gain the experience necessary to work independently. It will take continued investment and sustained effort before agencies fully recover from the staffing shortages that have developed over the past two decades.

The Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police has remained deeply committed to addressing these challenges. Our work focuses not only on recruitment, but also on retention, leadership development, and organizational culture. Professional development is essential to ensuring officers and leaders have the tools they need to succeed. Programs such as our Police Executive & New Chief School and our Chief Mentoring Program have played a critical role in supporting law enforcement leaders across Michigan. These programs ensure that no new chief leads alone and that leaders at every level have access to mentorship, training, and guidance.

Accreditation has also been an important component of strengthening Michigan law enforcement agencies. Agencies that pursue accreditation demonstrate a commitment to professional standards, accountability, and continuous improvement. This not only improves operational effectiveness but also enhances officer morale and public trust.

Equally important has been proactive advocacy. The Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police has worked closely with lawmakers and stakeholders to ensure that new laws and policies support both law enforcement professionals and the communities they serve. Programs like the Public Safety Academy Assistance Grants are the direct result of collaborative efforts to address the challenges facing agencies across the state.

Michigan's law enforcement community has faced significant staffing challenges, but we are seeing meaningful progress in addressing them. The renewed interest in policing, the success of academy assistance grants, and the continued commitment to professional development and leadership are helping to rebuild the profession. While we are not yet at full strength, the foundation is in place for recovery.

The work ahead requires continued partnership between law enforcement agencies, policymakers, training institutions, and professional associations. Staffing is not simply about filling vacancies, it is about building a professional, capable, and resilient workforce prepared to serve the public with integrity and excellence.

The Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police and its members remain committed to that mission.

New Jersey

Chief Sean Gutsick, Holland Township Police / Office of Emergency Management

Across New Jersey, recruitment is no longer simply about attracting candidates: it is about competing for a limited number of qualified individuals in a highly regulated and demanding environment. Smaller and mid-sized agencies, which make up the majority of law enforcement agencies in the state, are feeling this strain the most. While compensation is often competitive, these agencies cannot always match the specialized opportunities, staffing flexibility, or visibility of larger departments.

For many smaller agencies, the challenge is not strictly pay. What has shifted, particularly with newer officers, is the increasing importance of time off, quality of life, and overall work-life balance. Historically, departments could rely on overtime, road jobs, and outside details to supplement income and attract candidates. That model is no longer as effective. Many newer officers are less focused on maximizing earnings through additional hours and more focused on predictable schedules and time away from work.

There has also been a noticeable cultural shift within the profession. In the past, officers in New Jersey tended to remain with one agency for most of their careers, often leaving only for a true "dream job" or major life change. Today, that stability has changed. Agencies are seeing increased movement between departments, sometimes driven by contract changes, scheduling differences, or quality-of-life considerations. In some cases, officers are even willing to take a reduction in pay to move into positions that offer more traditional schedules, such as weekday assignments or roles with consistent hours.

Retention has therefore become the more critical issue. Officers today are more mobile and willing to move between agencies for incremental improvements in schedule, quality of life, or career development. This creates a cycle where departments invest significant time and resources into hiring and training, only to lose officers early in their careers.

From a leadership perspective, long-term stability will not be solved by financial incentives alone. Agencies that focus on culture, communication, and leadership development are better positioned to retain their people. Officers want to feel supported, informed, and valued, and that begins with consistent, engaged leadership at every level of the organization.

In New Jersey, agencies are also recognizing the importance of involving the entire organization in recruitment. Every officer interaction, community engagement and public contact becomes part of the recruiting effort. Clearly defining who you are as an agency and communicating that identity effectively has become just as important as traditional hiring strategies.

Addressing these challenges will require a shift in approach. Agencies are finding more success by focusing on scheduling flexibility, quality-of-life improvements, and early-career support rather than relying solely on financial incentives. Adjustments to staffing models, greater predictability in time off, and creating pathways for professional growth within smaller agencies can help improve

retention. At the same time, regional cooperation and shared resources may play a larger role moving forward, particularly for smaller departments that cannot solve these challenges alone.

Ultimately, staffing is no longer a short-term hiring issue, it is a long-term organizational and leadership challenge. Addressing it will require adaptation, a focus on quality of life, and a broader shift in how agencies support and sustain their workforce over time.

Texas

Chief Danny Keele, Jersey Village Police Department

Texas presents one of the most diverse policing environments in the nation, and the staffing challenges facing our agencies reflect that diversity. With more than 2,700 law enforcement agencies—most of them small or midsized—the realities experienced by Texas chiefs differ significantly from those in states dominated by a handful of large metropolitan departments. As a result, recruitment and retention strategies in Texas must be tailored not only to the profession but to the size, location, and resources of each community we serve.

The Landscape of Texas Policing

While major departments in Houston, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio often shape public discussion, the typical Texas agency operates with far fewer officers and limited staff flexibility. Many departments serve suburban, rural, and remote regions where meeting minimum staffing levels is a daily challenge. With each agency operating independently, hundreds of departments compete for the same shrinking pool of qualified applicants.

Recruitment Challenges Unique to Texas

Texas chiefs consistently report that attracting new officers has become increasingly difficult. Private-sector opportunities offer competitive salaries and more predictable schedules, drawing interest away from policing. In metropolitan regions, significant pay increases by large agencies quickly reshape local labor markets. When major departments raise compensation, midsized and smaller agencies must contend with losing experienced officers to those higher-paying opportunities.

For rural agencies, the challenge is even more acute. Limited municipal budgets restrict their ability to adjust salaries or offer incentives, and many must work harder to attract candidates willing to relocate to smaller or geographically isolated communities.

As a result, many smaller Texas agencies rely heavily on academy graduates entering the profession. Some officers remain and build careers within those communities, while others view these agencies as stepping-stones, moving on once they gain experience. This pattern remains a longstanding and defining feature of staffing dynamics in Texas.

Retention and Early Career Integration

Retention has become just as critical as recruitment. Internal workforce assessments across Texas show that the first years of service are the most fragile. During this period, officers develop relationships with supervisors, establish expectations of leadership, and form their sense of whether the agency's culture aligns with their goals.

When communication is strong, supervision is consistent, and expectations are clear, agencies tend to see better long-term retention. When early experiences are uneven or support is lacking, officers are more likely to pursue other opportunities before they fully establish roots.

The Influence of Leadership and Culture

Texas chiefs increasingly agree that no recruitment strategy can compensate for deficiencies in leadership or organizational culture. Officers stay where they feel valued, informed, supported, and engaged. Supervisors—particularly those in smaller agencies—play an outsized role in setting tone, shaping culture, and ensuring consistent expectations across shifts.

Across the state, workforce assessments highlight the same priorities:

- Clear and consistent communication
- Supportive supervisory relationships
- Opportunities for development
- Recognition of employee contributions.

Agencies that cultivate these elements generally experience greater stability in their workforce.

Creating Pathways for Growth

Smaller Texas agencies often face limitations in career advancement and specialization simply because fewer positions are available. To address this, many chiefs have turned to regional partnerships, task force participation, and expanded training opportunities. These strategies allow officers to develop specialized skills and find meaningful growth without leaving their agencies, strengthening retention and engagement.

Looking Forward

Recognizing the recruitment challenges affecting agencies statewide, Texas leaders have undertaken efforts to broaden the pool of potential applicants. New statewide recruitment resources—including a centralized hiring website and regional coordinators—are designed to guide candidates toward agencies that match their interests, preferred locations, and career goals.

Yet even as statewide recruitment tools improve, the core lesson from Texas chiefs remains consistent: long-term staffing stability depends on more than compensation. Culture, communication, leadership quality, and opportunities for professional growth play equally important roles in keeping officers committed to the communities they serve.

Quick Hits on Key Staffing Issues

Recruitment

Financial Incentives as a Recruitment and Retention Tool

Ethan Humphrey

The Challenge

Several tactical solutions can help make the police staffing challenge more manageable. Financial compensation, for instance, is among the leading influences on the decision to join (Santos, Jaynes, and Thomas 2024) or remain with a police department (Davies et al. 2024).

Financial incentives can help agencies optimize their recruitment or retention plans. Among the most common financial incentives are salary increases, reimbursements for such purposes as tuition, and bonuses for reaching a threshold of years of service or a specific level of education (Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] 2023). Agencies may also pursue financial tactics such as incentives for prior military members, stipends for bilingual officers, relocation pay, and housing assistance.

Field Spotlight

Agencies using financial tactics to improve recruitment or retention include

- Anaheim Police Department, which has used hiring bonuses and a referral incentive program (PERF 2023).
- Houston Police Department, which is increasing the starting salary from $62,574 to $81,600 and its base salaries by 36.5 percent (Balarajan 2025).
- Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), which has implemented a "Housing for Hires" program, providing recruits with rent subsidies of $1,000 per month for up to two years (PERF 2023).
- Oakland Police Department, which established bonuses of $3,000 for three years of service, $5,000 for five years, and $7,500 for 10-plus years (PERF 2023).
- Tucson Police Department, which offers officers tuition reimbursement of up to $5,250 per year (City of Tucson n.d.).
- Prince George's County (Maryland) Police Department, which has a deferred retirement option plan (DROP) under which officers with 22 years can accumulate retirement pay on top of their salary (PERF 2023).

What Research Suggests

Financial compensation of law enforcement officers should be commensurate with the risks and hardships of the job (Davies et al. 2024). Increases in base pay are an exceptionally effective means of growing the applicant pool (Santos, Jaynes, and Thomas 2024). Moreover, increased salaries and officer satisfaction with compensation are associated with decreased attrition (Wilson et al. 2023). However, financial incentives should not be viewed as a "cure-all" for staffing issues and are not a sustainable response for every decrease in staffing. They serve as an immediate and, sometimes, warranted short-term solution to staffing shortages but may not address other causes of a staffing shortage, such as low morale, ineffective leadership, or a negative workplace culture (PERF 2023).

Unanswered Questions

Because there is little research on the return on investment from financial incentives, it is difficult to rank such incentives in terms of improving staff levels, affordability, and the quality and longevity of recruits or staff.

The long-term effects of financial incentives are also unknown. If officers are attracted to an agency only because of its financial incentives, there is no guarantee that they will remain with the police department. Rather, they may gravitate towards another police department or a different career that offers more lucrative compensation (White et al. 2010).

Promising Practices

Increasing the base salary is a highly effective means of acquiring new recruits (Santos, Jaynes, and Thomas 2024). Bonuses and reimbursements (e.g., for fluency in another language, or for education costs) are also quite successful. Retention incentives, such as bonuses for years of service milestones, deferred retirement option plans, and the option for voluntary overtime, are also effective. Agencies may also target incentives to issues recruits face, such as the LAPD did in its "Housing for Hires" program (PERF 2023).

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Mentorship Programs for Police Hiring and Career Development

Tiana Gaudette and Jeremy M. Wilson

The Challenge

One of the causes of the police staffing challenge is the long and arduous police hiring process, which typically extends from four months to more than a year (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP] 2019). Applicants face written exams, physical agility tests, background checks, and polygraphs, all of which can be challenging and invasive. Depending on their situation and needs, applicants may be unable or unwilling to go through the entire process.

Agencies increasingly seek to guide and retain applicants through the hiring process. One means of doing so is formal and informal mentorship programs for applicants. These programs are meant to support applicants through their training and early career. Mentorship programs can also help attract high school or college students nearing graduation who are interested in a career in policing.

Field Spotlight

The Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department's (IMPD) MyLegacy Mentoring Program is a noteworthy example of a formal police mentoring program (Stelter 2017).

Established in 2010, the program is designed to promote growth and development throughout an officer's career, beginning with the application stage. One of the initial program goals was to ease young officers' transition from civilian life to law enforcement by matching them with a mentor. The mentor guides the recruit through the application and training process while also communicating with the recruit's family members on the nature of police work.

The program has evolved to facilitate mentoring relationships among veteran officers. For example, veteran officers who have work-related or personal struggles, such as coping after being involved in a shooting or experiencing a substance use disorder, could receive support through the program from other veteran officers.

The program has had a positive impact on department performance, resulting, for example, in a 40 percent reduction in discipline cases in the first few years of its implementation.

What Research Suggests

Mentorship can help recruit and retain high-quality police candidates. Participation in a mentorship program—whether formal or informal, short- or long-term—is associated with higher job satisfaction among police officers (Gau and Paoline 2025). Mentorship programs are also associated with perceived opportunities for career advancement as well as greater peer acceptance.

Unanswered Questions

While mentorship programs are gaining traction, there are several unanswered questions regarding them. These include

- How can mentorship programs be improved to further increase recruitment and retention?
- What metrics should be used to evaluate mentorship programs?
- What barriers do police agencies face in building a formal mentorship program, and what resources or supports can help them overcome these barriers?
- What can be done to dismantle the "culture of competition" (Lavender and Todak 2022) among officers and thereby help facilitate mentoring relationships?

Promising Practices

There are several promising practices for building mentorship programs.

- Start Small. Agencies should "start small" by selecting trusted individuals and training them in communication and relationship-building skills (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services 2023).
- Build Trust Early. Confidentiality is one of the most important elements of a successful mentoring program. Mentees must feel confident that they can speak openly with their mentors (Stelter 2017).
- Mentorship Training. The IMPD Mentorship Program provides mentors with five days of formal training, including scenario-based training and writing of mentorship mission statements, and participation in activities such as zip lining (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services 2023).

Conclusion

Police mentorship programs can help recruit and retain a qualified police workforce. Mentorship programs offer benefits to police officers at every stage of their career. Agencies can take advantage of existing resources to help implement formal mentoring programs in their department or improve informal mentorship practices.

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Physical Fitness Tests and Police Officer Success

Elliot Idol and Tiana Gaudette

The Challenge

Physical fitness tests are a standard component of the police hiring process. By measuring aerobic capacity, muscular strength, endurance, agility and coordination, physical fitness tests help ensure that applicants possess the physical capabilities needed for their duties. There are, however, questions about their use. These include to what extent do physical fitness tests relate to conditions encountered on the job and predict officer performance?

Physical fitness tests may not predict graduation rates among different recruit populations. Sex differences in physical fitness scores may contribute to fewer women pursuing careers in policing. In particular, surveys find that women self-report difficulties in their perceived ability to successfully perform the tasks included in police physical fitness tests (Bissett, Bissett, and Snell 2012) and they report less interest in applying to policing based on physical fitness testing standards (Aiello 2024).

Field Spotlight

The Santa Ana (California) Police Department requires all recruits to complete a physical agility exam involving a 1.5-mile run, 500-yard run, solid fence climb, chain link fence climb, obstacle course, and a body drag exercise. To encourage more women to apply, the department has hosted practice training events providing female recruits with tips and advice to help pass the physical agility exam. A department detective explains: "We want to show that men and women can do the same work. We want [female recruits] to have the confidence to believe that they can handle the work" (Douglas 2023). The training event has received positive reactions from participants.

What Research Suggests

Physical Fitness Predicting Job Performance

The work of line officers in policing is typically characterized by long periods of limited physical activity interrupted by short periods of demanding high-intensity tasks (Anderson, Plecas, and Segger 2001). This has led to questions of whether physical fitness tests should be kept for recruits and incumbent officers (Bissett, Bissett, and Snell 2012). A large portion of officers may be deemed unfit (Strauss et al. 2021) and only a small percentage may maintain entry-level physical fitness requirements (Anderson, Plecas, and Segger 2001). While physical fitness tests may be needed to determine who can handle the sudden periods of physically demanding tasks, especially in managing resistant and non-compliant suspects (Lonsway 2003), many officers who competently handle resistant suspects have not been notably "large, muscular, or athletic" (Gaines, Falkenberg, and Bambino 1993).

Nevertheless, physical fitness test scores have been related to success in performing key tasks. Research in analogous industries like firefighting has found that strength helps public safety staff safely perform critical emergency functions (Henderson, Berry, and Matic 2007; Sharkey and Davis 2008). Specifically, as noted in police officers, musculoskeletal fitness and upper body muscular endurance are both associated with performance on occupational tasks (Beck et al. 2015; Canetti et al. 2024).

Physical Fitness Predicting Officer Health

Physical fitness tests have consistently predicted officer health. Physically fit officers not only have better job performances but also report experiencing less stress and better psychological well-being (Boni 2004).

Physical Fitness and Sex Differences

Men consistently score higher than women in police physical fitness tests (Bloodgood et al. 2019), and research in analogous industries like the military finds women recruits have higher injury rates than men (Knapik et al. 2001). These differences partially contribute to fewer women pursuing policing careers (Dewitt and Gasparini 2024).

Unanswered Questions

While there are clear benefits to having officers who are physically fit, more research is needed to link physical fitness tests to job duties and success on the job.

Promising Practices

Physical fitness is positively associated with officer health, well-being, and performance of occupational tasks. It is worthwhile to consider all the ways fitness can be supported throughout officers' careers. Additionally, given physical fitness test scores vary by physiological characteristics, a sex-specific approach to preparing police recruits for physical fitness tests may help more candidates meet minimum fitness standards (Bloodgood et al. 2019). Officers note such an approach may alleviate fears of inadequacy and prepare them for not only the physical fitness tests but also for the culture around physical fitness in policing (Dewitt and Gasparini 2024).

Conclusion

While physical fitness tests are an established component of the police hiring process, to what extent they predict officer performance on the job needs further exploration. As the policing profession continues to adapt to address staffing shortages and promote officer wellness, there is growing evidence to suggest that supporting the overall fitness of staff can help officers manage stress on the job. Additionally, such support may enable many who initially struggle with meeting fitness standards to ultimately meet or exceed them.

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Pipeline Programs for Boosting Police Staffing

Tiana Gaudette and Jeremy M. Wilson

The Challenge

Police departments have long implemented programs that serve as 'pipelines' into agencies, but ongoing staffing shortages encourage additional review on their use and effectiveness as a way to bolster ranks. Commonly implemented through Explorer and Cadet programs, these efforts engage youths and young adults before official police academy training and bestow them with practical skills. Cadet programs in particular help prepare participants for a career in law enforcement.

While these programs take many forms, they can be classified generally into three types: traditional recruitment, stop-gap, and leadership development. Both traditional and stop-gap recruitment programs are meant to segue cadets into the police academy. Traditional recruitment programs often have no age cut-off. Stop-gap programs are generally targeted at youths 17 to 20 years old who want to gain policing experience but are not old enough to apply to the police academy. Agencies use these programs to offer them immediate employment.

Leadership-development programs are less geared toward recruitment and instead aim to foster leadership skills in youths aged 14 to 21. Many police departments offer Explorer programs, a non-scouting subsidiary program of the Boy Scouts of America. Explorers are younger than those in other cadet programs, and while they get similar hands-on training to cadets, they typically serve as volunteers only (Police1 Staff 2025).

All three program types have similar qualifications for program acceptance. These may include a high school diploma (or for Explorers, good academic standing), citizenship, no criminal record, and good moral character. Traditional and stop-gap programs may provide hourly pay and benefits. Cadets from all programs are generally provided with first-hand experience of law enforcement. Participants receive training on topics such as criminal and traffic law, crime prevention, record keeping, and physical fitness. They are active in the office as well as on the streets by going on patrols and ride-alongs with officers. They also assist with community events and other tasks.

Field Spotlight

The Lansing (Michigan) Police Department Explorer Post #911 (City of Lansing n.d.) is open to youths aged 14 to 21 who can pass a background investigation and complete an interview process. The program introduces youths to aspects of policing such as paramilitary organization, community service events, physical fitness training, military drills and ceremony, uniform and grooming standards, character development, and leadership skills. Explorers also receive training on law enforcement subjects and can go on ride-alongs with officers. The Explorer program has seen its members go on to careers in policing; it played an instrumental role, for example, in generating interest of Robert Backus, the department's current chief, in a policing career (City of Lansing 2024).

What Research Suggests

Cadet programs offer several benefits to participants. In addition to providing law enforcement training in the classroom, in the office, and on patrol, the program helps participants increase their levels of self-assertive efficacy, self-regulatory efficacy, and empathy, and to develop skills related to resisting peer pressure to engage in antisocial behaviors such as illicit consumption of drugs and alcohol (Anderson, Sabatelli, and Trachtenberg 2007). It also helps youths build caring relationships with adults outside the home.

Explorer and cadet programs offer a variety of benefits to police agencies. Exploring programs provide a cost-effective way for departments to invest in their community's youth—regardless of whether they pursue a career in law enforcement—by helping them develop critical prosocial skills. Explorers and cadets can mitigate staffing shortages of sworn officers by assisting with various tasks around the department or at community events. Pipeline programs appear to be well-regarded by officers: a survey of officers in an Arizona department found that Explorer programs were perceived as an effective method to proactively recruit "good cops" (Terpstra, White, and Fradella 2022).

Unanswered Questions

While pipeline programs are popular, there has not been much academic research on them. Unanswered questions regarding such programs include

- How prevalent are police cadet programs in the United States?
- How cost-effective are Explorer and police cadet programs?
- How effective are Explorer and cadet programs at recruiting youth into a career in law enforcement?
- How effective are Explorer and cadet programs at training youth for a career in law enforcement?
- Do officers who graduated from Explorer and cadet programs fare better in their career than those who did not participate in such programs?

Promising Practices

Previous research does suggest several promising practices for cadet programs. These include

- Having a Clear Rationale (Osterburg and Trubitt 1970). Having well-defined goals for the cadet program—such as instilling leadership skills or recruiting future officers—will help prevent departments from assigning too many conflicting roles to their cadets.
- Securing Funding. Building and managing a cadet program can be a time-consuming process. Explorer posts, for instance, typically rely on volunteer work to be successful. Applying for 501(c) non-profit organization status can help posts in soliciting donations (Macchia 2014).
- Finding Cadet Recruits. Targeted recruitment strategies include setting up an information table at your local high school during lunch time (Macchia 2014). Other strategies include

promoting the program online through the Department's website and local news websites and placing informational flyers on high school bulletin boards.

- Seeking Community Support: To gauge community support for establishing an Explorers program, the Blanchard (Oklahoma) Police Department surveyed local schools and public events. This helped affirm support for the program (White 2019).

Conclusion

Cadet programs can help to recruit officers and promote leadership among youth in the community, yet research is needed to understand these programs' overall, long-term effectiveness and cost-efficiency.

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Ride-Alongs in the Police Hiring Process

Elliot Idol

The Challenge

Ride-along programs are an effective way to showcase the realities of police work. They help interested parties better understand the challenges, responsibilities, and hazards of police work as well as specific departments. Such programs allow departments to advertise themselves to college interns, field training officer trainees, and the general public (Shults 2020).

Ride-alongs are commonly described as eye-opening for both those who are considering police work and those who are not involved in it (Owsinski 2022). This brief discusses how ride-alongs assist agency hiring processes by educating potential applicants, enhancing community engagement, and potentially weeding out those who would be ill-suited to a career in law enforcement.

Field Spotlight

Specific ride-along programs include

- Hometown Heroes. This Indianapolis campaign seeks out potential new police recruits through simulated police academy classes and ride-alongs with veteran officers (U.S. Department of Justice 2009).
- Shawano (Wisconsin) Police Department Ride Along Program. This program is designed to be both an educational experience and recruitment tool for those interested in observing police work.

While ride-alongs are traditionally held in-person, there have been some attempts to create virtual ride-along experiences (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP] 2014). The IACP's recruitment and career exploration website (Discover Policing n.d.) once included virtual ride-along videos depicting common police work scenarios. These videos emphasized the service orientation and community policing aspect of the career but also were accompanied by questions meant to help viewers gauge their fit to the law enforcement career. For example, one question asked, "How would you feel about a job that involves working with sensitive populations such as individuals experiencing homelessness or substance abuse problems?"

Virtual ride-alongs may allow for potential applicants to explore the policing career before pursuing a traditional ride-along.

What Research Suggests

Ride-alongs can serve as a key tool for recruitment efforts and even promote officer retention. Recruitment and marketing materials for policing careers are not always accurate reflections of day-to-day police work. Often, they minimize the public service aspect of the career (Simpson 2022). This disconnect between expectations for a policing career and reality may be one reason for officers leaving agencies or even the field (Nader et al. 2025; Davies et al. 2024).

For those interested in a policing career, ride-alongs are one means for determining whether to commit to a specific agency (Todak 2017). The ride-along experience also gives an agency the opportunity to observe and evaluate an applicant (Sokolove 2002). Expectations for a policing career are shaped by these ride-alongs (Todak 2017).

Civilian ride-along programs may have some effect on participants' views regarding police legitimacy, although persons participating in such programs tend to have positive views of the police beforehand (Mathna and Koen 2023). Some may develop more negative views if exposed to officers who are disrespectful during the ride-along. Ride-alongs may help advertise the policing career to those who were not previously interested and also prompt participants to share their experiences with others, thereby providing some advertisement for the department (Bonello and Schafer 2002).

