

**Recruitment and Retention in Law Enforcement**

Sheriff Jesse Jahner, Cass County Sheriff's Office  
Lieutenant Kyle Phillips, Blue Earth County Sheriff's Office  
Lieutenant Paul Gronholz, Rochester Police Department  
Chief Deputy Andy Galles, Crow Wing County Sheriff's Office  
Sergeant Maja Donohue, Olmsted County Adult Detention Center

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of our capstone research paper is to focus on the current and future trends in law enforcement staffing, including addressing the reduction in available candidates. Through our research, we will discuss the reasons for the unprecedented vacancies and lack of interested replacements to fill open positions. A significant focus of our work will address critical steps and theories that agencies can utilize to help attract and retain quality personnel to meet the needs of our communities and ensure we maintain public safety and excellent relationships with community partners. Any recruitment and retention program should begin with a departmental analysis of the actual need for officers and determine the need moving forward. This analysis should involve a critical analysis of how officers do their jobs and what innovations are available to make a police officer's job more efficient.

## **Recruitment and Retention in Law Enforcement**

The research for this paper has been a collaborative effort amongst representatives from five different law enforcement agencies, including the States of Minnesota and North Dakota. The purpose of our research is to address recruitment and retention efforts amongst law enforcement agencies and identify ways we can be innovative in our employment efforts. With the recent attention on the George Floyd situation and other nationwide criticism of law enforcement use of force scenarios, law enforcement personnel have found themselves under harsh criticism. This criticism, along with many other factors, has affected professional recruitment and retention in profound ways. The trend in many agencies seems to portray a downward spiral of viable candidates and challenges amongst agencies to retain experienced officers.

### **Historical Context**

The year 2021 was a challenging year for the retention and recruitment of law enforcement officers. Law enforcement has come under much criticism with the incident involving George Floyd, Minneapolis Police Officers, and other law enforcement use of force. With the additional focus on law enforcement and the negativity surrounding the profession, it has been reported that recruitment and retention are at an all-time low for many law enforcement agencies (PERF, 2021). Many factors have contributed to this decline. Some of these factors include the current stigma surrounding the profession, how the job may be evolving, and the lack of interest in the field (Smith, 2021). The lack of interest in the field is evidenced by more individuals who seem to be leaving the profession than are applying (Smith, 2021). We look at historical data to determine supporting evidence that recruitment and retention may be at an all-time low.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics approximately 700,000 full-time officers were working in the U.S. in 2018, 23,000 less than in 2013. In contrast, the population in most areas has increased (Kaste & Mack, 2018). In examining additional data from 1992 to 2008, the Department of Justice's October 2012 edition of Justice Statistics data show that general-purpose agencies' number of sworn personnel increased by about 141,000 or 25%. The 1.6% average growth rate for officers exceeded that of the U.S. population growth at 1.2%. Additionally, the average officer hired during this same period exceeded those who separated from their agencies (Reaves, 2012). From this information, it appears that the law enforcement profession, including recruiting and retention, was on a steady incline.

Although there seems to be a steady incline, it is reported that around 2006, that incline began to slow down. According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Police Chief Magazine*, the slowdown may have resulted from a few factors to include generational differences (Langham, 2017). It further states that the Baby Boomer generation offered many high candidates for law enforcement along with Generation X. However, as our Millennial Generation started to fill the workforce, there tended to be a slowdown of sorts, possibly attributed to law enforcement salaries, benefits, and upward (promotional) ability (Langham, 2017).

### **Law Enforcement Recruitment and Retention: Current Trends**

In our efforts to understand historical trends, we examined current recruitment and retention trends amongst law enforcement agencies to draw our conclusions. On a national level in 2021, the City of Seattle lost 200 officers. In that same time frame, New York City lost 15% or about 5,300 officers. The Louisville, Kentucky officer ranks shrank by 20%. According to the Police Executive Research Forum, officer resignations were up 18% in the first half of 2021

compared to the same period in 2020 (Bernstein, 2021). Also, during this period, Police Departments have reported a 45% increase in the retirement rate over last year (Bernstein, 2021). The Cass County Sheriff's Office ND, with a 235-person department, is currently 21 Deputies short on a local level. The average number of monthly applications for the Cass County Sheriff's Office ranges between 12 and 17, down from the previous years of approximately 20 to 25 (A. Henrickson, personal communication, September 21, 2021). The Rochester Police Department in Minnesota is reporting a decline in the number of applicants they are receiving. According to City of Rochester Human Resource generalist Jill Douglas, in 2020, Rochester received 170 applicants for Police Officer, and through September of 2021, they have only received 60 (J. Douglas, personal communication, September 21, 2021). In addition, Rochester Community and Technical College reported 26 students attending their 2020 law enforcement SKILLS program, down from 34 students in 2017 (R. Mohawk, personal communication, September 21, 2021). The evidence shows a definite decline in recruitment and retention amongst law enforcement agencies.



Figure 1 (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2020)

Therefore, the question becomes, how do we do a better job at recruitment and retention?

**Recruitment Strategies in Law Enforcement**

According to a 2021 nationwide survey by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), responding agencies reported filling only 93% of their available positions from a period starting in April 2019 through March 2021. Larger agencies in the survey witnessed a 5% overall decrease in their hiring rate, whereas smaller agencies increased SEE FIGURE 2 & 3 (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021).

