

THE IMPACT OF CIVILIANIZATION OF THE TRAFFIC
INVESTIGATION FUNCTION ON STAFFING IN A MID-SIZED
POLICE AGENCY

Article

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While municipal law enforcement's use of civilian personnel in field operations has increased, many law enforcement agencies strictly limit the duties civilian personnel may perform in the field. One area in which civilian personnel appear underutilized is in the area of traffic collision investigation. While some police departments do utilize civilian personnel to document minor traffic collisions, most police departments still use sworn personnel to conduct injury and fatal traffic collision investigations. These traffic collision investigations are very time-consuming and labor intensive. One must ask, does the investigation of a traffic collision require a sworn peace officer?

Since the inception of modern day law enforcement, police officers have performed a variety of duties. The duties traditionally performed by police officers may be divided into two main categories, law enforcement and order maintenance. Law enforcement is the traditional role of police departments and includes activities associated with the apprehension and arrest of criminals. Order maintenance includes all of the other duties police officers are required and expected to perform such as traffic collision investigation, traffic control, code enforcement, parking enforcement, mediating civil disputes, animal control investigations, as well as many other duties.

Over the years, the demands and requirements of municipal police departments have significantly increased. With these increased demands, police departments have responded by producing highly trained professional police officers. Increased education, training, salary and benefits, and rigorous selection standards have caused police officers to become a very expensive commodity for most cities. A survey of several mid-sized police departments in the San Francisco Bay Area shows the average annual cost of a police officer is approximately

\$115,000.¹ This figure does not include mandated training, equipment and other associated costs.

As the costs for police service have increased, funding sources for municipal governments have diminished. For the past three to four years, many cities have experienced major budget reductions and deficits. Currently, most cities in California, as well as the state government itself, are experiencing some type of financial problems.

Examples of California cities facing budget deficits include the cities of Union City and Richmond. Union City is facing a seven-million-dollar budget deficit for fiscal year 2004-2005. The city staff is currently in the process of determining layoff and service reduction strategies, which may include closing a fire station and reduction in the police department of up to five sworn positions. Despite income from a recently imposed 9-1-1 service fee and a recently proposed public safety parcel tax, city revenues are still projected to fall short of expenditures. City officials estimate that even with a wage concession plan to recoup one million dollars, the city could be facing a seven-million-dollar deficit.²

In the city of Richmond, the situation is just as bleak. In December of 2003, the city of Richmond laid off eighteen firefighters and closed one fire station. Despite this action, Standard & Poor's has informed bondholders that it may lower the bond rating for Richmond, its agencies and various bonds. Acting City Manager Jay Corey estimates that unless the city reduces its spending drastically, Richmond's cash flow could dwindle to \$125,000 by mid-April (2004).³ Pat Samsell, Richmond finance director, explained the financial problems are due in part to police officer retirement costs: "Thirty percent of whatever police officers make goes into the PERS cost, which the city pays for. That adds up to a lot of money. The percentage will rise to 40 percent next year and 44 percent the year after."⁴

The increased cost of police officers, coupled with the increased demand for police service, have caused many cities to reevaluate and reduce some services police departments have traditionally provided to the public. One of the services significantly affected has been traffic collision reporting and investigation. A survey of several mid-sized East Bay police departments conducted by this author, found many police departments no longer respond to or have very long response times to reports of minor crimes, non-injury traffic collisions and other order maintenance functions.⁵ While some communities accept this reduced service level, many communities will not. How law enforcement responds to the challenge of the increased demand for services while facing declining budgets will affect policing for years to come.

One approach some police departments are using to reduce labor costs in law enforcement has been the increased use of civilian employees. The increased use of civilian personnel is commonly referred to as “civilianization.” Civilianization is not a new idea to law enforcement. Some authors estimate civilianization within law enforcement began with the inception of formal record keeping.⁶ During the past two to three decades, the use of civilian employees in police departments has dramatically increased. Today, civilian personnel perform many of the duties sworn police officers formally performed. These duties include but are not limited to: records keeping, dispatching, jailer, property and evidence clerks, minor traffic investigations and in some cases, criminal investigations and management.

Within the past several years, many agencies have begun utilizing civilian personnel to perform duties in the field. Civilian personnel utilized in the field are often referred to as Community Service Officers (CSO). The duties CSOs perform include parking and code enforcement, traffic control, preliminary investigations of minor crimes and some traffic collision reports.

Some of the benefits of civilianization include the following: lower overall training costs, less turnover in what may be viewed by sworn officers as less desirable duties, improved inter-agency relationships, improved response time and service to the public.⁷ In Brian Frost article titled “The Privatization and Civilianizing of Policing”, he states, “It has become increasingly clear that civilian personnel tend to perform certain specialized roles more effectively than sworn officers, who are trained as generalists and then rotated from one assignment to the next accordingly.”⁸ Utilizing civilian personnel in the field relieves police officers of some order maintenance functions and allows officers to utilize their time performing law enforcement duties.

