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THE ADEQUACY OF POLICE FORCES

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Rumors of crime waves, the growing importance of street traffic regulation and the pressing question of police salaries, all combine to make the adequacy or inadequacy of police forces a matter of quite general interest. The so-called crime wave has led to a rather careful scrutiny of the size of the uniformed and detective forces, the street traffic problem requires that large numbers of men be withdrawn from circulating patrol and placed on traffic duty, while necessary increases in policemen's salary scales within the past two or three years have made city councils unwilling to consider further material increases in the police department budgets.

The difficulties arising from this situation have resulted in considerable activity in the compilation of comparative statistics which are designed to prove that the police force of this or that city is numerically inadequate by comparison with other cities falling within the same general population group. Such statistical compilations generally seek to compare the number of patrolmen per square mile of area, the number of patrolmen per ten thousand of population, and the number in relation to the assessed value of real property, the latter being taken as an index of the relative value of personal property within each jurisdiction.

It cannot be said that the compilation of such figures has contributed to any very illuminating or conclusive result. A chief of police who is confronted with figures which indicate that the police force of his own city is more numerous in its relation to these factors than other cities of comparable size is very likely to be able to adduce a dozen reasons—ofttimes good reasons, too—why the particular crime, traffic, and patrol problems which he is called upon to face are of such peculiar nature as to require separate and special treatment when the numerical strength of his police force is at issue. A very brief consideration of some of the elements entering into the police problem will serve to indicate why comparative statistics of this character fail to provide any reliable index of police needs.

In the first place, there is no attempt at measuring the widely divergent crime situations which the "man-on-the-job" is compelled to

¹National Institute of Public Administration, New York Bureau of Municipal Research.

face. There is no consideration of the proportion of certain racial elements which experience has shown to be especially troublesome to the police, to the continuity of employment, or to special geographical and transportation factors which make certain cities natural reservoirs for tramps and criminals. Similarly, no weight is given to the presence or absence of docks, piers, and other waterfront features which serve to complicate the crime problem, to extraordinary risks such as New York's Wall Street, nor to the extent and character of industrial development. Neither should the habits, traditions, and natural law-abiding inclination and disposition of the people of the city be overlooked or ignored.

Washington, D. C., with its 25 per cent of negro population falls into a different category from Milwaukee with less than $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1 per cent of negroes. Newark has 28 per cent foreign-born, and Kansas City 8 per cent. Seattle, the sixth seaport of the United States, presents a problem that is radically different from Minneapolis or Indianapolis. Yet all of these cities lie within the same general population group, and are therefore generally accepted as being comparable for the purposes of police statistics.

Traffic regulation, both as a matter of expeditious movement of vehicles and as a measure of protection for the pedestrian, is receiving more and more attention from police administrators. In many cities it constitutes the most serious problem which the police are called upon to face, in that it has become necessary to transfer large numbers of men from patrol to traffic duty. Where increases in the uniformed force have not been made to compensate for this loss, it is quite clear that additional police personnel is required.

But although the problem of traffic regulation arouses serious concern in nearly all cities, comparative statistics do not differentiate between those communities where extensive drafts have been made on the patrol force for traffic duty, and those in which relatively few have been transferred for this purpose. Specifically, such conditions do not give weight to factors such as the width of city streets, the number and distribution of main thoroughfares, or the amount of through tourist automobile traffic which is routed through cities surrounding great metropolitan centers like Boston and New York.

The matter of street patrol, with which comparative statistics seem to be chiefly concerned, opens up so many questions as to require more extended consideration. At the very outset cognizance must be taken of the fact that the density of population has a very intimate bearing upon the police needs of any community. Los Angeles and Pittsburgh

are of equal size with respect to population, but the former city has an area almost nine times greater. This does not mean of course that the police force of Los Angeles should be nine times as large as that of Pittsburgh, nor even twice the size of the latter. But it does serve to emphasize the importance of intimate first-hand knowledge of local conditions to which formal statistical compilations do not lend themselves.

The topography of the city and the condition of its highways also have their effect upon the ease or difficulty of providing adequate patrol. It is now widely recognized that effective police work depends upon the time required to respond to a complaint to almost the same extent as the delivery of fire department apparatus to the scene of a fire. In both instances the "split-second" figures largely in determining the result. It therefore follows that anything which tends to retard police automobiles and motorcycles in reaching the scene of a crime, such as steep grades and defective pavements, makes necessary the use of additional patrolmen if the area is to be adequately protected. Thus in New Orleans the police authorities are faced with a really serious problem owing to the fact that the condition of most of the streets, particularly in the residential districts, emphatically prohibits fast driving. There it is a simple question of more foot and motor patrol, and the introduction of police sub-stations or patrol booths. But such requirements as these only serve further to limit and condition the value of comparative statistics.

