

The Challenges in Recruitment and Officer Retention in Today's Law Enforcement Profession

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Abstract

Law enforcement agencies are currently experiencing unprecedented staffing shortages and recruiting challenges. The inability to fill vacancies as quickly as they become available result in a variety of hardships that affect the agencies and their employees differently. Leaders have the responsibility of addressing both viewpoints. Leaders must ensure the safety and job satisfaction of their subordinates by addressing the more predictable internal environmental disruptions caused by shortages and be prepared for the more unpredictable external issues that arise due to the same reason. This capstone research will explore how hiring practices and employment requirements affect the law enforcement workforce. It will also address reasons employees leave the profession, and how those vacancies affect the organizations and the people who work for them. Finally, it will provide leadership suggestions to improve recruiting and retention practices through effective change to reduce the gap between the number of employees who are being hired and the number of employees who are leaving. The suggested effective change will strive to increase employee morale, maintain the integrity of the profession, and reinforce core values that foster community relationships and public trust.

Introduction

The internal and external environments of the police profession feed off of each other in ways that directly affect the organization, its employees, and the community it serves. In 2017, the South District of the Madison Police Department, Wisconsin, obtained a grant that explored how to build better relationships with its very diverse community, which included Caucasian, African American, Latinx, and Hmong backgrounds. The study found that each of the groups engaged with law enforcement differently based upon their respective cultural perceptions. Poor interactions resulted in poor communication and support, whereas more positive interaction resulted in better communication and support (Stoecker et al., 2019).

If the internal and external environments are in a positive lockstep with each other, both prosper. A healthy organization with effective leadership and strong values will attract employees who want to continue that legacy. Those employees will be the face of the agency as they engage with a public who supports them, and the public will understand the importance of requested resources when the organization is faced with difficult situations. A community that feels protected will do what is necessary to continue to feel secure, including replenishing a historically noble profession with their beloved fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters. This is supported by Stoecker's article, which goes on to document that by accepting feedback and advice from their diverse community, the Madison Police Department built relationships which included "partnering with community led organizations, engaging with community based bridge-builders, gathering information and recruits from bridge-builders, holding direct community discussions, and turning information into action," (para. 3).

In today's culture, there must be reciprocation between the organization, its employees, and the community because they are all reflective of each other. The department must be

representative of the community to attract community interest. The community must trust the organization to earn departmental trust. The employees must serve the community and the organization to be supported by both. Quite simply, each entity, the organization, its employees, and the community, get from each other what they are willing to invest into each other.

Literature Review

The year 2018, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd protests, was the beginning of the era in which law enforcement agencies in the United States began struggling to recoup and retain staff members (O'Brien, 2022). Others attribute the difference in values between the retiring baby boomers who sought long term careers and millennials who do not believe in financial planning as a contributing force to the current state of hiring and retention. According to Epic Recruiting (2023), these millennials represent a large pool of avid social media subscribers who spend a significant portion of their day watching a screen, an activity that does not appeal to baby boomers (para. 15).

The declining disparity in employment numbers has generated discussion concerning improved recruitment techniques and retention incentives. Most agree on the need for the organization to invest in its employees personally to attract more favor in terms of loyalty and longevity. Successful recruiting requires the organization to be aware of the makeup of the community it serves and matters of importance to them. Erikson (2023) contends, "Improving the recruiting efforts of police departments across the nation requires the effective socialization of job opportunities to communities of interest while also offering appropriate incentives to separate and distinguish a career in law enforcement from competing industries" (para. 12).

Recruitment leads to the task of securing employee retention. Beyond the obvious factors of the potential danger and profitability concerns, law enforcement officers want to be involved in something of importance. Lack of community support and scarce developmental opportunities contribute to employees' feelings of discontent because a person and a career of importance warrant both support and development. Exempting those qualities from the equation makes law enforcement a job rather than a career.

Recruiting Practices and Employment Requirement

Historically, when agencies attempted to fill an open position they would receive significantly more applicants than the amount of available positions. Not only did this allow leaders to be more selective on who they hired, but it also limited the necessity for recruitment tactics. Recruiters could simply announce the open position without much effort and easily get overwhelmed with applications. Recently this has proven to not be the case. Agencies are now receiving fewer numbers of applicants which forces them to get creative in their recruitment efforts (Langham, 2017).

