

WHITE PAPER

The Critical Impact of Public Safety Staffing

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Background:

“9-1-1, What is your emergency?” Call takers at public safety communication centers across the United States say this line 7.6 times every second of the day¹. With over 96% of the country’s geographic area supporting 9-1-1 access, this lifeline to citizens became an integral component of how law enforcement is alerted to criminal activity. For the criminal justice system to function effectively, agencies must have the right personnel answering these calls, responding to reported incidents, and completing investigations. Skilled employees are the most valuable resource of the government, and when these resources begin to dwindle, those most in need of law enforcement services are the ones most impacted.

After the financial collapse of 2008, law enforcement agencies within the United States entered the first downward trend for staffing in 25 years. In 2011, the United States Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office and Michigan State University produced a study titled *A Performance-Based Approach to Police Staffing and Allocation* to address the questions leaders had about the number of personnel needed to provide necessary services. The compiled data showed over 12,000 officers were laid off and approximately 30,000 positions remained unfilled². Two takeaways from the study are that context matters regarding staffing, and many agencies feel their uniqueness makes inter-departmental comparisons less useful.

A decade later, law enforcement agencies, some which never fully recovered from the 2008 financial collapse, were facing new challenges related to staffing. In November of 2022, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) held a conference in Washington, D.C., for agency leaders to discuss and share strategies related to recruitment and retention. What began as a roundtable event evolved into a standing-room-only discussion with representatives from hundreds of agencies. In the end, the information shared helped leaders discuss different strategies on how to move forward³. However, there were no definitive answers on how to survive the current crisis.



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The staffing crisis impacting public safety is not isolated only to law enforcement. In a 2019 study by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) titled *The State of Recruitment: A Crisis for Law Enforcement*, researchers addressed that nursing, teaching, construction, and the military are all suffering from a shortage of skilled labor⁴. The Marshal Project (2023) conducted a similar study four years later and found employment numbers demonstrate that Americans are slowly opting out of government jobs with a 5% drop in government workers and a 4% decrease in law enforcement⁵.

Comparing the 2011 study to the PERF conference in 2022 is critical to understanding how detrimental the current staffing dilemma is to law enforcement. In 2009, agencies laid off or furloughed personnel because there was a lack of funding. However, as funding became available, agencies could use the qualified candidate pool. In 2023, funding is readily available, with some agencies offering up to \$40,000 in incentives for new officers⁶. At the same time, a City of San Francisco Supervisor proposed the city automatically match hiring incentives for other agencies to avoid a catastrophic staffing shortage⁷. Regardless, the culmination of three years of low recruitment, increased retirements, and increased resignations have dropped staffing in some agencies to record low levels.

Impact:

Public safety organizations have specific responsibilities, such as responding to 9-1-1 calls or maintaining a corrections facility, codified in various documents. In California, Article 1 of the penal code clearly outlines a County Sheriff's duties to maintain a jail. At the same time, Article 1 does not definitively address the role of handling patrol functions outside of powers of arrest and crime prevention⁸. As staffing decreases, leaders remove personnel from investigations, specialty units, and delay promotions to ensure necessary staffing in the organization's essential services.



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At the Seattle Police Department, the agency is at a 30-year low for staffing, with only 954 officers deployable of the department's 1,400-member allocation⁹. In 2019, a Priority 1 call for service, which is an immediate threat to life, yielded a patrol unit dispatched in 8.7 minutes with a goal of fewer than seven minutes. In 2022, the same call for service took 10.3 minutes⁹. A review of four years of published calls for service data for 15 agencies revealed 14 had increased wait times, with an estimated response time in Mesa, Arizona, only .9 minutes greater, while New Orleans, Louisiana, had the highest estimated response time of 95.0 minutes longer¹⁰.

