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**Document Title:** A Multi-Site Assessment of Police Consolidation: Final Summary Overview

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**Document Number:** 252503

**Date Received:** January 2019

**Award Number:** 2013-IJ-CX-0019

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# A Multi-Site Assessment of Police Consolidation

## Final Summary Overview

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This project was supported by Award No. 2013-IJ-CX-0019, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

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January 2018

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## Final Summary Overview

The United States is unique for its number of police agencies: nearly 18,000, including more than 12,000 local law enforcement agencies and more than 3,000 county sheriff's offices. Given this high number of agencies, scholars and policymakers have suggested for nearly a century that consolidation of agencies could yield efficiencies in the delivery of law enforcement services, as well as help to reduce corruption, improve services, and reduce crime. Consolidation has become increasingly common in some places (e.g., Los Angeles County, California, since the 1950s) and times (e.g., following the "Great Recession" of 2008 and early 2009).

Yet there has been little systematic evidence on consolidation and its effects. Research on police consolidation has been scant, outdated, and limited to few settings. Much of it has been done by consultants seeking to bolster the case for municipalities seeking to undertake consolidation. The limited rigorous research on the topic has yielded mixed findings.

To develop practical resources for policymakers and practitioners, we used a multi-method approach to examine the implementation and effectiveness of three models of police consolidation: merger of agencies, regionalization under which two or more agencies join to provide services in a broader area, and contracting by municipalities with other organizations for police services. Specifically, we conducted field visits, surveys of residents and police officers, and analysis of crime data in four communities that had consolidated their police services. These were

- Compton, California, a city of 95,000 residents, which since 2001 had contracted with the Los Angeles County Sheriff for police services
- Lakes Area, Minnesota, a police jurisdiction with 9,000 residents, formed by the 2004 merger of the police departments in the neighboring cities of Chisago and Lindström

- Pontiac, Michigan, a city of 60,000 residents, which since 2011 has contracted with the Oakland County Sheriff for police services
- York Area, Pennsylvania, a police jurisdiction of 60,000 residents, initially formed by the 2000 regionalization of police services in Windsor and York Townships, and which provides contract police services to several neighboring boroughs.

We selected these communities because of their variety in size, model of consolidation, region of the country, and rates of crime, because their chiefs promised (and provided) support for the project, and because their consolidations were recent enough that institutional knowledge about the process and administrative data prior to the consolidation still existed and yet the consolidation was old enough that adequate post-consolidation data exist.

To date, we have drafted four articles for academic journals based on this research. These include one article on the effects of consolidation on community crime, one article on attitudes of residents toward consolidation, and two articles on attitudes of police personnel toward consolidation. We review each of these below.

## Effects of Consolidation on Levels and Clearances of Crime

Much of the limited previous research on consolidation has focused on fiduciary benefits. Less research has assessed whether changes in police services affected the number of crimes observed or solved. There has been some cross-sectional research that contract cities have higher clearance rates, lower crime, and lower financial expenditures than non-contracting cities providing local police services. Yet there have been very few opportunities to test whether these changes are a consequence of selection or sequencing. That is, it has not been clear whether any increase in crime clearance rates and decreases in crime and policing costs after contracting has occurred because contract cities tend to be

more affluent communities with generally lower levels of crime, or because a change in police services helped communities subsequently address crime more effectively and efficiently.

Compton, California, provided a unique setting for testing the effects of contracting. In contrast to many contracting cities, Compton in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was an economically depressed community with surging rates of violent crime, much of it from gang activity. In addition to having crime rates higher than those of communities of comparable size, it had crime clearance rates about half as high. No prior study had examined the impact of contracting on a disadvantaged community with high crime.

Upon contracting with the Los Angeles County Sheriff for police services, Compton also gained several resources its own municipal police department had not provided. These included crime lab and fingerprint processing services; provision of computerized information directly to patrol officers on prior calls for service, wanted suspects, crime mapping and analysis, and incident reports; and community policing services. Prior to contracting, Compton spent \$18.3 million for a department with 130 full-time sworn officers. In the first year of contracting, it spent \$12.0 million for 170 sworn officers. Upon entering a contract with Compton, the Los Angeles County Sheriff also improved police headquarters in the city, removed cars in unacceptable conditions, and invested in computers and communication equipment as well as weapons and ammunition.

To test changes in clearance rates before and after contracting, we used an independent-samples differences-in-means test. To assess changes in criminal offenses while minimizing selection differences in comparison settings, we used group-based trajectory analysis combined with difference-in-difference regression estimation. Our data sources included annual Part I offenses (murders, assaults, robberies, rapes, burglaries, motor vehicle thefts, and larcenies) culled from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) from 1985 to 2012 for cities with populations greater than 75,000 in 2000, annual full-time law-enforcement employment data for Compton and comparison cities, and city-level structural covariates from the 2000 census of the United States.

