

PERFORMANCE AUDIT IN BRIEF

Police rostering NSW Police Force



THE AUDIT OFFICE
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

About the audit

The NSW Police Force adopted flexible rosters in 1995. Flexible rosters using a variety of shift patterns were meant to match officer numbers to workload and to improve the working conditions of police.

In this audit we wanted to find out whether the current rosters support efficient and effective policing.

Specifically we examined:

- whether rosters provide for the flexible deployment of staff
- whether rosters meet the needs of the community and victims of crime
- what impact rosters have had on officers and the NSW Police Force.

The audit focuses on general duties police. That is, police who wear uniforms, work out of local police stations and represent the largest group of officers that routinely work around the clock.

Audit opinion

Today, few elements of the 1995 flexible roster model are in practice in the NSW Police Force. Current rosters are neither consistent with the flexible roster model nor represent best practice. As a consequence, both the community and police are missing out on some of the benefits that the Force saw this model providing.

Instead, general duties police work predominantly 12-hour shifts. These shifts have common starting times and finish times. And in most commands, the majority of these shifts are worked in blocks of four, followed by at least four days off.

Some commands deploy more officers on busier nights, but generally a similar number of officers are rostered on duty regardless of demand. Although a number of factors affect performance, the rigid work

pattern increases the risk the Force may be unable to attend calls quickly, provide good customer service and protect the well being of its officers.

Overall, the Force is not meeting its target for responding to urgent calls for assistance. Today, one in four complaints is about customer service. Victims of crime report issues including difficulties in contacting an officer and frustration at having to wait for an officer to return to duty to find out about their case. The timeliness of investigations is also at risk when follow-up is delayed. Seventy per cent of commanders surveyed indicated that rosters did not support continuity of investigations or victims' needs.

We are also concerned that the current roster pattern may not be in the best interest of the health and safety of officers. Sick and injury leave is higher in NSW than other states and the Force is yet to assess the extent to which rosters may contribute to this.

The problem is not entirely the use of 12-hour shifts. Twelve-hour shifts are not inherently bad. Rather, it is the practice of block rostering that seems to be the main problem.

The NSW Police Force and the Police Association of NSW are both publicly committed to the flexible roster model. According to the Association, flexible rosters can provide greater coverage during periods of peak demand resulting in better services to citizens. As this is the case, the Force should implement flexible rosters as envisaged in 1995.

The Force also needs to do more to protect its general duties officers from fatigue in line with contemporary practice for managing shiftwork.

Key findings

What are flexible rosters and do police use them?

A flexible roster is one that varies shifts patterns and lengths to optimise policing, efficient resource use and the welfare, health and safety of officers.



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We found some commands vary the start time and length of some shifts, but there is much inflexibility. Most shifts are 12 hours long, start around the same time and deploy a similar number of officers day and night.

Are rosters good for the community and victims of crime?

Effective rosters should help officers respond rapidly to calls, manage cases and support victims. The rosters used by NSWPF do not always do this.

The number of urgent calls for assistance has increased by 33 per cent over the last four years to more than 110,000 calls. In 2006-07, police attended 80 per cent of these calls within 12 minutes 25 seconds, failing to meet its target response time of 80 per cent within 10 minutes.

Many variables affect response times. Rosters are one of these variables yet commands do not review response time to identify if the roster contributes to delays.

The current block roster gives officers only two day-time shifts every eight days. These day shifts are the most effective time for following up victims, witnesses, and other police who work standard (non-shift) hours. The limited opportunity for follow-up under the current roster may affect the timeliness of investigation and victim support.

Of the commanders we surveyed 70 per cent said current rosters did not support the continuity of investigation and victim support.

Are rosters good for officers and the NSWPF?

A good roster meets the operational needs of the business, minimises the risks of shiftwork to staff and allows employees to balance their work and private lives.

The 12-hour block roster is popular with general duties police. It provides more time off and by concentrating working hours allows officers to have longer breaks from work.

Research indicates that rosters can negatively affect employee health and welfare and there are specific risks associated with shift work that need to be managed.

NSWPF officers take more sick and injury leave than officers in forces that have different roster arrangements. The NSWPF is currently analysing how its rosters affect officer welfare.

The NSWPF does not have a fatigue management policy, but it has parameters that limit the number of 12-hour shifts worked to three shifts in a week. These parameters are not adhered to. Officers typically work four 12-hour shifts in four days and we found some officers working six 12-hour shifts in seven days.

The long rest periods between shifts makes it easier for officers to have a second job. If this happens, then the opportunity for rest may be lost. One in ten police officers has approval to work a second job but others may work without approval on their rest days.

The NSWPF does not provide guidance to commands assessing requests for secondary employment in terms of fatigue management. There is no limit on the maximum hours that can be worked.

Summary of recommendations

The NSWPF is currently reviewing the impact of rosters on officer health and welfare and is developing a fatigue management policy.

The NSWPF should:

- ensure rosters balance the needs of the community, victims of crime, the Force and officers
- help commands introduce a variety of shift patterns, start times and lengths to meet the objectives of flexible rostering
- better manage officer fatigue.