Unanswered Questions

There is limited research on ride-alongs in the recruitment process, so strong conclusions cannot be drawn about their impact. Several unanswered questions remain, including

- How do ride-alongs impact law enforcement hiring rates?
- Are virtual ride-along programs as effective as traditional, in-person ride-along programs?
- To what extent do ride-alongs help with recruitment beyond educating those who are already interested in a law enforcement career?
- What are the long-term impacts for officers who participated in a ride-along during their job search?
- How does participating in a ride-along program impact civilians' perceptions of law enforcement?

Promising Practices

There are several key recommendations for police departments in building an effective ride-along program (Shults 2020).

Departments should ensure participants are fully informed and respectful of the officer's position as the "car commander." They should also interview participants after their ride-along experiences to assess how it went and what could be improved (Oliver 2023). The officer who provides the ride-along can make or break the experience and therefore should reflect the values of the department well (Mathna and Koen 2023).

For the applicant, ride-alongs should be opportunities to better understand the policing career and the culture of the agency (Oliver 2023), and agencies should include ride-along programs alongside other recruitment efforts (Todak 2017). Ride-alongs could be a formal component of the hiring process that allows the agency to observe the candidate's potential fit with the agency (Sokolove 2002). Multi-agency ride-along programs can introduce potential applicants to the different agencies of their region. Such multi-agency programs would be an excellent resource for those who

are interested in policing, but it is unclear if they would increase the number of applicants (U.S. Department of Justice 2009).

Conclusion

Ride-alongs can help further advertise an agency to those who are already interested in a career in law enforcement or at least have a positive view of the police. They can also help both agencies and candidates decide if they are a good fit for each other, as ride-alongs help provide an accurate representation of what a career in law enforcement entails. This could help boost later retention. There is, however, very limited research examining the impact of ride-alongs on the hiring process, preventing strong conclusions and pointing to the need for further research.

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Facilitating Police Applications and Removing Barriers for Women

Elliot Idol

The Challenge

When considering a career in policing, women report having more concerns than men and put more stock into these concerns (Clinkinbeard, Solomon, and Rief 2021). Some of these concerns are similar to those of men, e.g., the dangerous and stressful nature of the job. But women are also concerned over gender as a barrier to a policing career (Rossler et al. 2020), lack of a work-family balance, and physical demands of the job (Clinkinbeard, Solomon, and Rief 2021).

Some structural elements of the police recruitment process may also inappropriately screen out qualified women applicants. For example, some physical fitness requirements over-emphasize strengths more inherent in male bodies (Schulze 2012) with little regard to what is actually required to do the job. Lack of attention to parental leave, pregnancy, and nursing policies also places women at a disadvantage (Schulze 2010).

Field Spotlight

The Los Angeles (CA) Police Department has implemented a Women's Candidate Advancement Program (https://www.joinlapd.com/womens-cap) to help women prepare for the physical requirements of police academies and to give them the opportunity to meet current women officers. This helps women overcome what many see as a barrier for pursuing law enforcement careers and gives them an opportunity to hear from women officers who have overcome the perceived barriers.

What Research Suggests

Men and women have similar motivations for becoming law enforcement officers—the desire to stop those who would do harm, to help the community, and to fight crime—but differ in some more specific values they see in the field (Clinkinbeard, Solomon, and Rief 2021). Men are more likely to report joining policing because of a desire to experience companionship with coworkers, while women are more likely to report joining policing to have a challenging career. Women are particularly motivated by a desire to be a role model. Masculine self-concept (how masculine participants reported themselves to be) also explains gender variances in interest in law enforcement careers (Clinkinbeard, Solomon, and Rief 2020).

Representation and Facilitating Conversations

Women officers often believe there should be more women in policing and encourage potential applicants to be persistent in pursuing a law enforcement career. But for this encouragement to happen, current officers need opportunities to connect with potential recruits (Rief et al. 2024).

There is a need for mentors to support women officers in navigating the culture and expectations of policing, and women need to be included on hiring committees, present during interviews, and on recruitment teams (Skaggs et al. 2024). Policing candidates report that women's representation and visibility within law enforcement agencies influences their decision to join policing, but they often

do not see that diversity in agencies (Durbin and Cox 2020). These findings suggest that exposure to women in policing can facilitate hiring of women officers.

Structural Changes

Because men and women report similar motivations for pursuing policing careers, recruitment materials and structural changes meant to target women are unlikely to exclude or deter men (Raganella and White 2004). Most changes suggested by academics and women in policing to attract more women to the field center around facilitating a better work-life balance, such as creating clear and supportive parental leave policies (Rief et al. 2024) and having family-friendly accommodations for scheduling (DeWitt and Gasparini 2024). Clearly outlining physical fitness requirements in the job description can also help women considering a career in policing (Aiello 2019).

There is some evidence of a disconnect between supervisory staff and line officers regarding women in policing. Line officers are more likely than supervisory staff to believe that the agency is not supportive of women and to favor intentional actions to hire women (Cordner and Cordner 2011).

Unanswered Questions

Though research in this area is increasing, more data and input from officers can help provide better answers to such questions as

- What contributes to the different interests that men and women express in law enforcement careers?
- What are the most common barriers that women applicants face when applying to a police department, and how can they be mitigated?
- How well are hiring requirements aligned with the nature of police work?

Promising Practices

Both researchers and practitioners suggest implementing small-scale, tangible plans, with both top-down (having leaders facilitate change and champion for women) and bottom-up (focusing on line-officers and street-level interactions with the community) approaches (Ward and Prenzler 2016). They also suggest using data to continuously assess the role and prevalence of women in policing.

Conclusion

While women are less likely than men to consider a career in law enforcement, they have similar motivations for pursuing policing careers. Differences in pursuing policing careers arise from the greater concerns that women report about a career in policing and the greater weight they give such concerns. Agencies wishing to help women overcome these concerns can create more opportunities for potential applicants to speak with women officers, particularly to demystify concerns over physical fitness standards, work culture, and work-life balance. Future research

should focus on aligning hiring requirements with police work, and identifying and mitigating application barriers.

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Promotions

Facilitating Promotions and Removing Barriers in Police Agencies

Elliot Idol

The Challenge

The promotion process in policing refers to the advancement of members to higher ranks and greater levels of responsibility within the organization (Barnum et al. 2024). Promotions serve several important roles within the organization, namely recognizing dedicated officers, enhancing organizational effectiveness, and filling higher-level leadership positions to better manage operations.

Although promotions serve critical functions within a policing organization, the promotions process can be undermined by bias, lack of transparency, and poorly designed evaluation methods (Barnum et al. 2024). This can reduce morale among organizational members and may even contribute to turnover, particularly when officers perceive a lack of fairness in promotional opportunities (Boag-Munroe et al. 2017).

As a result, there is an ongoing need to identify effective strategies to combat barriers and facilitate promotions in policing. There is an immediate need for data to evaluate the experiences of underrepresented minorities in policing, as well as a need for efforts to facilitate conversations and networking for individuals across policing.

Field Spotlight

The Castle Rock (Colorado) Police Department adopted technological advances in artificial intelligence to improve its promotional process. The department implemented a "360-degree process" that collects structured feedback from a variety of sources, including peers, supervisors and subordinates (Perry 2025). This information is then used to inform advancement decisions as well as to provide each candidate with a development plan that summarizes their strength and grow areas. The department chief claims that integrating AI platforms has streamlined the promotions process while improving transparency (Perry 2025).

What Research Suggests

Among reasons police officers cite for rejecting promotions are unwillingness to leave their current assignment, administrative bias, and salary reduction from a loss of overtime (Tung 2024). Officers also may not pursue promotions due to concerns over work-life balance, particularly concerns regarding parental and caregiving support (Barnum et al. 2024). At the same time, officers who perceive limited promotion prospects are more likely to consider leaving the field (Boag-Munroe et al. 2017).

Officers from populations underrepresented in policing note a need for networking opportunities. Many stress not only the importance of finding a mentor in senior leadership (Yu 2020) but also suggest finding mentors who can champion for officers from underrepresented populations seeking promotions (Huff et al. 2024).

Promising Practices

There are several promising practices related to facilitating promotions and removing barriers. These include

- Being Proactive. Agencies should take a proactive approach to reducing barriers that officers encounter throughout the promotions process. They can identify aspects of the agency's culture that are affecting promotional processes as well as how best to support officers' attendance at training and career development programs.
- Offering Mentorship. Providing mentorship programs, shadowing opportunities, and promotional videos that feature a wide range of officers may give members the confidence to apply for promotions.
- Improving Transparency. Agencies can better prepare new recruits for success in achieving promotions by establishing clear expectations early, disclosing all aspects of the process well ahead of time, and regularly informing officers of their progress in meeting expectations. Candidates who have undergone the promotions process should be given the opportunity to review their scores, ask questions, and provide feedback.

Conclusion

There may be social and structural barriers preventing officers from being promoted in policing. There is also evidence that some officers do not actively pursue promotions because of concerns about work-life balance and about tokenism. Promising practices to facilitate promotions include increasing opportunities to network and to find mentorship as well as improving transparency around the promotions process.

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Mentorship Programs and the Police Promotion Process

Elliot Idol

The Challenge

Difficulties in the promotion process can lead to problems in retention and thereby contribute to the police staffing challenge. To overcome these difficulties, numerous organizations have suggested implementing formal mentorship programs to help prepare officers for leadership, particularly by developing programs targeting traditionally underrepresented demographics in law enforcement. This brief provides an overview of what is known about mentorship programs' impact on the promotion process and highlights some programs and techniques implemented by law enforcement practitioners to prepare officers for the promotions process.

Field Spotlight

Several professional associations, including the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE), the National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives, and the Hispanic American Police Command Officers Association, have created formal mentorship programs (Falzone 2023). Here, we highlight NOBLE's mentoring program for aspiring chief executive officers (CEOs), as well as a program in the Overland Park (Kansas) Police Department which was inspired by NOBLE's success.

NOBLE's Mentoring Potential CEOs program prepares law enforcement officers for leadership (Oliver 2018). It has three components:

- Classroom instruction on the knowledge, skills, and traits required for effective law enforcement CEOs and chiefs, taught by police chiefs and specialized professors.
- A formal mentoring assignment of proteges to experienced executive officers who have at least three years of experience serving in a leadership role.
- A written plan developed by the protégé, outlining the developmental steps needed to move from their current assignment to the CEO position.

A review of the program found 88 percent of those completing it achieved promotion, with more than half becoming CEOs (Oliver 2018).

Overland Park created a program targeting all potential proteges (Stephens and Jokerst 2025). The department views mentorship as essential to leadership. To address the difficulties in promoting competent officers, the department has created a pipeline to develop leaders who can step into supervisory roles, equipped with all necessary knowledge and training. The pipeline extends from newly hired to newly promoted officers. The program also includes academic leadership training. Prior to promotion, officers undergo an onboarding module, in which they shadow those in the promotional position and take on the role in a supervised setting, allowing them to perform the job with guidance.

What Research Suggests

Multiple conditions create opportunities for promotion in law enforcement. While contributors to success will vary by officer, there are common conditions that help officers achieve leadership (Morabito and Shelley 2018). One of these conditions is mentorship.

Mentorship has been associated with higher promotion rates (Paoline and Gau 2024) and with career progression by creating opportunities for advancement (Dreher and Cox 1996) and instilling officers with the confidence needed to pursue promotion (Falzone 2023). Those who serve as mentors are also more likely to be promoted (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services 2023).

There is a clear want for mentorship programs in policing (Hassell, Archbold, and Stichman 2011), but mentorship practices should be careful to not be seen as favoring some officers over others in the promotion process. Officers report wanting to engage in a promotional process that is fair, and mentorship programs should reflect this.

Unanswered Questions

Though mentorship programs have been lauded by practitioners, there has been limited academic research on the extent to which mentorship helps officers in the promotional process, and even less how mentorship may help. Officers who are more likely to be mentored, for example, may be officers who are more likely to be promoted regardless of mentoring.

Promising Practices

There are several promising practices for establishing mentorship programs to aid promotions. These include

- Establishing Goals. Practitioners suggest establishing clear and tangible goals and expectations, including those related to promotion, for the program and its participants (Falzone 2023; Oliver 2018). When establishing a mentorship program, departments should clearly define and communicate concrete expectations and actively engage with potential leaders to understand what officers want and need from the program.
- Tailoring Frameworks. Mentoring frameworks should be tailored to the unique needs of a department but also be flexible enough to allow variation between officers. Matching mentors with proteges requires understanding the unique characteristics of each officer.
- Securing Funding. Some mentorship programs have challenges with financial support and need to rely on donations and volunteers. Clear and relevant goals may help with acquiring funding and administrative support.

Conclusion

To help promote quality officers achieve leadership positions, numerous law enforcement organizations have implemented formal mentorship programs. Such programs appear to increase promotion rates, arguably because of how mentorship provides networking opportunities for

officers and helps officers build the confidence necessary to pursue promotions and serve in leadership.

Practitioners recommend that, when creating mentorship programs, departments clearly state achievable goals and expectations, so that participants will have better chances of succeeding and funding requirements can be more clearly defined. While there are many anecdotal examples of mentorship programs' success, there is still limited research on the impact of mentorship in law enforcement, and it is unclear what specifically about mentorship leads to increased promotions. Still, mentorship appears to have multiple benefits and to serve law enforcement departments well.

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Turnover and Retention

Why Officers Leave and How to Prevent it

Elliot Idol

The Challenge

Among the contributors to police staffing shortages are increasing resignation rates (Adams, Mourtgos, and Nix 2023). Such attrition can adversely affect department morale and effectiveness, job commitment, operational capacity, and further turnover (Wilson et al. 2023). This review highlights contributors to officer attrition and what may be done to address them.

Field Spotlight

The Williamson County (Texas) Sheriff's Office shows how multiple methods to improve recruitment and retention can be successfully implemented at once to effect change (Ridderbusch 2023). These changes were initiated through a top-down approach, in which the sheriff advocated for his staff and fought to get competitive pay and full benefits for them. Nevertheless, a key aspect of this change involved listening to the needs and wants of potential applicants and current line officers.

Both increased pay and improved benefits helped change the department culture to better fit its workers, specifically the younger, incoming cohorts of officers. The department sought to reject nepotism and supported officers' mental and physical health. It created a support team of mental health professionals, including an outside counselor familiar with public safety work, and constructed properly furnished gyms and break rooms on-site for officers. It also created new training opportunities using internal and external instructors.

What Research Suggests

Research suggests notes several influences on officer turnover, including

- Education level. Those with higher education may be more likely to leave due to dissatisfaction with pay and career opportunities, but this may vary by the officer's rank and position (Wilson et al. 2010).
- Lack of work-life balance. Officers describe unsustainable workloads, stress, deteriorating mental and physical health (Davies et al. 2024), and the difficulty maintaining a healthy work-life balance as reasons for considering leaving the agency or the field. These effects may be stronger for those with parental obligations (Wilson et al. 2023).
- Poor management and supervision. Some officers' reasons for leaving law enforcement may be less about the field and more about poor, abusive, or unfair leadership within their individual agencies (Wilson et al. 2023). Officers may also feel they are unheard by the broader organization, left out of the decision-making process for things that impact them, and treated as if they do not matter (Tyson and Charman 2023).

Unfairness as a general theme extends to career development opportunities and financial compensation. Some officers report leaving policing to find better opportunities and better compensation (Wilson et al. 2010). They may express frustration with the lack of recognition for

their efforts within a department where they perceive there are limited opportunities for promotion or that only those favored by the administration are promoted (Tyson and Charman 2023). Such perceptions may extend beyond promotions to the variety of assignments available (Nader et al. 2025).

Officers also report leaving policing because of the mismatch between their expectations of the job and its realities (Lynch and Tuckey 2004). They describe the marketing and recruitment materials as misleading about the realities of a policing career and are then dissatisfied with the work because it is not what they signed up to do (Davies et al. 2024).

Unanswered Questions

A lack of academic-practitioner collaboration (Wilson et al. 2023) and reliance on anecdotal data rather than empirical evaluations (Wilson et al. 2010) limit what is known about the causes of officer retention and attrition. Many studies focus on identifying causes of these issues, but there is little generation of actionable solutions or evaluation of policies to determine what works.

Promising Practices

While there is limited research evaluating policy effectiveness, there are some research suggestions on what can be done to reduce officer attrition (Wilson et al. 2023; Nader et al. 2025).

Many of the practices suggested by scholars center on taking care of officers and providing organizational support. This includes providing competitive salaries, reducing unfair promotion practices, increasing development opportunities, instituting family-friendly policies, providing more opportunities for officers to explore various career options within the agency, and facilitating changes in assignments.

Officers themselves have also offered suggestions on what would make them reconsider leaving policing or influence their decision to continue with a law enforcement career (Charman and Bennett 2022; Davies et al. 2024).

Officers want work-life balance to be supported through policy and culture changes, specifically by reducing workloads, providing more flexible work schedules, and giving appropriate financial compensation for the risk and hardships of policing—and all of this to be overseen by quality leadership and management. They want cohesion between advertised expectations of police work and the actual experience of front-line work. They want better career development support and more career opportunities offered within policing, specifically through educational incentives, training opportunities, and the ability to change roles.

Conclusion

Attrition is among the more prominent contributors to police staffing problems. Officers who resign from policing report being unsatisfied with the realities of police work, commonly because of frustrations with the lack of work-life balance, beliefs that the organization is unfair in its compensation and promotional opportunities, and poor leadership. Many officers suggest that the

career which was advertised to them is not truly representative of police work and believe recruitment materials need to be more honest about what a law enforcement career entails.

Addressing these frustrations on an organizational and cultural level in police departments may help increase officer retention. Nevertheless, there are limitations to what is currently known about this topic, mostly stemming from the lack of academic-practitioner collaboration. Future efforts should prioritize collaborative efforts to generate actionable policy suggestions.

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Strategies to Retain Police Staff

Elliot Idol

The Challenge

Police staffing faces a three-fold challenge: 1) fewer individuals are entering the profession, 2) many are leaving it for other fields, and 3) more are retiring from it (Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] 2019). From 2020 to 2021, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic and several publicized incidents of police violence coincided with an 18 percent increase in resignations among police officers and a 45 percent increase in their retirements (PERF 2021). Put another way, police staffing issues stem as much from agencies being unable to retain officers as much as from their inability to attract them.

Police officers essentially choose policing twice: first when they join policing through the recruitment process, and again when they decide to stay (Howes and Goodman-Delahunty 2015). This is the process of retention. This brief discusses what officers consider when deciding to leave the policing profession and what tactics may help improve the retention rates in policing.

Field Spotlight

Officers leave and remain in policing for a variety of reasons. Hence, there are a variety of strategies to encourage officer retention. Many of these seek to help officers envision a future in the law enforcement career. The Tempe (Arizona) Police Department, for example, has created a Development Plan, which is described as "a living and guiding document for individual employees to strengthen their current performance and prepare them to strengthen their contribution in the future" (PERF 2019, p.53). The development plan is created from an analysis of each officer's experiences and a set of questions meant to help officers identify their personal development goals. Direct supervisors review this plan annually, helping officers to identify immediate and long-term goals.

What Research Suggests

There are multiple influences on officers' decisions to leave or stay in policing, as well as variation in these among officers. Common reasons for leaving policing include better career development opportunities, better work-life balance, and less biased policies and promotional practices.

Officers who perceive a lack of opportunities for career development and are dissatisfied with their current job responsibilities may leave the policing career (Land 2021). Some officers resign due to unmet expectations about what the policing career would entail (Wilson et al. 2010). Officers may also leave for better economic opportunities elsewhere; salary plays a key role in influencing an officer's decision to leave (Skaggs et al. 2024). Officers may not consider money in isolation but in tandem with working conditions, and specifically whether the pay is high enough to justify undesirable conditions.

Work-life balance and officers' health also play a large role. Officers who intend to leave policing have higher stress levels and poorer psychological health than others (Drew, Keech, and Martin

2025). Officers also consider work-life balance when deciding to leave policing (Howes and Goodman-Delahunty 2015).

Many officers who leave or intend to leave policing describe frustrations with departmental policies and practices. Some officers leaving the field report a lack of recognition for their skills and perceive the system to be unfair (Tyson and Charman 2023). Others cite unfair management (Howes and Goodman-Delahunty 2015) and promotional practices seen as unjustly favoring certain officers (Mukwevho and Bussin 2021).

Unanswered Questions

Most research in this area draws from anecdotal accounts (Wilson et al. 2010). While there have been efforts made to identify problems, there is unclear or conflicting evidence regarding the causes of retention problems, or *why* there are retention issues in policing. For example, one analysis (Adams, Mourtgos, and Nix 2023) finds a clear increase in officer turnover after 2020 but is unable to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic or protests over police violence caused them, while another (Grunwald 2024) suggests that the 2020 protests had no effect on police turnover rates.

Promising Practices

Academics and practitioners have suggested several options for improving retention. While varying in approach, these suggestions all recognize the importance of evaluating the unique needs of departments and personnel.

Employees themselves can offer insight into why they stay or leave (Wilson et al. 2010), including through such means as exit interviews (PERF 2019). Officer surveys on job satisfaction can help create action plans to improve retention (Sun et al. 2022). One officer interviewed by researchers suggested that, to increase retention, agencies should "offer training and development opportunities, and use a more inclusive, democratic management style to recognize and value my experiences and capabilities" (Howes and Goodman-Delahunty 2015). Other research has also suggested providing officers with more opportunities for professional development to boost retention (PERF 2019; Wilson et al. 2023).

In addition to seeking continuous feedback from officers about their experiences and perceptions, agencies should provide continuous feedback *to* officers. Performance evaluations should be clear with measurable standards (Kearns 2007), and feedback should be given regularly to officers based on these standards (Verlander and Evans 2007). Increasing employee voice by offering officers more involvement in managerial decisions can also help retention (Buccellato 2020). This also helps reduce perceptions of unfair promotional practices (Wilson et al. 2023) and increases perceptions of procedural fairness (Sun et al. 2022), both of which in turn can help boost retention.

Increasing compensation and benefits is a widely suggested method of improving officer retention. Compensation should be defined broadly to include numerous benefits, and agencies should tailor these to their employees' needs, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach (Wilson et al. 2010). Benefits may include creating pay structures to prevent officers from leaving for higher paying

positions in other organizations (Kearns 2007) and providing financial assistance to officers seeking to further their education (Buccellato 2020). Providing financial assistance for education also gives officers an opportunity for other professional development. If necessary, agencies can tie such incentives to policies requiring repayment of incentives should officers leave before a specified time.

Still other benefits may include free uniforms or financial allowances for uniform-related expenses, increasing pay at specific milestones, offering take-home vehicles, and allowing officers to work overtime or earn extra income through certain second jobs (Reaves 2012). Offering incentives for housing close to an agency (to shorten commuting times) and offering insurance at minimal costs may also boost retention (Yearwood and Freeman 2004).

Greater variety of duty assignments can reduce turnover, as can giving officers the opportunity to explore different career opportunities within policing (Nader et al. 2025). Similarly, creating clear paths of progression in an agency, with evaluations and promotions based on an agency's core values, can help increase retention (Sun et al. 2022).

Because officers who intend to leave policing have higher stress levels and overall poorer psychological health than those who intend to stay, agencies may wish to increase further implement efforts to reduce stress and help officers stay healthy (Drew, Keech, and Martin 2025). Such efforts may include peer mentoring and support programs (Sun et al. 2022) and on-duty physical fitness facilities (PERF 2019).

Conclusion

Among the leading influences on police retention are economic opportunities and officer well-being. Many of the approaches to increase retention focus on making officers feel valued and respected. Among common tactics to improve retention are conducting exit interviews, providing greater benefits, and creating opportunities for professional development. It is unclear how well these tactics work, because the limited research on them is largely anecdotal. More research is needed to assess the effectiveness of these strategies. Police agencies and individual officers themselves are unique and variable; therefore, agencies should individually evaluate the needs and wants of their officers in systematic and routine ways and use that information to develop their own action plans to improve retention rates.

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Workforce Environment

Pregnancy and Parental Support for Police Officers

Dayanara Gonzalez and Tiana Gaudette

The Challenge

Balancing work and personal life is difficult in any career, but for law enforcement officers—who often work irregular shifts in high-stress, physically demanding roles—it is particularly challenging. Inconsistent policies or outdated operational norms can make these challenges even harder to manage.

Officers navigating pregnancy and early parenthood may face a lack of clear policies, flexible work options, or adequate facilities, such as private lactation spaces or safe duty modifications. Without clear supports, officers may experience increased stress, lower job satisfaction, and ultimately leave the profession.

While these challenges can affect any officer, they are often more pronounced for women, who are more likely to be primary caregivers and may face physical and cultural barriers during pregnancy and early parenthood. These pressures, if unaddressed, can quietly erode morale, increase turnover, and dissuade qualified applicants from pursuing or remaining in law enforcement careers. As agencies work to strengthen their workforce, it is essential to ensure policies and practices support all officers through major life transitions.

Field Spotlight

Several departments have modernized their approaches to better support officers who are pregnant or parenting.

