



Police Staffing Observatory
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

MANAGING POLICE STAFFING ASSESSMENTS

A DECISIONMAKER'S GUIDEBOOK

JEREMY M. WILSON | SETH WILLIAMS |
RONALD SERPAS | CLIFFORD A. GRAMMICH

In partnership with



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Institutional Partner Support

Workforce management is among the most important challenges police agencies face. For the approximately 17,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies employing more than 700,000 sworn officers, effective staffing is critical for providing quality service to communities, facilitating the well-being of officers and professional employees, and meeting performance objectives. Recruitment and retention are crucial for building strong, effective, quality workforces—as are allocation, work scheduling, deployment, selection, training, promotions, supervision, succession planning, leadership, culture, organizational learning, and still so much more. These are complex concepts that have multidimensional interactions and effects. Historically, practitioners have had few accessible, evidence-based resources to guide their workforce planning processes.

The Police Staffing Observatory (PSO), administered as part of the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice and drawing on nearly five dozen staffing experts from around the world, helps police organizations navigate and plan for their dynamic workforce challenges. Through its research, outreach, and collaboration with the local-global law enforcement community, the PSO helps bridge the gap between scientific rigor and the operational realities of policing. The PSO actively develops knowledge and resources, offering practitioners actionable lessons on creating and sustaining their workforces.

Like the PSO, our associations prioritize staffing, and we have worked diligently with our members to understand and address the workforce needs of the law enforcement community. With this in mind, we are pleased to be institutional partners of the PSO. Working together, we can create and share resources that advance workforce science in ways that provide practical value for police agencies in meeting their staffing needs. This report is just one example of our collaboration. It demonstrates the utility of academic-practitioner partnerships for addressing public safety needs and improving the police profession. We hope you find some helpful guidance in this resource, and we encourage you to avail yourself of the many others developed by the PSO.

With our greatest support,



Roxie Heussner

Roxie Heussner
Executive Director, AZ Assoc. of Chiefs of Police



Jennifer C. Pritt

Asst. Commissioner Jennifer “Cookie” Pritt (ret.)
Executive Director, FL Police Chiefs Assoc.



A.A. Ayers

Chief A.A. “Butch” Ayers (ret.)
Executive Director, GA Assoc. of Chiefs of Police



Ron Wiles

Chief Ron Wiles (ret.)
Executive Director, MI Assoc. of Chiefs of Police



Mitchell C. Sklar

Mitchell C. Sklar, J.D.
Executive Director, NJ State Assoc. of Chiefs of Police



John “JJ” Jones

John “JJ” Jones
Executive Director, SC Police Chiefs Assoc.



Gene Ellis

Chief Gene Ellis (ret.)
Executive Director, TX Police Chiefs Assoc.



Cory McGookin

Cory McGookin
Executive Director, VA Assoc. of Chiefs of Police

Preface

Police agencies struggle to maintain their staffing levels, leading many of those charged with maintaining workforces to focus on recruitment and retention. However, critical first questions to ask include “How many staff do we need” and “How can staff be deployed most efficiently?” Historically, staffing levels have been determined by “rules of thumb,” benchmarks, precedent, gut feelings, funding directives, and resource availability. Such benchmarks do not fully correspond to an agency’s workload, nor the form and quality of service it seeks to provide. In short, they are not sufficient for modern policing realities. Instead, police executives today need a framework for deciding on personnel levels, creating defensible budget requests, optimizing existing resources, and bridging community expectations with organizational capacity.

Recognizing the shortcomings of traditional methods, in 2014, with support from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), Jeremy Wilson and Alexander Weiss produced [*A Performance-Based Approach to Police Staffing and Allocation*](#). This earlier work offers a step-by-step approach to conducting an objective, data-driven workload-based assessment that focuses on determining the optimum number of staff an agency needs for patrol operations. It has largely become an industry standard, forming the foundation of staffing assessments and methodologies across the country. As more agencies seek to pursue this kind of assessment to shape their resource allocation and deployment, it becomes increasingly important to understand their complexities and how to manage them.

To provide practical guidance to those who lead and oversee the development of police workforces, the COPS Office provided support to the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory to compile and summarize lessons on managing staffing assessments. This guidebook sets a landscape for the staffing assessment process, identifying key issues and components that must be considered when contemplating or conducting, whether in-house or contracted, a workload-based assessment to inform staffing needs. It does so by drawing on decades of field experience, technical assistance, and research by the authors in developing and conducting workload-based assessments with a wide range of public and private institutions for a variety of work functions, but especially for police agencies. This guide will be particularly useful for decisionmakers and planners seeking to implement or oversee a staffing assessment to help optimize resources. It is designed to provide police and civic leaders an overview of the issues they need to consider now in workload assessments, with some discussion of the specific steps in conducting these assessments.

Introduction

Staffing is the heart of public safety. Nearly all local spending on police goes toward operational costs, with most such money going to salary and benefits (Urban Institute 2024). Yet there is little evidence-based guidance on how police agencies can build, maintain, and optimize their workforces. Police agencies need such guidance as they confront decreasing numbers of staff and changing expectations of their communities. Further complicating these efforts are incidents of police force that have tarnished the image of the profession (Mourtgos, Adams, and Nix 2022) and changing generational preferences regarding work (Wilson et al. 2010).

Underlying research on recruitment and retention is the question of how many police officers an agency needs, and how a police agency can best use its staff at the right place and right time. Police agencies typically struggle to assess their staffing needs and lack the tools to determine an appropriate number of staff, often relying on “rules of thumb,” or historical levels established in different times, circumstances and ways since forgotten. When staffing drops below a specified level, agencies may assume they are understaffed and overloaded. But such specified levels may not be tied to agency workload or performance. And disconnects among current workforce levels, what an agency needs to do its work, and what it is told it needs to do its work can adversely affect police and community morale and efficacy.

Workload assessments can provide a common ground for understanding the services a police agency is providing and must provide, in delivering these services most efficiently and effectively, and in matching services provided with resources available. Staffing studies can help agencies make the most of their existing resources before requesting new ones. They can help identify inefficiencies, redundancies, and opportunities for alternative response models. And, if they do point to the need for additional resources, they can make such budget requests defensible, transparent, and grounded in evidence rather than assumptions.

Workload assessments are most likely to succeed when those conducting them communicate throughout what the study does and does not cover, how it will be used, and the steps after its completion. This publication guides agencies seeking to undertake a staffing study to determine an appropriate number of staff, how to deploy them efficiently and effectively, and how to promote continuous learning across the agency for staffing allocation.

This work provides a framework for police and civic leaders in considering workload assessments. Its underlying perspective is that staffing is not so much a problem to be solved but rather a means to achieve larger agency goals and objectives (Wilson and Grammich 2024a). Such questions may be particularly pressing as agencies consider how to accomplish more with less or, if needing more resources, how to justify requests for them and then put them to the best use. In providing such guidance, this work answers the following questions.

- What is a staffing study? What are its components and what information does it provide?

- Why conduct a staffing study? What information can such a study provide that an agency may lack?
- What are the challenges associated with a staffing assessment? What reactions may such studies provoke, and how can these be addressed?
- What are typical approaches to staffing allocation? What are the advantages and disadvantages of different methods to calculate the optimal number of officers?
- What data are needed for a staffing study? Which data are agencies likely to have, and which may they need to collect?
- Who should be part of the conversation? What contributions might agencies expect from different participants?
- Who should conduct the study? What are the tradeoffs between internally and externally conducted assessments?
- How much should a study cost? What will affect the cost of such a study?
- How long should a study take? What processes must be accounted for as part of a typical assessment?
- How often should a study be conducted? Beyond periodic updating, what might prompt the need for reassessment?
- What should agencies do after a staffing study? How should they communicate its results and implement its findings?
- What key lessons should agencies draw from this guidebook?