Currently, the most popular and effective way for an agency to reach potential applicants is using social media. In today's society social media is an ever-growing set of platforms that connect people all over the world. Langham (2017) tells us, "However, most generally agree that using the Internet reaches a significant number of applicants and is one of the most cost-effective means for recruiting. Researchers found that more than 80 percent of those recruited into law enforcement used the internet on a daily basis" (para. 17). With the use of platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, recruiters have a better opportunity to reach a broader audience.

One consideration a leader must take in regards to using social media for recruitment is the way in which it is presented. The primary group of applicants currently consists of the

generation known as millennials. The previous tactics of placing emphasis on long term careers and the thrill of chasing the bad guys is no longer appealing. A study by Neogov (2020) suggests millennials care more about their job being meaningful than they do a large paycheck. Leaders should consider concentrating more on the social aspect of police work and demonstrate a fun work environment. Millennials typically want to see recruitment videos that show the applicants how they can make a positive impact in the world.

Langham (2017) suggests another tool that can be utilized for recruiting are job fairs (para. #17). Job fairs are events where an agency can meet with potential applicants in person. This opportunity allows leaders to place emphasis on a candidate's personal wants and needs. It also gives the leader an opportunity to conduct an informal on the spot interview. Just as with the social media tool, a leader needs to consider the team they send to the job fair to better appeal to the millennial applicants. Sending a recruiter with good social skills and displaying all of the high-tech equipment, such as drones, is a great way to attract them.

Departmental Hiring Requirements

Every department has a standard set of requirements that an applicant must meet in order to be hired. These requirements can vary for each department depending on the needs and laws associated with that area. According to a study conducted by Stoffle (2023), some agencies have lowered their standards in an attempt to retain enough employees to keep the community safe due to the rising issues of recruitment and retention. While this does put an officer in uniform, it can come with devastating consequences. Stoffle's study also addresses the following hiring requirements, to include age, education, documentation, physical fitness, pre-employment testing, background checks, and polygraph tests.

One very common standard is requiring the applicants to be 21 years of age. This is primarily due to laws that require an individual to be 21 years of age before possessing a pistol. Some agencies offer applicants to begin their careers at the age of 18 years old and work in positions closely related to the sworn officers. Dispatcher and animal control are examples of positions in which these individuals can temporarily be placed. Some states, such as Mississippi, have recently passed laws that allow 18-year olds to possess firearms. In the case of Mississippi, an individual can possess the firearm as long as it was given to them as a gift and they must be able to identify from whom they received it.

Many departments have an educational requirement which primarily consists of a high school diploma or an equivalent GED. A recent study by South New Hampshire University (2023) says 1% of agencies in the United States require applicants to have a four-year college degree. Approximately 19% of agencies require some level of college credits typically up to an equivalent of an associate's degree. Roughly half of the agencies that require college level credits will waive the requirement if the applicant has an acceptable amount of military experience. Larger departments are more likely to require college degrees than smaller agencies.

A valid driver's license is another requirement that applicants must have. Officers are required to operate vehicles as part of their duties and must be legal when doing so. Any specialized units, such as motor officers, are also required to possess the appropriate endorsements on their license that are required by that specific state. It is not uncommon for agencies to verify the status of their officers' license on a routine basis to identify any unknown changes such as an expired license.

Physical fitness standards can vary in many ways, but most agencies typically have something in place that is usually similar to that of the police academy the applicants will be attending if hired. Several agencies have reported lowering their physical fitness standards. Some agencies have even changed from a traditional style testing system into an obstacle course. Most agencies do not require officers to conduct fitness tests once they have completed the police academy.

Agencies that are protected by civil service are typically required to complete a civil service test during the hiring process, depending on each state's laws. Agencies that are not covered by civil service traditionally have an equivalent written test. Most of these tests measure applicants' verbal skills, much like the verbal section of standardized tests similar to the SAT and ACT, and some may include job-related questions as well such as report writing. A study suggests that strong verbal skills, which are included in the test, are arguably the most important trait of a good officer (South New Hampshire University, 2019).