- The San Jose (California) Police Department expanded paid parental leave from 40 hours to 320 hours to boost recruitment and retention of officers (Vera 2024).
- The San Diego Police Department offers childcare with extended hours at reduced rates (Cohen Booth 2024).
- The Fremont (California) Police Department implemented telework, created lactation rooms, and adapted training for expecting officers (Washington 2025).
- The Lacey (Washington) Police Department has designed facilities to include lactation and decompression rooms for officers (Hollis 2024).

In addition, legislation such as Washington State Senate Bill 5425 and the federal Providing Child Care for Police Officers Act promote part-time and flexible scheduling as well as funding and resources for childcare (Washington State Legislature 2023; U.S. Congress 2024).

What Research Suggests

Returning to duty after childbirth or adoption is often complicated by unclear policies, inconsistent practices, and outdated resources (Schulze 2011). Officers may struggle with a lack of paid leave, rigid scheduling, or unclear expectations during and after parental leave (Schulze 2010). These

barriers contribute to job dissatisfaction, lower morale, and turnover, particularly for those managing family responsibilities (Langan, Sanders, and Agocs 2017).

Officers with caregiving responsibilities experience heightened stress and diminished job satisfaction in the absence of supportive policies. This stress can contribute to burnout or a decision to forgo advancement opportunities (Padilla, Smith, and Renfro 2025). Officers benefit from paid leave, flexible scheduling, and access to childcare, as well as from transitional support such as light-duty assignments or phased return-to-work plans.

Unanswered Questions

While momentum is growing for parental support policies, important questions about them remain. Among these are

- To what extent do family-supportive policies impact officer recruitment, retention, and performance?
- How can agencies offer parental accommodations while maintaining operational flexibility?
- Are flexible and part-time schedules feasible in agencies facing staffing shortages or budget limitations?
- What metrics can be used to evaluate success and scalability?
- How can agencies balance uniformity in policies with the need for case-by-case discretion in parental accommodations?
- What internal champions or peer-support mechanisms help normalize parental leave use in male-dominated settings?
- How do state laws and union contracts affect an agency's ability to implement family-supportive policies?

Promising Practices

In many agencies, there are no clear policies supporting officers during pregnancy and early parenthood. Promising practices aim to fill these gaps by updating agency policies, modernizing facilities, and fostering a workplace culture that supports officer well-being. These practices may include adding lactation and decompression rooms, paid leave, flexible schedules and return-to-work options, and light-duty assignments during physically demanding stages of pregnancy. Agencies are also encouraged to assess available childcare resources in their area. As they develop or update these supports, agencies must ensure compliance with applicable federal, state, and local laws, including the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Providing Urgent Maternal Protections for Nursing Mothers Act.

Conclusion

Supporting officers through pregnancy and parenthood is a matter of operational readiness, workforce stability, and officer well-being. Agencies that proactively address these needs will be better equipped to retain skilled personnel, reduce stress and burnout, and foster long-term commitment to the profession (Yu 2019).

While operational improvements are essential, part of the challenge lies in shifting longstanding cultural norms within policing. Resistance is often rooted not in logistics but in legacy perceptions of professionalism. As law enforcement evolves, so too must our definitions of support, readiness, and resilience.

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Childcare in Police Agencies: Supporting Parents and Caregivers

Dayanara Gonzalez and Tiana Gaudette

The Challenge

As agencies grapple with persistent staffing shortages, addressing the practical needs of officer caregivers has become an overlooked but critical lever for workforce stability. Caregiving support—particularly access to affordable, reliable childcare that aligns with the nontraditional and often unpredictable hours many officers work—is essential for many officers. Officers commonly report childcare as one of the major challenges they face in their career (Padilla, Smith, and Renfro 2025; Roman and McGough 2024; Schulze 2011). The absence of affordable and flexible options can lead to missed work and employee dissatisfaction, in turn influencing decisions to enter, stay, or advance within their policing career (Agocs, Langan, and Sanders 2015).

Field Spotlight

Several law enforcement agencies and organizations are pioneering solutions to support officers with caregiving responsibilities. Among these efforts

- The San Diego Police Department in 2024 launched one of the nation's first agency-run childcare centers, offering extended hours and care at 50 percent of the market rate.
- The Baltimore Police Department in 2025 introduced Policy 1704, which provides $250 monthly childcare stipends to 100 employees for children up to age 12, including those with special needs.
- Meridian, Idaho opened the state's first law enforcement childcare facility in 2024, accommodating 84 children across nine agencies and operating seven days a week with extended hours (Evans 2024).

Private initiatives have also sought to address these issues. Among these initiatives

- The Erik Hite Foundation in Tucson, Arizona, provides discounts on childcare tailored for families who work in law enforcement (Baker 2025).
- The National Law Enforcement Foundation has emerged as a key partner in exploring innovative childcare solutions tailored to the unique needs of law enforcement personnel.

Finally, the 2024 Providing Child Care for Police Officers Act is a bipartisan proposal to allocate $24 million in federal funds over five years to support agencies in creating and bettering childcare services.

What Research Suggests

Providing childcare support can improve officer retention, particularly among early-career officers and caregivers (Baker 2025). Officers with caregiving responsibilities often report increased stress and lower job satisfaction when childcare is inaccessible or unaffordable (McCanlies et al. 2019). These conditions can lead to lower retention and decreased willingness to pursue promotions (Padilla, Smith, and Renfro 2025). This suggests that agencies offering childcare stipends, flexible

or part-time schedules, and childcare programs are more likely to retain officers who are caregivers.

While national datasets do not track how many officers are parents or caregivers, anecdotal and agency-level evidence suggests these responsibilities are a key contributor to retention, especially among early-career officers.

Unanswered Questions

Though has been progress in supporting officers with caregiving responsibilities, several unanswered questions remain. Among these are

- What type of program (e.g., providing stipends monthly to assist in affording childcare, extending daycare hours to nontraditional working schedules) is best suited to support officers with caregiving needs?
- What is the best way to measure the impact of childcare programs and initiatives on recruiting and retaining officers?
- What is the impact of on-site childcare on helping officers stay on the job longer?
- Do childcare programs and caregiver assistance help parents perform better at work or even advance further in their career?
- How do caregiving challenges differ between urban and rural agencies, or between large and small departments?
- What long-term funding models make childcare programs sustainable?

Promising Practices

Several emerging practices show promise in addressing the needs of caregiving officers. These include

- Childcare Stipends, which reduce financial barriers and provide immediate relief to families.
- On-Site and Extended Hour Care, which help align services with officers' shift schedules.
- Flexible Work Options, including part-time, job-sharing, and shift-swapping, which enable officers to meet family responsibilities without leaving the profession.
- Supportive Legislation such as the Providing Child Care for Police Officers Act, which signal growing recognition of the issue and offer financial pathways for agencies to act.

Taken together, these practices can reduce attrition, boost morale, and ensure that officers with a range of family responsibilities can thrive in the profession.

Agencies implementing these supports report improved morale and reduced attrition among officers balancing work and caregiving demands.

Conclusion

Practical childcare support is increasingly essential for agencies seeking to recruit, retain, and support a committed public safety workforce. By recognizing and responding to the realities of shift

work and caregiving demands, agencies can strengthen morale, improve job satisfaction, and enhance operational readiness.

While many departments recognize the operational value of childcare support, some resistance reflects long-standing assumptions about caregiving that may no longer align with the realities of today's workforce. Addressing these challenges requires not only policy solutions but also a shift in mindset about what a sustainable and supportive law enforcement career looks like.

By proactively addressing caregiving needs, agencies send a clear signal: officers need not choose between family and a long-term policing career.

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Workforce Planning

Rethinking Resource Allocation in Small Police Agencies

Nathan Cronin and Jeremy M. Wilson

The Challenge

Small police agencies are often described as efficient, adaptable, and resilient. Chiefs, sheriffs, and local stakeholders frequently emphasize that their agencies must "do more with less" to meet community expectations (Den Heyer 2014; Wilson et al. 2010). Yet in many cases, small agencies are not simply doing more with less but too much with too little.

Resource allocation in small agencies rarely involves distributing surplus capacity. Instead, leaders are routinely forced to stretch limited personnel, time, and funding across a growing list of responsibilities. Patrol coverage, investigations, traffic enforcement, community engagement, training requirements, administrative compliance, and special assignments all compete for the same finite resources. As internal and external expectations expand, the absence of deliberate allocation decisions can lead to overextension, officer fatigue, and inconsistent service delivery.

Unlike larger departments, small agencies lack the staffing depth to absorb new initiatives without meaningful tradeoffs. When resources are spread thinly across too many functions, no single area receives sustained attention. Over time, this can erode organizational effectiveness while reinforcing the perception that resource shortages are unavoidable rather than the result of allocation choices.

Field Spotlight

The experience of the Arcadia, Wisconsin Police Department (APD) highlights how resource allocation challenges, particularly in smaller police agencies, can reach a breaking point (Kremer 2025). In April 2025, all APD officers resigned, leaving the community without locally staffed law enforcement. This, in turn, required law enforcement coverage from the Trempealeau County Sheriff's Office, straining its resources as well. Reported reasons for officer resignation included budget constraints, limited advancement opportunities, and higher pay offered by nearby agencies. In small agencies, where officers routinely balance patrol, investigations, and administrative responsibilities, the loss of even one position can substantially reduce the service capacity of remaining officers and increase strain on them.

What Research Suggests

Research on police staffing and organizational performance indicates that how resources are allocated matters as much as overall resource levels. Police workload and staffing research emphasizes that personnel, time, and funding are most effective when aligned with clearly defined organizational priorities (Wilson and Weiss 2014). When resources are dispersed across too many functions, agencies may experience reduced effectiveness, even if staffing levels remain constant (Mendel et al. 2017).

Research on small and rural policing highlights the challenges created by limited specialization (Ostrom, Parks, and Whitaker 1978). Officers in small agencies frequently perform multiple roles, shifting among patrol, investigations, and administrative duties, as well as community engagement (Kremer 2025). While this versatility is often necessary, it increases cognitive load and reduces efficiency. Competing demands and the need to allocate limited resources across multiple responsibilities can limit officers' ability to perform any single function at a high level (Den Heyer 2014).

Workforce research also cautions against equating activity with productivity (Drucker 2012). Agencies that attempt to maintain a wide array of programs without sufficient capacity may see diminished returns across all areas. In this context, "doing more" does not necessarily translate into better outcomes. Rather, strategic focus, i.e., the alignment of limited resources with core mission priorities, plays a central role in organizational effectiveness.

Allocation challenges are not only financial. Leadership decisions regarding scheduling, assignment, training time, administrative workload, and supervision can all shape how resources are experienced on the ground. Small agencies that rely heavily on informal or reactive allocation practices may unintentionally create inefficiencies and contribute to officer burnout.

Unanswered Questions

Despite growing recognition of resource allocation challenges, several questions remain unresolved for small police agencies. Among these

- How can leaders systematically assess whether current responsibilities align with available capacity?
- What tools or metrics can help agencies evaluate the actual cost of maintaining multiple functions with limited personnel?
- How can agencies most efficiently deploy their limited staff?
- What methods, practices, technology, and opportunities increase the productivity of staff or can mitigate their workload?

There has also been little discussion on how small agencies can communicate allocation tradeoffs to stakeholders. Chiefs and sheriffs may recognize internally that certain activities are unsustainable but lack clear frameworks for explaining these realities to governing bodies or the public. Without shared understanding, agencies may continue to absorb new responsibilities without corresponding adjustments.

Further work is needed to identify practical approaches that help small agencies prioritize functions, evaluate tradeoffs, and make allocation decisions transparent and defensible to stakeholders.

Promising Practices

Promising practices in small-agency resource allocation begin with explicitly acknowledging limits. Rather than framing constraints as failures, agencies benefit from treating resource allocation as a strategic process. This includes identifying core functions that must be protected and secondary activities that can be scaled back when resources are strained.

Some agencies have adopted workload assessments that examine how officers spend time across different responsibilities, inform optimum staffing allocation levels and deployment schemes, and provide decision support for budget negotiations (Wilson and Weiss 2014). These assessments help leaders identify tasks that consume significant resources without contributing proportionally to organizational goals. In some cases, agencies have reduced, consolidated, or restructured programs to better align with staffing capacity.

Another conceptual approach involves formalizing decision-making processes for new initiatives. By requiring leaders to identify what will be reduced or eliminated when new responsibilities are added, agencies create clearer tradeoffs and avoid unchecked expansion. This practice shifts organizational culture away from "doing everything" and toward "doing the right things well."

Conclusion

For small police agencies, the challenge is not simply acquiring more resources but using existing resources more intentionally. Reframing the narrative from "doing more with less" to "doing what matters most with what we have" allows leaders to engage in more honest and sustainable planning.

By recognizing overextension as a resource allocation issue, agencies can begin making strategic choices that support officer wellbeing, organizational performance, and community trust. In small agencies, where budgets are thin and expectations are high, thoughtful allocation may be one of the most powerful tools leaders have.

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Metrics for Assessing Police Hiring and Attrition

Ethan Humphrey and Jeremy M. Wilson

The Challenge

Police departments across the United States seek to find effective means to improve recruiting and retention. But how do they define the problem, address it, and measure their response? Answering these questions requires properly assessing hiring and attrition challenges and efforts (COPS Office 2016). In doing so, a department can determine where issues exist and which responses work (Lexipol Content Development Team 2025; Wilson and Grammich 2024). Performance metrics can help this process by quantitatively revealing department experience.

Proper metrics can effectively identify areas of difficulty or losses for departments and help evaluate efforts to mitigate them. Tracking hiring and attrition metrics will better enable departments to answer questions such as

- To what extent do applicants drop out because of a lengthy hiring process?
- Where are the key points of applicant and staff turnover?
- Are resources being spent on a specific strategy that yields little or no return?
- Is a specific strategy yielding more applicants or retaining more staff than another?

Metrics can show if a strategy is increasing hires or preventing attrition in a manner that is quick, inexpensive, and attracts the highest quality staff. Analyses of metrics can reveal which approaches may be optimal for a department's circumstances.

Metrics can be especially helpful in navigating current staffing challenges. Turnover has driven many recent staffing challenges (Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] 2024), but practice and research has given more attention to recruitment (Davies et al. 2024; Wilson et al. 2010), highlighting the need to properly identify and evaluate retention issues and strategies.

Field Spotlight

Many departments use metrics to assess staffing efforts and potential problems. Among these

- The Topeka Police Department assessed its cost-per-hire for using "wraps" or advertisements on car windows. It found the program resulted in more applications and cost much less than the professionally produced commercial it previously used (Cobb 2020; Wilson and Grammich 2024).
- The Albuquerque (New Mexico) Police Department used online campaigns with targeted advertisements in place of job fairs for hiring. These substantially increased interest in agency jobs, reduced the cost per potential recruit by $154, and increased the size of graduating academy classes by 47 percent (AdHouse Advertising n.d.).
- The Seattle Police Department reduced its attrition rate by decreasing the time-per-hire by the application and initial testing process from five to nine months to three to five months (Daniels 2025).

What Research Suggests

There should be meticulous planning and analysis for efforts to address hiring and attrition problems. Initially, metrics can help diagnose issues and their characteristics, providing a more articulate understanding of the depth and specifics of the challenge. Following initial analysis, departments should implement a program evaluation or organizational learning model, which will assist with identifying, understanding, responding to, and assessing current issues or efforts (Lexipol Content Development Team 2025; Wilson and Grammich 2024).

Departments should be proactive in addressing specific issues. They should emphasize timely analyses of hiring and attrition. Swift responses will limit sunk costs on ineffective strategies. Assessing hiring or attrition by length of service, area, staff attribute, or cohort can help identify issues specific to strategies (Lynch and Tuckey 2004; Wilson et al. 2010). This process will identify where "pockets of turnover" or a lack of hiring exist and facilitate data-driven approaches (Lynch and Tuckey 2004).

Finally, at a high level, departments should collect data to track applicants and hiring (Wilson and Grammich 2024). Such efforts should gather a multitude of pertinent information, but particularly that needed to evaluate hiring and attrition. First, the tracking should gather information on what attracted an applicant (i.e., recruitment sources) to establish a better measure of each strategy's yield (PERF 2024). Next, it should include the passage rate of different groups for each recruitment and selection hurdle, such as physical exams, written tests, and interviews, so as to verify that applicants with specific skills and attributes are not being overlooked or disproportionately dropping out (Lynch and Tuckey 2004). Lastly, departments should use attrition rates to examine where most applicants and staff drop out in the workforce cycle.

Unanswered Questions

There are large research gaps on the effects of individual strategies in improving timing, costs, dropout rates, skills, and attributes. Most research on metric utilization comes from organizational reports, case studies, and practice-based websites (Lexipol Content Development Team 2025). Given the lack of academic research on these topics, it is hard to quantify which metrics are most important.

The details of some responses to hiring and attrition issues are also somewhat vague. For example, while many suggest improving workplace culture to improve recruitment and retention, there are few detailed instructions on how to achieve this goal.

Promising Practices

If not already doing so, departments should measure and use critical metrics, such as turnover and hiring rates. They should then develop a detailed plan that sets performance objectives, monitors efforts and potential issues in staffing, and evaluates current strategies to learn if, how, and where they work.

More specifically, police departments should use these metrics to discern what improves different elements of the hiring and attrition process. To reduce the time to hire, they should consider streamlining the hiring process (COPS Office 2016; Daniels 2025). They should measure the costs (e.g., advertising, recruiter salaries, bonuses, tests, screenings, operating, training) of individual strategies to assess the most affordable strategy (Wilson et al. 2010). They should determine what strategies can accomplish multiple goals (e.g., simultaneously decrease costs and increase the quantity and quality of recruits).

Conclusion

Addressing a few critical issues can help prevent attrition. Among these are ensuring that officers are satisfied with the work, given practical job expectations, and not overwhelmed by the workload (Davies et al. 2024). At the managerial level, improving leadership quality and devotion to employees as well as increasing encouragement to employees can help improve retention. Finally, fair compensation that aligns with the risks and hardships associated with policing can boost recruitment and retention (Davies et al. 2024). Departments would benefit from developing and monitoring metrics around all these issues.

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Organizational Learning and the Police Staffing Process

Tiana Gaudette and Jeremy M. Wilson

The Challenge

To adapt to modern threats and technologies, police agencies must do more than react—they must become learning organizations. That means intentionally building systems and cultures that generate, apply, and embed new knowledge into everyday practices (Senge 1990).

Organizational learning is an active process by which knowledge is generated, retained, and leveraged within an organization. It involves going beyond simply acquiring new knowledge to applying that knowledge to the organization's activities and modifying its behavior to reflect new insights (Garvin 1993). Organizational learning does not occur by chance, but by design with distinctive policies and practices that work together to facilitate the translation of new knowledge into new and improved approaches.

This approach is tied to performance improvement, but getting there can be challenging. Agencies that are transitioning to a learning organization may encounter obstacles along the way, including resistance to change, resource constraints, and alignment issues (Future Policing Institute n.d.). Other obstacles can include skepticism about research, resistance to collaborating with outside researchers, and concerns that encouraging critical thinking—especially among the rank and file—will undermine paramilitary structures (Geller 1997).

Field Spotlight

The Charleston (South Carolina) Police Department (CPD) exemplifies the qualities of a learning organization, particularly in the realm of recruitment (Wilson, Grammich, and Cherry 2024). The Recruitment and Retention Unit drives innovation in marketing and recruitment strategies using an evidence-based approach. Through collecting data across all phases of recruitment, the Recruitment and Retention Unit has provided evidence-based insights to improve an applicant's experience throughout the recruitment process. The CPD's commitment to growth in learning and evidence-based practices is also reflected in its expansive partnerships with academics and other agencies, as well as in Chief Chito Walker's dedication to improvement through professional development and mentoring.

What Research Suggests

There are two distinct types of organizational learning: "single loop" and "double loop." Single loop learning refers to detecting and correcting errors within an existing paradigm. Double loop learning is more conducive to transformational change because it questions the underlying paradigm, goal, or target in the process of learning. In the policing context, double-loop learning might involve officers seeking feedback from other community members and using that knowledge to inform their own understanding of a problem (Williams, Brower, and Kay 2016).

There are five core principles of organizational learning: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning (Senge 1990). At the heart of organizational learning is 'systems thinking,' which means seeing the organization as a whole rather than its individual parts.

Over the past several decades, there has been a growing amount of research applying the principles and practices of organizational learning to the context of police agencies. This research has led to several important insights.

To facilitate organizational learning, a police agency must foster a culture that supports and embraces challenging the status quo; ongoing and critical inquiry of existing policies and processes; systematic collection and assessment of information and metrics; and continuous search for and implementation of new innovations and strategies. Effective leaders recognize that encouraging innovation and questioning norms requires sharing ownership of problem-solving (Casavant 2014).

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) can play an especially powerful role in organizational learning among police agencies. RCTs—considered the gold standard in research—allow police agencies to rigorously test cause-and-effect strategies under real-world conditions. As such, RCTs are valuable to organizational learning for police agencies because they can provide evidence-based insights and strategies (Bedford and Mazerolle 2014).

Unanswered Questions

While more police organizations are becoming learning organizations, several questions remain about this practice. Among them

- How can organizational learning be optimized in different regions, jurisdictions, and cultures?
- How might other forms of research in the policing field beyond RCTs help promote or expand organizational learning capacities of police organizations (Bedford and Mazerolle 2014)?
- What are the most effective strategies to create an environment wherein all members of the police organization feel comfortable and confident in voicing their opinions and perspectives?
- How should police agencies increase transparency while reducing fear and anxiety among the public?
- How can police departments sustain learning practices across leadership changes and command shifts?
- What internal metrics best track whether an agency is learning, and not just doing?

Promising Practices

There are several promising practices for police organizations seeking to become learning organizations. These include

- After Action Reports (AARs). Described as a "necessity" for organizational learning (Binns 2011), AARs should be completed for all problem-solving initiatives, real-life incidents, or department training scenarios. Agencies can use deficiencies or best practices identified in these reports as a tool for improving response to future critical incidents or events. Departments should create regular opportunities to discuss AARs during roll calls, command meetings, and training sessions.
- Sentinel Event Reviews (SERs). SERs are voluntary, multi-stakeholder reviews of organizational errors or "near misses." Rather than identifying and punishing those responsible, an SER seeks to identify contributing causes—underlying acts, environmental factors, and omissions—and develop systems-based solutions to prevent the error from recurring. An SER of the Lex Street Massacre investigation and prosecution identified several "nonobvious" contributing factors, leading to novel recommendations for systemic reforms (Holloway and Grunwald 2019).
- Collaboration. Engaging with scholarly research and consulting with academics can help identify benchmarks and best practices at other police agencies and subsequently capitalize on their experiences (Binns 2011). Collaboration may also include identifying internal champions who can serve as liaisons between command staff, researchers, and line officers to translate findings into action.

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The Importance of Generational Differences in Police Recruitment

Elliot Idol

The Challenge

An aging law enforcement workforce (Etter and Griffin 2011) is leading not only to increasing retirements but also generational change in the workplace (Wilson et al. 2010). Millennials, i.e., persons born from 1981 to 1996, are becoming the dominant generational cohort in the workplace (Stephens 2015), and recruitment of younger generations is becoming increasingly competitive. Candidate pools today are less interested in a policing career (Santos, Jaynes, and Thomas 2024). Their higher levels of education are also leading them to consider a increasingly wide range of job prospects outside of policing (Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2007).

Because generations and other social groupings differ in their values and perspectives (Orrick 2008), recruitment materials should be tailored to individual groups (Taniguchi et al. 2023). To improve recruitment and retention efforts, agencies should understand how generations differ in work preferences.

What Research Suggests

Most change in policing is occurring as a result of generational differences and technology (Batts, Smoot, and Scrivner 2012).

Among the most prominent generational differences are those in values. Younger generations of workers want meaningful and fulfilling work which fosters belonginess and self-actualization (Taniguchi et al. 2023). They value personal development, sometimes more than organizational development (Batts, Smoot, and Scrivner 2012). This makes training and career development opportunities very attractive to them (Orrick 2008). Younger workers are also creative problem solvers who look for challenging work environments with problem-solving opportunities (Batts, Smoot, and Scrivner 2012). Although there is some evidence that younger generations have less organizational commitment, making them more likely to change careers (Twenge and Campbell 2008), age does not appear to predict intention to leave among law enforcement officers. Rather, retention is more strongly related to leadership issues and work-life balance (Williams and Sondhi 2022).

Where older generations often prefer financial more than other forms of compensation, younger generations may prefer being compensated with time, wanting flexible work schedules and a good work-life balance (Taniguchi et al. 2023). Additionally, younger generations prefer flatter organizational structures with a transparent decision-making process (Williams and Sondhi 2022) and a lot of feedback (Batts, Smoot, and Scrivner 2012). Because younger workers seek flexibility and a flatter organizational structure, the rigid, hierarchical paramilitary model of policing may be less attractive to them (Wilson et al. 2010).

