



Michigan's Aging Population and the Impact on Law Enforcement

[Matt Dolan, J.D.](#)

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In your community, is elementary, middle, and high school enrollment down? With the exception of a few private schools that have seen a recent influx of students, are most other schools closing or consolidating? Do you notice more retirement age citizens than in past years, and fewer young people? Is your community building age 55 and over living communities, and senior citizen facilities, more rapidly than traditional family homes and childcare centers? Is your community building as many dog parks for pets as they are playgrounds for children? If not, your community is the exception to the rule across the State of Michigan.

In recent years, U.S. Census data has shown that the long-term trend of an aging population in Michigan is likely to continue, even if some individual counties and municipalities have seen a slight uptick in population. Michigan's population that is 55 years old and over now exceeds the population of persons 24 years old and under, and those trends are expected to continue.¹

In June of 2023, Governor Whitmer established the Growing Michigan Together Council with the goal of addressing the challenges likely to be encountered by the state in the face of an aging population and increasing the working age population of the state.² In the council's first report in

December of 2023, it noted that Michigan is 49th out of 50 states in population growth and stated, “We’re losing too many of our talented young people and failing to attract others.”³

In April of 2024, the Michigan Center for Data and Analytics published a report on *Michigan Statewide Population Projections through 2050*. The report stated, “Michigan has shifted from a young, higher fertility population to an older, low fertility population. This is a challenging age structure for sustained population growth.”⁴

Aging populations are causing alarm in light of the burdens that these demographic shifts will create for those depending on accessible health care and pensions, as well as those expected to provide those services and pay into those systems.⁵ **The rapid aging of the Michigan population, which is set to accelerate in the coming years, will have profound impacts on our society across a multitude of different areas. Law enforcement is likely no exception.**

What an Aging Population Means for Police Recruiting and Staffing

In discussing the challenges of recruiting and retention with law enforcement leaders across the country, a constant theme emerges—an apparent lack of qualified applicants in the generation of young men and women entering young adulthood. This is not unlike the challenge facing countless other public service professions and the military.

One of the key components of the challenge is the lower birth rate over recent decades, which is resulting in fewer numbers of available applicants. On top of the fact there are just fewer young people today, we must consider issues of mental health, drug addiction, obesity, and other issues that make Generation Z (those born after 1996) a particularly challenging applicant pool from which to hire individuals qualified for a career in law enforcement.

In June of 2023 in Michigan, local news reports indicated that the number of sworn law enforcement officers in the state has gone down 19% since 2001—decreasing from 23,000 to 18,500. This decrease led to one Michigan police chief describing his staffing challenges and asking, with reference to the labor shortage facing law enforcement and other employers in the area, “Where did everyone go?”⁶

At the same time, thousands of officers who joined the profession 20 or 30 years ago are becoming eligible for retirement and are doing so. Recently, the executive leadership of the Cincinnati Police Department illustrated this reality in noting that, even if recruiting efforts in the coming years were successful, the retirement cliff facing the agency could not be avoided completely.⁷

All available demographic indicators point to the reality that the ranks of law enforcement will be thinning in the years to come, barring an unethical and counter-productive lowering of hiring standards. This significant lowering of standards has occurred in some agencies and the U.S. Department of Justice advocated for it in a recent report.⁸ **But if agencies maintain ethically and legally defensible hiring standards, their numbers of sworn officers are very likely to become smaller in many jurisdictions.**

So, does this mean that alarm bells should be ringing and that we should anticipate decades of unchecked criminal activity as so many officers retire and so few are sworn in? Not necessarily. **There is another side of this population equation that is found in the shrinking numbers of young adults—the population segment statistically more likely to engage in violent crime.**

In a sense, the same recruiting and staffing challenges facing law enforcement agencies may also face the criminal offenders who recruit young people to prey upon the community. If this proves to be true, it could be welcome news for police leaders committed to maintaining ethical hiring standards in the face of mounting officer vacancies.

