

The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

Lack of Officers: What is the Answer?

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by
Kevin K. Kelso

Victoria Police Department
Victoria, Texas
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Abstract

Introduction.....1

Review of Literature.....3

Methodology.....6

Findings.....7

Discussion/Conclusions.....13

References.....16

ABSTRACT

Police agencies around the United States are experiencing problems with a shortage in qualified officers and there are not enough officers to effectively handle current caseload trends. As a result, officers are not responding to calls in a reasonable amount of time that would satisfy a citizen in need of assistance causing these officers to have to bear the burden of citizens complaining about their response times. Is there a need to civilianize more of the police responses and to downsize the types of calls officers respond to?

Police officers around the nation are experiencing many healths related illnesses up to and including death. This is a direct result of the stresses that go along with the unbearable caseloads officers are expected to handle on a routine basis. Police management has to come up with viable solutions to this ordeal or the problem with personnel shortages are sure to increase.

Solutions to the ever increasing caseloads are to civilianize more of the types of responses to police assistance. Another solution is to decrease the types of calls officers respond to. Only those calls involving violence or that are in progress is one way of doing this.

Introduction

Police agencies around the United States are experiencing problems with a shortage in qualified officers and there are not enough officers to effectively handle current caseload trends. As a result, officers are not responding to calls in a reasonable amount of time that would satisfy a citizen in need of assistance causing these officers to have to bear the burden of citizens complaining about their response times. Thus, the citizens call and complain to supervisors, which also add to the officer's stressful state. Officers are fatigued at the end of their tours of duty because of the enormous amount of calls they are expected to handle day in and day out. Along with this strain come the related stresses associated with trying to separate the officer's job from their personal lives.

This added stress affects police officers lives in many different ways. Sometimes it affects family and marital life. Other time's officers turn to alcohol as a means of coping with this extreme burden. At times, many of the officers succumb to the most extreme method used as a way out: suicide. Officers more often feel that the department is not doing all that they can to retain and recruit enough officers to handle the workload of the job.

Officers within these departments suffer from low morale and many times leave their respective departments for better jobs. Often times the officer's safety comes into jeopardy because they get fatigued frustrated and have a less than attentive attitude.

Several departments are now seeking various solutions to avoid this detrimental trend. Due to budgetary constraints that many departments have to adhere to, pay raises may not always be a viable option. Possible solutions to this problem may be to make changes within the organizational structure. These changes could be beneficial to the officers and yet still maintain a plausible working relationship with the public; this is a growing trend within many law enforcement agencies.

This research is formatted to review the problems an agency is confronted with due to the lack of personnel and other related problems. This research will offer possible remedies various departments could implement to make for a more pleasant, but still viable agency. Research will be obtained from modern literature, various journals, and manuals.

The intended outcome of this research will allow departments, supervisors, and administrators to identify the problems and to formulate obtainable solutions. Both

officers and their departments will benefit from these findings. This will also be a benefit to the citizens of the respective communities giving them a higher quality of law enforcement within their jurisdictions.

Review of Literature

The most important and most expensive police resource is personnel. Consequently, the most important management planning tasks involve the allocation of personnel. Shortages in personnel are not a problem unique to one specific agency or department. Personnel shortages are something most agencies are experiencing and each agency is attempting to deal with it in their own ways. In departments of any size, the task of justifying increased personnel should not be trusted to chance or guesswork but instead should be supported by factual information related to increased demand for police services or through comparisons with other agencies of comparable size (Fyfe, 1997). Due to the ever-increasing call load, officers in today's society have to endure many strains. These strains, brought about by the call load, affect each individual officer in different ways. Because these officers are being affected, management needs to address the problems associated with the increased workload. This

research will address some potential remedies to the workload issues.

Combating the increasing crime and call load while utilizing today's decreasing resources is a challenge for police administration. This challenge requires not only having to work harder but to also work smarter. In doing so a safe and comparatively crime-free environment for those served may be obtained (Cronkhite, 1983).

Several studies indicate that immediate response to all requests for service is not cost-effective. Every effort must be made to improve the effectiveness of service response and investigative activities through various management techniques and procedures. Immediate response to those calls of serious crimes in progress or where there is an imminent threat of serious bodily injury or death is a means of handling this dilemma used by many agencies. Other responses to calls of service are delayed or scheduled when sufficient radio units are available. In some instances, low priority requests are made on an appointment basis during non-peak work hours (Cronkhite, 1983).

