

Considerations for Specialized Units

A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies to Ensure Appropriateness, Effectiveness, and Accountability

National Policing Institute



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Letter from the Director of the COPS Office

Colleagues:

Every profession has generalists and specialists, and law enforcement is no different: Some officers work in traditional units patrolling beats and responding to all types of calls for service, and others work in specialized units focusing on issues and situations for which they have particular training and experience. Some specialized units handle dangerous problems that pose serious potential and actual harm to communities, and their members do so at considerable personal risk. Often they work with a great degree of autonomy—and while that can be important to the tactical security of their mission, there have been too many occasions when specialized units have strayed from the primary mission of law enforcement. When this happens, it harms individuals, communities, and the trust between departments and those they have promised to protect and serve.

The COPS Office joined with the National Policing Institute to hold a series of forums discussing the importance of balancing the need for specialized units' expertise with the need for oversight and adherence to department-wide standards and practices. This guiding document presents state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement agencies a number of considerations to review and act upon when contemplating whether a given issue can be helpfully addressed by a specialized unit or whether a different approach might be more appropriate or effective; when planning the creation and dissolution of a specialized unit if one is necessary; and when managing specialized units that already exist and when dissolving those whose work has been accomplished.

Sincerely,



Hugh T. Clements, Jr.

Director

Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

Letter from the President of the National Policing Institute

Colleagues:

Law enforcement organizations, like other public safety entities, adjust approaches to the delivery of services based on the conditions they face, including the nature of community problems and the need for proactive and reactive responses. Also like other organizations, they must consider organizational issues such as staffing, training, expertise, and resource availability. The tool must fit the job to be effective. Specialized teams and units have long been used as an alternative to patrol where resources and staffing are often more constrained and responses to problems may vary widely across officers and shifts. In addition, not everyone on patrol can have the needed specialized training or expertise that some functions—and problems—require.

But specialized units often operate more independently than patrol, which may heighten the need for closer supervision. Specialized units are also often called upon to address situations and to use tactics that may present a higher risk for both officers and the community. In light of these circumstances and incidents involving specialized units, the National Policing Institute, with support from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, produced this report with input from contributors across law enforcement, community, academic, and advocacy organizations. In addition, this project and report responds to 21CP's *Task Force on 21st Century Policing: A Renewed Call to Action*, released on April 25, 2023, that called for the development of policies and practices to encourage evaluation, monitoring, and oversight of specialized units within policing.¹

While prescriptive guidance is challenging to give at the national level and deference should be given to local community needs and conditions, the guidance offered here is based on the diverse input of many individuals and what we know from research and evaluation. Our hope is that both agency and community leaders can benefit from this report and the guidance it offers in an effort to support effective, fair, and constitutional policing.

We offer our thanks to the COPS Office as well as the many individuals and organizations who contributed.

Sincerely,



Jim Burch
President
National Policing Institute

1. 21CP Solutions, *Task Force on 21st Century Policing: A Renewed Call to Action*.

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Executive Summary

Large and small law enforcement agencies across the United States use specialized police units to solve community problems that traditional patrol units lack the resources or expertise to address. Throughout the decades, specialized units—most notably specialized enforcement units focused on crime control in certain areas—have at times run afoul of law enforcement’s mission and of the Constitution. These instances of police misconduct can destroy the legitimacy of their own and other agencies and severely undermine community and officer safety. In the wake of Tyre Nichols’s tragic death in 2023 at the hands of officers assigned to a Memphis (Tennessee) Police Department specialized enforcement unit, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) heard from police chiefs across the country who were assessing their use of specialized units. The DOJ committed to provide a guide to assist law enforcement leaders, mayors, and communities in assessing the appropriateness of specialized units and ensuring the effective management and necessary accountability of such units. This guide is intended to benefit all state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) agencies irrespective of their history with specialized units or those units’ size.

In early 2023, the DOJ’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) and the National Policing Institute (NPI) partnered to hold a series of convenings, roundtable discussions, and interviews with law enforcement and community stakeholders to inform this guide. Law enforcement participants represented many types and sizes of SLTT agencies and included active supervisors of specialized units; other participants included individuals from several civil rights and community advocacy groups, many of whom work in and have a deep understanding of the perspectives of communities impacted by specialized units. The participants’ wide range of experiences, expertise, and perspectives played an indispensable role in forming the considerations represented in this guide.

The information presented in this guide was gleaned from many dedicated experts concerned with improving policing and creating safe communities. It is presented as considerations because they are just that: considerations, not edicts. Every law enforcement agency is different, serving unique communities and with unique public safety concerns. Recognizing these disparate needs, each agency should use the considerations in this guide in the manner that works best for it. The COPS Office and NPI strongly believe that using these considerations will strengthen an agency’s ability to police in an effective and just manner.

The goal of the guide is to give practical, actionable considerations for agencies and communities to help determine whether to form a specialized unit, and if so, how to ensure appropriate management, oversight and accountability for any such unit. The guide looks at four critical stages of a specialized unit’s development: (1) formation, (2) personnel selection and supervision, (3) management and accountability, and (4) community engagement. For document organization and ease of reading, the stages are presented as chronological or linear, spanning the life cycle of a specialized unit, but the authors realize that many agencies already have existing specialized units and can tailor the use of this guide to their unique needs. Several key considerations are put forth for each section of the guide and summarized here.

Formation

- Agencies should first be sure to clearly define the problem that their specialized unit aims to address.
- Agencies should solicit a broad range of perspectives—including those of patrol officers, other government and nonprofit and commercial organizations, and other impacted community members—as they attempt to define the problem.
- Agencies should consider if a law enforcement response is necessary to alleviate the problem. If so, agency leaders should then consider if that law enforcement response requires a specialized unit instead of traditional patrol units.
- Agencies should define the specific mission and scope of the specialized unit during its creation.
- Agencies should intentionally set the culture of the new unit based on department values and the unit's mission.
- Agencies should create policies and procedures prior to the beginning of the specialized unit's work.

Personnel selection and supervision

- Specialized unit supervisor selection should consider individuals with the maturity and ability to manage ambitious and motivated officers.
- Agencies should consider the supervisor's ability to create a healthy unit culture.
- Agencies should consider selecting supervisors who have a risk-management mindset.
- Specialized unit personnel selection should include input not only from the unit supervisor but also from outside the agency for balanced perspectives.
- Specialized unit personnel selection should consider each candidate's work and complaint history and skill set in relationship to the unit's mission and scope of work.
- Agencies should consider setting clear policies on specialized unit term limits and explore options such as a hybrid system where some unit positions are permanent.
- Agencies should consider diversity and experience working with diverse communities when making personnel and supervisor selections.

Management and accountability

- Agencies should chiefly consider their mission and the mission of the specialized unit during the development of performance metrics.
- If using traditional output metrics (e.g., arrests, tickets), agencies should be wary of incentivizing these outputs without regard to outcomes (e.g., reductions in crime; increases in community safety or trust). The number of outputs is only an indicator of completing the activity and not necessarily an indicator of changes in the outcome or the quality of the event.
- Agencies should customize data collection on specialized unit operations to the nature of the unit's work (e.g., oversight and review of developed risk matrices and operations plans, or knock-and-talk locations visited).
- Agencies should incorporate qualitative information from supervisors in individual officer ratings.
- Agencies should fully explain the purpose of new or innovative performance metrics. Officers may be accustomed to traditional metrics and question the purpose of new or broader metrics.
- Agencies should decide what metrics will be used to judge performance and then determine the cadence of review. Some metrics may have weekly reviews, while other, more complex metrics will have less frequent reviews.
- Agencies should establish baselines for metrics, routinely monitor the metrics for abnormalities, and seek explanations for any anomalous changes.
- Agencies should analyze the risk factors for each specialized unit.
- Agencies should develop specific policies and practices to mitigate the risk of individual units.
- Agencies should establish mechanisms to ensure appropriate levels of transparency.

Community engagement

- Agencies should strive to understand the context of the challenges facing their community before deploying a specialized unit.
- Before deploying a specialized unit, agencies should consider creating a community communication plan.
- Agencies should consider speaking with community members before forming or disbanding a specialized unit and continue to obtain feedback as the unit is deployed in the community.
- Agencies should consider seeking feedback from subsets of the community that are typically reluctant to communicate with law enforcement agencies.
- Agencies should consider using third parties in the community to obtain community perspectives that are difficult to reach.

Introduction

Specialized police units in the United States originated in the 20th century at the advent of the professional era of policing and changes in law enforcement organizational structures. As law enforcement agencies implemented these changes, aided by new technology like patrol cars and radios, organizations became more formalized, centralized, and specialized.² Technological advancements also created a need for organizational units to handle functions that required specialized skills. In addition, law enforcement agencies have formed specialized units to foster police-community relations and address social problems identified as community priorities.³

A specialized unit is an officially designated component of a law enforcement agency requiring specialized training, skills, and mission.⁴ If an agency determines it needs a specialized unit to address a problem in its community, appropriate scoping and supervision are critical to ensuring the unit's effectiveness. As history has demonstrated, the advantages of specialization come with challenges as well. Specialized units often address inherently high-risk, dangerous problems such as gun violence, tactical situations, or the apprehension of violent offenders.⁵ Members of such units often face increased danger and also are often subject to relatively limited supervision and afforded immense discretion when carrying out their duties.⁶ Unfortunately, this mix of high-risk tasks, discretion, and opaque operations can result in tragic consequences, as evidenced by the Rampart CRASH scandal of the Los Angeles Police Department in the late 1990s.⁷ More recently, the 2023 death of Tyre Nichols at the hands of officers assigned to a Memphis (Tennessee) Police Department specialized enforcement unit sparked a national dialogue about the role of specialized units in policing.⁸

The issue confronting law enforcement leaders as they work to protect and serve the community is realizing specialized units' benefits while holding unit leadership and personnel accountable and striving to eliminate harm. The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) partnered with the National Policing Institute (NPI) to assess the available research on specialized units, convene diverse stakeholders to gain a broad understanding of the role of specialized units in SLTT agencies, and develop actionable recommendations for law enforcement executives. The topics addressed in this guide are relevant not only to law enforcement leaders across the United States but also to community members and stakeholders concerned about law enforcement operations generally and specialized units specifically.

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2. Maguire, "Structural Change;" Maguire, *Organizational Structure*.
 3. Friday et al., *Evaluating the Impact*; Maguire, "Structural Change;" Walker and Katz, "Less than Meets the Eye;" Willits and Nowacki, "The Use of Specialized Cybercrime Policing Units."
 4. *United States v. City of Albuquerque*.
 5. *United States v. City of Albuquerque*; Center of Juvenile Law & Policy at LMU Loyola Law School, *50 Years of Identifying Root Causes*; Willits and Nowacki, "The Use of Specialized Cybercrime Policing Units;" PBS, "Rampart Scandal Timeline."
 6. Center of Juvenile Law & Policy at LMU Loyola Law School, *50 Years of Identifying Root Causes*.
 7. Center of Juvenile Law & Policy at LMU Loyola Law School, *50 Years of Identifying Root Causes*.
 8. PERF, "Lessons from 'Monday-morning Quarterbacking' Sessions;" Gupta, "Vanita Gupta on Police Reform."

The intent of this publication is to provide the field with practical, actionable guidance on specialized units. In so doing, the authors strive to incorporate multiple perspectives and help law enforcement agency leaders ask critical questions to ensure that when specialized units are developed and deployed, they advance public safety, protect civil rights, and promote community trust.

Figure 1. Goals for specialized units resource guide

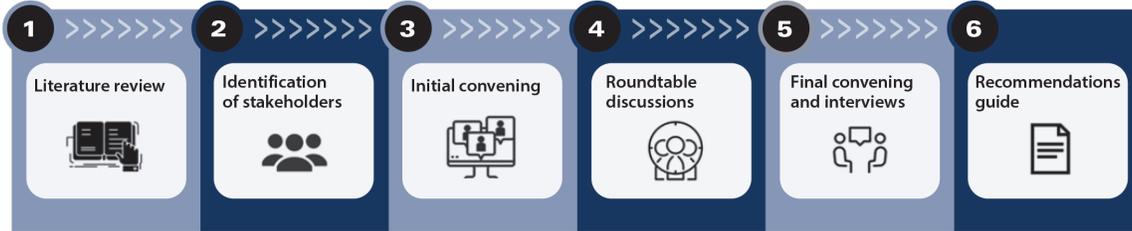


Figure 1 displays the specific goals NPI and the COPS Office collaboratively developed in service of this larger purpose. In pursuit of these goals, this guide prioritizes strategies and recommendations that are

- evidence-based or practice-based;
- developed by a diverse group of stakeholders;
- informed by lessons learned from previous specialized unit operations (both successful and unsuccessful);
- focused on the types of specialized units most likely to be engaged in selective or directed enforcement efforts;
- relevant and actionable for the first-line supervisors and command staff responsible for specialized unit operations;
- characterized by the most promising contemporary and innovative practices.

Development of the specialized unit guide

The NPI team and COPS Office jointly created a detailed work plan to ensure the desired goals were achieved. Figure 2 on page 3 displays the overall methodological approach. Each component of the methodology is described in detail in the appendix and briefly summarized here.

