MEDIA & PUBLIC EDUCATION

THE STAFFING STORY BEHIND OFFICER FATIGUE

A stand-alone briefing for reporters, editorial boards and community leaders.

Why this is an officer-wellness issue. When departments cannot fill patrol positions, existing officers may shoulder more calls, overtime and unpredictable schedules. That can leave less time for recovery and proactive community work. Staffing levels differ by agency, so national findings should prompt questions about local conditions.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

64,200 — **SWORN VACANCIES**

The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated this many vacant full-time sworn positions at state and local agencies in 2020 (report released March 2026).

1.4% — **STAFFING GAIN**

Agencies in the Police Executive Research Forum survey gained 1.4% sworn staffing during 2025, but remained below early-2020 staffing.

91% — **HIGHER ODDS**

Officers working four or more 11+ hour shifts weekly had 91% higher adjusted odds of emotional exhaustion than those working none.

37% — **HIGHER ODDS**

Officers reporting mandatory overtime had 37% higher adjusted odds of emotional exhaustion in the same 2019 study of 3,140 officers.

Read the numbers correctly: The vacancy count describes 2020, the staffing gain describes survey respondents, and the burnout figures are associations from an observational study—not proof that scheduling caused exhaustion.

HOW TO MAKE THIS A LOCAL STORY

- Ask for the staffing gap. How many authorized positions, funded positions and filled patrol positions does the department have? How have these changed over two years?
- Ask about the hours. How often are officers required to work overtime, cover extended shifts or return after limited rest? Request aggregate, not individual, records.
- Examine public outcomes. Compare patrol coverage, response times, injuries and turnover over time. Ask officials what other factors might explain changes.
- Give the research proper context. Describe burnout findings as statistical associations, and do not present 2020 vacancies as current openings.

Suggested quote: “A discussion of police staffing should include how often officers work, how much rest they get and whether the public receives reliable coverage.”

Sources: BJS, Hiring and Retention of State and Local Law Enforcement Officers, 2020 (Mar. 2026); PERF staffing survey (May 23, 2026); Peterson et al., BMJ Open 9:e030302 (2019).