Recruiting & Retention: The Mental Health Effects of 'Doing More with Less' in Law Enforcement

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Abstract

Law enforcement agencies across the country are struggling to maintain a sufficient number of qualified officers, and the lack of staff has a negative impact not only on the community but also on the individual officer's physical and mental well-being. This additional stress, added to an already hazardous profession, has highlighted the negative aspects of law enforcement, and is causing tenured officers to leave their agencies. Maintaining a sufficient number of qualified officers has reached a critical juncture in our society. This current trend has caused a significant impact on how law enforcement officers interact with the citizens they serve. The challenge of retaining and recruiting law enforcement officers has become more difficult against the backdrop of economic challenges and expanding responsibilities, coupled with a significant decrease in resources. As agencies plan to deal with the staff shortages, organizational leaders need to become more adaptive and plan for deep change on how mental health issues are handled throughout different law enforcement organizations. Maintaining and improving the mental health for new and current law enforcement officers needs to be the utmost priority of all law enforcement agencies. To gain insight into these challenges we will explore professional law enforcement research articles and course material from the National Command and Staff College.

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Introduction

Staffing issues within the law enforcement profession are a complex phenomenon. There is a significant amount of research on retention and recruitment in the law enforcement profession that speaks to the current trends. An article entitled, *Police Recruitment and Retention for the New Millennium,* speaks to these trends (Wilson, Dalton, Scheer, and Grammich, 2010). Most of the research focuses on the end product, meaning how the lack of staffing affects the community and the agency. Some of the more prevalent proposals speak to a significant correlation between staff and crime rates, that the more officers a department has, the more they will be able to deter crime in a proactive manner. While on the surface this approach seems to be valid and fairly easy to comprehend, the problem is much more intricate. Police agencies are being asked to do more, either with the same staffing numbers or at a reduced staff. Agencies with a limited staff are still expected to adequately serve and protect the communities they are sworn to safeguard, (Wilson et al., 2010) but the emotional effect to the officer who is tasked to fulfill these mandates must be examined.

One of the emerging topics in connection to the retention and recruitment issues in the law enforcement profession is an unintended consequence, but one that has been playing a more significant role in the causation of waning retention (Nardi, 2021). There is an unintended consequence that must be explored and that is the mental health side effect of tasking officers to do more with less—fewer resources, less community support or the appearance of such, less support from organizational leadership, and fewer options for advancement or training, just to name a few. Improving the mental health for all law enforcement officers facing these challenges needs to be of the utmost priority for every law enforcement agency.

Most agencies have fully recognized that with the current trends in recruitment and retention, agencies will not be able to sustain themselves organizationally. The question that every agency is attempting to answer is how the agency can improve retention and recruitment rates within their organization. The unfortunate reality is the lack of qualified officers not only affects the communities and police departments, but it also has a significant impact on the individual officer and their physical and mental well-being.

While examining the current trends in recruiting and retention within the law enforcement profession, it is just as important, if not more so, to understand the potential 'why' behind what seems to be a mass migration out of this profession and what agencies and officers can do to reduce the emotional and physical impact of doing more with less.

Current Issues with Retention and Recruiting

In tackling the current issues with retention and recruiting within law enforcement, it is essential to first look at who is currently leaving the profession. From a generational perspective, the Baby Boomer generation is at the point of retirement and is leaving the profession at a much higher rate than qualified replacements can be hired (Wilson et al., 2010). It is fairly easy to understand and commend those who have committed their entire working adult life to the service of others. The profession of law enforcement was once revered as a noble and just profession, but that cultural perspective has shifted, and it is important to look at what caused that change.

A change in retention and recruiting based on generational preferences is found when examining a generational connection to the workforce shifts (Wilson et al., 2010). The younger generation of workers might be less committed to an organization than older generations and are more likely to even change career paths altogether (Snyder, 2017a). This problem is

compounded by the lack of cohorts of young people failing to meet the minimum requirements for becoming sworn officers (Wilson et al., 2010).

The growing trend of unfulfilled expectations and the stigma of the new norm on how officers are perceived, either in the media or by certain segments of the population, may be a contributing cause to underlying mental health factors that are exacerbated by the additional stress of the job. These factors, compounded by the lack of resources to deal with the stress in a healthy and productive manner, has caused officers to voluntarily leave much earlier in their careers than ever before (Wilson et al., 2010).

