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Officer-per-Thousand Formulas and Other Policing Myths

A leadership model for better police resource management

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Condensed Version

"We added 200 more officers, and to be honest, I can't really tell you that anything changed in the community at all."

—An assistant chief from a major city

The concepts for solving the police resource questions described in this article are simple. However, few leaders apply them fully. We think we know why. The concepts are simple, even obvious. But the degree of political will and administrative leadership required to carry them out can seem almost revolutionary.

The authors of this article have worked with many communities across the United States—some of the smallest and largest, the most dangerous and safest. We have worked with chiefs who "require" 2.0 officers per thousand to begin community policing, and for managers with 3.6 officers per thousand who declare they cannot do proactive policing without more cops.

In every town—regardless of crime rate, regardless of department size—we hear about comparable jurisdictions with more officers and how local officers are overworked, going from call to call. We have yet to find a department that thinks it could do with fewer personnel.

Overseeing it all are city and county leaders allocating resources among crime, water, parks, and public works while trying to weigh arguments for more police that often hinge on workload measures and the perceived need to have as many officers as another community. It is time to challenge the assumptions and practices guiding these staffing requests. The questions aren't "How busy are we?" or "Do we have as many officers as the next town?" The question should be "What will it take for us, in this community, to achieve our public safety goals?"

This article is about how local leaders can connect this question to their own resource decisions. It's an overview of a subject about which more could be said. We begin with a brief discussion of types of policing and their expected impacts.

Three Elements of Effective Policing

Across the nation, a debate on policing has raged, complete with competing terminologies, philosophies, and habit patterns. While the debate is not over, there is a growing consensus that three elements are common to effective departments. While some departments emphasize one element over others, we have found that it is the combination of the three that holds the greatest potential. The three include:

Orient toward crime, not just criminals. Traditional policing focuses on whether a perpetrator can be identified and arrested. Effective policing focuses on how to reduce crime, fear, and disorder to elevate community livability. The question is not simply "Can we catch the criminal?" It is also "What can we do so that there is less crime?" This effort will include making arrests as well as working to change the proximate factors that enable crime. Those who emphasize this approach often consider themselves proponents of problem-oriented policing.

Ask citizens to reassert their role. It is only a slight caricature to say that, under traditional policing, responsible citizens are seen as naïve noncombatants whose job is to stay out of the way. Effective policing recognizes that when citizens understand and practice their role in keeping a neighborhood safe, then community safety and livability will improve.

In too many local governments today, the concept that police and citizens are part of one continuum, sharing a common set of duties in the interest of community welfare, has become a fading memory. In many localities, however, the idea of reasserting this shared responsibility and moving away from the myth of 911 as a cure-all is beginning to take root.

Champions of this strategy often consider themselves proponents of neighborhood watch programs and community partnerships. Some use the term "community policing" to describe community partnering efforts, while we use the term to encompass a more comprehensive definition of effective policing.

Assume responsibility. Surprising as it may sound, we still hear from police managers or officers who insist that police cannot influence the local crime rate. Yet effective policing hinges on a willingness to take personal responsibility for the level of crime in a community. One oft-cited example in police accountability is New York City's CompStat model. The approach makes use of crime analysis, examines crime trends, and requires commanders to develop strategies accordingly. In the authors' view, the core innovation in New York was not any one technique but the commitment made to establishing an accountable mindset.

In most communities, the debate continues over the value of these three elements. Confusion about the role of citizens and skepticism about problem solving can still be

found, but arguments in favor of these two elements have gained ground. Curiously, acceptance of the third element, accountability, has met with the most resistance. Yet this third element must be in place for the power of the other two to be realized.

If this is the direction in which your community desires to move, then read on for a discussion of police resource decisions. Here is a hint to start with: Running a department on the principles of accountability, problem solving, and the ability to ensure citizen involvement does not have to cost a penny more.

Accountable Decision-Making Model

Ideally, resource decisions should hinge on these three questions:

- Are we achieving the results desired in the community? If yes, make no change, or consider reducing resources. If no, . . .
- Are we using our resources efficiently? If no, improve management first. Adding resources to an ineffective system will cause little change, as in the popular definition of insanity: doing the same thing repeatedly while expecting a different result. Once resource use has been optimized, then . . .
- Given that our organization is using its resources well, how much closer to the community goal can we move with a given amount of added resources? And is this benefit worth the cost (including the need to trim other budgets or defer other tasks)?

