

Police LOS Standards

The dramatic increase in violent crime rates has grabbed headlines and become a central focus for legislative action at state and national levels. Clearly, a sense of security is an essential factor in a community's quality of life. Simply putting more policemen on the beat has not always brought the desired reduction in crime rates. Other factors have significant influence on crime rates including poverty levels, lack of educational opportunity, sentencing and policing practices. How can we meaningfully measure improved police LOS? This section describes some traditional measures of police service adequacy such as response time and staffing levels. It also briefly notes some opportunities to improve on traditional measures.

Response Time

Response time is the amount of lapsed time in minutes between when a call is received and when the first officer arrives on the scene. It is perhaps one of the measures most noticed by the average citizen. In fact, some argue that too much emphasis has been placed on reducing response time to keep citizens happy. The emphasis on response time may come at the expense of time which would be better spent on crime prevention (ICMA, 1984). Many service requests are not urgent. In addition, recent studies indicate that the average citizen delay in calling the police is four to five and a half minutes. The time to report the crime may exceed the average time it takes the police to respond to the call. In such situations, it becomes less likely that a fast response will result in an arrest (Crockett, 1989). Response time is also a data intensive, indirect measure of either personnel needs or overall police service performance. There is no question, however, that a quick response time is critical when a crime in progress has been reported or when there is a medical emergency. A better objective may be to match the appropriate response to the type of service call. Some calls demand an immediate mobile response. Others may be less pressing or may even be handled by a civilian employee over the phone. The following figure illustrates a call prioritization approach to handling service calls.

Service Call Prioritization Can Stretch Resources

Several examples of response time standards follow:

Sample Response Times			
	Des Moines	Bainbridge Island	Chula Vista (CA)
Non-Emergency	12:53 min	6 min*	
Urgent	05:34 min	6 min*	62% w/i 7 min & 7 min ave
Emergency	03:58 min	6 min	84% w/i 7 min & 4.5 min ave
* Although Bainbridge Island's official six minute standard is for emergency response, in practice, police are responding to all calls within a six minute average response time.			

Staffing Level

Once again, there is no consensus on staffing levels for local police departments. The ratio of both officers and total police employees per 1000 is significantly related to crime rates. However, there are many variables that enter into crime rates. Such standards have limited meaning because the actual number required will vary depending on the size of a city, geographic region and city type (central, suburban, free-standing rural). Even cities of the same population size and type may differ widely in staffing needs because of differences in demographics, socio-economic characteristics, climate or other unique conditions. The table in the last section shows typical police employee per 1000 population ratios in cities of varying sizes and in different regions in the country. Again, the Pacific Coast has lower police employee staffing levels at 2.32/1000 than all but one other region in the country (ICMA *Baseline Data Report*, 1992). Washington state as a whole has 2.28 police employees per 1000 population and a ratio of 1.6 officers/1000. In a 1989 study, Seattle found that it ranked ninth of 16 comparable-sized cities with 3.06 employees per 1000 and 2.27 officers per 1000. The study noted that all eight of the cities with a higher ratio of employees per 1000 had lower crime rates than Seattle (Carroll Buracker & Associates for Seattle Police Department, 1989). In making such comparisons, we must recognize that other factors may influence these results. Average income levels, demographic make-up, and even climate may differ from city to city and influence crime rates. Crime reporting procedures can skew statistics. Seattle has established programs which may encourage reporting crime. Des Moines has a current standard of 1.5 officers per 1000 but aspires to a level of 2 officers per 1000 (city of Des Moines, 1992). Other Washington examples follow in descending order of population size:

- Yakima: 1.7 officers/1000 & 2.3 employees/1000,
- Moses Lake: 1.9 officers/1000 & 2.8 employees/1000;
- Poulso: 2.3 officers/1000 & 2.7 employees/1000;
- Cle Elum: 2.6 officers/1000 & 3.1 employees/1000;
- Darrington: 2 officers/1000 & 2.7 employees/1000;
- Rock Island: 1.9 officers/1000 & 3.7 employees/1000;

Workload Analysis

Adding more officers or police employees does not always translate into a proportionate improvement in police LOS. Recent reports on the subject indicate that the only reliable way to determine police staffing needs is to analyze police workload. Workload analysis allows a community to maximize its use of existing resources before requiring new resources. It is important to examine where the time is going. If too much of an officer's time is committed to responding to non-emergency service calls, inadequate time will be available for preventative work, directed and random patrols or emergencies. The International City Management Association advises that for optimum efficiency, no more than 30 to 35 percent of an officer's time should be in the "committed patrol time" category (responding to routine service calls and their immediate follow-up).