The youngest generation of workers has shown a significant preference for extrinsic work values, such as prestige, changing tasks, social and cognitive aspects of work, and flexibility (Wilson et al., 2010). Recruiting this generation has proven to be more challenging due to the current negative public perception. Younger workers have significant reservations about the profession in general and feel they are more apt to be disliked, and they expect to encounter hostility and disrespect every day on the job (Todak, 2017). The reality is that being a police officer not only comes with innate physical hazards, but that there is a significant emotional hazard that is far too often left unaddressed until it manifests itself in unwanted behaviors, such as domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, suicidal ideation, or suicide itself. It is clear that these are unfortunate side effects of not handling the stress of the job appropriately. More importantly, it is up to the leadership of agencies to change the status quo, as new emerging leaders need to be adaptive thinkers as they are now challenged to come up with solutions (Anderson, Gisborne, & Holliday, 2006).

When it comes to retention, an officer's overall physical and emotional wellness is key to maintaining not only a healthy employee, but also a more productive and empathic human being.

It is no surprise that officers feel they are mistreated by certain segments of the population, and as a result, some officers, who do not have the proper coping mechanisms and lack emotional intelligence may take on an *us versus them* mentality. This negative perception is compounded by the officers' negative perception of society. This false narrative plays far too well on both sides of the spectrum. If this false narrative is allowed to go unchecked, more officers will leave the profession and the potential hiring pool will be tainted by this negative misperception in society.

Negative Wellness Effects of Law Enforcement

The physical and mental wellness of law enforcement officers is paramount to a law enforcement organizations ability to effectively protect and serve its community. Several factors have the potential to negatively impact the wellness of law enforcement officers if not addressed and managed by individual officers and the organization. In our experiences, shift work, long/odd hours, and experiencing traumatic events are more likely to be associated with the negative aspects of being a police officer. Recently, the positive public perception of police officers has been challenged by factions of society and parts of the country have called for less funding for police departments. Furthermore, technological advances, including body worn cameras, and media coverage related to critical incidents involving law enforcement, has added scrutiny towards police officers' actions. Nardi (2021) states, "An intense focus on what police do wrong has led to a skewed perception of how they perform their jobs more generally" (para. 5). These factors have contributed to the challenges of recruiting new police officers and have led to a high number of resignations and retirements among tenured police officers. Lack of successful recruiting and the increase in officers leaving has led to manpower shortages amongst

law enforcement agencies. These shortages have added more responsibilities on police officers

and forced some to work overtime to fill the voids created by unfilled positions.

Law enforcement officers have always faced long hours and shift work, which often

requires them to sacrifice sleep to meet the needs of the organization. With organizations

struggling to meet manpower demands, some officers are being asked to work even more hours

to meet community needs. Winter (2021) states, "The Minneapolis Police Department has spent

about $3 million more than budgeted on overtime this year, with about half due to a staffing

shortage, the department's finance director said Monday" (para.1). Although extra hours may

benefit officers financially, working more and sleeping less negatively impacts their physical and

mental health. Fatigue over a long period of time leads to irritability, cognitive impairment,

memory loss, impaired moral judgement, increased reaction time, decreased accuracy, and an

impaired immune system (Harrington, 2017). Ultimately, when an officer suffers from these

effects, their ability to effectively protect and serve themselves and the community suffers.

Organizations must recognize the risk fatigue places on officers and the community and take

proper steps to manage those risks. Harrington (2017) states, "Progressive leaders must

continuously seek strategies to eliminate or mitigate risks that threaten safety, impair resources,

or cause litigation."

Police officers consistently encounter dangerous situations and contact individuals going

through traumatic events, which could lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These

stressful experiences and a culture that has not always promoted a healthy avenue to cope,

negatively impact the mental health of police officers.

Such exposure can impair the mental well-being of officers and affect their ability to

perform duties to the public. The potential long-term effects of PTSD in police officers

may additionally lead to behavioral dysfunction such as substance abuse, aggression, and

suicide (Violanti, 2018, para. 1).

In the past, police officers were expected to compartmentalize their feelings and move

onto the next incident. It is critical that law enforcement leaders promote change within their

organization to proactively address the stress impacting their officers. This type of change may

be a cultural shift for their department but protecting officer's mental well-being is vital. Long

(2017a) states, "To halt erosion a leader must take risk and step outside organizational

boundaries."

It is no surprise that more officers died of suicide last year than were victims of homicide

on duty. We all know officers who have succumbed to the unique burdens of the job in

other ways as well, such as alcoholism, multiple divorces, and other personal problems

(Strong, 2019, para. 1).

It is important to remember that even the strongest most respected officers can suffer the

damages of PTSD and recognize that the ripple effects of these symptoms not only impact the

officer, but their families, the department, and the community.