These questions must be asked, and answered, in order. Note that these questions are unrelated to officer-per-thousand measures or measures of relative workload. This is because such counting methods do not correlate well with crime rates. Consider the cases of these three cities:[1]

1. New York City enjoyed comparatively low crime rates and saw substantial drops in crime during the latter half of the 1990s. It had a ratio of about 5.0 officers per thousand during the time period—the second-highest ratio in the nation among larger cities.

2. San Diego, whose overall crime index and rate of crime reduction closely matched New York's in the late 1990s, had a ratio of 1.7 officers per thousand, one of the lowest ratios among the 30 largest cities. It enjoyed approximately equal success with fewer than half of the officers per thousand.

3. Portland, Oregon, where the crime rate was higher than both San Diego's and New York's, saw large crime reductions in the late 1990s, with an officer-per-thousand ratio close to 2.0.

These changes are not simply byproducts of generalized national trends. Unfortunately, it is easy to find other big cities with staffing levels similar to those given here that saw smaller changes during the same time period.

Similar issues are evident in smaller towns. In one review conducted of cities that are home to "Big 12" Conference universities, we found the following results.

In the year 2000, Waco, Texas, had 1.9 officers per thousand and, based on reported crime data, had the highest crime rate among the Big 12 cities. Norman, Oklahoma, had the lowest officer ratio (1.3) and yet one of the lowest crime rates. Lubbock, Texas, reported the fastest-increasing crime trend and a ratio of 1.5 per thousand. Two of the better performers in terms of trends—Boulder, Colorado, and Columbia, Missouri—are listed by the Bureau of Justice Statistics as having 1.7 and 1.6 officers per thousand, respectively. Big city or small, no meaningful correlation has been found between the number of officers and the crime rate.

What do the more successful communities have in common? Certainly not the relative sizes of their police forces. If a community wishes to reduce crime, additional officers can help only when added to an effective, mission-focused department, one that has instilled throughout the organization an accountability for community livability and for the level of crime.

The following steps outline how these concepts can guide staffing choices.

Step 1. Set Community Goals

Take this pop quiz: Name the top three community goals your police department intends to achieve this year. Now, name the community goals your department plans to accomplish within three to five years. Your answers should be automatic. Effective organizational management begins with a clear focus on a shared mission and a concrete set of goals.

Without a clear set of measurable, community-oriented goals, a sort of "mission drift" sets in. Activities within units and divisions develop around diverse agendas, and coordination among units becomes difficult. Frustration with department management, among both officers and citizens, climbs.

Curing such dysfunction requires strong leaders who can reignite a mission-driven approach. Doing the heavy lifting necessary to achieve this cure, which requires both cooperative planning and leadership directive, is a first step toward effective policing.

Success also hinges on developing goals in partnership with the community served. Goals developed at the stroke of a pen by a police chief or a civilian administrator are often changed just as quickly and do not reflect a shared commitment from the citizenry.

Further, to be effective, goals must define a desired outcome, not an intended process. For instance, "Reduce crime and fear in a specific area by X percent" is a legitimate goal. "Do more problem solving" may be a great strategy to support the goal, but it is not the goal.

Significantly, the goal is also not the absence of crime. There is a point, well before zero crime, at which a community consensus is reached that the marginal return is not worth the cost—that is, that a community would rather spend on other priorities or enjoy lower

taxes than pay for additional increments of safety. The relevant questions, therefore, are "What is acceptable?" and "What are we willing to do to achieve it?"

Also, the question is not "How does our crime rate compare with those of other cities?" This question, like its companion, "How does our officer-per-thousand ratio compare?," is not relevant. These are stand-ins, easier to answer than the real question: "What is the vision we have for our community, and what will it take to get there?"

Step 2. Review Efficiency

If your law enforcement leaders tell you that, with added resources, they will improve livability and reduce crime in specific neighborhoods by predicted amounts, you may have a department ready to make great use of the new resources. If police officials ask managers for more officers without promising a community benefit, however, an efficiency review may be in order.

The challenge lies in determining whether resources are being used well. This task often requires better use and additional development of management information. And because management information is often poorly aligned with goals, assessing effectiveness is best done in three phases: 1) act on what is already known, 2) make better use of existing information, and 3) develop measures for untracked goals.

