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Outsourcing the Police

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By Steve Yoder

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Budget cuts not only mean fewer police services—they provide openings for private contractors.

In Naperville, Illinois, a city of 145,000 about 35 miles west of Chicago, the drive for fiscal austerity has hit the police department hard. In just over two years, under pressure from the state's budget crisis, the agency has shed 23 officers—amounting to 12 percent of the force.



New York City police officers Photo by apollonia666, via Flickr

Police services that seemed crucial in more prosperous times have also gotten the axe.

Naperville's crime information programs, which provide educational sessions on issues like Internet safety, gangs, and drug prevention to neighborhood residents and local schools, are gone. So are many cops who were placed in schools as resource officers. There are also fewer dispatchers, which forces the public to wait longer for the police to show up for nonemergency calls.

And the agency is considering not responding at all to vehicle thefts and traffic accidents in which no one is injured. Instead, citizens would file reports on those online, over the phone, or in person.

"I've been a police officer for 44 years," Naperville Chief David Dial told The Crime Report. "Nothing approaches the cuts we're seeing now."

Naperville is far from alone. Across the country, the fiscal crisis has forced police departments to cut services and lower the profile of cops on the beat.

That, in turn, has persuaded many worried local authorities to search for viable alternatives. Some are hiring civilians to take the place of uniformed officers in desk jobs. Others are contracting with private security firms for certain law enforcement functions.

Outsourcing is a path taken by other public services in recent years. One example: the rise in privately operated state prisons. But contracting out public safety—a throwback to the 19th-century era when private police forces patrolled the streets of many U.S. cities—could raise new public anxieties, and not only in cities and neighborhoods where crime remains a troubling issue.

Will the public go along with an end to some traditional police services?

As far as the [Police Executive Research Forum](#) (PERF) is concerned, they may have no choice.

In an eye-opening [survey](#) of police chiefs released last September by PERF, an association of police executives from the largest jurisdictions in the nation, more than half of the 608 respondents said that their budgets had been cut between 2009 and 2010. Of those, another 59 percent said there would be more cuts in 2011.

Fewer Patrols, Less Response

The wave of cuts is hitting both large and small departments.

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In Baltimore, the police department no longer provides security at fairs and festivals unless it is reimbursed. In Maine's capital of Augusta, a city-commissioned study recommends that police no longer respond in person to crimes involving property damage, gas drive-offs, stolen bicycles, and hit-and-run accidents if no one is hurt.

The Pennsylvania city of Mt. Laurel is looking at slashing bike patrols, investigations of nonviolent crimes like prostitution and narcotics possession, crossing guards, and neighborhood watch activities. Township Manager Jennifer Blumenthal is proposing those and other cuts while acknowledging to phillyburbs.com (published by Calkins newspapers) that they probably will result in more crime.

And in Illinois' St. Clair County, the sheriff's department announced in January that it would stop responding to tripped business and residential burglar alarms and calls about property crimes that are not in progress.

In all, 47 percent of respondents to the PERF survey said that police services have been or will be reduced in their jurisdiction.

Those cuts have opened the doors for private companies to move in. In St. Clair County, an alarm company has taken advantage of the new situation: starting February 1, for an extra \$25 Barcom Security will send an armed guard to the homes of their customers whose alarms are triggered.

In Naperville, the police likely will seek out private contractors this summer to provide security at festivals and other public events rather than pay overtime to regular officers. In Southfield, Michigan, the police began contracting in mid-2008 with the security company G4S to operate a holding facility for prisoners before they are transported to the county jail—a task previously managed by the county sheriff's department.

Police elsewhere are outsourcing core functions. For example, in the face of budget cuts, Oakland, California, contracted armed private guards in 2009 to patrol one troubled neighborhood instead of hiring more police. And the Schaumburg, Illinois police have contracted out their internal affairs investigations.

Trends in Outsourcing

Those moves are part of a longer term trend, according to economist Simon Hakim, who directs Temple University's [Center for Competitive Government](#), which studies innovative practices and privatization in government.

