“Impossible Jobs or Impossible Tasks? Client Volatility and Frontline Policing Practice in Urban Riots” by Kevin Morrell and Graeme Currie extends the theoretical framework of Hargrove and Glidewell from their 1990 work *Impossible Jobs in Public Management*. Hargrove and Glidewell continue the apologetic mantra allowed for most public executives, which can be traced back to Robert Martinson’s “Nothing Works” (1974) essay. In fairness to Martinson, he was critically describing issues within inefficient and nonproductive correctional rehabilitation programs and was looking for change in order to improve results. Similarly, Hargrove and Glidewell do not portray a completely hopeless view and describe the coping mechanisms of successful bureaucrats, but they still allow for sympathy for the public administrator.

By using the specific example of policing riots, Morrell and Currie expand on Hargrove and Glidewell’s concept of impossible jobs by dividing jobs into tasks that are possible and impossible. This important distinction removes the concept of impossible jobs, a term that is overused (except for the rare circumstance of a job in which every task is impossible). This distinction cannot be overstated. Without it, public administrators and public servants may easily throw up the white flag of surrender and fail to provide the services that the public expects of them under the guise that their mission was impossible from the start.

Having worked in the public sector, and specifically policing, for more than 25 years, I have been exposed to several examples of this theme of hopelessness in accomplishing the mission. Being told that crime reduction is a greater societal problem that cannot possibly be solved by the police was the most common statement reflecting impossibility. Hearing from fellow colleagues how they were overwhelmed by their current assignment was another annoyingly repetitive theme. By looking at a job as a set of tasks, public administrators will be able to divide their mission into smaller, more consumable portions and triage which tasks are possible and which tasks need further thought to solve.

Policing in general and riot policing in particular are useful cases for demonstrating this new distinction. While some may perceive policing as an impossible job, it is a job with many tasks that are achievable and a few tasks that are impossible. Even within riot policing, there are tasks such as crowd containment, barrage protection, and cordon formation that are possible and should be applied when feasible. Other tasks, such as determining crowd motivation, factions within crowds, and reaction to escalation or deescalation of force, prove more difficult and appear to be impossible.

Morrell and Currie’s inclusion of frontline supervisors is a significant step in researching impossible jobs and an improvement on the framework. Prior to this work, the field was strictly reserved for commissioners and agency heads. Research examined behavior in the context of riot policing, where decisions have to be made quickly in the field at a local level by frontline supervisors with imperfect information. Knowing full well that their decisions might be fully reviewed after the fact by a board of inquiry with access to information not available to them at the front line, supervisors could easily perceive such responsibility as an impossible task. Such perceptions might well lead some frontline supervisors to indecision.

Overall, Morrell and Currie’s extension of the framework removes complete pessimism from certain jobs deemed impossible by dividing a job into tasks that may or may not be possible. This new concept allows for accountability for commissioners and frontline supervisors for routine or difficult tasks while acknowledging certain tasks within a job title as impossible. This distinction will also prevent managers of difficult jobs from being lionized purely for assignment or appointment to a position deemed impossible. Under this new framework, only a small number of positions should be deemed impossible.
Morrell and Currie imply but fall short of suggesting that ingenuity in public administration is the goal. Good bureaucrats manage tasks that are possible. Great bureaucrats are those who manage the possible tasks and convert impossible tasks into solvable practices. In the case of riot policing, a great supervisor, as opposed to a merely good one, will devise a nonverbal tactical communication system for frontline officers and tactics to subdivide mobile crowds. Such a supervisor might devise techniques to gather intelligence to identify factions within a crowd, thus reducing an impossible task to a feasible assignment. These accomplishments would show creativity and determination in solving a problem.

Morrell and Currie’s work can prevent unnecessary lionization of public managers, allow their evaluation based on the performance of tasks that are manageable, remove criticism from tasks that are impossible, and promote the demonstration of ingenuity by converting tasks from the impossible to the possible.

References