

**Recruitment and Retention in Law Enforcement**

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### **Abstract**

One of the most significant challenges that today's law enforcement agencies are facing is the ability to maintain adequate staffing. Law enforcement agencies are experiencing some of the highest attrition rates seen in years and the problem is further compounded by the reduced number of applicants to replace those that are lost and to meet the increased demands on law enforcement. As a result of constant societal pressures for reform and development, exacerbated by low staffing, law enforcement agencies are being forced to accomplish more with less. The hiring and retention crisis experienced in the law enforcement community has created a need to identify and address the issues that are plaguing law enforcement agencies across the nation.

In this study, a brief history of policing along with past and current recruitment methods will be discussed. Developing a better understanding of past practices can assist in identifying the underlying causes for this crisis. After attempting to identify the causes, potential solutions will be discussed in an effort to address the challenge for employee recruitment and retention felt by law enforcement agencies across the nation.

### **Introduction**

In its early stages, American policing consisted of watch groups, operating mainly at night, which were comprised of community volunteers responsible for alerting citizens of dangers and providing protection of property. Although these watch groups served as an effort for protection and an attempt at maintaining order, they proved to be rather ineffective, as watchmen were often accused of drinking or sleeping during their watch. As the country continued to grow, law enforcement groups such as sheriffs, constables, and additional citizen based watch groups were formed. These groups were developed to better organize law enforcement, but they too, proved to be ineffective and were often faced with allegations of corruption, dereliction of duty, and selective enforcement. As immigrants arrived in large numbers and major American cities developed, the need for full time police officers became ever apparent. In 1844, New York City created the first full time police department in the nation. Larger cities like Boston, Chicago, and New Orleans also organized police departments within the following decade. Continued growth across the nation caused the need for standardized federal and local laws which were passed in an attempt to give law enforcement officers the ability to identify and remove criminals from neighborhoods and ensure the safety and protection of their citizens (Archbold, 2012).

As the nation continued to grow, so did its need for law enforcement agencies. In the decades to come, law enforcement agencies made great strides in standardizing and improving law enforcement throughout the nation. Although great efforts and improvements were made, law enforcement was still plagued with allegations of corruption, racial inequalities, and criminal activity within the law enforcement communities themselves. Though the majority of law

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enforcement officers were noble, honest, and upstanding, major events such as the civil rights movements of the 1950's and 1960's, racial inequalities experienced in the war on drugs from the 1970's and 1980's, and incidents such as the Rodney King beating in 1991 all demonstrated major injustices in law enforcement and the need for continued improvement and development.

As societal pressures continued to build, law enforcement agencies made numerous efforts for reform. One such effort was the increase for hiring standards at most law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement agencies recognized the need for candidates of strong moral and ethical values that were both mentally and physically capable of meeting the demands for a career in law enforcement. Law enforcement by nature poses opportunities for corruption, moral turpitude, and an abuse of power. Enhancing hiring standards to “weed out” poor candidates became a method to ensure agencies received the best candidates possible and offered a layer of protection from those candidates that may be more susceptible to engaging in appropriate or unethical behaviors. Many law enforcement agencies began using psychological and personality testing along with polygraph or voice stress testing. Agencies also improved background investigations for potential employees and began conducting credit history investigations, social media checks, thorough employment, education, and military checks, and conducting extensive criminal history checks. These more stringent hiring processes were intended to reduce the number of candidates that displayed qualities that were not consistent with an agency's culture, detect any dishonest or unethical behavior that may disqualify a candidate, and ensure a candidate is mentally fit for the ever increasing duties a law enforcement officer must be able to manage during the course of their career.

Even with increased hiring standards, law enforcement agencies continued to see high application numbers. Traditional methods for recruitment including job postings in newspapers,

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online publications, and in governmental buildings along with promotion through word of mouth, proved to be effective. Law enforcement agencies had a larger pool of candidates to choose from which allowed agencies to be more selective and hire those best suited for the needs of their department or agency. The number of full-time law enforcement officers reached a peak in 2008 with 708,569 nationwide (Duffin, 2022). With law enforcement agencies having large numbers of applicants, little consideration was given to the needs of the applicant. The selection or hiring processes for candidates could range anywhere from six to eighteen months and often required candidates to report for testing multiple times during this time period often during normal business hours which required candidates to miss work or school to attend testing. The testing dates were often spread out over a great deal of time and agencies claimed the need for sufficient time to conduct thorough background investigations or schedule comprehensive psychological tests.