Figure 2. Methodological Approach

To inform the convening discussions, the NPI team first completed a comprehensive literature review examining the scholarly research on specialized units and reviewed the role of specialized units in federal pattern or practice litigation. The limited available research made law enforcement practitioner experience, community perspectives, and lessons learned from the field even more critical components for this guide.

The NPI team collaborated with the COPS Office to prepare and execute a series of four virtual convenings in May 2023, bringing together stakeholders with diverse law enforcement, civil rights, and advocacy perspectives. The convening participants considered specialized units both broadly and with specific focus on issues related to their formation, supervision, management, accountability, and community engagement. The final in-person convening was held on June 22, 2023, and aimed to again bring together a diverse group of SLTT law enforcement and community stakeholders to develop strategies and recommendations that law enforcement agencies can use to better form, manage, and evaluate specialized units. From the convenings, the NPI team, in collaboration with the COPS Office, developed this resource guide for the field to inform law enforcement executives' considerations for specialized units.

Participants in the initial convening agreed that specialized units that are enforcement-oriented and interact with community members are the most important to consider because of their impact on the community. Although some of the considerations provided in this guide may apply to all specialized units, the focus is on specialized enforcement units that make arrests with at least some visibility in the community.

The guide's contents are intended to spark dialogue in law enforcement agencies and communities about whether and how specialized units can and should be deployed. The guide is intentionally not framed as a "best practices" document, as NPI believes that the development and implementation of specialized units will vary considerably across types of units, communities, and agencies. Instead, throughout the guide, "considerations" are provided for agency executives to contemplate when making decisions about forming and maintaining specialized units.

This guide strives to help law enforcement agencies answer numerous key questions about specialized units and their development:

- What factors should be considered when assessing the need to create a specialized unit rather than exploring alternatives?
- What are some alternatives if a problem does not call for a specialized unit?
- What foundational infrastructure is needed to create a specialized unit?
- What factors should be considered when deciding where to place and manage specialized units organizationally?
- What types of community engagement are recommended before establishing a specialized unit? What measures should an agency take to ensure appropriate levels of transparency about this decision?
- What factors should be considered in developing the mission and vision of the unit?
- What factors should be considered when selecting unit members and supervisors?
- What activities and actions should managerial oversight entail?
- What activities and actions should day-to-day supervision of a specialized unit entail to ensure that officers and operations act according to agency policies, practices, and expectations?
- How should a law enforcement executive evaluate whether a specialized unit is fulfilling its mission? What criteria should be considered for determining success?
- What are the appropriate intervals and criteria for evaluating the continued need for the unit?
- How should individual performance among specialized unit members be measured, and what data should be collected to facilitate this performance evaluation?
- How can law enforcement agencies foster transparency and accountability in specialized units, particularly regarding community engagement and mitigation of community harm?
- What should a law enforcement executive take into consideration when deciding to maintain, dissolve, or redesign a specialized unit? What needs to go into a plan for dissolution or redesign?
- Does the unit recognize the importance of diversity, collaborating with diverse communities, and appropriate levels of transparency?

Specialized unit definition

As noted earlier, a specialized unit is an officially designated component of a law enforcement agency requiring specialized training, skills, and mission. This definition is broad and includes various types of specialized units that vary widely in their missions and necessary levels of expertise and training. Some specialized units are long-standing in agencies and allow select officers to develop specific expertise for specialized police functions. Other units are designed to allocate time and resources to pressing public safety issues and community concerns that traditional patrol response cannot fully address because of the volume

of calls for service.⁹ If they are successful, these units offer law enforcement agencies and the community a valuable resource to address both temporary and chronic crime conditions while maintaining daily patrol operations. The following list describes types of specialized units often found in law enforcement agencies:

- **Specialized tactical units.** Units whose focus is on tactical solutions to critical incidents that involve a threat to public safety or high-risk situations that would otherwise exceed the capabilities of traditional law enforcement first responders or investigative units.¹⁰ Examples include special weapons and tactics (SWAT), canine, bomb squad.
- **Specialized investigation units.** Units whose focus is on the use of investigative methods and techniques to solve specific types of crimes and develop cases for prosecution.¹¹ Examples include homicide, human trafficking.
- **Specialized enforcement units.** Units working in the community to focus on specific hot-spot areas, repeat offenders, or types of crime. Examples include drugs, gangs, street crime, gun violence, highway interdiction.
- **Specialized analysis units.** Units rooted in specialized technological, analytical, or forensic skills. Examples include ballistics, cybercrime, crime analysis, fingerprinting.
- **Specialized community-oriented units.** Units formed to foster police-community relations and address social problems. Examples include community engagement or community policing units, homelessness outreach, crisis intervention.

Finally, local and state officers may serve on specialized units operated by federal law enforcement agencies (e.g., fugitive, violent crime, and drug task forces). These types of specialized units are outside the purview of the current guide, as they involve complex relationships that warrant additional dedicated conversation. Rather, this report is focused on specialized units that fall entirely under the control of local or state law enforcement agencies.

9. Frantz and Perez, "Coinciding Crises;" Maguire, "Structural Change;" Katz, "The Establishment of a Police Gang Unit;" Katz, Maguire, and Roncek, "The Creation of Specialized Police Gang Units;" Burke, *Examining Drug Enforcement*; Lombardo and Olson, "Organizational Approaches."

10. *United States v. City of Albuquerque*; *United States v. City of Newark*; *United States v. City of Cleveland*; for more information, visit NPI, "Federal Interventions Dashboard."

11. *United States v. City of Albuquerque*; *United States v. City of Newark*; *United States v. City of Cleveland*; for more information, visit NPI, "Federal Interventions Dashboard."



1. Consideration and Formation of Specialized Units

This section is organized around two central questions. (1) Is a specialized unit necessary? And if yes, (2) what organizational infrastructure is needed to ensure the unit is effective and accountable? Although much of the section's guidance refers to starting a new specialized unit, the considerations outlined can also assist law enforcement executives in reexamining existing specialized units to improve their operations or evaluate the need for their continued operations.

Is a specialized unit necessary?

Research on the formation of specialized units is limited. The key takeaways from the scant body of literature agree that, when forming a specialized unit, agencies should consider emerging societal issues identified as priorities by communities (e.g., drugs, increased violence)¹² as well as law enforcement executives' priorities and officers' interests. Convening participants similarly identified the following reasons that departments may consider creating a specialized unit:

- Patrol resources are being disproportionately spent on recurring problems, affecting the department's ability to respond to other issues.
- A problem has emerged that requires a specialized skill set not used in regular policing activities.
- A vocal source (e.g., a community group, city leadership) is asking law enforcement to solve a problem.

Convening participants discussed the considerations law enforcement executives should weigh when determining whether a specialized unit should be formed, regardless of the impetus behind the question. Law enforcement practitioners expressed the view that when patrol officers are overburdened by a specific crime or community issue, a specialized unit dedicated to that issue can alleviate that burden. Several participants described specialized units as invaluable and necessary to the efficient operations of a law enforcement agency. The formation of a specialized unit, however, should not be the default response to every identified issue. Some issues may not require a law enforcement response at all, and other issues can be addressed by an agency's patrol function and existing investigative units.

Participants recognized that agency leaders sometimes create specialized units as an immediate or instinctive reaction to a problem without sufficient forethought as to whether the formation of a specialized unit aligns with the priorities and desires of the community or whether alternative law enforcement or community responses might be better suited to address the issue. Law enforcement can all too often become the catch-

12. Friday et al., *Evaluating the Impact*; Maguire, "Structural Change;" Walker and Katz, "Less than Meets the Eye;" Willits and Nowacki, "The Use of Specialized Cybercrime Policing Units."

all solution for community issues. This reality may be because the police are a well-known resource within the community, because the community lacks other relevant resources, or because those resources are too limited in capacity (e.g., they cannot provide 24/7 response).

Convening participants noted that it is common for a law enforcement executive to react to problems by taking on the responsibility of addressing them, particularly when faced with political pressure or community demand. This response often comes from a position of wanting to act and help the community. Taking a more holistic approach to problem solving—one that considers the role of alternative resources and responses—will involve shifting to a mindset that law enforcement will handle what is appropriate for law enforcement but will defer to other organizations and resources best suited for other problems. For example, as challenges involving homelessness have increased in recent years, some local governments have created multi-departmental units dedicated to addressing this issue. Law enforcement leaders may consider sharing or transferring responsibility for addressing particular problems to other departments within the local government structure.

Participants discussed the importance of agency leadership defining a problem when considering possible approaches to solving it, including the formation of a specialized unit. In framing the problem, law enforcement executives should be data-driven and should include a variety of viewpoints in answering a series of questions (shown in figure 3 on page 9). The definition of a problem often influences the strategy for its mitigation. Agency leaders should invest time into understanding the nature of the problem and distinguishing between its root cause and its symptoms. To understand the root causes, agency leadership will need to speak with community members directly impacted by the issue along with other organizations coping with symptoms of the issue. While reaching out to community members may prolong the process of defining the problem, it will ultimately foster a better understanding of the core issues and can lead to greater agency and community confidence in problem mitigation strategies. These issues are further discussed in section 4.

Some of the quantitative metrics that should be considered internally when evaluating whether to create a specialized unit are repeat calls for service, repeat offenders, response time to calls for service, trends over time (e.g., is a problem consistently getting worse?), and the length of calls. Looking at these metrics may provide more information to make judgements about the use of a specialized unit. In addition to these quantitative measures, law enforcement executives should seek knowledge about the problem from agency employees. During the convenings, both law enforcement and community stakeholders suggested that patrol officers working in the geographical area of the problem be consulted about the nature of the problem and possible solutions. These officers' responses not only help frame the problem but also allow leadership to gauge patrol capacity to handle the problem. In this way, understanding patrol officers' knowledge may inform whether a specialized unit is necessary and what specialized skills or expertise a specialized unit would need to be effective.

Figure 3. Framing the problem to inform the decision whether to create a specialized unit



Decision-makers cannot limit the information they weigh to just department input. As noted earlier and in figure 3, it is also important to think more broadly about whether alternative community resources may exist to address the problem, either in partnership with law enforcement or in a leading role. The type of community resources to consider will vary by the nature of the problem under consideration, but some possibilities include crisis response teams, social workers, medical personnel (paramedics emergency medical services [EMS], hospital staff), and community-based violence interrupters. Community advocates suggested that law enforcement executives think about whether the formation of a specialized unit is likely to be helpful or instead has the potential to escalate a situation.

Several theories of organizational behavior have been applied to the decision to form specialized units in law enforcement agencies. In particular, institutional theory offers compelling explanations of how and why specialized units exist within agencies. While the theory and related literature do not offer practical guidance for operations, they do offer a helpful perspective when organizations are contemplating forming a new unit. At the core of the theory is the uncontroversial idea that organizations tasked with coping with intractable societal problems such as crime and disorder will look for new solutions to problems when there is no obvious answer or best practice. Such solutions often come from other organizations facing the same issues. An organization such as a law enforcement agency will look to similar organizations for insight on coping with a problem and then take a similar approach. Once the solution is widely accepted throughout the field,

it becomes “institutionalized,” according to researchers John Crank and Robert Langworthy, with agencies reinforcing its use and spread regardless of its generalizability.¹³ In other words, once institutionalized, it becomes difficult for agencies to resist conforming to what is viewed as the norm in the field. While the spread of ideas and solutions in this manner can be beneficial, it can also present hazards for agencies and communities when the idea is poorly tested, ill-fitting, or inconsistent with community standards and expectations. Agency leaders should think carefully about using ideas or methods from other departments to ensure the approach they select is consistent with how their organization operates. With respect to specialized units, leaders should ensure that they are creating a new unit to actually address an existing community challenge and examine whether evidence exists that there is a particular problem in their community—and, more importantly, whether evidence exists that the proposed specialized unit will address that issue and positively impact the community.

What organizational infrastructure is needed to ensure a specialized unit is effective and accountable?

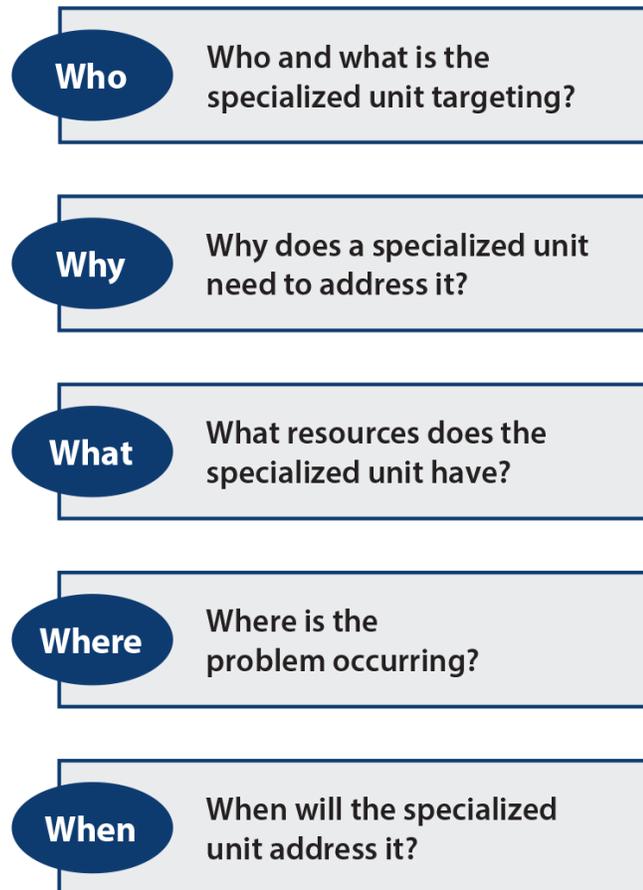
Convening attendees stressed the importance of creating a foundation and supporting infrastructure to make a specialized unit—whether it has just been created or it already exists—successful. This infrastructure includes a clear mission, organizational lines of responsibility, policy, and training.

