

# Recruitment and Retention Crisis Facing Law Enforcement

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National Command and Staff College, Session #014

January 2022

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## **Abstract**

A significant issue affecting law enforcement agencies around the country is the hiring and retention of police officers. This paper will analyze a confluence of factors in our modern society that have combined to create the crisis we are facing today in the law enforcement community. Some of these factors include the historic calls for police accountability and reform, negative attitudes toward the profession, increases in retirements and resignations, generational challenges, hiring standards, and a strong job market. First, we will examine how law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve are affected by this workforce crisis and discuss the challenges ahead for the current and future leaders of these agencies. Next, we will discuss the changing dynamics of policing and the strategies needed to succeed in the future. Within the analysis and examination of this topic, we include research found from various sources, concepts, practices, experiences, and skills learned by the authors of this paper.

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This paper is the collaborative effort of four currently serving law enforcement leaders representing agencies in the Southeast region of the United States. As leaders in departments that are, both large and small, we have experienced the shortfalls of staffing shortages due to the difficulties in recruiting, hiring, and retaining officers to fill our thinning ranks. This is precisely the dilemma facing many police departments nationwide today and, if unaddressed, is expected to get worse if current trends continue.

Historically throughout all our careers, the recruitment and retention of police officers has always been an issue due to the inherent danger involved and the seemingly low pay. However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has added its own set of challenges that has exacerbated this issue across the field. The advent of technology, such as body worn cameras and cell phones, has thrust the actions of a few officers into the limelight and resulted in community demands for police reform and the recent defund the police movements. A few high-profile cases have been used by the media and activist groups to demonize police officers, resulting in an increasing lack of respect for a profession which was typically one of esteem. This increased scrutiny and villainizing has resulted in more hesitancy to enter the law enforcement career path. As Generation-X leaders, the recruitment pool is changing to one of primarily Millennials, who has very different motivations, experiences, and work ethic value systems which present its own set of challenges.

### **Factors Contributing to the Crisis of Recruitment and Retention**

The shooting death of Michael Brown by a police officer in 2014 sparked outrage across the country and numerous protests chanting “Hand’s up, don’t shoot”. Although a subsequent FBI investigation found that there was no evidence that Brown had his hands up in surrender or

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said “don’t shoot” before he was shot, it didn’t matter. The media narrative of an innocent black male gunned down by a white police officer was sensationalized and politicized to an extent we had rarely, if ever, seen before. In addition, the public’s perception of policing had further diminished on the heels of Freddie Gray and George Floyd. George Floyd ignited a mass movement centered on persistent police violence against Black Americans and intensified calls for systemic change in American policing (Subramanian, 2021). In many of these incidents, ineffective police, and failure to issue timely official statements before the media created their own narrative led to misinformation and a negative outcome. The Black Lives Matter movement, which was founded after the death of Trayvon Martin at the hands of a neighborhood watch coordinator, has been the most influential and prolific purveyor of this narrative. Black Lives Matter causes raised over 10 billion dollars in the past few years from citizens, grants and corporations and they are a force to be reckoned with when it comes to the police reform movement (Brown, 2020).

In the months following George Floyd’s highly publicized death in 2020, over 30 states have enacted more than 140 new laws aimed at reform and police oversight. Those new laws encompassed a broad range of topics, such as restricting the use of force, mandatory body cameras, revamping disciplinary systems, installing civilian oversight and increased transparency in officer misconduct cases. New York has moved to make it easier for citizens to sue officers and Maryland, one of the first states to adopt the Law Enforcement Officer’s Bill of Rights, was the first state to repeal it (Eder, Keller, & Migliozi 2021 para 1). Many police agencies are now tasked with having to look at their policies while being transparent when it comes to dealing with minority communities to make transformative changes. This begs the question, do our current officers have the mental fortitude, integrity, and character to change the long-taught methods of

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Law Enforcement to better fit the changing surroundings we currently police in? With increasing public and media scrutiny and cries for fundamental reform, agencies must prepare to shift their philosophies from merely enforcing laws to a broader, more effective means of community engagement. The manner in which basic police work is handled is even up for debate with many groups saying that law enforcement officers should not be the first point of contact for people suffering from mental illness. This presents its own set of challenges considering that an estimated one fourth of fatal police interactions are the result of someone with mental health issues and/or substance abuse disorder (Westerville, 2021). Furthermore, many of those interactions can escalate quickly and become a dangerous situation for all parties involved, complicating the issue and need for armed response.

