

# POLICE CONSOLIDATION

# Engaging the News Media



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# About the Program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services

Although consolidating and sharing public safety services has received much attention in recent years, such efforts are not new. Moreover, despite the many communities that have in one way or another consolidated or shared these services, the process of doing so has not become any easier. In fact, to say that changing the structural delivery of public safety services is difficult or challenging is an understatement. At the core of contemplating these transitions, regardless of the form, is the need for open, honest, and constructive dialog among all stakeholders. Key to this dialog is evidence derived from independent research, analysis, and evaluation.

To help provide such independent information, the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice, with the assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), established the **Program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services (PCASS)** to help consolidating police agencies, and those considering consolidating, increase efficiency, enhance quality of

service, and bolster community policing. Together, they also developed resources, such as publications, videos, and the PCASS website, to assist communities exploring options for delivering public safety services. These resources do not advocate any particular form of service delivery but rather provide information to help communities determine for themselves what best meets their needs, circumstances, and desires.

PCASS provides a wealth of information and research on structural alternatives for the delivery of police services, including the nature, options, implementation, efficiency, and effectiveness of all forms of consolidation and shared services. PCASS resources allow local decision makers to review what has been done elsewhere and gauge what model would be best for their community.

For more information on PCASS and to access its resources, please visit <http://policeconsolidation.msu.edu/>.

The image shows a screenshot of the PCASS website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the Michigan State University logo, the title "Program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services", and the acronym "PCASS". Below this is a secondary navigation menu with links for "RESOURCES", "PCASS PUBLICATIONS", "ABOUT US", "CONTACT", "MULTIMEDIA", and "ENDORSEMENTS". The main content area features a large photograph of a booth at a conference, with a sign that reads "PoPCaSS Program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services" and a large letter "S". Below the photo, there are three columns of text:

- PCASS Publications**:
  - Police Staffing Allocation and Managing Workload Demand: A Critical Assessment of Existing Practices
  - Strategies for Police Recruitment: A Review of Trends, Contemporary Issues, and Existing Approaches
- Welcome to the Program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services**:
  - The program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services (PCASS)** at Michigan State University's School of Criminal Justice provides a single-point resource on structural options
- PCASS News Highlights**:
  - PCASS articles released "Strategies for Police Recruitment: A Review of Trends, Contemporary Issues, and Existing Approaches" and "Contracting for Law Enforcement Services: Lessons from Research and Practice"

# The Context of Media Coverage on Consolidation

In recent years, the number of communities that have considered consolidating or have moved to consolidate some services or agencies has increased sharply. As tax bases have dwindled, communities have sought to provide public safety services within constricted budgets. The Police Executive Research Forum (2013) indicates that most police agencies experienced budget cuts in 2012, and nearly half of those experiencing cuts expected more in 2013.

One strategy communities have adopted to cope with such constraints is to share resources through consolidation, enabling the coordination of law



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enforcement services within communities or across them. Recent research on the degree and type of consolidation is scant, but the number of news agencies discussing this issue is significant. Consolidation has taken all forms, from sharing common services to contracting to merging police departments to consolidating police and fire services into a single

public-safety department (Wilson, Weiss, and Grammich 2012; Wilson and Grammich 2012).

Because recent research on consolidation is scant, police executives have few contemporary lessons to guide their work. Most literature has historically focused on whether and how police consolidation impacts the quality and efficiency of police services (Krimmel 1997; Lithopoulos and Rigakos 2005; McDavid 2002; Simper and Weyman-Jones 2007; Southwick 2005; Wilson and Grammich 2012; Wilson, Weiss, and Grammich 2012). Most relevant literature is also dated. While the Program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services (PCASS) website lists hundreds of resources identified by Michigan State University researchers on consolidation, mergers, and other shared services programs, a large portion of these resources is several decades old, and many studies are by private consultants with few works published in peer-reviewed outlets.

Research to date has also neglected consolidation in smaller communities, the ones to consider it most earnestly. This is significant because most law enforcement agencies in the United States are relatively small with fewer than 10 sworn personnel (Reaves 2010).

There appears to be no extant research on how news media portray police consolidation. When considering consolidation, agencies of all sizes must address media issues but have little guidance regarding how to do so. This is particularly critical for small agencies that may be the least experienced in dealing with news media.

As such, this publication seeks to offer lessons and guidance on engaging news media during police

agency consolidation. Managing media relationships is a critical and vital challenge to receiving community support. Although how the public receives information and news has changed dramatically in recent decades, news media continue to be a primary outlet for information about crime and justice issues (Callanan 2012; Chermak 1995; Chermak and Weiss 2006; Graber 1980). Most of the public experiences crime vicariously, consuming images from various entertainment, news, and Internet sources. Communities face many social issues, but news media have limited space and time to cover them. Most citizens have limited opportunity to engage in the political decisions that affect their lives. Therefore, news media serve as a buffer that determines the issues that consumers should think about, as coverage choices help to set the public policy agenda.