Unit mission

The importance of having a clearly articulated mission and expectations for the unit was perhaps the most common theme across all convening sessions. Participants were clear that a vaguely defined mission (e.g., “get out there and do something about that”) is dangerous. A specialized unit’s mission should be specific, data-driven, and measurable. Articulating a clear definition will aid in assessing the unit’s performance and effectiveness (discussed further in section 3).

One convening participant cited mission creep as a problem that agencies should be aware of when it comes to specialized units. For departments with numerous specialized units, some of them may find themselves performing similar or identical tasks. For example, in an agency with one unit designated to serve high-risk search warrants, at some point another unit may start serving its own high-risk search warrants. This redundancy creates the potential for inconsistencies in tactics and practices. One solution is to have clear policies that define not only the mission of specialized units but also their assigned tasks and areas of responsibilities.

13. Crank and Langworthy, “Institutional Perspective on Policing.”

Figure 4. The five Ws of a specialized unit mission

With respect to a specialized unit's mission, convening participants recommended that law enforcement agencies do the following:

- Establish the unit's mission, roles, and responsibilities both out loud and in writing.
- Articulate how the specialized unit's mission aligns with and furthers the overall agency mission.
- Use the five Ws (see figure 4) to specify a clear tactical mission. Emphasize the importance of being data-driven in mission and operations (e.g., focus on wanted suspects, known repeat offenders, NIBIN [National Integrated Ballistic Information Network] leads, crime hot spots).
- Create a unit identity that aligns with the defined mission and considers how the unit is likely to be perceived by the public (e.g., unit name or acronym, uniform color and design, vehicle color and type).

Organizational responsibility

Deciding where to place and manage specialized units organizationally depends on a variety of factors, including agency size and the type of specialized unit. Convening participants raised considerations about the importance of keeping specialized units integrated into the larger department. Law enforcement executives should consider creating an organizational position to facilitate communication and oversight while guarding against creating information silos. Depending on a specialized unit's mission, it may be beneficial to place specialized units in the same chain of command as crime analysis, investigations, and other units with which they might collaborate or cross-train. This organizational proximity can facilitate ready access to information and colleagues. The physical location of specialized units is also a relevant factor. One convening participant noted that a centralized location allows for people outside the unit, including the executive leadership, to regularly engage with the unit (e.g., check in at roll call). The selection of the physical location will be discussed more in section 2.

Example from the Field

The Dallas Police Department recently updated how it trains members of its specialized units by taking a more unified approach to tactical training. Rather than training varying across individual specialized units, the newly created Tactical Training Group uses experts from different specialized units to lead universal training on tactical skills for all specialized unit members. Trainers are experienced officers focused on teaching and promoting unified best practices to SWAT, fugitive, gang, narcotics, and special patrol units and the community response team.*

* Roebuck, "Dallas PD Making Changes."

Policy

Law enforcement executives should establish written policies that govern all aspects of the specialized unit. Based on convening discussions and recommendations from previous U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) interventions, department policies related to specialized units should include¹⁴

- team organization and function, including chain of command and member roles;
- coordination of tactical operations in emergencies;
- personnel selection and retention criteria, including mandated physical and tactical competency of team members;
- training requirements;
- equipment appropriation, maintenance, care, and inventory;
- deployment protocols;
- threat assessments to determine appropriate responses;
- after-action reviews and reports;
- requirement to review policies at least annually and to be current in legal developments and training updates;
- designated review periods (e.g., annual) for the unit's operations.

Clear procedures for unit operations are critical for holding accountable the unit's members and the unit as a whole. Agency directives that clearly delineate the role and mission of individual specialized units also minimize the possibility of mission creep or overlap in agencies with multiple specialized units.

14. *United States v. City of Albuquerque*; *United States v. City of Newark*; *United States v. City of Cleveland*; for more information, visit NPI, "Federal Interventions Dashboard."

Training

Law enforcement executives should ensure that specialized unit members have the requisite training in skills, tools, and tactics to complete their mission. Agencies should fully invest in training to ensure that staff members understand the tasks that they are going to be performing before they begin their work. Although training can be a significant commitment of resources, the potential risk and liability of ill-trained specialized units demands it. Convening participants emphasized the importance of training to fully equip specialized units to proactively engage in risk management in their operations.

Practitioners cautioned that, in the absence of sufficient specialized training, officers will at times default to past trainings that may not be directly applicable to their specialized role and may contribute to mission creep. One example provided was that officers trained to investigate drug crimes might struggle to focus on gun crimes without training that specifically aligns with their new mission. Agency leaders and first-line supervisors should ensure the training for the specialized unit is consistent and supports what the unit is asked to do by the agency.

In summary, the importance of this foundational infrastructure cannot be understated. The NPI's review of the DOJ's pattern or practice investigations showed that these investigations frequently attribute problematic operations and harmful outcomes of specialized tactical units (e.g., lack of operational planning, failure to coordinate with patrol, lack of accountability, use of excessive force) to ill-defined missions, inadequate training, unclear policies and reporting structures, and insufficient managerial review of required training and policy compliance.¹⁵ Many of the DOJ's recommendations overlap with those suggested by convening attendees. Support for this type of infrastructure was also found in the NPI's literature review. One evaluation of a specialized domestic violence unit found that it benefited from formal mission criteria, policies and training specific to the unit, support from agency executives and city leadership, buy-in from officers, and integration into the law enforcement organization rather than isolation.¹⁶

Setting the culture

Organizational and unit infrastructure are necessary foundational pieces of a specialized unit. They should drive the formation and sustainment of the desired unit culture to avoid falling victim to the phenomenon, described by U.S. Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta, whereby "culture eats policy for lunch."¹⁷ One of the most important aspects of culture that convening participants discussed was that a specialized unit's culture and cohesion are important and should be aligned with and operate within the larger organizational mission, vision, and values. Participants agreed that it is incumbent upon law enforcement leadership and first-line supervisors to create and foster the desired culture for a specialized unit. Not only should the specialized unit's culture align with the organization's culture, but also the organization's culture should reinforce formal policies and procedures by creating norms of compliance.

15. *United States v. City of Albuquerque; United States v. City of Newark; United States v. City of Cleveland*; for more information, visit NPI, "Federal Interventions Dashboard."

16. Friday et al., *Evaluating the Impact*.

17. Gupta, "Vanita Gupta on Police Reform."

Extensive research has been done on police culture and the subcultures associated with it. While this guide is not intended to give a full account of that research, it is useful for law enforcement leaders to understand how police culture can shape organizations. Two prominent factors shaping police culture are the potential for danger on the job and the coercive power possessed by officers.¹⁸ Other characteristics include suspicion of community members and a strong crime-fighting orientation.¹⁹ Many of the characteristics found in police culture are mechanisms to cope with the dangers of the profession.²⁰ This is manifested in symbols such as unit members getting tattoos documenting their participation in the unit. The key concern with culture is its influence on behavior. Section 2 will discuss the role supervision plays in culture.

An underlying logic exists to how individuals behave in organizations:²¹ They behave in ways that they believe will lead them to success.²² This simple concept can help agency leaders think about their organizations' culture and reward systems. For example, what work behaviors and achievements lead to selection for a specialized unit or promotion? What behavior and actions lead to rewards or commendations? These ordinary decisions in organizations send messages to employees that weigh on their decisions and, ultimately, their behavior. Over time, behaviors form the norms of the organization. Examples of this cause and effect have been found in research where officers who embraced traditional police culture such as a crime-fighting orientation were more likely to conduct searches during ordinary traffic stops, demonstrating that culture is correlated with behavior.²³

Community engagement

In addition to the organizational infrastructure, convening participants viewed community engagement as essential when creating a specialized unit. Having a dialogue with community members about what problems are occurring (as discussed earlier in this section) and what factors were considered in the decision to form a specialized unit provides the agency with the opportunity to better understand the issue from the community's perspective and to hear any concerns they may raise. This feedback should be meaningfully and thoughtfully considered in devising the specialized unit's approach to the problem, particularly if there are concerns about community harm. Furthermore, this community engagement must be ongoing. Convening participants advocated for regular, transparent communication with the community about a unit's purpose and activity. In addition, it is important that the agency be intentional and transparent in communicating (a) whether the plan is for the unit to be permanent or temporary (while taking care not to divulge sensitive information that may undermine operational goals) and (b) how a temporary unit will be assessed for dissolution. Criteria for evaluating the lifespan of a specialized unit are discussed in section 3. Further information about ongoing community engagement strategies is included in section 4.

18. Paoline, "Taking Stock."

19. Paoline and Terrill, "The Impact of Police Culture."

20. Brown, *Working the Street*

21. Taylor, *Walking the Talk*

22. Taylor, *Walking the Talk*.

23. Paoline and Terrill, "The Impact of Police Culture."

Key considerations for the formation of specialized units in SLTT law enforcement

- Problem definition is a critical first step when forming specialized units.
- A broad range of perspectives—including those of patrol officers, other government and nonprofit and commercial organizations, and other impacted community members—should be considered when defining the problem.
- Agency leaders should consider whether a law enforcement response is necessary to alleviate the problem.
- Agency leaders should consider whether the problem requires a specialized instead of traditional patrol units.
- Agencies should define the specific mission and scope of the specialized unit during its creation.
- Agencies should intentionally set the culture of the new unit based on department values and the unit's mission.
- If possible, agencies should create policies and procedures prior to the beginning of the specialized unit's work.

The Lifespan of a Specialized Unit: When to Disband, Dissolve, or Repurpose

The evaluation of specialized units should include an eye toward whether the unit is still necessary and functioning as desired. Specialized units are often maintained for a long period of time, but it is important to periodically assess whether the problem the unit was designed to address is ongoing or whether the original goals have been met. In other cases, the performance of the unit may be determined to be so dysfunctional or misaligned with the mission of the agency that disbanding is the best option. The circumstances of the original problem or the agency or community's capacity may have changed to the point that it is more appropriate to shift responsibility back to patrol or to a non-law enforcement entity. Having a clearly identified mission and goals from the initiation of a specialized unit, along with clear metrics for evaluating its success or failure, can assist in determining the appropriate time to dissolve it.

Convening participants discussed starting with the assumption that newly created units should be considered temporary until a problem is resolved and the function can be integrated into normal operations. Some participants even suggested creating a sunset date for the unit during its creation. Consistent with this thinking, at least one accreditation body published a standard that required agencies to review specialized assignments annually and determine whether they should continue.* In many instances, specialized units become permanent features of agencies as the units become institutionalized and operations become built around them. In these situations, disbanding the unit can be much more difficult as agency employees and other stakeholders become accustomed to the unit.

Some of the reasons for potentially disbanding a specialized unit cited by convening participants included an outdated or obsolete mission, changes in community values, and a problematic unit culture. Outdated or obsolete missions can occur when the current thinking on problems changes in society. Participants gave examples of drug units that rose to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, losing support from the agency and community as the model of enforcement anchored in the "War on Drugs" faded. Vice units of the past faced similar circumstances as a new awareness of human trafficking reached many agencies.

One convening participant shared an account of disbanding a specialized unit because of continued complaints from the community and lack of adherence to the mission. The participant explained that the unit had failed to carry out its mission of deterring crime in the community, which was clear from the work outputs and complaints. The need for the unit still existed, so the agency disbanded the unit and, after a time without it, started a replacement unit with a renewed vision and completely different leadership. Some of the original officers were allowed to join the new unit on a case-by-case basis.

One challenge faced by agencies considering disbanding specialized units is how to transition the unit and officers to a new way of thinking about community crime issues. At the department level, there will be routines and policies that rely on the disbanded unit that must be revised. If a unit is disbanded and officers are transitioned to a new unit, the transition may be difficult. Convening participants discussed problems with trying to create a new unit with the existing personnel from the disbanded unit. One convening participant believed that it is better to start over rather than try to rebrand or transition an existing unit to a new mission. Another participant provided an account of an officer who was a successful career drug investigator and struggled to transition to an intelligence-based crime reduction strategy. Eventually, the investigator was moved to another position.