In November, the Tehama County Sheriff's Department suspended patrol services during daytime hours due to staffing¹¹. In San Francisco, California, the Police Department has a recommended staff of 2,182. However, the total number of full-duty capable officers is only 1,537, and almost 500 of those personnel are eligible for retirement⁷. In Boston, Massachusetts, the Commissioner said the agency was in such a dire position that he asked for surrounding agencies to provide lateral transfers into the department to support the organization¹². Although surrounding law enforcement agencies may sympathize with the situation, these agencies are unlikely to reduce their staffing to support these requests.



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Police1.com surveyed officers in December of 2022 and the results were telling. When asked what the biggest challenge of 2022 was for law enforcement officers, 52% of the respondents cited recruitment and retention. The same survey's results concerning recruitment and retention challenges in 2021 revealed a 15% increase in just one year. As Shults wrote, "Reports of excessive overtime and fatigue, increased response time, cutting short investigative services, rushing rookies into the field and wondering if there is going to be a backup available are all on the minds of officers" (2022)¹³. Most leaders fully understand that when Sir Robert Peel wrote *The Nine Principles of Policing* in 1829, he was correct that agencies must maintain a relationship with the public¹⁴. However, when an organization is fighting for survival, it is common to revert to providing only legally mandated services.

Implications:

While the most severe crimes will still be investigated, the solvability factors associated with a criminal offense are weighed against the available resources necessary to complete the investigation. In the most basic terms, agency leaders question if the investment of resources will solve a crime and lead to a successful prosecution. Even if both conditions are achievable, the lack of available trained personnel is taking a toll on clearance rates.

At the Seattle Police Department, most of the agency's resources are focused on answering calls for service while on patrol. Of the 234 detectives the agency had in 2019, over 100 detectives were no longer available to conduct investigations¹⁵. In June of 2021, a leaked internal memo from within the agency stated that the Sexual Assault Detective Sergeant could not assign new cases due to a lack of available detectives¹⁶. According to Brownstone and Hiruko, at the time of the memo, five detectives had 30 sexual assault cases waiting for assignment, and 116 alerts required attention of pending identifiable DNA from rape kits¹⁷.

One barometer often used to assess the status of crime in the United States was initially the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program and now the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). However, a lack of nationwide participation in providing the Federal Bureau of Investigation with the necessary data presents a situation where law enforcement across the United States cannot objectively state if the country is better or worse off. According to Li, 7,287 of the 18,818 law enforcement agencies in the United States did not submit crime data for 2021¹⁸. This missing information represents nearly 40% of the country's crime data.



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Homicide clearance rates is an area of concern for the public and law enforcement. On January 21, 2023, Executive Director Chuck Wexler from PERF provided a list of four recommendations on ways agencies can improve in this area, while addressing the staggering statistic that homicide clearance rates in 2020 declined to 50%¹⁹. In December 2022, Elinson and Frosch published a story in the Wall Street Journal titled *Murders of Black Women Rose During the Pandemic. The Solving of their Cases Fell*. In the article, an analysis of homicide clearance rates between 2018 and 2021 showed that the overall clearance rate decreased from 51% to 49%²⁰.

Not having personnel available to investigate crimes directly impacts the ability of law enforcement agencies to disrupt the crime cycle. In 2016, the National Institute of Justice published an article titled Five Things About Deterrence. The first, probably the most important, is, “The certainty of being caught is a vastly more powerful deterrent than the punishment”²¹. This sentiment was echoed again in a 2022 news story about the understaffed Cleveland Police Department, where resident Erika Watson said, “People pretty much doing what they want to do because they know the police are not around”²². As a long-term strategy, merely handling priority calls cannot ensure a safe community.

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Alternative Service Delivery:


For decades law enforcement agencies across the United States have utilized consulting services and contractors to fill organizational gaps. While some opportunities involved hiring individual contractors or contracting through large scale employment providers, most offerings were directly linked to a dedicated individual working with an agency. The concept of providing hours of investigative or consulting services related to investigations was wholly unheard of because no companies offered a complete solution. This lack of presence in the market provides

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both a unique opportunity to provide an impact while also presenting a challenge that law enforcement leaders face, as former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld referred to, as “unknown unknowns²³.” That said, law enforcement leaders can adapt to everchanging environment if they are informed about the possibilities.