Readers seeking answers to particular questions regarding the staffing landscape may skip ahead to better understand the areas where they need the most help or they may read through for a complete overview of workload analyses and what they can accomplish.

What Is a Staffing Study?

A police staffing study is an analysis of how a police force employs its personnel across functions, shifts, and locations (Dolly 2025). Among its components may be analyses of calls for service, including by month, weekday, and time of day; time needed to dispatch and clear calls; and shift relief factors, i.e., the number of staff needed to cover a shift, given employee absences such as scheduled time off or illness as well as related constraints such as contract issues.

Typically, staff allocation, i.e., matching quantifiable and projected workload and time on task to person-hours needed to perform policing functions, is a priority of staffing studies. Such functions may include not only patrol, perhaps the most visible work of a policing agency, but also detective work, narcotics enforcement, and myriad other duties such as public assistance and crime prevention. Patrol services generally have robust data, such as that from computer-assisted dispatch (CAD) systems, to inform time on task and workload. Though CAD data may have shortcomings (e.g., failure to incorporate all officer duties after a call), they can provide insights on the date, time, type, and location, among other variables, of a call (Wilson and Weiss 2014). Broader records management system data, if available, can also help ensure capture of data on ancillary duties such as report writing and court appearances.

In addition to providing perspective on the role of patrol, the “backbone” of police work, staffing studies can inform department allocation of other functions, such as investigative services. Unfortunately, there is generally less data, particularly about time on task and workload volumes, about other functions than there is on patrol. Nevertheless, police agencies may spend a considerable amount of resources on such services. One analysis found that police agencies often devote 10 to 20 percent of their budgets to crime investigations, especially those regarding serious violent or property offenses (Lum et al. 2018). Another found that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 27 percent of sworn personnel in agencies with at least 100 officers were specifically assigned to investigative functions (Lum et al. 2024). This proportion reportedly dropped to 15 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic, pointing to several questions that agencies may wish to address with a staffing study, such as whether community demands for police investigations have changed or whether the needs for such investigations have changed. One analysis of investigations in a Florida agency found that investigative time can vary from an average of 1.83 hours for a case of identification theft to 29.7 hours for a robbery to 146.7 hours for a homicide (Prummell no date). Improvements in investigative technology and techniques have increased the time spent on a case, suggesting the need for periodic revision of staffing analyses. (For a more complete workload analysis regarding investigative functions, see PFM 2025.)

Other functions, such as administrative support, and some specialty units have still less data about time on task and workload volumes. Such functions may be subject to policy decisions by agency leadership, and hence less likely to have or yield granular workload metrics for staffing studies. Such positions, however, should still be included in a staffing analysis. Departments need to determine if they have the appropriate number of professional staff for the functions they are performing—and perhaps whether civilian professional staff (hereafter referred to as professional staff) should be performing tasks that sworn officers are currently handling.

Staffing studies should also include analyses of sworn staff performing administrative and supervisory functions. This can include consideration of a proper span of control for organizations, i.e., an appropriate number of personnel for a supervisor to manage. One hindrance to such analyses is the lack of knowledge of time on task for sergeants and lieutenants in patrol and investigations. This can lead to ambiguity in staffing studies. There is also a lack of authoritative research on an appropriate span of control for administrative and supervisory personnel both in policing and in other industries. Yet police departments may be required to institute an appropriate span of control for “close and effective supervision” of officers (see, for example, discussion regarding Baltimore in Alexander Weiss Consulting 2020). Appropriate spans of control may vary by policing function and agency policy. Identifying and assessing the duties of administrative and supervisory personnel can help police departments organize their work more efficiently, meet external requirements that may be placed on them, and ensure that their leaders do not suffer burnout and leave the profession.

Staffing studies must consider additional topics that will cut across policing functions. Such topics include the proper mix of sworn and professional staff, deployment (i.e., when and where to assign staff), work schedules (e.g., length and timing of shifts, whether shift overlaps are needed to

manage peak times), and organizational structure, including, where applicable, labor contract limitations.

Many functions of police agencies are identical or similar across the nation; hence, staffing analyses may have some significant areas of commonality. But each community has unique characteristics and unique demands for services that each given police agency must address. A staffing study can help agencies understand their context, how they serve their community, and how they can better serve it.

In sum, staffing studies can provide insights into how police personnel spend their time serving the community, and whether current staffing aligns with near- and long-term department needs and goals, while ensuring efficiency and effectiveness. Ideally, they should be “tooth-to-tail,” covering all functions of a department. Their insights may be limited by the data available for different functions, but a staffing study can help identify where data are lacking and should be collected. The lack of data on police functions outside patrol, such as sworn and professional staff leadership tasks, does not negate the necessity of such data. Rather, as we will discuss, as part of a staffing study, agencies should identify the information they need and find ways to access it. This may involve creating new tracking mechanisms, integrating existing data sets, developing proxy measures, or exploring previously unasked questions.

Why Conduct a Staffing Study?

Police agencies (or governing bodies overseeing them) may conduct staffing studies for many reasons. First, they may need an estimate of staffing levels for budgeting and strategic planning. Second, they may be seeking ways to optimize resources. Third, they may wish to inform policymakers about the resources available to meet workloads requested by their communities. Fourth, staffing studies can illustrate the implications of policy preferences and facilitate a conversation on policing “wants” and “needs.”

Above all, staffing studies can help police agencies build organizational legitimacy with the public, their governing bodies, and their line personnel. Such workload assessments can reduce reliance on anecdotal claims and internal bias, introduce more opportunities for evidence-based policing, and allow police executives to clearly articulate risk, service gaps, and tradeoffs in personnel allocation and deployment decisions. They do so by establishing a shared understanding of current staffing levels and starting discussions on future needs. Agencies may conduct staffing studies for a combination of these and other reasons, as the “on-the-ground” needs of an agency may be intertwined with the operational, political, and fiscal realities it faces.

Estimating Staffing Levels

A staffing study can empirically illustrate the resources needed to accomplish organizational goals. It does so by both documenting the work a community needs and calculating, from analysis of personnel and their deployment, whether current personnel are sufficient to perform such work.

Many police department representatives say they are understaffed. When asked how they know this, they may compare their current number of personnel to a budgeted or historic number. Such numbers may not reflect actual workload but a political budgeting process shaped by incremental changes in context and affordability. The resulting disconnect between the number of officers an agency truly needs and the number others claim it needs can undermine morale within the organization, consequently undermining organizational performance.

A staffing study can also assess what the balance of sworn and professional staff should be. The professional work of a department may include budgeting, fleet management, human resources, information technology, and personnel management. It is not uncommon for a department to appoint professional staff at the level of a deputy chief to manage such resources. Regardless of the number of sworn and professional staff, the work of each functional area of the department must be completed. Understanding the appropriate ratio of sworn to professional staff can help departments plan for each when a change in one occurs. For example, a department that faces a shortage of sworn personnel may benefit from adding professional staff and freeing sworn personnel from functions that do not require their level of training and certification. This would better leverage sworn personnel to perform only those functions that they alone can deliver. Conversely, if a municipality directs a police department to lay off professional staff, the department may need to reassign sworn officers to perform professional management work, because the need for such work does not disappear. Shifting sworn personnel to such work can create a structural artifact that may be difficult to reverse, even should agencies later encounter shortages in sworn personnel. Agencies need to understand this and adjust accordingly. Staffing studies can help them balance staff appropriately.