Younger generations are more knowledgeable about technology and view it more favorably, but digital literacy may not be based on an officer's age (Bossler and Holt 2013). Still, younger officers

may prefer digital sources of information, rather than reaching out to senior officers who draw from their own experiences (Demircioglu 2010).

Unanswered Questions

Much of the research on generational differences is anecdotal and may not be applicable to all officers. Systematic evaluations of generational differences appear limited, particularly for generational differences among police officers. Much generational research focuses on the Millennial generation and may not be true for Gen Z candidates, i.e., those born 1997 to 2012, entering the workforce. Updated research should evaluate changing generational preferences and confirm whether the newest entries to the workforce have similar values and levels of digital literacy.

Promising Practices

Among practices suggested to attract younger candidates are shortening the hiring process (Dudley 2022) and implementing online recruitment channels (Wilson et al. 2010). Programs that target youths, such as formal pathways from high schools or universities to a law enforcement career, may also help boost recruitment (Williams and Sondhi 2022).

Mentoring can be particularly beneficial for young officers. Younger officers appear to value ongoing education and learning opportunities (Williams and Sondhi 2022), and mentoring can help them learn from older officers. Additionally, because young officers value career development, agencies may wish to expose them to specialized training early in their careers and provide multiple learning opportunities which allow creativity and experimentation (Betts, Smoot, and Scrivner 2012).

Given the limits of research and a diverse population, agencies should make their own efforts, such as conducting routine feedback surveys, to learn their employees' wants and needs (Wilson et al. 2010). This is particularly important for younger generations of officers, who value feedback and transparency (Williams and Sondhi 2022).

Conclusion

Research evaluating the differences between generations of officers suggests that younger workers want a career that is meaningful and personally fulfilling and allows room for creativity and continuous career development. Younger generations may not fit as well as older ones with the hierarchical, paramilitary structure of policing, as they tend to prefer flatter organizational structures with a transparent decision-making process. They also appear to rely on digital sources of information and communication, but age is not always a strong predictor of technological skills or preferences. Much research in this area focuses on the Millennial generation, whose youngest members are 30 years old as of this writing, and hence is becoming outdated. Nevertheless, recommendations for creating online recruitment methods and sources of information, as well as continuously communicating with officers to determine needs and wants, may still apply.

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The Underappreciated Role Jurisdictional Size Has on Police Staffing

Nathan Cronin and Jeremy M. Wilson

The Challenge

Police staffing discussions frequently center on workload (e.g., call volume, crime), population size, minimum staffing expectations, and budgeted allocation levels (Wilson and Grammich 2024). While these are important, they often fail to capture the operational realities faced by rural police agencies. In many rural jurisdictions, patrol staffing demands and challenges are shaped more by geography than by calls for service. Large patrol areas, long travel distances, limited road networks, rugged terrain, and seasonal weather conditions all directly influence response times, officer availability, and the ability to provide consistent patrol coverage.

Rural agencies commonly patrol expansive geographic areas with small, dispersed populations. Even when call volume is low, the time required to travel between calls and maintain visible presence across wide geographic expanses places significant strain on limited staffing resources. As a result, agencies that may appear adequately staffed based on population ratios may struggle to provide timely backup, ensure officer safety, or meet community expectations for service.

Field Spotlight

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota illustrates how geography can fundamentally shape patrol staffing needs. Covering approximately 3,500 square miles, an area larger than Delaware and more than twice the size of Rhode Island, the reservation presents one of the most geographically challenging law enforcement environments in the country. Road networks are sparse, communities are widely dispersed, and travel between incidents can require substantial time, even under favorable conditions.

Despite this vast geographic footprint, reported staffing levels have often left only a small number of officers on duty to patrol the entire reservation, for which population estimates vary from 20,000 to 40,000 (Schafer 2023). The agency has approximately 30 sworn officers, of whom six to eight may be on patrol at any given time. A single officer may be for covering hundreds of square miles, resulting in extended response times and limited backup availability (Hult 2025). These conditions have raised significant concerns about officer safety, service delivery, and the ability of law enforcement to respond effectively to emergencies.

What Research Suggests

Police workload is shaped not only by the number of calls officers respond to, but also by the time required to complete those calls (Wilson and Weiss 2014; McCabe et al. 2025). In rural environments, travel time can represent a substantial portion of officer workload, even when call volume is low. Larger patrol areas and longer distances between incidents reduce the number of calls an officer can handle during a shift and increase the amount of time officers remain unavailable for new calls or for uncommitted, proactive policing. While travel time could be modeled as part of a workload-based assessment, such calculations tend to work better for larger organizations (Wilson and Weiss 2013).

Agency comparisons should also account for contextual factors such as geography (Hollis and Wilson 2015). Agencies with similar call volumes or staffing levels may face very different operational challenges depending on the size and layout of their jurisdictions. As a result, reliance on officer-to-population ratios or simple benchmarking can systematically understate staffing needs in rural settings.

Unanswered Questions

Although geography is widely acknowledged as an important factor in rural policing, questions remain about how best to measure its impact on staffing needs. There is limited consensus on which geographic indicators (e.g., patrol area size, average travel time, or road density) should be incorporated into staffing models. More research is needed to determine how agencies can balance expectations for rapid response with the realities of distance and terrain.

Further work is also needed to identify best practices for communicating geographic staffing challenges to stakeholders and policymakers in ways that are both accessible and evidence based.

Promising Practices

Promising practices in rural patrol staffing begin with explicitly recognizing geography as a core operational variable. Agencies are increasingly using mapping tools and travel-time analysis to better understand patrol coverage, response capabilities, and staffing gaps. These tools allow leaders to move beyond call counts and visualize how officers spend time moving across their jurisdictions.

Another promising approach involves establishing minimum staffing levels based on coverage and officer safety rather than average workload alone. This goes beyond arbitrary feelings about what seems appropriate and requires careful analysis and consideration. By identifying the number of officers needed to ensure timely backup and reasonable response times across large patrol areas, agencies can more clearly articulate baseline staffing needs. Reframing staffing discussions around geography, response time, and officer availability can help align expectations with operational realities in rural and tribal communities.

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Deeper-Dive Discussions on Staffing Strategy

Inexpensive Staffing Tactics for Police Staffing Challenges

Chase Flowers and Jeremy M. Wilson

Police Staffing and Limited Resource Availability

Police staffing is a significant challenge for many police agencies. Surveys by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP 2019 and 2024) found that more than 70 percent of responding agencies have reported that recruitment was more challenging recently than it has been.

To overcome these challenges, agencies seek new tactics for recruitment and selection. Given the financial constraints many police agencies also face (Wilson et al. 2010; Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] 2023), many agencies seek tactics that are both effective and inexpensive. This guide draws on a larger COPS Office-supported assessment of staffing tactics to examine tactics perceived by practitioners to be effective and affordable.

Approach

The larger COPS-Office supported assessment identified, through a search of journal articles, news stories, and practitioner reports published from 2010 to 2022, 237 tactics that an agency could use for recruitment or selection. We asked 42 practitioners to rate a random subset of the tactics, with 30 ultimately providing responses, for a 71 percent response rate. The sample was non-probability based, which limits generalizability, but it was constructed to include those working in departments of various types (e.g., local and state police) and sizes and in positions associated with staffing processes in agencies across the United States.

For each tactic, we asked three respondents to provide ratings on various performance dimensions, including agency costs, staffing levels, immediacy of impact, workload management, implementation ease, quality of police work, and community policing (see box on "Staffing Tactics Performance Dimensions"). We calculated the mean average for ratings of performance on each tactic's dimensions to develop a composite assessment that accounted for potential variation based on practitioner experience. The average ratings we present include only those where at least two practitioners provided ratings.

We focus here on 39 staffing tactics that respondents indicated would be cost-neutral or even decrease agency costs, i.e., tactics that received a mean rating of at least 3.00 on the question of whether the tactic would "increase or decrease agency costs." We review these 39 "affordable" tactics by each of the other performance dimensions. Again, our goal is to draw attention to tactics that are both effective and affordable. As such, while this analysis may be helpful for police agencies seeking inexpensive staffing solutions, it does not reveal or investigate all the different options available to an agency to bolster its staffing.

Staffing Tactics Performance Dimensions

Respondents rated each staffing tactic on the following performance dimensions based on the associated scales:

- Would the tactic increase or decrease ***agency costs***?
    1. Greatly increase ($50,000 or more over a year)
    2. Somewhat increase (less than $50,000 over a year)
    3. No effect
    4. Somewhat decrease (less than $50,000 over a year)
    5. Greatly decrease ($50,000 or more over a year)
- Would the tactic decrease or increase the ***number of staff***?
    1. Large decrease (5% or more over a year)
    2. Modest decrease (less than 5% over a year)
    3. No change
    4. Modest increase (less than 5% over a year)
    5. Large increase (5% or more over a year)
- Would the tactic have a ***delayed or immediate impact*** on department staffing levels?
    1. Very delayed (more than 24 months)
    2. Somewhat delayed (13 to 24 months)
    3. Somewhat immediate (3 to 12 months)
    4. Very immediate (within 3 months)
- Would the tactic make **workload management** less or more effective?
    1. Much less effective
    2. Somewhat less effective
    3. No change
    4. Somewhat more effective
    5. Much more effective
- Would the tactic be ***difficult or easy to implement***?
    1. Very difficult (significant staff time and coordination over a year)
    2. Somewhat difficult (moderate staff time and coordination over a year)
    3. Somewhat easy (modest staff time and coordination over a year)
    4. Very easy (little staff time and coordination over a year)
- Would the tactic reduce or increase the ***quality*** of police work?
    1. Greatly reduce
    2. Somewhat reduce
    3. No effect
    4. Somewhat increase
    5. Greatly increase
- Would the tactic impede or advance the goals of ***community policing***?
    1. Greatly impede
    2. Somewhat impede
    3. No effect
    4. Somewhat advance
    5. Greatly advance

Affordable Staffing Tactics

Table 1 highlights the staffing tactics that practitioners rated as the most affordable, i.e., those tactics can implement at no increase to agency costs. Most of the tactics in this category rely on civilian support, process improvements, or administrative planning rather than costly program development. (Except where noted, all means are based on a five-point scale).

Respondents suggested civilianization, i.e., having civilians perform work that officers now do, could save agencies up to $50,000 annually, receiving a mean rating of 4.00. Hiring skilled professional staff to perform duties that are typically held by sworn officers allows agencies to reduce salary expenses and training costs. It also allows them to reassign officers to duties and tasks that fully use their training, expertise, and specialized skills (PERF 2024).

Respondents also suggested developing a recruitment plan could reduce agency costs. Effective planning helps agencies determine their specific staffing needs, prioritize resource allocation, and carry out recruitment activities without requiring additional funding. To be effective, a recruitment strategy should clearly outline the agency's hiring goals over the next five years, estimate the number of officers and resources that will be needed, and consider needs across the organization (U.S. Department of Justice 2009).

Table 1: Most Affordable Staffing Tactics

Tactic	Cost Rating Mean
Civilianize Positions (i.e., Have Civilians Perform Work That Officers Now Do)	4.00
Developing a Recruitment Plan	4.00
Easing Financial Requirements	4.00
Reducing or Condensing Training	4.00
Implementing a Special Tax for Recruitment and Retention Increase	3.50
Providing Realistic Job Previews	3.50

Field Spotlight

The Baltimore (Maryland) Police Department has faced a challenge in finding sworn officers who are willing to work in Internal Affairs. To overcome this challenge, it turned to civilianizing the positions, hiring civilian Investigative Specialists to replace sworn detective positions in the unit (PERF 2024). Even though the department hired ten civilians to replace eight sworn officers, the move still helped it reduce costs related to salaries, pensions, training, uniforms, and staff turnover. Department officials found the civilian employees to be strong writers who meticulously analyze information and approach their work with a strong sense of objectivity.

Increasing Staff Levels

Table 2 presents affordable tactics that respondents suggested could increase staffing levels specifically. These tactics have two main themes: modifying agency processes, such as streamlining the hiring process, reducing processing times, and establishing lateral hiring procedures, and broadening eligibility standards, such as easing financial, citizenship, or physical appearance requirements, and adding preference points for desired characteristics.

Among tactics considered to be most affordable, streamlining the hiring process was the tactic most highly rated tactic for increasing staffing levels. It received a mean 4.67 rating on this dimension, indicating respondents thought it could lead to a modest to large increase in staffing over a year. Agencies can lose applicants to competing departments or the private sector when hiring timelines are too long (PERF 2023). Combining steps into a single event and reducing unnecessary steps can prevent applicants from dropping out or accepting other employment offers. This approach could be even more effective if it is paired with another tactic that modifies the agency's processes, such as reducing processing times from application to hire.

Several tactics that involved broadening eligibility standards were also ranked highly. Easing financial requirements helps agencies increase their staffing levels by removing barriers that disproportionately affect otherwise qualified applicants. Loosening citizenship requirements and easing physical appearance standards allow agencies to attract more applicants without lowering any essential job-related qualifications. These strategies can also help agencies maintain an edge in a challenging recruitment environment while taking on no additional cost or even reducing costs.

Finally, providing exam or preference points and establishing lateral hiring procedures were also rated as effective and affordable. These tactics allow agencies to identify specific applicant qualities that the department values while also expediting the hiring of experienced officers.

Table 2: Most Affordable Staffing Tactics that Increase Staffing Level

Tactic	Staffing Level Mean	Cost Rating Mean
Streamlining the Hiring Process (e.g., Combining Steps Where Possible)	4.67	3.33
Easing Financial Requirements	4.50	4.00
Implementing a Special Tax for Recruitment and Retention Increase	4.50	3.50
Loosening Citizenship Requirement (e.g., Allow Lawful Permanent Residents to Apply)	4.50	3.00
Adding Exam or Other Preference Points for Desired Characteristics	4.50	3.00
Establishing Lateral Hiring Procedures	4.33	3.33
Reducing Processing Times from Application to Hire	4.33	3.33
Easing Physical Appearance Requirements	4.33	3.00

Field Spotlight

The Rockville (Maryland) Police Department streamlined its hiring process by combining several of its required tests and screenings into a single event, allowing candidates to complete their applications and receive a conditional offer on the same day (PERF 2023). The Oklahoma City Police Department has begun offering smaller police academies on a more frequent basis to prevent recruits from waiting months for the next academy to begin. Reducing the time applicants wait between steps of the lengthy hiring process can help keep recruits eager and engaged, while also lowering the likelihood of attrition before being hired.

Timing of Effects

Table 3 highlights the staffing tactics that practitioners rated as affordable and the most effective for immediately impacting staffing. These tactics tend to fall into three themes: process acceleration, such as streamlining the hiring process and general lateral hires; financial access and support, such as easing financial requirements and implementing a special tax for recruitment and retention; and candidate engagement, such as including encouraging language in follow-up communications. Together, these tactics are designed to place candidates in positions as quickly

as possible, limit attrition during the hiring process, and increase staffing levels without requiring new spending.

Respondents suggested streamlining the hiring process could have a somewhat to very immediate impact on staffing levels. They gave this tactic a mean rating of 3.67, suggesting an effect within three to 12 months. Should agencies simplify the steps in their hiring process and shorten their hiring timelines, they could extend offers more quickly and place new hires in the field sooner. Several tactics listed could complement this one. Using encouraging follow-up communication with applicants could help keep candidates engaged and promote consistent progress through the hiring process.

Table 3: Most Affordable Staffing Tactics that Most Immediately Affect Staffing

	Timing	
Tactic	**Mean (on a 4-point scale)**	**Cost Rating Mean**
Streamlining the Hiring Process (e.g., Combining Steps Where Possible)	3.67	3.33
Easing Financial Requirements	3.50	4.00
Civilianize Positions (i.e., Have Civilians Perform Work that Officers Now Do)	3.50	4.00
Implementing a Special Tax for Recruitment and Retention Increase	3.50	3.50
General Lateral Hires	3.50	3.33
Adding Exam or Other Preference Points for Desired Characteristics	3.50	3.00
Including Encouraging Language in Follow-Up Communications	3.50	3.00

Field Spotlight

The Tacoma (Washington) Police Department has implemented a lateral-hiring incentive program to help address its severe staffing shortages (Tacoma Weekly Staff 2025). The program provides cash bonuses and leave benefits to lateral hires. These lateral hires can be deployed within two months, while entry-level recruits may take a year or more to complete training and academy courses. The department estimates costs for the program to be $3.4 million, with $1.2 million for the incentives and leave benefits, and the remainder for vehicles, equipment, and other items associated with expanding staff. Such a total is actually less than the $3.5 million the department paid in overtime from 2022 to 2024. A council member claimed that "this is the more fiscally responsible thing to do," and that "lower overtime costs and better staffing flexibility will benefit the entire city" (Tacoma Weekly Staff 2025).

Reducing Workload

Table 4 highlights the staffing tactics that practitioners rated as the most affordable for reducing workload. These tactics focus on shifting responsibilities, streamlining internal processes, and removing barriers that slow down the agency's operations.

Civilianizing positions is among the most effective tactics for reducing workload while saving resources. This reduces the number of administrative responsibilities sworn officers must handle. Another theme involves planning and improving processes. Developing a recruitment plan and streamlining the hiring process both reduce workload by standardizing procedures, improving coordination, and minimizing hiring delays.

Finally, several tactics in this table, such as easing financial requirements, establishing lateral hiring procedures, and streamlining the hiring process, also appear in other tables of effective tactics because they tend to produce compounding benefits. Although they reduce workload, they also improve staffing levels, increase efficiency, and lower costs, making them well-suited for agencies looking for affordable and impactful solutions.

Table 4: Most Affordable Staffing Tactics that Reduce Workload

Tactic	Reduce Workload Mean	Cost Rating Mean
Civilianize Positions (i.e., Have Civilians Perform Work that Officers Now Do)	4.50	4.00
Easing Financial Requirements	4.50	4.00
Hiring Retired Officers	4.50	3.00
Developing a Recruitment Plan	4.33	4.00
Streamlining the Hiring Process (e.g., Combining Steps Where Possible)	4.33	3.33
Establishing Lateral Hiring Procedures	4.33	3.33
Reducing Processing Times from Application to Hire	4.33	3.33
Implementing a Special Tax for Recruitment and Retention Increase	4.00	3.50
General Lateral Hires	4.00	3.33
General Community Outreach	4.00	3.00

Field Spotlight

To address its staffing shortage, the Albany (New York) Police Department has proposed that 10 special patrol officer positions be created and staffed by retired police officers (Global Ordnance News 2025). The retired officers would receive $62,350 to $89,230 while working in front desk operations, community outreach, and youth engagement. First-year officers in the department earn just over $65,000, not including overtime. With the department currently having at least 70 vacant positions, mandatory overtime and back-to-back shifts are common. These long shifts have contributed to officer burnout and increased turnover. By hiring retired officers the department hopes to reduce overtime and free sworn officers for other duties.

Ease of Implementation

Table 5 presents the tactics rated as the easiest to implement while remaining affordable. These strategies require minimal staff time, little coordination, and no additional financial investment. Many of the tactics in this table involve communication, transparency, and providing guidance to applicants. These approaches can be implemented quickly, rely on existing staff, and allow agencies to immediately strengthen their recruitment procedures without requiring additional funding.

A major theme for the easy-to-implement tactics is improving transparency by better informing applicants about job expectations and benefits. These tactics include advertising fitness standards, advertising police benefits, and using encouraging language in follow-up communications. These strategies work because they reduce candidates' uncertainty and help applicants prepare for stages of the hiring process where applicants may be more likely to fail or quit. For example, advertising and openly disclosing fitness standards can help applicants be aware of and prepare for fitness tests, thereby increasing their chances of success throughout the hiring process and on the job (PERF 2023).

A second theme is low-effort engagement strategies that increase applicants' connection to the agency. Tactics such as ride-alongs, department tours, exit interviews, easing physical appearance requirements, and devising "superhero" storylines allow agencies to offer low-cost opportunities for engaging with candidates and current employees. These approaches can be incorporated into current agency practices to improve the overall candidate experience and increase candidate involvement.

Table 5: Most Affordable Staffing Tactics that Are Easiest to Implement

Tactic	Ease of Implementation Mean (on a 4-point scale)	Cost Rating Mean
Advertising Fitness Standards	4.00	3.00
Exit Interviews	4.00	3.00
Including Encouraging Language in Follow-Up Communications	3.67	3.00
Offering Department Tours	3.67	3.00
Ride-Alongs	3.67	3.00
Advertising Police Benefits	3.67	3.00
Easing Physical Appearance Requirements	3.67	3.00
Easing Financial Requirements	3.50	4.00
Devising "Superhero" Storylines for Officers	3.50	3.00

Field Spotlight

The Abilene (Texas) Police Department has shifted from a traditional physical assessment to one that better aligns with the physical fitness requirements of the job. The new assessment has replaced an obstacle course test with "a rowing test that is more equitable in determining a prospective applicant's job readiness" (PERF 2023, 28). The department shares testing standards with applicants beforehand to allow them to prepare for the assessment.

Improving the Quality of Policing

Table 6 highlights staffing tactics that practitioners rated as most effective for improving the quality of police work while remaining low-cost. Two themes stand out among the tactics: community engagement and process planning. These approaches strengthen how officers interact with the public and help agencies coordinate staffing efforts without the need for significant funds.

Community engagement includes tactics such as general community outreach, one-to-one outreach, and outreach to specialized organizations. These strategies help agencies build stronger relationships with the community and potential recruits. In addition, using these strategies can increase trust, promote communication, and improve the overall quality of police services. These engagement-focused tactics can improve interactions during recruitment, as personal and individual support can lead to applicants becoming more committed and better prepared for the hiring process and the job. Individualizing the recruitment process through one-to-one outreach appears to be a particularly promising tactic, with 70 percent of applicants indicating that being assigned a mentor would positively impact their decision to pursue a career in policing (PERF 2019).

Process planning includes tactics such as developing a recruitment plan, streamlining the hiring process, and establishing lateral hiring procedures. Although these are administrative strategies, practitioners still rated them highly for improving the overall quality of policing. Effective planning allows agencies to determine their staffing needs, identify priorities, and more efficiently manage recruitment and hiring activities. While general community outreach is rated highly here for improving the quality of policing, its mean cost rating, though still neutral, is lower than that for developing a recruitment plan. This indicates a possible trade-off between quality and cost that agencies must consider.

Table 6: Most Affordable Staffing Tactics that Improve Quality of Policing

	Quality	Cost Rating
Tactic	**Mean**	**Mean**
General Community Outreach	4.33	3.00
Developing a Recruitment Plan	4.00	4.00
Implementing a Special Tax for Recruitment and Retention Increase	4.00	3.50
Streamlining the Hiring Process (e.g., Combining Steps Where Possible)	4.00	3.33
Establishing Lateral Hiring Procedures	4.00	3.33
One-to-One Outreach (e.g., Having a Single Recruiter)	4.00	3.00
Outreach to Specialized Organizations	4.00	3.00

Note: The quality and cost means are on a 5-point scale.

Field Spotlight

The Arlington (Texas) Police Department uses social media in unique ways to increase its community outreach. Among these are "tweet-alongs." These showcase the daily work of police officers and provide a firsthand look at the different types of calls officers respond to, while also building legitimacy within the community (PERF 2016).

The Richmond (Virginia) Police Department has used one-to-one outreach programs to personalize the recruitment process. These include mentoring programs and family meet-and-greets for recruits (PERF 2019). These programs provide recruits with a direct line of communication and information and help build a support system for the organization, recruits, and their families (PERF 2019).

Advancing Community Policing

Table 7 presents the tactics that practitioners rated as most effective for advancing community policing while also remaining affordable. Two themes emerge: community engagement and organizational planning. These tactics were all rated favorably, but general community outreach proved to be the highest rated. Its 5.00 rating suggests the practitioners who assessed it feel that it "greatly advances" community policing.

The community engagement theme includes tactics such as general community outreach, outreach to specialized organizations, ride-alongs, and one-to-one outreach. These tactics tend to increase personalized contact between officers and community members, and do so at no cost. This allows agencies to increase trust and communication without requiring new resources. For example, when departments offer opportunities for individuals to participate in ride-alongs, this can improve community perceptions of law enforcement and serve as a valuable recruitment tool (Shults 2020). Individuals who participate in ride-alongs gain a realistic view of officers' duties, which can advance community policing by reducing tension and building trust (Owsinski 2022).

The organizational planning theme includes tactics such as developing a recruitment plan and streamlining the hiring process. Developing a clear recruitment plan helps agencies ensure that community strategies are organized and focused. Streamlining the hiring process reduces administrative workload, enabling officers to dedicate more time and attention to interacting and engaging with applicants and community members. These two themes show how agencies can advance community policing not by implementing costly tactics, but by focusing on personal connections and properly planning.