If the demand for service continues to escalate, the necessary allocation of officers with present personnel must be made, or a reduction in the services rendered will

have to be decreased (Nolan, 1978). There are ways to reduce the call load and response times in a service system: reduce the average rate of calls, reduce the variation of types of calls responded to, or to increase the number of officers servicing the calls. Determining which factor has the greatest impact is not always a simple matter (Watson, 1998).

Because of the vast array of problems of attacking this matter, officers are suffering stress-related illnesses and other strains at a horrific rate. Police work is a high stress occupation, which affects, shapes, and at times, scars the officer and their families (Nolan, 1978). Some of the stresses typically related to the environmental work factors are fatigue, marital/family problems, burnout, alcoholism, other health problems, and suicide. Because of these and other stressors which police are subsequently exposed to, police are characterized by high incidences of various types of stress-related outcomes.

Officers that experience numerous or frequent stressors may have troubled marriages. Police officers are incurring divorces at an astronomical rate. Police also have a higher suicide rate than that of other occupations. Alcoholism is another significant outcome from the high

stresses related to police work (Golembiewski, 1990). The appropriate staffing level of law enforcement agencies has continually been the subject of debate by police officials, politicians, and law enforcement union leaders. Job related workloads can also be viewed as a direct source of stress. This type of stress can be caused by the frequency of a task or the task itself. Strain is tougher on officers who have a high workload than it is on officers with less of a workload. Officers who have to work hard are more susceptible to stress than those who have a low workload. Stressful events in the street work of policing makes more of a difference to the high workload officers compared to the low workload officer (Stotland, 1988).

Methodology

Police agencies around the United States are experiencing problems such as a shortage in qualified officers and there are not enough officers to effectively handle the current caseload trends. As a result, officers are not responding to calls in a reasonable amount of time that would satisfy a citizen in need of assistance causing these officers to have to bear the burden of citizens complaining about their response times. There is a need to civilianize more of the police responses and to downsize the types of calls officers respond to.

The literature researched concerning police responses and the types of responses revealed types of calls that could be civilianized and types of calls that did not need a police response. This research into coping with shortages in personnel leads to the conclusion that definite changes could be made to lead to smaller call loads which would lead to faster responses and less stress on officers.

Findings

As the call for service from the public increase, so do the demands on the police officers. The higher expectations of the public is passed on down to the officers, delivering the message that officers must accomplish more with less. These high demands placed on the officer are very stressful and lead to a variety of stress related problems. Both work underload and overload can be stressors, but overload seems to dominate in policework, both qualitatively as well as quantitatively. Most studies agree that qualitatively work overload occurs in policing because high conflicting expectations are placed on the officer (Golembiewski, 1990).

Police work is a high stress occupation. It affects, shapes, and at times, scars the individuals and families involved. Stress overload encourages a variety of health

and family problems, one of which is suicide (Dash, 1978). Evidence indicates that suicide among police officers has a higher frequency than that among other occupational groupings, both in the United States and throughout the world. The suicide rate among police officers is six and a half times higher than for the total population (Golembiewski, 1990). Many sources of occupational stress amongst the police society have been identified as contributing to stress-related illnesses. Among these stressors are shortage in personnel and longer working hours. The lack of available officers and the inevitable increase in working hours is a major source of stress experienced by the junior and middle management police officer (Cooper, 1982). Officers who have to work hard are more susceptible to stress than are low workload officers. Stressful events both on and off the job appear to exceed a threshold of stress tolerance among the already hard working, high workload officer (Stotland, 1989). Workload as an aspect of objective reality of a job can be viewed as a direct source of stress, such as the frequency of any task or the nature of the task itself (Pendleton, 1989).

To manage the demand placed on the officer, a system must be devised to tailor the police response to this demand on a consistent, logical basis. For each step in

the complaint process, the type of response that would be most beneficial should be dictated. Departmental policies in most police agencies are that the officer must be dispatched to handle all complaints with few exceptions. Should handling a three-day-old theft have the same response level as a burglary or robbery in progress? The immediate response to this question is often that:

1. the police department is a service organization
2. the public demands services and
3. this demand can only be served or can best be served by a personal response

Patrol officers are responsible for the performance of all primary police tasks. They interact with citizens on a daily basis in a variety of situations in which they may:

- prevent crime
- conduct investigations
- engage in problem solving activities
- maintain order or restore it where it has been breached
- aid persons in need of assistance
- engage in conflict resolution
- control traffic/enforce laws
- write tickets/issue warning

- write reports
- use physical, or even deadly, force

In virtually every department, patrol is the largest independent police organizational subdivision and the only operational unit the police administrator cannot afford to disband (Fyfe, 1997).