Optimizing Resources

Staffing studies, particularly those that rely on workload-based allocation, can promote overall efficiency and achievement of performance objectives (Wilson and Weiss 2014; Wilson and Grammich 2024a; McCabe et al. 2025). A workload-based approach, by considering workload, performance objectives, workload schedules, and other resources, can help improve policing efficiency and effectiveness. For example, as Wilson and Weiss (2014) demonstrate for the Rockford (IL) Police Department, the workload-based approach can show how changing the performance objective (i.e., the proportion of time patrol staff are expected to respond to community-generated calls for service) affects staff availability each hour of the day, and how a 10-hour work schedule affects the proportion of staff on duty at any one time and the need for staff to meet performance objectives and minimum staffing requirements. More recently, a workforce allocation model to optimize response time to 911 calls in Chicago used historical data to calculate how much time individual patrol cars spent responding to calls and devised means to reassign cars as needed to optimize workload among all cars (Ander 2022).

Informing Policymaking Conversations on Demand and Resources

Policymakers may need staffing studies to inform their conversations about the demand for police services and the resources to provide them for several reasons.

First, jurisdictions or accrediting agencies may require them. The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies mandates periodic workload analysis for accreditation (Shane 2025). Jurisdictions may also seek to periodically update staffing studies to reflect any changes in required services.

Second, staffing studies may be a formal part of a reform process, which may point to the need for better or different data. The Baltimore Police Department, for example, underwent a staffing study and plan as part of a consent decree regarding police procedures. It found vacancies of 27 percent in patrol but only of 2 percent elsewhere in the department. The subsequent staffing plan identified ways to better measure task time for patrol officers as well as non-patrol functions that might be consolidated or delegated to professional staff to yield more patrol officer hours (Alexander Weiss Consulting 2020).

Third, staffing studies may assist jurisdictions undergoing other transitions. A staffing study may help a new administration implement its vision for the police department or assist municipalities in negotiating collective bargaining agreements with their officers. Jurisdictions that have seen their territory or population change greatly, or expect to, may also benefit from a staffing study to discern how best to serve their changing communities. Agencies in growing areas, for example, may both need to understand their current needs and plan for staff as the population and service areas expand in form and quantity.

Discussing Wants and Needs

Staffing studies can clarify the implications of policy preferences and support informed discussions on “wants” and “needs” for a police department, taking into account affordability, operational practices, and other practical constraints within a community. They can focus discussions on service level expectations, response times, and operational risk tolerances. They allow police executives to link budget requests and related discussions to community impact and measurable outcome.

Police agencies may reflexively believe that they do not have enough officers, they have never had enough officers, and they never will have enough officers, without assessing how their number of officers compares to their workload. When asked, some may note their level of 20 years ago, and that they have fewer today, and therefore claim they must be short-handed. In fact, an agency that has not assessed or changed its number of officers in many years may have too few, too many, or enough officers. A staffing number set years ago, or without a workload-based staffing study, is

likely the product of political negotiation, budgetary constraints, or other external considerations, rather than a reflection of what the agency needs to accomplish its mission. Such numbers can become even more contentious in political discussions of the number of officers needed and its relationship to community crime without reference to other needs communities may have for policing services. Ideally, police agencies should think about the work they have to do and the work that they want to do within the context of affordability. While police agencies must contend with many influences outside their control, a staffing study can help match resources with community desires in style, quantity, and quality of police service.

A staffing study using high-quality data and analysis can help an organization “level set” the department against internal and external needs and perceptions. It provides all concerned with the same baseline of information. Perspectives on future wants and needs will still differ among those concerned, as they will in any policy discussion. But such discussions must start from a common baseline and understanding regarding how the current work of a department is accomplished, and how it can be more efficient or what additional resources it needs. Understanding the current workload, or a level-setting discussion of it, can support coherent, informed conversations with leaders and stakeholders (e.g., elected and appointed officials, community groups, collective bargaining units, business leaders, local news media) and budget analysts about current realities and potential alternatives.

Such discussions are particularly important when jurisdictions experience shifts in population, demand, or expectations regarding department services. Communities that currently contract for services or are considering consolidation may benefit from a staffing study to determine how many officers they would need to provide their own services. (See Ozer et al. 2019, for example, on two Ohio jurisdictions that were considering a shift from contracted services to an independent agency serving both communities.) Any efforts to change or reconfigure service should include a logical plan based on reliable data for providing the new services, consideration of patrol areas, and staffing suggestions for other functions, as well as discussion of the resulting budgetary impact, labor negotiations, and consideration of financial decisions by the governing jurisdiction. Should agencies lack reliable data, staffing studies can help them identify priorities for gathering it.

Finally, staffing studies can illustrate the need to expand the use of professional staff or to authorize and fund new sworn positions. A staffing plan mandated by consent decree reforms in Baltimore, for example, identified opportunities to increase available patrol staffing by assigning professional staff to roles such as towing services, special events planning, community services administration, and a data-driven strategies division (Alexander Weiss Consulting 2020). A staffing study of a suburban Cincinnati police department documented the need for more patrol staff at peak demand times, as well as for more sergeants to maintain appropriate spans of control (Corsaro and Akbas 2020).

What Are the Challenges Associated with a Staffing Study?

Staffing studies may face a variety of challenges. They may point to levels of police officers that differ from what communities, police departments (including leadership, management, and labor organizations), and other stakeholders believe they have needed. They may suggest levels that communities have not been able to attract or sustain. They may pose challenges to existing administrations and therefore be resisted by them. If not done transparently, they may erode trust in a department.

A staffing study in Bridgeport, Connecticut, illustrates the political complexity of such studies (Lockhart 2025). While department and union leadership suggested they needed at least 400 officers, the staffing study suggested 329 were sufficient. City council leaders who supported a lower number than the department wanted said the study allowed them to “kill th[e] myth” that 400 officers were needed, although they suggested the department may need 350 officers. Further complications stemmed from the study’s recommendation that the department change its shift structure and that it introduce more professional staff, both moves opposed by department leaders.

Political complexity was also evident in a staffing study of the Metropolitan Police Department in the District of Columbia. The study, which audited staffing at every level of the department, suggested that levels of patrol officers were sufficient, though there was some misallocation by shift and area (Hermann, 2024). The study also noted the need for better data on staffing and deployment to understand the complex policing needs of the city. The city’s mayor and police chief, citing data on the type of crimes in the jurisdiction, pushed back against the study findings, though accepting recommendations for improved data collection, a greater number of detectives, and opening to professional staff jobs performed by sworn officers. In other words, focusing on one area of police duties (e.g., fighting crime) may lead to different interpretations of staffing needs than others.

Jurisdiction leaders may decline to fund staffing study recommendations. The DC city council, for example, did not fully fund the mayor’s fiscal year 2025 request for professional staff to assume duties performed by officers (Hermann 2024). Toronto officials declined to fund the additional 178 officers recommended by an independent evaluation of the 5,604-member force (Church 2014). The suggestion for more officers, members of the police services board said, ignored financial realities.

Staffing study processes should be transparent throughout. In Hanford, California, perceptions that a citywide staffing study—including the police department—was driven by the city manager led to conflict among city workers, supervisors, and residents (Yamashita 2012), ultimately resulting in no substantive action. Similarly, a Pittsburgh police staffing study encountered resistance arising from concerns that the consultants conducting it had spent too little time

observing police operations and that city administrators influenced the outcome (“Editorial: Police Staffing Study Lacks Credibility and Should Be Tossed” 2023).

A key to transparency, and more generally to a successful staffing study, is consideration of communications from the outset. This includes establishing early what the study does and does not cover, how it will be used, and steps after its completion. Communication of a staffing plan should include both staffing numbers and the context in which a department and its members can see themselves. Above all, a staffing study should be a communications document that shows where a department is, what it needs, and how it should consider staffing issues. It should anticipate the questions government leaders and human resources professionals are likely to raise—and provide clear, well-supported answers. Its narrative should articulate the “why” of police staffing studies, that is, what the community seeks from its police and the reasons for those demands (as discerned, for example, from citizen surveys or focus groups), along with the “how” the work will be accomplished and the “how many” regarding the number of staff and supervisors needed to accomplish it. It should reflect on its original impetus, e.g., the question that first prompted the staffing study, and the path an agency will need to take to meet the needs of its community. Its approach will vary by whether the recommendations are to increase staff, change investigations, or reallocate staff by function, region, or shift. Understanding and executing these communications needs can help the staffing study avoid the political, economic, management, or other risks that will threaten its implementation and resulting benefits.