Although these higher standards for employment have proven to be effective, and the results are likely immeasurable, law enforcement agencies continued to have problems within their communities. Examples of unnecessary use of force, unjustified police shootings and in-custody deaths, and continued allegations of racial injustices are continually problematic for law enforcement agencies. In more recent times, incidents such as the officer involved shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the officer involved shooting of Laquan McDonald in Chicago, Illinois, and the in custody death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota have all contributed to public outrage and the demand to “defund the police” and the need for police reformation. As the demand for police reform increased and many law enforcement agencies and professionals were portrayed as villains or demonized, the number of candidates that sought a career in law enforcement began to dwindle. Law enforcement agencies that were once

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inundated with applications have seen a sudden decline in applicants and interest. Now recognized as a crisis in law enforcement, many agencies are struggling to find new or innovative ways to recruit law enforcement professionals. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) conducted a survey in 2019 in which seventy-eight percent of law enforcement agencies reported having difficulty in recruiting qualified candidates and seventy-five percent of law enforcement agencies reported that recruiting is more difficult today than it was five years ago (IACP, 2019).

As law enforcement is once again faced with a new demand for reform and development along with increased responsibilities and duties, increasing populations, and an increase in violent crime, the need for more effective recruitment for law enforcement professionals is evident. “At least ten major cities lost historic numbers of citizens to murder last year. Nationally, police data suggests homicides rose seven percent in 2021. Fatal shootings have increased roughly eighty percent since 2014 (Time, 2022). Understanding the demands placed on law enforcement professionals and the example of increased homicides along with the alarming increase in gun violence clarifies the need for communities to have adequately staffed law enforcement agencies. In an effort to address the crisis of recruitment and retention in law enforcement, agencies must begin by identifying the underlying causes for the reduced numbers of qualified candidates and attempt to solicit more candidates without lowering or compromising standards.

### **New Approaches**

Now that we understand how law enforcement organizations have conducted recruitment in years past, we can assess why this traditional method limits the organization and how we can improve and gain recruits in a trying time. Traditional recruiting has been something that has

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been a rock for law enforcement organizations. A job posting would be made, and the applicants would flood in with minimal effort from the organization. However, over the last couple of years, this expected level of consistency has been slowly slipping away, leaving law enforcement organizations with limited applicants to fill the ranks. As we dive into the problem, it is evident that the workforce coming into law enforcement is comprised of the millennial generation. The millennial generation are those born between 1982- 2004. Millennials are "shaped by computers and technological advances, are comfortable with technology, seek flexibility, are independent, are multitaskers, and are the most highly educated generations who value training. Millennials are also demanding and some of the most confident generation who are very process focused." (Snyder, 2017). At face value, these are traits that almost any employer would value. So why is there a downward trend in law enforcement applicants nationwide? Most of the law enforcement workforce, including law enforcement leadership, is comprised of generation X (1960s-1980s) and the baby boomer generation (1946-1964). Generation X, baby boomers, and millennials see things from different perspectives, which vary enough for a disconnect to arise. This leads to fewer law enforcement applicants applying to organizations. Snyder (2017) explains that "boomers are raised to respect authority figures, believe that hard work pays off, pay their dues and step by step promotions. They are loyal to their employer and value chain of command." Law enforcement leaders have come up through the ranks, paid their dues, and rarely questioned authority. It seems inherently complex for these leaders to agree completely with the new hires within their organization. Law enforcement does not like change but is also quick to demand it. We get stuck in the mentality that we have always done it this way and are resistant to suspending our frame of reference and seeing things from another perspective. We must make an active effort, or our overall numbers will continue to decrease.

## **Rising to a New Level of Law Enforcement Recruiting**

A forward-thinking organization must be able to plan, adapt, and shift to maximize its recruiting effectiveness. “Planning is the key to long term success. Local government economics tend to lag approximately two or three years behind that of the general economy” (Tobia, 2019). Knowing that traditional law enforcement agencies are typically behind the times, let’s look at some ways to improve recruiting within a law enforcement organization.

### **Start with Why**

A law enforcement organization must have clearly defined goals and visions written and practiced by all organization members. “People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it” (Sinek, 2019). Why does your organization do what it does? Many organizations and leaders often overlook this simple assertion.