Background checks and polygraph tests are common amongst most police agencies. In recent times, a lot of agencies have stated that they have become more lenient on what would disqualify applicants during this process. Lowering these standards causes agencies to hire individuals that could possibly be incapable of safely and successfully fulfilling their duties. Leaders must decide if they are willing to accept employing individuals who could cause future problems or remain short staffed until more qualified candidates can be attained.

Reasons for Leaving the Profession

Recently, recruitment and retention in law enforcement agencies in the United States have displayed a steady decrease. For example, the New York Police Department, one of the largest agencies in our country, has exhibited losses to its ranks at an outrageous pace. This is a distinction not seen since 2007, when they had a labor dispute. More than 1,500 NYPD officers

have either resigned or retired so far this year, which is on pace to be the biggest exodus of officers since the statistics have been available, according to a New York Post article. NYPD pension stats obtained by The Post show 524 police officers have resigned and 1,072 have retired as of May 31, 2022. The 1,596 total is a 38% spike from the same period in 2021, when 1,159 cops called it a career, and a staggering 46% climb from 2020, when 1,092 left the force by the same date (Balsamini, 2022).

Equally disturbing, the Los Angeles Police Department, one of the largest in the country, is also experiencing overwhelming shortages. Police Chief Michel Moore reported recently that sworn staffing had fallen to 9,103, down nearly 1,000 from 2019, the year that preceded the outbreak of COVID-19 (Zahniser & Jany, 2023).

This phenomenon of events is not only affecting large metropolitan areas but also suburbs, municipalities, and towns across the United States. For every LAPD and NYPD across the nation, there is a much smaller St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office or Pascagoula Police Department experiencing the same trending effects.

Contributing Factors to Deficits

Human factors have been identified as contributors to the ongoing staffing deficits being experienced by public service agencies. The increased stress levels that officers encounter as a result of staffing shortages have created an unavoidable dangerous cycle. As a result of the higher stress imposed on the officers, life balance has become a tough sell for recruiters and recruitment efforts for experienced officers who are on the fence about leaving the agency or are near retirement. Additionally, the demanding nature of police work, including long hours and exposure to traumatic events, can lead to burnout. This can result in officers feeling emotionally and physically exhausted, leading them to seek alternative career paths or retire early.

Public servants often face low salaries and limited benefits compared to the risks and responsibilities they undertake. This can make it difficult for them to support themselves and their families, leading them to seek better paying opportunities. The issue of compensation is more inclusive than just salary and includes a number of benefits such as health insurance, vacation, retirement, schedules, and equipment. Deficiencies or perceived inequities in any of these areas can contribute to turnover (Orrick, 2007).

A 2019 survey of law enforcement executives conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) found that 78% of responding agencies had difficulty recruiting qualified candidates, and 75% felt that recruiting challenges were worse than they had been five years earlier. The same survey found that generational differences in preferences for work-life balance, challenges in the hiring process, and the public's image of law enforcement were all perceived as affecting the profession's challenges in recruiting (IACP, 2019). Echoing similar findings, a report by the Police Executive Research Foundation found that 63% of agencies reported a decrease in the number of applicants for open police officer positions relative to five years earlier (PERF, 2019).

External Influences

Public servants often face public scrutiny and criticism, especially during times of high profile incidents involving law enforcement. This negative perception can take a toll on officers' morale and job satisfaction, leading them to consider leaving the profession. These events have had an impact on law enforcement agencies' ability to recruit and retain officers. Potential recruits are not applying to the academy because of poor perceptions of the policing field, and officers are leaving the field because of burnout and additional stress related to these perceptions and on the job responsibilities during this period. Changes in laws, policies, and political climate

can impact the way police officers carry out their duties. Officers may feel that these changes hinder their ability to effectively do their job, leading them to consider leaving the profession.