After the economic collapse of 2008, the City of San Bernardino, California filed for municipal bankruptcy. San Bernardino was one of three large cities in California that could not continue providing services to the citizens. At the law enforcement level, San Bernardino chose a unique approach to the problem and introduced the use of civilians as detectives. In March 2016, Lieutenant David Green of the San Bernardino Police Department completed his master’s thesis titled *A Different Shade of Blue: An Evaluation of the Civilian Detective Concept and its impact on Police Capabilities* at the Naval Postgraduate School about the use of civilian detectives. According to Green, when comparing salaries of civilian to sworn detectives, the average savings among departments was 29%²⁴. While this strategy is not widely employed across law enforcement agencies, the implementation was born from necessity.

Introducing LexisNexis® Risk Solutions Public Safety Investigative Services and Consulting to the law enforcement community requires both education and concept development. At the education level, law enforcement leaders must be introduced to not only the concept of analytical services on demand, but what effective service delivery looks like. Many leaders still struggle with understanding the cloud computing concept, so trusting that work is being accomplished when they cannot look out their office door to see a body in a cubicle is novel. At the development level, leaders will need to not only take the information learned in the education phase, but construct a mental model as to how they see these services fitting in their existing schema. The exciting element of this offering is the ability for LexisNexis Risk Solutions to help leaders achieve a goal they are incapable of obtaining with their current staffing.



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The Investigative Services and Consulting capabilities of LexisNexis Risk Solutions offers more capability than many agencies can develop internally. The Office of Justice Programs, which is within the United States Department of Justice, produces a publication titled Analyst Toolbox – A Toolbox for the Intelligence Analyst. The International Association of Crime Analysts references this publication by stating it provides a listing of the computer hardware, software, and database resources that an analyst needs²⁵. LexisNexis Risk Solutions Public Safety Investigative Services and Consulting provides all the listed products identified as part of the analyst toolbox²⁶. At the same time, this offering is consistent with focus areas of the International Association of Chiefs of Police 2022 Intelligence Summit which states, “Private sector vendors play a critical role in supplying information technology systems to departments and agencies”²⁷.



In the current environment, managers and officers are desperate for ways to increase the number of available personnel because there is an absolute tipping point when people stop working.

Conclusion:

