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**Civilian Staff in Policing: An Assessment of the 2009 Byrne Civilian  
Hiring Program  
Executive Summary**

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POLICE EXECUTIVE  
RESEARCH FORUM

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## ABSTRACT

Civilians have come to play significant roles in law enforcement over the years. As the number of civilians in policing has increased, their roles have expanded as well. Originally occupying clerical positions, civilians now are often found in technical positions, research and planning positions, and administrative positions. In some departments, they even assist in non-hazardous patrol and investigation duties traditionally in the domain of uniformed officers.

During the recession of 2008, many law enforcement agencies were forced to lay off substantial numbers of employees as municipalities struggled to balance budgets with lower tax revenues. Although many law enforcement administrators appreciate the value that civilians bring to policing, they were often the first to be laid off or furloughed as budgets were tightened. The Bureau of Justice Assistance, through its Byrne grant program, provided competitive funds for agencies to retain civilians or hire new civilian staff.

This report presents the results of an NIJ-funded national examination of the Byrne civilian hiring program and the effects of the program on law enforcement agencies and crime rates. It also provides a picture of the state of civilianization in policing and issues associated with the hiring, retention, uses, and performance of civilians. The study combined a variety of research methods, including a national survey of the use of civilians in policing, interviews with agencies that hired or retained civilians through the Byrne program, an analysis of crime rates among Byrne grantees and matched control agencies, and case studies of innovative uses of Byrne funding.

The results underscored the range of positions that civilians now hold and the positive contributions they make to police agencies. Civilians are now not only in clerical and support roles, but also in key skilled positions in I.T., crime analysis, intelligence, human resources, and media relations. Resentment of civilians that has been observed in earlier reports was not a major issue among respondents in our study.

We found that Byrne grant recipients made good use of the positions made possible by the program, in many cases adding significant new analytic and intelligence capabilities to their departments. Byrne grant recipients believed that civilians hired through the program increased their agencies' effectiveness by freeing sworn staff for patrol and investigation duties, by enhancing crime analysis and intelligence capabilities, and by reducing costs. In most instances, the short-term grants led to permanent positions within the law enforcement agencies. During a period of recession and retrenchment, the Byrne civilian hiring program helped make it possible for some agencies not only to retain key civilian staff, but also to add civilian staff in a way that enhanced the capacity of their departments.

## INTRODUCTION

As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, a law designed to help bring the United States out of the severe recession of 2008, the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Edward Byrne Memorial Competitive Grant Program (hereafter, the Byrne program) attempted to bolster state and local criminal justice agencies in ways that would reduce crime while supporting economic growth and the creation and retention of jobs. One way that the Byrne program promoted these goals was by funding law enforcement agencies to hire civilians for functions such as crime analysis and forensics work, planning and research, and communications. Civilianization has the potential to make agencies more effective by enabling them to put more officers on the street, by diversifying the agencies' workforce skills, and by increasing agencies' efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The Byrne program supported the continuing trend of civilianization in law enforcement agencies, by which civilians have grown from 7.5 percent of law enforcement personnel in the 1950s to about 30 percent today (Kostalec, 2006).

The balance between sworn officers and civilian police employees is a complex issue, especially during an economic downturn. On one hand, police agencies facing budgetary problems are inclined to cut civilian positions before sworn ones. A series of PERF surveys following the economic crisis of 2008 found extremely strong support among police executives for the view that sworn officer positions should be the last thing cut in the budget. On the other hand, police leaders caution against laying off civilians who do essential work, because the result will be that sworn officers will be taken off the streets and assigned the tasks previously done by civilians, usually at a higher cost. In terms of achieving an economic stimulus during a recession,

hiring and training of civilians usually can occur more quickly and at lower cost than hiring sworn officers, thus producing more jobs and more rapid economic benefits.

To date, there has been little assessment of how civilianization affects the effectiveness of police agencies. The outcomes of the Byrne civilian hiring program, while potentially promising, require study.

This report presents a national examination of the Byrne civilian hiring program and the impacts of those hires on law enforcement agencies and their communities. It also provides new data on issues associated with the hiring, retention, uses, and performance of civilians in policing. The study, funded by NIJ, encompasses several objectives. First, it attempts to provide a descriptive assessment of civilian hiring under the Byrne program. How many civilians were hired, and in what capacities? Did they fill in positions previously held by sworn staff, or were Byrne grant funds used to support entirely newly-created positions, such as crime analysis or intelligence gathering and dissemination? How much time was needed to hire civilians under the program, and how much training was required for the new hires?

Second, the study attempts to determine how these civilian hires fit into the law enforcement cultures. Were they accepted by sworn staff? Did they perform well in their positions? Were they satisfied in their positions, or was turnover a major issue?