Police consolidation is a complex issue that can significantly impact the quality of life in and the security of a community. Members of the public have an important stake in the decision to or not to consolidate, and how the media informs the community about this issue may determine whether the public supports consolidation or whether it is effective.

Although there is a large body of research on media coverage of crime and criminal justice issues, there is significantly less about that of policing issues. Not one study has specifically examined how the news has presented the consolidation of law enforcement agencies.

To address this lack of information, this publication highlights how the news presents consolidation, specifically in terms of community interests, budgetary concerns, and other potential considerations and outcomes. This guide also explores what sources

news reporters use to construct consolidation stories and how reporters use these sources to convey what messages. Most important for public officials and policymakers considering consolidation in their own communities, this publication provides best practices based on interviews with representatives of agencies that sought consolidation and provides recommendations on how best to communicate through the media.

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Managing media relationships is a critical and vital challenge to receiving community support.

# Understanding Police-Media Relationships

Police executives are consistently bombarded with requests from news media personnel for information, access, and clarifications about ongoing cases. Most requests made by reporters relate to police involvement in specific crime incidents. News about crime focuses on the early stages of the criminal justice system, and there is particular interest in investigations and arrests.

Police executives must constantly manage their relationships with various types of media personnel. News media can be demanding, but at the same time their reporting on crime and justice issues provides an opportunity to help the public understand the challenges the law enforcement agency faces and the role of the agency in the community. The public has high expectations about the performance of law enforcement agencies, but it may not understand all the constraints and obstacles police face when responding to crime and providing a full range of services. Media pressure is particularly intense when either a high-profile case occurs or there is a report of police improprieties.

Police organizations have invested considerable effort and resources to manage media relationships and use them to their advantage (see Chermak and Weiss 2005). Police departments have increasingly opened themselves up to media inquiries, have hired and trained full-time public information personnel (see Chermak and Weiss 2005; Skolnick and McCoy 1985; Surette and Richard 1995), and have structured the amount of access news personnel have to the organization (Ericson et al. 1989).

Although police-media relationships can be tense, especially after a high-profile event leading to criticism of police, such relationships are usually symbiotic (see Chermak 1995; Chermak and Weiss 2005,

2006; Grabosky and Wilson 1989; Guffee 1992).

Bureaucratic constraints on news production, such as the amount of time available to produce a story, motivate news personnel to cultivate relationships with accessible sources. For news about the beginning stages of the criminal justice process, this means a heavy reliance on law enforcement sources. This dependence provides law enforcement sources with opportunities to promote the department or respond to a contentious issue such as police consolidation.



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Media coverage of consolidation is particularly challenging for law enforcement executives not only because it can be contentious but also because it involves many community power-brokers. Like law enforcement agencies, others who have a stake in media coverage of consolidation, including state and local politicians, community members, and firefighters, may also have full-time public relations staff to respond to media inquiries, generate press releases about the organization, and distribute information

through other outlets such as social media. Consolidation may pose many communication challenges within and among police and other agencies involved in the consolidation, outside parties, and community stakeholders, and the media is an important resource that could be used to respond to the challenges. Unfortunately, there has been little discussion about effective ways to respond to these challenges.

When considering consolidation, police executives have few resources to guide them on how best to use access to the media. Yet such lessons should be documented not only for consolidation efforts but also for communicating new programs, strategies, and policy decisions to multiple constituencies, particularly if the importance of a decision should become lost in dissemination.

Several sources of information were critical to understanding this issue and recommendations. First, the authors of this publication, *Police Consolidation: Engaging the News Media*, analyzed relevant literature on police consolidation and police-media practices.

Second, they conducted a comprehensive content analysis on how the news presented police consolidation. This analysis sought to better understand what issues the news presented about consolidation, what sources the news used in these stories to define this issue, and what particularly effective ways the agency could use media access to promote the agency or respond to concerns about consolidation (see the appendix for further details about the content analysis).

Third, the authors of this publication interviewed police executives to better understand best practices for interacting with the media on this issue. Interviews included police executives who head a consolidated agency, executives of agencies sharing services with

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When considering consolidation, police executives have few resources to guide them on how best to use access to the media.

other agencies, and executives of agencies that considered but did not undertake consolidation. These interviews provide vital insights into practices police executives can use when considering consolidation.

