

Recruitment and Retention Challenges in Law Enforcement

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Abstract

Law enforcement agencies are experiencing a recruiting and retention crisis due to the difficulty in attracting qualified applicants and retaining experienced officers within their ranks. This challenge is crucial to maintaining public safety in the community that agencies serve. Law enforcement agencies across the nation face extreme criticism and scrutiny from the public in the wake of several officer-involved shootings that have been deemed criminal and unjustifiable. The public perception of law enforcement has taken a dark side with the ease of utilizing all social media platforms to promote hidden agendas in a negative light. Due to the low rate of pay officers receive and the increasing staffing shortages with forced overtime, other professions, and career opportunities seem more favorable as a promising career. The purpose of this research is twofold: First, to identify and understand the challenges that police agencies are facing in recruiting and retaining the next generation of officers. Secondly, to identify new strategies and practices that agencies could take to combat the current recruitment and retention crisis.

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Recruitment and Retention Challenges in Law Enforcement

In today's challenging times, recruitment and retention in law enforcement are taking their toll. The job of law enforcement is much different from previous years. The scrutiny that police officers experience today was not present twenty years ago. The national media has cast a negative light on law enforcement as a profession. This does not bode well for recruitment and retention. Attracting qualified applicants to a career field that is consistently being scrutinized is difficult.

Police agencies attempting to retain their current officers is becoming increasingly difficult. The amount of stress that policework places on an individual is great. Combine that with the stressors of public scrutiny, such as from the national media, can have a negative effect on law enforcement. This can lead to early retirements, officers leaving the profession for less stressful employment, or burnout, resulting in employment termination or lack of production. Retaining quality employees who perform at a high level is a challenge for every law enforcement agency around the country. Many factors contribute to the recruitment and retention of employees in law enforcement. In our research, we will discuss how leadership plays a role in dealing with this current issue in law enforcement.

Significance of the Topic

Ask any police chief or sheriff to list one of the most challenging internal issues facing their agency, and the vast majority will list recruiting and retaining their sworn officers. In fact, most law enforcement agencies across the United States are experiencing a crisis in attracting and recruiting new officers and retaining those currently in their ranks. Agencies receive fewer applications, while more officers leave the profession for early retirement or enter another

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job field. This recruiting and retention crisis is not isolated and affects agencies of all types and sizes throughout the country.

Literature Review

Recruitment and Retention Numbers

So, what is driving this recruitment crisis? To assess this situation, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) in 2018 surveyed 411 law enforcement agencies inquiring about trends in officer recruitment and retention. The survey revealed three separate problems affecting staffing levels: Fewer applicants, officers resigning before retirement age, and an increasing number of officers who are eligible to retire (Wexler, 2019). Additionally, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) conducted a 2019 membership survey to explore the recruiting and retention crisis issues. The goal of this survey was to better understand the extent of the recruiting crisis, and the impact these challenges have had on police agencies and the communities they serve. According to the IACP survey, the difficulty in recruiting law enforcement officers is not due to one particular cause. Rather, multiple social, political, and economic forces are simultaneously at play in shaping the current state of recruitment and retention (2019, para. 4).

Fewer Applicants

Both surveys attributed that the reason for reductions in police staffing is due to a drop in the number of people applying for policing jobs. According to the PERF survey, sixty-three (63%) of agencies that responded said the number of applicants for police positions had decreased, either significantly (36%) or slightly (27%) over the past five years (Wexler, 2019). More officers are leaving their department and in many cases, leaving the policing profession well before they reach retirement age.

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Another issue that police agencies are having to contend with is that a growing number of current officers are becoming eligible for retirement. PERF's survey found that about 8.5 percent of current officers are eligible for retirement, and 15.5 percent will become eligible within five years (Wexler, 2019). A large number of officers who entered policing during the 1990s are now reaching retirement age. Their departures reduce the number of sworn personnel and the overall level of experience in many agencies.

Generational Differences

Another reason for the reduced number of applicants is millennials entering today's workforce look at the relatively low pay, high risk of death or great bodily harm, an unfavorable opinion by some public members, and are deciding to choose another career. Millennials and Generation Z are more likely to value work-life balance than their Baby Boomer counterparts. This translates into young people hoping for more flexible hours and guaranteed time off. Mandatory overtime and working holidays and weekends suddenly become less appealing. Sociologists and authors Chip Espinoza, Mick Ukleja, and Craig Rusch observe in *Managing the Millennials* that those professionals who "live to work" are largely gone, having effectively been replaced by a generation of Millennials who "work to live" (2010).

Public Image of Law Enforcement

The public's perception of law enforcement has declined in recent years to influence recruiting new officers to the profession negatively. Highly publicized police encounters with citizens, especially those involving force, have increased public scrutiny about law enforcement. Also, social media outlets have provided a platform for the public to share their opinions about their interaction with police officers. According to the International Association of Chiefs of

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Police, many agencies who participated in their 2018 survey strongly believe that public perception of law enforcement limits interest in the profession and is a sizable barrier to effective recruitment (2019, para. 6).

