



# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES (Wave 1)

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*A joint report between the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, George Mason University*

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the operational landscape of policing. The police—along with fire and rescue first responders—have been on the front lines of response, tending to medical emergencies and managing the social consequences of COVID-19, while at the same time providing safety and reassurance to their communities. The risk of exposure to COVID is high for first responders, and some law enforcement officers have already succumbed to the disease. Stay-at-home orders have also changed people's routines, impacting patterns of crime, disorder, traffic incidents, and other events to which officers routinely respond.

Because of these considerable changes, the pandemic has significantly impacted law enforcement agencies and their operations. To inform the field of the patterns of preparedness, changes in operations, adjustments to training, and civilian workforce effects, as well as to share successes in mitigating challenges, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy (CEBCP) at George Mason University partnered on a multi-wave panel survey to document the impacts of COVID-19 on law enforcement agencies in the United States and Canada. This report reflects preliminary results from the first panel of data collection, implemented between March 25 and April 3, 2020.

Respondents from almost 1,000 agencies (see survey methodology appendix) responded and were asked to provide answers **as of March 23, 2020**. We selected March 23rd as the first date marker for responses because as of that date, COVID-19 had already been declared a pandemic (March 11th), the U.S. President had declared a national emergency (March 13th), and by March 23rd, nine states had issued a statewide stay at home order with many local jurisdictions already supporting the practice of social distancing and remote learning/work.

## CHANGES TO AGENCY OPERATIONS

Survey responses indicated that by March 23rd, COVID-19 had substantially changed law enforcement agency operations:

- **91%** of responding agencies had already provided their officers with written criteria or guidance on changes to officer responses to calls for service due to COVID-19.
- **43%** of responding agencies had stopped or significantly changed their response to at least twenty percent or more of their calls for service.
- **57%** of responding agencies had experienced significant declines in their calls for service, with **14%** of respondents noting more than a 50% reduction in calls for service. *We note that this adjustment in calls for service could reflect a reduction in certain types of calls and increases in others. Much more research is needed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on calls for service to the police.*
- **72%** of agencies had telephone, internet, or teleconference systems actively in use to respond to calls for service and take reports remotely.

Agencies had substantially reduced their use of arrests, especially for minor offenses. This reduction in the use of arrest was also impacted by changes in jails and correctional facilities. As of March 23rd:

- **76%** of respondents had provided their officers with formal guidance to reduce their use of physical arrests for minor offenses.
- **65%** of responding agencies noted that the jail or correctional facility that intakes agency arrestees had already restricted the types of arrestees it would receive because of COVID-19 (e.g., misdemeanants or those who seemed ill).



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When not responding to calls for service, many law enforcement agencies regularly carry out proactive activities to prevent and deter crime or improve police-community engagement and relationships. The COVID-19 crisis has significantly reduced these activities as of March 23rd:

- **61%** of responding agencies indicated that they had adopted formal policies to reduce or limit proactive traffic or pedestrian stops.
- **73%** of responding agencies had adopted policies to reduce or limit community oriented policing activities.
- However, **39%** of responding agencies had adopted specific policies to increase community presence for certain locations (grocery stores, hospitals, or other public spaces).

Schools and universities have shuttered their doors due to COVID-19, with many transitioning to online learning. When asked about agencies' academy training operations as of March 23rd, answers were much more varied:<sup>1</sup>

- **34%** of agencies had suspended academy training without offering an alternative.
- **18%** of responding agencies had suspended in-person training and were using online alternatives.
- **35%** of agencies had *not* suspended new police recruit academy training.
- **52%** of agencies were still continuing their recruitment and hiring activities.

### AGENCY PREPAREDNESS FOR COVID

During a crisis, law enforcement agencies must still respond to calls for service and maintain legitimate and positive relationships with their communities. During pandemics, however, all of these routine activities place officers at risk for disease infection. We asked agency leads how prepared they were for responding during the COVID-19 crisis. As of March 23rd:

- **43%** of agency leads said that all of their officers had received formal guidance from either the Center for Disease Control (CDC) or other health agency on COVID-19.
- Of these agencies, **53%** of them had received information from CDC resources, **44%** from state health departments, and **55%** from local health agencies.

- **57%** of responding agencies answered affirmatively that they had provided formal training or guidance to officers on how to maintain social distancing when responding to calls for service.

Personal protection equipment (PPE) for front-line officers has been a significant concern. We found that 90% of agency respondents stated that as of March 23rd their officers had in their possession and while on duty PPE that they could use. This PPE likely includes regular equipment distributed before the COVID-19 crisis (this survey did not gauge the amount or sustainability of that PPE, which will be asked in the second round). Agencies were most likely to respond that officers had face masks and gloves. Although future responses may diverge from these findings, as of March 23rd:

- **15%** of agency respondents rated their ability to provide for PPE to their officers as "excellent"; **38%** as "good"; **28%** as "fair"; **13%** of agencies indicated this ability to be "poor" or "very poor."
- **57%** of responding agencies had tasked their first-line supervisors with regularly inspecting, monitoring, and supervising the use of PPE.

Agencies were also asked about managing officers exposed to COVID-19 and whether they had contingency plans for a large number of officers getting sick or quarantined. As of March 23rd:

- In terms of their agency's ability to manage exposed officers, **14%** rated "excellent"; **48%** as "good"; **24%** as "fair"; and **7%** as "poor." These ratings were similar in terms of an agency's ability to help officers prepare for sickness, stress, or fatigue related to COVID-19.
- **74%** of agencies said they had a strategy or contingency plan in place to handle a significant number of officers on sick leave or in quarantine.