Increased scrutiny and negative public perception of police officers adversely impacts an

officers' mental health. Transparency in law enforcement is critical to building strong and

trusting relationships with the community. However, with the implementation of body cameras

and other technological advances, police officers' actions are scrutinized more closely than ever

before. Police officers have an enormous responsibility to equitably enforce the law and uphold

the constitutional rights of community members. Often this responsibility requires them to make

split second decisions under intense circumstances. These decisions are then judged by

organizational leaders, fellow police officers, the public, and the media. Additionally, high

profile officer involved shootings and in-custody deaths have led to some media members attacking the character of police officers.

> Exit interviews in the PERF survey and other data show that a key factor in the police resignations and retirements is the national conversation and protests that center on changing what the police do, how they're funded, and how to better hold officers accountable for abuse of force and racial bias (Westervelt, 2021, para. 9).

Far too often behavioral issues that have manifested from an underlying mental health issue or psychological trauma go undiagnosed and are compounded into unwanted and unacceptable behaviors. Agencies deal with such behavioral issues in a reactive manner, such as coming to work under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or when an officer is dealing with undiagnosed psychological trauma which manifests itself externally, perhaps in which an officer loses the ability to empathize and lacks the proper skill set to deescalate a situation, an excessive use of force is more likely to occur. In this example of the use of excessive force, the outward result is a review of the officer's actions in accordance with department policy. Agencies often fail to ask the tougher questions as to why the officer used unreasonable or excessive force in the first place. Instead, the question that needs to be asked is if there is psychological trauma associated as an underlying causation. If that is the case, agencies need to be proactive in recognizing these causations and offer resources to the officer on the early onset of psychological trauma, thereby leading to the potential reduction of complaints against officers. Transforming leaders must help the organization analyze the root cause of internal and external problems, thoroughly consider a range of solutions, and implement team members ideas (Anderson, 2017).

It is imperative to achieve a better understanding of how individual officers deal with the daily stressors of the job, which is now compounded by the current reality that officers are

expected to do more, be more, and know more than ever before in this profession. When mistakes are made, the potential consequences go far beyond just losing one's employment. The unfortunate reality is officers who make mistakes are being personally sued or criminally charged. It has long been understood within the profession that if an officer violates the core values and the oaths taken upon becoming an officer, that officer is not fit to continue to be a law enforcement professional (Snyder, 2017b). These officers, however, are not the focus of this paper. Rather, it is the officer who, after working a double shift that may include being called to a traumatic event, goes off shift without any psychological first aid to help them process what occurred. Conversely, in our own experiences if an officer is involved in any physically traumatic event, such as an officer-involved shooting where any degree of injury, is sustained, the officer is immediately taken to the nearest level one trauma facility without delay.

Organizational Change

It is not sufficient to acknowledge the negative wellness effects that are impacting current police officers and contributing to the recruiting and retention crisis across the country. Organizations and individual officers must both take responsibility for prioritizing officer wellness and take necessary steps to invest in current officers and highlight the rewarding nature of public service towards potential recruits. It is vital that organizational leaders embrace and encourage teamwork within the organization and community by clearly communicating the importance of officer wellness and demonstrating the organization's commitment to officer wellness by developing meaningful wellness programs and peer support systems. Teamwork is key to minimizing the negative wellness effects and maximizing wellness programs and peer support. Established teams work as a cohesive unit, can focus on common objectives, and perform for the future (Therwanger, 2020).

One of the promising methods of combatting the retention issue is dealing with the onset of psychological trauma, and emotional and mental health wellness, head-on (Jetelina, Molsberry, Gonzalez, and Beauchamp, 2020). However, before this can truly gain traction, deep change within the culture needs to occur. In general, agencies are often more concerned with the suitability of potential new hires than with the overall mental health of new to veteran officers. This lack of organizational empathy has the potential to cause a natural divide between the individual officer and the agency. For some agencies, promoting officer wellness may be a paradigm shift from the current culture. This type of deep change within an organization will be met with resistance and leaders must be prepared to combat the opposition. Transformational leaders encourage organizational change and are willing to experiment to find potential solutions and must be tenacious when implementing a new way of thinking (Long, 2017a).

Employee assistance programs are common amongst law enforcement organizations, and many have established peer support teams, but these programs are reactive, and organizations still fight the negative stigma of seeking help amongst police officers. The "tough guy" mantra of police officers causes many of them to refuse to ask for help for fear of looking weak to their fellow officers or being unfit for duty by their organization.