For law enforcement leaders, improving the relationships between the community and police is fundamental to developing effective recruitment and retention strategies. Scrutiny of the police and unfavorable media coverage have led many young people to view police differently than their parents may have. Each of these factors contributes to the negative perception of policing as a career opportunity for potential recruits. For this reason, law enforcement agencies must implement changes within their agencies to provide the community with a positive perception of police to regain the trust of those they aim to protect and serve.

Retention Challenges

The Public Executive Research Forum survey indicated that the average length of service in police agencies is decreasing. According to their survey, officers who leave before reaching retirement age do so within their first five years on the job (Wexler, 2019). To better understand retention challenges and why officers are leaving their agencies, PERF's survey asked agencies that conduct exit interviews to indicate why officers cite most often as their reason for leaving the department. The most commonly selected response was that they had found a job at another local law enforcement agency (Wexler, 2019). Thus, competition between agencies is a factor in retaining officers, as well as recruiting them. The second most popular answer was "pursuing a career outside of law enforcement. This indicated that many sworn officers are leaving the profession entirely. The study reported that currently, 8.5% of officers are eligible for retirement, and another 15.5 % will become eligible within five years (Wexler, 2019).

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Impact on the Profession

If this trend continues, where law enforcement agencies continue to lose officers without bringing in qualified applicants to replace them; their communities will soon begin to feel the effects. The results could be longer wait times for calls for service, fewer crimes solved and an overall decrease of services to the community. Low staffing can also place a financial strain on law enforcement agencies. Open positions can lead to increased overtime costs needed to cover shifts. Costs are always a concern, as a standard cost to recruit, hire, equip and fully train a police officer from the time they submit their initial application to the time they can function independently may exceed \$100,000 and take up to eighteen months (Meade, 2016). A staffing shortage could decrease officer morale due to officers' inability to use their earned leave or transfer to other divisions. Lastly, high turnover can also lead to a leadership vacuum caused by experienced officers leaving for early retirement. Losing experienced, trained officers with years of experience is especially damaging to an agency and hinders succession planning. As stated by Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Wellington Scott, succession planning is "A critical leadership tool for ensuring organizational growth and continuity by eliminating substantial gaps in institutional memory, knowledge, and leadership through strategic planning of key personnel" (2017). Thus, it is essential for law enforcement agencies to be mindful that the current retention crisis could inhibit their ability to create succession plans in order to develop tomorrow's leaders.

So, where are law enforcement agencies going to find the future officers to address their staffing needs? Often, police agencies mistakenly believe that the traditional incentives that resonated with officers hired decades ago, such as a take-home vehicle or overtime pay, will attract people entering the profession today. According to the Police Executive Research Forum, many of today's officers are interested in a different set of incentives, such as a diversity of

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assignments; opportunities to learn and develop new skills; more flexible scheduling to support a desirable work-life balance, including time for family responsibilities; regular and more frequent promotional exams; and having mentors they can turn to (Wexler, 2019). Law enforcement agencies that are in touch with the expectations of those entering today's workforce can institute incentives such as an employee recognition program and promotion opportunities. These types of programs build loyalty as it gives employees a reason to be invested in the agency's success.

Compensation and Incentives

Additionally, offering attractive compensation packages could set some agencies apart. Monetary incentives can include sign-on bonuses or a salary increases when a police recruit moves from the academy to the field. Retention in law enforcement for the modern era must be focused on the officer's future and not just the agency. Along with training programs and opportunities, continuing education is an incentive to offer employees seeking formal education while serving the community. According to Sereni-Massinger, "Agencies who form partnerships with educational institutions create opportunities for annual education on cross-cultural leadership. Annual continued education for law enforcement in critical thinking creates opportunities for improved professional self-regulation, decision-making, problem-solving and proper analysis of various plausible outcomes. Annual continued education geared towards interpersonal skills creates opportunities for increased communication, enhanced community rapport, and improved potential for de-escalation of hostile events" (2016, para 1). Providing continuing leadership education for officers will enhance their professionalism to serve the agency and community with purpose and pride.

Training our workforce is another key element in improving retention. Adequate training programs, opportunities, and standards will ensure law enforcement officers are prepared to

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execute professional police duties within the community they serve. Furthermore, supplying officers with advanced technology and state-of-the-art equipment can boost morale while giving our workforce the tools to succeed.

Recruitment Teams

Building recruitment and retention teams from within the agency is another method used to evaluate what an agency offers candidates. Building a productive recruitment team with all levels of rank will help identify diverse recruitment and retention incentives. These officers should understand the mission and goals of the agency and the desirable characteristics of potential officers. An agency needs to have specially trained personnel who reflect the diversity of the agency and community (Meade, 2016). By giving our officers an important role as team members in the recruitment process, they can buy into our agency's future and effectively motivate those around them to produce positive results in recruiting. Giving the team a voice and allowing them to take on a leadership role will allow them to seek qualified candidates for the agency.