A potential solution to relieving some of the workload and potential stresses of officers is to dictate the type of response that would be most advantageous overall. Between 80 and 90 percent of all citizen-initiated calls-for-service is of a non-criminal nature (Kenney & More, 1986), Williams and Sumrall (1983) reported that the traditional practice of responding to every call-for-service is unnecessary and costly. Immediate personal response would be retained for in-progress and other critical crimes such as robbery, rape, etc. Delayed personal response would be used for complaints requiring personal response, but not immediately. Such incidents as not in-progress burglaries, most felony thefts, neighborhood disputes, etc. could be handled in this fashion. Telephone response could be most useful for civil disputes, in which one party has already left. The police service rendered in these cases is almost always informational. The telephone service could also be used in

a variety of nuisance complaints such as criminal mischief reports, property damage reports, etc. Service at the police facility would be required to respond to the police rather than the other way around (Nolan, 1978). Nonsworn officers working within every division of the police department as opposed to sworn police officers is an alternative to personnel shortages. The benefits, where professional standards are promulgated are: 1)dollar savings; 2)the increased availability of police officers to their primary task; 3)civilian specialists, prepared for the task at hand; 4)productivity is increased in law enforcement and in the specialized auxiliary services because the best people are working in their own area of expertise. Morale, motivation, and productivity are at their highest level when the best people are placed in the positions for which they are most qualified (Quarles, 1977). Nonsworn personnel should not be used in positions requiring the full exercise of police authority or in jobs that provide essential training for career police officers.

Another possible solution to the personnel issue would include no follow-up of cases evidencing no useful solvability factors. Follow-up time can be saved by allowing victims of certain crimes to list additional information not included on the original report on a

separate form, given to them by uniformed officers, which is mailed to the police station. This informs victims that a detective will not contact them unless additional information is required. Use of this form eliminates the necessity of detectives having to complete follow-up investigation reports and reduces the number of phone calls to the detective from curious victims only wishing to know how things are going on their case (Cronkhite, 1983). These cases would not be referred for further investigation. They would be filed by a crime analysis function to be referred out at a later time if further information is developed as in the case of multiple clear-up (Nolan, 1978).

Some police agencies have discovered it to be necessary to stop taking most "property damage only" traffic accident reports. Units are only dispatched to the scene of such accidents to eliminate traffic hazards and to verify that a correct exchange of personal information between parties involved. No reports are taken (Cronkhite, 1983).

The national average for departments of all sizes is 2.2 officers per 1,000 population (Dowling, 1995). One way to retain officers as done by the Brownsville Texas Police Department is to offer a retention bonus. Officers with

one year experience given a bonus of \$2,000, those with three or more years were given \$4,000, and officers with at least five years of tenure were given a \$7,000 retention incentive. Officers who accepted the retention bonus had to agree to not resign from the department for a specified period of time. Breaking the agreement would result in the city recouping the money by reduction of accrued vacation and sick leave (Dowling, 2002).

The ability of cities to grant pay increases to police employees has been hampered by worsening economic conditions. In 1967, the President's Crime Commission reported that if the police service is to be an attractive career opportunity it must offer compensation that is competitive with other occupations or professions that seek men of the same age, education, and experience (Bopp, 1974).

Discussions/Conclusions

Police agencies around the United States are experiencing problems with a shortage in qualified officers and there are not enough officers to effectively handle current caseload trends. As a result, officers are not responding to calls in a reasonable amount of time that would satisfy a citizen in need of assistance causing these officers to have to bear the burden of citizens complaining

about their response times. This, coupled with the stress of caseloads, is creating many problems with individual officers and their departments. There is a need to civilianize a wider variety of calls and there a need to downsize the types of calls officers respond to.

The literature researched concerning the coping with personnel shortages in law enforcement revealed that many calls, specifically that not in progress, could be better served being handled by civilians. This will drastically reduce the number of calls officers respond to thus reducing caseload and stress levels. Calls for police assistance that are not violent in nature and/or lapsed calls are better suited handled by civilians trained in this area.

The literature researched also indicated that many calls for police assistance such as non-injury accidents do not get a police response. Cases evidencing no useful solvability factors should receive no follow-up. These cases would not be referred for further investigation.

The findings of the research did support the hypothesis concerning the need to civilianize a wider variety of calls for police assistance. It also supported the hypothesis of eliminating calls for certain types of

police assistance, which are only responded to in order to satisfy the public demand.

The benefits of police officers responding to a decreased caseload are many. The lower caseload results in less stress amongst officers, which in turn makes for happier officers. It also frees up time that will allow more time for officers to do more proactive types of patrol. This increase in proactive patrol could result in fewer calls for all those involved, as it will provide officers with more time to deal with that few percent of criminals who cause the majority of offenses.

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