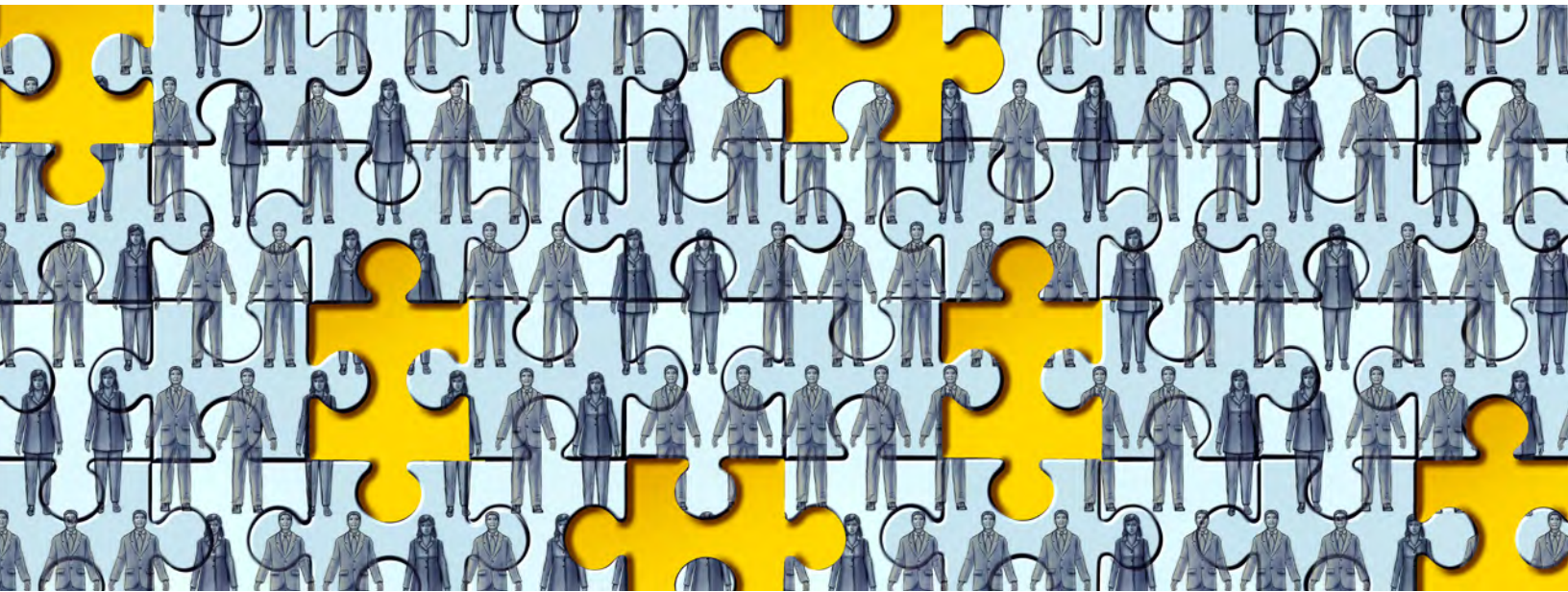
Skilled employees are the most valuable resource of the government. As a former government employee, the number of times I heard managers reference doing more with less is countless. The challenge facing agencies is that a tipping point exists when those responsible for doing the work choose not to participate. Mental health and officer wellness were critical topics long before staffing issues and the demonization of public safety officers became so prevalent. In the current environment, managers and officers are desperate for ways to increase the number of available personnel because there is an absolute tipping point when people stop working.

Agencies across the country are actively trying to fix this problem. Some agencies are offering hiring bonuses, and lowering their physical agility requirements and drug usage standards. While time will indeed judge if any of these actions were the right

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decision, the reality is that they will not impact today's crime victims. Even if every understaffed agency had 100% of their personnel demands met at this moment in time, the individuals would not make an impact on the criminal justice system until they underwent background screenings, completed hiring, attended a basic academy, and finished field training. In other terms, if a tree gets planted today, do not expect shade tomorrow.

Until law enforcement agencies can develop sustainable solutions, opportunities exist to help public safety organizations navigate this territory. Law enforcement can adapt to new environments, but it takes making leaders aware of opportunities or alternative service delivery methods. Twenty years ago, the concept of having mental health care workers work alongside law enforcement officers in the field to deal with individuals was not even a consideration. Now, government agencies routinely utilize these personnel to support their operations. What once was unheard of is now on the way to becoming a standard.



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About the Author

Dan Morrissey is a technology innovator with a strong focus on increasing public safety capabilities. After 25 years of law enforcement service, Dan retired from the Sacramento County Sheriff's Office as a Captain of the Field Support Division. In this assignment, Dan oversaw all Information Technology elements of the agency in addition to the Public Safety Access Point, Intelligence Unit, Forensic Identification, Crime Scene Investigations, and Records Bureau. Dan has a strong background in mobile device forensics, call detail record analysis tools and geolocation technologies. Dan's reputation within the advanced analytics world is well known, and he worked with the Naval Postgraduate School Common Operational Research Environment lab involving Social Network Analysis. Dan has a bachelor's and master's degrees from American Military University in Intelligence Operations and is currently attending the University of Virginia for a second graduate degree in Public Safety. In 2022, Dan joined LexisNexis® Risk Solutions in the Public Safety Business Development Unit to help advance the law enforcement solution portfolio.

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