



Staffing Investigative Units By Chief Marlin Price, Retired

This is the second of a three-part series on police staffing. This article discusses the staffing of investigative operations. Part three will discuss staffing of other police activities and some tips on discussing these issues with your city manager or mayor.

In part one of this series, we determined that the workload or time required model could accurately identify how many officers were needed to answer citizens' calls and have time left over for self-initiated crime control activities. We could do this because the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) captured the total time spent on each call. Unfortunately, in investigative units, no one keeps track of the time spent on investigations. Many departments do not have historical data on how many cases were assigned, how many detectives were assigned cases, and what the clearance rates were. This makes using a workload model very difficult.

Before discussing the specifics of staffing, we need to ask ourselves what we want to accomplish and what our goal for CID should be. Should we strive to clear 100 percent of the cases? That makes an admirable goal, but we all know that will not happen. We are not doing a great job to begin with. The Department of Justice does a National Victimization Study every year. We know from that study that, on average, less than half of all crime is reported to the police. Only one in five rapes are reported. The reasons for not reporting range from "I don't trust them" to "they can't do anything." Even when reported, we have not had much success clearing cases.

DPS reports for 2023 show the following clearance rates for ALL Texas agencies:

Murder/Homicide	59.7%
Rape	19.7%
Robbery	21.8%
Aggravated Assault	38.7%
Burglary	9.6%
Theft	10.5%
Auto Theft	7.5%
All Index crimes	13.5%

We know that smaller departments in Texas average a higher clearance rate, often in the low to mid-20s. We know that not all crimes will be solved, but as we have seen lately in Houston, it is critical to at least assign all crimes against persons to a detective for follow-up. Given our lack of success in property crime investigations, it may be time to start working on preventing crimes before they happen rather than relying on follow-up investigations to catch the bad guys.



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So, how do we figure out how many detectives are needed? The TPCA has developed an investigative staffing workload model but has several drawbacks. First, most agencies don't have historical data on investigative operations, and no one in smaller agencies has accurately estimated how much time should be spent on each type of investigation. There are two other methods for estimating staffing of investigative units. The first is the percentage of the department. Several years ago, the TPCA surveyed and found that most Texas cities have between 11 and 16 percent of their department as Detectives. This can be inaccurate in smaller departments because your total department may not be sized appropriately.

The method currently used by most national consulting firms and the TPCA is known as national benchmarks. The national benchmarks were initially developed from a study by Prunel in Florida in 2007. The benchmarks are the number of new cases each detective should receive in a month. Suppose your detectives receive greater than those numbers for more than three months in a row. In that case, an additional detective(s) should be added to keep the individual detective's caseload within the benchmark. Detectives who maintain an average caseload within the benchmarks can usually clear the average number of cases for a city of their size. As caseloads get lower, more time is available to continue investigating, and this usually results in a slight increase in clearances, but rarely will they exceed five or ten percent higher than the average. The national benchmarks are:

Crime Against Persons	8 – 12 new cases per month
Homicide	.6 new cases per month
Crimes Against Property	15-20 new cases per month
Financial Crimes	10-20 new cases per month.

These national benchmarks assume a functioning case screening process that assigns detectives only to property crimes with workable leads. Detectives should be assigned to all crimes against persons cases, and follow-up is required.

The main problem with staffing investigative units is that you can always do more investigating, but that is no guarantee that the case will ever be solved. Research in criminal investigations has consistently found that most detective work is routine file checking and very little Columbo. If you are having difficulty in hiring police officers and thereby being able to staff detective positions, consider adding a civilian investigative aide who can do file and database research, prepare case packets, copy videos, and many other tasks that can free up time for your detectives. Research indicates the best way to improve clearance rates is to enhance patrol officers' preliminary investigations. Research also shows that investigative units with clear written procedures, checklists, and strong supervision have higher clearance rates than those without.



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The TPCA is committed to assisting Texas agencies in determining their best staffing levels. If you want to talk with one of our retired chiefs doing these analyses, contact Executive Director Gene Ellis.

Chief Marlin Price is a retired Chief of Police and the former Director of the Texas Accreditation Program. He is a TPCA instructor in several training programs and has authored two books, "Effective and Accountable Policing" and "Police Department Auditing," both available on Amazon. Profits from the sale of these books go to the TPCA Foundation's Officer Death Benefit Fund.