In the 1970s, says Hakim, there were 40 percent more police than private security guards. By 2009, those positions had flipped, with about 60 percent more private guards than public officers.

Hakim thinks partnerships between police and private companies make sense. In such arrangements, police still handle most investigations and arrests. But highly specialized tasks, like investigating identity theft, Internet fraud, or counterfeit goods, can be farmed out to firms with specific expertise.

For example, last year the companies Coach, Chanel, and Oakley contracted with Stumar Investigations for an undercover probe of merchants selling counterfeit goods in the Philadelphia area. Once Stumar had done the background investigations, they turned their files over to the police to make the arrests.

At the other end of the spectrum, Hakim says contractors can manage more straightforward tasks like transferring prisoners and providing security in public buildings. In Florida's Hernando County, for example, private security guards from G4S took over courthouse security from sheriffs' deputies in 2009, a move expected to save between \$142,000 and \$176,000 a year.

Savings like those can be traced in part to the wage difference between police and private guards. The yearly average salary of a private guard in 2009 was about \$26,000, less than half that of a police officer, which averaged \$55,000, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Neither figure includes the value of benefit packages; Department of Labor figures for 2009 show that the benefits of state and local government workers averaged \$13.65 an hour, while private-sector packages were worth \$8.02.

But police also have at least high school and often college degrees and usually go through rigorous police academy coursework, often lasting 12 to 14 weeks. Security guards often don't need a high school diploma and get far less training.

[ASIS International](#), an industry association, recommends 48 hours within the first 100 days on the job. Because of that, Rachel Hedge of the [National Association of Police Organizations](#) (a coalition of police unions and associations) says jurisdictions should be skeptical of farming out police work: "Policing is a core public service that should be provided by the professionals."

Indeed, G4S has had its share of troubles in Florida. Last August, the company's contract to manage the Pasco County Juvenile Assessment Center was canceled after a company security guard hit a 13-year-old boy while searching him. Sheriff Bob White then put his deputies back in charge of running the facility, telling the St. Petersburg Times the incident showed that "only law enforcement officers, not civilians, can be trusted with maintaining public safety."

And last September, five G4S employees were arrested for allegedly over-billing Miami-Dade County for

millions of dollars of work that they never performed under a contract to guard Miami Metrorail stations.

One expert has another concern: outsourcing could erode public support for the police. David Bayley, a criminologist at the State University of New York at Albany, notes that many wealthier neighborhoods, like gated communities, are now paying for their own private guards.

"I've asked police a lot about this," says Bayley. "In effect they are deferring now to the rich protecting themselves."

That leaves the police to patrol troubled neighborhoods, and Bayley worries that over time, wealthier citizens could lose interest in paying for those services if they don't see themselves benefiting.

Will Police Numbers Stay Down for Good?

Hedge of the National Association of Police Organizations says her group has an alternative to outsourcing: more funding for the Community Oriented Policing Services Hiring Program, which sends federal money to state and local law enforcement agencies to retain or rehire cops.

Originally authorized in 1994 at just over a billion dollars a year, funding had fallen to \$20 million by 2008. The Obama administration is asking for \$600 million in the 2011 budget, which would mean 7800 more officers nationally. The latest House Republican proposal is \$298 million; House Democrats are asking for \$277 million. With the parties negotiating over how to fund the government in 2011 and 2012, the final size of the hiring program for both years remains to be decided.

Without federal help, a reduced role for police may be here to stay in some places.

In Naperville, Dial says that even if his budget recovers, the number of officers won't go back to what it was—health care and pension costs for police employees are rising so fast that any budget increases will be absorbed rather than used for new hires.

But he offers the ultimate private-sector solution to a public-sector problem: "Raise your families in a responsible manner. If people do certain things, if they join gangs, I can't help them. If they drink and drive I can't protect them. . . . So my message would be, don't do it and we'll all be a lot safer."

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