There is also an insidious and lesser known secondary danger of policing. The secondary danger of policing is often unspecified and seldom discussed. It is an artifact of the police culture and is frequently reinforced by police officers themselves. It is the idea that equates 'asking for help' with 'personal and professional weakness.' Secondary danger has been implicated in perhaps the most startling of all police fatality statistics, the frequency of police officer suicide (Digliani, 2021, para. 9).

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Officers who experience mental health trauma often do not seek services, even when they are available. Some of the reasons for this include concerns about confidentially in the department, disbelief in a psychologist's ability to understand their line of work, and feeling like they are not fit for duty (Jetelina et al., 2020). These issues further compound the problem of organizational credibility, which in turn affects organizational leadership (Anderson et al., 2006). In a profession that speaks of brother and sisterhood and trust as the backbone of its core values, it becomes difficult for an agency to expect unfettered loyalty from its officers in the face of cultural mistrust and the appearance of an organization's failure to adequately adapt to the known mental health crisis among police officers.

To combat this culture, organizational leaders must establish a cultivating culture that allows them to provide continual training to improve officers' understanding of these secondary dangers and the importance of addressing potential issues early. Therwanger (2020) states, "Train people to know more, cultivate people to grow more." Credible leadership will positively impact the organization's capacity to encourage officers to seek help when they face wellness issues. If organizational leadership is not viewed as credible, employees may question the agency's motives. Long (2017a) states, "People will not believe the message, if they don't believe in the messenger." Credible leaders are collaborative, concerned for people, visible, and gain commitment from employees (Long, 2017a).

In addition to Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and wellness teams, peer support teams are another important factor when addressing and promoting officer wellness. Well trained peer support teams provide officers with different support than therapists or EAP counselors. Dr. Digliani (2021) states, "The power of the peer is the factor that is a constant in the support provided by peer support team members. It is the factor that is not, and cannot, be

present in any other support modality" (para. 48). Organizations can implement a peer support system early in an officer's career and throughout the field training program, to familiarize them with the program (Digliani, 2021). As I look back on my experiences as a police recruit and working through the field training program, I would have benefitted from contact from members of a peer support team. For peer support teams to be successful, members must receive proper training and officers must believe the information they share will be held in confidence.

> For peer support teams to function well, police officers must also place an emphasis on developing statutory confidentiality protections, standardizing foundation training, standardizing ethical parameters, establishing clinical supervision and a "ladder of escalation" (immediate clinical consultation and support for the supporters), ongoing monthly training, regularly scheduled team meetings, and annual advanced training (Digliani, 2021, para. 51).

Effectively implanted peer support teams can provide support resources for the employees and their families. When combined with other employee wellness programs, peer support teams are essential to department's providing officers with the best support (Digliani, 2021).

It is imperative that organizational leaders become proactive in adapting to change. Much of the current crisis in retention and recruitment can be pinpointed to organizational leaders merely reacting to the current situation instead of anticipating and planning for change in a proactive manner (Prince, 1988). The current attempts at dealing with mental health issues are not yielding the expected results. For example, the potential lack of promotional opportunities, increased job dissatisfaction, boredom, and the feeling of being trapped by a skill set are often addressed as potentially problematic behavioral issues. From an organizational perspective, this may be accurate, but an argument should be made for what is the root cause of these issues.

The current police culture may be a contributing factor to how mental health needs are viewed. As leaders in our own organizations, we are now responsible for implementing this transformation within our own organizations. There needs to be a paradigm shift in how we lead going into the future. Failure to do so will perpetuate the potential false narrative that the agency does not care about its employees. In a highly competitive market where agencies are actively recruiting from the same pool of candidates, an agency's reputation for being indifferent to the needs of its employees will have a catastrophic long-term effect not only on that agency's ability to maintain staffing levels but may also have a negative societal effect on attracting highly qualified officers. (Wilson et al., 2010).

As organizations begin to tackle the current trends of retention and recruitment from the perspective of increasing awareness and reducing the stigma that is associated with mental health issues, it will be of the utmost importance to engage the officers who are currently suffering from psychological trauma, whether that trauma is reported or not, as well as engaging potential new hires on the reality of the psychological trauma that is often associated with the profession. Agency leaders must be able to act quickly, be flexible, responsive, resilient, and creative not only to survive but also to thrive in the complex and unpredictable field of law enforcement (Anderson et al., 2006). The added stress of being required to do more with fewer resources, less support, and less perceived appreciation plays on the mental wellness of every officer, and if left unchecked, will have negative short and long-term consequences on the profession and the individual officer.