The results focus on several critical issues and strategies that police executives might consider:

- The amount and type of coverage of police consolidation
- Stakeholders emphasized in news coverage
- How budgetary and other economic issues regarding consolidation are presented
- Key sources reporters use to construct consolidation stories
- Approaches to managing media relationships

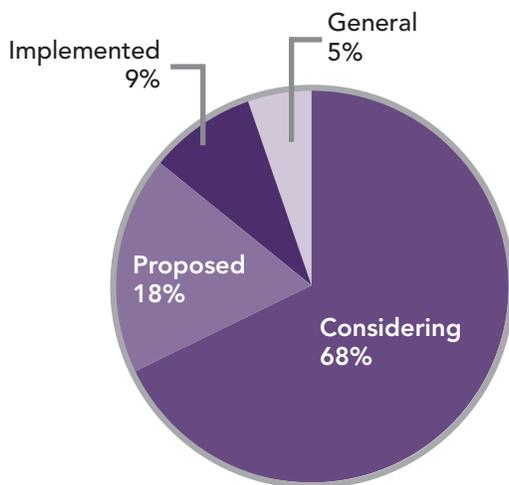
# Amount and Types of Coverage of Consolidation

Altogether, 294 articles on consolidation from 2002 through 2012 were identified for analysis. (See appendix for explanation on the methods for selecting stories for analysis.) Figures 1–4 summarize the characteristics of this sample.

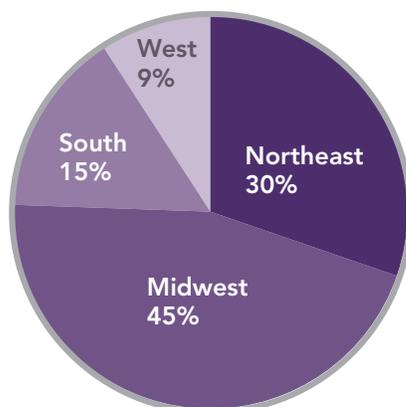
Stories ranged from 107 to 3,390 words with an average length of 678 words. Most stories were on agencies considering consolidation. Nine percent of the stories were about communities that had implemented it. More than seven in 10 were about

consolidation with neighboring law enforcement agencies, either across borders or with overlapping jurisdictions such as cities within counties. More than one in 10 dealt with consolidating units within an agency. Fewer stories were on consolidating specific services, such as communications, or on police-fire consolidation. At least one story discussed a consolidation effort occurring in 38 different states, but three in four stories were published in the Northeast or Midwest. Finally, most of the articles examined were published after the recession of 2008.

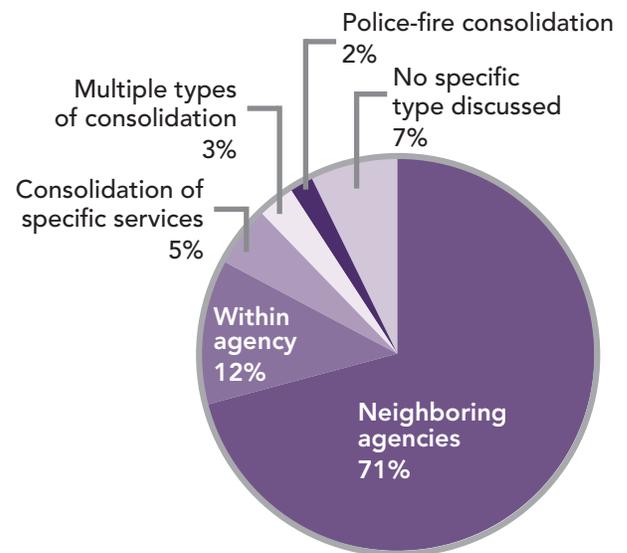
**Figure 1. Newspaper sample stage of consolidation (n=294)**



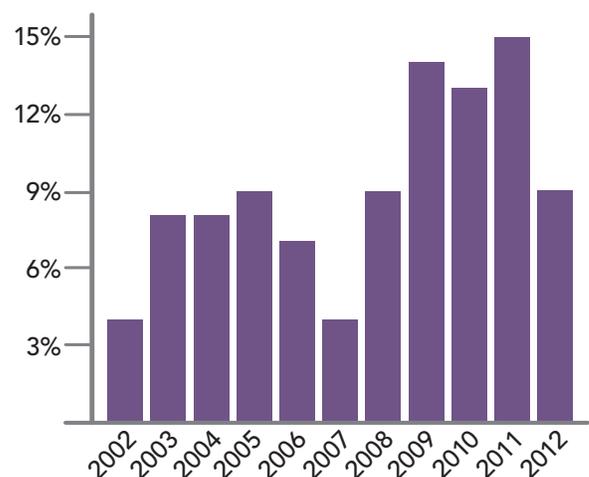
**Figure 2. Newspaper sample region (n=294)**



**Figure 3. Newspaper sample type of consolidation (n=294)**



**Figure 4. Newspaper sample year (n=294)**



# Stakeholders in News Stories

Consolidation is of great interest to government officials, fire departments, community groups, and police-labor organizations. Tables 1–3 provide data about the nature of the representation of these different stakeholders. Note that all stories in the sample mentioned law enforcement or law enforcement agencies.

Stories about consolidation were most likely to include government agencies. Nearly 95 percent of the stories included mention of some state or local government agency. In fact, these stories most frequently presented government agencies regardless of the stage of consolidation being considered. Typically, stories included a mayor or other high-ranking political official. It is not surprising that these stories rarely presented other officials—such as finance officials, judges, and utilities representatives—as these sources have less of a stake in the presentation of consolidation in the news.