Change in organizations is challenging, and disbanding a specialized unit that has existed for years or decades can be unsettling for officers and for the department as a whole. Many officers view assignments in specialized units as coveted positions, and to remove them, even for the betterment of the department, can be a challenging experience. Questions regarding an officer's new placement and potential adjustment of unit-specific benefits will need to be considered. A unit member who has received hazard pay, for example, may be unhappy with a lower salary when their unit disbands and they go back to patrol. If the decision to disband is made, agency leaders should communicate the need for the new direction to agency staff and the benefits to the department.

* CALEA, "16.2.1 Annual Review."

2. Selection and Supervision of Specialized Units

Selecting personnel to staff and supervise a specialized unit is critical to its success. In addition, law enforcement executives should identify their expectations for what daily and long-term operational supervision entails. This expectation setting is part of the organizational responsibility component of the infrastructure described in section 1.

Supervisor selection

Convening participants stressed the importance of staffing specialized units with effective and accountable supervisors who can operate both as unit leaders and as a part of the greater agency structure. Supervisors in specialized units are responsible for reinforcing the mission, expectations, and culture that the department has created. Characteristics law enforcement executives should prioritize in selecting specialized unit supervisors include the following:

- Highly disciplined and professional (e.g., positive performance history without disciplinary or complaint concerns)
- Tactically sound
- Experienced, mature, and knowledgeable
- Strong leadership capable of managing diverse personalities
- Experience making difficult leadership decisions when necessary
- Experience working in the unit (for existing specialized units)
- Diversity and experience in working with diverse communities

Daily supervision

When asked how supervisors can ensure that officers and unit operations are aligned with policies, practices, and expectations for the unit's goals, convening participants made several recommendations for the type of day-to-day supervision that a law enforcement executive should consider for a specialized unit:

- **Supervising from the field.** Supervisors should be engaged with their officers in the field, providing clear directions while also encouraging officers to seek opportunities for creativity and problem solving.
- **Advocating for unit needs.** Supervisors should ensure officers receive sufficient specialized training and equipment or other resources needed to carry out the assigned mission.
- **Planning and risk mitigation.** Supervisors should foster a culture of planning and risk management for all operational plans with an emphasis on officer safety, professionalism, and mitigation of any potentially negative community impacts.
- **Coaching and mentoring.** Supervisors should regularly debrief their officers to create a culture of continuous improvement and to reinforce expectations, particularly after major operations and by reviewing body-worn camera (BWC) footage as needed.

Challenges for specialized unit supervision

Law enforcement executives should be aware of the potential challenges associated with specialized unit supervision and be intentional about mitigating these issues. As described in the introduction, specialized units are often engaged in potentially high-risk and high-liability work. The nature of the work likely will necessitate the need for strict discipline and planning to mitigate risks and ensure officer and public safety. Convening participants noted that officers selected for specialized units are often young, type A, proactive "go-getters," and they require a strong hands-on leader to maintain unit cohesion and ensure officers with strong personalities work well together and in alignment with the mission and culture of the organization. In doing so, supervisors should take care not to inadvertently create an "us versus them" mentality with the community or the larger organization. Supervisors should also be cautious with their operational involvement. As noted earlier, active in-field supervision is necessary, but supervisors can become too close to the action and lose their objectivity.

The nature of the work and mission should be taken into consideration when determining the proper span of control.

— *Law enforcement practitioners' perspective*

One law enforcement executive specifically raised the issue of how critical a viable span of control (i.e., the number of individuals a supervisor manages) is to supervisors being able to execute their responsibilities effectively in a challenging environment. The original research on span of control dates to the 1930s and sets ranges on spans of control from three to 30 individuals.²⁴ The idea behind span of control is that the more complex subordinates' tasks, the smaller the supervisor's span of control should be. A manageable span of control in law enforcement averages seven officers for one sergeant, but law enforcement executives need to weigh multiple factors in setting the span of control, including the unit's mission and daily operations as well as the overall agency size and available staffing.²⁵ For example, a 1:7 ratio may be appropriate for patrol units, whereas a street crime unit might be better served with a 1:5 ratio.

One participant stated, "If you're going to put specialized units out there with the expectation to handle a specific problem, the resources need to be sufficient that the agency can explain why the work looks the way it does. We set ourselves up for failure by being overextended, which then limits our ability to solve these problems." The idea of overextended resources is easily applied to supervision given the importance of clear guidance and leadership during high-risk tasks.

Officer selection

This section focuses on the process of selecting officers to staff a specialized unit, which is an important element of the unit's success.

The process

When selecting officers to fill specialized unit assignments, convening participants emphasized the importance of having an application and selection process that is open, based on clearly defined eligibility criteria, and transparent to the entire department. Convening participants cautioned against a process with little to no oversight, as without oversight selection can be based upon whom an officer knows rather than their qualifications. Convening participants pointed out that if officers are not being presented with open opportunities for career advancement, it can cause damage to department morale and retention.

Who decides?

Convening participants differed on recommendations for supervisor involvement in the selection process for specialized unit members. Some convening participants recommended, based on lessons learned from previous experience with specialized units, that supervisors should not be involved in selection based on the potential for selected unit members to feel loyalty to the individual supervisor rather than the mission, department, and community. Other convening participants thought supervisors should be part of a selection panel to ensure fit, while a few participants suggested supervisors should be able to staff their team if the selection process is open, transparent, and based on specific criteria. The IACP model policy on Personnel Transfer and Rotation specifically recommends that a selection committee be responsible for the process of selecting specialized unit staff. Regardless of how a department chooses to select members of a specialized unit, the process should be clearly described in policy.

24. Gulick, "Notes on the Theory of Organization."

25. PERF, *Promoting Excellence*.

Selection criteria

No matter who is responsible for the selection process, convening participants noted several basic qualifications and eligibility criteria, desired skills and characteristics, and components of the selection process that can assist in identifying highly qualified individuals:²⁶

- Qualifications and eligibility
 - Minimum years of experience (will vary by department and type of unit)
 - Review of past performance, including attendance, internal affairs history, complaint history, disciplinary history, and performance evaluations
 - Factors including diversity and experience working with diverse communities
- Skills and characteristics
 - Tactically sound
 - Able to think creatively
 - Adept at problem solving
 - Team oriented
 - Experienced in investigating
- Selection process components
 - Practical scenario testing
 - Interview that assesses orientation to the mission, team mentality, and communication skills
 - Conversation with personal references

Many convening participants noted that an officer's past behavior is the best indicator of future behavior and emphasized the importance of a thorough review of an applicant's prior performance. In particular, officers should be screened for participation in a way that is protective of the public and other officers (e.g., screening for an officer's record of use of force complaints or interactions with minors). Participants noted that typical applicants for specialized unit positions are proactive, "go-getter" officers. Therefore, it is important that the selection process be rigorous enough to assess how well applicants balance proactivity with the clear boundaries of the goals and mission of the unit. Finally, considering a specialized unit team holistically, some specialized units may be particularly well served by diversity in unit members' experiences and perspectives. This concept is supported by literature emphasizing the impacts of demographic diversity or lack thereof on team effectiveness and culture.²⁷ Specifically discussing gender, the researchers show how morale and internal culture can stagnate through a lack of diversity coupled with a highly masculinist attitude among

26. Many of these criteria are consistent with previous literature examining specialized units; Clark et al., "Training SWAT Teams."

27. Dodge, Valcore, and Gomez, "Women on SWAT Teams;" Silvestri, "Police Culture and Gender."

officers. Efforts toward increasing diversity in police hiring have been more prominent in the 21st century than in the past as agencies seek to improve effectiveness through diversity of experience and thought and to better represent the communities they serve.²⁸

It can be useful for agencies to maintain an eligibility list after a selection process to avoid redundancy. The list should expire after a certain period of time (e.g., six months to a year). The selection process, eligibility criteria, and eligibility list are more likely to be regulated by agencies with a collective bargaining agreement in effect. As noted earlier, agency policy should also dictate how these processes will be handled.

Specialized unit tenure and rotation

Specialized unit tenure and turnover are important areas for agencies to consider. Some officers seek a specialized unit assignment out of dedication to the mission and a desire to focus on a particular area long-term, while others may use the unit as a learning experience and naturally move on to seek new opportunities after a few years. Setting an assignment duration can be unit-specific, with longer durations designated for units that require a higher level of training and expertise to allow an agency to reap the benefits of the necessary investments in these officers. Nevertheless, convening participants agreed that specialized assignment duration, tenure, and limits be delineated in policy.

Convening participants, however, had differing opinions and experiences around rotating officers out of a specialized unit. The benefits and drawbacks of mandatory rotation discussed by participants are displayed in figure 5.

Figure 5. Advantages and disadvantages of mandatory rotation out of specialized units

+ Advantages	- Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affords more employees growth opportunities • Ensures employees are well-rounded with varied experiences and skills • May promote officer wellness by facilitating movement from stressful positions • May improve morale by providing more opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inefficient use of resources and lower return on investment from a loss of experience, training, and institutional knowledge • Can discourage active supervision if term limits will automatically remove officers • May reduce morale for officers rotated out

Some participants suggested agencies take a hybrid approach where a specified number of specialized unit positions are permanent assignments, and others are subject to term limits. This type of policy would blend the experience gained from decades of experience while allowing new officers to join the unit. Ultimately, an agency’s decision on rotational procedures likely depends on several factors, including agency size, unit size, collective bargaining agreements, and the type of training and expertise required.

28. PERF, *Responding to the Staffing Crisis*; Morison, *Hiring for the 21st Century Law Enforcement Officer*.

Managing specialized unit culture

Police culture and its subcultures have long been known as influential factors in law enforcement organizations and individual officers' behavior.²⁹ As discussed, a prominent feature of police culture is the idea of managing the risks associated with the profession. This section will provide a more in-depth discussion of supervisors' role in managing culture. Because individual specialized units are the focus, a definition of group culture will assist in understanding the dynamics of them. Edgar Schein defines group culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."³⁰

Schein's definition of group culture is particularly helpful in framing what can occur in policing and specialized units. Consider a unit that has been together for years and survived life-threatening situations together; members of that unit may have very strong beliefs about how to "survive" in their policing environment. They may be prone to selecting new members who share or at least are open to those beliefs. Over time those shared basic assumptions about reality come to define their subculture.

Because a group has a shared culture does not necessarily mean it is a negative or harmful culture. To the contrary, many group cultures are beneficial to promoting success in organizations. In law enforcement agencies, it is not uncommon to find a culture of teamwork, professionalism, and support. Where group culture can impede organizational success and run contrary to the mission of the agency is when the cultural beliefs are rooted in negative views such as isolation, prejudice, or elitism. These attitudes and values can be pervasive and significantly impede organizational change according to some scholars.³¹ Crank identifies several themes in policing culture that can contribute to negative and sometimes tragic consequences. Some of those themes include morality, solidarity, and death.³² Taken too far, themes such as morality, where officers view themselves as the judges of good and evil, can put officers in danger of overstepping the boundaries of their role in the justice system.

Subcultures are a particular concern for specialized units that work in small and isolated groups, perform high-risk tasks, and have reporting structures disconnected from the rest of the department. Some specialized units, such as vice or gang units, are viewed by officers outside them as glamorous and may exemplify the values of traditional police culture.³³ Narcotics units, for example, may tend to value danger and excitement and show suspicion toward outsiders.³⁴ On the other hand, units that specialize in victim services or community policing may have values that others view as too soft on crime.

29. Alpert, Rojek, and Porter, "Measuring the Impact;" Cox and Kirby, "Can Higher Education Reduce;" Paoline, "Taking Stock;" Paoline, "Shedding Light;" Paoline, Myers, and Worden, "Police Culture, Individualism, and Community Policing;" Paoline and Terrill, "The Impact of Police Culture;" Silver et al., "Traditional Police Culture;" Silvestri, "Police Culture and Gender."

30. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

31. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

32. Crank, *Understanding Police Culture*.

33. Garcia, "Constructing the 'Other.'"

34. Frantz et al., "Coinciding Crises."

Participants offered several suggestions regarding setting the culture of specialized units. Many stated that as a prerequisite to a healthy specialized unit culture, the general agency culture should be healthy and pervasive. To ensure the specialized unit culture is established from the outset of the creation of the unit, convening participants agreed that supervisor and officer selection is key. Personnel selections should closely align with the type of culture the organization is attempting to set for the specialized unit.

For specialized units already in existence, agency leaders need to recognize the signs of a negative unit culture or subculture. Convening participants said that one indicator is the way officers describe their work and role in society. A common example of this is the “us versus them” mentality. Other participants mentioned looking at arrests for patterns of poor evidence for charges or for dubious arrests (those that might be described as being “in a gray area”). Other signs may be unofficial mottos or slogans for the unit with accompanying logos. In Schein’s view, these signs are considered artifacts of an underlying belief system.³⁵ The actual culture of an organization or unit may be hard to decipher and certainly not monolithic, but paying attention to the artifacts can alert agency leaders to a culture that is counter to the mission and values of the agency. One participant commented, “When there are scandals in police departments, officers are often not surprised. Officers may be aware of misconduct by other officers or their superiors but do not come forward because there is not a culture of active bystanders.” This observation also speaks to the culture of the department and signs that were ignored by agency leaders.