Finally, the study attempts to assess the effects of the civilian hires on community outcomes, in particular crime rates. Is there evidence of reduced crime in places where agencies received Byrne civilian hiring grants relative to similar agencies that were not grant recipients?

## **METHODS**

The study used several quantitative and qualitative methods. We assembled a project advisory panel of practitioners and researchers, who provided guidance on the overall study

design. With input from the panel, we designed and implemented a survey on civilian hiring that we administered to a nationally-representative sample of 537 law enforcement agencies. The national survey provided a comprehensive picture of the state of civilian employees in law enforcement agencies. The survey assessed how the 2008 recession affected budgets, layoffs of both sworn and civilian staff, and hiring during the period 2008-2012. The survey also asked about the civilian hiring process – how positions were advertised, whether recruitment was difficult, and whether departments had increased (or decreased) their qualification requirements for civilian hires. Other topics covered by the survey included the roles that civilians filled, the value that they provided to the organization, and how civilians fit into the law enforcement culture.

Next, we conducted telephone interviews with representatives of 32 law enforcement agencies receiving Byrne awards for civilians. These interviews were designed to elicit the experience of respondents with the civilians hired through the Byrne program. The interviews covered information on how civilians hired under the program were used, the processes that used to hire and train civilians, how the civilians contributed to the agency, and any challenges generated by the hiring of civilians. To determine how the Byrne civilian hiring grants may have affected community outcomes, we conducted an analysis of UCR crime trends in the communities receiving Byrne grants and crime trends in a matched comparison sample of similar agencies drawn from respondents to the national survey.

Finally, we conducted site visits to four agencies that made extensive and successful use of civilians. The site visits included interviews of civilians hired through the Byrne program, their supervisors, and others in their chain of command, as well as analysis of agency records, to identify effects of the program. Our analysis provides an in-depth description of how civilians

were used and metrics that define the value they added to their departments (where available) based on the four case studies in Florida, California, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

## **FINDINGS**

The multiple methods used in the study yielded a comprehensive picture of civilianization at a critical time immediately following a steep recession. It documented the state of civilianization and how agencies used Byrne grant funds to leverage hiring and retention of civilians, often in innovative ways that added significant value to departments.

The national survey found that the median budget of responding agencies declined 13 percent from 2008 to 2012, from \$3,994,151 to \$3,476,046. During the study period, some agencies struggled to retain both civilian and sworn staff. Eighteen percent of agencies laid off or furloughed civilian personnel between 2009 and 2012, and 22 percent thinned their ranks of civilian personnel through attrition. Twenty-four percent reported delaying the hiring of civilian personnel. A similar number of agencies (21 percent) laid off sworn officers between 2009 and 2012, and 32 percent of agencies reduced sworn personnel through attrition. Nearly half of agencies reported delayed the hiring of sworn officers. These findings are consistent with UCR data that indicate a 10 percent reduction in the numbers of civilians employed by law enforcement agencies during the same five year period between 2008 and 2012.

The national survey results indicate that it was not difficult to find qualified civilians to fill vacancies during the recession and subsequent slow economy. Fewer than one in ten respondents reported having difficulty filling civilian positions. Newspaper ads, posting positions on the agency website, and inter-agency recruitment were the most common modes of locating qualified candidates. Not surprisingly, the most commonly used recruitment methods

were perceived as more effective than the less frequently-used methods of radio and TV advertisements, social media, or job fairs.

The survey also found that civilians were most often used in administrative and support positions such as dispatch, communications, data entry, and other clerical work. But civilians also played a major role in technical areas: **Use of civilians in I.T. and computer programming was common, and civilian use increased during the study period in crime analysis, mapping, and intelligence; in planning and research, and in community and media relations. Civilian crime analysts were said to have strong skill sets due to their specialized background and education. In a majority of agencies, civilians had decision-making authority in budgeting, new program development, hiring of staff, and managing agency communications.**

Filling positions with civilians was typically a positive experience for responding agencies. Six in ten felt that civilian staff increased productivity and efficiency “to a great extent.” Some agencies mentioned that problems sometimes accompanied the hiring of civilians, most commonly low job satisfaction and retention challenges, but these issues were reported by just one in three agencies. In both the national survey and the interviews with Byrne grantees, just one respondent in four said that civilians met with resistance from sworn staff or that sworn staff objected to being supervised by civilians.

The phone interviews with Byrne grant recipients also indicated that civilians hired as a result of the federal program provided significant value to their agencies. One in four recipients used grant funds to retain civilian positions, while three in four used the funds to hire employees for new positions. The most common method of job advertisement, and the most successful, was use of government job websites. Four in ten Byrne grant recipients had few difficulties finding



civilian staff members. Only three in ten reported difficulties filling positions; about the same as the number indicated among the national survey respondents.