Community organizations or neighborhood associations were mentioned in 38 percent of stories. Community input was most likely in stories about

consideration of consolidation and on consolidation already implemented and somewhat less likely in general consolidation stories. Police labor unions were mentioned in 29 percent of all stories. By theme, police unions were more prevalent in stories on proposed consolidation and general consolidation.

Sixteen percent of stories featured fire departments, which is somewhat surprising given that less than two percent of the stories were specifically about police-fire consolidation. One reason for why stories included fire departments is that many articles focused on general budget-cutting for local governments, including those that may affect the fire department even if police-fire consolidation was not considered. Specific themes regarding stories mentioning the fire department include fire safety, strength of the relationship between the fire department and other stakeholders, fire training, and the history of the fire department. Fire departments, particularly issues of fire safety, were in a higher proportion of stories on implemented consolidation and general consolidation than others.

**Table 1. Stakeholders highlighted in newspaper stories by stage of consolidation**

Stakeholders mentioned	Mentioned in all stories (%)	Total stories (n=294)	Stories on considering consolidation (n=201)	Stories on proposed consolidation (n=54)	Stories on implemented consolidation (n=25)	Stories on general consolidation (n=14)
Government	95	278	196	51	20	11
Community	38	111	77	19	11	4
Police labor unions	29	85	50	23	6	6
Fire departments	16	46	27	10	6	3

**Table 2. Government stakeholders highlighted in newspaper stories by stage of consolidation**

Types of government stakeholders	Mentioned in all stories (%)	Total stories (n=294)	Stories on considering consolidation (n=201)	Stories on proposed consolidation (n=54)	Stories on implemented consolidation (n=25)	Stories on general consolidation (n=14)
Mayor	44	130	84	28	12	6
Council/board	15	44	36	6	1	1
Finance	2	6	3	2	0	1
Other politician	34	100	73	15	7	4
Other official	1	3	2	2	0	0

**Table 3. Fire department themes highlighted in newspaper stories by stage of consolidation**

Fire department themes	Mentioned in all stories (%)	Total stories (n=294)	Stories on considering consolidation (n=201)	Stories on proposed consolidation (n=54)	Stories on implemented consolidation (n=25)	Stories on general consolidation (n=14)
History	4	11	3	4	3	1
Training	6	19	13	2	2	2
Safety	15	44	27	8	6	3
Strength of relationship	9	26	18	3	3	2

## Budget and Other Economic Issues in News Stories

Economic concerns drive most public discussion of consolidation. Table 4 presents data on the primary reason a story cites a community as considering, pursuing, or implementing consolidation. In 84 percent of the stories, the primary reason is the potential for cost savings through some form of consolidation. Ten percent of stories cited the need to improve the efficiency of services, which is closely intertwined with economic benefits. The lack of discussion regarding the effect of consolidation on service quality is interesting given the research finding that officials overseeing consolidated police and fire agencies claim focusing on quality more than savings is a key component to their success (Wilson 2012).

Within the news stories, the primary reason cited for consolidation also varied by stage of consolidation being considered by the community. Stories on

communities considering or proposing consolidation were more likely to emphasize cost savings. Stories on communities that implemented consolidation also emphasized cost savings, but they mentioned efficiency more than stories on other phases did. One reason for this increasing emphasis on efficiency may be that communities implementing consolidation may have already agreed it can realize savings and have shifted to more concrete discussion of how specifically consolidation would work to make operations more efficient.

Nine of 10 stories mentioned the economy (see table 5 on page 13), but only three in four stories on implementation of consolidation mentioned the same. Stories before the 2008 recession were as likely to mention the economy as those afterward, indicating that the potential or perceived economic benefits

**Table 4. Primary reasons mentioned by communities in newspaper stories by stage of consolidation**

Primary reason	Total stories (%)	Total stories (n=294)	Stories on considering consolidation (n=201)	Stories on proposed consolidation (n=54)	Stories on implemented consolidation (n=25)	Stories on general consolidation (n=14)
Cost savings	84	248	168	52	17	11
Efficiency	10	30	20	2	6	2
Safety	1	2	2	0	0	0
Other	1	3	3	0	1	0
No reason cited	3	10	8	0	1	1

of consolidation are critical to public discussions of it, regardless of broader economic conditions. Forty percent of the stories noted the economy being used as leverage to justify consolidation. Such leverage was more common in stories on communities considering consolidation than in other stories, particularly those on communities that had implemented consolidation. More than 25 percent of stories on consolidation mentioned budget negotiations, though this was less prevalent in stories on communities that had implemented consolidation.

Qualitative data gathered offer insight on the nature of budget discussions. Often when the budget was discussed, news reporters emphasized a “fiscal crisis” to illustrate that budgets had decreased or were deteriorating, suggesting a sense of urgency about potential solutions. These stories also suggested that funding for current levels of service provisions was unsustainable and that the community needed to be creative in reducing costs. Such stories almost always presented consolidation as a possible option, if not inevitable in some form.