Improving Community Relations

Community policing is a method used by successful agencies to gain the public's trust and respect. According to Lawteacher.net, "Community policing plays a pivotal role in the two defining elements of policing: police-community relations and problem-solving" (2019, para. 2). Organizations that involve the community in their mission and values will establish meaningful relationships with the public, aiding in strengthening community and police ties, which can be an asset with community problem-solving. Partnering with local government agencies and businesses to reach goals in the community will also develop stronger community policing as

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more members of the public become engaged in public safety. Police ride-alongs and outreach at local high schools are other ways officers can connect with potential recruits and increase the likelihood of bringing in quality candidates.

One example of a community outreach program provided by the St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office is a Citizen's Academy which provides community members with intimate knowledge and details of the Sheriff's Office's operations and goals. Each academy member receives ten sessions that detail the duties within the various divisions of the agency. Also, the agency has a TRIAD SALT group, which focuses on seniors and lawmen working together. The program includes concerned citizens, members of the St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office, and the St. Charles Council on Aging and Home Health Agencies. The goals of the program include crime prevention and assistance to victims of crime. Another initiative implemented by St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office is youth programs. The St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office provides drug awareness and education programs to the parish youth and a summer camp. The Sheriff's Office, Juvenile Programs Division, aims to reach the community's youth to prevent crime, violence and provide them with skills to enrich their lives. By implementing programs with youth, the Sheriff's Office can provide them with a positive perception of law enforcement, bringing unity and enhanced culture to the community.

Web-Based Outreach

Another powerful tool that can be implemented for recruitment is utilizing mainstream media platforms to grab the newer generation's attention, as it is the leading trend for all recruiting avenues. According to the 2019 IACP study, a few agencies have ramped up recruiting efforts online by building out recruiting websites that are separate from the agency's main site. Here, agencies can clearly list employment criteria, testing dates and let the community know

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when recruiting events are taking place (2019). The site could include a list of "frequently asked questions" for potential applicants. Having a recruiting website improves transparency and communication within the hiring process and may even take some of the daily burdens off human resources staff by readily providing answers to common applicant questions.

The recruitment team's role is to develop photos for billboards, newspaper ads, social media posts, and recruitment videos that represent the culture and demographics of both the agency and the communities they serve. The use of modern technology is a vital component when comprehensively presenting the information. Providing key points on benefits such as wages, insurance, and retirement packages on available career postings will encourage the candidate pool to inquire further into the postings. Explaining the fulfillment of continuous training and education sheds light on law enforcement as a professional career, not just a job.

Role of Leadership

Recruiting and retention within an agency must be achieved by leaders within the agency. To be effective, leaders should communicate the needs of the agency to all of its officers. This must be accomplished through effective organizational communication, which is the symbolic act through which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment for the purpose of achieving goals (Long, 2017). Communicating with its officers through satisfaction surveys to gauge the agency's needs is a tool that will be the beginning process of building a strong, solid foundation. Providing a platform for the voices of the agency to be heard is critical and demonstrates that commanders seek input from others to bring about positive change for employee recruitment and retention.

Another role that leaders should take during this recruiting and retention crisis is to be agents of change. Adapting to this crisis will require both incremental and deep change.

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According to Dr. Larry Long, "Incremental change is the result of rational analysis and planning. There is a desired goal with a specific set of steps for reaching it. It is limited in scope and often reversible. Control is maintained by those making the change" (2017). Incremental change usually occurs via a series of small steps, and change is implemented over time. In contrast, deep change is much more challenging to achieve and requires new ways of thinking and behaving. It is significant in scope. It breaks with the past and is often irreversible (Long, 2017).

Conclusion

To conclude, police agencies in the United States are facing a recruiting and retention crisis. The cause is not related to a lack of funding, but rather it's because they cannot attract enough qualified candidates to fill the ranks. The Police Executive Research Forum and International Association of Chiefs of Police studies have both concluded that fewer qualified candidates are applying to become police officers. To compound this problem, many officers resign after just a few years on the job. The traditional benefits of a job in policing, such as a good pension, take-home vehicle, and off-duty paid details, are not attractive to many young people entering today's workforce. The recruiting crisis facing law enforcement agencies across the country; fewer applicants, more officers are leaving the profession before retirement age, and an increasing number of officers are nearing retirement age and are likely to leave the profession soon.

To combat this crisis, the old ways of recruiting and hiring must be replaced with innovative, streamlined approaches. This begins and ends with leadership. Police leaders now have an opportunity to improve the current recruitment and retention policies within their agencies. This improvement can be accomplished through innovative policies, new approaches to recruiting, and compensation incentives for employees.

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Having a community that backs the agency and trusts the agency is also another step towards retaining employees. Without community's trust and backing, an agency will have a tough time getting cooperation. If this trend continues, the community that they serve will suffer. This, in turn, will cause a loss of trust and cooperation within the community.

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