Among other factors which may enter into the question of the adequacy of the force, there may be mentioned the number of patrolmen detailed to other than police duty, such as is commonly made to public offices, libraries, museums, the health department, and the like. There is no uniformity of practice in these matters, the widest variations being found in cities of comparable size. Nevertheless, these regular and special details serve to determine the number of members of the force who are available day after day for general police duty. The same general principle applies to matters such as the geographical disposition of the patrol force, the location of precinct and "beat" lines and of precinct station houses, the personal capacity of the members of the force both individually and collectively, the methods and effectiveness of patrol supervision, and similar imponderable considerations which from their very nature are not susceptible of systematic and statistical presentation.

Finally, cognizance is seldom or never taken of the fact that police departments are operated on both the two and three platoon basis—a

consideration so fundamental as utterly to invalidate any compilations of comparative data that fail to give it weight. While based, in a general way, upon either the two or the three platoon principle, duty schedules are subject to such limitless variation that in actual practice it is found that the average number of working hours for patrolmen in American cities ranges between seven and twelve hours per day.

It should be too clear to require further demonstration that considerations such as the foregoing so profoundly influence police administration that they cannot be ignored in testing the adequacy of police forces. And yet it is quite impossible to grade and evaluate each—to give to each of these elements its due weight and importance in determining the proper size of a given police force in its relation to others.

But, although it would therefore appear impracticable to employ comparative statistics in any very large or general way, the need for standards relating to the numerical strength of police forces remains. There probably never has been an instance of a police force of consequential proportions of which it could confidently be said that no additions to its numbers were necessary, because each increment in the size of the force might reasonably be expected to carry with it some improvement in crime conditions. Police activities are necessarily carried on without the aid of a positive and attainable objective. No one expects a police force to succeed in suppressing crime entirely; if this were so, it would become necessary to make successive additions to the police force and to its material equipment until the anticipated result was realized or until the law of diminishing returns discouraged further increases.

In actual practice, of course, police administrators make their requests for additional personnel and equipment on the ground that certain conditions have arisen which they believe can and should be corrected by a larger force or additional equipment. But it is frequently found that not only the police department, but the fire, health, public works, or other departments also are facing specific problems which call for larger expenditures for extensions and betterments, each being of an equally urgent character to the minds of the several department heads concerned. The solution of this difficulty presents a question which it is not the purpose of this article to discuss, but it must be self-evident that since the fiscal resources of the municipality are limited, the police department may be forced to content itself with but a small part of the increase which it deems absolutely necessary, or may perhaps be denied the increase altogether.

But definite disapproval of projected additions to personnel and equipment should not be allowed to discourage improvements of this nature until the administrative head of the police department has satisfied himself that a more effective and economical disposition of the police force is clearly impossible. Here, at least, he will be aided by the experience of other communities in these matters. He will be able to readjust the distribution of his force in accordance with certain practical standards, the value of which have been proved by experience. In order, however, that the police administrator may be able intelligently to lay out precinct and "beat" lines, locate and relocate precinct stations and patrol booths, and distribute the members of the force generally, it is necessary that he should have an accurate picture of existing crime conditions and extraordinary crime hazards within the city. Every experienced policeman has a good working knowledge of the police problems of certain districts—a few are even able to see these problems both for the entire city (provided it be of moderate size) and in detail; by precincts, patrol posts, and neighborhoods. They are familiar with the social and racial complexion of each area, together with its reputation for order and observance of the law.

It will be conceded, however, that such men as these last are rare, and that in many instances the administrative head of the police department has not enjoyed that intimate contact with police problems which permits their visualization in this manner. By close application the police head may hope to acquire such first-hand knowledge, but his term of office is limited and on the day that he turns over his duties to a successor the usefulness of the knowledge so laboriously gained is destroyed and the learning process must be repeated. Clearly, what is most needed to meet this situation is a "departmental memory" which shall conserve through successive administrations the information collected by each as an aid in effectively distributing the members of the police force.

A system which has proved to be very effective in its practical operation in New York City consists of two simply arranged forms which record the outstanding features of interest to the police for each building and each city block, thereby providing a permanent record with a fact basis upon which the distribution of patrolmen, and their assignment to "circular" and "straightaway" beats or to fixed posts, to mounted, foot or motor patrol, may with confidence be predicated. In short, final determination of the question of adequate numbers of police must of necessity wait upon efforts directed towards improving the direction and disposition of the force. But if such efforts, though par-

tially successful, still do not eliminate all of the local conditions complained of, a strong stand may be taken for an increase of the police force without the necessity of relying upon the fact that another city of comparable size is maintaining a larger department. If, on the other hand, the organization and operation of the police department is found to be faulty, it may be fairly questioned whether any mere increase of its numbers will alone serve any useful purpose.