Reporters rarely discussed personnel hiring in the stories on consolidation but did emphasize layoffs in 15 percent of stories. Layoffs were more prevalent

in general stories about consolidation than they were in stories on other themes.

Media coverage also considered other types of community outcomes resulting from consolidation, albeit less frequently than it considered budgetary issues. Table 6 shows how media coverage portrayed four types of outcomes. Overall, more than one in four stories discussed how consolidation might impact the quality of life in a community. Only one in 10 stories discussed the potential impact on the crime rate and fear of crime. Very few stories discussed the effects of consolidation on community policing.

Stories on different stages of consolidation tended to emphasize different outcomes. Reporters are more likely to discuss how consolidation might impact quality of life, crime rates, and fear of crime in stories where consolidation has been proposed than in stories where consolidation has been implemented. This may indicate that as consolidation proceeds, citizen attention turns to less speculative and more concrete scenarios of how consolidation will affect them. Similarly, although few stories discuss community policing, those that do are more likely to be on implementation than on the initial stages of consideration.

**Table 5. Economic issues mentioned in newspaper stories by stage of consolidation**

Economic issues	All stories (%)	Total stories (n=294)	Stories on considering consolidation (n=201)	Stories on proposed consolidation (n=54)	Stories on implemented consolidation (n=25)	Stories on general consolidation (n=14)
Economy mentioned in general?	91	267	182	53	19	13
Economy used as leverage?	40	117	87	18	7	5
Budget negotiations discussed?	27	80	55	17	3	5
Personnel hiring?	1	4	2	2	0	0
Personnel layoffs?	15	44	30	7	2	5

**Table 6. Presentation of community outcomes by stage of consolidation**

Community outcomes	All stories (%)	Total stories (n=294)	Stories on considering consolidation (n=201)	Stories on proposed consolidation (n=54)	Stories on implemented consolidation (n=25)	Stories on general consolidation (n=14)
Quality of life	27	80	49	20	8	3
Crime rate	11	31	15	12	3	1
Fear of crime	10	28	17	8	2	1
Community policing	2	5	2	1	2	0

## Sources and the Information Provided in the News

News sources are critical to story selection and construction. Reporters are under time pressure to produce news stories every day. Media personnel manage this pressure by implementing strategies to make story construction more efficient. Perhaps the most critical of these strategies is relying on readily available and willing sources whom a reporter can contact quickly and will provide timely information. Reporters choose sources not only for their willingness to participate but also for their credibility and their ability to provide knowledgeable representation of community concerns.

A news story about police consolidation is not routine. Such stories are much rarer compared to ordinary crime stories. Reporters will have more time to produce these stories and therefore are more likely to reach out to diverse sources representing various stakeholders in the community.

Table 7 provides information on as many as five sources collected for each story. Reporters most frequently cited politicians in their stories on police consolidation. Governors, mayors, city council members, and other state and local politicians account for 44 percent of all sources cited and 65 percent of first sources cited. Law enforcement sources account

for 16 percent of all sources but were more prevalent as second or third sources; more generally, law enforcement sources are not cited as prominently as they might be on stories regarding crime or specific police programs. Fire representatives account for 14 percent of the overall sources and tend to be cited more as third, fourth, or fifth sources. Similarly, labor and other community sources each accounted for less than 10 percent of overall sources and were most prevalent as fourth or fifth sources, suggesting their perspective is not a high priority for reporters or in stories.

The collected data also shows the type of information provided in these stories. The coding is based on a scheme used in past research (Chermak 1995), categorizing quotes as either factual statements, as evaluative (in a positive, negative, or neutral way), or as making specific recommendations. Table 8 shows the types of comments provided by differing sources. Government officials were much more likely than others to make positive statements (62 percent) in favor of consolidation. Police and fire were most likely to provide neutral statements. Labor provided negative statements, and community sources were relatively balanced between positive and negative statements.

Table 7. Sources cited in consolidation stories

Source	All stories (%)	First source (%)	Second source (%)	Third source (%)	Fourth source (%)	Fifth source (%)
Mayor	26	38	23	11	4	0
Fire rep.	14	3	13	35	33	33
Police chief	13	11	31	21	4	0
Community member	11	6	8	14	19	17
City council	8	10	7	7	2	0
Labor rep.	8	4	4	9	35	50
Other local politician	4	5	3	1	2	0
Other state politician	3	4	4	0	0	0
Media source	4	7	2	1	0	0
Governor	3	4	2	0	0	0
Other police	2	2	2	2	0	0
Political candidate	2	3	0	0	0	0
Sheriff	2	2	1	0	0	0

Table 8. Perspectives provided in news stories

Type of information	Police (%)	Government (%)	Fire (%)	Community (%)	Labor (%)
Factual	13	17	12	9	10
Evaluative/positive	23	62	14	25	12
Evaluative/negative	6	4	6	23	55
Evaluative/neutral	58	16	66	42	20
Recommendation	1	1	2	0	2

# Best Practices for Communicating about Consolidation

Within this study, several agencies appeared to be managing extraordinarily well the news coverage regarding their ongoing consolidation. The stories were positive not only about the consolidation effort but also about the agency in general and its leadership.