What Are Typical Approaches to Staffing Allocation?

There is a continuum of approaches to determining police allocation. Where feasible, workload-based methods are superior to others (Wilson and Weiss 2014). Such methods, however, may not always be feasible, due to lack of quality data or too few calls for service to analyze in an area requiring police service. (In such cases, analysts may choose to use multiple methods to determine an appropriate staffing level. See, for example, Ozer, Sabransky, and Gerard 2019, which used multiple methods to suggest staffing levels for a jurisdiction that had been contracting for police services.)

The methods we review below are

- anecdotal
- per capita
- minimum staffing
- historical/incremental
- authorized level
- operational risk

- workload-based.¹

These may overlap in some ways. For example, a historical standard may be based on a per capita standard that was based on anecdotal or “gut feeling” evidence. But each also has its own characteristics, as we note.

Anecdotal

The simplest, and crudest, means for determining staffing levels is by anecdote or “gut feeling.” Departments may choose a number of officers that feels “right” to it. Such feelings may not reflect what is occurring in a community or even reflect all the “feelings” of a community. While such a number lacks analysis, it can shape cultural expectations of service delivery and contribute to exhaustion and fatigue when agencies are unable to meet these expectations. Suggestions that the number is unrealistic may also lead to confusion in the community over why it needs to be changed. While an anecdotal approach may seem reasonable in a jurisdiction needing an unspecified but low level of police service, there are other approaches such communities could take, even if imperfect, as we discuss below.

Per Capita

The per capita method seeks to determine an optimum number of officers per jurisdiction resident and then calculates the number of officers needed for the jurisdiction (Orrick 2008). This method has the advantage of being easy to calculate and interpret. Per capita methods that control for crime rates, i.e., that compare jurisdictions with similar levels of crime, may enable comparisons with peer communities (Edwards 2011).

Such advantages, however, are outweighed by numerous disadvantages. This method does not address how officers spend their time, the quality of their efforts, or community conditions, needs, and expectations. It cannot guide agencies on how to deploy their officers. It cannot suggest an ideal number of officers per resident. Communities of similar size may differ in the number of officers they employ, while those with different populations may employ the same number of officers (Hollis and Wilson 2015). The number of full-time sworn officers per 1,000 population in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, the three most populous cities in the United States, ranges from 2.3 to 4.4 (FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Programs 2025). Per capita ratios do not account for changes in population characteristics. They do not account for variations in policing style, service delivery, or response to crime that a community may desire. They also do not account for variations in the use of professional staff by a police department. They do not account for variations in physical characteristics of a community, nor for non-crime related functions and activities that

¹ In addition, private institutions may use return on investment to determine staffing levels, seeking the staffing levels that will generate the greatest net benefit. Though not typically used in policing, such an approach may be used in private protection industries that must determine how much to spend in enforcing, for example, their intellectual property rights and against infringements to them (Wilson et al. 2022).

officers may perform. Finally, they do not account for temporary influxes of population for a community, such as that caused by business patterns or tourist events (see, for example, McLendon 2025, on problems in using per capita or minimum staffing approaches in Miami, given the tourist and transient populations of the city). Given these and other shortcomings, the International Association of Chiefs of Police has strongly advised against the use of the per capita method. It notes: “Ready-made, universally applicable patrol staffing standards do not exist. Ratios, such as officers-per-thousand population, are totally inappropriate as a basis for staffing decisions. Defining patrol staffing allocations and deployment requirements is a complex endeavor which requires consideration of an extensive series of factors and a sizeable body of reliable, current data” (International Association of Chiefs of Police 2025).

Minimum Staffing

A minimum staff approach requires police agencies to estimate the minimum number of patrol officers that must be deployed at any time to maintain officer safety and provide adequate protection to the community (Wilson and Weiss 2014). Communities may rely on past practice, policy, or supervisory judgment, among other variables, to establish a minimum staffing level (McCabe 2013). The use of minimum staffing levels may be reinforced by organizational policy or collective bargaining agreements. Efforts to change such levels may face opposition from those committed to them (e.g., collective bargaining units). Police agencies in small communities with few calls for service may rely on minimum staffing to meet resident expectations that a minimum number of police is on duty at all times.

There are no objective standards for setting a minimum staffing level. Rather, agencies may consider population, number of calls and crimes, and other variables before establishing a minimum staffing level. Such levels may even be set, like those based on anecdotal evidence, by “gut feeling.” Yet even objective standards for a minimum level can be problematic. If an agency sets its minimum level at that needed to meet peak demand for services, then it may be providing excess capacity at other times. If an agency sets its minimum level at that needed to meet the minimal demand for services, then it may incur overtime costs at other times.

In short, choosing a minimum staffing level may result in deploying too few officers when workload is high and too many officers when it is low. It can reduce agency ability to change officer deployments in response to changing workload. And it can present problems to management when trying to accommodate officer requests for time off.

Benchmarking

An agency may choose to set its staffing level at a benchmark level established by observation of peer communities. There are several difficulties with this. Perhaps the biggest is identifying what truly is a peer agency, and why it should be a standard for your community (Wilson and Grammich 2024b). As such, this method shares many of the same deficiencies as the per capita method,

which fails to account for variations in community characteristics and expectations for police service.

Consider, for example, the suburban Detroit communities of Warren and Sterling Heights: they have nearly identical total populations and are close to each other in the same county. But Sterling Heights has a larger foreign-born population and a larger population that speaks a language other than English, while Warren has several large employers, most notably General Motors. Different community compositions and levels of economic activity can lead to different demands for police services.

Or consider two other suburban Detroit communities, Livonia and Clinton Township. Both are similar in total population as well as other demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, and both have low crime rates. Livonia accomplishes its work with a force about 50 percent larger than that for Clinton Township. Given that both appear to be successful at limiting crime, it is difficult to say which should serve as the peer standard.

Communities and their leaders must determine for themselves what level of policing services they require, accounting for their own characteristics and needs. Each community is unique in some way. There is no way to know whether another community is staffing exactly right—or if it bases its staffing on your organization. Benchmarking can help communities focus on the questions they need to ask themselves. As such, it can be a tool more for creating than answering questions.

Historical/Incremental

Another way communities may choose their police staffing level is making incremental changes to their historical staffing levels. This can pose several problems. First, there may be no way to know why a community originally chose a level of staffing. Second, historic staffing levels may not be what an agency needs now or in the future. Third, historic staffing levels do not indicate how well police agencies are performing their functions. Fourth, historic staffing levels may not indicate whether an agency has an optimal level of staff—or offer any insight into what the optimal level of staff would be.

A staffing level based on department history can cause morale problems. Consider, for example, an agency with half the number of officers it once had, with no obvious means to rebuild its force to that level. Insisting that it should seek to do so risks demoralizing officers currently on the force, who are implicitly told they lack the numbers to provide sufficient police service to their community. Police agencies should determine the number of officers and the functions they need currently and build their force around that, not a historical artifact.

Authorized Level

Police agencies may seek to build their force around their authorized level, i.e., the number of officers that is budgeted for them (Wilson et al. 2010). While such a level may be based on a

staffing assessment, it will typically be based on affordability, politics, and negotiation, without connection to what the organization does or would like to achieve. Like the historical level, it may be based on experience without reference to current demand for services, community expectations, or ways to achieve efficiencies.