Messaging to the unit

When specialized units are given independence and latitude, they can often stray from the established policies and procedures, sometimes thinking they are exempt. Convening participants argued that supervisors play a key role in countering this tendency by establishing and maintaining a professional, mission-driven culture. It is important that law enforcement executives and managers throughout the chain of command reinforce the desired culture through consistent messaging, actions, and decisions. For example, choosing what actions to celebrate or admonish and choosing whom to promote, hire, or remove from the unit will send a message to both specialized unit members and the larger agency. It is important to maintain awareness of the effects of awards and personnel decisions on unit culture. Some convening participants advocated for holding officers in specialized units to a higher standard of conduct. If their professionalism and conduct is not to the standards of the agency or unit, they should be removed. Taking these actions sends a clear message to officers in and out of the unit that the agency upholds high standards and will not tolerate compromises.

The messaging to the unit can be amplified for better or worse by informal leaders of the unit. Like formal leaders, informal leaders can influence and move people to action—just without the formal authority of the organization. Agencies should recognize informal leaders for many reasons, but a primary one is understanding their role in shaping organizational and unit culture.

35. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

Uniforms and signifiers

In addition to a unit's culture, it is important to consider the outward appearance of that unit compared to the rest of the department. Units that operate with more autonomy and discretion may want to establish themselves separately from the rest of the department, such as wearing different uniforms or having pins or patches to mark their distinction. As noted, these pins and patches become artifacts of the culture. When considering this distinction, leadership should be aware of how these nuances can impact the culture of the unit and the reflection it has on the department. If these distinctions are needed, there should be a functional explanation for the difference in uniforms and why it is necessary for this unit. Agencies should be cautious of colors and symbols. Several participants noted the tendency for specialized units to gravitate toward nontraditional uniforms such as tactical gear or plain clothes. Like other artifacts, they signify a distinction between the unit and the rest of the department. The participants realize there are circumstances warranting nontraditional uniforms but suggested that wearing them should be the exception and a clear justification be required.

Law Enforcement Practitioner Perspective

Unit names should be descriptive of what the unit does (e.g., Gang Intelligence Unit, Tactical Robbery Unit, Gun Violence Reduction Unit). This standard reinforces their mission and does not evoke predatory or "warrior" connotations or acronyms. The name could be an acronym. For example, the Pennsylvania State Police have a SHIELD unit, which stands for **S**afe **H**ighways **I**nitiative through **E**ffective **L**aw Enforcement and **D**etection. The name both is descriptive of what the unit's mission is and has a "guardian" type of connotation.

Unit name

Naming the unit can also have a large impact on how that unit is perceived within the department and the community. When deciding a name for the unit, it is important to understand how that name conveys the mission and culture of the unit. It may also be a reflection of how the agency views the problem being addressed by the unit or the community. Units with bold, warrior-like names (e.g., CRASH, Scorpion, Wolfpack) emphasize and further separate the agency from the community and perpetuate the "us versus them" mentality. This also applies to acronyms for units' names. Care should be given to understanding how they are likely to be perceived.

Officer safety and wellness

Officers working in specialized units, particularly ones that deal with traumatic events (e.g., crimes against children, sexual violence), are constantly exposed to trauma that can cause emotional drain and eventually damage their mental health. One participant, a law enforcement executive, worked in a child crime unit, where they saw extensive mental health drains in their officers. Officers were left in the unit for too long with no support, which in many cases ended their careers and affected their personal lives. Building in regularly scheduled check-ins for specialized unit officers will allow leadership to assess officers and ensure they are receiving the necessary support and resources for wellness. Some departments require homicide detectives

or members of units exposed to secondary trauma to have regular check-ins with counselors as a preventive measure. Left unchecked, these secondary trauma issues can exacerbate workplace stress and existing problematic cultures. Agencies should consult the wide array of existing resources available on this topic.³⁶

Unit location

A sometimes-overlooked aspect of accountability is the physical location of a specialized unit. The investigation into the Rampart affair of the late 1990s cited the physical separation of the unit as a contributing factor to that scandal.³⁷ One convening participant noted that some officers embrace the idea of being “off the grid” and not bothered by the “pesky” formal rules of the agency. In small agencies that house all operations within one building, this issue is not relevant. Larger agencies should consider the impact of breaking physical ties to the main organization. Because of space considerations or undercover operations, work stations may need to be separated. In these cases, agency leaders should routinely visit off-site locations and pay close attention to artifacts in the physical space. Artifacts can include the physical upkeep of the structure, posters, and décor; manners of address; unofficial logos; and the language used to describe the work. Artifacts may also include personal or unofficial social media posts and pages that send messages contrary to the mission of the organization. If the artifacts indicate an unhealthy culture or one not consistent with the mission and values of the organization, leaders should take action.

Key considerations for personnel selection and supervision

- Specialized unit supervisor selection should consider individuals with the maturity and ability to manage ambitious and motivated officers.
- Agencies should consider the supervisor’s ability to create a healthy unit culture.
- Agencies should consider selecting supervisors who have a risk-management mindset.
- Specialized unit personnel selection should include input from the unit supervisor but have outside input as well to balance considerations.
- Specialized unit personnel selection should consider each candidate’s work history and skill set in relationship to the unit’s mission and scope of work.

Agencies should consider setting clear policies on specialized unit term limits and explore options such as a hybrid system where some unit positions are permanent.

36. “Officer Safety and Wellness,” Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://cops.usdoj.gov/officersafetyandwellness>.

37. LAPD, *Board of Inquiry into the Rampart Area Corruption Incident*.

3. Management and Accountability of Specialized Units

Performance management and evaluation are crucial for holding specialized units accountable and ensuring that officers are effective while upholding the law. This section describes the activities and actions that managerial and executive oversight for a specialized unit should include as part of overall accountability. These oversight activities have an emphasis on the broad spectrum of metrics that should be used to assess effectiveness both by first-line supervisors in performance evaluations and by the chain of command in auditing the performance of the unit as a whole. The evaluation of specialized units should be an extension of or flow from the foundation of the department and unit mission discussed in previous sections.

It is difficult to effectively evaluate a unit if the mission and goals of the unit are not clear. Throughout this guide, an emphasis has been placed on making informed decisions about the creation, personnel selection, supervision, and management of specialized units. All these facets of specialized units work together and are strengthened when the connection among them is strong. Not only do these distinct pieces work together, but they also provide a system for risk management. The concept of risk management as it relates to specialized units is explored in greater detail later in the section.

Metrics development

What a department measures matters. How a department counts indicators of effectiveness or success in a specialized unit communicates the unit's priorities to its members. Clearly articulating the criteria on which specialized units will be evaluated is the first step to holding the unit accountable. The development of metrics can be complicated because of the nature of policing and the possibility of creating the wrong incentives for officers. Traditional metrics in law enforcement are centered around tasks or activities that are simple to define and count. Responses to calls for service, arrests, and tickets are still commonly used because they are easy to capture and count. These metrics can be defined as *outputs*, or the work performed by individuals within an organization.³⁸ The problem with these traditional metrics or outputs is that they may not relate directly to the outcomes the agency or the community desires. *Outcomes* are the results of the organization's work.³⁹ In the context of policing, outcomes are such things as greater feelings of safety, lowered risk of crime, and less disorder in the community. Outcomes are difficult to measure and are often not the direct result of one action or program but of several variables coming together to create changes in communities.

Although agencies tend to measure individual and unit performance on objective criteria (e.g., arrests, stops), convening participants recognized that quantifiable outputs are not always the best performance indicators. Participants argued that relying solely on more traditional enforcement metrics can backfire as officers can become more focused on quantity than quality. They suggested that good supervision could allow for evaluations based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative criteria, such as whether officers are able to be

38. Wilson, *Bureaucracy*.

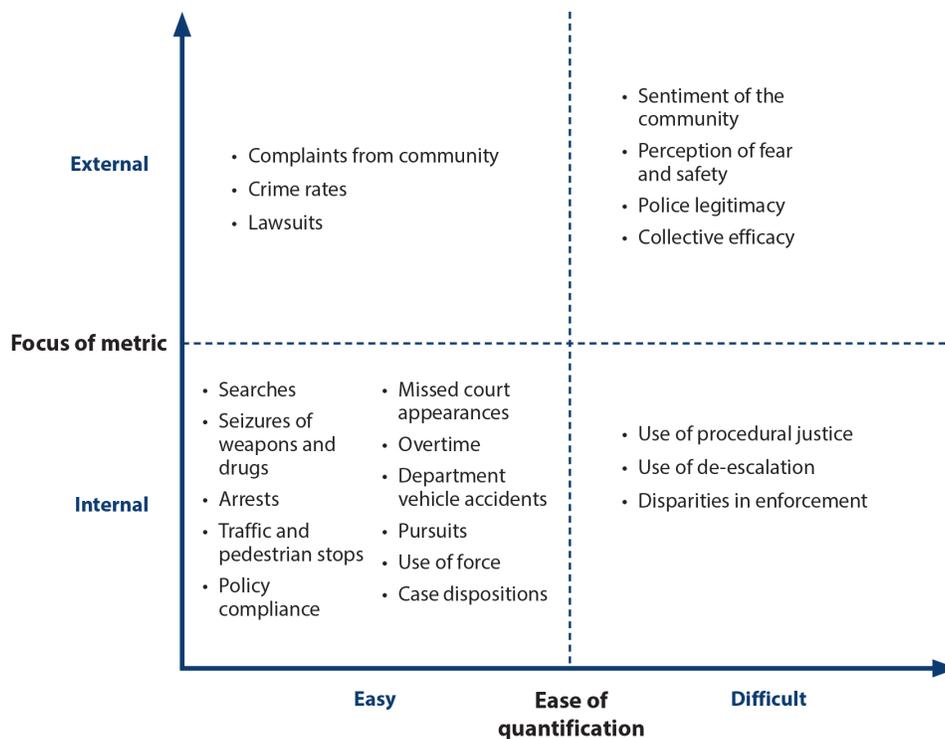
39. Wilson, *Bureaucracy*.

independently productive in support of the mission, whether they work well with teammates, and how much direct supervision they require. This effective supervision is achieved by developing regular reports and reviews that incorporate evidence from supervisory observations alongside numbers and statistics to provide a comprehensive picture of the individual and unit.

A second major point of the conversations around performance metrics was the need for examining a broad range of outcomes related to the mission of the specialized unit. While the mission can be narrow and defined, such as decreasing the number of vehicle thefts in a particular city area, the view of performance should be broad. Following the example of decreasing vehicle thefts, a broad set of performance metrics could include vehicle thefts reported, stolen vehicles recovered, arrests, tickets issued, cases prosecuted, use of force incidents, complaints, pursuits, vehicle accidents, overtime, community outreach events, and community sentiment. A holistic view of performance should take into account the entire context of what the specialized unit is doing to achieve its mission. Put another way, how the mission is achieved is critically important; the ends should not be used to justify the means.

Figure 6 displays possible performance metrics for specialized units, including enforcement outputs, administrative outputs, community outputs, and community outcomes. The metrics are placed in a matrix grouping the metrics by ease of quantification and the focus, internal or external. Figure 6 is not intended to be exhaustive, nor is it intended to suggest that every performance metric should be measured by law enforcement agencies for all specialized units. Rather, its purpose is to demonstrate the importance of considering a wide range of metrics when evaluating effectiveness for specialized units and understanding that some metrics can be difficult to capture and quantify.

Figure 6. Possible performance metrics for specialized units



Key considerations for identifying metrics

Performance metrics will vary across agencies and among units within a single agency. However, there are key considerations that can be generalized to most law enforcement agencies with specialized units used for enforcement actions. Those considerations are as follows:

- The development of performance metrics should be driven by the missions of the specialized unit and the agency.
- If using traditional metrics (e.g., arrests, tickets), agencies should be wary of incentivizing these metrics without regard to outcomes. The number of outputs is only an indicator of completing the activity and not necessarily an indicator of changes in the outcome or the quality of the event.
- Data collection on specialized unit operations may need to be customized to the nature of the unit's work (e.g., oversight and review of developed risk matrices and operations plans, or knock-and-talk locations visited).
- Qualitative information from supervisors should be incorporated in order to rate individual officers.
- Officers may be accustomed to traditional metrics and question the purpose of new or broader metrics. For clarity, it will be necessary to fully explain the purpose of the new metrics.

“The volume of stop-and-frisk complaints in New York was overlooked due to the sheer volume of complaints received daily, but audits and lawsuits revealed the problem was much larger than a few unhappy community members.”

— *Community Advocacy Participant*

Performance management

Wilson states that law enforcement organizations are “coping” agencies where it is hard to define what is “good” performance, complicated by the ability to directly observe performance.⁴⁰ That sentiment is easy to understand when thinking about law enforcement officers going from call to call only interacting with the community and co-workers and perhaps a momentary encounter with a supervisor on a crime scene. The difficulty of defining good performance and then trying to measure it does not lessen the critical importance of these activities. Performance management can be described as a systematic effort to improve performance through an ongoing process of establishing outcomes, setting standards of performance, and then collecting and analyzing data about the performance to make improvements.⁴¹ Previous sections have discussed the

40. Wilson, *Varieties of Police Behavior*.

41. Shane, “Performance Management.”

need to make the mission of specialized units clear and examine a variety of metrics to judge the performance of individual officers and units. Those sections set the stage for the critical task of managing the day-to-day performance of individuals and units.

