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Analyzing Staffing as Cornerstone to Police Transformation

Carlos G. Aponte

Adrián Pérez, MBA

Alexander Weiss, PhD

As part of one of our staffing studies, we assessed the workload for the Auto Theft Division of a State Police Department. This division had several units in the region that were separately staffed. There was, for example, a unit staffed with 19 investigators (detectives) in a jurisdiction where 63 cars had been reported stolen during the past year, while another unit had 13 investigators for a jurisdiction where 883 cars had been reported stolen in the same timeframe. Throughout our engagement in this agency, we repeatedly found similar cases in almost all divisions and departments. This kind of workload imbalance is common in many police agencies across the US and reminds us how critical it is to carefully study workload in order to find the appropriate staffing for patrol, community policing, investigations, supervision, use of force, and budgeting. In this article we intend to explain why a comprehensive staffing analysis can clear the way for an effective police transformation, and be a smart way of readjusting budgets.

There are many reasons why law enforcement agencies have staffing levels that do not align with their actual workload. Most of the time, police executives find it hard to redeploy personnel even if they identify a pattern of peak activity in areas that are understaffed. Police unions, tradition, and political pressure are some of the reasons why this is so hard. In many cases, it is even difficult to make temporary adjustments.

Recently, increased fiscal pressure on city budgets has required agencies to conduct comprehensive staffing studies to justify the need for sworn officers. Although there are various approaches to calculating the right staffing level for an agency, the most popular and the one we have advocated for is a "workload-based approach," where workforce is calculated based on demand. More specifically, demand can include: service calls for patrol, crimes for detective units, and other reactive activities that sworn officers are assigned to, which can vary per jurisdiction.

A workload-based staffing study can unearth a significant number of findings that can turn into opportunities for transformation and reform. We have identified some of the most common opportunities here:

1. Geographic and temporal re-distribution of officers (Having the right number of officers where and when they are needed the most)

   One of the most valuable opportunities that arise from conducting a staffing analysis in a police department, or in any organization, is to redeploy or relocate human resources according to their workload. It is often the case that organizations ignore work demand when they apply any relocation policy. In the case of police departments, it is very common to see that more senior officers will be given the option of moving to less demanding or active precincts or divisions. This was certainly the case in one agency, that covered a large area, where more senior officers were able to "move back home" after a period of serving in high activity areas. The issue was that most police officers had been recruited from areas with low crime, so when they were due for a

transfer, most end up in low demand precincts resulting in unintended consequences. For example, officers in high crime areas were usually younger, and less experienced, both in patrol and in the investigation units. Also, precincts in high activity areas were more likely to be understaffed, and in some cases led by Sergeants instead of Lieutenants or Captains. Ironically, precincts with low criminal activity and reduced workload ended up with multiple high-ranking officers, and in some cases excess capacity.

The same allocation issue that is evident in geographic deployment is also commonly seen in shifts, where as a result of union driven minimum staffing levels, precincts may deploy the same number of officers on patrol at 4pm as at 4am. This, of course, creates an overload of work for officers at 4pm and an underutilized team at 4am.

2. Better supervision

According to best practices, the right number of officers per supervisor is somewhere between 8-14, depending on workload and type of duties. However, agencies sometimes promote supervisors in a manner that creates imbalance. After enough years of not looking closely at staffing, agencies can become top-heavy, meaning that they have too many supervisors per officer. In other cases, agencies can become under-supervised if they promote sergeants to higher ranking positions without backfilling those roles. As a result of these inconsistent promotion practices and the effect an under supervised team can have on use of force, most consent decrees put a level of emphasis on reaching a healthy supervisor to agent ratio closer to one for every eight.

3. More time for continuous training

When an agency is deployed inefficiently there may be consequences. For example, officers have less time to be trained. When we interviewed precinct directors in one Police Department we found that they were often faced with a tough decision: do I send an officer to training, and have one less car on patrol, investigating and responding to calls? Or do I let the officer skip training and go to the beat? An agency needs enough capacity to deploy well trained officers.

4. Civilianization

Police Departments often assign sworn officers to administrative roles that could be filled by civilians or be outsourced. In one Police Department, we found an alarming number of sworn officers fully equipped with handguns, tasers, and handcuffs who spent 90% of their time performing administrative duties such as reviewing personnel timecards or providing public background checks. Additionally, in each precinct there were often one or two sworn officers performing as "fleet managers", taking care of the ten or fifteen patrol cars in the precinct, including washing and driving them to regular maintenance appointments. Also, this department maintained an outdated tradition of using sworn officers as radio operators, which is a practice that has been assigned to civilians in most agencies across the country.

These officers could instead fill operational staffing needs, respond to crime complaints, and lower the burden on routinely stressed-out field officers. Hiring civilians to fulfill these roles will also be a cost-effective measure since the officers' salary in this department surpassed

average civilian salaries by close to $10,000 per year, not including the differences in benefits and time-off.

5. Better internal intervention

  Police Departments have the responsibility to offer safety and security to citizens in their jurisdictions, and in doing so, they must uphold integrity, fairness, and transparency principles. To do this, most departments have established internal mechanisms to evaluate the performance of its members. A key aspect of this initiative is having enough officers to conduct internal investigations into use of force and act upon them swiftly. Nevertheless, there are often times when there are not enough officers assigned to these duties and investigations can end up being backlogged for a long time resulting in public mistrust. For instance, one Police Department had fewer officers performing internal investigations than needed in almost half of its Area Commands. There can also be a sense that there is a conflict of interest since officers are essentially policing other officers. Having a more robust and unbiased internal investigation unit could certainly contribute to the reduction of these type of incidents.

6. More efficient internal processes

  An indirect result of performing a comprehensive staffing analysis in a Police Department is clearer visibility on the number of resources dedicated to a specific function or process. This can provide an opportunity for leaders to reevaluate options to automate, or digitalize some processes, but also to eliminate outdated practices. For example, one Police Department could digitalize incidence reporting, automate time and attendance using a biometric punch system, and consolidate statistical reports sent to Area Command and Headquarters. In the end, when agency directors looked at the number of resources dedicated to internal processes, they were surprised and willing to consider digitalization. However, one barrier to digitalizing processes that needs to be addressed is a culture of mistrust in some police departments where a handwritten signature is still seen as the ultimate piece of evidence for any official document.

7. Better budgeting

  Annual budgets for Police Departments are mostly determined by the number of employed officers on payroll. Thus, as stated before, it is extremely important to calculate the right staffing level for a Department using the "workload-based approach" which considers actual workload demand. Failing to do so can result in budgets that may be overstated or insufficient depending on the case. In a similar manner, Departments should allocate appropriate funding to ensure its workforce has the right tools to perform at an optimum level (equipment, training, technology). It may even be better to have a smaller workforce with all the right tools than a larger one with deficiencies in key areas.

Conclusion

These are some of the most impactful benefits of taking a hard look at staffing allocation in a law enforcement agency. The direct effect of understaffed and overstaffed teams is a bit obvious, and can

become detrimental to the community in some cases. One can hypothesize that there is also a direct relationship between use (and abuse) of force and staffing levels, mostly based on improper supervision and training. However, performing a comprehensive analysis of workload and workforce in an agency can certainly spearhead a positive transformation, that in some cases will help the community with better policing, and in others will help officials justify an appropriate budget for their agency. In conclusion, staffing should be seen as a cornerstone to identifying opportunities to transform and reform a Police Department.