Like the historical level, the authorized level can become an artificial benchmark for need, creating the perception that the agency is short-staffed if it is not employing its authorized level (Wilson and Weiss 2013). Such perceptions, in turn, can diminish morale and productivity (Shane 2010) and make it appear that the police agency is not providing adequate police services to the community.

Operational Risk

Smaller police agencies or those with service demands too low for adequate workload modeling may choose to set staffing levels at those needed to mitigate operational risk. This is like an authorized-level approach but involves formal consideration of the services that must be available even if demand for them is not always present.

One example of how mitigating operational risk may dictate the level of police protection is national parks (Wilson and Grammich 2025). Parks may face under-resourcing of enforcement and uncertainty about the true levels of crime within them. In addition, overnight visitors to parks may have a reasonable expectation of protection in areas where there may be no immediately available police service from a local jurisdiction. Such circumstances point to the need for law enforcement personnel to protect natural resources and assist visitors as needed.

Seasonal variations can also affect the need for police services on college and university campuses. Campuses experience wide variation in police workload throughout the year due to special events, the number of students on campus, and the time of year. As a result, a campus police agency may be overstaffed in the summer but understaffed during autumn and spring semesters (Woolfenden and Stevenson 2011).

Workload-Based

Ideally, police staffing should be based on workload-based allocation models. Workload-based models account for what the organization must do and wants to do. Such models are generally considered to be the best standard for determining workforce needs (Wilson and Weiss 2014).

The workload-based approach derives the number of officers needed from the demand for police services (den Hayer et al. 2008; Fritsch et al. 2009; Lumb 1996; Shane 2007; McCabe et al. 2025). This approach is the only one to systematically analyze and determine staffing levels based on need (e.g., by calls for service), service style or performance (e.g., by how much discretionary time an agency wishes officers to have), and other agency characteristics.

The workload-based approach estimates future police staffing needs by modeling current levels of police activity (Orrick 2008; Wilson and McLaren 1972). Although workload-based assessments may differ in their approach, they typically are driven by calls for service and incorporate work schedules, back-up personnel needed, benefit time for officers, and training time to estimate allocation and deployment across shifts and areas (Wilson and Weiss 2014). A workload-based assessment, for example, may calculate the amount of time patrol officers spend responding to calls, the amount of time department leadership deems necessary for other patrol activities (see, for example, Srinivasan et al. 2013, and Vose, Miller, and Koskinen 2020, on committed and uncommitted officer time), and then calculate the number of patrol officers needed to respond adequately to calls, manage discretionary activities, and cover officer off time as well. Workforce-based assessments are typically applied to patrol officers but have been adapted to calculate needs for other department functions (see Alexander Weiss Consulting 2020, on Baltimore). They can help facilitate discussions between what a community wants or desires and what it needs or can afford.

Workload-based approaches have limitations. They rely on average rather than extreme demand in producing estimates. Response times can vary by community and be greater in larger geographical communities, which can affect workload calculations. Lack of sufficient data can limit the applicability of workload-based applications, both in small communities with limited demand for service as well as for units outside patrol with less available data. Workload-based approaches, for example, may work best in communities with at least 15,000 calls for service per year (Wilson and Weiss 2014).

What Data Are Needed for a Staffing Study?

Those conducting a staffing study have essentially four data requirements. These are for data on local context, on workload demand, on workload supply, and of sufficient quality to generate reliable estimates on staffing requirements. We review each of these below.

Local Context

Police staffing studies need to account for community preferences regarding style, quantity, and quality of police service. They should also account for existing agreements, contracts, court findings, and other requirements that could structure or otherwise shape staffing. Each community will have unique circumstances, as well as those that will change over time. Communities may vary, for example, in what they want sworn officers (or non-sworn staff) to do, as well as in how much time they want officers to have available for discretionary or self-initiated activities. An affluent suburban community in Texas, for example, pays for its public safety officers to be fully cross-trained in police, fire, and emergency medical services, so that an officer responding to a call for service can handle nearly any circumstance, but at a higher cost than neighboring jurisdictions pay for such services (see discussion of Highland Park, Texas, in Wilson, Weiss, and Grammich 2016). We will later discuss who should be part of the conversation in setting broad goals for the

police department. Here, we note that interviews and focus groups (e.g., among business, community, elected, political, religious, and other leaders), as well as surveys of community members to gain insight into workload, staffing, and desired services, can help agencies identify the broad goals they should pursue for their communities and the number of staff needed to fulfill them.

Workload Demand

Defining and measuring “work” can vary by agency. Workload models will require decisions on a wide variety of issues. These may range from identifying officer duties and guidelines for executing them (e.g., frequency of street patrol) to expectations for officer discretionary time (e.g., community policing, officer-initiated activities) and the need for officer “back-up” on calls for service. The availability of data can also vary. While agencies may have details, such as those gathered from CAD systems, on patrol officer duties, extensive details for other units may not be available. Below we discuss issues in estimating demand for patrol services and other police services.

Patrol Workload Demand

To understand current demands on the patrol workforce, police agencies should seek data on the calls for service they currently receive, the time required to service the calls, and the proportion of officer time available for administrative functions, discretionary activities, and breaks and time off. Analysis should consider at least a full year of this information—or ideally three years—to identify outliers, trends, and the baseline workload, and how it may change in future years.

CAD systems can provide information on current calls for service. A workload-based assessment should consider not just the total number of calls but their distribution by hour of the day, day of the week, and month of the year; the reason for the calls for service (e.g., domestic disturbance, larceny, noise complaint, traffic complaint); and the time needed to respond to calls. Time needed to respond to calls should include time from receipt of call to dispatch, time from dispatch to arrival on scene, and time on scene for each unit until the last unit clears the scene. Considering disposition codes of calls for service can yield insights into how agencies may address future calls. (See, for example, the analysis by Lum, Koper, and Wu 2021, of 911 calls, showing 62 to 83 percent of such calls required no further action besides responding to the call, and that the number of calls requiring written reports varied from 16 to 34 percent.) Assessment of such data on calls for service should separate discretionary activity (e.g., security checks or business contacts) from activities that officers must undertake (e.g., respond to calls for service). Such discretionary activities should be modeled as what department leadership wants officers to do as time permits in an overall crime prevention and safety strategy.

Agencies also need to consider the time that officers need to perform administrative duties such as filing reports and appearing in court. Calls for service may also affect others in the agency besides the responding officers. They may affect those performing back-up duty, conducting detective

work, or working in crime labs—all of whom should be considered in agency-wide workload analyses. Based on their strategic priorities, agencies should also add the proportion of time that leaders expect officers to have for discretionary activities. Consider, for example, an agency that wants patrol officers to have half their time on duty available for discretionary activity. Its baseline estimate for patrol officer time then becomes double the estimated time needed to respond to calls.

Other Workload Demand

Police agencies perform other duties besides patrol. These may include follow-up investigation of crimes, traffic enforcement, crowd control, SWAT teams, school and community education, record keeping, and department administration. While these vary by agency, all agencies provide services beyond patrol—and hence need workload estimates for functions beyond patrol.

Unfortunately, there are fewer examples of time estimates for police work outside patrol. One reason for this may be the variation of duties by agency. Agencies will vary by size, for example, in their record keeping and other administration needs, and many will not have their own SWAT teams. Even for common non-patrol functions, such as investigations, demand may vary, as jurisdictions vary in the investigations they need.

For non-patrol units, agencies may need new or untapped sources of data. These may be formal or informal. Formal ways to track data may include using existing logs or creating new logs or other means to record activity (see, for example, Prummell [no date] on varying investigation workloads in a Florida county). Informal means may include staff estimates gathered through interviews or surveys (see, for example, Tan et al. 2022, on using focus groups and a task-load instrument to assess work among investigators). Developing or administering workload estimates will involve tradeoffs in cost, speed, ease, reliability, accuracy, and precision. More formal measurements of workload, for example, will likely yield more accurate, precise, and reliable estimates, but also be costlier, more difficult, and slower to collect.