Convening participants stressed the importance of performance management and the critical role first-line supervisors played in it. Participants consistently stressed the importance of having sergeants (or equivalent) in the field with officers to observe the work of specialized units and to supervise actively and directly. Beyond managing the performance of individual officers, the agency should manage the performance of the specialized unit in the context of the entire department. The difficulty of measuring individual officer performance manifests itself with entire units. The previous section discussed metrics agencies could use to evaluate officers and units. Even if specific metrics are defined and captured for evaluation, it can be difficult to determine benchmarks for good or bad performance. For example, an agency may decide to measure the performance of a new street crimes unit by the number of arrests, searches, complaints, force incidents, and case dispositions. As the agency collects and analyzes the data, agency leaders notice the unit made 30 arrests and generated four community member complaints in a month. Without context, these numbers have little meaning, and even with the context of comparison units and the number of officers, it may be difficult to draw conclusions because the nature of work among the units may vary considerably.

Despite the initial difficulty of putting metrics into context, agencies should continue to track an agreed-upon set of metrics for specialized units. The review cadence for metrics may differ depending on the data source and complexity of the analysis needed. For example, simple counts of activity such as arrests or complaints could be compiled and reviewed weekly, whereas more complex data analyses such as racial disparities from arrests may be done only quarterly. Maintaining records is important because it enables agencies to see historical trends and detect emerging ones. Even though comparisons to other units may be difficult, historical comparisons in a unit can provide much-needed context.

When examining formal complaints, it is critical to examine both the number and nature of complaints against specialized unit members. In particular, law enforcement executives and managers should look out for complaints related to over-policing, racially biased policing, and excessive force.

— *Law enforcement practitioners' perspective*

Participants offered advice on making the best use of the metrics available to agencies. Many agencies will have metrics such as arrests, tickets, and complaints available almost immediately for review by supervisors. Convening participants urged agencies to carefully review the individual cases for quality and not become deafened by the ambient noise of day-to-day activities in a department. For example, supervisors should review arrest reports and reconcile the charges with the specific mission and operational plan for the unit. For complaints, supervisors should look at the task the officer was performing and analyze whether the officer's behavior is routine for the unit, is a widespread practice, or was an accepted practice and reasonable for the situation.

Close and thorough review of arrests and complaints should be done in coordination with direct observation of the specialized unit performing their work. This task once again highlights the importance of first-line supervision and reinforces earlier discussions on the importance of selecting supervisors who are mature and strong leaders able to make hard decisions that are in the best interest of the entire department and the community.

Looking at the variety of specialized units in many agencies, it may be hard to determine appropriate benchmarks for selected metrics. One reason for this difficulty is that many important metrics, such as use of force incidents or community complaints, are relatively rare compared to the number of daily tasks officers perform. Their low frequency does not diminish the validity or importance of tracking them, but it does make recognizing patterns more difficult for some agencies. Tracking metrics, even low-frequency ones, allows agencies to identify patterns of risk for specialized units.

Audits

An important theme recurring throughout each roundtable discussion and in the follow-up interviews was the question of audits. The auditing process plays an important role in maintaining accountability and managing performance. Units that have more individualized discretion should be closely monitored and regularly audited to ensure that unit objectives align with the department's mission. These regular audits of units will also help leadership understand what goals are being met and can guide the next steps in deciding those units' future.

The framework for conducting audits will vary by agency size and resources. Police audits are used to inform leaders and administrators about the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of their operations and programs.⁴² Audits are often conducted by systematically inspecting work products of officers to ensure compliance with policy. Agencies should be cautious about using unit supervisors to do the audits, according to convening participants. Some participants thought that the auditing function should be performed by a supervisor or manager outside the unit to increase objectivity. One participant from a large agency assigns a sergeant outside the unit to this work to ensure policy compliance and conduct BWC footage audits. Many accredited agencies may have a staff inspection function that could perform the audits. A key point made by the convening participants is that the audits need to examine the important day-to-day tasks of the specialized unit.

Many participants advocated for the use of BWCs in specialized units. BWC recordings can be an important tool in fostering a culture of accountability. Many participants advocated using the recordings to audit performance in the field. When auditing BWC footage of specialized units' operations, departments should audit internally and not only look at what is occurring in the footage but also whether the BWCs are being used in the circumstances in which they are mandated. Participants noted the value of both regular (e.g., quarterly) and random audits of BWC footage. Using BWC footage in this way can help solve the problem of monitoring officers, as pointed out by Wilson.⁴³

42. Jiao, *Police Auditing*.

43. Wilson, *Bureaucracy*.

Risk management

Thus far, this guide has made many recommendations on forming and managing specialized units. All of these recommendations directly or indirectly manage the risk associated with specialized units. Policing as a function of society and a profession involves inherently risk-laden tasks. These risks are dangerous to both officers and community members. There are many unknown variables that officers face as they carry out their duties. The risk can be amplified for specialized units that are often directed to mitigate violent crime in communities. For this reason, it is important that agencies consider ways to identify and then mitigate the risk systematically. The following section will review the broad principles of risk management that can be applied to specialized units. Although much of this literature focuses on managing the risk of lawsuits, potential risks also include alienating the community, diminishing the effectiveness or legitimacy of the unit or the agency, violating people's constitutional rights, and endangering both officers and community members. These risks must also be considered and avoided to the extent possible.

Charles Perrow developed a theory to describe how catastrophic events such as the Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Challenger disasters occur.⁴⁴ Perrow describes such disasters as "normal accidents," where complex systems with multiple points of failure can produce catastrophic events from what seem like minor mistakes or omissions. Interactions can set off a chain reaction of events with a single point of failure to which human operators may have difficulty understanding and reacting. Patrick O'Hara applies Perrow's theory to law enforcement organizations by stating that as they grow and specialize, the likelihood of error may increase unless it is controlled.⁴⁵ David Klinger expands Perrow's work to interactions between law enforcement and members of the public in the context of officer-involved shootings.⁴⁶ He states that as the number of community members and officers involved in incidents increases, the greater chance of unexpected interactions among humans and features of the physical environment increases the possibility of a "normal" accident.

One can imagine many scenarios in law enforcement where a normal accident plays out. For example, an officer conducts a traffic stop of a car with two occupants, with two officers serving as backup. The passenger exits the car and confronts one of the officers. At this point in the traffic stop, many things could happen depending on the actions of any of the officers and either of the passengers. The traffic stop is evolving into a complex system where the action of one actor can set off a chain reaction of events that become difficult for each individual to understand in real time.

Knowing these scenarios are likely to occur, how can law enforcement agencies reduce the associated risks to the lives and safety of officers and community members, as well as to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the agency? Agencies can draw lessons from risk analysis studies focusing on legal liability. G. Patrick Gallagher identifies several areas prone to lawsuits synonymous with high-risk tasks, including use of force, pursuits, emergency vehicle operations, search and seizure, arrest, and care and custody of prisoners.⁴⁷ Gallagher's approach to risk management is that the point of attack for any lawsuit is deficient police performance in the field. By maintaining proficient performance from officers, the risk of lawsuits will be reduced. The six layers of

44. Perrow, *Normal Accidents*.

45. O'Hara, *Why Law Enforcement Organizations Fail*.

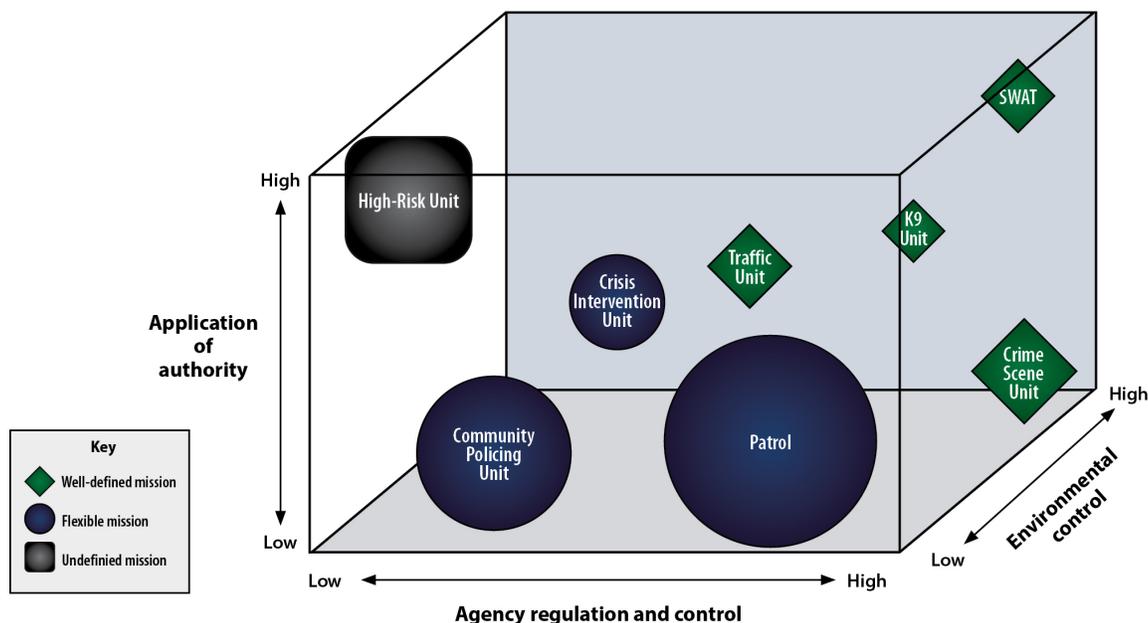
46. Klinger, *Social Theory and the Street Cop*; Klinger, "Organizational Accidents."

47. Gallagher, "Successful Police Risk Management."

his mitigation system are (1) policy, (2) training, (3) supervision, (4) correction, (5) constant review, and (6) legal support. The six-layer process to protect against lawsuits may be instructive in reducing the overall risk in law enforcement operations. Many of the layers identified by Gallagher are consistent with the findings from the convening participants. Participants noted that risk management for specialized units should be emphasized at the front end. Goals, objectives, and metrics of evaluation should be established at the inception of enforcement-based specialized units and maintained. As stated earlier, these metrics can help identify risk areas; once risks are identified, agencies can develop policies and practices to reduce them.

Figure 7 is a risk identification model for specialized units in an agency. Models are useful for describing or understanding a concept, even though exceptions to the model are likely to exist. In the risk identification model, the axes represent the unit’s application of authority, agency regulation and control, and the unit’s environmental control. The size of the unit is represented by the size of the circle, and the color indicates the degree of mission clarity. Looking at the red circle on the model representing a hypothetical high-risk unit, notice that the unit has a high application of authority, low agency regulation and control, and low environmental control. Compare the high-risk unit to the SWAT unit to its right. The SWAT unit could be considered lower risk, although it is clearly engaged in the application of authority while carrying out duties. The key differences are that the SWAT unit has a well-defined mission, high regulation, and control over most environments. To illustrate the differences, consider the stark differences between a high-risk unit with four officers conducting a pedestrian stop of three individuals on a street corner and a SWAT unit working to take a barricaded subject into custody. The high-risk unit may not have trained for this specific scenario and may have little control over the environment at the onset of the stop. In contrast, although the SWAT is engaging in a clear high-risk task, the members are typically thoroughly trained with regular simulations of similar events, possess ample resources, and have controlled access to the house or structure from containment teams. Comparing the factors present and not present in both scenarios illustrates how the risk in the barricaded subject scenario is intentionally minimized while the high-risk unit faces many unknown—and therefore unmitigated—risks.

Figure 7. Risk identification model for specialized units



Accountability

Police accountability is defined as being responsive to the public and the law.* Law enforcement agencies are given special authority by society to help the criminal legal system carry out justice on behalf of the community. At the same time, law enforcement's capacity to do this work is contingent on agencies' and officers' being accountable to the law and legal standards. Simply put, law enforcement cannot effectively enforce the law if they themselves do not follow the law.

According to Walker, society has several mechanisms for achieving police accountability, such as the courts or the political system.† Both of those mechanisms have been used in the aftermath of police brutality and severe misconduct cases. For example, agencies and officers may be sued after an incident of severe police misconduct, or legislators may change laws to prevent such occurrences. Walker points out that although police misconduct often manifests itself through the actions of a few officers or even a single individual, the individual misconduct often arises in the vacuum created by the organization's lack of accountability. Walker views accountability as a police organizational issue. This guide is focused on the same framework for accountability: the organization. How do law enforcement agencies keep specialized units accountable from within the structure of their own organization?

The recommendations discussed thus far in this guide provide the foundational pieces for creating organizational accountability. All aspects of the formation and management of specialized units are interwoven and together provide necessary, though not exclusive, components to foster accountability. If any of these components are weak or absent, accountability will be difficult to achieve. Convening participants asserted that accountability must start at the top of the organization, with strong leadership emphasizing the values and mission of the organization. The mission of the organization and the specific unit must be clear to all employees. Accountability depends on a clear definition of what success looks like in the unit and ensuring that members of the unit meet these benchmarks. Emphasizing those metrics from the beginning sets the tone, which should then be regularly reinforced by first-line supervision.