The key interviewees were from five different agencies of different sizes (the number of officers were 22, 42, 55, 71, and 218), representing different types of consolidation:

- Two police-fire consolidation
- Two police-sheriff consolidation
- One administrative services consolidation among agencies of different sizes

Some of the police executives characterized the consolidation as being far less contentious than anticipated. One of the interviewed police executives said that consolidation was occurring across government



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units and that it was accepted widely as an effective cost-cutting measure. Another executive said consolidation of police-fire services was smooth because firefighters were ready for a leadership

change. A third executive noted that the small-scale consolidation needed for a city police agency and sheriff's office consolidating dispatch services limited concern.

Other interviewed agencies did not succeed in consolidation efforts. These interviews identified several influences leading to the rejection of consolidation despite the considerable effort agencies made to publicize the importance of consolidation.

All interviewees, regardless of whether their consolidation effort succeeded, highlighted similar concerns and stressed five similar practices for media communication regarding consolidation:

**1. Effectively manage the relationship with the media.** All of the executives stressed the need to have an important foundation for positive relationships with community media organizations. All said they were open to media scrutiny and emphasized the importance of communicating to reporters. They noted open access and cooperation is a two-way street. Reporters need access to police reports and police sources, and cooperation provides opportunities to communicate effectively in the media.

The executives noted they were constantly working on developing relationships because of the high turnover at news organizations and the frequent occurrence of issues that strain the relationship. Executives must be willing to discuss issues and concerns with the media. One executive told us he had monthly meetings with editors and staff at the local newspaper to discuss concerns and highlight directions of the department. Many agencies used public information officers (PIOs) to manage this relationship directly, but not all agencies had a PIO. Other agencies assigned staff to be the lead on

stories and received training to better understand what the news media needed. Executives also noted that stories about consolidation do not typically interest news media, but they claimed there was great value in accessing the media to educate the public about consolidation.

- 2. Communicate with key stakeholders to agree on talking points.** The executives agreed consolidation can be contentious for several reasons. They talked about the potential of losing staff, changing jobs, and an evolving organizational identity and the threats these pose to consolidation efforts. Executives stressed the need to hear and respond to concerns, to discuss to the best of their ability the reasons for (or for not) moving forward with consolidation, and to present the results of their efforts in a uniform manner. For example, one executive had a list of key reasons for consolidation that included information on cost savings, impact on public safety, and potential improvements to staffing. The executive shared these talking points both internally and with reporters to help them easily understand the goals of the consolidation and the rationale for it.

Even with such efforts, setting aside political differences is quite difficult, and even the best efforts can be derailed. One agency executive was asked to evaluate whether consolidating the police department and sheriff's office made sense. This agency, as a neutral body that held public hearings on the issue, conducted research to evaluate the pros and cons, evaluated other locations where consolidation had succeeded and failed, and asked subject-matter experts and agency executives for their thoughts and conclusions. Despite such efforts, community and policymakers were unable to reach a consensus.

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All interviewees, regardless of whether their consolidation effort succeeded, highlighted similar concerns and stressed five similar practices for media communication regarding consolidation.

Similarly, another agency executive discussed how the agency "did everything right." Agency staff discussed consolidation with key stakeholders, completed extensive economic analysis that documented the savings, and presented the ideas through various forums and news coverage. However, the final decision was derailed by specific individuals who were against the consolidation despite evidence that it was the best option for the community.

- 3. Share data with the media.** All executives stressed data were critical to the decision-making process. They highlighted the expectations for making

decisions and using supporting data and analysis to justify approaches. Several executives discussed extraordinary efforts to calculate savings, produce staffing models, and offer projections over time about needs and costs. They then provided these data to news media when discussing the efforts. One executive emphasized his concern that the only justification presented in the news was the potential cost savings even though he went to great lengths to explain to reporters how changes could impact service delivery and response time.

**4. Pursue all communication channels.** The executives agreed coverage of consolidation was not a high news priority. Although all were able to get positive coverage about the issue, they noted coverage is inherently limited and may not be read by most of their key constituents. They stressed the need to discuss an issue like consolidation

through multiple channels and to communicate using various strategies. Executives discussed attending community meetings to highlight the potential changes, including how services might change in particular neighborhoods. Most of the executives also discussed using social media and blogs for communication.

**5. Rebrand the new agency.** Executives stressed the need to brand the new agency and to help the public understand its new identity, especially when significant changes occur. Agencies can use news and social media to rebrand themselves, but, the executives stressed, they should also take many other steps to communicate with the public about the change. These may include having business cards and letterhead with the new logo, annual reports for the new agency, and press releases about the agency.