Perhaps most importantly, a workload analysis can guide agencies in identifying data they should collect to improve future operations. An agency may find it does not have all the data it needs to analyze workload throughout the department. Nevertheless, the data it has may provide initial indications of its workload and assessing it can highlight areas for improvement.

Workload Supply

To achieve baseline estimates of task and discretionary time, agencies must calculate officer time for breaks and training, as well as scheduled off days, holidays, vacation days, and illness days. Such time figures into shift relief factor calculations, which agencies need to determine the number of officers in their force to ensure that a specified number is on duty as needed. Below, we present a simplified calculation of a shift relief factor. (Our example is adapted from Vose, Miller, and Koskinen 2020. Srinivasan et al. 2013, provide another example in their discussion of

workforce assessment for an urban police department, and Wilson and Weiss 2014, note how calculations may vary by agency characteristics.) Steps in calculating the shift relief factor are

1. Identifying calls for service. This should include backup units responding to a call as well as others (e.g., detectives, crime-scene technicians) who may need to support a call.
2. Identifying time available to address calls for service. This calculation should account for administrative and ancillary duties, such as roll call, training, court appearances, and report requirements; combined, these duties could take up to 25 percent of an officer's time.
3. Determining minimum staff to answer calls for service. This should include both the time that officers may spend on calls and the time needed for administrative and ancillary duties. For example, if, on an eight-hour shift, the agency expects to have 80 hours of time obligated for calls and for administrative and ancillary duties, then it needs 10 officers for that shift.
4. Determining minimum staff per shift to meet performance objectives before shift relief. This should include the time an agency may want available for officers to perform discretionary activities. For instance, if an agency wants officers to spend two-thirds of their time on discretionary duties, it will need three times as many officers as it would require solely to manage calls for service and administrative and ancillary tasks. Or if an agency needs 10 officers to handle calls and administrative and ancillary duties on a given shift, it would need 30 officers if it wants its officers to have two-thirds of their time available for discretionary duties.
5. Calculating the shift relief factor. The shift relief factor reflects the difference between the number of days an officer can work and the number of days that an officer actually works. A function of work schedules, it is typically based on the average actual usage for staff in a unit over at least one year. If a full year of data are not available, or if an agency wishes to provide a more conservative estimate, it could estimate the shift relief factor based on the entire allotted amount of time to officers. Theoretically, an officer on an eight-hour shift could work 2,920 hours per year (eight hours per day for 365 days). Practically, the officer will have shifts off after working 40 hours per week, as well as for personal time, vacation time, holidays, sick leave, and other forms of benefit time. The officer could also have mandatory training that would preclude their ability to conduct their typical duties. Assuming the average of these hours total 1,545 (832 hours or 16 hours times 52 weeks for regular time off; 40 hours for personal time; 162 hours for vacation; 112 hours for holidays; 104 hours for sick leave; 60 hours of miscellaneous leave such as for military, jury duty and family medical needs; and 65 hours for training), then an agency will need 1.89 officers (2,920 hours divided by 1,545 duty hours) on its force for every officer it wants on a shift. Shift relief factors, which commonly exceed 2.00, vary across and even within agencies.
6. Assessing workload by shift, district, and other variables. Police workload will differ by time and area. An agency does not need the same number of officers at all times and places. It should therefore assess its workload by relevant variables to determine the number of officers it wants on different shifts or in different areas.

Again, this is a simplified example, and different agencies will have different requirements. But it broadly illustrates the types of issues a workload analysis should consider in determining how many officers an agency needs.

Quality Data

The goal of a staffing study is to have the most robust and reliable data available, thereby increasing the veracity and data-driven nature of its work. That said, few departments will have all the data they want or need for a detailed or nuanced study. If it lacks complete data, then a department should use the data it has, refine it (e.g., correcting errors) as needed, and, if necessary, make assumptions for other data elements.

While CAD data may provide insight into calls for service and time needed to answer them, especially if fully leveraged to account for all uses of officer time, an exhaustive police workload analysis will require other data, particularly that for other legal and law enforcement duties as well as ministerial and administrative duties. Efforts to construct an exhaustive staffing study can point to areas where agencies need data and guide them in gathering such data.

A staffing study should be a dynamic exercise. If an agency lacks reliable data, for example, on investigations or specialty units, it can create metrics to track workload and then assess data over time. Staffing studies are not necessarily one-time exercises but can and should be refined and enhanced over time.

Who Should Be Part of the Conversation?

There are at least five groups who should be part of any conversation regarding staffing studies, with some overlap depending on stage of the study.

First, the support of senior leadership both in the agency and its governing jurisdiction is needed from conception of a staffing study to implementation of its findings. Staffing studies require resources and plans for their use—resources only senior leadership can provide. Support from employee associations can also ensure cooperation with the study and implementation of study findings.

Second, senior agency leaders should work with community stakeholders to identify police service objectives, e.g., types of service desired. This should include identifying calls for police service, community preferences in how these should be addressed, and community priorities for police engagement and discretionary functions, such as those indicated through focus groups or community surveys. This should also consider limitations on what can be reasonably expected of the police.

Third, staffing studies should include agency members who have knowledge of and access to data systems. Such members can identify what insights existing data can provide and what may be needed to augment them. They would also be key in any efforts to collect new data.

Fourth, staffing conversations should include experts who know about the intricacies of conducting analyses. While large agencies may have their own research bureaus, smaller ones likely do not. Furthermore, even seasoned research professionals of larger agencies may find it difficult to be viewed as experts in their home jurisdiction. Rather, justifiably or not, their contributions to such work will be characterized within their political circumstances.

Fifth, the “level setting” task of a staffing analysis, i.e., the determination of the number of staff an agency currently needs, should include representatives from a community’s executive (e.g., its mayor), legislature (e.g., council members), and community leaders to ensure all agree on the ideal number of police staff and the reasons for it. In St. Paul, Minnesota, for example, the decision on whether to hire additional officers following a staffing study involved senior agency leaders, the city council, and the mayor (Nelson 2020). In Spokane, Washington, the decision to hire additional officers following a staffing study involved the city council public safety committee, the mayor, the police chief, and the police union (Hill 2017).

While senior agency leaders, leading community stakeholders, knowledgeable staff, and other experts are key to staffing studies, the conversation regarding them should be as broad as possible. Broader input can lead to better output. Most Americans understand crime through what they learn from their friends, families, neighbors, and local law enforcement (Eddy et al. 2024).

Conversations between community residents and local law enforcement about policing needs can be a powerful influence on the broad decisions political leaders must make on policing. Police interact with the community every day in answering their calls for service. Such engagement can extend to what police services residents need and want. Engaging the community and getting their input can provide, like no other source, the information needed to make the most cogent case possible for community demands and the resources needed to answer them.

Who Should Conduct the Study?

Who should conduct the study depends on agency resources and needs. While engaging external expertise can help agencies provide a study perceived to be free from local political influences, we recognize that there are other tradeoffs that agencies may need to consider. External studies can bring to bear the latest expertise regarding staffing issues and perspectives from other communities. Internal studies, however, may bring deeper knowledge of the community as well as of the strengths and weaknesses of available data. Agencies may also be able to more easily provide resources for a staffing study conducted internally than one conducted externally. In sum, deciding whether to conduct a staffing study internally or externally will depend on the resources available, perspectives needed, and other tradeoffs for agencies to consider.

More specifically, if agencies wish to conduct an internal staffing study, they should consider who needs to be on the team and why. If they wish to conduct an external study, they should consider the types of external institutions that do this work and are available to them. This may include independent or corporate consulting firms as well as research organizations. If seeking an external

partner, agencies should consider the reputation, experience, and insights that the partner can offer on the community and its needs. If seeking an external partner, an agency should consider not just the experience that a partner has in assessing patrol, but also its practical experience in assessing other areas as well as in offering innovations or efficiencies for its clients to adopt.