Here's how it works:

Act on What Is Already Known

This work can happen the moment your goals are clear. No new data are required. This is simply a frank, clear-eyed assessment of current practices. For effective managers, the territory is familiar:

- Align tasks for greater accountability. For example, many agencies change priorities so that patrol supervisors and officers no longer focus only on activities during a shift, but also assume ongoing responsibility for results in a specific neighborhood.

- Infuse a "mission focus" throughout the organization. We have spoken with chiefs and sheriffs who realize that they have become so mired in administrative issues that they no longer ask commanders to account for crime trends and other public safety concerns. If leaders do not routinely ask their subordinates to account for community safety, then adding resources will not help.

- Review and improve community contact points. The contact points (calls for service, drug complaints, and others) are critical opportunities. To the degree that such contacts leave citizens without a sense of what else they can do to improve neighborhood livability, the best crime-fighting resource that any community has will further atrophy.

- Evaluate responses to false alarms, repeat calls to the same location, repeat calls involving the same parties, and other tasks that do not advance the mission efficiently.

- Assess training, recruitment, performance, and promotion standards. As a simple example, the officer whose performance is measured in the number of tickets written is not motivated to make an intersection safer. We have seen multiple instances in which officers reduce crime through problem solving yet earn negative reviews because their arrest or citation counts are down.

Make Better Use of Existing Information

The next section of the efficiency review involves making a better analysis of available data. Examples are:

- *Patrol Deployment.* A key resource is discretionary patrol time, or the time available for officers to make self-initiated stops, advise a victim in how to prevent the next crime, or call property owners, neighbors, or local agencies to report problems or request assistance. Understanding discretionary time, and how it is used, is vital. Yet most departments do not compile such data effectively. To be sure, this is not easy to do and, in some departments' may require improvements in management information systems.

- *Crime Analysis.* This technique gives agencies a more accurate method of identifying crime patterns, hot spots, year-to-year trends, suspect information, and community concerns. Yet crime analysis is not routine work at most departments and is used well by few. Crime analysis helps remove the intuitive guesswork and shift-to-shift differences in perceptions that can inhibit effectiveness.

Set Measures for Untracked Goals

The third part of the efficiency review involves measuring performance on goals for which data are not traditionally tracked. The following statements reflect issues that many departments face:

- We want to reduce the length of time for which chronic problems affect a neighborhood, but how will we know if we have succeeded? Do we have a method for counting hot spots and other chronic problems? Do we have a method for tracking how long they exist?

- We want to work more closely with citizens and encourage them to get involved in problem solving. But how do we know if it is working? What indicators for involvement can we track?

- We say we want to reduce crime, as well as crime-enabling fear and disorder. We can measure changes in reported crime, but what about the levels of these two factors? A department that tracks only call-response time and clearance rates will have difficulty in fulfilling a mission to cut crime and enhance livability.

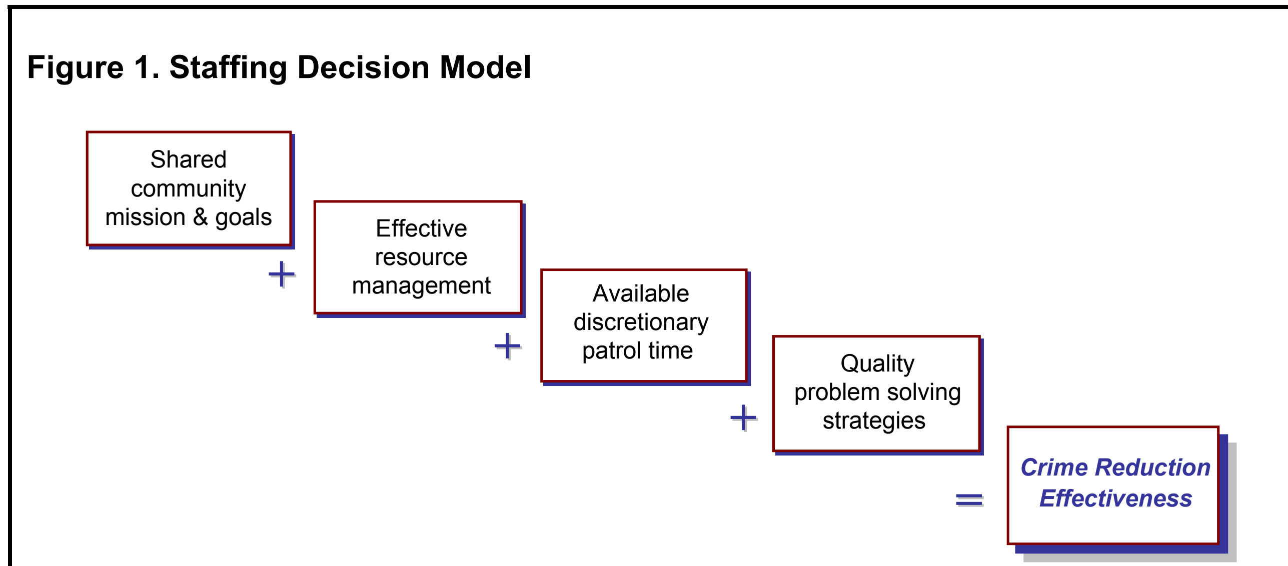
To make communities safer, we must measure the complete picture of safety issues that matter most, yet few departments do this well. While Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) statistics are one indicator, relying exclusively on these data will miss societal changes that have occurred since UCR standards were adopted long ago.