# Policy and Operational Considerations for Executives

The decision to consolidate can change the culture of a community. Therefore, community members must be well-informed, engaged, and critical of the reasons why their community might consolidate law enforcement services and thereby significantly change how such services are provided. There are many ways that community members might learn about such important decisions, but media coverage of this issue remains most critical. This study on which this publication is based highlights three important policy considerations about consolidation and the media:

**1. Law enforcement agencies should consider developing broad and nuanced publicity campaigns for consolidation.** The authors' research indicates that the stories told by news media about consolidation are decidedly limited in scope to what public officials, namely government representatives, wish to portray. A large number of consolidation stories focused on specific communities that were considering it or that were at different stages of the process. In contrast to most crime and criminal justice policy stories that emphasize the opinions of police sources, stories on consolidation include a larger number of community stakeholders with great interest in the issue. Stories on consolidation typically have politicians, especially the mayor or city-council members, discuss the merits of the policy. More than 95 percent of stories cited politicians, and most stories cited politicians as their first source (see table 7 on page 15). Politicians are also the source most likely to provide a positive assessment of consolidation and are at the forefront of promoting consolidation, almost always for its potential economic benefit.

However, a consequence of diminished police sources in consolidation stories is that the news

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Research indicates that the stories told by news media about consolidation are decidedly limited in scope to what public officials wish to portray.

media have dominantly or only used economic issues to justify consolidation. Economic issues are certainly important, but the public also needs to consider how changes might impact calls for service, response time, crime rates, and general feelings of safety. It is also important to consider the impacts on the agency and its personnel. Some news stories discussed these issues but only infrequently. Likewise, consolidation could significantly impact the nature of relationships between the police department and community organizations and groups, but this issue also received little discussion.

One strategy to engage the public in a discussion of a wider range of issues about police consolidation is to devise a broader organizational strategy

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Community meetings will always be important for discussing critical issues, but using other sources such as social media beyond media contacts might help communities to understand fully the implications of consolidation.

for communicating to the public consolidation information and the issues surrounding it. All government agencies, including law enforcement, have significantly revised their approach to interacting with the public as the media environment has evolved. Taking full advantage of various communication sources can help disseminate as much information as possible to the public. Community meetings and interactions with community groups will always be important for discussing critical issues, but systematically using other sources such as social media beyond media contacts might help communities to understand fully the implications of consolidation.

- 2. An agency must discern when to access and approach the media.** Several interviewed law enforcement executives shared the importance of selling their perspective on consolidation to internal stakeholders before the media. This approach yielded more acceptance and fewer dissident voices when the news media later reported consolidation. Such an approach, however, may succeed or fail based on the perceived degree of change expected or known to occur as a result of consolidation. For example, some interviewees stressed that they did not face resistance to their move to consolidation because their focus was only on combining services or because multiple agencies mutually supported the consolidation. Other interviewees noted political resistance to the move because of concerns about the loss of seniority and identity of the agency. Even though these executives said the move made economic sense and staff did what they could to ensure a smooth transition, political backlash derailed the effort.

News reporters have time and space constraints, but law enforcement executives can still provide

the types of information and guidance that would allow reporters to write more nuanced stories. Several interviewees noted long meetings they had with reporters to discuss the pros and cons of particular story coverage and the presentation of policy issues.

This can be particularly important given how rare it is for reporters to have relevant research or reports about consolidation, despite the growing body of research and other resources available. News media also rarely attempt to put the issue into broader context, instead typically presenting only the impact consolidation would have on the communities directly involved. Such lack of context is not surprising given that the number of journalists has decreased greatly in recent years and the resources to cover broader, investigative stories have dwindled.

The stories reviewed generally presented consolidation as a foregone conclusion and that agencies had no other option. Although consolidation can greatly affect agency culture, morale, and relationships with community organizations and leaders, reporters do not consider such consequences. Reporters also do not access research on cost savings and other impacts but instead assume consolidation can only be positive. This leads to a decidedly one-sided institutional view: that consolidation has potential economic benefits that are of urgent importance in desperate times and that the ripple effect of such decisions in transforming communities are not as important as saving money, even if the specifics of such promises are underexplored.

For example, one interviewee specifically discussed how the agency had become economically more viable because of consolidation. However, as the

community has grown, so too have significant staffing gaps. Yet according to this interviewee, because these issues do not interest news reporters, initiatives to address the issues suffer.

### **3. Encourage the media to provide more than single or short-term coverage of consolidation.**

Although consolidation does receive coverage, there might be, on average, no more than two or three articles about this issue in a community considering it. Police executives face the challenge of discerning when to use their access to the media to raise this issue and getting news media to cover it. Criminal investigations and arrests by police receive frequent coverage, but policing programs and policies do not.

For example, Chermak and Weiss (2006) found that coverage of community policing was quite rare compared to that of crime incidents and that stories emphasized only characteristics of specific community-policing initiatives. They found the number of crime-incident stories in less than two weeks matched that for community policing in a year.