In Wilson, Dalton, Scheer and Grammich's (2010) work, it is suggested that there are several variables for the attrition. Budget crisis across agencies in America may cause agencies to reduce their number of officers. Also, a pending wave of baby boomer generation retirements threaten to significantly reduce the experience levels of agencies across the nation. This publication also suggests that younger generations might be more likely than older ones to change careers to find the actual work they enjoy best. The younger generation might also change jobs more often than older ones, especially in vast areas with dissimilar economies in an effort to find the work they like best. This creates difficulties for agencies who invest considerable time and resources in training officers, only to have them leave after a short term.

Lastly, like any other profession, members of law enforcement may leave their job due to personal reasons such as family obligations, health issues, or a desire for a career change. Leaders of agencies who are faced with mass exodus must navigate the balance of retention and keeping the troops content. Taking the changing expectations and emerging priorities in policing seriously will encourage the development of important guidance regarding how to effectively address current recruitment and retention challenges (Sun, et al., 2022).

Effects on Law Enforcement Employees

Increased Workload and Burnout

Staff shortages place an increased burden on law enforcement officers, resulting in longer work hours, increased overtime, and elevated stress levels. Overextended work hours can lead to physical and mental exhaustion, potentially impacting job performance and officer well-being. Law enforcement shortages contribute to higher rates of burnout and decreased job

satisfaction among officers. The prolonged exposure to stressful situations and the perception of inadequate support may result in officers leaving the profession or experiencing reduced commitment to their duties.

Officer Safety Concerns

Inadequate staffing levels pose a serious risk to law enforcement personnel. When not enough officers are available for backup or support, these individuals may be placed in dangerous scenarios that could lead to personal injury or even death (Burns & Buchanan, 2020). This is particularly concerning during armed confrontations and emergency responses, where the need for additional help is critical but delayed due to limited resources. Furthermore, inadequate staffing can impact safety because the need for more personnel also affects the availability of training and equipment necessary for minimizing risks associated with their duties.

Lower Morale and Job Satisfaction

Law enforcement personnel shortages can lower morale and job satisfaction. Due to staff shortages, officers must work more, which can lead to fatigue, diminished motivation, and engagement. This scenario hurts people and their job, making it harder to finish assignments. Law enforcement agencies must implement comprehensive policies to identify areas where staff may become overwhelmed before they break down. This is amplified when officers feel unsupported by their organization, furthering feelings of disillusionment among staff. Ultimately this leads to higher attrition rates as demoralized employees search for greener pastures elsewhere, creating a vicious cycle where staff departures create more workload resulting in reduced morale with increased attrition following suit. To mitigate these effects, organizational leaders must prioritize support services to help alleviate stress and associated negativity caused by the personnel shortage problem. This includes offering counseling services, career

development opportunities, and other wellness programs that encourage a positive work environment to ensure the well-being of those who remain in their roles.

Effects on the Community

Decreased Response Time and Emergency Preparedness

Law enforcement shortages can threaten community safety. Fewer officers may delay response times and ignore emergency calls. This can lead to increased victimization as perpetrators are given more time to commit their crimes or evade police efforts. It also diminishes crime prevention attempts, leading to an overall sense of insecurity among members of the public (Mourtgos et al., 2022). Insufficient personnel could also decrease emergency preparedness plans for disasters or crises, reducing communities' ability to contain and effectively address such occurrences when they arise. Ultimately, these shortages necessitate intensified recruitment efforts by local authorities to ensure adequate coverage from law enforcement services now and into the future if citizens are to remain safe in their neighborhoods.

Strained Community-Police Relations

The lack of law enforcement officers can hurt the ability to build relationships with communities. Without increased staff, more workloads are spread across existing personnel, which can cause a decrease in officer presence and interaction within neighborhoods. This decreases opportunities for police-community partnerships such as community policing initiatives or crime prevention activities that require two-way communication and trust between citizens and law enforcement agencies. It also becomes difficult to share information effectively when the relationship is strained due to limited resources or conflicting agendas. A strong connection between members of the public and law enforcement helps ensure success in

addressing criminal activity. However, this collaboration may be compromised if too few officers are available to patrol streets, respond to calls, investigate crimes, or actively engage with residents during social gatherings.

