PSO Perspective

"Crisis" Versus "Challenge": Field Lessons for Building Police Workforces

Jeremy M. Wilson, Clifford A. Grammich, and Terry Cherry

This *PSO Perspective* summarizes and extends lessons from our research, Reframing the Police Staffing Challenge: A Systems Approach to Workforce Planning and Managing Workload Demand, appearing in Vol. 18 of *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice.* It highlights the advantages and disadvantages of referring to the current police staffing situation as a crisis, and how, by instead considering it a dynamic challenge, a systems approach offers evidence-based guidance for addressing it.

The "Crisis" in Police Staffing

Police staffing is among the most challenging issues for municipal leaders. Decreases in applicants during the COVID-19 pandemic and increases in resignations and retirements following the George Floyd protests have been the source of some recent concerns. Yet staffing concerns have recurred over time. Roughly two decades ago, pending "baby boom" generation retirements, expanded police duties for homeland security and budget shortfalls posed staffing challenges. For more than a half-century, police agencies have also struggled to recruit forces representative of their communities, a challenge that continues today.

Many have referred to the most recent difficulties in police recruitment and retention as a "crisis." Such characterization can facilitate awareness and hence support, resources, research, and other means to address the problem. It can provide the impetus to make necessary changes to staffing approaches.

The "crisis" characterization, however, has some downsides. It can oversimplify a complex situation. It focuses attention on allocation levels and minimizes the importance of other staffing issues. It obscures what communities need and want from policing and what the organization seeks to achieve. It downplays ongoing difficulties, such as in selection and training, agencies face building and maintaining their workforces. It overshadows the success of some agencies in meeting their workload obligations and accomplishing their performance objectives. It also provides cover for those who are not innovating, encouraging an "everyone is struggling" response.

Issue framing can influence organizational outcomes, leading to either paralysis or empowerment. Labeling staffing a "crisis" suggests the occurrence was unforeseen and beyond the organization's control, absolving the agency of responsibility for self-assessment, preparation, and growth. In contrast, framing staffing as a "challenge" fosters a resilience-oriented mindset, enabling the organization to address the issue through strategic creativity and evidence-based planning.

Reframing the Staffing Challenge through a Systems Approach

Considering staffing a challenge can lead to a systems approach where staffing is but one of several solutions. It leads to questions such as how do we know a police agency is "understaffed"? If it is understaffed, how do we address the effects of understaffing? What all, including boosting retention and productivity, can be done to build more robust, effective, and diverse police

workforces? What solutions, such as relying on non-sworn personnel or reprioritizing tasks, are there for managing police workforce demand?

A systems approach has at its core three elements of strategy: workload, i.e., the work police must do, such as answering calls for service; performance objectives, e.g., additional work agencies choose to do, such as preventative patrol; and workforce goals, such as achieving diversity. The strategy must address several elements of workforce context: allocation, the number of officers needed to accomplish the workload; deployment, including how officers are assigned by shift or geography; recruitment and selection; retention; training; productivity, which can diminish in times of strained community relations or increase under skillful management; and succession planning, including identifying the next generation of police leaders and ensuring they have the skills they need. Finally, a systems approach must consider the operational environment, including leadership, agency culture, the resources available to an agency, non-sworn staff alternatives , and organizational learning for staffing issues.

A Six-Step Workforce Planning Approach

To develop a systems approach for workforce planning and meeting workload demand, we suggest the six steps below.

1. Determine an efficient allocation level. A workload-based approach based on calls for service and how to answer them can shift the discussion from what is wanted to what is needed and keep it within the context of what the community can afford.
2. Establish workforce goals. Agencies may form a coalition of stakeholders to assess which

goals—e.g., for diversity, special skills, or future force planning—are most important and how to reach them.
3. Assess existing circumstances, including what the community wants the police to do, before setting a force size.
4. Formulate strategy, including elements of staffing, alternative service delivery, agency needs and supports, and performance metrics and analysis.
5. Implement strategy, adjusting as needed to obstacles such as budgetary changes as they arise.
6. Monitor and assess performance, including routine, systematic, and comprehensive reviews which inform subsequent workforce planning.

Conclusion

Our central lesson is that it is not just number of officers that matters: what they do and how they do it also matter. Reframing the staffing situation as a dynamic challenge of meeting workload demand and performance objectives is key to addressing it. Drawing upon research evidence, such framing can help reveal preferences of stakeholders for agency work, the realities of what the agency must do, and the costs and tradeoffs of necessary and desired work. The most efficient approach to managing police workload will be one that balances strategy, staff, and process.

Jeremy M. Wilson is professor of criminal justice at Michigan State University and the director of the Police Staffing Observatory. Clifford A. Grammich is director of Birdhill Research and Communications, LLC. Terry Cherry is a sergeant with the Charleston (SC) Police Department.

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 Michigan State University to promote evidence-based police workforce research, strategy, and operations. It aims to advance police workforce knowledge and its application through research and its dissemination, including practitioner partnerships.