Many convening participants agreed that it can be hard for supervisors working in a unit for a long time to be objective about the unit's performance. The tendency to invest in one's own work product and champion it is natural. To ensure an objective performance assessment, convening participants suggested having other work units, such as internal affairs or staff inspectors, conduct audits and performance reviews of specialized units. If an agency is too small to have objective and detached assessments done internally, an outside firm could be hired periodically to perform reviews on operations. These reviews should consider include gathering views and input from community members to provide another perspective on the performance of the work unit. Convening participants suggested that agencies develop a self-assessment checklist for specialized units. That checklist should include the questions and considerations raised in this guide (and outlined in the executive summary) and should also be tailored to incorporate any other considerations specific to individual agencies and communities.

From a more routine operations perspective, agencies should consider the levels of review given to the reporting of incidents such as uses of force, pursuits, and vehicle accidents. While the total number of reviews may ultimately be dictated by the size of the agency, taking at least one of those reviewers from outside a unit's command structure may help keep the unit grounded in the practices of the entire organization. For example, consideration should be given to having all use of force incidents reviewed by an internal affairs unit or similar. Doing this will standardize the reporting and review standards.

There is no one way to ensure accountability for specialized units. Agencies must build systems and protocols internally that allow leaders to objectively evaluate their operations and specialized units' performance. Agency leaders should be aware of the inherent pull of the organization toward maintaining the status quo and tradition. Questioning the actions and the existence of specialized units will be unsettling to many employees and undoubtedly disrupt the status quo. The lesson from many consent decree sites, however, is that having strong internal accountability systems can address problems as they arise and keep those problems from spreading more widely in the agency. For example, investigators highlighted the poor accountability systems with the Ferguson (Missouri) Police Department as perpetuating a pattern of unconstitutional policing. Poor accountability systems also law undermine law enforcement effectiveness by eroding the public trust and legitimacy essential to garnering community confidence and engagement in policing activities. †

* Walker, "Institutionalizing Police Accountability Reforms."

† Walker, "Institutionalizing Police Accountability Reforms."

‡ Civil Rights Division, *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department*.

Figure 7 on page 33 is a model for agencies to use when assessing the risk factors associated with specialized units. In the context of specialized units, a risk factor is a characteristic of the unit that may increase or decrease the possibility of negative outcomes for the officers or community. The model can be supplemented with analyses of performance metrics and audits. Agencies identifying specialized units as high-risk should then implement policies and practices for risk mitigation. While not directly speaking on risk management, many participants advocated for practices that are fundamental to that goal and consistent with the six layers of mitigation protection.

Returning to the example of the specialized unit stopping pedestrians, an agency may consider implementing several practices to mitigate risk. Along with some of the higher-level recommendations within this guide, this hypothetical agency should consider implementing these further practices:

- Ensure officers are clear on the values and mission of the agency and unit.
- Familiarize officers with the community and current issues within the local area.
- Ensure each “mission” or targeted enforcement has clear objectives tied to intelligence and data in the context of solving problems for the community.
- Use intelligence to inform approach strategies—for example, opting for approaches that are less ominous and conducive to voluntary compliance.
- Train officers on approaches to enforcement actions. The training should include tactics and the use of procedural justice and de-escalation techniques consistent with the principles of constitutional policing.
- Conduct regular audits of BWC footage on community interactions and debrief with the unit on tactics and approaches.

Although these practices may appear to be micromanaging or tedious to officers assigned to specialized units, these principles of risk management are intended to instill a pervasive culture of effective and constitutional policing through time in both the unit and the larger agency.

Key considerations for performance management and risk management

- Decide what metrics will be used to judge performance and then determine the cadence of review. Some metrics may have weekly reviews while other more complicated analyses and reviews will have less frequent reviews.
- Establish baselines for metrics and then constantly monitor the metrics for abnormalities. Seek explanations for changes in the metrics.
- Analyze the risk factors for each specialized unit.
- Develop specific policies and practices to mitigate the risk of individual units.

4. Community Engagement

Following recent high-profile incidents of police misconduct, including the tragic death in police custody of George Floyd in May 2020, the policing field has experienced increased calls for transparency—one indicator of its need to ensure communities perceive police as legitimate. To be perceived as—and to be—transparent and legitimate, agencies should use outreach and engagement methods that are proactive, intentional, and ongoing. Communities where specialized units are often focused may be distressed by various social problems beyond crime and violence (e.g., poverty, homelessness, public health concerns). At the same time, some of these communities, or at least segments of these communities, may have a negative relationship with law enforcement. Agencies that deploy and disband specialized units with no notice and no community engagement leave the public wondering what the unit is doing and fearing that law enforcement will exacerbate rather than alleviate existing distress.

As noted in the introduction, to further explore issues related to specialized units and their impact on communities, the NPI team and the COPS Office participated in additional outreach efforts to a variety of community advocacy and civil rights stakeholders to assess how agencies determine the need for specialized units and seek more in-depth feedback on several key issues related to how specialized units are perceived once they are established and the risks they can pose to community members. The intent of these interviews was to gain a greater understanding of the following topics from the stakeholder’s perspective:

- What are some considerations for communicating the use of specialized units to the community?
- What techniques or practices have been effective to assess the opinions of community members reluctant to communicate with law enforcement directly?
- How should law enforcement leaders address situations where the community is polarized or sending mixed messages concerning the need for or effectiveness of specialized units?
- What are practices that law enforcement agencies could implement to assess the effectiveness of specialized units systematically?
- What metrics or indicators could law enforcement agencies use to audit specialized units?

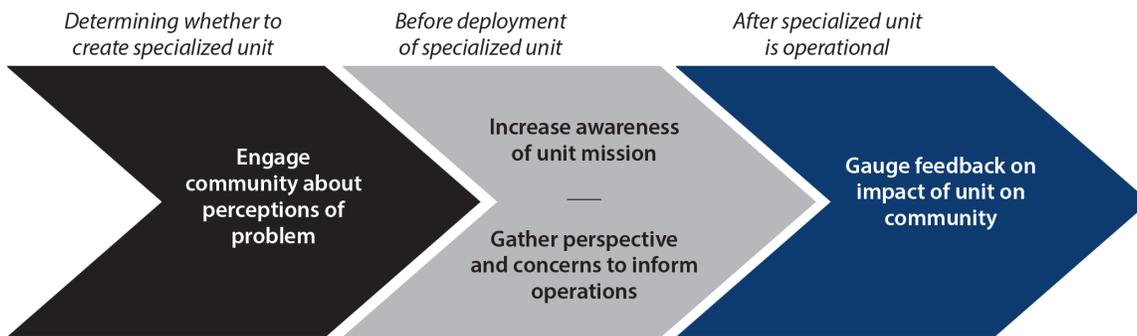
These sessions bolstered the information gathered during the convening series and provided more detailed guidance and insight about how law enforcement should engage with their communities on specialized unit’s creation and dissolution, operations, and related issues.

Timeline of community engagement

Figure 8 on page 38 displays a timeline of community engagement that can guide agencies in planning their dialogue with communities about crime problems, community impact, and potential solutions. Agencies with existing specialized units can use this timeline as a method for engaging through a slightly different lens. It is never too late to solicit community perceptions about the problem the specialized unit is targeting and how community resources might be used to reduce the problem in conjunction with the specialized unit.

Similarly, increasing awareness and transparency about what the specialized unit does (and does not do) is valuable even after unit creation. Finally, the process of gathering feedback on the impact of the specialized unit (good or bad) should not be thought of as a one-time check-in. Rather, law enforcement leaders should be regularly engaged about the benefits and drawbacks of the specialized unit’s ongoing operations.

Figure 8. Timeline of community engagement



As described in section 1, before the creation of a specialized unit, in the pre-decisional, information-gathering stage, it is critical for law enforcement to engage the community about their perceptions of the problem and what they think are potential solutions, including whether to form a specialized unit and whether alternative community resources exist to address the problem.

Even if communities perceive the problem, they may not see specialized units as solution.

— *Civil rights group representative*

Once the decision to create a specialized unit is made, educating the public about the perceived need for the unit, the decision to create it, its planned mission, and planned measures to ensure its accountability is vital. As described in section 1, feedback received during this period of engagement should be considered during further planning for the specialized unit, particularly when there are concerns about community harm. Several convening participants noted they had valued community members’ feedback during the formation of a specialized unit, and it had caused them to refine their unit’s mission. In increasing the public’s awareness about the specialized unit’s purpose, a law enforcement agency can increase its own awareness of community insight into the problem.

Once specialized unit operations begin, the law enforcement agency should be willing to have open discussions about how specialized units are operating. In addition to *whether* the objectives of the specialized unit are being achieved, the agency and community will also care about the impact of *how* the objectives are being achieved. One law enforcement practitioner noted that they meet regularly with community partners, show them the data related to the problem of focus, and discuss their concerns. While remaining mindful of operational security is paramount, this type of transparent dialogue can go a long way to increasing community awareness and understanding of the specialized unit’s operations.

Finally, at each point in the community engagement timeline, it is essential that the agency report back to the community about how it incorporated their previous feedback. This shows that their viewpoints were taken seriously. It also demonstrates transparency by showing the actions that have been taken. This component of community outreach can be challenging because feedback can take time to implement. Therefore, it is wise to manage expectations from the start, so people understand and have reasonable expectations for the agency’s response.

Strategies for gathering community feedback

Before developing a community engagement plan focused on a specific problem and potential new or existing specialized unit, law enforcement leadership should consider the current state of police-community relations. Table 1 displays some critical questions that should inform how law enforcement agencies engage with community members. Agencies should also give some consideration to *who* from the agency engages with the community. Depending on current police-community relations, this may be a role for the agency executive, the commander overseeing the unit, specialized unit leadership, or well-known patrol officers.

Table 1. Considerations for community engagement

Perspective	Questions
Patrol perspective	Are beat officers positively and meaningfully engaged with the community? Can they act as liaisons to the community?
Current relations	Is the department starting from a base of legitimacy and open communication, mistrust and hostility, or some of both?
Opportunity to build or support community capacity	What is the capacity of existing community organizations to address the same problems law enforcement may be asked to handle?
Historic context	Have previous specialized units or enforcement tactics been used in this community? How have they been perceived?

As noted earlier, community engagement in contemporary policing in the United States should be more intentional, more inclusive, and more creative. Simply holding a monthly chief’s town hall is not enough. Law enforcement agencies should go beyond traditional outreach methods because those who engage with law enforcement regularly are just one subset of the larger community. Agencies should be careful not to only listen to the loudest or most passionate members of the public. Community voices and lived experiences are not monolithic, so agencies should develop new strategies to ensure that diverse stakeholders’ perspectives are heard, particularly those most impacted by specialized units and least likely to be involved in typical community engagement efforts. Both law enforcement practitioners and community advocacy group leaders recommended several community engagement strategies:

- Host traditional town hall meetings.
- Administer community surveys; these can be very detailed and systematic or more of a quick “pulse check” (e.g., place a QR code on a utility bill with a few short questions).
- Conduct callbacks after crime reports.
- Follow up after community complaints are closed.

- Engage in conversation-based, informal feedback in neighborhoods and businesses.
- Gather input from elected or political leaders based on their engagement with constituents.
- Engage community members at neutral sites or events (e.g., churches, community centers, parks, regular community organization meetings).
- Establish ambassadors or liaisons in community organizations.
- Work with other organizations to lead conversations without police presence.

In general, convening participants saw the benefits of multiple methods of engagement to ensure wide representation of community perspectives. The diversity in perspectives that law enforcement agencies are likely to hear may pose a challenge for determining the path forward. Convening participants recommended weighing the totality of the circumstances and being cognizant of opposing viewpoints and concerns.

Convening participants recognized that there are many individuals not typically present in outreach dialogues because of their sentiments toward or personal experiences with law enforcement. Community advocates suggested that engagement with individuals who have been or fear being harmed by law enforcement may be difficult, but these relationships may also be most critical to foster. Advocates recommended law enforcement leaders take on these conversations and try to empathize and connect with community members rather than feel attacked or defensive. Law enforcement officials should acknowledge the harm that similar types of specialized units have caused in the past. That acknowledgment is an excellent opportunity for them to demonstrate the policies, training, selection process, supervision, and management practices they have put in place to help this unit stay focused on the mission and protect civil liberties. Community members may still be skeptical after these conversations, but it is important for law enforcement leaders to build community trust by being transparent and engaging in these discussions.

“We have to do a better job of working with the community and not just policing them.”

— *Community advocacy participant*

Community advocates specifically noted that some community members who are scared, mistrusting, or apprehensive of law enforcement will generally not engage in ordinary community outreach tactics and may not engage at all. Creating opportunities for these conversations will require more creativity, intentionality, and patience. In these cases, feedback from these groups may have to be obtained by someone other than law enforcement officials. Community advocacy groups recommended that agencies identify an intermediary—either community liaisons who are members of an organization or other individuals to bridge communication gaps by relaying feedback between the group or organization and the law enforcement agency. This may be a particularly effective tactic for gathering information from those directly impacted by law enforcement operations.