The survey of several mid-sized police departments from the San Francisco Bay Area found only a few departments utilized civilian personnel to investigate traffic collisions. The departments that did utilize civilian personnel in the traffic investigation function limited them to investigating only minor, non-injury collisions. None of the departments contacted allowed civilian personnel to investigate serious injury and/or fatal collisions.⁹

Each of the departments contacted had different policies regarding the documentation of traffic collisions. Some departments completed a report on all collisions reported, while other departments only responded to and documented injury and fatal collisions. Each of the departments indicated the actual decision to document the collision rested with the involved drivers and officer responding to the collision. Injuries and/or major damage also influenced the responding officer’s decision to document a collision.

A random survey conducted by this author with several citizens recently involved in traffic collisions found that many are frustrated with their local police department’s response or lack of response to their calls for service. The citizens contacted by this author were not

identified and were contacted in informal settings. One person who called their local police department after being involved in an accident was shocked to learn the department did not respond to non-injury traffic collisions. As the person stated, “This was my first call to the police department and they wouldn’t come.”¹⁰

Since the reporting procedures and use of civilian employees vary tremendously among departments, this article will use one mid-sized, police department as a case study.

During the past five years, the San Leandro Police Department, like most departments in the San Francisco Bay Area, has experienced increased demands for police service. The increases are in both order maintenance and law enforcement type duties. The tables below and on the next page illustrate the increases in police reports, calls for service and reported traffic collisions during the past five years.

San Leandro Police Department Calls for Service and Police Reports, 1998–2002¹¹

Year	Calls for Service	% Change	Total Reports	% Change
1998	75,069		14,292	
1999	78,483	5 % (increase)	14,771	3% (increase)
2000	84,193	7 % (increase)	14,576	1% (increase)
2001	83,298	- 2 % (decrease)	15,324	5% (increase)
2002	86,525	4 % (increase)	15,929	4% (increase)

(Table 1-1)

The San Leandro Police Department has seen a steady increase in calls for service and police reports from 1998 - 2002. During this time, the size of the department has remained the same and the population of the city has increased only slightly.

City of San Leandro Traffic Collision reports, 1998 – 2002¹²

Year	Collision Reports	% Change
1998	1218	% Change
1999	1204	0
2000	1157	-4% (decrease)
2001	997	-14% (decrease)
2002	1292	30% (increase)

(Table 1-2)

Traffic collisions increased thirty percent in 2002 after two years of fourteen and four percent reductions. In interviews with Sergeant Overton of the Police Department’s Traffic Division and Anna Vickroy of the City Traffic Engineering Office, neither could provide an explanation for the significant changes.

The San Leandro Police Department has a reputation for quality service. The department considers itself a “full service” law enforcement agency and presently responds to virtually all calls for service. The department currently is comprised of 94 sworn officers and 47 full-time civilian positions. Currently, the department does not have CSO program. The department does have three civilian Police Service Aides who work in the field doing code enforcement work and one civilian position dedicated to Abandoned Vehicle Abatement. While the CSO position is not currently filled, it does exist in the department’s salary schedule. The current salary and benefit cost for a CSO is approximately \$65,000. This is approximately half the cost of a sworn police officer.

The department has a traffic division of six motor officers who have the primary responsibility of traffic collision investigation and traffic enforcement. The motor officers also respond to other calls for service as needed.

In an interview with Sergeant Overton, the supervisor of the traffic division, he estimated that the response to traffic direction/control, documentation and investigation of each collision takes an average of four hours, since two and sometimes three officers may respond to a collision.¹³

Using the year 2002 information of 1,292 collisions, this would indicate a minimum of 5,168 hours were spent on collision investigations. The cost to the city for collision investigation is approximately \$285,730. It is possible that within the next five years, by 2009, civilian personnel could accomplish the collision investigation function at a significantly reduced cost and allow sworn officers to perform higher priority law enforcement duties.

As the trend toward increased civilianization continues, it is becoming evident that civilian personnel are able to perform certain specialized roles more effectively and efficiently than sworn personnel: Typically, sworn officers are trained as generalists and are rotated from one assignment to the next every three to five years. Civilian personnel, on the other hand, are typically trained as specialists and remain in their assignments for several years. Civilian personnel also tend to remain interested in the order maintenance duties they were hired to perform, and they complete these duties at a higher level than sworn officers who tend to have greater interest in law enforcement duties.¹⁴

The civilianization of the traffic investigation function in a mid-sized urban police agency would allow the officers normally assigned to traffic investigation to perform enforcement duties that civilian personnel are not able to perform. Additionally, those officers would be available to

respond to serious felony crimes rather than being occupied performing traffic collision investigation duties.

The complete civilianization of the traffic investigation function will be a major change for law enforcement agencies. The issues surrounding this change are complex and difficult to project. However, based on the data for the past five years, it is expected that increases in calls for service and collisions will continue in the next five years. The budget instabilities and deficits previously discussed are also expected to continue for the next several years. Law enforcement agencies' failure to anticipate and respond to these projections will result in service reductions and citizens who will feel their police department is not available to serve them.