Escalation of Criminal Activities

Shortages in law enforcement personnel can embolden criminal elements within a community (Thompson & Payne, 2019). Criminals may perceive the reduced police presence as an opportunity to engage in illicit activities with a lower risk of detection and apprehension. This includes crimes such as theft, drug trafficking, violent acts or assaults against individuals, vandalism of public and private property, and other illegal behavior degrading the quality of life for community members. The lack of sufficient law enforcement personnel decreases deterrence, leading to increased crime rates across the area and compromising social well-being. Community members often feel more vulnerable due to these increased crimes, prompting safety concerns, thus reducing the overall quality of life for inhabitants living within the affected areas.

Retention Solutions

Since the modern landscape of law enforcement has experienced a shift in dynamics, and challenges in recruitment and officer retention have come to the forefront, addressing these challenges requires profound and incremental changes, especially within the organization's leadership approach and structure. Here we will delve into potential solutions, highlighting the importance of leadership, organizational change, and addressing human factors in shaping the future of law enforcement agencies.

Leadership

According to contemporary leadership theories, being a leader isn't just about having authority, but also about motivating and empowering others. This applies to law enforcement

agencies as well, where officers should feel appreciated and empowered to make decisions. Authentic leadership, which prioritizes vision, passion, and inspiration, can be particularly effective in this context. It can help change the perception of law enforcement and make it a more desirable career choice for new recruits.

Leadership in law enforcement demands versatility. Being able to adapt to change and guide your team through it is essential. Conflict resolution and effective communication skills are necessary, as well as the ability to understand and respond to diverse situations and individuals. This level of versatility contributes to better officer morale and promotes effective departmental functioning.

There are two effective ways to improve law enforcement agencies: Authentic leadership and servant leadership. Authentic leaders inspire officers and prioritize their development, while servant leaders focus on the needs and growth of their team. Lieutenant Colonel R'ami Spain (2017) emphasized this when she stated, "Servant leaders exist for the sake of others." Both approaches create a caring environment that reduce officer turnover.

Emotional Intelligence

It is important to acknowledge the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in modern leadership, especially in high-stress positions like law enforcement. As defined by Sarah Fletcher (2012), "Emotional Intelligence gives us the ability to understand and manage our emotions and those around us" (para. 2). When law enforcement agencies prioritize and nurture EI among their ranks, it can lead to a number of positive outcomes. These include stronger relationships among officers, increased trust, and better decision-making in difficult situations. Additionally, officers aware of their emotional triggers are better equipped to maintain their mental health and

resilience, which is crucial in policing. Promoting emotional awareness throughout the organization fosters a culture of empathy, understanding, and proactive mental well-being.

Organizational Change

Organizational change is paramount. Drawing from Dr. Larry Long's (2017) observation that "individuals must change before the organization can change," to address recruitment and retention issues, law enforcement agencies must reassess their internal processes, policies, and cultures. Incremental changes, such as enhanced training programs or improved working conditions, can produce immediate relief. However, deep changes addressing the core values, beliefs, and structures of the organization are necessary for long-term solutions.

Importance of Team Skill Development

Building and maintaining effective teams is crucial for the success of law enforcement agencies. Organizing team meetings or workshops that discuss and define core values, beliefs, or approaches is an effective way to engage employees. These gatherings will provide a platform for open and respectful dialogue, allowing team members to express their perspectives, experiences, and ideas. Through these discussions, a collective understanding and appreciation of diverse viewpoints can emerge, fostering inclusivity and collaboration. Based on the discussions and identified commonalities, a collaborative effort should be made to develop a clear and concise vision statement. As Dr. Terry Anderson (2017) stated, "If I don't know where I'm going, I can't get there." Developing these skills within teams leads to superior operational outcomes and enhances officers' morale and commitment to the agency.

Significance of Professional Culture

A positive professional culture emphasizes respect, trust, and mutual understanding. Law enforcement agencies must foster a culture that values diversity, promotes learning, and

prioritizes officer well-being. A strong, positive culture can significantly reduce recruitment and retention challenges by driving talent acquisition and retention. A strong, positive professional culture attracts talent. Job seekers are increasingly looking at company culture as a major factor in their job decisions. Moreover, employees are more likely to stay with a company where they feel they fit in with the culture and share its values. As Eric Therwanger (2017) stated, "Ninety-five percent of people want to be part of something special and something great. And when you make the culture special and great, they want to be more involved."

