

An Opinion: How Many Police Officers is Enough? Let's Consider Some Facts

By Scott Laird

The U.S. Department of Justice and the FBI puts out a report each year on police employee data, which lists, by region, the average number of full-time, sworn police officers employed in communities. The report is broken down into five categories based on the size of communities, starting at cities over 250,000 down to communities with populations of less than 10,000 citizens. In the 2008 report, in the Pacific West region, for cities under 10,000 in population, the average number of full-time police officers per 1,000 inhabitants is 3.7.

The City of Vernonia just approved a new budget for fiscal year 2010-2011 which included some cuts in certain areas, including the elimination of the part-time Chief of Police position beginning on September 1. The Vernonia Police Department is currently down one officer, because of a resignation earlier this spring, currently leaving Vernonia with three full-time officers and a part-time Chief. The department is currently going through the process of hiring a new officer.

Which has once again started the conversation around the community, at least in some circles, of whether we have too many police officers here in Vernonia. What the real discussion should be is, How many officers can we afford? And, What levels of service are we willing to accept?

As we are all well aware, many governmental agencies are currently having to make significant cuts to their budgets. They are looking at ways to trim expenses and reduce services. Vernonia is no different.

Recently, I have heard people here in Vernonia state that the recommended number of police officers is one officer per 1,000 of population and are using this figure as an argument for reducing our police department. I have not heard anyone explain where that recommended figure of one officer per 1,000 comes from.

According to that calculation, Vernonia should only have two-and-a-half officers. That figure doesn't make much sense given our circumstances, especially the fact that we have reduced levels of support from our County Sheriff's Department and are located so far away from any other backup agency.

Is one officer per 1,000 inhabitants really a recommended figure? I decided to do some research. Which is when I came across that above-mentioned Department of Justice report.

That above report goes on to clarify that these are average numbers and not recommendations. The report states: *"Because of law enforcement's varied service requirements and functions, as well as the distinct demographic traits and characteristics of jurisdictions, readers should use caution when drawing comparisons between agencies' staffing levels based upon police employment data from the UCR Program. In addition, the data presented here reflect existing staff levels and should not be interpreted as preferred officer strengths recommended by the FBI. Lastly, it should be noted that the totals given for sworn officers for any particular agency reflect not only the patrol officers on the street but also officers assigned to various other duties such as those in administrative and investigative positions and those assigned to special teams."*

I take the above paragraph to mean, among other things, that the Department of Justice does not make recommendations for staff levels.

I did some further investigations and talked with a few law enforcement officials from around Oregon.

First of all, no one that I spoke with could confirm that there is any kind of recommended number of officers per 1,000. Erik Gabliks of the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training (DPSST) says his agency doesn't deal in recommended staffing levels. "That's not something we get involved in," said Gabliks in a phone interview. "As far as our Department is concerned, there are no set standards or recommendations for numbers of officers."

Lieutenant Greg Hastings, Public Information Officer for the Oregon State Police stated that he was

unaware of any recommended number and noted that what most communities do is look at other surrounding communities in their region when establishing their department size.

To help cities compare their departments with others around the state, the Oregon League of Cities (LOC) provides a Police Officer Data report; for 2009, the following are figures for the communities in Columbia County:

City	Population	# of Officers	Average
Clatskanie	1735	5	2.88
Rainier	1825	5	2.74
Vernonia	2370	5	2.11
Scappoose	6605	10	1.51
St Helens	12,380	19	1.53

As you can see, Vernonia is right in the middle in terms of population and average number of officers. What needs to be noted is that the figure of five officers for Vernonia is not accurate. Vernonia has not had been fully staffed with five officers since 2008. The Vernonia Police Department spent the last year with four full-time officers and a half-time chief. The figures for other communities might also be slightly skewed, but the point is that Vernonia is similarly staffed in comparison to other departments in Columbia County.

Columbia County Sheriff, Jeff Dickerson, had this to say when asked about recommended numbers of officers, reinforcing the idea that it really is about financial constraints and expected service levels: "It really depends on what educated voters and taxpayers are willing to pay for. If you only have two or three officers in your town, what does that mean? It means that if you dial 9-1-1, maybe no one is coming. That's the reality. But it is also a question of sustainability. In the unincorporated areas of Columbia County, we have around 24,000 residents. It would be nice if we had twenty-four deputies, but there is no way we could afford that."

Dickerson also went on to note the need for municipal departments to have higher levels of staffing. "They have people who live outside their cities who use city resources," said Dickerson. "They come in to shop, they drive through, they attend events."

How does Vernonia compare to the ten other communities closest to our size from around the state? Here are more figures from the Oregon LOC:

City	Population	# of Officers	Average
John Day	1855	4	2.16
Enterprise	1975	4	2.03
Rogue River	2090	4	1.91
Gold Beach	2140	4	1.87
Gervais	2260	3	1.33
Stanfield	2290	4	1.75
Vernonia	2370	5	2.11
Myrtle Point	2550	5	1.96
Lakeview	2685	5	1.86
King City	2785	5	1.80
Burns	3025	4	1.32

According to the Oregon LOC, here are the overall average figures for small communities in Oregon:

Population	Total Cities	Low	High	Average
2-5,000	26	1.06	2.74	1.79

As stated in the report quoted above from the Department of Justice, there are many variables that should be considered when analyzing this type of



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data: "...service requirements and functions, as well as the distinct demographic traits and characteristics of jurisdictions..." In other words, how far away is the closest back-up agency? What is the call volume and crime rate in the community? What are the local financial constraints?

As you can see, the trend in Oregon is for smaller communities, for the most part, to have more officers. This trend is also reflected nationwide.

According to the Department of Justice report, the Pacific West region has the least number of average officers of any region in the country. In cities with populations of 100,000 to 250,000, the average number of officers is 1.3; this is the lowest figure anywhere in the country. In no region or population group in the country is the average number of officers less than 1 per 1,000 inhabitants.

As I think you can tell, I am not recommending here that we either cut or increase the size of our police department in Vernonia. According to the averages, the figures seem to indicate that we are staffed at probably just the right numbers with a force of 4-5 full-time sworn officers. What I am suggesting is that if we are going to have a discussion about adjusting the size of our police department, let's talk about what we can afford and sustain and use facts and figures to compare us to other local police departments. Let's not use some made-up number that apparently no law enforcement agency or official in Oregon seems to be using.

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