Table 7: Most Affordable Staffing Tactics for Advancing Community Policing

Tactic	Community Policing Mean	Cost Rating Mean
General Community Outreach	5.00	3.00
Outreach to Specialized Organizations	4.67	3.00
Ride-Alongs	4.67	3.00
Developing a Recruitment Plan	4.50	4.00
Streamlining the Hiring Process (e.g., Combining Steps Where Possible)	4.33	3.33
One-to-One Outreach (e.g., Having a Single Recruiter)	4.33	3.00

Note: The community policing and cost means are on 5-point scales.

Field Spotlight

The Sacramento (California) Police Department offers a ride-along program to all individuals 18 years of age or older with a valid driver's license and no outstanding warrants. The goal of the program is to "encourage community involvement in law enforcement, and to educate the public by opening lines of communication between the community and the police" (City of Sacramento n.d.). The department states that the ride-along program also provides potential recruits with an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the challenges, hazards, and benefits that come with being a police officer. A recent high school graduate who was participating in the Sacramento Police Department ride-along program prevented an officer from being harmed by radioing for backup from inside the police cruiser (KCRA Staff 2019). This participant indicated an interest in joining the department after completing college. Instances such as these show how ride-alongs can lead individuals to become attracted to a career in law enforcement.

Executive Summary

As police agencies continue to face significant staffing challenges while operating with constrained budgets, leaders must determine the best way to allocate their limited resources. Agencies need strategies that promote and increase staffing without requiring a substantial financial investment. This guide provides an overview of the most affordable staffing tactics based on practitioner ratings, offering agencies a list of options that achieve multiple staffing goals at a minimal cost. By reviewing how these inexpensive tactics were rated across dimensions such as staffing levels, immediacy, workload, ease of implementation, overall impact, and advancement of community

policing, agencies can determine which tactics best align with their organization's needs. Below are some takeaways of our work to help them do so.

Many Tactics Advance Both Affordability and Staffing Goals

A key takeaway from our assessment is that several inexpensive staffing tactics simultaneously reduce costs and strengthen recruitment or staffing capacity. Although the focus of this guide is affordability, many of the highest-rated tactics, such as developing a recruitment plan, streamlining the hiring process, easing financial requirements, and conducting ride-alongs, also positively influence staffing levels, applicant engagement, and agency efficiency. For example, developing a recruitment plan can help agencies better anticipate their hiring needs, strategically allocate resources, and promote efficient recruitment efforts. While this tactic may require only minimal funding, the benefits seem to go well beyond affordability, as seen by its ratings across the performance dimensions.

Similarly, streamlining the hiring process was consistently rated as a low-cost tactic and impactful. Simplifying or eliminating unnecessary steps can help agencies retain more of their applicants, alleviate some of the burden placed on administrative staff, and shorten time-to-hire without requiring new funding. This tactic's appearance across multiple tables highlights its versatility and its ability to increase staffing levels, immediately affect staffing, reduce workload, improve the quality of policing, and advance community policing.

Several outreach-based tactics, such as ride-alongs, one-to-one outreach, and general community outreach, also showed overlapping benefits. While these tactics require little to no financial resources, they can still increase applicants' interest, improve relationships, and strengthen agencies' involvement in the community. The low cost and high impact of these tactics on relationship building make them valuable to a wide range of departments, especially those with limited budgets.

Tactics Perform Differently, and Some Help Achieve Multiple Goals

Although all the tactics in this guide are considered affordable, their performance varies across staffing objectives. Some tactics, such as streamlining the hiring process and easing financial requirements, appear repeatedly in our assessment because they have compounding benefits. These tactics not only reduce costs but also speed up the hiring process, expand applicant pools, and improve the experience for applicants. Other tactics may be effective in one area, such as reducing workload, but less effective in others.

Agencies must understand these differences if they wish to select tactics that are best suited to their needs. Departments that are facing severe and urgent staffing shortages are likely to select a strategy that ranks highly for immediacy, while a department that is focused on community relationships may select a tactic that focuses on community engagement. Evaluating these tactics across multiple goals allows agencies to make informed decisions about which approaches are most effective for addressing their staffing challenges and where is best to invest their limited resources.

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Strategies for Speeding Up the Police Hiring Process

Ethan Humphrey, Elliot Idol, and Jeremy M. Wilson

Introduction

Typical police responses to vacancies and increasing workload demands focus outward, emphasizing innovative tactics to improve recruitment (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP] 2024). Nevertheless, internal process changes, specifically those that accelerate the hiring process, can also be critical. Improving hiring speed is especially important in the current staffing climate, as it directly influences applicant retention, attraction, agency competitiveness, and operational efficiency (Bureau of Justice Assistance [BJA] and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services [COPS Office] 2023; Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] 2023; Wilson et al. 2010).

The Problem May Lie in the Process

The length of the overall hiring process—which in some cases can take six months to a year—is crucial to applicants (IACP 2024; PERF 2023; Swarns 2015). Among the stages of the process are the application, written and physical fitness examinations, a psychological assessment, a background investigation, a drug test, several interviews, and a polygraph text (IACP 2024; PERF 2019; Schafer and Nelson 2022). Still, efficient police agencies can reduce hiring processes to a few months (BJA and COPS Office 2023; IACP 2024).

The recruitment process in police agencies can be overly complicated and rigid, with procedural and budgetary constraints often not found in private organizations (National Policing Institute 2025; PERF 2025; Schafer and Nelson 2022). Excessive formalization and red tape may arise due to merit system protections and strong due process requirements. For large agencies, screening and testing of applicants may take seven to 12 weeks to complete, with requirements for multiple tests, complicated forms, and limited hiring flexibility slowing the process.

Many hiring delays are self-created rather than externally imposed. Among these are outdated eligibility criteria and redundant paperwork (PERF 2023). A comprehensive review of the hiring process in the Fairfax County (Virginia) Police Department found that internal, optional processes were driving unnecessary delays. This highlights the importance of periodically reviewing processes, requirements, and steps to ensure they continue to add value and align with community preferences.

Modern Applicant Preferences and Standards

Extended hiring processes may be particularly unattractive to younger generations, many of whom want "immediate gratification. The idea of applying for a job that may take up to 12 months or longer to secure is unfathomable for many" (Dudley 2022) Candidates often drop out due to the length of and confusion about the application process (Gibbs 2020; Swarns 2015), including concern over a lack of transparency (Skaggs et al. 2022). Additionally, candidates often apply to

several positions and accept the first offer they receive (Gibbs 2020; PERF 2019). This adversely affects under-resourced agencies that may struggle to streamline hiring processes.

Applicants heavily weigh processes and timelines when determining where to apply (Wojslawowicz et al. 2024). Candidates may be less willing to apply to agencies whose processes they perceive as overly formalized and time- and effort-intensive (Sievert et al. 2022). Modern applicants expect the process to be online (PERF 2019). Web-based systems facilitate ease and speed, and accelerated testing timelines are more attractive to high-quality applicants (Linos and Riesch 2020).

An Urgent Need for Improvement—and How to Achieve It

Improving hiring and testing timelines are critical for law enforcement agencies losing officers faster than they can replace them (Adams, Mourtgos, and Nix 2023; Del Pozo et al. 2024; PERF 2025; Wilson et al. 2010), while also struggling to ensure that hiring processes effectively attract and identify high-quality candidates (Linos and Riesch 2020; Hilal and Litsey 2017; Schafer and Nelson 2022; Sun et al. 2022). By improving the hiring process, agencies can reduce voluntary applicant drop-off (Linos and Riesch 2020). Streamlining and speeding up the process must be prioritized to minimize the loss of those who have already been "hooked."

The availability, benefits, and public-service-orientation of a career in law enforcement are appealing to many (Elntib and Milincic 2021; Epiphanio and Mário 2025), but high-quality candidates may have financial obligations, such as student or credit card debt, family responsibilities, or other fixed expenses, and may forgo careers in law enforcement because they cannot afford to wait through long hiring processes (BJA and COPS 2023). Faster and simpler processes may attract those who would not normally consider a career in law enforcement (Wilson et al. 2010). Shorter hiring timelines may expand and improve the applicant pool.

Streamlining also produces operational benefits by improving efficiency and reducing internal resource demands (BJA and COPS 2023). For example, combining or aligning hiring steps, using "hiring days," and adopting technology can reduce redundant administrative work and scheduled assessments (BJA and COPS 2023; PERF 2019; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Moreover, many agencies report that these processes allow fewer personnel to manage the same volume of applicants, freeing staff for other duties (PERF 2023).

Promising Practices for Accelerating the Hiring Process

Several field experiences, though not all formally evaluated, show promise for accelerating police hiring processes. We summarize these below.

Changing and Simplifying Requirements

Existing assessments can be altered to speed hiring or to allow candidates to independently prepare for the application process. Several departments have modified automatic disqualifiers and reconsidered when certain hiring standards must be met (PERF 2023; IACP 2024). For example, some departments allow applicants additional time to meet physical fitness benchmarks during the academy (IACP 2024), recognizing that recruits typically gain substantial strength and

endurance over the course of training (Crawley et al. 2016). Departments may accept a college degree in place of a written exam and adjust disqualifying criteria related to prior drug use or minor driving infractions (PERF 2023). These changes are largely perceived not as lowering standards, but instead as removing barriers that exclude otherwise qualified candidates before they are able to demonstrate pertinent job skills such as communication, professionalism, and intelligence (PERF 2023; Schafer and Nelson 2022). Furthermore, agencies that continuously review and audit selection criteria will not only speed their hiring processes but also likely be more aligned with modern expectations and community preferences (Sun et al. 2022).

The Los Angeles Police Department undertook several steps to reduce its recruitment and hiring process, which had been averaging six months (Linos and Riesch 2020). Among these were removing a preliminary background application (PBA) and offering expedited testing to some candidates. Removing the PBA worsened the applicant pool quality and had an unclear impact on the speed of the overall process, but candidates who participated in expedited testing (taking multiple assessments on the same day) were more likely to score higher on the personal qualifications essay and pass their department interview. In addition to being attractive to high-quality applicants, expedited testing was also associated with candidates staying in the process and not dropping out early.

Hosting "Hiring Days" and One-Stop Assessments

To increase efficiency in the hiring process, agencies have begun experimenting with hiring days. This allows candidates to complete multiple steps of the hiring process in a few days or even a single day. By restructuring its hiring process this way, the Williamson County (Texas) Sheriff's Office reduced its hiring timeline from three months to one (Ridderbusch 2023). Its Expedited Testing Day has applicants sign paperwork and take the standardized written test, which is immediately graded. Passing candidates move on to the Physical Agility Test, which, upon successful completion, is followed by an interview with command staff. Candidates passing all these steps receive a conditional job offer. Applicants are responsible for providing background information and the department conducts background checks, psychological tests, and drug screenings in the weeks following a conditional hiring.

The Expedited Testing Day was created in response to comments from potential applicants who noted difficulties in attending multiple recruitment events. To address this concern, the Expedited Testing Day is held on Saturdays to allow for more applicants to attend. The Williamson County Sheriff's Office reports its accelerated hiring process has shortened the application timeline and attracted candidates who otherwise might not have applied (Ridderbusch 2023).

Rockville (Maryland) and Baltimore County (Maryland) have also reported success with similar single-day application events (PERF 2023). Several agencies have successfully streamlined the process by allowing applicants to rapidly advance through multiple stages, from submitting the application to meeting with a psychologist.

Sharing Interagency Requirements and Processes

Police agencies commonly invest significant time and resources in conducting tests and assessments of the same applicant (Schafer and Nelson 2022). Some candidates may apply to ten or more agencies, completing multiple physical and written exams for each, even though the requirements are very similar, if not identical. This results in agencies collectively reviewing similar or identical applications multiple times.

Alternatively, agencies could standardize and share initial hiring criteria (Schafer and Nelson 2022). Through this approach, applicants would complete tests and documentation only once, with the results made available to any agency the applicant chooses. This would save time and costs for both the agencies and the applicants. Some jurisdictions are already using such processes. For example, the Lakes Area (Iowa) Law Enforcement Coop, a group of 11 law enforcement agencies, share the application and testing process (Schafer and Nelson 2022). Agencies participating in such a cooperative effort can add additional evaluation criteria if they wish.

Using Technology to Streamline Applications

Technology can help streamline and modernize the application and hiring process through such means as electronic documents, virtual meetings, and online assessments (Burleigh 2021). Technology is most effective when it reduces friction and simplifies the process for applicants. Paperless applications, automated notifications upon receipt, online testing with rapid results, and live chat tools allow applicants to consult about challenges or questions as they arise (BJA and COPS Office 2023). Application questions and content can be customized to individual applicants, filtering out questions that are not pertinent. For example, only those who indicate prior military experience would be advanced to questions concerning length of service, relevant training, and branch (BJA and COPS Office 2023). Technology can increase application speed and the number of completed applications, though it should be paired with high-touch engagement with applicants, such as recruiter check-ins or status updates, to minimize dropouts (PERF 2019).

Agencies report that virtual interviews improve access to the applicant pool without diminishing screening quality (BJA and COPS Office 2023; Sun et al. 2022). For instance, the Arlington (Texas) Police Department used virtual preliminary interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic and credited the practice with sustaining recruitment success while shortening the overall hiring timeline (Sun et al. 2022). Online interviews may be especially beneficial for applicants who are relocating or juggling another job while awaiting an agency offer, as they may minimize unnecessary time and travel (BJA and COPS Office 2023; Sun et al. 2022). Agencies note that virtual formats are especially effective for structured interviews, oral boards, and informational meetings (PERF 2023).

Agencies have also used virtual tools to consolidate multiple steps relevant to the hiring process. These tools include remote document submission, virtual background interviews, and parallel scheduling of interviews and screenings. These processes reduce idle gaps between steps and the need for applicants to repeat steps (PERF 2023; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Nevertheless, many processes, such as physical, medical, and psychological exams, still require in-person meetings (BJA and COPS Office 2023).

Reminder messages for tasks such as completing personal history statements can help applicants themselves speed the process (Linos and Riesch 2020). A recent experiment tested the effects of reminder emails and follow-up text messages to candidates encouraging them to complete personal history statements, noting a two-week deadline and that most applicants could complete the statement in that time. While this communication had only a modest effect on the number of recipients who submitted the statement, it had a substantial effect on the proportion who did so within two weeks.

Partnering with Service Providers

Partnering with third-party vendors can lighten the administrative burden by moving the application process to other platforms and using private sector screening centers to pre-screen applicants (Dudley 2022). Vendors are most commonly used for written and physical testing, psychological evaluations, and background processing. Some vendors advertise success in automating repetitive and redundant administrative tasks (Police1 2020b) and in saving significant time on completing background checks (Police1 2020a). These partnerships can reduce overtime costs, provide validated and legally compliant assessments, and free up internal staff to focus on other duties (U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Testing managed by third-party vendors also expands test sites geographically, eliminating or reducing the need for applicants to travel long distances (PERF 2023; U.S. Department of Justice 2019).

Agencies can also outsource specialized or high-volume screening steps to prevent backlogs from stalling the hiring process (PERF 2019, 2023). However, agencies should monitor and track timelines and attrition rates throughout the process to ensure that vendors are "meeting the mark" and applicants feel valued throughout the process.

Rolling Hiring and Testing Cycles

Many agencies have sporadic hiring and testing periods, often ending application and testing opportunities before all vacancies have been filled (BJA and COPS Office 2023). As a result, some candidates who may have applied after the application cut-off are unable to do so. Rather than cutting off applications at a particular date, agencies should continuously accept and review them until all positions are filled and even afterward to secure "hire-ahead" positions (Sun et al. 2022).

For example, the Georgetown (Texas) Police Department updated its hiring process to be continuous after discovering that applicants were choosing other agencies if it was not hiring at the time (BJA and COPS Office 2023). Updating its hiring process allowed the department to generate multiple hiring lists, have candidates available for positions as they opened, and make the process more manageable for administrative staff (BJA and COPS Office 2023). This allowed the agency to address staffing challenges rapidly rather than being reactive to issues.

Finally, testing smaller groups of applicants more frequently allows candidates to advance through the process without waiting for the next scheduled exam (BJA and COPS Office 2023). This can both help retain those in the hiring process and speed up the hiring timeline.

Reducing the Post-Offer Gap

Police agencies often lose candidates during the gap between conditional job offers and academy start dates, particularly when that gap spans several months (PERF 2023). One way to reduce this gap is to increase the number of academy classes. This modification typically entails having smaller continuous cohorts entering the academy or partnering with larger agencies for academy training. Another option is to place staff in cadet positions, enabling them to be compensated and gain experience, while awaiting the academy. Such strategies enable agencies to spend less time processing and hiring candidates who drop out, maximizing the return on their time and investment.

Conclusion

Screening standards need not be compromised to shorten hiring timelines. The modern candidate pool appears to expect a speedy and straightforward application process, but the hiring process in policing is typically very lengthy and perceived as burdensome and complicated. Agencies have reported using various techniques to quicken the hiring process and lighten the administrative load for both the agency and applicants. These include changing or simplifying requirements, hosting "hiring days," sharing requirements and processes, using technology, partnering with third-party vendors, using rolling hiring cycles, and reducing the waiting period between employment offers and the academy. These approaches demonstrate that hiring timelines can be significantly reduced through process improvements that still preserve, rather than weaken, applicant screening.

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Community Policing Solutions to Police Staffing Challenges

Ethan Humphrey and Jeremy M. Wilson

Community Policing and Police Staffing

Proper police staffing and effective community policing are paramount to many leaders seeking to deliver effective public safety services to their communities. In recent years, these goals have become increasingly important but difficult to reach due to legitimacy and staffing concerns (del Pozo et al. 2024; Fine et al. 2024). With staff levels in 2025 still five percent below what they were in 2020 (Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] 2025) and communities' perceptions of safety decreasing (del Pozo et al. 2024), agencies are seeking viable solutions. This is an increasingly complex challenge given agencies face decreased budgets (Jacobs et al. 2021) and difficulty in attracting qualified applicants (del Pozo et al. 2024).

What should police agencies do when facing strained community relations, a diminished staff level, fewer qualified applicants, a decreased budget, and an expectation of an immediate response? The answer lies in optimizing solutions to meet each agency's individual needs, limitations, and priorities, because there is no "silver-bullet" staffing approach for all agencies (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP] 2024). Solutions that are a challenge to some may be optimal for others. To accurately gauge effectiveness, an assessment of various factors relevant to police agencies is essential and necessary. To address these issues, this guide draws on a larger assessment supported by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services of staffing tactics that practitioners suggest can help agencies meet both staffing and community policing goals.

Approach

The larger COPS Office supported assessment identified, through a search of journal articles, news stories, and practitioner reports published from 2010 to 2022, 237 tactics that an agency could use for recruitment and selection. This review focuses exclusively on tactics among those 237 that may also advance community policing. We asked 42 practitioners to rate a random subset of tactics, with 30 ultimately providing responses, yielding a 71 percent response rate. The sample of practitioners was non-probability based, but it was designed to include those working in department types (e.g., local and state police), and sizes and in positions associated with the staffing process in locations across the United States.

For each tactic, we asked respondents to provide ratings on various performance dimensions, including impact on community policing, staffing levels, the quality of police work, agency costs, ease of implementation, and the immediacy of impact (see box on "Staffing Tactics Performance Dimensions"). We averaged ratings for each tactic's dimensions to develop a composite assessment that accounted for potential variation in experience. We retained for analysis only those with at least two ratings by practitioners.

We focus here on the 32 tactics among the 237 to which respondents gave a rating for community policing impact of 4.33 or higher, meaning they would more than "somewhat advance the goals of community policing." We then ranked and sorted these 32 tactics along other performance dimensions that we asked respondents to consider. We note again that these 32 tactics are only a subset of all 237 we evaluated. Hence, while this guide will benefit police agencies seeking to advance community policing through staffing tactics, it does not reveal all the potential ways our full analysis found to facilitate staffing.

Staffing Tactics Performance Dimensions

Respondents rated each staffing tactic on the following performance dimensions based on the associated scales:

- Would the tactic impede or advance the goals of ***community policing***?
    1. Greatly impede
    2. Somewhat impede
    3. No effect
    4. Somewhat advance
    5. Greatly advance
- Would the tactic decrease or increase the ***number of staff***?
    1. Large decrease (5% or more over a year)
    2. Modest decrease (less than 5% over a year)
    3. No change
    4. Modest increase (less than 5% over a year)
    5. Large increase (5% or more over a year)
- Would the tactic reduce or increase the ***quality*** of police work?
    1. Greatly reduce
    2. Somewhat reduce
    3. No effect
    4. Somewhat increase
    5. Greatly increase
- Would the tactic increase or decrease ***agency costs***?
    1. Greatly increase ($50,000 or more over a year)
    2. Somewhat increase (less than $50,000 over a year)
    3. No effect
    4. Somewhat decrease (less than $50,000 over a year)
    5. Greatly decrease ($50,000 or more over a year)
- Would the tactic be ***difficult or easy to implement***?
    1. Very difficult (significant staff time and coordination over a year)
    2. Somewhat difficult (moderate staff time and coordination over a year)
    3. Somewhat easy (modest staff time and coordination over a year)
    4. Very easy (little staff time and coordination over a year)
- Would the tactic have a ***delayed or immediate impact*** on department staffing levels?
    1. Very delayed (more than 24 months)
    2. Somewhat delayed (13 to 24 months)
    3. Somewhat immediate (3 to 12 months)
    4. Very immediate (within 3 months)

Staffing Tactics for Community Policing

Police staffing and community policing are intertwined in many ways. First, one tactic can achieve both goals. For example, police agencies often suggest that community members participate in a ride-along to get to know police officers better in general (Fisher-Stewart 2007) or to gain a better understanding of the job's realities before applying (Wilson et al. 2010). As one of our respondents

noted, "We currently have a ride-along program for citizens, as well as for applicants." More generally, doing something positive for the community naturally attracts (i.e., helps recruitment) and engages (i.e., community policing) members of that community (Police1 2025). Second, positive community input and integration are key to effective recruitment because it is from the community that an agency needs to recruit. Also, the hiring of officers should consider their ability to successfully engage with the community (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015). Third, the community should set the standard for recruits, emphasizing the specific skills or attributes that are important to them (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015).

Table 1 lists the staffing tactics respondents suggested were also best able to advance the goals of community policing. (Except where noted, all means are based on a five-point scale.) Many of these tactics featured outreach through community events, organizations, or activities orchestrated by police departments. Others, such as workload assessments, acquiring statewide recruitment funds, and developing a recruitment plan, can also involve consulting the community in some respects. For example, workload assessments are typically based on calls for service and performance objectives that include proactive activities such as community policing (Wilson and Grammich 2024; Wilson and Weiss 2014). Agencies may also consider community perspectives in workload assessments (Nolan 2017; Smith 2025).

Table 1: Top Ten Staffing Tactics for Advancing Community Policing

Tactic	Community Policing Mean
Community relations analysis	5.00
General community outreach	5.00
Ride-alongs	4.67
Community event outreach for recruiting	4.67
Community outpost program, e.g., police-organized community centers	4.67
Outreach to specialized organizations	4.67
Workload assessments	4.50
Statewide recruitment funds	4.50
Targeting a broad range of college majors	4.50
Developing a recruitment plan	4.50

Field Spotlight

The City of Raleigh, North Carolina, surveys the community every two years (RaleighNC.gov 2025). Among the survey topics on police-community relations are respondent perceptions of the quality of police services, the relationship between the community and the police, and how frequently respondents interact with police. The city seeks to make data-driven decisions on the findings. The survey can help recruiting by allowing the agency to publicize favorable views on it or to demonstrate the need for more staff to foster better interactions with the community and improve the quality of police work.

The Cranston (Rhode Island) Police Department has established an outreach on "Building Bridges Through Fitness" (LPR News 2025). This event aimed to develop connections between officers and local youth. The event featured individual officers and their youthful teammates training for and eventually competing in a fitness event together. The broader goals of the initiative are to foster trust and understanding, enhance recruitment, engage the community in meaningful discussions about policing, and strengthen community ties.

Increasing Staff Levels

Table 2 depicts the five best staffing tactics for community policing that increase staff level, according to practitioners. Mentoring applicants is the top tactic here. A respondent noted that this is "difficult to do, but [a] great idea and definitely worth the time and money spent." Respondents noted the potential of streamlining the hiring process and engaging with candidates throughout it. One respondent noted engagement should be tailored, claiming, "Engaging with a college football recruiter vs engaging like a virtual Q&A are vastly different, likely with different impacts and effectiveness." Agencies should not consider everything that involves some communication as effective engagement. Rather, they should prioritize quality over quantity and provide recruits with a dialogue and interaction that shows that they matter to the agency. Regarding engagement, another respondent noted, "We are heavily engaged with each applicant throughout the hiring process. It has increased our success rate from application to graduating the academy."