Potential Solutions

It is nearly impossible to train and prepare someone for the psychological trauma that comes with being a police officer. Some of the tragedies that are witnessed by officers include,

but are not limited to, horrific car crashes, the death of a child, mass casualty events, officer

involved shootings and in-custody deaths. Officers are trained to respond to and handle some of

the most traumatic events in a highly professional manner, but more training is needed in

handling the long-term effects of exposure to trauma. Although not physically injured, these

events can leave officers with unseen mental scars. The employee's level of emotional

intelligence may impact their ability to manage the emotions they experience when exposed to

these traumatic situations. Emotional intelligence continues to increase over every decade of life

and emotional intelligence skills can be improved (Robinson, 2017). With that in mind, it is vital

that departments emphasize the importance of growing employees' emotional intelligence and

provide training and resources on this topic.

   To be proactive regarding these traumatic events, organizations should enact policies

requiring wellness units be notified and respond to the scene to meet with officers. This allows

officers involved to debrief these incidents with other officers and personnel trained to identify

potential warning signs. Wellness team members on scene are then able to assess the situation

and provide additional resources they deem necessary. Furthermore, it is our belief the sooner

organizations can provide meaningful resources to the officer the better the officer will be able to

cope with the psychological trauma. It will also mean the organizational leadership will be

obligated to provide future follow-ups with the officers as needed. Also, organizations must be

cognizant of officers staying in certain positions for long periods of time. These positions

include Homicide, Child Abuse investigators, and Sex Crimes. Although experience and gained

expertise is valuable, the results of continuous exposure to these types of crimes can have

devastating and lasting results on officers. To address this, organizations could implement

annual wellness checks to allow professionals to evaluate the officers' mental health and make

recommendations. Agencies should also consider policies that encourage employees to transfer from these positions. In addition, it is our position to fully assist officers with a mild onset of psychological trauma, encouraging transfers not only creates openings for other employees to have opportunities it has the potential to combat mental and emotional fatigue. These increased opportunities encourage officers to remain with the department and can be used to recruit new hires.

A potential practical solution is the development of a rubric that captures psychological trauma that is either significant or reoccurring. Most agencies do well in getting officers assistance after major events such as officer involved shootings. However, more needs to be done in making the connection between repeated mistakes, less than desirable behavior, psychological trauma or exposure to potentially traumatic events, and the impact it has collectively on the officer. A rubric may be able to account for mental health stressors that are potential contributing factors to low-performance marks. This practical approach should be applied to officers at different levels of need. The ability of the leader to employ a style-shifting approach that is unique to each situation has the potential to be more productive in intervention phases and instrumental in developing emotional intelligence, which will assist the officer in recognizing certain triggers and stressors that are associated with psychological trauma.

To shift the negative perception associated with law enforcement and promote successful law enforcement personnel, organizations must leverage media platforms to their benefit. Leadership should identify successful employees within their agency who exemplify their agency's core values and share their story. Although the negative circumstances of law enforcement receive ample coverage, there are many law enforcement professionals that effectively cope with the stressors they encounter. Hopefully, shining a light on employees who

managed the negative wellness effects of a law enforcement career will normalize the need for officers to accept help and reverse the dangerous stigma of the "tough guy" mantra. To highlight these employees and the other benefits of a career in law enforcement, agencies should work with local news media as well as create content for their own social media outlets. Communicating through local news media, assists in fostering the relationship between the department and media members. Using social media helps reach a wide range of people within the community including the younger generation and gives the agency complete control of the means used to deliver their message.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, throughout each of our law enforcement careers we have both worked with and personally known police officers who were impacted and succumb to the negative wellness effects associated with law enforcement. Whether the individual became reliant on alcohol, suffered from severe PTSD, or took their own life. The call for systematic deep change is already upon us.

Effectively addressing recruiting and retention amongst the current climate and issues facing law enforcement organizations is a critical task. Although staffing levels may be decreasing throughout police agencies, the responsibilities and expectations placed on police officers are not, challenging law enforcement personnel to accomplish more with fewer resources. The extra work and additional trauma this potentially exposes officers to, can have debilitating effects on their wellness. When an officer's wellness suffers, so does their capability to provide the community with the high level of service they deserve and expect. The additional stress this adds to an already mentally and physically demanding career is contributing to officers leaving the profession which places additional demands on the remaining personnel.

Furthermore, officers reaching retirement age, increased scrutiny, and a negative public perception narrative are also contributing to increased resignations/retirements and a decrease in recruiting numbers. These changes and new challenges in law enforcement, will not be solved by approaching recruiting and retention as it has been in the past. Leaders must initiate new tactics, display adaptive leadership, and evolve to meet the present demands. Captain Dugan (2017) states, "Effective leaders are compelled to continually improvise, innovate, and adapt to ever changing circumstances, deliberately.

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