In addition to using multiple avenues of engagement, law enforcement leaders should leverage social media to promote opportunities for providing feedback (e.g., announcing town hall meetings, community events they will be attending, etc.). Agencies can also use social media to increase awareness of the creation of the unit, its mission, and its impact as well as to receive real-time feedback. Community advocacy groups said that using media options (in addition to in-person engagement) to be transparent with the community may garner good will with the community and lead to better relationships.

Key considerations for community engagement

- Agencies should attempt to understand the context of problems within communities.
- Agencies should consider speaking with community members before forming a specialized unit and continue to obtain feedback as the unit is deployed in the community.
- Before deploying or disbanding a specialized unit, agencies should consider creating a community communication plan.
- Agencies should consider seeking feedback from subsets of the community that are typically reluctant to communicate with law enforcement agencies.
- Agencies should consider using third parties in the community to reach community perspectives that are difficult to obtain.

Conclusion

Varied in scope and size, specialized units can provide critical support to law enforcement agencies' patrol operations and expand their personnel's ability to address important issues facing the community. Because of communities' continued demands on local government—and in particular on law enforcement agencies—specialization is common, and many agencies and communities rely on specialized units to address difficult crime and safety problems. However, the combination of high-risk tasks, discretion, and opaque operations common in specialized enforcement units can result in tragic consequences. These concerns are amplified when specialized units do not set and continually reassess a clear and community-oriented mission and scope; when they incentivize output metrics (e.g., arrests, tickets) without regard to outcomes (e.g. reductions in crime; increases in community safety or trust); or when they employ limited supervision that allows the growth of an autonomous culture or the pursuit of operations that are not consistent with the mission and values of the agency or profession. The goal of this guide is to offer guidance on whether to use specialized units and how to ensure such units function to improve society and safeguard against corruption, abuse, and harm to communities.

Each agency has its own history with specialized units. For some agencies, that history may date back to the department's inception. For others, specialized units may be a newer development. This guide is meant to assist all SLTT agencies irrespective of their history with specialized units or those units' size. For that reason, the guide is comprehensive, providing considerations from a unit's formation to its disbanding. While these stages may seem chronological or linear, they work together in a complementary fashion, with each stage reinforcing the others. Conversely, if one component is weak, it reduces the effectiveness of other parts of the system.

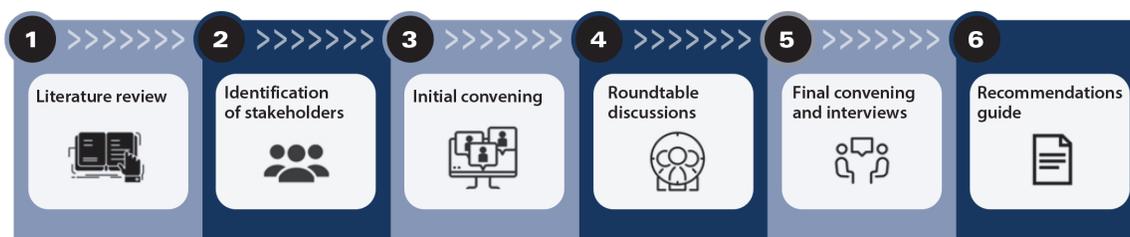
The concept of specialization is rooted in making performance gains in efficiency and productivity. Policing as a profession reaps those benefits by allowing officers and detectives to become better at specific aspects of their jobs and thereby improve police operations like investigations and crime control. Effective policing must be rooted in legal principles and community standards that promote community safety and trust.⁴⁸ The intent of this guide is to provide law enforcement and community leaders with the tools to achieve effectiveness and accountability when determining if and how to use specialized units in their communities.

48. Walker, *Police Accountability*.

Appendix. Methodological Approach and Work Plan

The National Policing Institute (NPI) team and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) jointly created a detailed work plan to ensure the desired goals were achieved. Figure A1 displays the overall methodological approach. Each component of the methodology is briefly summarized in this appendix.

Figure A1. Methodological approach



Literature review

The NPI team first completed a comprehensive literature review examining the scholarly research on specialized police units to gain the necessary context for the remainder of the project. The literature review included studies that have addressed questions about the formation, management, and effectiveness of specialized units, as well as the role of police culture and its impact on specialized units.

The information gathered from the literature review is interspersed throughout this guide where relevant, but, notably, the available research is insufficient for developing evidence-based best practices. There has been little examination of variation across different types of specialized units or agencies. Limited information exists on the factors influencing the decision to form, staff, and manage a specialized unit or on how a police agency's environment affects specialized unit efficacy. Much more research is needed to understand the impact of specialized unit assignment on policing outcomes like arrests and uses of force and community-related outcomes like complaints, perceptions of procedural justice, and trust in the police.

The limited available research makes law enforcement practitioner experience, community perspectives, and lessons learned from the field even more critical components for this guide. In addition to the review of scholarly literature, the NPI team also leveraged original research into federal pattern or practice litigation to supplement existing knowledge and inform the convening discussions. Specifically, the NPI team examined six of 79 U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) interventions⁴⁹ that included recommendations related to

49. These include civil consent decrees, settlement agreements, memoranda of agreement (MOA), and technical assistance letters.

specialized units. (In the case of these interventions, all units were special weapons and tactics [SWAT] or other tactical units). Like the literature review findings, the DOJ interventions' insight and recommendations are noted where relevant throughout the guide.

Identification of stakeholders and summary of convenings

The NPI team collaborated with the COPS Office in preparing and executing the convenings, including identifying stakeholders for participation. Because specialized police units are common and impact the lives of community members positively and negatively, a critical component of the project was to be as inclusive as possible when identifying and selecting stakeholder participants. The NPI team invited participants to the initial convening on May 3, 2023, described further in this section, from the executive leadership of several national law enforcement organizations. From there, the NPI team identified roundtable participants and in-person convening participants.

The roundtable and in-person convening participants were purposefully selected to represent a broad range of ideas and perspectives, with the goal of creating a guide that was useful for practitioners. To this end, the NPI and the COPS Office included a strong representation from civil rights and community advocacy groups and active law enforcement practitioners from around the country, some who are currently managing specialized units. This diversity of participation ensured that perspectives from both law enforcement and civil rights and community advocacy groups were represented in the roundtable discussions and the in-person convening.

Identified invitees were assigned to roundtable sessions, which were conducted in May 2023 and focused on specific topics based on their expertise and with an eye toward diversity of experiences. The purpose of this approach was to bring stakeholders together to discuss issues related to specialized police units from various perspectives. Diversity within the various discussions facilitated free-flowing conversation and healthy debate. To promote attendees' participation and ensure all voices were heard, the facilitators occasionally sought feedback from specific participants. Although complete consensus was not the goal, the facilitators strived to find common ground among the participants to shape the language around the recommendations.

Facilitators began each discussion with an opening script that provided an overview of the project and its goals. Facilitators used semi-structured question protocols tailored to each discussion topic, which were initially derived from the NPI team's review of the literature and guidance from the COPS Office. The perspectives raised by participants informed each subsequent convening. Multiple notetakers from the NPI supported the convenings to accurately capture each discussion's substance.

A summary of the series of convenings and the general affiliation of involved participants is provided in table A1 on page 45. A total of 50 stakeholders participated in at least one convening, while 15 participated in two or more events. The number of participants in each group ranged from 10–18.

Table A1. Overview of the convening series on specialized police units

Convening topic	Date	Number of participants	Participant affiliation
Initial Convening: Executive Session	May 3, 2023	11	7 national law enforcement organizations
Roundtable 1. Formation of Specialized Units	May 22, 2023	10	4 local law enforcement agencies 4 national law enforcement organizations 1 civil rights organization
Roundtable 2. Supervision and Selection of Specialized Units	May 23, 2023	17	7 local law enforcement agencies 5 national law enforcement organizations 1 civil rights organization 1 community advocacy organization
Roundtable 3. Accountability and Community Impact of Specialized Units	May 25, 2023	16	1 local law enforcement agency 3 national law enforcement organizations 4 civil rights organizations 4 community advocacy organizations
Final Convening	June 22, 2023	18	7 local or state law enforcement agencies 7 national law enforcement organizations 2 civil rights organizations

Note: The listed number of participants does not include DOJ or NPI representatives.

Initial convening

The initial convening, called the Executive Session, was facilitated by former police executive Dr. Ronal Serpas and sought to define the purpose and goals of specialized units and their impact on the community. It also sought to gain support for the project from leading stakeholders and represent diverse law enforcement practitioner perspectives on the experiences and challenges of forming, managing, and evaluating specialized units. Finally, the initial event sought to highlight the importance of community engagement and transparency throughout this process.

Roundtable discussions

Initial convening participants identified specialized units' formation, supervision and management, accountability mechanisms, and the role of community engagement as areas to be explored in more detail in the roundtable discussions. Dr. Colby Dolly, an NPI director and former law enforcement officer, facilitated each of the virtual roundtable convenings and focused on exploring and discussing issues related to these priority areas in more detail.

Final convening and follow-up interviews

After the virtual convenings, the NPI team prepared and disseminated a read-ahead document for final convening attendees summarizing the previous sessions and critical questions for discussion at the in-person event. The final, in-person convening brought together a diverse group of SLTT law enforcement and community stakeholders to develop strategies, recommendations, concepts, policy implications, and resources that police agencies can use to better form, manage, and evaluate specialized units. The in-person convening was held on June 22, 2023. Dr. Dolly and Dr. Robin Engel, NPI's Senior Vice President, co-facilitated the in-person convening.

At the conclusion of the in-person convening, the NPI team identified a few topics that warranted additional targeted follow-up interviews to either more fully explore issues already raised or to discuss topics that were identified at the final convening. Throughout July 2023, the NPI team conducted nine interviews with leaders from law enforcement agencies, civil rights organizations, and community advocacy groups, including four individuals who had not been able to attend any of the convenings detailed in table A1 on page 45. These interviews were conducted by Dr. Dolly and Dr. Jennifer Cherkaskas (also an NPI director). A note taker attended each interview to ensure that the conversations were accurately represented. The topics included the following:

- Specific criteria for creating and disbanding specialized units
- The impact of specialized units on overall agency productivity
- The impact of unions and collective bargaining agreements on specialized units
- Strategies for promoting transparency with and engaging community members to solicit their input and feedback
- Strategies for auditing specialized units

Finally, some participants shared additional perspectives in email communications following attendance at one of the convenings or, in some circumstances, in place of attendance. The content of these written communications is incorporated throughout the guide where relevant.

Recommendations guide

Upon the completion of the follow-up interviews, the planning, formulation, and writing of the recommendations guide began in August 2023. During this process, NPI staff reviewed the notes and literature collected during the project and held meetings to discuss the formation of recommendations. The draft was then presented to the COPS Office for review and publication.

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About the National Policing Institute

The **National Policing Institute** is an independent nonprofit research organization with a track record of rigorous research and analysis designed to advance American policing. Intentionally designed to be an unbiased and credible source of fact and knowledge, NPI is not an advocacy or fraternal organization and has no advocacy mission beyond advocating for scientific evidence to support effective constitutional policing practices.

Established in 1970, the National Policing Institute (NPI, formerly the National Police Foundation) is the oldest nationally known 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan, independent research organization dedicated to improving policing in the United States. The National Policing Institute supports change-makers in policing, communities, and government by harnessing the power of science and innovation to promote public safety for all. The National Policing Institute operates with independence and objectivity. Our work identifies ways to improve policing; ignite a spirit of collaboration among officers and the communities they serve; and use rigorous scientific study results to address the most complex public safety issues facing neighborhoods, cities and towns, states, and the nation. For the last 53 years, the National Policing Institute's work has remained a catalyst for significant change in policing and communities; contributed to scholastic exploration and discovery; informed policymakers, community members, and practitioners alike; and served as a model for the systematic and fact-based examination of real-world challenges. To accomplish this mission—Pursuing Excellence through Science and Innovation—the National Policing Institute works closely with those working in and affected by policing across the United States and internationally. Today, the National Policing Institute continues to advance the principles of 21st century democratic policing through its work. Though many may have ideas worthy of consideration, the National Policing Institute offers actionable solutions to the challenges confronting communities and policing leaders.

To learn more, visit the National Policing Institute at www.policinginstitute.org.



About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When law enforcement and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has been appropriated more than \$20 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 136,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- More than 800,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.
- Almost 800 agencies have received customized advice and peer-led technical assistance through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.

The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, roundtables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement. COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, <https://cops.usdoj.gov>.



The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) and the National Policing Institute (NPI) convened a series of meetings in 2023 to discuss specialized units in state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement agencies and create guidance for those agencies' leadership to consider when forming, managing, and disbanding such units. It includes sections on identifying the need for a specialized unit; selecting the unit's membership and leadership; managing the unit; establishing its policies, procedures, and end date; holding the unit and its members accountable; and working with the community when they have feedback on the specialized unit's operations.



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To obtain details about COPS Office programs, call
the COPS Office Response Center at 800-421-6770.

Visit the COPS Office online at cops.usdoj.gov.

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