### CHANGES TO CIVILIAN WORKFORCE

Agency civilian employees have also been affected by COVID-19. As of March 23rd:

- **60%** of responding agencies indicated that a portion of their civilian workforce was now working remotely. **11%** of agencies had already moved ninety percent or more of their civilian workforce to remote work.
- **62%** of responding agencies said that the number of hours civilians were working had not changed, although **30%** mentioned that civilian work hours had decreased.

<sup>1</sup> This question had a high non-response rate of 14%.

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- **68%** of responding agencies rated their information technology capabilities for civilians to work from home as “excellent” or “good,” whereas **19%** rated them as “fair.”

## STATES WITH STAY-AT-HOME ORDERS

As of March 23rd, nine states had stay-at-home orders (California, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Ohio, Oregon, New Jersey, New York, and Washington). Preliminary analysis shows minimal differences between agencies in states with such orders compared to those without, with a few exceptions:

- Agencies in states with orders compared to those without were more likely to increase officer presence at grocery stores, hospitals, and other public spaces (**48% versus 39%**, respectively).
- Agencies in states with orders compared to those without were also more likely to suspend recruit training without offering an alternative (**42% versus 31%**, respectively).
- Agencies in states with orders compared to those without were more likely to discontinue recruitment and hiring activities (**52% versus 40%**, respectively).
- Agencies in states with orders compared to those without were more likely to have civilian employees working remotely (**72% versus 58%**, respectively) and with decreased hours (**43% versus 26%**, respectively).

## CREATIVE IDEAS

We asked respondents to share any ideas developed in their agencies that have been successful at mitigating problems or challenges due to COVID-19. Some important themes emerged from their responses:

**Preparedness:** Some agencies wrote that as soon as COVID emerged, they started ordering and managing PPE supplies and tested early ways to disinfect, work from home, or practice social distancing.

**Adaptability:** A number of responses focused on adjusting shift schedules, work days, squad and deployment formations, and also having some shifts answering calls over the phone from home to minimize officer interactions with each other and the public. Some have stopped in-person roll calls or have staggered shifts to minimize officer interactions with each other.

**Communication:** Increasing communication with police department employees and community members, often daily, using various forms of communication (including videos), seems to have improved morale and reduce false information.

**Collaboration:** Agencies felt they were successful when they had consistent and strong levels of communication with other stakeholders (hospitals, fire, EMS, other law enforcement agencies, state and county government, health departments, etc.).

**Service:** Many agencies have gone beyond their law enforcement duties to help with food and medical distribution to vulnerable populations, especially the elderly. Others have worked with medical providers to ensure COVID tests were available for vulnerable individuals.

**Gratitude:** Some agencies shared that local businesses and community members had donated PPE and other supplies when their police departments were in need.

## CITATION FOR THIS BRIEFING

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*Note: A more detailed analysis and article will be forthcoming by the authors after the second survey panel is collected.*

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## APPENDIX: SURVEY METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

The sample of U.S. and Canadian agencies come from those with chief executives who are members of the IACP. The IACP is the oldest and largest nonprofit membership organization for law enforcement executives. The survey was an agency-level survey, and agencies were given explicit instructions that a single survey was to be filled out once for each agency, by a chief executive with direct knowledge of operational adjustments due to COVID-19. Surveys were sent to 6,402 chief executives from a total of approximately 5800 unique law enforcement agencies. A total of 989 surveys were returned by April 3, 2020 after two reminders, reflecting an estimated agency-response rate of 17%. While a national sample of all U.S. and Canadian agencies would have been ideal, and while a larger response rate is preferred, using the IACP membership agencies was believed by the authors to be the quickest way to obtain an estimate of current and ongoing impact of COVID-19 on law enforcement agencies.

The agencies who answered the survey reflect the range of agencies (in terms of number of sworn officers and population of jurisdictions) in the U.S. and Canada as shown in the statistics below. Responses were received from agencies in 49 U.S. states and 5 Canadian provinces. We note that in the U.S., almost three-quarters of local agencies have fewer than 25 officers and approximately 95% of local agencies have fewer than 100 officers.<sup>2</sup> The returned sample, therefore, over-represents agencies with more than 25 officers.

Sworn officers	%
Less than 25	41.2%
25-49	24.0%
50-99	14.7%
100-499	11.3%
500 or more	2.9%

Civilian employees	%
Less than 10	56.0%
10-19	14.2%
20-29	7.8%
30-49	5.5%
50-99	4.8%
100 or more	5.6%

Population	%
Less Than 25,000	59.8%
25,000 - 49,999	14.7%
50,000 - 99,999	8.9%
100,000 - 249,999	5.2%
250,000 - 499,999	1.4%
500,000 - 999,999	1.6%
1 million or more	2.4%

Approximately 6% of agencies did not respond to each of these questions.

## MISSING ANSWERS AND DUPLICATE RESPONSES

Some agency respondents did not answer specific questions. Although dependent on the question, missing responses were generally 5% or less and do not significantly impact this survey. Specific notes are provided if a larger proportion of answers were missing for any specific question, but all percentages provided in this brief are calculated against totals that include missing responses.

Although we did not record identifying information from responding agencies, approximately 30 responses had the same IP addresses for two responses that may indicate that they were from the same agency (and also contributing to missing responses). A more in-depth analysis of duplicates will be performed in later assessments of future waves of surveys, but we do not anticipate this issue to significantly impact the results provided.