### **Re-Think How You Are Reaching Out to Potential Applicants**

Millennials are technology-focused and proficient; therefore, the ways we intend to reach them must align correctly (Snyder, 2017). Traditional recruiting job postings are simple word documents lacking attention-grabbing qualities. The organization's websites are similarly aligned and lackluster. The website and job posting are something the organization can control and is often the first impression that the organization has on an applicant. Break the norm, and make these adaptive with links to videos, member interviews, and photos of the building and equipment. Highlight the organization and explain who you are and why you do what you do.

### **Social Media**

Is something that the millennial generation is comfortable with and uses as a research and information-gathering tool (Snyder, 2017). This, again, is something that we, the law enforcement organization, control the narrative of. Fill Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter,

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and Instagram with positive organizational influence. Make regular, current, and tasteful posts, be faithful to the organization's identity, and use these as a tool to share the why statement of the organization.

### **Make Sure All Employees Look Sharp and Are Well-Equipped Each Day**

Every employee is an ambassador and recruiter for the organization and the city they serve. “The professional and uniform appearance of officers furthers the goals of law enforcement agencies by projecting a positive and professional image to the public (IAPC, 2019). When members are well equipped and outfitted, it sends a clear message to everyone who sees them that the organization cares and values its employees' needs. It is important to remember that first impressions are everything. If able, employ a dedicated recruiting element who are effective communicators, knowledgeable, engaging, and charismatic.

### **Go to the Applicants**

The days of the applicants' standing in line for us are gone. It is no longer about what the applicant can do for us but what the organization can do for the applicant. Seek out military bases, career fairs, college campuses, physical fitness facilities, and sporting events as hotbeds for recruiting potential. “Being able to physically speak with potential candidates can help hiring managers understand some of the more tangible factors, such as verbal skills and enthusiasm about a position” (Talent Intelligence, 2022). A knowledgeable recruiter who is well-informed and has a variety of handouts and swag to give out at the right place at the right time is highly beneficial to seek out and recruit potential applicants.

### **Applicant Ride-Along Programs**

Burlison (2022) indicates the importance of implementing a ride-along program for applicants. This is an informal interview process in which a law enforcement employee can see

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how the potential applicant acts, carries themselves, and how they view the profession to get a better view of the overall perspective of the applicant. Allowing this informal interview could be an enlightening experience for the employer and the potential applicant.

### **How Do You Get Potential Applicants to Show Up for Testing and Evaluation**

It begins with relationship building. “It takes five positive interactions to make up for one bad one” (Ellis, 2019). Remembering that each time a member encounters a potential applicant is an opportunity to maximize the member-applicant exchange process, just as we conduct the leader-member exchange process. Share your cell phone numbers, call, and text, learn about them and encourage them to answer questions. We should be sharing information, being truthful, and always being humble.

### **Gas Card**

Offer a small dollar amount gas card to applicants who attend the hiring process. This is a small gesture that shows that the organization values its potential members and recognizes that times are difficult, and that the organization appreciates the effort of the applicant to compete. If this gets applicants in the chairs to begin the process, it is worth the money.

### **Streamline the Hiring Process**

As discussed, traditional hiring processes were long, drawn out, and offered little communication. Law enforcement organizations should strive to minimize the stress on applicants and provide clear instructions and guidance on the who, what, when, where, and why of the process. For example, agencies have seen immense success in having the physical fitness test, agility test, written test, and oral board interview on the same day. If an applicant passes, they only have to do the medical, psychological, and polygraph, which could be scheduled in close succession and limit the back-and-forth trips for out-of-state applicants. Nowadays,

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applicants are not willing to wait six months to get a job. Millennials want results now, and they will go elsewhere if the law enforcement organization cannot provide this (Snyder, 2019).

### **Take Applications Year-Round**

It should be standard practice for a law enforcement organization to continuously take applications and have applicants complete the hiring process to establish a roster of qualified applicants. Law enforcement nationwide sees trends where employees stay only a brief time after getting hired. Having a qualified applicant pool to draw from is one less stressor that hiring managers have to stress about when vacancies arise.

### **Incentives**

Monetary incentives are always appreciated, regardless of profession. Often, new applicants are concerned with the bottom dollar on their paychecks. However, the cost of living is rising astronomically. The Social Security Administration advised the cost of living for 2022 was 5.9% and it will increase to 8.7% for 2023 (SSA, 2022). An agency that is aware of this and compensates its employees accordingly will be sought after. Offering an increased starting salary for education, experience, training, and language proficiency could give the agency an upper hand. Take-home vehicles, uniform allowances, provided equipment, gym memberships, allowed workout times, benefits packages, and flexible schedules are also key priorities in applicant consideration.