### **Morale**

The 2020 Gallup poll of American's Confidence in Major Institutions showed only 48% of people placed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in police officers. That was the worst rating in the polls history since its 1973 launch and in 2021, that rating only rose 3% to 51%. In a state poll in California, only 39% of people said that police were "racially fair", and that rating fell to only 19% among the black community (Mellen, 2021). The systematic portrayal of police officers as the enemy has produced an environment where police officers are less respected and therefore more likely to be disobeyed. This change has made officers' job significantly harder and even more dangerous. Moreover, recent riots and calls to defund the police have created a sense of uncertainty for many officers who used to see police work as a source of job security. This environment has produced an environment that has resulted in low morale and frustration among many officers, with many deciding that the job is not worth it anymore.

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## **Retirements & Resignations**

A recent survey by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF, 2021) shows that there has been a startling 45% increase in retirements as well as an almost 20% increase in resignations in the 2020-2021 over previous years. Those numbers represent a looming catastrophe for the law enforcement profession if we continue down this road. The sheer volume of negative stories in the media involving law enforcement may be creating new challenges for recruiting, hiring, and retaining well qualified officers. The negative response elicited from the public may cause people who might otherwise consider a career in policing to look in other directions for employment. While retirements and resignations are on the rise, the applicant pool has shrunk by approximately 5%. Additionally, the LA Daily News reported that over the past 5 years, one quarter of all resignations have come from officers with less than 5 years on the job (Mellen, 2021). These sobering statistics have resulted in increased burnout and stress placed upon existing officers. To cover the employment deficits, many departments have no choice but to require officers to pull overtime on a regular basis. The Covid pandemic has further exacerbated this issue as departments struggle to cover sick officers' positions while already being short staffed.

## **Hiring Standards and Job Market**

Further complicating the employee shortage issue is the process of becoming a police officer. The hiring process is lengthy and difficult, often taking between 4 months to a year to complete. Applicants must pass several interviews, a background check, mental and physical fitness tests as well as a polygraph and be drug free. An applicant's work history, past drug use or even speeding tickets can all make an applicant ineligible. As many of us in leadership within our departments have seen, it is not unusual for up to 90+% of applicants to be expunged during

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this process. If the recruit does manage to make it through the initial hiring stages, there is still a mentally and physically challenging academy which consists of a minimum of 664 hours of training in 42 different areas. The hours of training required to be certified as a police officer vary from state to state (Mellen, 2021).

The present recruitment challenges dealing with Law Enforcement have many layers. There is currently a significant decline in applicants, specifically due to what was cited previously. The negative political climate that has risen from incidents like George Floyd's death sheds a tarnished light on this noble profession. Our traditional pipeline of ex-military members seeking law enforcement jobs has also decreased, as there are fewer Americans volunteering to serve in the military. Additionally, the incidence of veterans who served in the Middle East suffering from PTSD is conservatively estimated between 11-20%. With the amplified public concern over excessive force, this creates the need for even more scrutiny and screening of our once reliable military resource of applicants (Smith, 2016) Statistically there has also been a drop off with “police family” or tradition officers. This increasingly shallow pool of candidates leads to numerous issues, but primarily it intensifies the competition between agencies for the best candidates.

### **Generational Challenges**

Snyder (2017) asserts, “Planning for the future of law enforcement leadership can be more successful if consideration is given to the fact that tomorrow’s leaders and new employees may have completely different motivations, attitudes, needs, desires, and ways of doing things than today”. However, supervising officers from different generations does have its challenges.

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The new crop of applicants are primarily millennial and Gen-Xers. These age groups have very different motivations and place less value on the benefits which once drew people to police work. Paid academy, overtime opportunities, regular pay increases, job security and generous retirement do not hold the same lure as it did for their “Baby Boomer” counterparts. Younger workers are much more interested in a work/life balance and do not value employment longevity as a motivating factor. According to a recent Bureau of Labor Statistics taken in November 2020, the average millennial tends to be transitory, spending approximately 4.1 years on the job before moving on (Mellen, 2021)

Lastly, our challenges lie with how we inspire during this current climate of change. Without a doubt, millennials are a societal force that today comprises the largest segment of the workforce. As we have witnessed with such movements as Black Lives Matter and the Women's March, millennials are willing to be active about issues that affect them directly. To a degree not seen in any previous generation, millennials see themselves in the shoes of others who don't look like them, speak the same language, have the same education, or come from the same background, perhaps because of their high level of respect for diversity. Passion for an issue drives millennials to get involved. Trust keeps them true to an agency addressing their issue. By agencies addressing police reform actively and being proper change agents, we automatically appeal to the generation of men and women who will comprise our profession's police forces for years to come (Economy, 2019 para 2).