Table 2: Top Five Staffing Tactics for Community Policing that Increase Staffing Level

Tactic	Level Mean	Community Policing Mean
Mentoring applicants or potential applicants	5.00	4.33
Streamlining the hiring process	4.67	4.33
Community event outreach for recruiting	4.67	4.67
Statewide recruitment funds	4.33	4.50
Engaging with candidates throughout the hiring process	4.33	4.33

Field Spotlight

The Edmonton (Alberta) Police Service has implemented a "Recruit Mentoring Academy." This initiative provides police applicants with mentorship throughout the fitness, interview, and other stages of the hiring process (IACP n.d.).

Both the Rockville (Maryland) and Baltimore County (Maryland) Police Departments have merged their hiring assessments into recruiting events (PERF 2023). The streamlining of the recruiting and testing process allowed applicants to complete several entrance exams and interviews all in one day at the same event. An executive of the Rockville Police Department stated that the initiative was highly successful, resulting in conditional offers to 17 candidates.

Improving Quality of Policing

Table 3 ranks the staffing tactics that respondents suggested can boost community policing by their perceived effect on the quality of policing. Of the top-ranked tactic here, targeting a broad range of college majors, one respondent stated, "Reaching a broad range of majors would expand our footprint at any college/university." Nevertheless, another practitioner noted a "challenge" in "understanding the correlation between majors and student interests for recruitment…" This suggests that outreach to a wide range of majors is generally positive but could lead to some inefficiency due to interacting with students who are less interested in policing.

Table 3: Top Five Staffing Tactics for Community Policing that Improve Quality of Policing

Tactic	Quality Mean	Community Policing Mean
Targeting a broad range of college majors	4.50	4.50
General community outreach	4.33	5.00
Mentoring applicants or potential applicants	4.33	4.33
College student pathway program, e.g., those meeting qualifications get entry-level jobs	4.33	4.33
Outreach to specialized organizations	4.00	4.67

Field Spotlight

The Lansing Community College hosts the Mid-Michigan Police Academy, which can be completed simultaneously with an associate's degree (Lansing Community College n.d.). Upon completing certain requirements, students become eligible to be licensed as a police officer. Additionally, the typical student is sponsored or hired by a local police department as a recruit, with the expectation that they will become a police officer upon completing the program. The sponsorship and pathway program provides students with multiple benefits, including knowing that they will have a job immediately after exiting the academy (if they have reached the age requirement), acquiring certification and their degree simultaneously, and having a stronger connection and attachment to their agency and the policing field. These benefits may lead students to develop greater commitment and reduce attrition from their agency or the field in general.

Several police chiefs in Eagle County, Colorado conducted outreach with local churches (Sloan 2018). An officer of the Vail (Colorado) Police Department reported that, for his department, outreach is not just an event where the department hopes people attend but alsoan opportunity for the department to go where community members congregate and feel safe. This type of outreach has been highly successful in building meaningful connections with community groups. This approach may be perceived as improving the quality of police work because specialized groups may connect with the public more effectively and bring useful skills to the profession.

Decreasing Agency Costs

Some staffing tactics require abundant resources and funds that are simply not available for certain agencies. Table 4 provides the top staffing tactics for community policing that are most affordable, all of which respondents suggested would be cost neutral or even reduce costs. The top two tactics here—developing a recruitment plan and streamlining the hiring process—are both process modifications. Regarding a recruitment plan, one of our respondents stated, "Priorities, systems, processes and technology, along with high touch, will improve police recruitment." The other three tactics here, which respondents suggested would be cost neutral, were categorized by outreach.

Table 4: Top Five Staffing Tactics for Community Policing that Decrease Agency Costs

Tactic	Cost Mean	Community Policing Mean
Developing a recruitment plan	4.00	4.50
Streamlining the hiring process	3.33	4.33
General community outreach	3.00	5.00
Outreach to specialized organizations	3.00	4.67
Recruiting local residents	3.00	4.33

Field Spotlight

The Davenport (Iowa) Police Department celebrated National Coffee with a Cop Day by gathering at a local coffee shop with community members (Gillespie 2025). The mission of this form of outreach is to eliminate barriers between the community and the police, recognize the community's concerns, and create a relationship between the police and the community. Additionally, Coffee with a Cop is an innovative approach to engaging with and attracting the community and requires little to no cost (Cotter 2016).

To streamline the hiring process, police agencies may modify the length and steps of their applications (PERF 2023). Agencies may inadvertently develop barriers to the process. One agency representative quipped, "It takes us longer to investigate a recruit than a triple homicide" (PERF 2023). Making the application process easier, faster, and streamlined where possible may reduce costs by reducing the administrative staff's immense, oftentimes repetitive workload (Linos and Riesch 2020).

Ease of Implementation

Table 5 highlights the top staffing tactics for community policing that are easiest to implement. Ride-alongs, general community outreach, and recruiting local residents are all outreach-based. Regarding "recruiting local residents," one respondent stated, "Locals know the community and the agency, so recruiting homegrown folks is always a bonus as they have a tie to the community and that helps community policing in many ways. Every officer on every call should be a recruiter locally[. Recruiting] should not fall on one person." Regarding the process modification of "developing a recruitment plan," one respondent contended it is "extremely important for each agency to have and work these plans." "Statewide recruitment funds" were also seen as relatively easy to implement, perhaps because agencies themselves would not be raising the funds.

Table 5: Top Five Staffing Tactics for Community Policing that Are Easiest to Implement

Tactic	Ease of Implementation Mean (based on 4-point scale)	Community Policing Mean
Ride-alongs	3.67	4.67
Developing a recruitment plan	3.33	4.50
General community outreach	3.33	5.00
Recruiting local residents	3.33	4.33
Statewide recruitment funds	3.33	4.50

Field Spotlight

The Cincinnati Police Department allows interested recruits or civilians to participate in a ride-along with a police officer patrol unit (City of Cincinnati n.d.). The ride-along program is part of the department's community involvement plan. Such programs may be considered easy to implement because many agencies throughout the United States already have them in place.

The Milwaukee Police Commission developed a recruitment plan aimed at increasing applications and acquiring a high-quality pool of applicants (City of Milwaukee 2025). The plan entails conducting strategic recruitment events and targeted advertising and outreach, increasing opportunities to apply, targeting overlooked populations, and using new financial incentives. The plan also outlines modifications to the selection and hiring process aimed at modernizing testing. The report on the recruitment plan notes that many tactics discussed in the plan have already been tested and are "tried-and-true", indicating that the plan primarily uses approaches known to have worked. Furthermore, any new initiatives or the expansion of previously used strategies has been developed to strategically and methodically address past issues and target concerns that the community and officials have specifically emphasized.

Immediacy of Effect

Police agencies that need an immediate solution to their community policing or staffing needs may choose to use one of the tactics listed in Table 6. "Department-produced videos featuring officer 'stories'" was the top-rated tactic here. Social media or website dissemination could allow rapid dissemination of such a video, and for departments to more quickly create personal connections with candidates.

Table 6: Top Five Staffing Tactics for Community Policing that Most Immediately Affect Staffing

Tactic	Immediacy Mean (based on a 4-point scale)	Community Policing Mean
Department-produced video featuring officer "stories"	4.00	4.33
Streamlining the hiring process	3.67	4.33
College student pathway program	3.50	4.33
Community outpost program	3.50	4.67
General community outreach	3.33	5.00

The second-highest rated tactic for immediacy of effect was "streamlining the hiring process." To streamline the hiring process, agencies might consider: (1) assigning a dedicated recruiter to facilitate and coordinate activities (U.S. Department of Justice 2009), (2) eliminating redundancies in the process (PERF 2019), (3) combining multiple assessments into a one-day event (Center for Public Safety and Justice 2025; U.S. Department of Justice 2009), (4) using technology to automate steps creating a simpler and more efficient process (Center for Public Safety and Justice 2025), and

(5) using vendors to manage the testing processes for recruitment and selection (U.S. Department of Justice 2019).

Field Spotlight

The Lexington (North Carolina) Police Department produces YouTube videos that showcase its officers and their backgrounds. In one video, an officer discusses what piqued her interest and led her to becoming an officer and why she enjoys working for the department (City of Lexington 2024b). In another, an officer discusses what led him to become a police officer and states that, as a school resource officer, he has been able to mentor and guide youth in pursuing a positive life and career trajectory (City of Lexington 2024a).

The Honolulu Police Department has a college student pathway internship program (Join Honolulu PD n.d.). The internship aims to integrate those acquiring a bachelor's degree with the application process, enabling them to transition immediately into the department at the time of graduation into an entry-level position.

Executive Summary

Those leading police agencies and making decisions about police staffing and community policing strategy must consider how to most efficiently allocate their scarce resources toward these objectives. They can use our findings to prioritize staffing tactics that best advance community policing implementation while helping to meet their other performance obligations and objectives. Considering the multiple ways staffing tactics perform relative to their agency's needs and circumstances can help them to more efficiently achieve their organizational goals. Below are some takeaways of our work to help them do so.

Many Tactics Advance Both Community Policing and Staffing

A major takeaway or theme highlighted by our assessment is that of outreach. Tactics that involve face-to-face interaction and personalization appear to have a strong impact on multiple dimensions. This is consistent with a high-touch recruitment process (Wilson, Grammich, and Cherry 2024). Most tactics within each table ranked by quality, cost, implementation ease, and timing were outreach tactics. Another significant theme, although less pronounced than that of outreach, is modification of processes. At least two process tactics appeared as top tactics for staffing level and cost. In fact, streamlining the hiring process appeared as the second-highest rated tactic for both performance dimensions.

Tactics Perform Differently, and Some Help Achieve Multiple Goals

Many tactics were rated as highly effective across multiple dimensions. General community outreach, for example, was found among the top tactics for improving policing quality and reducing costs while being relatively easy to implement and quick to have an effect. General community outreach could be operationalized in several ways. Agencies can consider what they and others have done in the past to engage the community, facilitate community interaction, or explore new opportunities. Example approaches include (U.S. Department of Justice 2019):

- Conducting youth-oriented outreach (e.g., Police Activities League or Building Bridges through Fitness)
- Developing university and college partnerships
- Expanding outreach beyond events and connecting with groups who traditionally have not had a positive relationship with the police
- Developing a web or social media presence
- Creating and following through with plans to consult the community as an advocate in strategy development
- Using the news media for outreach
- Receiving and using hiring recommendations from key community stakeholders
- Conducting foot patrols to foster communication and problem-solving.

Practitioners also note streamlining the hiring process can improve staffing levels relatively quickly with modest cost while also fostering community policing.

Developing a recruitment plan was among the highest-rated staffing tactics for community policing for both cost and ease of implementation. To improve efficiency, police decision-makers can formulate a formal plan to organize and guide their recruitment efforts, accounting for the agency's context and objectives. Doing so may allow an agency to more easily and affordably configure its recruitment strategy to effectively engage the community.

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Leadership as a Morale Engine in Small/Medium-Size Police Agencies

Nathan Cronin and Jeremy M. Wilson

Nature of the Issue

Officer morale has become an increasingly important issue for small and medium-sized police agencies, particularly as departments struggle with staffing, retention, and workload pressures. Understanding this issue requires examining how morale operates within these organizations and why it carries such weight in smaller agencies.

In many smaller agencies, frontline officer morale challenges are often attributed to structural resource constraints, particularly chronic budget limitations and staffing pressures that intensify workload demand and organizational strain (Mastrofski, Willis, and Kochel 2007). Morale challenges can also be driven by issues and perceptions of leadership, both at the immediate and executive levels (Wilson et al. 2023). Chiefs and executive supervisors suggest staffing shortages, tight budgets, limited advancement opportunities, and competition from neighboring departments are the primary causes of low morale. These challenges are real, and no amount of leadership skill can eliminate them. However, they do not fully explain why morale can vary so dramatically from one agency to another, even among agencies operating under similar challenges. In practice, morale in smaller agencies is shaped less by organizational size or resources and far more by leadership, particularly the behavior and communication from supervisors.

In smaller to medium-sized agencies, morale is not a symbolic concept or a line item on an employee survey. It is a daily experience shaped by how officers are treated, how decisions are communicated, and perceptions on whether leadership is fair and consistent. Because smaller agencies are close-knit organizations with limited internal mobility, leadership behavior has greater impact on morale than it does in larger police agencies. Officers interact with supervisors more frequently, have fewer ways to avoid poor leadership, and feel the effects of executive decisions more personally. As a result, morale in smaller agencies tends to rise or fall more based on supervisory behavior than structural conditions.

Morale may also affect whether officers choose to stay with an agency or look elsewhere. In small and medium-sized departments, retention decisions are rarely driven by a single event but instead develop over time as officers weigh whether the organization is one at which desire to remain a part of long-term. When morale is consistently low, officers are more likely to disengage, begin exploring opportunities with other agencies, or leave law enforcement altogether. This dynamic is especially important in smaller agencies, where officers have fewer internal options for change (e.g., change shift or work assignment) and when agency dissatisfaction is felt more personally. By contrast, when morale is strong, officers are more willing to tolerate the structural limitations that often come with smaller departments, such as limited advancement opportunities or tighter staffing. In sum, morale can either accelerate turnover when neglected or support retention when leadership is attentive and responsive.

What Are Agencies Experiencing?

Agency leaders frequently observe morale-related challenges emerging through everyday supervisory interactions and operational decisions. These experiences provide insight into how morale issues develop and spread within small and medium-sized police agencies. Small police agencies operate in an organizational environment that naturally amplifies the impact of leadership on frontline officers. Officers often work with the same supervisors for extended periods, sometimes for most of their careers. Decisions about schedules, overtime, assignments, and training are made by people the officers know well and see regularly. In this setting, leadership is not a distant or bureaucratic construct, but instead an immediate and visible reality.

These conditions make morale particularly vulnerable in smaller agencies. Frustrations can grow quickly when not addressed, especially when officers feel decisions are made without explanation or consistency (Wolfe and Lawson 2020). A schedule change that might go unnoticed in a large department can become a major source of frustration in a smaller one if officers feel it was handled unfairly or with bias. At the same time, positive leadership behaviors, such as clear communication, consistency, and respect, can have an equally powerful stabilizing effect. Even when staffing is tight and workloads are heavy, good supervision can sustain morale and keep officers engaged.

Frontline supervisors can be especially influential. Sergeants and other first-line supervisors are responsible not only for managing work but also for shaping officer perceptions of the organization and of external events that impact the agency, such as high-profile use-of-force incidents, protests, and unrest. In smaller agencies, these supervisors are the primary connection between line officers and command staff, and their behavior often defines the agency's culture. Officers closely observe how supervisors make decisions, how they handle conflict, and how they treat people under stress. Over time, these observations form the basis of officers' morale (and provide behavior they can model, leading to cascading effects).

Because supervisors control much of officers' daily experience, their influence extends well beyond formal authority. Decisions about overtime, time off, assignments, and training opportunities send powerful signals about fairness and respect. When supervisors are consistent, transparent, and willing to explain their reasoning, officers may be more likely to view decisions as legitimate, even when outcomes are not ideal. When supervisors appear arbitrary, dismissive, or inconsistent, morale can erode quickly. In smaller agencies, perceptions may indicate that there is little separation between supervisory behavior and officer attitudes.

Fairness and transparency are particularly important drivers of morale in smaller departments. Officers want to believe that decisions are made for legitimate reasons and that rules apply equally to everyone. Officers do not necessarily expect perfection but do want leadership to be honest and consistent. When supervisors take the time to explain why certain decisions are made, officers are less likely to feel resentful or disengaged. Transparency can help prevent misunderstandings and reduce the spread of rumors that often undermine morale in close-knit organizations.

What the Research Is Saying

Research on police organizations consistently shows that leadership practices can be tied to officer morale. Studies in policing and organizational behavior emphasize that fairness, transparency, and consistency are central to how officers evaluate their leaders and their organizations (Lonergan 1960; Frydl and Skogan 2004; Wolfe and Lawson 2020; Coffey 2021). In small and medium-sized agencies, these dynamics are especially visible because discretionary decisions are more personal and more closely observed by officers.

Transparency plays a critical role in sustaining morale (Geetha 2004). Officers do not need to agree with every decision, but they are more likely to accept outcomes when they understand the reasoning behind them. When explanations are absent, informal communication fills the gap, often in the form of rumors or assumptions that undermine trust. Over time, this erosion of trust can have a direct impact on morale and engagement. Consistent communication helps prevent these dynamics and reinforces a sense of organizational fairness (Frydl and Skogan 2004).

Consistency in supervisory behavior can be equally important. In smaller teams, perceived favoritism stands out immediately and can erode morale quickly. Research suggests that even minor inconsistencies can have outsized effects in close-knit organizations (Lonergan 1960). Supervisors who apply standards evenly and communicate expectations clearly create predictability and trust, which supports morale even when decisions are unpopular.

Daily interactions between supervisors and officers also matter greatly. Research indicates that morale is shaped less by formal policies, suggesting that how supervisors treat officers in routine interactions matters greatly (Hammond and Waltemeyer 2021). Respectful communication, constructive feedback, and recognition of effort contribute to stronger morale, while dismissive or publicly critical behavior can have lasting negative effects. In close-knit organizations, these interactions accumulate over time and shape how officers feel about their work, their supervisors, and their agency.

Feedback and voice are also strongly linked to morale (Smith 1995). Officers who feel they can raise concerns without fear of retaliation are more engaged and committed to their organizations. Small and medium-sized agencies are particularly well positioned to foster this type of communication through regular check-ins and informal conversations between supervisors and officers. These practices reinforce trust and allow leadership to identify and address issues before they escalate.

Next Steps Forward: Policy and Practice

Addressing morale concerns in small and medium-sized police agencies requires practical, leadership-driven approaches rather than resource-intensive reforms. Improving morale in small police agencies does not require major financial investment but instead can be achieved through intentional leadership. Chiefs and agency leadership must recognize that supervisory behavior is central to morale and need to ensure that supervisors are properly equipped and expected to lead fairly, communicate clearly, and engage consistently with their officers.

Small police agencies will continue to face staffing challenges, budget limitations, and external pressures. However, agencies can control how leaders treat their own personnel. In smaller departments, leadership is viewed as personal, visible, and unavoidable to frontline officers. Supervisory behavior can shape morale more drastically than any policy, perk, or benefit can. When supervisors lead with fairness, transparency, and respect, officer morale can stay at a consistent level, even under difficult, and at times, challenging conditions. When leaders fail at these qualities, morale can suffer and retention rates plummet. In smaller police agencies, leadership is not just a management function but the engine that drives morale.

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Improving Police Service Provision through Proper Span of Control and First-Line Supervision

Ethan Humphrey and Jeremy M. Wilson

Introduction

Span of control is a measure of the number of subordinates a manager directly supervises (Blau and Schoenherr 1971; Ouchi and Dowling 1974). While important for all levels within a police department, this concept is most often associated with "first-line supervision" (Currie 1988). In this context, first-line supervision describes the number of officers assigned to a sergeant. First-line supervisors are crucial for effective policing, as they strongly influence officers (Cronin, McDevitt, and Cordner 2017; Engel and Worden 2003; Ingram and Lee 2015; Kapustin, Neumann, and Ludwig 2022; Smith 2022), ensure officer accountability (Engel 2000; Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] 2018; U.S. Department of Justice 2019), and serve as a vital channel between upper management and line staff (Santos 2019; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Given the significant impact of supervision quality, determining an appropriate span of control is central to organizational effectiveness. This guide discusses several aspects of span of control and first-line supervision that are critical to accomplishing the work of police organizations in ways that make the most of their staffing resources.

Why is Span of Control So Important in Policing?

Police agencies face increasingly complex and unpredictable work. For example, officers are increasingly responding to homelessness, gang, and mental health-related incidents (CSG Justice Center 2019; U.S. Department of Justice 2019; Santos 2019). When something goes awry, an officer cannot simply put the situation on hold or have their supervisor "fix" the issue immediately. Operational dispersion of officers, both by area and situation, makes supervision quite complicated.

A primary reason for maintaining a proper and balanced span of control is to ensure operational efficiency. When supervisors are stretched too thin, communication becomes strained and their ability to provide timely guidance diminishes (PERF 2018; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). An appropriate span of control can enable supervisors to exercise better leadership, thereby ensuring the quality of the work and guidance provided (PERF 2018; Santos 2019). Because patrol officers are the most public-facing members of the agency, their behavior reflects the professionalism and mission of the entire agency. Their performance is heavily shaped by the training, guidance, and expectations set by first-line supervisors (Cronin, McDevitt, and Cordner 2017; Engel and Worden 2003; McManus, Isaza, and Engel 2018). Skilled supervisors are thus critical not only for shaping officers' decision-making but also for ensuring that departmental strategies and policies are implemented as intended. Without them, even the most thorough plan of action will become operationally substandard due to a lack of attention or disregard for the intended execution (Santos 2019).

First-line supervisors spend most of their time on administrative and oversight duties (e.g., emails, tasking personnel, reviewing work) rather than on discretionary leadership activities (Perry and Davis 2025). This underscores the importance of span of control. Broadly speaking, span of control is also crucial because officers rate supervisors most favorably when they are fair, supportive, and transparent (Cronin, McDevitt, and Cordner 2017). These supervisory skills tend to dwindle when supervisors are going from task to task due to a high span of control. Officers' positive perceptions of supervisors are correlated with their overall job satisfaction (Cronin, McDevitt, and Cordner 2017), which in turn may serve as a retention mechanism (Davies et al. 2024; Wilson et al. 2023).

What Happens Without a Proper Span of Control?

While allowing supervisors to manage an abundance of officers may seem like an effective practice, especially when staffing is short, doing so risks compromising the quality of policing. Officers often require support from their supervisor and must know that when they need guidance, they will receive it. If the supervisor's attention is consumed by duties related to other officers or by an overwhelming volume of administrative work, an individual officer may be less sure about receiving guidance. Moreover, overburdened first-line supervisors may not be able to detect officer misconduct (Smith 2022), especially if their workload is focused on reactive, task-driven responsibilities rather than proactive mentoring or early identification of misconduct (Perry and Davis 2025). Thus, a high span of control can decrease the ability to provide efficient oversight of subordinates and to identify problems within an agency.

A span of control that is too low can present other challenges, including inefficiency and underuse of available resources. To achieve a low span of control, an agency will need ample staff to fill first-line supervisor positions. Assigning too few officers to a sergeant does not make efficient use of the sergeant's time. Moreover, especially when staffing is short, the placement of too many staff in first-line supervisory positions takes away from the ability to deploy staff in line positions, where they may be most needed.

Are There Common Supervisory Ratios?

The ICMA Center for Public Safety Management uses the "Rule of 60" to determine the overall composition of police agencies. This rule states that 60 percent of sworn officers in a department should be dedicated to the patrol function (McCabe n.d.), thereby preventing the organization from becoming top-heavy (i.e., having an excessive number of supervisors relative to officers).

Span of control, specific to first-line supervision, is calculated by dividing the number of patrol officers by the number of sergeants in an agency. Currently, span of control benchmarks or ratios vary. The average span of control measured in a survey of 140 U.S. agencies was 1:7 (Lane 2006). Clark (2009) recommends ratios of five to 12 officers per supervisor, depending on operational demands, while the Matrix Consulting Group (2020a) claims that no sergeant should supervise more than nine officers.

Lower supervisory ratios may mitigate risks and produce better oversight (Clark 2009; PERF 2018). Many agencies assign supervisory ratios based on tradition, but such approaches typically lack

integration of actual determinants for a proper span of control. Models that consider such determinants would be more practical and accurate.

What Determines the Optimal Span of Control?

Applying a "one-size-fits-all" approach to agencies with varying circumstances and contexts can pose problems by not meeting the needs of particular situations. Little research has systematically examined how contemporary supervisors spend their time and their job task requirements, a lack which calls into question the utility of commonly used benchmarks for span of control (McManus, Isaza, and Engel 2018; Reynolds 2020). Below we review common determinants for an optimum span of control.

Task Complexity

The complexity of tasks is among the most critical determinants of span of control (Bohte and Meier 2001). Complex calls for service involving an investigation, domestic violence, or a mental health crisis, for example, would warrant greater attention than other calls (CSG Justice Center 2019; Santos and Santos 2023). Therefore, the types of duties delegated to or prioritized by first-line supervisors are vital to establishing an appropriate span of control. Span of control could vary both within and across units depending on the nature of the work.

Competency and Experience of Officers and Supervisors

The levels of competence and experience of officers under supervision significantly shape the amount of attention they require. Newer officers often require more guidance, as responsibilities are often different from what is learned in the police academy. Competency also extends beyond years of service; those with specific skills or training will be more effective on some particular assignments. Accordingly, agencies with many newer or lower-skilled officers will likely need a lower span of control.

The experience of supervisors is also important, as less-seasoned sergeants may require smaller spans of control to simultaneously learn as they teach subordinates. Supervisors who lack familiarity with agency procedures or specialized units may struggle to provide adequate oversight when responsible for too many officers. At the same time, highly experienced supervisors tend to exercise better judgment and operate in accordance with departmental policies and therefore to be able to handle a higher span of control.