### **Continuous Improvement Teams**

Continuous improvement teams identify a leader then build a team that communicates, builds knowledge, integrates shared accountability, and establishes a culture of learning (Hinds Zandra Levesque, 2021). These teams should be implemented within every law enforcement organization to evaluate current policy, procedure, and organizational effectiveness. This team

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should be composed of members from all levels of the organization, proactive, forward-thinking, and embodying the visions and goals of the organization. In this application, the team should seek statistics on past and present recruiting efforts. Talk with other organizations and career fields on what works and what does not and be bold and pitch new and transformational ideas to attain new applicants.

### **Employee Retention**

Employee retention is an organization's ability to retain employees or the effort to keep employees. Every law enforcement agency invests time and money in training its employees to prepare them to perform their duties effectively. It is estimated to cost approximately one-hundred thousand to train a new officer from hire to fully capable to handle calls independently. In larger cities the cost can be as much as two-hundred and forty-thousand (FPPTA, 2019). It is a complete loss to departments that lose those fully trained employees when they quit. Training a new employee is far costlier than retaining an employee (Wilson et al., 2010). Employees leave for a variety of personal and professional reasons. An organization needs to understand these reasons and develop retention strategies to avoid these employee losses (Patil, 2022).

Law enforcement agency retention is frequently metaphorically compared to a bucket to describe police staffing and demand. Imagine a bucket partially filled with water. The water represents the current staffing level of police. The unfilled portion of the bucket is the unmet demand or need for officers. Somewhere in the middle of the unfilled portion is a line that separates the actual allocation for officers and the staffing deficit. The leak in the bucket is attrition, with much of the baby-boomer generation retiring and current generations either less likely to want to enter law enforcement or more likely to change careers. Unfortunately, the bucket has become more difficult to fill as it grows. Law enforcement responsibilities continue to

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broaden. Unfortunately, as the bucket becomes more challenging to replenish, it is also growing. Law enforcement responsibilities have broadened. Community policing increases the functions police undertake (Wilson et al., 2010).

### **Importance of an Organization's Vision and Mission Statement**

An organization's vision and mission statement or lack of can directly impact employee retention. Employees who better understand the organization's goals and objectives are more likely to remain with the organization. An organization's policies and procedures should also be transparent and understood by employees. Employees who understand the policies become more effective and feel less stress from not having any ambiguity (Patil, 2022).

### **Importance of an Organization's Brand and Image**

All law enforcement agencies are currently struggling with their branding and image. Unfortunately, no matter how well administered an agency is, they are affected by the misdeeds of departments across the nation. The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery by law enforcement or, in Arbery's case, a retired officer affects all law enforcement. Typically, police misconduct receives significant attention in the media. All departments must be brand driven in their communities by establishing trust with community stakeholders and showing your department is professional and ethical. Maintaining your organization's brand is a retention issue. Your employees want to be proud of their association with the department. If a law enforcement agency has a poor image in the community, it will also struggle with retaining its employees (Patil, 2022).

### **Importance of Advancement Opportunities, Career Planning, and Succession Planning**

Opportunities for advancement, career planning, and succession planning affect employee retention. Employees with opportunities for advancement had better job satisfaction.

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Career planning encourages employees to see potential growth and a path to success within an organization. Succession planning is essential to an organization, human capital that maintains knowledge, skills, and experience. Rothwell (2011), as cited in Garg and Weele (2012), stated that "succession planning is an organized structure formed by an organization to make sure that there is a continuous progress in the organization with retention, skills, and development for knowledge for the future and progression at the individual level."

### **The Importance of MAGNUS Leadership**

An organization's leadership has a significant effect on employee retention. We have all heard the expression, "people don't quit jobs; they quit managers." A toxic work culture is ten point four times more potent than compensation in predicting an organization's attrition rate (Willis, 2022). In the last six years, organizations of various disciplines have drastically increased spending on leadership development. Within leadership development, priorities have shifted a little. The number one priority for the last four years has been coaching, and communication is ranked number two. The most significant change in training priorities was interpersonal relationship skills which jumped from twelfth to eighth in the priority rankings. High-performing leaders are four times more likely to retain employees than low-performing leaders (Leimbach, 2022).

High-performing organizations typically include character development in their leadership programs. Adversely low-performing organizations usually do not have any character development. Both high and low-performing organizations see integrity and ethics as essential character elements. Low-performing organizations then focus on resilience. High-performing ones focus on curiosity, diversity, and openness (Leimbach, 2022).

