

A New Service Strategy

How police staffing studies guide smarter fiscal and policy decisions

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Police services are among the largest expenditures for governments, particularly at the local level.¹ Nearly all local government spending on police goes toward operational costs, largely salaries and benefits. As a result, police staffing expenses comprise a substantial share of local government budgets. This makes police workforce planning—including determining how many officers a police agency needs and how to deploy them at the right times and places—critical for fiscal management.

Yet, there is little evidence-based guidance on how police agencies can build, maintain, and optimize their workforces—guidance that’s needed as we confront a “new normal” in staffing levels, changes in recruitment and retention, and evolving community expectations. Absent evidence-based, data-informed approaches, police agencies may struggle to assess their staffing needs and rely on unproven “rules of thumb” or historical levels set under conditions that no longer apply.

Police staffing studies can provide common ground for understanding the services a police agency must provide,

how to deliver them most efficiently and effectively, the expectations of elected and appointed leaders, and how to align service levels with available resources. This article outlines what a best-practice workload-based staffing study entails, the data it requires, and how law enforcement agencies and government finance professionals can use its results.

What is a police staffing study?

A police staffing study analyzes the ways a police agency allocates personnel across functions, shifts, and geographic areas to meet proactive and reactive workloads.² Some staffing studies focus primarily on patrol, the “backbone” of policing work; however, a staffing study should also examine functions such as investigations, administrative support, supervision, specialty units (critically important and time-consuming tasks non-police administrators may not initially consider), and those carried out by professional (civilian) staff. It should also consider the appropriate mix of staff (rank, supervision, span of control, sworn/professional), deployment (when and where to assign staff), work schedules (shift length and timing), organizational structure, and overarching policy and operational goals.

Moving beyond common rule-of-thumb planning, staffing studies provide evidence-based insights into how police personnel spend their time and whether current staffing levels align with near- and long-term community and police agency needs and goals. While data limitations may constrain some analyses, conducting a staffing study can help communities identify and obtain the data they need for improvement. This lays the groundwork for establishing common definitions of workload and data on distinct types of police workstreams, and how those workstreams drive staffing levels. This groundwork provides budget, finance, and law enforcement leaders with a common baseline and starting point for short- and long-term financial and operational discussions.

Why conduct a staffing study?

Police agencies or their governing bodies may conduct staffing studies for many reasons. Exhibit 1 summarizes these reasons, which we discuss further below.

First, police agencies may need an estimate of staffing levels for budgeting and strategic planning. A staffing study can empirically demonstrate the resources required to achieve organizational goals. It does so by documenting the work a community wants and needs and, based on an analysis of personnel and their deployment, estimating whether current personnel are sufficient to perform it. It can also help determine the appropriate balance of personnel for each function (e.g., what must be done by sworn staff and what can be performed by professional staff).

Second, police agencies or their governing bodies may seek ways to optimize resources. Staffing studies, especially those that rely on workload-based allocation in all aspects of an agency’s mission to meet community wants and needs, can improve overall efficiency and help achieve performance objectives.³ A workload-based

approach that considers workload, performance objectives, schedules, and other resources can improve policing efficiency and effectiveness.

Third, police agencies may seek to inform elected and appointed leaders’ understanding of the agency’s resource needs and availability to meet community demands.

Additionally, some accrediting bodies require staffing studies for achieving (and maintaining) certification. Staffing studies can also be a formal part of reform efforts. Likewise, staffing studies may assist jurisdictions undergoing other transitions, such as a shift to a data-driven culture rather than one relying on historical precedent, changes resulting from an election or appointment of a new police leader (e.g., new sheriff or chief), or a shift in a community’s fiscal standing.

Finally, staffing studies can illustrate the implications of differing policy preferences and facilitate a conversation on policing “wants” and “needs.” Police agencies may believe they don’t have enough officers without assessing how officer headcount and allocation compare to their workload.

A staffing study using high-quality data and analysis can “level set” discussions and align expectations with operational realities among a range of stakeholders (e.g., elected and appointed officials, department leaders and staff, and community, business, and labor partners).

What are the challenges associated with a staffing study, and how should communication be navigated?

The adage “Hell hath no fury like a cultural artifact interrupted by data” is appropriate here. Two frequent challenges arise in many jurisdictions:

1. Staffing studies may identify a number of police officers and professional staff that differ from what communities, police agencies, and other stakeholders believe are needed. Often, these notions are long-held and become cultural artifacts with no verifiable basis. Frequently, this results from historical assumptions that are inconsistent with current conditions.
2. Staffing studies may suggest results that a community has been unable to attract or sustain, staffing levels are appropriate, but other organizational changes are necessary, or a division of sworn and professional duties that communities or agencies do not desire.