Altogether, we found that, after contracting, Compton saw improved police performance as measured by crime clearance rates, a unique reduction in property crime, and maintenance of cost savings realized from the initial contracting. Violent crime rates did not shift in any discernible or statistically significant manner relative to comparison communities, but property crime rates, particularly for burglaries, did. Specifically, burglary rates decreased 39 percent after contracting in Compton relative to comparable cities. Clearance rates increased by statistically significant amounts for all Part I offenses except homicide. And expenditures for police services remained 25 to 34 percent lower than they had been before contracting.

Our results support other research on how organizational and strategic policing approaches can help reduce property crime. Burglary offenders are aware of environmental cues and will target their crimes accordingly. Changes in offender perception of risk as related to improved burglary clearance rates could have made Compton a less-attractive target for burglaries, as might have better investigations and more resulting arrests. Better investigations and more resources in turn might have been a result of improved resources and greater emphases on local problem solving and interagency partnerships facilitated by contracting.

Improvements in clearance rates may have resulted from changes in reporting criteria, more realistic reflections of crimes cleared resulting from improvements in database development and management systems, or actual increases in crimes cleared. We found crimes were consistently classified between agencies. Los Angeles County Sheriff's data analysts, however, suggested data accuracy improved after contracting, which could have led to more accurate clearance data and improved investigations.

Altogether, our findings suggest that contracting for police services can maintain or reduce levels of crime at a reduced cost and possibly generate crime control benefits through enhanced services that contracting agencies may offer and local jurisdictions may lack. Further studies examining

other geographic settings as well as different social and political contexts can provide additional evidence on the specific mechanisms by which contracting may reduce crime.

## Resident Perceptions of Consolidation

The public generally has positive attitudes toward the police, but such support is not consistent across all neighborhoods and demographic groups. Whites, for example, are generally more supportive of the police than Blacks and Hispanics are. Persons of higher income tend to support the police more, though the effects of income may interact with those of race. Research on age and support for the police has shown mixed effects, while most previous research also shows gender and education to have no or inconclusive effects on support for the police.

Resident contact with the police may also affect support for the police. Previous research indicates increasing number of contacts with the police, particularly involuntary contacts, adversely affects support for the police. Crime prevention activities and fear of crime may also affect support for the police.

Although police consolidation has been implemented in many cities, there is no research that examines how support for the police varies by model of consolidation. We surveyed residents of the four communities in our study to determine whether support for the police might vary by model of consolidation, and what influences their support for the police. Across all four communities, we completed 853 resident surveys, with response rates by community varying from 16.5 to 25.2 percent. We measured police effectiveness by how respondents rated the police in controlling crime, their satisfaction with the level of police presence, and their ratings of the police in providing services the neighborhood wants, in solving local problems, and in preventing crime. We measured confidence in the police by respondents' trust in police and how likely they were to agree that the police are friendly and deal fairly with the people.

Overall, we found residents in Lakes Area, the community with merged services, were most likely to rate police effectiveness highly and to express confidence in the police. Residents in Compton and Pontiac, the communities with contract services, were least likely to do so.

Controlling for demographic variables and police contact across all four communities, we found older residents and those who completed more than a high school education were more likely to have confidence in the police. Blacks and Hispanics were less likely to have confidence in the police, as were residents concerned about slow response times.

Within the contract communities, middle-income respondents (i.e., those with household income between \$50,000 and \$75,000) were more likely than others to view the police as effective, as were residents who think contracting saves money or that it keeps the community safe. Residents who think the police respond slowly were less likely to think contracting was effective. Similarly, residents who think the police are slow to respond expressed less confidence in the police, while those who think contracting makes the community safe had more confidence.

Within the merger communities, residents with more than a high school education and who thought the merged agency kept the community safe thought the police were effective. Homeowners and those concerned about response times were less likely to think the police were effective. Residents concerned about response time were also less likely to have confidence in the police.

Within the regional community, homeowners were more likely to view the police as effective, as were those who had called the police or received a ticket. Blacks and Hispanics were less likely to think the police were effective, as were respondents who had been the victim of a crime. Homeowners were also more likely to express confidence in the police, as were males. Blacks, Hispanics, residents of other races, crime victims, and those who thought the police respond slowly had less confidence in the police.

Our findings across all four communities support some earlier research findings. Blacks and Hispanics, for example, have less confidence in the police as do crime victims. Response time also



influences views on the police, even if having little effect on crime rates. At the same time, some results varied by community. Race, for example, did not influence views of the police in the contracting or merger communities. Homeownership positively affected views of the police in some communities but negatively affected them in others. Crime victimization, education, income, and age also varied in their effects by community. Variables such as police response time and whether the local policing model saved money also varied in their effects by community.