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High-performing organizations have executive leaders that are engaged in leadership development. They get out of their offices and contact employees on the job. They model effective leadership behaviors and set clear expectations for leadership development. They mentor developing leaders instead of using the sink-or-swim approach in low-performing organizations (Leimbach, 2022).

Supervisor behaviors contributing to employee attrition include "setting poor examples, indecisiveness, unfairness, being overly critical or not sharing credit for work, and poor communication" (Wilson et al., 2010, p. 41-42). Leaders that adhere to the traditional leadership styles and do not communicate their vision lose employee trust. Current generations do not thrive in a silo or paramilitary-style organization. Therefore, training supervisors to mentor and review police bureaucracy is essential to improving retention (Wilson et al., 2010).

### **Importance of Employee Wellness Programs**

Law enforcement agencies should use a holistic approach toward employee mental health. The four pillars of health, nutrition, physical activity, sleep, and behavioral health, are not the only concerns for an organization. An agency should have open communication between its employees and leaders. Open communication allows leadership to understand employees' needs and problems. Furthermore, the communication must have a feedback loop. Addressing employee complaints makes employees feel heard through improvements or explaining why the circumstances are necessary (Willis, 2022). Employee assistance programs to assist employees with personal issues, such as substance abuse, relationship problems, and financial hardships, or peer-to-peer programs to assist employees with recovering from critical incidents or referral to a mental health professional are essential for employee health and retention. An adequately

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managed employee wellness program demonstrates that the organization cares about them and boosts employee retention (Willis, 2022).

### **Importance of Fair and Competitive Compensation**

Though employee compensation, such as salary and benefits, do not impact retention nearly as much as the actual work environment, inadequate compensation will enhance the other negative influences. Employees' complaints about pay or benefits are typical symptoms of other issues. However, organizations should seek salary fairness by modernizing their pay and benefits structures (Wilson et al., 2010). Remember, pay is far down the list of why employees leave an organization. The top reasons are employees not being treated respectfully, prevented from being able to make an impact, not being listened to, and not being given additional responsibility (Abrashoff, 2012, p. 13).

### **Importance of a Welcome Program**

Peer mentorship is a concept that can improve employee retention; it is not a field training program. An organization can assign a peer mentor to help a recruit by advising them of the occupation's challenges. They provide a person a recruit can talk to that is not in their direct chain of command and is not evaluating their training. Captain Abrashoff had his executive officer create a welcome aboard program, which helped guide new sailors and infected the jaded vets with the new sailor's enthusiasm (Abrashoff, 2012, p. 162-163).

Employee retention requires leadership to care about their employee's welfare genuinely. Leaders must have face-to-face conversations with employees that discuss more than just the job. Discussions about the employee's family, goals, experiences, needs, and much more. Leadership needed to share their knowledge and life experiences to help guide officers. Guidance in finances or retirement goals is required and can significantly improve an employee's quality of life.

### **Implications for Police Leadership**

In recent years, law enforcement agencies across the nation have expressed major challenges in recruiting new employees and retaining current employees. Although many have made efforts for improvement by taking actions such as increasing pay, implementing stronger benefits, and creating employee incentives, these improvements have not fixed the root problem for the recruitment and retention crisis. As more and more agencies feel the strains of inadequate staffing, they are conducting a deeper analysis of the causes for these challenges. One of the major causes for an agency's inability to recruit new employees and retain their current employees is directly related to the agency's culture. A positive culture creates loyalty, unifies people, and promotes higher performing employees (Therwanger, 2018). As agencies strive to improve their culture and unify employees, they must understand that this begins with strong and effective leadership. Leadership is the foundation of success and culture follows the leader. "Your culture is exactly at the level of your tolerance for poor performance" (Therwanger, 2018). As more emphasis is placed on leadership training and development, leaders can begin to understand the importance of the different styles of effective leadership and the tremendous impacts their actions have on their followers and the organizations as a whole. Thus leaders can begin to improve their agency's culture.

Improving an agency's culture is critical to addressing the employee recruitment and retention crisis in today's law enforcement agencies. The first step to improving culture is to develop and enhance leadership abilities. With proper training and development in the area of leadership, leaders can begin to develop a better sense of purpose and a strong ability to positively influence those around them. The development of strong and effective leaders within

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organizations is paramount to an agency's overall success and will help strengthen the culture by promoting unity and cohesion within an agency and reducing negativity and internal stressors.

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