



## *PSO Perspective*

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### Not Forgetting the Case Study: Why Internal Staffing Research Must Continue

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This article highlights the value of agencies conducting research in their own organizations, reinforcing the case study approach to be of great worth for both researcher and practitioner. This article is inspired by the observed (but often unsung) impacts of case studies, extending far beyond the agency of origin.

In recent years, police staffing research has experienced a type of renaissance. Partially fueled by a worldwide pandemic and coupled with the echoes of civil unrest resounding throughout the nation, renewed scholarly consideration of police recruitment and retention has directed a reexamination of well-known research constructs through a more contemporary lens. As a result, two schools of thought regarding police staffing literature have emerged. On one hand, researchers revisit and continue to find [evidence for foundational components](#) such as leading [career motivations](#), [persistent barriers](#) to the profession, and [dynamic staffing challenges](#) – speaking to the age-old proverb there is nothing new under the sun. On the other, the staffing environment is arguably brand new. More refined data collection methods, a contextual backdrop unknown to modern history, and the advancement of policing as a profession characterizes insight produced as novel, relevant, and above all, useful for implementation.

With practitioner-researcher partnerships quickly becoming a standard for staffing research, there is great opportunity to raise the standard of data produced internally. For researchers, this includes a duty to drive discussions on application and limitations. Within these dialogues,

generalizability (or the lack thereof) should be at the forefront of the conversation.

#### The Generalizability Talk

Generalizability, simply defined, is a construct that notes the feasibility of applying findings elsewhere to achieve similar results. As a paradigm, generalizability is readily identified by researchers as a limitation because education demands us to consider this at every avenue. We see this frequently in qualitative approaches, often in the form of (anticipated) critique where the findings are only relative to the sample under study.

While it is our responsibility as researchers to explain why generalizability should give pause before making widespread changes, it can be a great asset in arguing for continued research, specifically at the agency level. Under implementation science, generalizability becomes an indicator of potential value by means of model adaptation. As a disclosure, this is not a call to circumvent experimental or quasi-experimental research designs – which though laborious, have significantly contributed to establishing our knowledge base in the social sciences. Rather, it is an invitation to reframe how we view non-experimental designs and the potential for widespread impact as the result of a single localized research effort.

## Reintroducing the Case Study

Enter the value of the case study. As a research approach, case studies are arguably the most practical for police agencies to undertake, as much of the information needed to construct the project is in place or readily available. [Case studies perform in-depth analyses of a particular issue](#), and are situated within a real-world context. Translated to law enforcement application, case studies can take the form of problem or policy evaluation, examine the influence of targeted training practices, or provide insight into officer wellness programs.

Case studies within police research serve as both a model *and* potential method for future learning, with a healthy dose of realism. Meaning, we can examine the intricacies of how an agency found success or derived a conclusion, while acknowledging that a copy and paste method will not necessarily provide the same results in our own backyards. We can recognize the effort one agency took to address a problem, while considering the modifications needed for the approach to be practical in our departments.

The focal point of a case study is the agency itself, with all its nuances, leadership dynamics, and community influences. Findings that stem from these efforts are uniquely calibrated to how the agency operates. At face value, this seems great for the agency, but limited for others looking to perform similar evaluations. In reframing case study application, the focus is not just the findings, but the process of achieving results.

In the goal of seeing evidence-based decision making becoming the norm across all police agencies, case studies reinforce the value of internal research, the necessity to share it, and

the opportunity to provide a [roadmap](#) that is comprehensible to others.

## Advocating for Continued Internal Staffing Research

We now apply these concepts to how staffing research is planned, shared, and consumed. We recognize that the case study design provides a valuable and accessible avenue for agencies to undertake as they seek to demonstrate data-driven strategies. Further, results of these efforts should be elevated to encourage opportunities for model adaptation. When reviewing findings (whether our own or others), we do so with a discerning eye, noting when inferences are limited, strategies are strong, and the conclusions are compelling for further action. Finally, we partake in all the above because the work must continue.

Staffing research will never become irrelevant. Regardless of the subject's popularity or expressed range of difficulty to maintain staffing levels by agencies, police departments cannot exist without officers. The police officer is the backbone of the agency, without whom our communities would cease to exist as we know them. This undeniable fact elevates the importance of continued work at the local level, regardless of research design, and the support we must provide each other to reveal our own discoveries.

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## About the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory

The [Police Staffing Observatory \(PSO\)](#) is a global collaborative of academics, scholars, practitioners, and students working with Michigan State University to promote evidence-based police workforce research, strategy, and operations. It aims to advance police workforce knowledge and its application through research and its dissemination, including practitioner partnerships.