



PSO Perspective

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Staffing Strategies for Small-, Medium-, and Large-Sized Police Agencies

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This PSO Perspective examines why police staffing challenges are not a single, uniform crisis facing agencies. Specifically, it describes how small, medium, and large agencies face distinct staffing pressures related to coverage, workload, retention, growth, specialization, and organizational complexity. It argues that staffing solutions should be tailored to agency size, structure, and operational demands.

Historic Staffing Strategies

Historically, police staffing strategies have often relied on broad, standardized approaches to determine how many officers an agency needs. Common methods include utilizing per capita ratios, or comparisons to similarly sized jurisdictions. These strategies are appealing because they are relatively easy to understand and communicate to key stakeholders, community members, and agency leaders. They provide a starting point for discussing whether an agency is understaffed, adequately staffed, or positioned for future growth.

Where these traditional strategies fall short is when they are applied uniformly across agencies of different sizes, based on the number of sworn officers an agency employs. Agencies of all sizes may be experiencing inadequate staffing levels, but the nature and determinants of those shortages can vary substantially by agency size. As a result, strategies that may be effective for one size of agency may be unrealistic or ineffective for another.

Small Agency Staffing Strategies

Small agencies often face staffing challenges that are less about specialization and more about maintaining basic coverage, officer safety, and a community service orientation. With fewer sworn officers, even a single vacancy can create noticeable strain on patrol coverage, response capacity, and

morale, particularly due to the linkage of staffing shortages to increased workloads, organizational stress, burnout, and agency turnover. These agencies may also have limited promotional opportunities, fewer specialty assignments, and difficulty competing with larger agencies on pay and benefits. As a result, staffing strategies for small agencies should focus on maximizing flexibility, improving retention, and protecting minimum operational coverage.

Feasible strategies may include:

- Predictable scheduling
- Cross training officers for multiple responsibilities
- Strengthening recruitment pipelines
- Utilization of part-time or reserve officers
- Development of shared services agreements with neighboring jurisdictions for specialized functions.

Small agencies may also benefit from low-cost retention efforts, such as clearer communication from leadership, mentorship for newer officers, recognition of added responsibilities, and opportunities for officers to take ownership of specific roles, such as training, traffic safety, evidence, community engagement, or investigations.

Medium-Sized Staffing Strategies

Medium-sized agencies often sit in a difficult middle ground. They may be large enough to experience growing call volume, community expectations, specialized responsibilities, and internal divisions, but not large enough to absorb vacancies as easily as larger police agencies or maintain deep staffing across every function. As these agencies grow, staffing challenges may emerge when patrol demand, investigations, supervision, training, and administrative needs expand faster than the agency's organizational structure and capacity.

Staffing strategies for medium-sized agencies include:

- Proper alignment of shifts and specializations
 - Ensuring personnel are assigned where workload and demand are the greatest
- Assessing whether specialized assignments are properly staffed
- Strengthening front-line supervision
- Identifying where civilian personnel can relieve sworn officers from administrative functions.

Medium-sized agencies may also benefit from formal career pathway development, because officers may begin to expect advancement and specialization opportunities that are more difficult to provide in smaller agencies.

Large Agency Staffing Strategies

Large agencies often face staffing challenges tied to scale, complexity, and workforce movement. While they may have larger applicant pools and more specialized resources than smaller agencies, they must also manage academy pipelines, retirements,

resignations, and staffing needs across internal districts. In these agencies, staffing problems may not be limited to whether enough officers are hired, but whether personnel are moving through the organization in ways that support operational need.

Staffing strategies for large police agencies include:

- Forecasting retirements and vacancies
- Monitoring attrition by career stage
- Evaluating academy and field training capacity
- Identifying bottlenecks in promotion or specialty assignments.

Large agencies should examine whether officers have clear pathways for advancement and whether internal transfer processes are perceived as fair and accessible.

Conclusion

Police staffing challenges should not be treated as a single or uniform problem across the board. While agencies of all sizes may face staffing shortages, the causes and solutions often differ substantially by agency size. Staffing strategies and solutions are most effective when they reflect the size, structure, and operational realities of the agency rather than relying on broad strategies applied across the profession.

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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.