Civilians hired through the Byrne program did not, for the most part, perform clerical or administrative tasks, as was generally found in the national survey regarding existing civilian staff members. **Rather, the most common roles of new hires were crime analysts and police service officers handling investigations and other work typically performed by uniformed staff. Six in ten grant recipients said that the civilian positions had freed up time of uniformed officers to engage in more time on the street, and grantees were equally as convinced that the civilians hired had increased case clearance rates or increased information on crime trends and criminal intelligence.** These findings were echoed in the case studies: In all four agencies examined, civilians hired under the Byrne program increased agency productivity through creating new partnerships between analysts and investigators and/or freeing up time of uniformed staff to spend more time in investigations or patrol functions. In one case, a civilian position led to a substantial reduction in police overtime costs as well as freeing more officers for duty on the streets.

Phone interview respondents reported few challenges stemming from hiring of civilians with Byrne funds. Fewer than one in five reported problems with resistance from sworn staff, lack of productivity, low job satisfaction, or difficulty adapting to the law enforcement culture. Somewhat higher proportions (three in ten) reported problems with retention and turnover of civilian staff. This is a higher number than reflected in the national survey, and may result from the fact that Byrne grant recipients hired groups of civilians at the same time. **Many of the civilians who left grant-funded positions went on to other positions in their agency or were**

**hired by another law enforcement agency, so the investment made in their training was not lost.**

**Significantly, the phone interviews disclosed that 81 percent of the grant-funded positions had been maintained by the agencies even after the grant period had expired – in many cases, more than a year ago. Thus, the federal investment in most cases led to long-term enhancements to the grant recipients.** This was evidenced in the case studies as well. Indeed, even in Polk County, where the sheriff could not find funding to retain the 23 civilian positions, he recognized the value added to the department and created a program to train volunteers to perform functions similar to those performed by the Byrne civilians.

In order to assess the effects of civilian hires on policing outcomes, we compared the crime rates of Byrne grantees to non-Byrne grantees. Although many factors can affect crime rates, one of the main purposes of the Byrne Grant was to allow states, tribes, and local governments to prevent and control crime. Although crime declined for both Byrne and non-Byrne agencies, the analysis did not reveal any greater decline in sites receiving Byrne civilian hiring grants. However, our research did produce anecdotal evidence about ways in which the Byrne grants improved police operations in ways that may have contributed to crime reductions. More than half of the agencies that participated in the phone interviews or the case studies believed that civilian hiring was responsible for significant increases in criminal intelligence available for investigations work and in crime analysis capabilities. A similar number reported decreases in evidence backlogs as a result of civilian hires. Just under half of the Byrne grantees reported increases in case clearance rates.

The four case studies were consistent with the findings from the phone interviews. The positions added with grant funds either added new capabilities to agencies (the intelligence

analysis units created in Baltimore and California) or freed up significant time for uniformed officers (East Stroudsburg, PA and Polk County, FL). The work performed by the civilians was highly valued by their agencies according to officials interviewed. Even in Polk County where the sheriff's office was unable to retain the grant-funded positions, volunteers were being found to fill the roles vacated by Byrne-hired staff.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the study found that civilians are playing an increasing role in police operations. While some agencies reduced civilian staff during the recession, others hired civilians to supplement thinned ranks of uniformed staff and to enhance departmental effectiveness through crime analysis. The tasks of civilian employees have extended beyond clerical roles to technical positions and even to some tasks previously in the domain of uniformed patrol staff. Civilians in many agencies are in top management positions in personnel, budgeting, and communications.

We found little evidence of resentment of civilians by uniformed officers. The resistance of sworn staff observed in earlier times seems to have largely evaporated as uniformed officers become accustomed to having civilians in the work place. Indeed, with the increasing reliance on technology, crime analysis, and development of intelligence tools, highly trained civilians have de facto become a necessity in modern law enforcement agencies.

Our evaluation of the Byrne civilian hiring program found that grant recipients made good use of the positions made possible by the program. In many cases, grantees added significant new analytic and intelligence capabilities to their departments with Byrne funds. Interviews with grant recipients and law enforcement administrators on site visits strongly indicated that respondents perceived that their agencies benefitted from the civilians hired with

grant funds: They believed that the civilians freed up the time of uniformed staff to spend more time on investigations and patrol; that the activities of the civilians helped to solve and prevent crimes; and that the work of civilians resulted in significant cost savings to their departments.

In most instances, the hires made possible by Byrne grants led to permanent employment of the civilians hired and long-term retention of the positions created with grant funds. When turnover did occur, the civilians often went into other positions in the department or similar positions in neighboring law enforcement agencies. During a period of recession and retrenchment followed by sluggish economic growth, the Byrne civilian hiring program helped make it possible for some agencies not only to retain key civilian staff, but also to add civilian staff in a way that enhanced the capacity of their departments.