Police Staffing Observatory
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

PSO Perspective

November 2026 Vol. 3, No. 4

Moving Beyond Per-Capita Rates for Police Staffing Allocation

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This PSO Perspective examines why officer per capita metrics may serve as an insufficient staffing metric. It highlights numerous additional factors, such as geography, workload, call demand, backup availability, and proactive capacity shape staffing needs. It further argues that agencies need more context-sensitive measures of operational demand.

The Traditional Per-Capita Staffing Ratio

For decades, police agencies, researchers, and policymakers have relied on population-based staffing ratios to estimate appropriate police staffing levels. The appeal of using per-capita metrics is largely rooted in its simplicity. Population figures are readily available, easy to compare across jurisdictions, and provide agencies with a quick reference point for discussing staffing levels with elected officials and the public.

Historically, per-capita ratios served as a broad method for estimating police workforce needs during periods of population growth and urban expansion. Even today, agencies are often compared to other jurisdictions or national averages using officer-per-capita calculations. More broadly, public concern about police staffing can help shape policy preferences, including support for additional funding when residents are informed about the consequences of short staffing.

Why This Falls Short

While these metrics may provide a general starting point for discussion, they were never intended to fully capture the operational realities of policing. Over time, the increasing complexity of law enforcement responsibilities, differences in agency structure, and variation in service demands have exposed important limitations in relying too heavily on population alone to determine staffing needs.

Per-capita staffing ratios may provide simplicity in determining staffing numbers, however, they often fail to reflect the operational realities agencies face day-to-day. Simplistic and static ratios can overlook key factors such as:

- Calls for service
- Crime patterns
- Tourism
- Commuter populations
- Minimum staffing needs
- Proactive policing expectations.

Agencies handling frequent high-priority calls or requiring secondary officer backup may need more personnel than population alone suggests. As policing responsibilities expand, relying too heavily on population-based benchmarks risks oversimplifying a complex staffing problem.

Better Ways to Determine Optimal Staffing

Rather than relying primarily on population-based ratios, agencies should assess staffing through a more operational framework based on a workload assessment. At a minimum, staffing assessments should consider four core questions:

- What work must be handled?
- Where and when must officers cover?
- What minimum staffing is needed to operate safely?
- What capacity is needed beyond responding to calls?

These questions shift the focus away from population alone and toward the actual time, coverage, and service demands placed on officers.

A more practical staffing assessment should include calls for service, response times, geographic coverage, temporal call distribution, officer availability, backup needs, administrative workload, and proactive policing capacity. For smaller or rural agencies, this may mean prioritizing minimum patrol coverage, travel time, and backup availability. For larger agencies, this may involve workload distribution, specialization, and deployment across districts or shifts. Although no single formula can perfectly determine staffing needs, agencies can make stronger staffing decisions by examining workload, geography, minimum coverage, and discretionary capacity together rather than relying on static population benchmarks. In practice, agencies should treat population ratios as a starting point for discussion, not as the final answer for staffing decisions.

Key Takeaways

1. Population alone does not determine police staffing demand or operational workload.
2. Agencies with similar populations may require significantly different staffing levels based on geography, call volume, and service expectations.
3. Per-capita staffing ratios often fail to account for travel time, backup needs, and proactive policing capacity.
4. Effective staffing assessments should emphasize workload, time demand, and minimum operational coverage rather than static population benchmarks.
5. There is no universal staffing formula, and agencies should avoid applying identical staffing expectations across fundamentally different jurisdictions.

Conclusion

While population-based staffing ratios may provide a simple benchmark, they are increasingly insufficient for capturing the realities of modern policing. Agencies today face varying demands shaped by countless factors, which cannot be fully explained through population alone. As staffing challenges continue nationwide, agencies and policymakers should move toward more flexible and context-driven approaches that better account for actual service demand and operational capacity.

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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.