

JSO Staffing

One of our members has recommended increasing the number of JSO officers by 369. The reason given for the recommendation is that this is the number needed to bring Jacksonville up to the average of 2.36 officers per 1,000 residents reported for all Florida cities.

The purpose for the paper is to show why using the average number of officers per 1,000 residents for all Florida cities is not an appropriate standard for determining whether more or less law enforcement employees are needed.

“Average” has a number of meanings, some informal and others not so formal. In everyday usage, it means “typical” or “representative” or even “usual.” The formal definition is: “Average = Sum of Values/Number of Values.”

It is the latter definition upon which the recommendation is based. The supporting argument takes one “Value” (Jacksonville), compares it with the “Average” for all of Florida and concludes that because the Jacksonville “value” is less than the Florida “average” more officers should be hired to bring Jacksonville up to the average.

What are the implications of this argument? The most obvious is that if the average is the standard, then every Florida city that is lower than average should hire more officers and, by the same standard, every one that is above average should make force reductions to reach the “standard.”

The FBI maintains a comprehensive database called "Crime in the U.S." with information about law enforcement by region, state, county and city. This includes statistics on populations, the number and types of crimes, and the number of law enforcement employees. Information about the latter is in a database sub-set named "police employment data."

The FBI data base for 2019 covers 223 cities in Florida. Of these, 99, including Jacksonville, are below "average" and 124 are above "average". Compliance with the "average standard" would, on its face, cause massive hirings and layoffs among Florida cities.

It is clear that deviation from the all-city average is not an appropriate measure of whether individual cities have fewer or more law enforcement employees than they need.

The average is by no means useless. When an average for a given city deviates significantly from the all-city average, it is a sign that there may be a problem. The cause for the deviation needs to be investigated and then action can be taken if a real problem is found.

The 2019 FBI database shows that the number of law enforcement employees per 1,000 residents in Florida cities varies all the way from 1.14 to 4.01. What are the possible reasons for great a range?

The most obvious answer is that there are genuine economies of scale in city operation—the large cities generally operate with lower unit costs than small ones. This is borne out by the FBI statistics.

The FBI statistics cover 20 Florida cities with populations of 100,000 or more and 203 with smaller populations. The averages per 1,000 residents for the larger cities is 2.62 law enforcement employees and 1.94 sworn officers. Comparative statistics for the smaller cities are 4.14 and 2.32. Expressed as differences in percentages, small cities have 58% more law enforcement employees per thousand residents and 20% more sworn officers.

Economies of scale are obviously in operation here. It is likewise obvious that Jacksonville belongs in the large city group, rather than a combined group that includes far more small cities than large ones.

Jacksonville ranks high among Florida big cities. It is third in the number of total law enforcement employees per thousand residents. It has a substantial lead in the number of civilian employees per thousand and it is in the middle (eleventh) of officers per thousand.¹

The FBI database has both national and regional summary tables by city population. Overall, the national average for cities with 250,000 or more residents is 3.4 law enforcement employees per 1,000 residents. It is the same for comparable cities in the South Atlantic region. Jacksonville at 3.5 is higher.

Nothing in the foregoing data suggests that additional law enforcement employees are needed in Jacksonville.

¹ What is also apparent is that Jacksonville uses civilians to do work that officers perform in smaller cities—another example of economies of scale.