

The City of Billings recently received a report from the Center for Public Safety Management (CPSM) regarding the quality and efficiency of the Billings Police department. This outside, objective look at public safety in Billings confirms that Billings does, in fact, have a serious issue with public safety, but that the Billings PD (despite being stretched thin) “provides quality law enforcement services.” However, all departments have room to improve, and there are things the City of Billings can do to address its public safety problem; therefore, CPSM put forth 102 recommendations for improving policing and safety for our city.

Key Observations

- Billings has an abnormally high crime rate. In 2019 Billings had 610 violent crimes per 100,000 residents, compared to 405 in Montana and 379 nationwide (pg. 16, Table 3-1).
- Nonresidents, lack of jail space, and inadequate substance abuse and mental health treatment are significant contributors to the high crime rate (pg. 14).
- Billings PD is understaffed. Best practice is to have enough officers on patrol to ensure that no more than 60% of their time is dedicated to answering calls for service; Billings officers currently spend between 66.6% and 72.6% of their time responding to calls, putting them in a reactive, instead of proactive, posture (pg. 38-47).
- Billings PD could be more efficient by utilizing civilian employees and volunteers. Civilian support staff can reduce the amount of time officers spend on administrative tasks, leaving more time for policing (pg. 51).
- Billings PD’s decentralized facilities are another source of out of service time (pg. 126).

Key Recommendations

- Hire an additional 19.5 full-time employees (6 sworn officers and 6.5 civilians) (pg. 137, Table 8-5).
- Consideration should be given to revising the organizational restructure to more closely align similar work efforts and improve command and control (Rec. 102).
- Incorporate civilians into the patrol workforce to handle non-emergency calls, assist with investigations, direct traffic, etc. (Rec. 5).
- Assign detectives to specialized units rather than having all detectives generalize (Rec. 20).
- Pursue opportunities to acquire and relocate to a police facility that will better serve the needs of the community and department (Rec. 95).

3 Things City Council Can Do in 2021

- Provide additional funding, preferably by passing a public safety mill levy that sustainably provides adequate funding for police and fire operations.
- Develop a false alarm ordinance that incentivizes alarm owners to reduce the false alarms generated on their property through proper installation and operation of the alarm system.
- Prioritize addressing the lack of adequate jail space. Council will need to cooperate with the County and State, think creatively, and attack this problem on multiple fronts. Yellowstone County should use federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to expand the jail.