Operational Uncertainty or Variation

Police supervisors and officers routinely receive new directions or priorities. Staff handling new issues while simultaneously trying to understand them or figure out how to best respond will need more supervision. New initiatives, such as community-oriented policing, can be complex for line-level officers and require supervisors who are aware of appropriate strategies and the agency-level mission (Willis 2011). Adoption of new policies, transition to new leadership, or external events can also affect supervision needs. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty and new

procedures heavily impacted the decision-making of officers and supervisors alike (Fenton-O'Creevy et al. 2024).

Geographic Dispersion

The size and number of beats within a jurisdiction can affect a supervisor's ability to arrive quickly on scene to provide guidance or support. Greater dispersion also limits face-to-face supervision and reduces opportunities for mentoring or guidance. Widely distributed patrol areas are common in smaller or specialized agencies such as park police (Wilson and Grammich 2025; Wooley and Smith 2022).

Technology

Technology enhances organizational efficiency by streamlining tasks and strengthening communication (Koper, Lum, and Willis 2014). To be effective in managing critical incidents, first-line supervisors must be able to complete administrative tasks while also on the street and supporting officers (PERF 2018). Mobile digital technology may enable sergeants to complete paperwork and administrative tasks electronically in the field. Such tools increase the accessibility of these supervisors to those they oversee.

Unity of Command

Unity of command, i.e., a principle holding that an officer should report to a single supervisor, is crucial for determining an appropriate span of control (Alexander Weiss Consulting 2020; Straub et al. 2017). Unity of command can help produce familiarity, clarify reporting practices, and decrease confusion or conflicting directives (Straub et al. 2017). Unity of command can, however, be difficult to establish.

What Do Staffing Assessments Reveal About Span of Control and Agency Size?

Staffing studies, often conducted by analytically experienced professionals, can help identify an optimal span of control by determining overall staff allocation needs. Below we highlight several examples that illustrate differences in existing and suggested supervisory ratios by agency size.

Large Agencies

In 2019, the Baltimore Police Department had 688 officers available for patrol (Alexander Weiss Consulting 2020). However, sergeants were often not on duty due to vacation, sick leave, or still other reasons, requiring line-level officers to assume the role of sergeant. A staffing study found that for the department to meet call-for-service demands as well as to accomplish community outreach and proactive policing, it would need 805 police officers and 115 sergeants. Therefore, the department's "ideal" sergeant-to-officer ratio was 1:7.

In 2024, the Oakland Police Department had 492 sworn line-level officers and 99 sergeants, while it was authorized to have 547 sworn line-level officers and 118 sergeants (PFM 2024). A staffing study

concluded that Oakland needed 112 more officers and 22 more sergeants than were budgeted. This included 394 officers and 58 sergeants for patrol, yielding a supervision ratio of 1:6.8.

In 2020, the Denton (Texas) Police Department had filled 182 of 195 authorized sworn positions, including 78 officers and eight sergeants in patrol (Matrix Consulting Group 2020a). A staffing study found that the department needed to increase its number of sworn officers in patrol to 86, which would lead to a span of control ratio of 1:10.8 in patrol. The study also found the department by 2030 would need to significantly increase staffing in the patrol division to 105 officers and 11 sergeants, with a span-of-control ratio of 1:9.5, to manage anticipated call volumes and other duties.

In 2017, the Pinal County (Arizona) Sheriff's Office had 168 deputies and 31 sergeants, resulting in a supervisory ratio of 1:5.4 (Center for Public Safety Management 2017). Due to increasing workload, training requirements, and population growth, a staffing study recommended expanding the department to 169 deputies and 33 sergeants, which would result in a supervisory ratio of 1:5.1.

In 2015, the Louisville Metro Police Department had 963 officers, 155 sergeants, 55 lieutenants, and 13 majors (Alexander Weiss Consulting 2015). This resulted in a sergeant-to-officer ratio of 1:6.5; a lieutenant-to-sergeant ratio of 1:2.8; and a major-to-lieutenant ratio of 1:4.2.

Small and Mid-Sized Agencies

In some smaller agencies, first-line supervisors are often tasked with administrative duties that would otherwise be managed by higher-ranking individuals. Sergeants in these agencies may handle calls for service, schedule officers, assist with procurement, and, on some schedules, act as department executives (U.S. Department of Justice 2019). This suggests the optimal span of control for smaller agencies (e.g., with a sworn staff of fewer than 100) may differ from that for larger ones.

In 2023, the Forney (Texas) Police Department had 29 authorized positions, including four patrol sergeants, with a supervisory ratio of 1:6 (Fritsch 2023). A staffing study suggested that Forney increase its sworn officer count to 33 (excluding traffic officers) and its number of patrol sergeants to eight, for a supervisory ratio of 1:4.1.

As of 2020, the Conshohocken (Pennsylvania) Police Department had four sergeants and 12 officers, resulting in a supervisory ratio of 1:3. Although this ratio is low, a staffing study (Matrix Consulting Group 2020b) determined that the department should maintain this ratio and current staffing levels.

In 2017, the Colerain (Ohio) Police Department maintained 6 sergeants and 30 patrol officers, yielding a supervisory ratio of 1:5 (Corsaro and Akbas 2017). Nonetheless, to meet operational demands, a staffing study suggested that the department increase the number of sergeants to 8 and officers to at least 35, resulting in an approximate supervisory ratio of 1:4.4.

In 2016, the Lake Forest Park (Washington) Police Department had three patrol sergeants and 11 officers, resulting in a supervisory ratio of 1:3.7 (Lake Forest Park Police Department 2016). A

staffing study conducted by the police department concluded that it would need five additional funded positions to fill staffing gaps, which, without an increase in the number of sergeants, would yield a supervisory ratio of 1:5.3.

What Are Other Lessons for Improving First-Line Supervision?

While the workload of first-line supervisors, particularly the number of staff they manage, affects their performance, so can their selection, training, and evaluation. We discuss these below.

Selection

Ensuring effective first-line supervision begins with selecting the proper supervisors. Agency executives must identify leadership skills among personnel and begin refining them before selecting a supervisor (U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Agencies should seek to identify candidates who are experienced, honest, have a good work ethic and character, and can communicate well both up and down the chain of command.

Agencies should also be objective when selecting individuals for promotion. The requirements and processes necessary for promotion should be clearly stated to all members of the organization and be transparent (U.S. Department of Justice 2019). These procedures ensure that other members of the organization will cooperate with and accept the first-line supervisor. Should agency leaders determine the current promotion criteria are not pertinent to the position's actual duties, they should strongly consider consulting experts and members from each level of the agency about how to restructure the requirements.

Although many departments use a "rank-order" list of those who have passed the sergeant's examination and have adequate experience to identify the next sergeant, there are other ways to approach the selection process (PERF 2018). For example, the Prince William County (Virginia) Police Department considers all who have passed the sergeant's exam to be equal, which may provide more opportunities to those who are overlooked. The Chicago Police Department makes one-third of its promotions based on "merit." In these cases, officers who have completed the initial phases of the promotion process are recommended for promotion by higher-ranking personnel, based on their test results, history, and character. This, one agency official said, reduces the number of promotions for those who were "good at taking tests, but who were not necessarily going to excel at the position" (PERF 2018, 37).

Training

A first-line supervisor's capabilities, guidance, and knowledge depend on effective and applicable training. Police chiefs often have more control over training than testing or selection (PERF 2018). Agencies can expand their training or improve areas that are typically lacking by (1) going beyond minimum state training requirements, (2) utilizing external organizations such as police associations and universities, (3) providing timely training, (4) extending training to include field exercises and mentoring, or (5) using scenario-based training or lessons from real-world body-camera footage (PERF 2018; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015). Simultaneously

training first-line supervisors and officers may also prove beneficial, as they navigate new areas together, learn what works, and gain insight from each other.

While specific training should be tailored to an agency's operational needs (e.g., community-police relations training), there are a few broad areas to focus on. These include improving confidence, capability to act, and standards for consistency (McManus, Isaza, and Engel 2018). First-line supervisors should also develop overall proficiency in the job by becoming familiar with the law, agency-specific policies, and community stakeholders (U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Through training, first-line supervisors should learn to lead effectively, make critical decisions under stress, think strategically, and engage with and respect the community they serve.

Professional development training can help first-line supervisors continually refine their skills and knowledge (PERF 2018; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Professional development is also beneficial for succession planning, as training can help first-line supervisors later advance to higher ranks (U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Furthermore, training opportunities can mitigate attrition, as staff place a high value on training and career development (Davies et al. 2024; Lin et al. 2023).

Evaluation

Most police agencies use evaluation systems or probationary periods for early-career first-line supervisors (PERF 2018). These systems may entail formal training programs, reviews upon completion of each training, or a simple rating of competency level in certain areas. The Tucson (Arizona) Police Department employs one of the more rigorous evaluation methods, continuously assessing sergeants' capabilities in such areas as communication, community engagement, crime reduction, incident command, knowledge of duties, leadership, management, and problem-solving.

To measure performance, departments should examine the day-to-day operations and reports of both supervisors and officers (U.S. Department of Justice 2019). For example, arrest reports, incident reports, and activity logs should be accurate and confirmed, and show supervisors' attention to detail. Body-worn camera footage can also be reviewed to assess performance and skill. Metrics can help ensure that the current span of control is optimal for an organization (Arnold 2025). By assessing confidence in management, employee engagement, productivity, or retention rates, an agency can better visualize whether its supervisory ratio is well-suited for its work. Evaluation systems and metrics ensure that supervisors are providing the level of oversight commensurate with the agency's current span of control.

Lastly, agencies should evaluate supervisors on their modeling of organizational values and expectations. Supervisors' priorities significantly affect their subordinates' behavior (Cronin, McDevitt, and Cordner 2017; Engel 2002; Engel and Worden 2003). Supervisor reflection of organizational values and priorities is especially vital when an agency adopts new or ambiguous directives such as community policing (Engel 2002; Santos 2019; Willis 2011).

Conclusion

Establishing an accurate and efficient span of control is paramount for proper police agency functioning. First-line supervisors are at the helm of policy, practice, and behavior, as they largely influence ground-level buy-in and accountability (Santos 2019; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Their ability to lead effectively depends on meeting workload demand, setting clear expectations, and having support at all levels of the organization. When supervisory ratios or span of control are too high or low, agencies put effective communication, oversight, resource efficiency, support, and development at risk. Police executives should tailor the span of control in their agencies to the characteristics of their organizations. Additionally, agencies should select the most appropriate candidates for supervisory roles and then provide comprehensive development and training opportunities (PERF 2018). Span of control does not pertain solely to administrative composition but affects nearly every level of the organization and the work it produces.

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Building a Modern Public Safety Workforce: The Role of Professional Staff in Policing

Narelle Hickmon and Tanya Meisenholder

Professional Staff as a Workforce Strategy

Public safety agencies across the United States are operating under sustained staffing pressure. Many departments continue to experience sworn vacancies, rising overtime costs, and expanding workload demands that strain personnel, budgets, and leadership capacity. At the same time, the scope of modern policing has grown more complex. Agencies are expected to meet core public safety demands while managing increasingly technical, administrative, and legal responsibilities that are essential to effective operations and increasingly central to how agencies function, but do not always require sworn authority.

Staffing challenges are therefore questions of workforce design, not just headcount. Agencies must decide how work is allocated, which roles require police authority, where specialized expertise is needed, and how to sustain capacity over time. These decisions shape organizational effectiveness and the ability to adapt to changing demands.

Professional staff are employees who do not hold sworn law enforcement authority and perform essential operational, technical, analytical, administrative, and leadership functions. Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics show the scale at which professional staff are already embedded in policing nationwide. As of December 31, 2020, more than 14,700 general-purpose law enforcement agencies employed an estimated 708,000 full-time sworn officers and 348,000 full-time civilian personnel (Brooks 2022; Goodison 2022).

Within this broader workforce, local police departments employed approximately 126,000 full-time civilian personnel alongside roughly 473,000 sworn officers in 2020, with professional staff especially concentrated in larger agencies where organizational complexity and scale are greatest (Goodison 2022). Sheriffs' offices rely most heavily on professional staff; in 2020, sheriffs' offices employed more full-time civilian personnel than sworn officers nationwide, consistent with their responsibilities for corrections, courts, and administrative functions (Brooks 2022). These roles support many of the functions that allow agencies to operate day to day.

In many agencies, administrative, technical, and specialized functions have been performed by sworn personnel through assignment-based or temporary placements. While this approach offers flexibility, it can limit continuity and the development of sustained expertise. As policing responsibilities have expanded, agencies have increasingly relied on professional staff to provide specialized skills, institutional knowledge, and operational stability in areas such as finance, human resources, records management, information technology, data analysis, policy development, accreditation, and community-facing services.

This guide supports police leaders, public safety executives, human resources professionals, and policymakers in approaching professional staff as part of a deliberate workforce strategy. It focuses on how staffing design can better align roles, authority, expertise, and career pathways to strengthen organizational capacity over time.

Professional Staff and Organizational Capacity

Despite the growing reliance on professional staff, many agencies continue to frame these roles as secondary or peripheral to core police work. When professional staff are viewed primarily as working in support functions rather than as contributors to organizational capacity, agencies limit their effectiveness and underutilize their expertise.

Limits of Treating Professional Staff as "Support" Functions

Treating professional staff as support personnel often results in unclear authority, constrained decision-making, and their exclusion from planning processes. Professional staff may be responsible for complex functions—such as records management, data systems, policy development, or compliance—while lacking the authority to implement changes, enforce standards, or coordinate across units. When challenges arise, sworn personnel are frequently required to intervene, slowing decision-making and placing additional demands on sworn resources (Poikela, Haake, and Lindberg 2024).

At the same time, agencies frequently rely on sworn personnel, trained as generalists, to perform highly specialized administrative, technical, or analytical work. While sworn officers bring valuable operational experience, frequent rotation, redeployment, and competing enforcement demands can limit their ability to develop or sustain expertise in these functions. This approach contributes to inefficiencies and repeated loss of institutional knowledge as personnel cycle in and out of specialized roles (Hall and Meisenholder 2024).

These patterns create a mismatch between responsibility, authority, and expertise across the organization. Professional staff may be accountable for outcomes without the authority needed to act, while sworn personnel are diverted from enforcement or investigative duties to manage functions outside their core training. Over time, this misalignment weakens organizational capacity and increases workload pressures across the workforce.

The consequences extend beyond efficiency. Professional staff who lack role clarity, authority, or recognition are more likely to experience frustration, reduced commitment, and job dissatisfaction, increasing their risk of turnover (Alderden and Skogan 2017). Continued reliance on sworn personnel to fill specialized roles further strains sworn capacity and limits agencies' ability to respond effectively to evolving public safety demands.

These challenges are not the result of individual performance failures. They reflect staffing models that insufficiently align skills, authority, and expectations. Agencies that continue to frame professional staff as ancillary, while relying on sworn personnel for specialized work, risk

perpetuating inefficiencies and constraining their ability to fully leverage the expertise necessary for modern public safety operations.

Core Professional Staff Role Domains

Professional and civilian staff support a wide range of operational, technical, analytical, and leadership functions across modern policing organizations (Hall and Meisenholder 2024). While job titles, classifications, and organizational placement vary across jurisdictions, these roles tend to cluster into several core domains identified in practitioner research and guidance (King and Wilson 2014; Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] 2024).

Operations and Administration

Professional staff play a central role in maintaining the administrative and operational infrastructure of public safety agencies. These functions support daily operations, fiscal accountability, and compliance with local and state requirements.

Common roles include:

- Finance and budgeting
- Human resources and personnel administration
- Procurement and contracting
- Scheduling and timekeeping
- Grants management
- Records and property management.

Analysis, Technology, and Data

As policing has become more data-driven and technology-dependent, agencies have expanded their reliance on professional staff with technical and analytical expertise.

Common roles include:

- Crime and intelligence analysis
- Information technology and systems administration
- Digital evidence and body-worn camera management
- Research, evaluation, and performance analytics.

Strategy, Policy, and Compliance

Many agencies rely on professional staff to manage strategic planning, policy development, and compliance with external requirements. These functions are particularly important in complex regulatory and accountability environments.

Common roles include:

- Policy development and revision
- Accreditation and standards compliance

- Risk management and internal coordination
- Legal liaison functions and coordination with municipal or county counsel.

Community-Facing and Service Roles

Professional staff frequently serve as the primary point of contact between agencies and the public in non-enforcement contexts. These roles support service delivery, communication, and victim-centered responses.

Common roles include:

- Communications and dispatch
- Public information and media relations
- Victim services and advocacy
- Community outreach and engagement.

Many of these positions require strong interpersonal skills and institutional knowledge and operate on a 24-hour basis alongside sworn personnel.

Leadership and Management Roles

In some agencies, professional staff hold senior leadership and management positions with responsibility for coordinating operations, overseeing divisions, or supporting executive leadership.

Common roles include:

- Chiefs of staff or executive advisors
- Civilian commanders or directors
- Division or bureau managers.

These roles demonstrate that professional staff are not limited to technical or administrative functions but can play a direct role in organizational leadership and decision-making.

Professional staff roles also serve as an entry point for individuals drawn to public safety work who are not interested in sworn positions. For some, these roles represent a long-term career in public safety. For others, they provide exposure to the field and pathways for advancement within or alongside sworn structures.

Integration and Staffing Challenges

Although professional staff are increasingly central to law enforcement operations, agencies continue to face challenges related to integration, classification, and retention. These challenges are not isolated. They reflect staffing systems and organizational structures that were historically designed around sworn personnel rather than a workforce that includes both sworn and professional staff.

Career Paths, Classification, and Compensation

A central challenge for professional staff involves limited career advancement opportunities and classification and compensation systems that are often misaligned with role demands. While sworn personnel typically have clearly defined classifications and advancement pathways, professional staff have historically had fewer opportunities for growth and internal mobility, limiting long-term career development (Hall and Meisenholder 2024). These constraints affect retention, institutional knowledge, and overall agency effectiveness (PERF 2024; Rockefeller-Ramsey 2023).

Professional staff frequently report feeling undervalued and uncertain about career progression and organizational hierarchies (Poikela, Haake, and Lindberg 2024). Compensation structures are often insufficient to support advancement or internal movement, particularly when comparable roles in other agencies or sectors offer clearer pathways and more competitive pay (Poikela, Haake, and Lindberg 2024; PERF 2024). Addressing these challenges through formal civilian classification systems, career ladders, and promotion policies similar to those established for sworn personnel can support retention and long-term workforce stability (King and Wilson 2014).

Workplace Stress and Job Security

Workplace stress and job security further complicate the integration and retention of professional staff. While sworn personnel face higher physical risk, professional staff are also exposed to significant stress and trauma, including vicarious trauma through repeated exposure to disturbing images, calls, threats, or verbal abuse (Button et al. 2007; Huey et al. 2023; Mousseau, Morin, and Charbonneau 2025). Burnout affects both sworn and professional staff, highlighting important parallels across the workforce (McCarty and Skogan 2012).

Professional staff experience elevated levels of occupational stress, psychological distress, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion (Adams and Mastracci 2020; McCarty and Skogan 2012; Nam et al. 2024; Steinkopf et al. 2018). These pressures are often compounded by job insecurity. Professional staff are more vulnerable to layoffs during periods of fiscal constraint and their positions are frequently among the first eliminated (Davis et al. 2013). Job insecurity weakens morale and organizational commitment and can accelerate turnover. When professional staff positions are cut, sworn personnel are often reassigned to administrative or specialized roles for which they may lack training or experience, recreating earlier capacity challenges (Davis et al. 2013).

Role Clarity, Authority, and Reporting Structures

Effective integration of professional staff depends not only on formal role design, but also on how authority is recognized and exercised within agency structures and culture. In many agencies, professional staff are assigned responsibility for key functions without clear decision-making authority or well-defined reporting structures. As a result, professional staff may depend on sworn personnel for approvals or coordination even when the relevant expertise resides with professional staff.

These structural challenges are reinforced by organizational culture. Police culture has historically emphasized sworn identity and loyalty, which can create resistance to professional staff authority and influence (Alderden and Skogan 2014). Negative perceptions of professional staff as competing with sworn personnel for roles or resources can limit integration and reinforce exclusion (PERF 2024). Research indicates that the expertise and perspectives of professional staff are often questioned or dismissed, contributing to unequal treatment and reduced influence in decision-making processes (Alderden and Skogan 2014; Hall and Meisenholder 2024).

Similar barriers affect leadership and advancement. Professional staff report needing to exert greater effort to achieve career goals and often face resistance when pursuing leadership roles (Hall and Meisenholder 2024; Poikela, Haake, and Lindberg 2024). These dynamics can lead to underutilization of skills, job dissatisfaction, and decisions to leave the organization (Alderden and Skogan 2014; Pozzobon and Scott 2024; Taylor, Kowalyk, and Boba 2007).

Why These Challenges Are Staffing System Issues, Not Individual Failures

Challenges related to the integration and retention of professional staff accumulate over time through structural barriers, cultural dynamics, workplace stress, and job insecurity. While these challenges may appear role-specific, they are best understood as features of staffing systems and organizational structures that were not designed to support a workforce that includes sworn and professional staff. Classification systems, authority structures, and reporting relationships are often built around sworn roles, leaving professional staff with limited clarity, authority, and inclusion in decision-making.

These conditions constrain collaboration, limit effective use of professional expertise, and undermine organizational effectiveness. Workplace stress and job insecurity intensify these challenges, increasing burnout and turnover in roles that are critical to agency capacity. Addressing these issues requires intentional workforce planning and structural alignment rather than isolated personnel actions or training interventions.

Staffing Practices That Support Professional Staff Effectiveness

Agencies are more likely to benefit from professional staff when staffing practices support role clarity, appropriate decision-making authority, and long-term retention. Effective use of professional staff depends not only on hiring, but on how positions are designed, supported, and integrated into the organization.

Clear Role Definition and Alignment with Authority

Unclear role definitions and misaligned decision-making authority create persistent challenges for professional staff. Agencies can reduce ambiguity by developing formal role descriptions that clearly define responsibilities, scope of authority, expectations, and points of coordination with sworn personnel. Clear role design supports accountability and enables professional staff to operate confidently within their areas of expertise.

Effective implementation also requires deliberate classification and titling of professional staff positions, transparent advancement criteria, and clearly defined promotional steps that reflect the specialized nature of the work (PERF 2024). Establishing realistic timelines for recruitment, hiring, and onboarding helps reduce strain on human resources personnel and supports smoother integration into agency operations.

Parallel Career Development Pathways

Agencies seeking to strengthen professional staff effectiveness benefit from career development pathways that are parallel, but not identical, to sworn promotion systems. Rather than fitting professional staff roles into sworn hierarchies, effective approaches design advancement pathways that recognize specialization, leadership responsibility, and technical expertise.

Internal advancement opportunities are particularly important for professional staff, including leadership roles that carry formal supervisory or managerial authority over other professional staff and personnel policies that prioritize internal candidates (PERF 2024). Clear career pathways support retention, encourage professional development, and help agencies compete for specialized talent in a tight labor market.

Training and Supervision

Effective integration also depends on training and supervision models that prepare both sworn and professional staff to work together. Traditional police training often centers on sworn roles, leaving gaps in expectations related to collaboration, supervision, and communication across functions.

Because professional staff roles are specialized, training models should include role-specific onboarding, ongoing professional development, and continuing education opportunities (PERF 2024). Incorporating professional staff into structured training and supervision frameworks, similar in form though not in content to those used for sworn personnel, strengthens team functioning and supports effective use of professional expertise (Hall and Meisenholder 2024).

Inclusion in Planning and Decision-Making

Integrating professional staff into planning and decision-making processes strengthens organizational effectiveness by ensuring that specialized expertise informs agency priorities. Inclusion in discussions related to policy development, technology implementation, compliance, and resource allocation ensures that professional staff have meaningful input into decisions that affect their functional areas.

Meaningful inclusion involves engaging professional staff early in planning processes, rather than limiting participation to consultation after decisions have been made. Routine participation in leadership meetings, planning teams, and project development efforts supports coordination, continuity, and alignment between sworn personnel and professional staff with operational or technical authority (Hall and Meisenholder 2024).

Retention as a Core Workforce Outcome

Retention of professional staff should be treated as a core workforce outcome. Many professional staff positions require specialized knowledge that is difficult to replace. High turnover disrupts core functions, erodes institutional knowledge, and increases recruitment, onboarding, and training costs.

Supporting retention requires both structural and cultural strategies. Competitive compensation, clear advancement opportunities, and flexible work arrangements such as part-time or hybrid schedules can improve retention across professional staff roles (Hall and Meisenholder 2024; PERF 2024). Retention is also shaped by how professional staff are valued within the organization. Applying procedural justice principles to internal workplace relationships can address perceptions of undervaluation and strengthen commitment, morale, and job satisfaction (Alderden and Skogan 2014).

While these staffing practices shape effectiveness and retention, they do not eliminate the human demands placed on professional staff roles. Understanding stress, trauma exposure, and burnout is therefore essential to sustaining a stable public safety workforce.