Such realities can be difficult for some to accept, and the communication of changes must be managed carefully. A key to a successful and transparent staffing study is considering communication from the outset. This includes establishing early with multiple audiences (internal and external) why the study is being conducted, what it will cover, how it will be shared and used, and the intended steps after completion.

Communicating a staffing plan should involve more than presenting staffing numbers. It should provide context that enables a police agency and its members to see themselves. Above all, a staffing study should be a communications document that uses data to

EXHIBIT 1 | Why Conduct a Police Staffing Study?



define the workload of a law enforcement agency, explain the “why” and “what” behind its needs, and outline how it should approach staffing issues efficiently and effectively. For budget and finance leaders, understanding these is imperative, given the significant personnel and operating costs in most government budgets.

What data is needed for a staffing study?

Staffing studies have four general data requirements. These are for data on/of:

1. Local context. Police staffing studies need to account for the community and elected and appointed leadership’s preferences regarding the style, quantity, and quality of police service. They should also account for existing agreements, contracts, court findings, and other requirements that could shape staffing. Each community will have unique and evolving circumstances. They may vary, for example, in their expectations of sworn officers and professional staff, as well as in how much time they want officers to spend on discretionary activities or how they want the police agency to triage criminal investigation cases.

2. Workload demand. Defining and measuring workload demand can vary by police agency. Workload models require decisions on issues ranging 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) and the need for officer “back-up” on calls for service. Computer-assisted dispatch systems may provide adequate data on patrol officer duties, but comparable data for other units, such as investigations, specialty units, and professional staff, may be lacking. Nevertheless, several best practices are emerging to quantify workload in these non-patrol functions. For instance, emerging work demonstrates that investigative workload can be measured and evaluated

systematically to inform workload-based staffing needs for detectives and their supervisory chain of command.

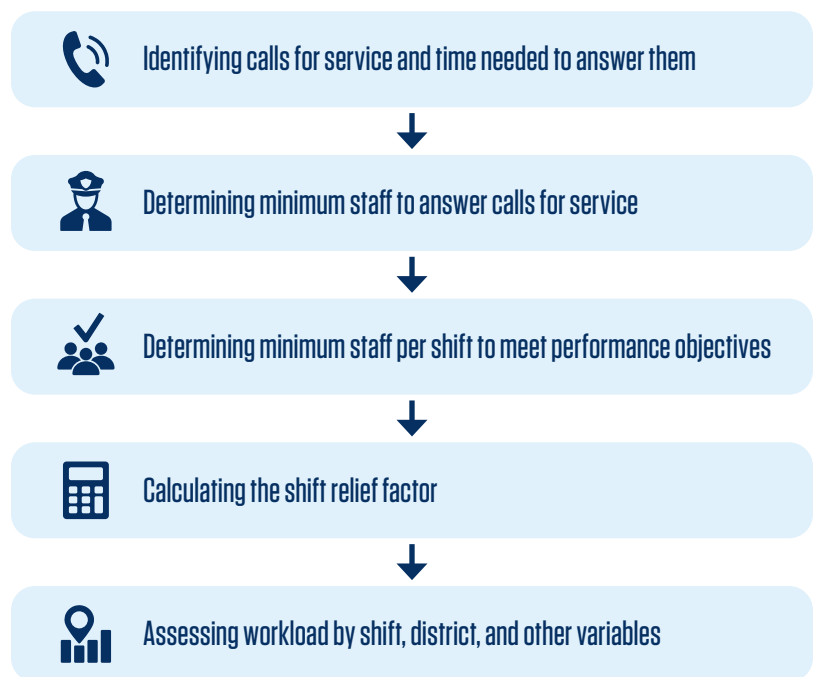
Additionally, it is vital to quantify the workload of support functions (and determine whether sworn or professional staff should provide those services) so a department’s most fundamental functions—such as patrol and investigations—can deliver services in line with expectations. Too frequently, police agencies, government officials, and the public may inadvertently overlook quantifying the critical support functions necessary for the more visible aspects of the department to perform their services—a concept coined “tooth to tail” by the Department of Defense in assessing how many support personnel are required to support the front lines.

