

Audit at a glance



Police Operations and Staffing

MAY 2023

ABOUT | The Denver Police Department and its more than 1,400 uniformed officers strive to keep the public safe through crime prevention and crime reduction strategies.

Law enforcement agencies nationwide are struggling to hire and retain officers. This is in part because of greater scrutiny on law enforcement — and negative perceptions by the public — following events like the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020.

Understaffing puts a strain on police agencies, reducing officers' availability to respond to 911 calls and impairing their wellbeing. It also limits the time officers can spend in the community rebuilding trust and relationships with the people they serve.

In the report

FINDING: The Denver Police Department lacks comprehensive, strategic policies and documented guidance to ensure effective operations

- We found the Denver Police Department did not have a detailed and comprehensive strategic plan — nor did it have other targeted comprehensive plans for community policing or recruitment.
- Without overall strategic guidance and better recruitment and retention efforts, the police department will remain understaffed — which could put officers' safety, health, and wellness at risk as well as risk community members' safety.
- The department specifically lacks a holistic strategy for community policing, which promotes targeted strategies to proactively build trust in a community and address public safety issues like neighborhood crime.
- Absent a comprehensive strategy for community policing, the department's efforts will remain siloed across the city and Denver police officers will have a harder time healing their relationships with the people they serve.
- A 2022 study of policing best practices says police departments must reinforce and repair relationships with their communities — by creating a “felt presence” — before they can address conditions that impact how the public perceives safety and crime.
- Meanwhile, without a comprehensive recruitment program, the police department cannot accurately assess progress toward long-term goals or determine whether it is effectively increasing applications for job openings.
- The department also needs to update its staffing model, which was based on data from over a decade ago and did not align with best practices that say staffing models should be based on officers' current workloads.
- The outdated staffing analysis relies on data from 2008 through 2012, so it does not consider current needs or resources — such as reflecting that Denver's population grew by 19% from 2010 to 2020.

FINDING: The Denver Police Department does not have effective strategies to understand and address low retention

- Turnover among uniformed officers has increased since 2020, particularly among senior officers.

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- Our survey found morale among uniformed officers ranged from “fair” to “poor” — and we received over 130 written responses providing reasons for the low morale. Many pointed to burnout, poor leadership, low staffing, and officers feeling undervalued.
- Police officials are not gathering data points they need to be informed about why officers are leaving the department nor are they effectively assessing the information they do have.
- Part of addressing low retention involves improving the diversity among officers and improving the culture of policing, but the police department lacks specific goals to ensure the diversity of its officers reflects Denver.
- While the race and ethnicity of Denver’s 700 or so patrol officers closely reflects the city’s residents, there are disparities in gender. Women are half of the city’s population but make up less than 19% of patrol officers.
- Female officers are also resigning at a disproportionate rate, further perpetuating gender inequities within the department.
- Department officials have expressed a desire to increase diversity, acknowledging that “women and officers of color do not see viable career paths or access to opportunities.”
- Diversifying Denver’s police department could help improve the public’s perception of law enforcement by improving representation of historically marginalized populations and healing distrust with the community.

FINDING: The Denver Police Department should improve officers’ access to in-house physical therapy and mental health services

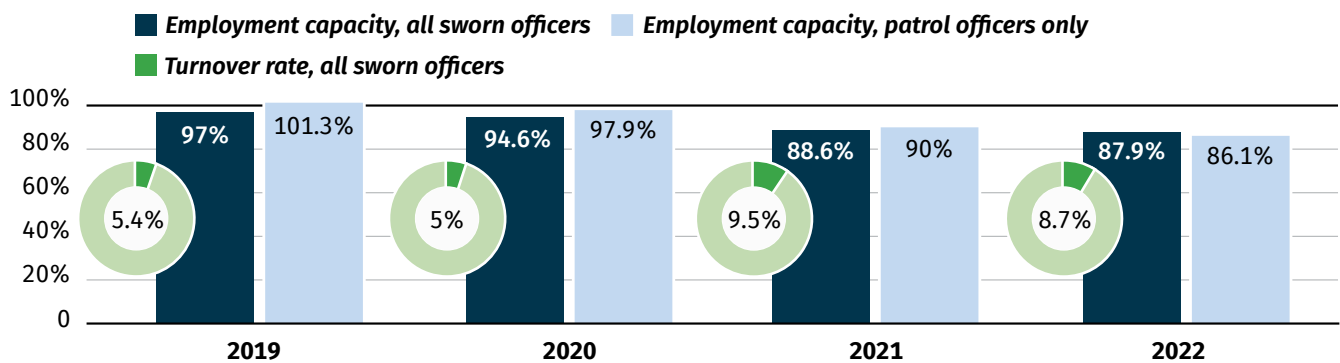
- Denver’s public safety and police departments generally do a good job with the wellness programs they offer their employees.
- However, physical therapy and mental health programs could be expanded to provide greater availability to police officers. Employees’ use of in-house physical therapy services has proven more effective and less costly than when they use outside providers.
- Denver could do a better job communicating the benefits of wellness programs both to existing police officers and staff and to potential recruits.

FINDING: The Denver Police Department has inconsistent processes to monitor officers’ time worked

- The police department monitors how many hours its officers work to ensure they do not exceed the maximum allowed in a given time frame. But we found those processes are not documented and, therefore, inconsistently applied when staff review whether officers work more than 64 hours a week.
- Based on our analysis of a statistical sample, we estimate between 23% and 60% of the police department’s weekly timecards from January 2017 through mid-October 2022 did not comply with requirements for officers’ time worked.

Denver Police Department turnover rates and workforce capacity, 2019-2022

“Workforce capacity” refers to the percentage of officers the department employed out of how many it was authorized to have in that year’s city budget.



Source: Auditor’s Office analysis of data from the Denver Police Department.

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