Step 3. Tie Recommendations to Results

With clear goals and an organization aligned to them, a department can more easily make recommendations to civilian leaders regarding the outcomes expected, based on the staffing level being considered.

Graphically, the decision model looks like the diagram found in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Staffing Decision Model



Examples of key questions that police management should consider when applying this model are shown in Figure 2. For these data points, the decision about what is acceptable must be made. The arbiter of acceptability should never be a police chief or local civilian leader alone. The answers gain legitimacy only when they are discussed openly with an involved community and policymakers.

Figure 2.

Sample Decision Points: Connecting Outcomes to Resources

Use of Resources

- Response time to emergency calls averages X minutes. Is this acceptable? If not, what should it be? If so, is a higher number also acceptable?
- Response time to lower-priority calls is X. Is this acceptable? If not, what should it be? If so, could a higher number also be acceptable?
- Average time spent per shift on false alarms and other calls not related to the police mission is X. Is this acceptable? If not, what is?
- Average discretionary patrol time is X percent. Is this acceptable? If not, how much time is needed? If acceptable, would a lower percentage of time work?

Crime and Livability

- Part 1 and 2 index crime rate for our city is X. Is this acceptable?
- Crime rate for our most affected neighborhoods is X. Is this acceptable?
- The number of chronic-call locations in our affected neighborhoods is X. Is this acceptable?
- The fear level in our most affected neighborhoods is X. Is this acceptable?
- Number of injury and fatality traffic accidents per year is X. Is this acceptable?
- Clearance rate for major crimes is X percent. Is this acceptable?
- Confidence/trust levels between our most affected communities and police are at X level. Is this acceptable?
- The percentage of citizens in our affected neighborhoods who are engaged in community policing and problem-solving activities is X percent. Is this acceptable?

If the answers to the key questions call for improving certain unacceptable conditions, it is police management's job to determine how to get this job done. For example, management may wish to boost discretionary patrol time, cut crime in a high-impact neighborhood, and increase citizen involvement. These will become outcomes that will guide resource decisions. Staffing increases should be considered only when management can say reliably that such changes will advance these goals.

At the conclusion of Step 3, local leaders will receive resource recommendations from police management that are directly tied to anticipated results in the community—results that police managers are prepared to account for at given levels of funding.

Step 4. Make Decisions, Hold Accountable

With agreements reached on the results desired and the staff necessary to achieve it, budget realities must be weighed to determine the speed with which change can happen. This final trade-off is up to policymakers, who, in the fourth step, will compare the priorities, expected results, and resource requirements of various agencies, allocate resources, and hold these agencies accountable for the results expected.

The method for holding departments accountable is based on the same kind of questions asked to make resource decisions (as listed in Figure 2). For example:

- If the level of crime has not decreased, why not?
- If problem-solving effectiveness has not increased, why not?
- If awareness of the role that neighbors play in crime reduction hasn't been raised, why not?

The answers to these and similar questions relate to the original decision points, giving policymakers tools for holding police accountable for results and resources and ensuring that police resources are focused on what matters most: meeting the community need. Using this accountable, mission-driven approach, elected and appointed leaders, police administrators, and the communities they serve can work together more effectively to ensure an acceptable—even desirable—level of safety and livability for all.

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[1]These examples use the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) statistics to provide some level of comparability among jurisdictions. This is simply a means of comparison and should not be construed as an endorsement of the UCR standard as the optimal measure of crime and public safety in a community. Effective crime reduction and public safety goals should take into account more information than reported crime in the specific UCR categories.