3. Workforce supply. To estimate workload supply, police agencies must calculate not only time on shifts but also time away from primary duties, including breaks and training,

scheduled off days, holidays, vacation days, sick leave, administrative duties, and more. Such time is included in shift relief calculations, which indicate how many officers an agency needs to ensure a specified number is on duty at any given time. Exhibit 2 outlines the steps to calculate the workload-based number of patrol officers required by a police agency.⁴

4. Sufficient quality to generate reliable estimates on staffing requirements. A staffing study should use the best available data to ensure the highest possible quality. That said, few departments will have all the data they want or need for a detailed or nuanced study. As a result, a staffing study should be a dynamic exercise. If a police agency lacks reliable data for certain units, it can create metrics to track workload and assess them over time. Staffing studies are not one-time exercises but can and should be refined over time. A key theme is not to make the perfect the enemy of the good.

EXHIBIT 2 | Determining Total Patrol Officer Staffing Needs



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Exhibit 2 is a simplified illustration, and details will vary by jurisdiction. For instance:

- Community needs for police service can vary by time of day, day of the week, month of the year, and area served.
- Communities seeking more discretionary time for their officers will need more officers to meet service demands.
- Communities may differ in their desire for police services based on their economic activity and community composition.

Regardless of community needs and wants, this model provides a framework for determining total police staffing needs and how changes to police work may affect them.

Who should be part of the conversation?

At least five groups should be included in any conversation about staffing studies (see Exhibit 3).

1. Participation of senior police leaders is essential. Staffing studies require resources, guidance, and long-term commitment that no one else can provide.

2. Police agencies should work with community stakeholders to identify police service objectives, such as the types of service desired. This should include identifying calls for police service, the investigative

caseload, workloads for other specialty units, community preferences for addressing these workload areas, and police engagement and discretionary activities.

3. Staffing studies should include police agency members who have knowledge of and access to the agency’s data systems. These individuals can identify what insights existing data can provide and what additional information may be needed for the study. They can generate detailed data from computer-aided dispatch, records management systems, and case management systems, as well as personnel and performance data.

4. Staffing conversations should include experts who understand the intricacies of analysis. While large police agencies may have their own research bureaus, smaller ones likely do not. Even in large agencies, research professionals may find it difficult to be viewed as neutral experts in their home jurisdictions. External experts can guide the conversation to balance a jurisdiction’s goals with its realities and assess what is necessary and what is sufficient for the staffing study.

5. Include all levels of leadership in staffing deliberations. Including a community’s executive (e.g., its mayor), financial and budget team (e.g., chief finance officer, budget director), legislature (e.g., council members), and other community leaders—particularly in “level setting” the number of desired officers—will

provide opportunities for transparency in decision making.

While the timing and sequence of these conversations will be dictated by local circumstances, politics, and needs, such conversations can generate broader input leading to better outcomes.

Who should conduct the study?

Who conducts a staffing study should depend on resources and needs. External partners can provide up-to-date expertise in staffing practices and perspectives from other communities. Internal teams can offer deeper knowledge of local conditions, including the strengths and weaknesses of available data, and may be more cost-effective, but may be lacking in breadth and depth of methodology and perspective; additionally, the adage, “it is hard to be an expert in your own backyard,” frequently applies in this realm. As a result, a balance of external and internal efforts may yield the most effective results for many departments.

Other questions when contemplating who should conduct a staffing study may include:

- **Breadth.** Is the study narrow or broad? What expertise and internal or external resources are needed to achieve the goals of the study? What does the police agency want to analyze? Is it considering how to allocate staff across the agency, within a particular function, in a specific district, or something else?

EXHIBIT 3 | Participants in Police Staffing Discussions

-  **1 Senior police leaders**
 -  **2 Community stakeholders**
 -  **3 Police agency members with knowledge of data systems**
 -  **4 Experts on conducting analyses**
 -  **5 Representatives from the community's executive and legislative branches**
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- **Available data.** What data exists, and what new data may be required? What tradeoffs, such as those in speed and precision, are acceptable in gathering data? Do internal staff already have the time and expertise to collect and analyze the necessary data? Can external partners help collect data?
- **Methods.** Does the police agency want to rely on internal staff, external consultants, or both? How will it gather any new data and community input? Are outside eyes helpful to surface ideas, concepts, opportunities, challenges, etc. that may otherwise be missed?
- **Time.** What are the realistic timeline needs and goals for the study in light of staff requirements and constraints?
- **Cost.** As of early 2026, study costs may range from \$50,000 to \$150,000 for police agencies with fewer than 100 officers or for a smaller division within a larger department, from \$100,000 to \$200,000 for a medium-sized department or for a large unit in a larger department, and from \$175,000 to \$500,000+ for a large department.