One explanation for our findings may be that residents simply do not understand how they are policed, especially in larger communities. The regional agency in our study covers nearly 60 square miles—or at least three times the area covered by other agencies in our study. General views on the police (rather than views on specific issues such as individual contact or response time) had no effect on views of police effectiveness or confidence in the police in the regional community. The number of communities served by the regional agency may also mute how general views of the police affect views on police effectiveness and responsiveness.

Our analysis shows strong opinions about the police, but there is limited understanding of how residents form such opinions. Future research should consider how residents gain their knowledge of the police, and how this influences their confidence in the police and views of police effectiveness.

## Staff Perceptions of Consolidation

Officer support of consolidation may affect how well consolidation is implemented. Yet prior to this research, there were only two previous works on the relationship between support for consolidation and views of officers on how consolidation affects their work, professionalism, and crime. Both these studies were of single mergers, and neither considered how consolidation affected views of officers in other forms of consolidation.

We surveyed officers in each of the four agencies in our study for their views on employment conditions, organizational capacity, and delivery of services. We assessed both how officers viewed the effectiveness of consolidation, and how they viewed its effects on their work. Our survey included 139 officers across all four agencies, with a response rate of 44 percent, and with response rates by individual agency varying from 27 to 92 percent.

In our first paper on officers' views, we found support for consolidation is quite strong. Among every group of officers defined by age, education, sex, years in law enforcement and with agency, position with agency, whether with agency at time of initial consolidation, and model of consolidation used in their community, large majorities support consolidation, with sizeable proportions saying they strongly support it.

Most officers also agreed that their "agency has a clearly defined set of expectations for officers," with even officers who oppose consolidation more likely to agree than disagree with this statement. Officers across all levels of support of consolidation claim to have seen some improvement in employment conditions, particularly in job security. Officers most strongly supporting consolidation also reported increases in job satisfaction and performance as well as officer morale, while those opposing it saw decreases in these.

Officers across all levels of support for consolidation agree they have sufficient technology, but those not supporting it claim their agency has insufficient personnel. By contrast, officers who strongly support consolidation report staffing levels, professionalism, investigative capacity, intelligence capacity, and staff recruitment have improved since consolidation.

Officers generally agree that consolidation "is more effective and saves money," with officers who most strongly support consolidation most likely to believe it saves money. Officers who support consolidation are likely to report seeing little to no change in the local police mission, while those who oppose it claim the local police mission has changed. Officers across all levels of support for

consolidation generally agree on its managerial benefits, while those strongly supporting it are most likely to agree that consolidation reduces costs and improves service delivery, coordination, and standardization. Officers who support consolidation are also more likely to report crime and disorder has decreased, while those opposing it say crime and disorder has remained the same or increased.

In our second paper on officer views on consolidation, we found many opinions varied by type of consolidation. Relative to officers from merged and contract agencies, officers from the hybrid agency using both regionalization and contracting were more likely to report that employment conditions such as job security and workload and organizational characteristics such as staffing levels and response time had worsened since consolidation. Officers from the contracting agencies were less likely to view contracting as cost effective, but more likely to say that crime and workload had decreased since consolidation while job security had increased.

Though the low number of respondents limits the implications of this study, it does provide new insights for municipalities that are considering the consolidation of police services. In particular, it shows that generating support of officers, integral to the process of implementing consolidation, is possible. It also shows that reasons for officer support, or, in a few instances, opposition to consolidation will differ by community. Future work can further advance understanding of officer support through additional comparative research of police views, including views of officers serving under still other models. Combined with empirical evidence on support for consolidation by residents as well as on other law enforcement outcomes, the findings from this work can contribute to a more comprehensive picture of police consolidation.

## Conclusion: The New State of Research on Police Consolidation

Prior to this work, research on police consolidation had been scant, outdated, and limited to few settings, with even less of it being rigorously executed. Our work has not only updated and added rigor

to the field, it has systematically compared how consolidation can vary by type of model—contracting, merger, or regionalization—employed. Though limited to just four communities, it provided insights on communities varying by size, region, socioeconomic characteristics, and levels of crime.

The project has demonstrated that consolidation can help reduce levels of crime and do so at a reduced cost. It can also gain the support of residents and officers, a key lesson for municipalities considering it, given the controversy that may often surround it. Resident perceptions of the police under consolidation varied in some predictable ways but in others that were less so. Officers were, not surprisingly, more likely to support consolidation if they perceived it as improving their community, their organization, or their working conditions. Communities considering consolidation may wish to consider which particular model is most likely to satisfy the needs of their residents and officers, and how it can be made to do so.

The research does have the limitations of any small-scale study. Nevertheless, the rigor it has brought to the field and the variation in communities and models of consolidation it has examined have brought long-overdue insights to this issue. Such insights should be invaluable to communities considering consolidation either for the savings or greater capabilities and resources it offers. They should also serve as a valuable baseline for those wishing to study other variations of consolidation in more communities.