Human Factors and Their Importance

Human factors, such as stress, fatigue, and cognitive biases, can significantly influence decision-making in high-pressure situations. Dr. Rosalyn Harrington (2017) stated that fatigue could "cause numerous unintentional health and safety consequences," such as over-exhaustion. Recognizing and addressing these factors is crucial for law enforcement agencies. Providing officers with adequate rest, regular training on cognitive biases, and tools to manage stress can help reduce errors and improve overall job satisfaction. To address the issue, in 2010, at their 117th Annual Conference, the IACP adopted a resolution on law enforcement fatigue. The IACP recommended, "That all law enforcement agencies provide training and adopt policies, which shall minimize the effects of fatigue on officers prior to and during their duty assignments," (IACP, 2010).

Recruitment Solutions

Legacy Leadership

Legacy leadership focuses on creating a lasting impact that benefits the organization and its members. For law enforcement leaders, this means fostering trust, empowerment, and positive change. Leaders should strive to cultivate an environment where officers take pride in their work,

which will impact recruitment and retention for years to come. To attract potential recruits, emphasize your organization's legacy, values, successes, and prioritize building a positive reputation. Invest in professional growth opportunities, offer guidance and mentorship, and have a clear vision for the future that prioritizes trust, meaningful work, and community engagement. Like Chief Gary Blankenship (2017) stated, "We want to leave our agencies better than when we started." Positive endorsements from former employees can also be a powerful recruitment tool.

Community Leadership

Law enforcement has evolved to focus on building strong community relationships by being present, approachable, and invested in community well-being. This is achieved through community policing, town hall meetings, and outreach programs, like the East Baton Rouge Police Athletics/Activities League, or P.A.L.'s Field Day (2023) program, that aims to break down mistrust and improve engagement. Transparency is crucial in this information era, and agencies should communicate openly about their policies, procedures, and decisions to build public trust. They use public forums, social media, and community meetings to encourage constructive feedback and accountability. Officers undergo continuous training to improve their cultural sensitivity, mental health, and conflict resolution skills as the world changes. This shows the agency's commitment to growth, adaptability, and service excellence. This approach positions officers as community leaders and guardians of well-being instead of just law enforcers. By bridging the gap between traditional policing and the dynamic needs of today's communities, officers foster a synergy that promise safer neighborhoods, heightened public trust, and a more integrated role for officers.

Using Media to Effect Change in Recruitment and Retention

With its capacity to influence public perception, the media offers law enforcement agencies an invaluable avenue to enhance recruitment and retention. To take advantage of these new methods requires adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership promotes flexibility to adapt to changing situations, learning from everyone in the organization, and innovating by breaking away from traditional protocols when necessary. As stated by Colonel Ted Spain, "This is an example of adapting to an ever-changing environment." An adaptive leader can harness this power, and use these media outlets to counteract negative stereotypes through positive branding and success stories, fostering trust through operational transparency. They can also spotlight career growth, engage younger audiences through social media campaigns, and open dialogue channels for feedback. Emphasizing the well-being of officers, celebrating the diversity within the force, and forging partnerships with media houses can further solidify the agency's image, making it appealing to potential recruits and retaining current personnel. In this digital age, effective media engagement is pivotal. It amplifies the agency's commitment to its force and bridges the gap between public perception and the realities of law enforcement.

Conclusion

The issue of recruitment and retention challenges for law enforcement is one that did not exist until recent years. Previously, there were a surplus of applicants and a shortage of available positions. Law enforcement organizations were able to remain restrictive with the selection process, and could conduct their internal business quietly without having to hire recruiters or provide more than job security and a decent retirement plan to keep employees on the payroll.

Times have changed, however, forcing law enforcement organizations to adapt. Like other industries, we have become more business-like and have to conduct ourselves in a manner that

attracts applicants and provides meaningful long term security. This means appealing to the workforce, those employed and those we hope to hire, by adjusting our practices and requirements, acknowledging and responding to the reasons people leave this career field, being accountable for the affect manpower shortages present, and having the courage to make effective changes to improve the situation.

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