

# Maintaining Force Effectiveness in a Recession



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Despite decades of debate and many studies, criminologists and economists remain at odds over the correlation between crime and the economy.

**M**unicipalities across the country are making important public policy choices about which local government services will be reduced or even eliminated to help close burgeoning budget deficits caused by enormously difficult economic times.

Most residents understand that elected officials must make tough decisions about how to balance municipal budgets in light of a national economic downturn unlike any other since the Great Depression. While natural tensions exist between what residents want and what municipalities can afford to provide, that strain becomes more dynamic during an economic downturn.

Public tolerance for spending cuts depends largely on their perceived consequences. Public reaction has been overwhelmingly negative when such cuts impact public safety and more directly, the quality of their lives. Ironically, while public safety is a critically essential service it also consumes a large share of municipal budgets. Worse yet, police budgets are mainly comprised of salaries and wages so budget cuts usually translate into fewer officers. As a consequence, despite efforts by elected officials to protect essential services, some communities have made painful cuts in police budgets.

This leads us to two important public policy questions: (1) Do economic downturns translate into increases in crime, and (2) How can a municipality continue to provide a high degree of public safety and control crime during difficult economic times and still live within its means?

The short answer to both questions is: it depends. Specifically, it depends on whether the police budget is an instrument through which the department allocates scarce resources among the most pressing public safety needs of a community; on which services are preserved; and how well those choices are communicated to the public.

Common wisdom holds that overall crimes increase during recessionary periods. This view may be common but not necessarily fact-based wisdom. Despite decades of debate and many studies, criminologists and economists remain at odds over the correlation between crime and the economy.

Whether or not the current economic recession translates into increases in crime remains uncertain, but we do know that violent crime is down in major cities across the country so far this year despite the sour economy. Here in New Jersey, statewide homicides declined by 24 percent during the first six months of the year, but crime is not down every-

where. Researchers believe there are other complex contributors to diverging crime rates, aside from the economy, such as policing strategies. Proactive crime prevention activities matter more than previously believed.

**Crime Fighting Strategies** Police departments that have adopted progressive crime fighting strategies have had more success in reducing crime than those that have not or who have opted to abandon these efforts because of resource constraints.

That is why the answer to the second question is of such importance to municipalities that are unable to avoid police cuts. The potential spillover effect of cutting or significantly reducing effective proactive crime fighting resources far outweighs any savings factored into a one-year budget.

When budget reductions are necessary, the extent of such cuts should not be determined in an arbitrary way to plug a hole in the budget. Merely asking for a net budget reduction, but not a plan for how the department will deal with such cuts may have devastating consequences, as a lot depends on not only the extent of budget cuts but also how they are managed. Overcoming the natural tension that this process engenders between principals and working together to explore potential consequences of different funding levels is critically important. Police leaders are often in a better position to assist elected officials in making those cuts surgically to minimize disruptions of vital services. On the other hand, elected officials should be wary of police plans that entail simply going back to basic policing or eliminating proactive crime fighting efforts. While this may be the simplest approach in dealing with proposed cuts, it can have negative consequences.

By using this approach, police departments are essentially handing over the streets to criminals. Particularly, what is often billed as a way of maintaining or increasing police visibility, minimizing delays to 911 responses, and controlling crime usually has the opposite effect. Planners should remember that fewer resources do not translate into fewer demands for services. For example, neighborhood quality-of-life issues that engender ten calls for service per month may easily double if left untreated. As a consequence, addition-

al officers shifted to purely reactive 911-call response mode will likely be overwhelmed by increasing workloads. This usually results in delayed response times to emergency calls for service.

Initial gains in police visibility soon disappear as patrol units run from assignment to assignment. Worse yet, the same quality-of-life conditions that are likely to generate more calls for service are the same ones that often lead to more serious forms of crime. The end result is likely to be higher demands on police resources and increases in crime.

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**Idle Time** Now more than ever, police should examine their operations more closely with a goal toward improving productivity and efficiency. This generally requires a good assessment of current department capacity, efficiency levels, and public demands on police resources. By comparing a department's optimized capacity to existing workloads, agency leaders can identify idle time or the difference between available and unused capacity. Idle time also represents patrol time available to proactively deal with carefully identified and prioritized community public safety problems. If little or no

idle time remains, efforts should be taken to reduce workload demands by employing alternative call handling methods, prioritizing responses to calls for service based on urgency, and eliminating non-essential services while preserving emergency response capabilities and officer safety. To succeed, however, the plan of action must enjoy the support of the governing body and be clearly communicated to the public so they know what to expect from their police department.

**Coordination** Finally, working closely with county and state agencies can help to ensure that high priority community problems are addressed in a collaborative manner. As part of the Governor's Strategy for Safe Streets and Neighborhoods, all counties and many cities are using a violence threat assessment instrument to identify gang and other crime problems that pose a significant threat of violence to communities. Threat assessments serve as a "roadmap" for prioritizing assistance to municipalities based on the severity of crime problems. However, the constant improvements of such efforts are up to the municipality, which again presupposes the availability of proactive crime prevention resources. Likewise, municipalities can also conduct a threat assessment to help prioritize local public safety problems, be they crime or quality-of-life issues. Doing so helps to focus limited resources on the problems that matter most.

These and other measures allow police departments to minimize the impact of resource constraints caused by budgetary pressures, preserves proactive community safety efforts and addresses community quality-of-life concerns during these challenging times. ▲

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