

SUMMARY FOR LEADERSHIP

Considerations for Specialized Units

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

National Policing Institute



Summary for Leadership

The following summary compiles excerpts and key takeaways from a full-length guide released by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) in partnership with the National Policing Institute (NPI).

Specialized units use their expertise to address situations that may present higher than usual risks for officers and the community. To inform agencies and community members on best practices around developing specialized units, several dedicated experts compiled considerations that can promote safer outcomes for agencies and those they serve.

The following are practical, actionable considerations to determine whether to form a specialized unit and, if so, how to ensure appropriate management, oversight, and accountability. These considerations pertain to four critical stages of a specialized unit's development: (1) formation, (2) personnel selection and supervision, (3) management and accountability, and (4) community engagement. The stages are presented chronologically, spanning the life cycle of a specialized unit.

We recognize that every law enforcement agency is different, serving unique communities and with unique public safety concerns. We further recognize that many agencies already have specialized units and can tailor these considerations to their unique needs. No matter where an agency or community is in the process, the COPS Office and NPI strongly believe that these considerations can strengthen an agency's ability to police in an effective and just manner.

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., increases in community safety or trust, reductions in crime). 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.

Download the full report here:



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