In Michigan, these pressures to compromise ethical hiring standards have been well publicized in recent months.⁹ The Detroit Metro Times recently published a story including multiple interviews with law enforcement leaders from around the State of Michigan, reporting that “With so many open positions, law enforcement officials are worried that applicants with abusive histories will slip through the cracks and land a job.”¹⁰

What an Aging Population Could Mean for Rates of Violent Crime

There seem to be two sides of the coin when it comes to the aging Michigan population as it relates to law enforcement. On one side, as we have discussed, is the likelihood of fewer officers—at least in many jurisdictions. On the other side, is the likelihood of fewer young people and, therefore, a smaller population of those most likely to commit violent crimes.

Across cultures and over generations, we see that the prime demographic of violent law breakers tends to be young adult and male. When sheriffs and police chiefs discuss combating violent crime, are they referring to their community's elderly population as the perpetrators? How many task force mass arrests of violent offenders involve the mug shots of offenders in their 60s and above? For those serving long prison terms, what percentage of them committed their crimes in middle or old age?

The answers to these questions are obvious. Older people are statistically unlikely to become perpetrators of violent crime. So, as the young adult population shrinks, it would make sense to expect less violent crime. Could these demographic realities help to explain the drop in homicides and other violent crimes that we are seeing in some parts of the state—particularly in spite of the fact that so many agencies are engaging in less proactive policing than in recent years—either due to staffing shortages, political interference, or officer morale?¹¹

More importantly, does an aging population indicate that law enforcement agencies in Michigan could operate with fewer sworn officers than in past years, when the population was younger and more statistically prone to engage in criminal activity?

This reality of declining numbers of law enforcement officers coinciding with broader concerns over a shrinking working age population is not unique to Michigan, although Michigan may face a greater demographic decline than other states.

Michigan's demographic predicament means that **law enforcement leaders and elected officials across the state should work to understand their jurisdiction's changing age demographics in order to understand the operational realities that lie ahead.**

Staffing Paradigm Shifts for Law Enforcement Leaders as the Population Gets Older

As law enforcement leaders seek to determine what their authorized strength should be with respect to sworn officers, simply looking to population numbers may be insufficient. How should we determine how many officers should an agency have as its authorized strength? Should it be based on the number of officers per 100,000 population? Or should agencies look for a new and more precise measure that takes into account the percentage of the population which is in the most crime-prone ages of 15 and 40?

In closing, **it is important to note that this article does not propose that the need for proactive policing practices will no longer be a vital part of public safety in Michigan. There are, and will continue to be, hot spots of crime—dots on which to place cops. Violent crime is, and will sadly continue to be, an ever-present danger, particularly in communities suffering from poverty and social breakdown.**

The issue is one of scale. Can a motivated, proactive police force of 300 officers do the work that was required of 400 officers generations ago due to the changes in demographic realities? Is it possible that many agencies will be tasked with doing less with less in terms of personnel resources in the years ahead as the number of violent offenders declines as a result of demographic trends?

These questions and more should be a part of the conversations that law enforcement leaders and elected officials have involving staffing and operations in light of an aging population—a development that will likely have a dramatic effect on Michigan law enforcement in the years ahead.

About the Author

Matt Dolan, J.D.

Matt Dolan is a licensed attorney who specializes in training and advising public safety agencies in matters of legal liability, risk management and ethical leadership. His training focuses on helping agency leaders create ethically and legally sound policies and procedures as a proactive means of minimizing liability and maximizing agency effectiveness.

A member of a law enforcement family dating back three generations, he serves as both Director and an instructor with Dolan Consulting Group. He has trained thousands of law enforcement professionals over the last decade.

His training courses include [Internal Affairs Investigations: Legal Liability and Best Practices](#), [Supervisor Liability for Law Enforcement](#), [Recruiting and Hiring for Law Enforcement](#), [Confronting the Toxic Officer](#), [Performance Evaluations for Public Safety](#) and [Confronting Bias in Law Enforcement](#).

Disclaimer: This article is not intended to constitute legal advice on a specific case. The information herein is presented for informational purposes only. Individual legal cases should be referred to proper legal counsel.

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