Altogether, using an external party to conduct workload analyses can bring new and broader perspectives to an agency from those who know what to examine, providing legitimacy to the findings. Those conducting internal studies may not be aware of all the issues they should consider, and face concerns about legitimacy and bias over their findings. At the same time, conducting a workload analysis internally, though time-consuming, does provide an agency the opportunity to develop its own expertise in these issues and allow for broader participation in the process.

How Much Does a Study Cost?

There are several drivers to the cost of a staffing study. Individual drivers will depend on each agency's needs. Among common drivers are

- breadth. What all does the agency want to analyze? Is it considering how to allocate staff across the agency, within a particular function of the agency, in a specific district, or something else?
- available data. What data does the agency have available for a staffing study? What does it need to gather? What tradeoffs is it willing to accept in gathering data, such as those in speed and precision?
- methods. How does the agency want to conduct the staffing study? Does it want to rely on internal resources or hire external experts? Does it need to gather new data or rely on what it has? How does it wish to gather community input (e.g., through focus groups or surveys)?

The cost of external studies will range by department size and scope of study. For example, a 2003 study of whether the Edgerton, Wisconsin police department should add an officer to its force cost \$15,000 ("Police Staffing Study Authorized" 2003). A 2015 study to determine whether the Mahwah, New Jersey police department should increase its number of officers from 51 to 56 cost \$45,000 (Villeneuve 2015). A 2017 staffing study of the Tinley Park, Illinois police department, conducted by Northwestern University, that analyzed call volume, length, and response times, in addition to surveying the community of approximately 55,000, cost \$30,250 (Nolan 2017; Northwestern University Center for Public Safety 2018). A 2007 study on whether the Milwaukee police were used optimally and how their workload execution compared to other departments, the first such study in more than 20 years, cost \$125,000 (Purvis 2007). More recently, a 2025 workload-based analysis of the Aurora, Illinois police department, including analysis of police work by area, day, and time, as well as community input on staffing, cost \$134,000 with a 5 percent contingency (Smith 2025).

Nevertheless, there are baseline levels of effort necessary to ensure a reliable study. As a result, a staffing study for a small agency (e.g., fewer than 100 officers) or one with a narrow engagement (e.g., a small division within a larger department) may, at the time of this writing, cost between

\$50,000 and \$150,000. One for a medium-sized department or for a large unit or several units in a larger department may cost between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Finally, one for a large department may cost between \$175,000 and \$400,000. Regardless of size, agencies considering a staffing study will also need to consider tradeoffs between quality, speed, and cost.

How Long Does a Study Take?

The length of time needed for a staffing study will depend on, among other things, whether the study is conducted internally or externally, the breadth and depth of the study (e.g., functions and size of the study to be assessed), and, as noted, tradeoffs among quality, speed, and cost. Key elements that can affect the time needed to complete a staffing study include the following.

- Determining the need for an assessment and whether to move forward with one. This will require support from department leadership and jurisdiction leaders.
- Whether the study is conducted internally or externally. For internal studies, agencies need to identify who will lead and support the study, identifying clear roles and responsibilities. For external studies, agencies will need to determine the source of funding and whether to pursue a direct contract with a vendor, issue a request for proposals, or procure through other means. Developing requests for proposals would include formation and marketing of the request as well as review and recommendation of submitted proposals. Time is also required to draft, review, negotiate, and execute contracts.
- Staff availability. For internal studies, time to complete the study will vary by how much time staff has available for study tasks relative to other department tasks. For external studies, completion time will depend on staff availability to engage with the contractor, provide data for use in the study, and meet with the contractor to discuss job duties and context for understanding daily operations and workload in the department.
- Data quality, quantity, and ease of access. The quality and quantity of data, and the ease with which it can be accessed for analysis, are critical in the project timeline and cost. While much analysis focuses on CAD data for patrol, typically the most visible part of the organization, it is equally important to examine data related to investigations, specialty units, administrative functions, and patrol duties not captured by CAD data.
- Project management or stewardship. Regardless of whether an analysis is done internally or externally, it will need support from senior agency leadership to ensure it stays on course, or, if it needs to change, that it can be adapted to on-the-ground realities.
- Creating high-level findings. Preliminary analyses and findings require a “reality check” to ensure they are grounded in context and operational understanding of the agency.
- Draft report. Details that an agency requires in the report, e.g., whether it needs in-depth analyses of all functions and areas it serves, or a high-level, “just the facts” analysis, will affect the time needed for a staffing analysis, and its costs. The review process can also increase project time and cost.
- Final report and presentation.

Altogether, agencies may expect staffing studies to take from six months to two years. But this is a rough estimate, with the ultimate length depending on the size of the agency, the resources available to it, and the balance it chooses among speed, cost, and quality of the study.

How Often Should a Study Be Conducted?

Typically, a staffing study should be conducted every five years. This repetition ensures staffing studies remain timely and evolve as circumstances change. Given that the staffing study process can identify data to collect and analyze, agencies may take a more dynamic approach, updating as new information or insights on workload become available.

Other circumstances that may necessitate more frequent staffing studies include

- experienced or planned changes in volume, timing, or location of workload. New housing or business developments, for example, may lead to demand for police services, as can changes in infrastructure (e.g., new roads).
- changes in performance objectives. Communities may, for example, desire more or less discretionary time for officers or more or fewer tasks for them. Such changes will affect the demand for police services and the number of officers needed to fulfill them.
- experienced or anticipated resource changes. Communities may find themselves with more or fewer resources than they had previously, as occurred following the “Great Recession” of 2007 to 2009. Such shifts often prompt a discussion of “wants” and “needs” in police services, and the staffing to meet them.
- cyclical social or economic changes. From 2019 to 2025 in the largest U.S. cities, for example, the numbers of gun assaults varied by more than 60 percent, of carjackings by more than 80 percent, and of residential burglaries by more than 90 percent (Lopez and Boxerman 2026). Consequently, a workload analysis for one of these years may be inadequate for another. Similarly, over the past quarter-century, police agencies have gone from hiring difficulties to shedding staff in the “Great Recession” (Wilson et al. 2010) to hiring difficulties during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Government Accountability Office 2026). A staffing analysis conducted in flush times may not be helpful in more lean years.
- changes in how work can be completed or is prioritized. Technology, for example, can have varied effects on workload. While technology allows detectives to do more work on a case, it can also increase the amount of time spent on a case (Prummell no date). Similarly, body-worn cameras can increase workload (to review camera footage) for supervisors and internal affairs reviews. Changes in how work is prioritized can also change tasks for an officer and the need to accomplish them. A greater emphasis on community policing may lead to more discretionary time for self-initiated activities by officers.
- substantive reorganizations in service delivery or work schedule. Changes in shift schedules, for example, can affect shift relief factors and the number of officers needed for a force. A developing need to address locations with particularly high demand for services (e.g., retail districts, which may suffer high numbers of thefts) can also necessitate a

staffing study and analysis of how to address emerging problems (see, for example, Ozer et al. 2019, on addressing hot spots in a suburban Cincinnati area).

What Should Agencies Do After a Staffing Study?

What an agency should do after a staffing study will depend on who requested the study (e.g., city leadership, police chief, police staff, community members) and its purpose (e.g., internal planning, to support a public request for resources, to justify the need for staff). The conversations after a staffing study will depend on what those requesting it were trying to accomplish. All such conversations, like the entire staffing study process, will require clear and open communications on the meaning of the study and its implications, explained in ways such that the results can be understood as widely as possible.

