



PSO Perspective

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Managing the Demand Element of the Staffing Crisis

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The police staffing crisis is often treated exclusively as a recruitment or retention problem. Yet, as this *PSO Perspective* discusses, managing calls for service demands can be just as critical for workforce stability and requires a less resource-intensive complement to staffing efforts.

Beyond Officer Shortages

Police agencies across the United States are struggling to keep pace with calls for service. The typical response is to increase staffing, primarily through recruitment, treating the issue solely as a supply problem. Too frequently, workforce strain is framed solely as a shortage of officers rather than a demand management challenge. As this Perspective contends, addressing staffing pressures necessitates more than adding personnel; it requires critically examining the drivers of demand and how to manage them more effectively.

Proactively Addressing the Workload

While the Problem-Oriented Policing (POP) model has proven to be a useful tool for crime reduction, its benefits in reducing workload are less frequently discussed. However, this utility of POP is vital, given that many calls for service [do not involve a crime](#) and do not cease with an arrest alone. Analyses of calls for service often reveal that a relatively small percentage of locations account for a disproportionately large share of total calls (i.e., repeats). These incidents can generate patrol capacity strain and require a more thorough response than a single officer can provide in a short timeframe. Therefore, addressing these concentrated issues expands beyond crime reduction alone, and finding solutions to even a single problem location can, in

some instances, eliminate [as much as 5%](#) of an agency's overall calls for service. Consider the following examples of especially large call volume drivers:

- [Domestic-related issues](#)
- [Disorderly conduct or noise complaints at bars and restaurants](#)
- [Disturbances at budget motels](#)
- [Loitering or disorder complaints at 24-hour convenience stores](#)
- [False alarm activations](#)

While each of these calls may warrant immediate attention, they also require more strategic responses, which POP can more easily facilitate. Furthermore, some demand drivers necessitate rather straightforward solutions. For example, [false alarms account for 10 to 25% of calls in the United States](#), yet addressing the root issue may be as simple as correcting an improperly installed security system or requiring verification of an emergency. In turn, by targeting issues that specifically drive workload, agencies can not only free up more officers and solve issues rather than just reacting to them, but also use that additional time for more proactive strategies.

Ensuring Efficiency

Agencies may also decrease demand by optimizing response efficiency. Although calls for service are rarely distributed evenly temporally or

spatially, response systems are often not customized to those patterns. Maximizing efficiency in response involves examining how calls are assigned, routed, and staffed. Measures that help ensure efficiency include:

- [Strategically deploying more officers in locations that receive the majority of calls](#)
- [Using a 10-hour shift schedule to provide a six-hour overlap during peak demand periods](#)
- [Using technology to automate police dispatch based on response time, traffic conditions, availability, and demand coverage](#)
- [Reducing “voluntary downtime” \(i.e., when officers wait a substantial amount of time after a call before going back in service\)](#)
- Limiting unwarranted multi-unit responses to low-level issues

These strategies are especially helpful for agencies that cannot spare current staff for new initiatives or acquire more staff. By optimizing how demand is handled, agencies can shorten unnecessary commitment, reduce workload strain, and enhance overall operational capacity.

Delaying or Eliminating Response

Although many 9-1-1 calls are often of great concern to the caller, a high percentage are not legitimate emergencies. In instances where a threat never existed or has already dissipated, agencies may elect to simply attain necessary information over the phone and schedule a follow-up. By aligning urgency with risk, officers

can still provide service without jeopardizing higher-priority incidents occurring in real time.

Additionally, some calls for service, such as parking or traffic-related issues, do not require a sworn patrol officer and their accompanying arrest authority at all. In many cases, the primary need for an officer is documentation or assistance with other resources rather than enforcement. In these circumstances, civilian police personnel, medical professionals, parking enforcement staff, or others may be better suited to respond to such calls. Shifting or eliminating sworn response for low-risk, service-oriented calls preserves patrol's availability while still maintaining community service.

Conclusion

Although an agency's staffing levels are vital to managing workload, examining the “supply” without regard for “demand” may be unsustainable and fail to address the issue at its root. Police executives should give significant weight to the structural features of demand that shape the workload. In doing so, they should aim to proactively address workload drivers, ensure efficiency, and determine whether an immediate police response is necessary.

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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.