Stress, Trauma, and Workforce Sustainability

Stress and burnout are widely recognized challenges in policing, but research shows that these experiences are not limited to sworn personnel. Professional staff working in law enforcement agencies experience significant occupational stress, emotional labor, and burnout, although the sources and manifestations of stress may differ by role (Adams and Mastracci 2020; McCarty and Skogan 2012; Nam et al. 2024). This section explains why retention and sustainability require organizational responses, not individual resilience.

Professional staff often occupy roles that involve sustained exposure to high workloads, time pressure, and emotionally demanding interactions with the public, victims, or sworn personnel. Research indicates that professional staff may experience frustration and psychological strain related to limited authority, unclear expectations, and constrained career opportunities, which can compound existing occupational stressors (Adams and Mastracci 2020; Poikela, Haake, and Lindberg 2024).

In addition to general occupational stress, many professional staff roles involve exposure to traumatic material. Dispatchers, analysts, records staff, digital evidence specialists, and victim service providers may encounter disturbing images, audio, or narratives as part of their routine duties. Studies document the presence of vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress among police support personnel, even in roles that are not traditionally recognized as trauma-exposed (Huey et al. 2023; Mousseau, Morin, and Charbonneau 2025; Steinkopf et al. 2018).

The cumulative effects of stress and trauma have implications for workforce sustainability. Burnout and psychological strain are associated with increased turnover, reduced engagement, and diminished organizational capacity (Adams and Mastracci 2020; McCarty and Skogan 2012). When

professional staff leave, agencies lose specialized expertise and institutional knowledge that can be difficult to replace, undermining continuity in critical functions.

Recognizing stress and trauma among professional staff as organizational issues rather than individual shortcomings is essential to sustaining a stable public safety workforce. Addressing these challenges supports retention, continuity, and long-term capacity across both sworn and professional roles (PERF 2024).

Common Pitfalls in Civilian and Professional Staffing

Despite the growing reliance on professional and civilian personnel, agencies often undermine the effectiveness of these roles through staffing decisions that are reactive rather than deliberate. The pitfalls below are common across jurisdictions and reflect staffing system design issues rather than individual performance failures. Practitioner research and guidance note that civilianization efforts frequently fall short when professional staff lack clear decision-making authority, defined career pathways, or organizational legitimacy, reinforcing turnover and underutilization rather than strengthening capacity (CNA Center for Justice Research and Innovation 2023).

Hiring Without a Clear Purpose or Authority

In some agencies, professional staff are hired without clearly defining responsibilities, scope of decision-making authority, or relationships to sworn personnel. When roles are poorly specified or lack formal authority, professional staff may be underutilized, creating confusion and inefficiency across units.

Using Professional Staff as Short-Term Staffing Relief

Professional staff are sometimes hired primarily to address immediate workload pressures or sworn staffing shortages. While this may provide short-term relief, it positions professional roles as temporary solutions rather than integral components of the workforce. Over time, this framing weakens role legitimacy and contributes to turnover.

Underinvesting in Onboarding and Professional Development

Agencies often expect professional staff to integrate with minimal onboarding, training, or development support. Limited investment in orientation and skill development slows integration, reduces effectiveness, and constrains the accumulation of specialized expertise and institutional knowledge.

Treating Professional Staff as Interchangeable or Expendable

When professional staff are treated as interchangeable support personnel rather than as individuals with distinct skills and experience, agencies experience higher turnover and loss of institutional knowledge. This approach undermines continuity and increases long-term recruitment and training costs.

Organizational Consequences

Collectively, these pitfalls limit the benefits that professional staff can provide. Agencies may experience reduced efficiency, weakened institutional memory, increased workload for sworn personnel, and diminished organizational capacity. Addressing these challenges requires moving away from ad hoc civilianization toward deliberate workforce planning that recognizes professional staff as core contributors to public safety operations. Agencies that invest in clearly defined professional roles with appropriate decision-making authority and organizational integration report stronger outcomes than those that rely on short-term or backfill approaches (Gwinn 2022).

Looking Ahead: Professional Staff and the Future Workforce

Professional staff are no longer an auxiliary feature of policing. They are a permanent and growing component of the modern public safety workforce. By 2020, local police departments employed more than 125,000 full-time professional and civilian personnel nationwide. In larger jurisdictions, these roles are even more central, supporting a substantial share of analytical, administrative, and specialized operational functions (Goodison 2022).

As public safety responsibilities expand beyond traditional enforcement, agencies increasingly rely on professional expertise that complements sworn authority rather than substitutes for it. Legal counsel manages consent decrees, public records requirements, and liability exposure. Budget and finance professionals oversee complex operating budgets, procurement, and compliance obligations. Technology and data specialists support records management systems, body-worn cameras, digital evidence, cybersecurity, and crime analysis. Analysts, planners, and researchers translate data into deployment decisions, grant strategies, and long-term planning.

Bureau of Justice Statistics data underscore this shift. Many large departments maintain specialized units or designated personnel responsible for functions such as internal affairs, crime analysis, accreditation, public information, research and planning, and crisis response. These functions increasingly depend on professional staff with distinct training, expertise, and career pathways (Goodison 2022). These roles are not peripheral. They shape organizational effectiveness, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability.

Yet many agencies continue to approach professional staffing reactively, adding positions to address immediate pressures rather than integrating them into a coherent workforce strategy. This ad hoc approach limits effectiveness and undermines retention, particularly when professional roles lack clear decision-making authority, advancement opportunities, or alignment with organizational goals.

Agencies therefore face a strategic choice. They can continue to treat professional staffing as a secondary consideration, or they can deliberately align workforce models with the realities of modern policing. Deliberate workforce planning recognizes professional staff as core contributors to public safety outcomes, invests in role clarity and development, and integrates these positions into leadership structures and long-term succession planning.

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Understanding Police Staffing through Online Reviews: A New Source of Workforce Insight

Natalie R. Rivera and Vivian Aranda-Hughes

Police agencies across the United States are facing sustained staffing pressure (Wilson and Grammich 2024). Many departments are contending with vacancies, mandatory overtime, burnout, recruitment challenges, and rising turnover. These challenges affect how officers are supervised, how well they are trained, and how prepared agencies are to respond to calls for service (Shane 2010; Maslach and Leiter 2016). Staffing conditions also shape officer wellness and public safety outcomes (Wilson and Grammich 2024; Miles-Johnson 2026). To respond effectively, law enforcement leaders require more than basic metrics. Traditional staffing indicators such as authorized strength and vacancy rates are useful but only capture part of the picture (Wilson and Weiss 2014). These numbers can miss how staffing levels are experienced by officers doing the work and do not always show whether workloads are reasonable, whether field supervision is consistent, or whether overtime undermines morale (Wilson and Weiss 2014; Wilson and Grammich 2024). Employee surveys can provide important insights, but they may be conducted infrequently and may not reflect the current conditions inside fast-moving organizations (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2014; Tourangeau, Conrad, and Couper 2013), creating a gap between what leaders can measure and what officers experience day to day.

To close this gap, departments need tools that offer timely, officer-centered insight. One source that deserves more attention is online employee reviews. These reviews, found on public job boards such as Indeed and Glassdoor, contain firsthand descriptions of what it is like to work in law enforcement agencies. Officers use these platforms to describe staffing levels, working hours, field leadership, training quality, and overall organizational support (Kozinets 2019; Van Maanen 2011), often in direct and unfiltered terms (Miles-Johnson 2026).

Why Online Reviews Matter

Job boards have become a regular part of the job search process. In addition to job postings, these platforms feature employee reviews, in which current and former employees can describe their work experiences. Reviews typically include the reviewer's role, employment status, location, ratings of workplace dimensions such as management and work-life balance, and open-ended commentary describing daily working conditions (Ahamad 2020; Indeed n.d.). For police agencies, these narrative reviews are particularly valuable because they capture dimensions of organizational life that are central to staffing outcomes but rarely measured systematically, including perceptions of fairness, supervisory support, workload sustainability, and organizational commitment (Colquitt et al. 2013; Meyer, Stanley, and Parfyonova 2012). Moreover, officers are not limited to the language of formal surveys, and they can describe problems in plain terms (Van Maanen 2011; Morrison 2014). These issues often appear in reviews posted months before they show up in internal data. Thus, the reviews offer an early signal of what is happening inside the organization (Kozinets 2019).

How Online Reviews Reflect Broader Conditions

Job board reviews can reveal patterned narratives about organizational conditions over time. Online employee reviews reflect underlying workplace dynamics, particularly when similar themes recur across independent contributors (Han and Anderson 2020; Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020). They capture meaningful and policy-relevant information about organizational stress, leadership practices, and workforce strain in public safety agencies (Miles-Johnson 2026). Job board reviews are increasingly seen as a credible source of organizational data. This matters because the issues described in these reviews are tied to key outcomes. For example, negative employee reviews about internal promotion, workload, and leadership practices may be directly linked to higher turnover (Stamolampros et al. 2019). Negative reviews tend to focus on basic conditions of employment such as supervision, safety, and scheduling. When these fundamentals are weak, job satisfaction falls, and employees begin to look for alternatives (Ryan, Parcero, and Daly 2025).

Using Reviews to Support Internal Decision-Making

For law enforcement leaders, the most important strength of job board reviews is their value as an assessment and evaluation tool that supports workforce planning (Wilson and Grammich 2024). Reviews provide a real-time pulse on how staffing decisions are experienced across the organization (Ployhart and Vandenberg 2010). Patterns in review content can reveal where staffing shortages are most acutely felt, how overtime is affecting morale, whether training pipelines are keeping pace with attrition, and how leadership practices are perceived by line personnel (Shane 2010; Griffin et al. 2010). Job board reviews are continuously generated, allowing leaders to monitor changes in workforce sentiment as conditions evolve.

Job board reviews are particularly effective as a starting point for organizational inquiry. Recurring themes in reviews can guide leadership attention toward specific areas that warrant deeper examination (Anseel et al. 2013). For example, repeated references to burnout tied to mandatory overtime can inform the development of targeted survey questions, focus group discussions, or exit interview protocols. Similarly, consistent praise for supportive supervision or training quality in certain units can help identify practices worth sustaining or replicating elsewhere in the organization. In this way, job board reviews help police leaders ask well focused questions of their workforce and validate or contextualize findings from internal data sources (Morrison 2014; Near and Miceli 2016).

Job board reviews lend themselves to practical and accessible analyses that align with the needs of police agencies. Thematic analysis of postings can identify dominant staffing-related issues and track their frequency over time (Braun and Clarke 2022). Temporal analysis allows agencies to examine whether workforce narratives shift following policy changes, leadership transitions, contract negotiations, or major organizational events (Ployhart and Vandenberg 2010). Comparative analysis enables agencies to benchmark their experiences against peer departments or similar jurisdictions, providing valuable context for workforce planning and strategic decision-making (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley 2008).

The value of job board reviews for policing is grounded by well-established theories of organizational behavior. For example, social exchange theory explains why staffing narratives are so central to officer retention and engagement (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005; Colquitt et al. 2013). Officers continuously evaluate whether the effort, risk, and commitment they invest are matched by organizational support, fairness, and recognition. When officers perceive that exchange to be unbalanced, disengagement and attrition become more likely (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Job board reviews capture these evaluations directly, offering leadership insight into how officers interpret the relationship between staffing demands and organizational support.

Practical Limitations and Considerations

Despite their value, job board reviews have clear limitations. They are self-selected, may overrepresent particularly negative or positive experiences, and provide limited demographic or contextual information. Claims made by reviewers cannot be independently verified, and findings should not be generalized to entire agencies without caution (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2014). However, the limitations do not mean that online reviews should be dismissed. Self-selection often reflects which employees feel heard inside the organization and which do not. When the same concern appears across multiple reviews, it deserves attention (Meyer, Stanley, and Parfyonova 2012). Many organizations have found that these reviews highlight issues not reported through formal channels, further underscoring what reviews can lend.

For law enforcement agencies, job reviews provide a cost-effective, accessible, and officer-driven way to understand how working conditions are being experienced. Agencies that systematically monitor and analyze these reviews are well positioned to identify emerging staffing pressures, assess the impact of leadership decisions, and align organizational strategies with frontline realities (Ployhart and Vandenberg 2010; Shane 2010). Reviews can supplement formal data, help validate findings from surveys or internal audits, and support smarter workforce planning. They can also help agencies track sentiment across units or divisions, identify signals of organizational fatigue or morale drop, validate whether leadership changes are improving workplace conditions, and assess agency reputation in the competitive hiring environment.

In conclusion, online job board employee reviews represent a legitimate and valuable source of workforce data for police agencies. They provide real-time, officer-generated insight into staffing conditions, organizational stress, and leadership effectiveness. When examined through a broader workforce assessment strategy, job board reviews can enhance situational awareness, inform targeted inquiry, and support effective workforce planning. For police leaders navigating sustained staffing challenges, these reviews offer a practical and powerful tool for understanding the organization from the perspective that matters most: the officers doing the work.

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Parting Remarks

Staffing remains a major concern for police agencies across the United States. The staffing challenge is complex and multifaceted, marked not only by retirements and voluntary resignations but also by recruiting and retaining qualified applicants. A key lesson emerging from this collection of research briefs and policy guides is that the most effective response to the police staffing challenge involves addressing all of these dimensions. Creating meaningful and long-lasting impact to workforce levels demands careful attention to recruitment, promotions, turnover and retention, workforce environment, and workforce planning. Overall, this guide underscores the value that academic research and collaboration bring to the policing profession. By combining insights from research and practice, this guide provides evidence-based guidance to critical areas affecting police staffing levels.

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Chief John Barkley, Treasure Island (Florida) Police Department, joined the Treasure Island Police Department in March 2020. He previously served 30 years in the Naples (Florida) Police Department in a variety of positions including road patrol, detective unit, and community policing, whee he also supervised many different units including criminal investigations, professional standards and both the operations bureau and the administration bureau. He holds an Associate's degree in Criminal Justice from Edison State College, a Bachelor of Applied Science degree in Public Safety Administration from Edison State College, and a master's degree in public administration from the University of Miami. He is also a graduate of the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Virginia and has served in executive positions for the Florida Police Chiefs Association.

Nathan Cronin is a doctoral student in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. His research interests revolve around police officer retention and morale, small and rural policing agencies, and fostering researcher-practitioner partnerships. He is a partner of the Police Staffing Observatory and has worked as a researcher under a number of federal grants, including analyzing body-camera program sustainability in small/rural/tribal police agencies.

Bryan Ergang serves as the Deputy Director of the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police. He began his law enforcement career in 1995 with the Township of Kalamazoo (Michigan) Police Department. Over a 31-year career, he served in a variety of leadership roles, including Patrol Division Commander, before being appointed Chief of Police in 2017, a position he held for eight years. He has served in key leadership roles on several local and statewide boards, including the Michigan High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas Executive Board, where he served as chair in 2021.

He holds a Bachelor's degree from Siena Heights University, a Master's degree in Public Administration from Western Michigan University and is a graduate of the FBI National Academy.

Chase Flowers, M.S., M.P.A., is a Michigan State University (MSU) doctoral student in criminal justice, where he also serves as a Research Assistant I and partner of the Police Staffing Observatory (PSO). Prior to attending MSU, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice with a minor in Legal Studies from the University of Central Florida (UCF), as well as a Master of Science degree in Criminal Justice and a Master of Public Administration degree at UCF. While completing his graduate degrees, Chase was employed as a graduate teaching assistant, where he assisted in the planning, instruction, and grading of students' work in six undergraduate courses, both in-person and online.

Lt. Collin Flynn, Gwinnett County (Georgia) Police Department, has worked in law enforcement for more than 20 years, holding a variety of assignments within the Criminal Investigations Division, Training Division, and the Public Information Office. He currently serves as Assistant Commander of the Office of Professional Standards. He holds both Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Criminal Justice and his Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from the University of North Georgia.

Tiana Gaudette is a Specialist and Ph.D. candidate in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. She assists Dr. Steven Chermak and Dr. Jeremy Wilson on funded research projects related to school violence, brand protection, and police staffing. Her work has been published in Crime & Delinquency, New Media & Society, Terrorism and Political Violence, as well as in several edited book collections. Tiana received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Criminology from Simon Fraser University.

Sgt. Austin Goehrig, Gwinnett County (Georgia) Police Department, has eight years of law enforcement service. He currently serves as a Sergeant supervising the Backgrounds and Recruiting Unit and is a part-time member of the SWAT team. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and maintains multiple Georgia POST certifications, including Field Training Officer, Intermediate, Advanced, Supervision, and General Instructor.

Dayanara Gonzalez is a master's student in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. She received her Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice with a minor in Philosophy from The State University of New York at Oswego in 2024. Her interests include offender reentry, policing, crime reduction, and discrepancies within the criminal justice system.

Chief Brandon Gurley, Brookhaven (Georgia) Police Department, has 27 years of law enforcement service. He has focused his leadership on strengthening organizational culture through leadership development, executive coaching, and an emphasis on emotional intelligence. Under his direction, the department has achieved high employee engagement and consistently low turnover rates in a competitive staffing environment. Chief Gurley also serves as Chair of the Atlanta Metropol Board of Directors and is actively involved in advancing leadership practices in law enforcement. He holds a Master's degree in Criminal Justice Administration from Georgia State University, as well as a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and an Associate's degree in Liberal

Studies. He is a graduate of the Northwestern University School for Police Staff and Command and the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange Training Program.

Chief Sean Gutsick, Holland Township (New Jersey) Police Department, currently serves as President of the Hunterdon County (New Jersey) Chiefs of Police Association. He has more than 30 years of experience across federal, state, and local levels, including service in the United States Air Force. He serves as Second Vice Chair for the Northeast Region on the FBI Criminal Justice Information Services Advisory Policy Board and has completed international training through the Police Scotland International Academy. He regularly engages with law enforcement leaders across the United States and abroad on issues related to staffing, leadership, and organizational development. His work has focused extensively on leadership development, community engagement, and regional coordination, including Community Emergency Response Team programs and multi-agency training initiatives.

Narelle Hickmon, M.S., is a doctoral student in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University, also serving as a Research Assistant II and partner of the Police Staffing Observatory. Narelle has collaborated with multiple law enforcement agencies, including Michigan State Police, on cold case investigations and is currently working on the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative project. Her research interests include police allocation, investigations, women in policing, sexual assault, and human trafficking. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Aquinas College and her Master of Science in Criminal Justice from Grand Valley State University.

Ethan M. Humphrey, M.S., is a Michigan State University doctoral student in criminal justice, where he also serves as a Research Assistant II and partner of the Police Staffing Observatory (PSO). Since joining Michigan State University, Ethan has developed multiple PSO Perspective research briefs and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services reports. His research interests include police staffing, community policing, crime reduction, and women in policing. He earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Criminal Justice from Radford University. During Ethan's tenure at Radford University, he served as a graduate research fellow in the Center for Police Practice, Policy and Research, where he assisted with funded projects relating to community policing and evidence-based responses to shooting incidents.

Elliott Idol is a doctoral student at the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. He graduated from the University of Maryland in 2024 with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Criminology and Criminal Justice. His research interests focus on police misconduct and police culture, and he is currently working on several papers with his advisor, Dr. Kutnjak Ivković, examining police sexual violence in South Africa.

Chief Danny Keele, Jersey Village (Texas) Police Department, has more than two decades of law enforcement experience. He has held assignments across patrol operations, criminal investigations, training, and specialized units in multiple Texas agencies. Chief Keele holds both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Criminal Justice from Lamar University and is a graduate of the Police Executive Research Forum's Senior Management Institute for Police. Chief Keele has contributed to statewide and national professional initiatives through service on the Texas Police

Chiefs Association (TPCA) Legislative Review Committee, the TPCA Recruiting, Retention, and Wellness Committee, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police Crime Prevention Committee. Chief Keele also serves as Secretary of the Houston Area Police Chiefs Association. His work focuses on advancing workforce development, professional standards, and organizational leadership within Texas policing.

Chief Steven Kinsey, Davie (Florida) Police Department, was appointed the Chief of Police for the Davie Police Department in September 2020. He has more than 32 years of Law Enforcement experience including as the Undersheriff at the Broward County (Florida) Sheriff's Office from 2013 to 2019 and the Assistant Chief of Police of Operations at the Fort Lauderdale (Florida) Police Department from 2008 to 2013. Chief Kinsey has served in a supervisory or command capacity in operations, investigations, and administration over the course of his career. He is a graduate of the FBI National Executive Institute, the FBI LEEDA Organization, the FBI National Academy, and the Police Executive Research Forum Senior Management Institute of Police. He holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from Florida International University and a Bachelor's degree in Criminology with a Minor in Sociology from Florida State University. He is currently President of the Broward County Chiefs of Police Association and serves on the Florida Police Chiefs Association Board of Directors.

Maureen "Mo" McGough, J.D., is Senior Advisor at the University of South Carolina Excellence in Policing and Public Safety Program, where she previously served as Founding Executive Director. She has a demonstrated history of collaborative reform with hundreds of police departments across the United States, and she is one of the country's leading facilitators of police-practitioner partnerships. She co-founded the 30X30 Initiative to Advance Women in Policing.

Tanya Meisenholder, Ph.D., is the Director of Police Research at the New York University Policing Project. In this role, she oversees the 30x30 Initiative, a national initiative to advance women in policing. Tanya has over two decades of experience in law enforcement, primarily at the New York City Police Department (NYPD). During her tenure at the NYPD, Tanya served in various leadership roles, including Deputy Commissioner of Equity and Inclusion, Assistant Commissioner of Strategic Initiatives, and Chief of Staff to the First Deputy Police Commissioner. Her work focuses on police reform, organizational change, diversity, equity, inclusion, training and development, and risk management.

Natalie Rose Rivera, M.S., is a dual major doctoral student in the School of Criminal Justice and Chicano/Latino Studies at Michigan State University. Her research focuses on gender-based violence, victimization, and corrections. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* and *Violence and Gender*.

Chief Pam Smith, Punta Gorda (Florida) Police Department, has more than 34 years of law enforcement experience in Maryland and Florida. In her previous service as Deputy Chief of the Anne Arundel County (Maryland) Police Department, she led the Department's three bureaus consisting of more than 700 sworn personnel and 240 professional staff. She has served a fellowship with the Police Executive Research Forum and is a graduate of the FBI National

Academy. She holds a Master's degree in Management from the Johns Hopkins University. She serves several policing organizations in Florida, including currently as the Florida Police Chiefs Association Secretary.

Ron Wiles serves as the Executive Director of the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police (MACP), where he leads statewide efforts to advance professional policing, strengthen leadership development, and support proactive public safety policy. A career law enforcement professional, Ron retired in 2022 after 26 years with the Grand Blanc Township (Michigan) Police Department, where he rose through every rank before being appointed Chief of Police in 2016. Ron remains actively engaged at the state level, serving as a commissioner on the Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and as a past commissioner on the Governor's Traffic Safety Advisory Commission. He served as MACP president from 2020 to 2022 and has held leadership roles on numerous boards focused on public safety and community trust. He holds a Bachelor's degree from Michigan State University and is a graduate of Northwestern University's School of Police Staff and Command and Executive Management Program.

Jeremy M. Wilson, Ph.D., is Professor and Associate Director of the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University, where he founded and directs the Police Staffing Observatory. As a scholar, educator, advisor, and consultant, he has collaborated with a wide array of public and private institutions, published over 200 products, and led more than $15 million of research and outreach projects sponsored by the U.S. Congress, U.S. Departments of Justice and the Interior, foundations, governments, agencies, associations, and corporations. His policing research focuses on evidence-based personnel planning and developing a systems approach to police staffing, integrating aspects of workload demand, performance objectives, resource allocation and deployment, recruitment, retention, cohort management, workforce attributes and related areas. For his contributions to police research and practice, he was named a Distinguished Scholar by the American Society of Criminology Division on Policing, and the Police Section of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences honored him with the O. W. Wilson Award. To learn more, see https://jeremywilson.org/.

Police Staffing Observatory
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

About the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory

The **Police Staffing Observatory (PSO)** is a global collaborative of academics, scholars, practitioners, and students working with the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice to promote evidence-based police-workforce research, strategy, and operations. Directed by Professor Jeremy M. Wilson, its primary aims are to advance police workforce knowledge and its application by

- conducting timely and innovative research on critical aspects of a wide range of police staffing issues, resulting in scholarly and practitioner-oriented resources
- creating a venue for the network of police staffing scholars to share opportunities, discuss ideas, and enable collaborations
- facilitating researcher-practitioner partnerships
- serving as a repository and dissemination vehicle for the research of collaborators so that it is easily discoverable by practitioners, policymakers, and others.

Through its facilitation of research and outreach, the PSO is a community of science that serves as a valuable resource for the community of practice. Hundreds of resources spanning police staffing systems can be accessed from the PSO website, https://cj.msu.edu/community/pso.