A close look at workload provides other opportunities to maximize resources. For meaningful analysis, workload data such as the nature, time and location of calls and personnel data should be collected. Studies show that an evening shift (4 P.M. to midnight) generally has the greatest workload. Other studies show opportunities for much work to be handled by civilian personnel. A San Diego police study found that two one-officer units have nearly doubled the productivity of one two-officer unit. One expert suggests that any police department, which answers any of the following questions in the affirmative, probably is not utilizing its resources optimally.

Checklist for Assuring Efficient Use of Police Resources

<input type="checkbox"/> Are more than 12 to 15 percent of sworn personnel assigned to the detective function? Less than 10 percent to patrol?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are police officers performing many non-police functions, such as message delivery, escort and serving as chauffeurs?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are the same number of officers assigned to every shift? Are minimum (staffing) policies followed?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are sworn personnel being used in jobs that could be done as well and at less cost by trained civilians? Normally, police should not be assigned as dispatchers, jailers, records clerks, desk officers or animal control officers.
<input type="checkbox"/> Are all calls for service answered by the dispatch of a patrol unit?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are patrol officers required to prepare written reports on all calls handled?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are all or most cars staffed with two officers?
<input type="checkbox"/> Are patrol officers returning to the station to type reports?

Crime Rates

Perhaps the most obvious indicators of police performance are crime rates. Crime rates address only one area of a police officers duties, however. Police officers spend only 10 to 15 percent of their time dealing with the kinds of major crimes tracked in police statistics. Officers may also respond to medical emergencies or traffic control needs, conduct public safety programs or perform a variety of other duties. Crime rates also tend to be cyclical, making short term comparisons difficult to use as an indicator of improved performance.

It may be fairer to apply crime rates as a measure of how the city as a whole is doing in addressing crime rather than as a tool to judge police department performance. Reducing crime rates in most areas will require more than efficient police operations and resources. Crime reduction efforts may always fall short without crime preventative programs which address conditions of poverty and drug dependency and which promote strong neighborhoods, job and educational opportunity and community design. There are many difficulties in establishing relationships between various program effects and crime rates or traffic accidents. However, ultimately, "output" measurements such as crime rates which measure results, may be truer measures of the success of community safety efforts.

Police Issues

- Should greater efforts to address the root causes of crime be made? To what extent might reductions in unemployment or percent under poverty level, and increases in educational level be measures of community security? A number of studies and crime statistics show a relationship between crime and poverty, lack of educational or employment opportunity. According to Department of Justice statistics, the average jail inmate was at the poverty level before entering jail. In addition, 40 percent of all jail and 28 percent of all prison inmates had completed high school compared to 85 percent of males age 20 to 29 in the U.S. population. Similarly, 45 percent of all male in jail had been unemployed before entering jail compared to 84 percent employment in the U.S. male population age 20 to 29 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1988).
- To what extent should a larger percentage of resources be devoted to a problem-solving emphasis (searching for and correcting the cause of or contributing factors to a problem) rather than a focus on rapid incident response? For instance, Many cities have adopted strict design standards for convenience stores resulting in reduced robbery incidents. Gainesville, Florida, found that convenience stores were far less likely to be robbed if they provide better visibility into the store, limit money kept in a cash register and train employees in crime prevention techniques (ICMA, 1989).
- To what extent may standards for community design and land use (outside of a police department's control) be a significant factor in crime reduction and police performance? For instance, neighborhoods with diverse land uses, a mix of single family and garden apartments and bright street lighting, experience lower crime rates (ICMA 1989).
- To what extent can "output" or performance measures, be fairly applied to measure the quality of a community's police service? (Output measures gauge results of police programs rather than the level of staffing and resources provided.) For instance, reduction in crime rates and traffic accidents may be better indicators of

performance than number of arrests or number of traffic tickets written. On the other hand, some factors contributing to crime rates, such as community design, may be outside a police department's control. See Appendix G for other examples of performance measures.