### **Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Law enforcement officers and their leaders work in a dynamic environment. The current climate in police work is increasingly dangerous, lacks public support, and incurs intense media scrutiny. To address the challenges of working in this ever-changing environment, an adaptive



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leadership style is a must. This type of leader emphasizes the importance of adapting to complex, rapidly changing environments, and focuses on creating the conditions for good leadership and problem solving (Spain, 2017). This type of leadership is critical to addressing the confluence of factors that have combined to create the recruitment and retention crisis facing law enforcement.

To meet the demands for social reform, accountability, and the challenges of recruiting and retention, most law enforcement agencies may need to make “deep” changes to its strategic alignment or organizational practices. In contrast to incremental changes, these modifications are more difficult to achieve and require a completely new way of thinking and behaving. Long (2017) asserts, “Deep change is major in scope, it breaks with the past and it is often irreversible. The deep change effort distorts existing patterns of actions and involves taking risks, something that is done not very often”. For instance, today’s police department is no longer just crime fighters, they are increasingly responding to issues outside of their traditional roles. Incidents involving persons with mental illness or behavioral health issues, homelessness, and drug dependencies have become commonplace. To meet these new challenges, police agencies will need to develop new strategies for recruiting officers with needed skills. During our law enforcement careers additional training in the use of such medical intervention as application of Narcan to an overdose victim has become the social and professional norm. The traditional approach to recruiting applicants from police families or leaving the military is no longer sufficient for modern policing. They must update their recruiting methods and look outside traditional candidate pools. For instance, many police departments are starting to offer cadet programs and internships for college students to encourage interest in policing from young, college-educated adults (Mostyn, 2018).

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The beginnings of change start with how the public views the legitimacy of its police forces. Law enforcement agencies must improve its relations with the Black, Latino, and young adults within their respective communities. Police departments that actively recruit and employ minority officers enhance their legitimacy among those groups, improve interactions and increase confidence among minorities. Community engagement is a key to reaching out to these communities. Ellis (2017) asserts, “Public safety agencies will always be judged by the intensity of our interactions. There’s no greater time to think about how we can unite and ignite our profession and the public we serve for the future”. Fostering working relationships with minority community leaders in churches, small businesses, and local organizations is paramount in cultivating better relationships and aiding in recruitment efforts. Law enforcement leaders must also consider the influence that officers have on juveniles and young adults in their community because today’s youth are potentially tomorrow’s police officers. Based on our personal experience, as leaders, positions such as School Resource Officers have the greatest potential to affect our youth in a positive manner while fostering a trust which can pay dividends.

A major concern from law enforcement agencies, large or small, around the country is whether today’s recruits have the skill set and temperament to meet the challenges of policing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Police agencies need a more diverse set of officers who possess key skills, such as emotional intelligence, problem-solving, technological expertise, empathy and “community-mindedness”, along with the traditional police officer skills required to meet the daily demands. To meet these requirements, the traditional way of recruiting must change. For instance, in the past, many police agencies highlighted specialized units like SWAT and other fast-paced images of officers forcing entries into buildings or firing high-powered weapons in their recruiting videos. These images don’t resonate with many in our population as they did in the past.

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Millennials and other young adults tend to be more attracted to the service aspect of policing. Police agencies would be better off presenting realistic portraits of what service-oriented policing is about and show the day-to-day work of policing in their communities. These changes would attract more non-traditional recruits (Mostyn, 2019).

Another factor affecting recruitment in law enforcement is the hiring standards. Finding enough candidates with the skills needed to succeed in today's law enforcement profession is challenging. To attract a larger pool of applicants in the hiring process, some agencies have relaxed standards in the hiring process while raising others. For instance, while some agencies have placed education and training requirements to their standards, some agencies in our region have relaxed their hiring standards regarding tattoos, facial hair, prior drug use, in particular marijuana. These changes reflect the shift in societal norms that many agencies around the country have adapted to (Mostyn, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

During these unprecedented and challenging times, law enforcement leaders need to adapt the principles of authentic leadership. They must be real, genuine and sincere in a way that closely aligns with their values, preferences, and needs. An authentic leader's integrity builds credibility, trust, inspiration, and accountability (Normore, 2017). By adopting the authentic leadership principles, law enforcement agencies can establish and maintain stronger bonds and relationships within the community and its leaders. If we understand our generational differences, it will assist us in reaching our goal of systemic change. By teaching our new recruits the why behind our job and what it truly means, which is service; we help to groom and raise the next generation of servant leaders. Actively cultivating relationships with the

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community, strategically recruiting, and selecting people who share their organizations' values, agencies can virtually solve their hiring and recruitment problems.

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