The human resource challenges to policing during pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has increased human capital demands on the public sector to unprecedented levels. The demands are particularly large for healthcare workers and police who are at the forefront of pandemic management. The police's functions have multiplied in a way that risks personnel health. This is worrisome given that they have a crippling shortage of manpower. It's critical that the virus's toll on the police does not compromise their operating capacity.

As per data consolidated by the Indian Police Foundation, as on 15th May 2020, approximately 2,453 police and Central Armed Police Forces personnel have tested positive for the virus, more than 2,723 are under self-isolation and approximately 210 personnel have been injured in attacks on duty. The death of 21 personnel is an irreparable loss to police capacity. A lesser acknowledged source of strain is poor mental health and suicide. In Bhopal, for example, a police officer attempted to kill himself due to anxiety related to COVID-19 duties. These setbacks to police capacity are not confined to India. In New York alone, it is estimated that 1 in 6 officers are infected with the virus. In the UK, the absenteeism rate is expected to go up to 25%.

As a key responder to pandemic management, police are enforcing lockdown, leading containment and contact tracing strategies, ensuring operations of supply chains and safe workplaces, protecting healthcare workers and supporting vulnerable populations. Their sustained engagement over the next 18-24 months will require meticulous capacity planning.

The US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention recommends planning for a 30-40% absenteeism rate in police during influenza pandemics. While we don't have a comparative statistic for reference in India, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in a letter to the states and union territories on 2 May 2020 has asked the state police and paramilitary forces to be ready with a "second line of defence". For this, they can enlist the support of "Home Guards, Civil Defence, NCC cadets, Scouts and Guides and Student Police Cadets".

MHA's guidelines also include: encouraging sick personnel to remain at home, considering the option of work from home for personnel not deployed in frontline duties, and making adequate provision of safeguards for personnels. This includes sufficient supplies of personal protective gear and regular disinfection of police premises, equipment and vehicles. The guidelines also recommend expanding police control rooms to incorporate special COVID-19 cells that can exclusively look at COVID19 issues and be adequately equipped with trained staff and resources.

In addition to the above guidelines, several other measures are needed to ensure operational continuity. First, police leadership should deploy rest and rotation policies to reduce the likelihood of exhaustion. For example, Bangalore police has been keeping 25% of its force on standby since 5th April. Second, they should assign desk duties to older police personnel and

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those with other health complications, as they are more susceptible to this virus. Training on technology use to allow for working remotely will help. Third, if feasible, the police must consider shifting in-person services to teleservices to maintain social distancing. Such measures are being deployed in Canada and in some US States.

Fourth, routine check-ups, peer support programmes and counselling support should be provided to deal with mental health issues. Fifth, a portion of the staff should be demarcated and deployed to continue with core policing duties. Cyber crimes, trafficking of counterfeit and substandard goods, including medicines, and sexual violence have been identified as key crimes during the pandemic, as per a recent Europol report. Sixth, it is critical that persons in command must be identified and succession planning done in advance to avoid key man risk. Seventh, states must insure their frontline officers against adversities. Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab have announced a Rs 50 lakh life insurance cover for its police personnel in light of COVID-19.

Finally, the current crisis should be used as an opportunity to push for long-pending reforms. The police headcount ratio needs to increase. India's sanctioned police per lakh population ratio is 198.65 but the actual ratio is far less at 158.22. Making matters worse, even the sanctioned ratio is inadequate compared to the average (343.97) in 101 countries (excluding India). Investing in skilling is also a must. Improving training in investigation, use of technology, and community oriented policing (recommended under the Second Administrative Reforms) is much needed. These skills are highly useful for pandemic response strategies, such as containment and contact tracing.

Structurally, law and order should be segregated from investigation, and now possibly pandemic/emergency duties. The segregation was recommended in the 2006 landmark Supreme Court in Prakash Singh v. The Union of India case, and will help reduce the burden on police officers and increase the efficiency of response.

The pandemic will leave behind many learnings for organisational capacity, operations management and structures. Implementing long pending reforms should be the foremost one!