When deciding how to proceed with a staffing study, law enforcement agencies, regardless of size, and their government partners must balance these questions while navigating trade-offs among quality, speed, and cost.

How often should a study be conducted?

Typically, a staffing study should be conducted at least every five years. This interval ensures that staffing studies remain relatively timely and evolve as circumstances change. Because a staffing study may identify new data and analysis needs, police agencies may take a more dynamic approach, updating as new information or insights on workload become available. In fact, best practice is to update staffing plans iteratively to continually improve the quality of analysis inputs and outputs.

More frequent studies may be warranted when there are changes in:

- **Known or likely workload or mix of workload drivers.** These include drivers resulting from new housing, business developments, or infrastructure (e.g., roads, rail crossings).
- **Leadership and/or performance objectives.** Communities

experiencing changes in police leaders, newly elected or appointed executive and/or legislative leaders, and jurisdictions seeking changes to officers' discretionary time (such as increased proactive or community engagement) or different priorities for officer tasks may benefit from a fresh look at their current (and/or new) workload and the resultant staffing requirements.

- **Resources.** Communities may experience fluctuations in resources, such as those that occurred following the recession of 2007 to 2009, or in personnel, such as those that occurred following publicized incidents of police violence in the early 2020s. Such changes in resources and personnel can prompt a discussion of “wants” and “needs” in police services, which an updated staffing study can inform.
- **How police work is completed or prioritized.** Technology may alter the way work is performed, reviewed, or automated, which in turn can affect staffing needs and the distribution of work across a department's units and among sworn and professional staff. A greater emphasis on community policing may also alter staffing needs.
- **Organization of service delivery or work schedules.** Modifications to shift structures or deployment models can affect shift relief factors and the number of officers and professional staff required to maintain full operations at all times.

What should police agencies do after a staffing study?

What a police agency should do with a staffing study after its completion will depend on who requested the study, its purpose, and its results. For government finance officials, staffing studies help assess the police department's financial needs, its current efficiency and effectiveness in utilizing allocated funding, and the implications of



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changes in police operations for other public functions. Staffing studies can provide an objective, empirical decision support that enables stakeholders to have constructive discussions about wants and needs within the context of affordability.

If a staffing study finds that a police agency is understaffed, the agency may seek to increase funding, improve recruitment and retention, enhance efficiency, or explore alternative service-delivery models. If a study finds that an agency has sufficient staffing, but its officers and detectives have limited time for proactive work, the agency may consider assigning additional officers to patrol and detectives to investigations, or implementing strategies to free up officers' and detectives' time. Senior leadership can guide police agencies through such

decisions by using sound data and department and community goals to determine actual staffing needs and the options available to meet them.

Police agencies will benefit most from staffing studies when they clearly outline how they intend to use them. Such plans serve as the framework for communicating results and next steps.

What are the key lessons for financial and budget leaders?

Police staffing studies help answer basic, interrelated questions about workload demands, police agency goals, and community expectations—information that is directly related to the cost of delivering police services.

Given that, staffing studies should be part of a broader consideration

of organizational efficiency efforts to ensure the effective use of public resources. As part of that effort, staffing studies are an effective communications tool. They can promote awareness about what police agencies must do, what additional tasks communities would like them to do, and whether current resources are being used effectively to address both these “wants” and “needs.” This helps level-set fiscal and policy decisions for elected and appointed leaders, stakeholders, and the community.

Staffing—both sworn and professional—is a key tool for meeting community wants and needs in policing, but it is not the only one. Other strategies and resources can contribute to public safety. Because every community's needs differ, the optimal mix of police staffing and other tools to deliver public safety will differ. Staffing studies, when viewed through a systems perspective on policing, can help leaders balance community demands for police services with the resources available to deliver them. ■

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¹ and Courts.” Urban Institute, *State and Local Budgets: 2024*. Backgrounds: Police, Corrections, and Courts, 2024.

² Colby Dolly, “Right People, Right Place, Right Time: Why Police Staffing Studies Matter Now More Than Ever.” National Policing Institute. July 10, 2025.

³ Jeremy M. Wilson and Alexander Weiss, *A Performance-based Approach to Police Staffing and Allocation*, Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014; Jeremy M. Wilson and Clifford A. Grammich, “Reframing the Police Staffing Challenge: A Systems Approach to Workforce Planning and Managing Workload Demand,” *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 18, 2024.

⁴ Example based on Brenda Vose, J. Mitchell Miller, and Stephanie Koskinen, “Law Enforcement Manpower Analysis: An Enhanced Calculation Model,” *Policing: An International Journal* 43 (3), June 2020.