Possible reasons for doing a staffing study, and follow-up actions, may include

- city or department leaders seeking guidance for operational and funding decisions. A staffing study may indicate whether a department has the right number of staff—and, if not, how far off it is. (See, for example, Grice and Hanley 2013, who used a variety of sources within financial and time constraints to suggest the Montville [Ohio] Police Department needed additional officers to fulfill its assigned duties.) A staffing study may help determine whether a jurisdiction can terminate unfilled positions or whether it will need to find resources elsewhere to maintain them.
- federal court orders. As noted above, a consent decree required a variety of reforms in the Baltimore Police Department. Other agencies have faced similar demands. In Baltimore, the consent decree explicitly required the department to “complete a comprehensive staffing study to assess the appropriate number of sworn and civilian personnel [needed to] satisfy the requirements of this” decree (Alexander Weiss Consulting 2020). It is not uncommon for court orders to require assessments of other components as well, such as the appropriate span of control for ensuring effective supervision. A follow-up to the Baltimore study included continued workload analysis and responses to its key findings and recommendations, as well as analysis of how new response options affected calls for service and how evolving needs affected staffing demands (Baltimore Police Department 2023).
- changing workload demands. A staffing study can help a jurisdiction plan for expanded work, resulting from growth in size or duties, or to reconfigure the agency to serve a shrinking jurisdiction.

If a staffing study finds that an agency is understaffed, then the agency may seek to boost recruitment and retention, increase efficiency, or explore alternative service delivery systems (Wilson and Grammich 2024a). If a staffing study indicates an agency has sufficient staff but officers still find themselves responding to other calls without time for other initiatives, then the agency may wish to consider strategies that place more staff in patrol or otherwise free up officer

time. Senior leadership can guide agencies through such issues by using good data to determine the true level of staff demands and alternatives to fulfill them.

Agencies will make the best use of staffing studies by charting how they intend to use them. Such plans become the structure for communicating results. Such structures must present results in ways that general audiences can understand them. Those guiding a staffing study and its implementation may wish to have separate, stand-alone presentations on calls for service data, crime data, investigations data, and case closure data. Presenting the findings in such units, rather than trying to tell the whole story at once, can help build acceptance of the findings, and build toward solutions as well. Such an approach may encompass a multi-year plan and implementation approach to take action on desired results as well as to proactively plan for future issues, such as pending retirement waves, cyclical recruiting challenges and opportunities, and potential fiscal challenges limiting hiring.

Finally, because policing needs will change over time, a staffing study should, as noted, be repeated periodically to account for changing workload and opportunities to manage it. Changing community needs and priorities, as well as technology to accomplish the work of policing, will affect what policing work a community desires and the means to accomplish it.

What Key Lessons Should Agencies Draw from This Guidebook?

Agencies should view staffing studies as part of the answer to general questions about workload demands, agency objectives, and community expectations. Using staffing studies to develop community partnerships can help win support of the community for the work of the police agency and the resources needed to accomplish it (Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux 1994). As earlier noted, staffing is not so much a problem to be solved but rather a means to achieve larger agency goals and objectives (Wilson and Grammich 2024a). Staffing studies should be part of a larger consideration of organizational efficiency. They can promote workload consciousness about what agencies must do, what additional tasks communities would like them to do, and whether agencies are making the best use of their resources. Staffing—both sworn and professional—is a key tool for meeting community needs in policing, but other tools can also help deliver safety. Each community’s needs are different, so the allocation of police staff and selection of other tools to serve the community will, and should, vary.

Staff allocation is but one means to help communities identify the options they have for meeting their policing needs. Staffing studies can help agencies identify some of the ways they can fulfill these needs, and where they might need more resources or to make more efficient use of existing resources. They should be part of a systems perspective for addressing policing needs (Wilson and Grammich 2024a). Such a perspective should not just look at the number of police needed but also at what a community wants in policing services and why, and how the agency should supervise and manage officers to fulfill community demands for police services (including, for example,

appropriate spans of control). Staffing studies can give police leaders the perspective they need to lead their agencies, and to provide the vision that officers need to undertake the daily risks and challenges of the profession.

Staffing numbers are important, but knowing an ideal staffing number is not sufficient to address community needs. Knowing the number is not a substitute for management, efficiency, and effectiveness.

In devising appropriate staffing numbers, jurisdictions should, if possible, use workload-based approaches. Staffing benchmarks of other approaches can provide context that helps to ask good questions, but such benchmarks are not dispositive evidence on the number of officers a specific community will need. Rather, workload approaches can promote discussions about a community's current demands for police services, how it might deliver such services most efficiently, and means to navigate the balance between a community's wants and needs for policing.

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About the Authors

Jeremy M. Wilson, Ph.D., is Professor and Associate Director of the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University, where he founded and directs the Police Staffing Observatory. As a scholar, educator, advisor, and consultant, he has collaborated with a wide array of institutions, published more than 200 products, and led more than \$15 million of research and outreach projects sponsored by the U.S. Congress, U.S. Departments of Justice and the Interior, foundations, governments, agencies, associations, and corporations. His policing research focuses on evidence-based personnel planning and developing a systems approach to police staffing, integrating aspects of workload demand, performance objectives, resource allocation and deployment, recruitment, retention, cohort management, workforce attributes and related areas. Among his staffing publications is *A Performance-Based Approach to Police Staffing and Allocation* (COPS Office), co-authored with Alexander Weiss, which serves as an industry standard for conducting workload-based staffing assessments. For his contributions to police research and practice, he was named a Distinguished Scholar by the American Society of Criminology Division on Policing, and the Police Section of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences honored him with the O.W. Wilson Award. To learn more, see <https://jeremywilson.org/>.

Seth Williams is a director in PFM's Management and Budget Consulting practice and deputy director of its Center for Justice Safety and Finance. He leads the firm's law enforcement and public safety practice, supporting law enforcement and public safety clients in staffing studies, operational improvement and fiscal efficiency reviews, recruitment/retention analyses, and organizational structure analyses. Before joining PFM nearly 16 years ago, he worked for the Office of the New Jersey Governor as the Cabinet Liaison and Deputy Director of Management and Operations.

Ronal W. Serpas, Ph.D., is a Professor of Practice in Criminology and Justice at Loyola University New Orleans, teaching undergraduate and graduate courses since 2014. Dr. Serpas recently retired from a 34-year career in American law enforcement. From 2001 – 2014 he served as the Police Superintendent in New Orleans, LA, Police Chief in Nashville, TN and Chief of the Washington State Patrol. Dr. Serpas was a successful change agent implementing organizational wide transformation, advancing Community Policing and implementing Justice and Legitimacy principles in the delivery of police service. In each department significant decreases in crime and increases in citizen satisfaction were achieved and sustained. Dr. Serpas was a leader for more than twenty years in creating innovative changes in recruitment/retention, deployment, criminal investigations, disciplinary investigations and actions, use of force policies and the investigations of use of force.

Clifford A. Grammich, Ph.D., is Director of Birdhill Research and Communications, LLC. He has more than 25 years of social science research and communications experience. Much of his experience has been as a communications analyst with the RAND Corporation. His work has spanned multiple aspects of police staffing and organization, including recruitment, selection, retention, staffing composition and consolidation.



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 the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice to promote evidence-based police-workforce research, strategy, and operations. Directed by Professor Jeremy M. Wilson, its primary aims are to advance police workforce knowledge and its application by

- conducting timely and innovative research on critical aspects of a wide range of police staffing issues, resulting in scholarly and practitioner-oriented resources
- creating a venue for the network of police staffing scholars to share opportunities, discuss ideas, and enable collaborations
- facilitating researcher-practitioner partnerships
- serving as a repository and dissemination vehicle for the research of collaborators so that it is easily discoverable by practitioners, policymakers, and others.

Through its facilitation of research and outreach, the PSO is a community of science that serves as a valuable resource for the community of practice. Hundreds of resources spanning police staffing systems can be accessed from the PSO website, <https://cj.msu.edu/community/psu>.