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What's the Value of an Extra Officer in Your Community? RAND Online Tool Provides the Answer

RAND's Center on Quality Policing has developed an online calculator tool that can help city managers, police leaders, city council members, media, and the public better understand the cost of crime in their communities and the returns on police personnel investments. Underpinning the tool is information drawn from peer-reviewed academic studies that measure the cost of crime and the effects of changing a police force size on crime.

The [calculator tool](#), allows users to input the current number of officers in their police department and a hypothetical change in the size of the force. Users also supply information on the number of index crimes in a typical year in their community, which can be obtained from official police statistics or from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports accessed via links included with the tool. The calculator outputs an estimate of the total annual cost of crime to the community and the projected change in crime costs resulting from the proposed change in the size of the force. It also calculates the crime reduction benefits—in dollar terms—that would be generated by hiring one additional officer, taking into account current force size.



Users of the tool have found it a useful means to facilitate conversations about the appropriate size and resourcing needs of local police departments. Particularly as many communities face budget shortfalls, recent budget debates in many localities have focused on cost reduction and cost cutting. The tool provides a way to help decision-makers move beyond costs and better understand the returns on their investments in public safety, which can be helpful as they set budgetary priorities. The tool's simplicity and the ability to customize calculations to take into account circumstances in a specific community have been features particularly welcomed by users.

In performing its calculations, the tool draws from estimates of the cost of crime and impact of police published in peer-reviewed research publications. Crime costs include those borne by victims, insurers, government, and society at large. The costs also include those that are *tangible*, such as a victim's medical bills or lost productivity, and those that are *intangible*, such as a reduced quality of life in a crime-ridden neighborhood. Studies incorporated into the calculator use a variety of approaches to capture the full range of tangible and intangible costs.

As an illustration, the calculator considers the impacts of a 90-person reduction in the size of the LAPD, a policy option that was debated in the LA City Council last year. In this example, existing research suggests that, holding other factors constant, such a change would result in about 70 additional motor

vehicle thefts, 65 robberies, 65 burglaries, and a total additional community crime cost of \$32 million. At current staffing levels, one additional LAPD officer generates about \$360,000 in annual crime reduction benefits according to the calculator.

A major goal of the calculator is to make the findings of existing high-quality research studies more accessible and useful for policymakers and the public. While simplicity and accessibility are two of the tool's virtues, it is also important that users understand the source of the numbers used in the calculator and the assumptions underlying its implementation. A supporting RAND publication entitled *Hidden in Plain Sight: What Cost of Crime Research Can Tell Us About Investing In Police* gives the details about specific studies used by the calculator to measure the costs of crime and the effects of police. In particular, it walks readers through the different components of crime costs, discusses methods commonly used by researchers to measure crime costs, and outlines the strengths and limitations of each method. It also describes the techniques used by analysts to isolate the impacts of changing the size of the police force from the myriad of other factors that can impact crime rates, and discusses ways that conclusions drawn from tools such as the calculator can be tested for sensitivity to alternative assumptions.



The calculator focuses on monetizing the crime reduction benefits of police, and facilitates comparisons between those benefits and the budgetary costs of the officers. Police departments also perform other functions, including traffic enforcement and disaster response, which likely generate additional societal benefits beyond what is captured by the tool. On the other hand, police may in some cases impose costs on society beyond their budgetary costs—as in the case of excessive use of force or racial profiling. Incorporating these costs and benefits into the calculator at this point remains challenging, because a body of research quantifying these other costs and benefits of police is still developing. Nevertheless, while the tool does not offer a fully comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of police, it provides a productive starting point for thinking about the costs and benefits of police personnel investments.

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