For consolidation, most articles appear when a community is considering consolidation with little follow-up afterward. Law enforcement agencies and surrounding communities would benefit from additional follow-up stories as consolidation moves forward, is implemented, and leads to specific changes. Such coverage would provide a broader understanding of this issue as well as opportunity for the community to understand the mission of the consolidated agency.



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# Appendix: Description of Media Content Analysis

For the sample, the authors of this publication searched Lexis-Nexis Academic, ProQuest Newsstand, and Google News for a 10-year period, from 2002–2012, and divided the sample into two eras of equal length: 2002–2007 (a five-year period prior to the recession), and 2008–2012 (a five-year period during and after the recession). The hypothesis was that these two distinct time periods would yield different results because of the intervening historical event of the recession and its effect on state and local budgets, which may have shaped media discussions of consolidation.

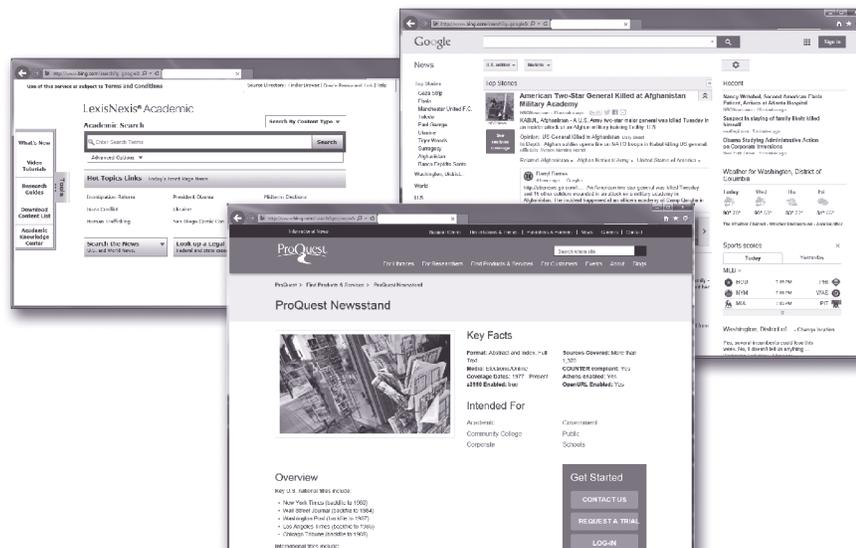
Searches used the following terms: police fire consolidation, police fire merger, public safety consolidation, and public safety department. The searches did not include quotations around these terms to help capture the largest number of articles possible. One of the search databases returned articles that had only two of the search terms (police and consolidation), which made weeding through irrelevant articles much more difficult.

However, the articles included were representative of the newspaper articles published during the time frame of the study. The overall initial sample was 306 articles; however, the elimination of redundant

articles and those on consolidation opportunities not pertaining to local government service provision reduced the number of articles to 294.

For each article, numerous characteristics presented in the news were coded:

- Story demographics (e.g., media organization and word count)
- Each organization mentioned in the article and its relationship to others
- The extent to which organizations had experience with consolidation, such as whether there were previous attempts or formal proposals for consolidation
- The state of the jurisdiction's budgetary, personnel, and economic trajectory profile at the time of publication
- Specific indicators the stories' authors mentioned regarding consolidation, such as the effect of consolidation on quality of life, crime rates, and community fear of crime
- Up to five sources cited in each of these articles and what each said about consolidation



## About the COPS Office

The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime.

Rather than simply responding to crimes once they have been committed, community policing concentrates on preventing crime and eliminating the atmosphere of fear it creates. Earning the trust of the community and making those individuals stakeholders in their own safety enables law enforcement to better understand and address both the needs of the community and the factors that contribute to crime.

The COPS Office awards grants to state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies to hire and train community policing professionals, acquire and deploy cutting-edge crime fighting technologies, and develop and test innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders and all levels of law enforcement. The COPS Office has produced and compiled a broad range of information resources that can help

law enforcement better address specific crime and operational issues, and help community leaders better understand how to work cooperatively with their law enforcement agency to reduce crime.

- Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than \$14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing.
- To date, the COPS Office has funded approximately 125,000 additional officers to more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies across the country in small and large jurisdictions alike.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than 8.57 million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs.

COPS Office resources, covering a wide breadth of community policing topics—from school and campus safety to gang violence—are available, at no cost, through its online Resource Center at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov). This easy-to-navigate website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.





Police consolidation is a complex issue that can significantly impact the quality of life in and the security of a community. To help agencies better understand this process, *Police Consolidation: Engaging the News Media* explores how the news presents the topic of consolidation, along with its associated community interests, budgetary concerns, and potential outcomes. This resource guide also explores what sources news reporters use to construct consolidation stories and how reporters use these sources to convey what messages. Most important for public officials and policymakers considering consolidation in their own communities, this publication provides best practices based on interviews with representatives of agencies that sought consolidation and provides recommendations on how best to communicate through the media.



**COPS**

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