Based on the research and information received for this article, it is evident that civilian personnel are less expensive to employ than a sworn police officer. Depending on the agency, a front line civilian position in the capacity of a Community Service Officer or a Civilian Accident Investigator can be one-third to one-half less expensive to employ than a sworn police officer. In large part, this is due to the increasing salary and benefit costs of sworn officers, particularly the costs associated with the Public Employee Retirement System (PERS). Additionally, civilian personnel are able to work as part-time or hourly employees, who receive limited or no health and retirement benefits, which can further reduce the costs associated with civilian employees. Currently, it is extremely rare for sworn personnel to work as hourly employees, without health and retirement benefits.

Presently, the state and many city governments are facing what can be best described as, severe budget uncertainties and instabilities. As we look to the next five years, one fact is clear, municipal governments and municipal law enforcement agencies must find methods to reduce labor costs while providing a level of service acceptable to their communities. One method to

accomplish the reduction of costs may be to examine the tasks law enforcement officers are performing in the field and ask: “Do we need sworn personnel to perform all of these tasks or can some tasks be adequately performed by less expensive civilian personnel?”

A critical element of the future of law enforcement is dependant on law enforcement leaders implementing methods to reduce labor costs. An examination of the duties and tasks performed by sworn personnel can be a beginning to accomplishing the task of reducing personnel costs. It is feasible and practical for civilian personnel, in the capacity of Civilian Accident Investigators (CAIs), to respond to and have the primary responsibility to investigate traffic collisions for a municipal law enforcement agency. This includes injury as well as fatal collisions.

The difficult question to answer is the impact that civilianization of the traffic investigative function would have on sworn staffing. The answer to this question depends on the method in which an individual agency implements the civilianization plan. In the optimal case, an agency would hire the required number of civilian accident investigators to relieve existing sworn officers from the task of investigating collisions. The sworn officers relieved of the traffic investigation function, would be redeployed to traffic enforcement and response to serious crimes in progress. In this scenario, the number of officers relieved from the traffic investigation function would increase available sworn staffing for law enforcement type functions.

Based on the research obtained for this article, this could be between seven and nine officers for a mid-sized, urban, police agency. This option would require the department to add seven to nine civilian positions. The cost to the agency for the new positions would be approximately half the cost of adding the same number sworn positions. This cost could be reduced even further if some or all of the CAIs employed were hired as part-time, hourly

employees without benefits. An hourly part-time position is potentially appealing to retired sworn personnel.

If a department is unable to fund additional civilian CAI positions, the department could opt to reduce the number of sworn positions through attrition. Since the cost of a CAI is about half of a sworn position, the department could add up to eight civilian positions, while reducing the number of sworn positions by four. While this option reduces the total number of sworn positions, the addition of CAIs relieves the sworn officers of the traffic investigation function and increases the availability of sworn officers by a net four positions.

In each of the options considered, the civilianization of the traffic investigative function increases staffing and availability of sworn officers in a mid-sized, police agency. With the budget instabilities facing municipal government, law enforcement agencies must identify methods to maintain acceptable levels of service while reducing expenditures. With the increasing demands being placed on law enforcement agencies, it is critical for managers to be creative in the delivery of services. The increased use of civilian personnel in field operations is one method for law enforcement managers to achieve the goal of reducing service costs while maintaining and enhancing the delivery of police services and community satisfaction. The labor-intensive duty of traffic collision investigation is a task civilian personnel can efficiently and effectively perform.

ENDNOTES

¹ Marc DeCoulode, Survey and Interviews with Bay Area Police Departments, January 2004.

² Erin Breznikar, "Union City Waiting for Pink Slips to Fall," The Daily Review, 19 January 2004, local section, p. 1.

³ Ibid

⁴ Rebecca Rosen Lum, "Richmond's Finances Get a Warning," West County Times, 13 January 2004, p. 1.

⁵ DeCoulode, Survey.

⁶ Dunbar, Peter "What will be the Impact of Civilianization on Police Investigations by 2002 at the Oakland Police Department?" Command College Paper, p. 2, 1997

⁷ International Association of Chiefs of Police Highway Safety Committee, "Traffic Safety in the New Millennium," p. 57, <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/enforce/TrafficSafety.pdf>

⁸ Brian Frost, "The Privatization and Civilianizing of Policing," Criminal Justice 2000, p. 24, 55, http://www.ncjrs.org/criminal_justice2000/vol_2/02c2.pdf

⁹ DeCoulode, Survey and Interviews with Bay Area Police Departments.

¹⁰ Marc DeCoulode, Informal survey with citizens involved in traffic collisions, January 2004.

¹¹ Peggy Heubal, Administrative Specialist San Leandro Police Department, Interview January 2004.

¹² Anna Vickroy, City of San Leandro Traffic Engineer, Interview January 2004.

¹³ Tom Overton, Sergeant, San Leandro Police Department, Interview January 2004.

¹⁴ Frost, "The Privatization and Civilianizing of Policing," Criminal Justice 2000, p,24, 55.

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