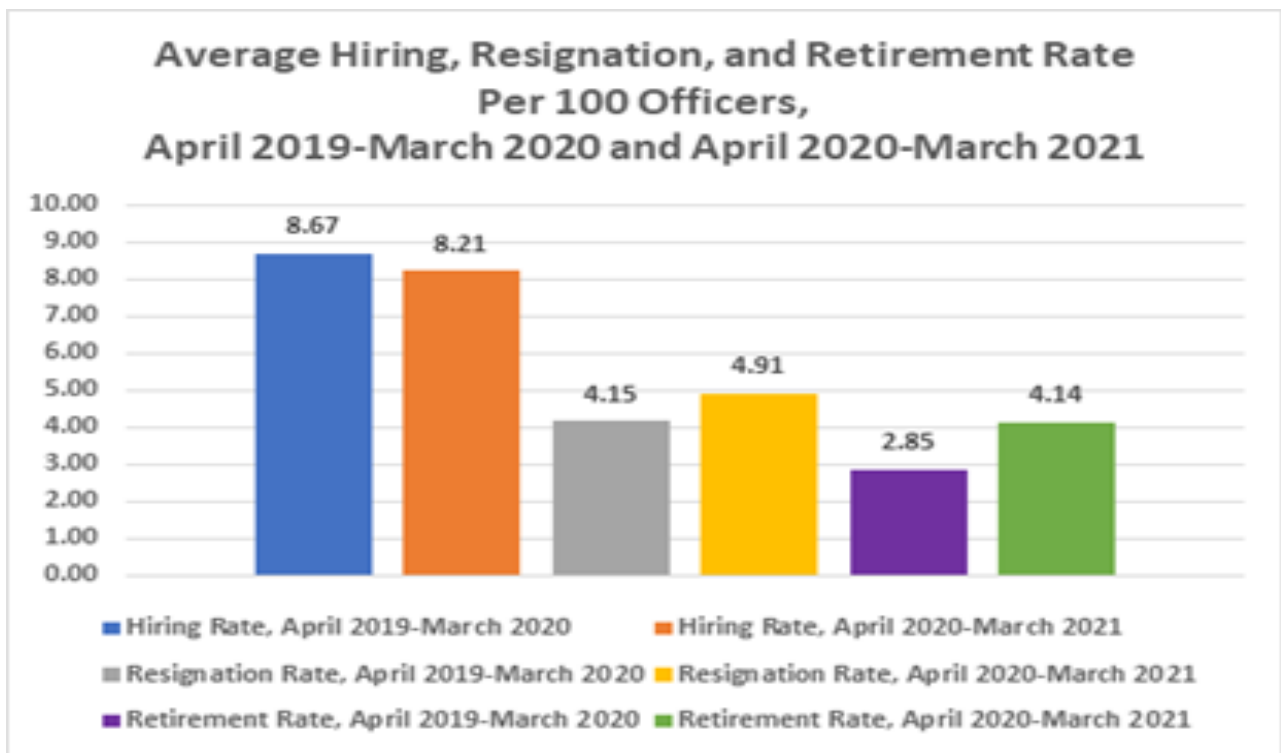


Figure 2 (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021)

Percent Change Between Time Periods by Agency Size			
Agency Size	Hiring Rate Change	Resignation Rate Change	Retirement Rate Change
0-49	3% (10.09 to 10.42)	11% (5.15 to 5.70)	49% (2.48 to 3.69)
50-249	8% (7.51 to 8.08)	28% (3.69 to 4.73)	59% (2.87 to 4.55)
250-499	-29% (8.10 to 5.77)	22% (2.81 to 3.42)	19% (3.23 to 3.85)
500+	-36% (8.65 to 5.52)	21% (3.93 to 4.76)	27% (3.43 to 4.35)

Figure 3 (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021)

The recent trend in police department vacancies has only been magnified across the United States since the George Floyd incident in Minneapolis in 2020. A National Public Radio report from 2018 identifies recruitments of officers as a crisis leading to "recruitment wars" between agencies to lure qualified candidates.

To affect a change in the recruitment numbers within the criminal justice field, we argue that agencies must adapt to a progressive way of marketing themselves to meet the needs of the current and future generations entering or interested in the field. For example, the Crow Wing County Sheriff's Office (CWCSO) in Brainerd, MN, has implemented a cross-functional team specifically focused on recruitment with a representation from all divisions within the organization. These recruiters proactively attend career fairs, visit college campuses, and

communicate directly with applicants before they even reach an interview or test date. This team was created after a deputy, during his sergeant promotional process, suggested the need for the recruitment program. He was entrusted with developing and managing this effort. Along with many other agencies, the CWCSO has devoted an entire website to recruitment efforts (Crow Wing County Sheriff's Office, 2021). Building trust both up and down the chain of command will be essential for recruiting success as the younger generations thrive from this empowerment (Willink, 2020).

Law enforcement organizations are changing to meet the needs of the new generations through social media campaigns and video overviews. According to Pew Research Center (2021), as of April 2021, 72% of adult Americans use at least one social media platform, with as high as 90% use among 18-29-year-olds. Their research also showed that social media use is consistent among Black, White, and Hispanic populations who reported 69-80% were using at least one social media platform. In terms of recruitment, most law enforcement recruits fit into this age bracket. According to Cruz (2020), Facebook is the leading social media platform used by 94% of law enforcement agencies. The primary use is to relay public safety concerns, community outreach, citizen engagement, and public relations. To leverage this information to our advantage, law enforcement agencies should use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to advertise to the targeted audience whom we are looking to attract.

To realize the best return on investment, agencies must evolve from traditional recruitment methods into the digital world through video, websites, social media, and the like (Blonder, 2020). The Richmond, Virginia Police Department is one example that aims to lure applicants into their agency. The recruitment video depicts many of the agency's divisions and walks the viewer through what it means to be a police officer (Richmond Police, 2019).



Another increasing recruitment tool being utilized is through monetary incentives such as signing bonuses. In a Police1 article, the state of Florida will consider a bill in their legislature that would offer \$5,000 to anyone new to law enforcement in Florida. Florida would also offer relocation money to out-of-state candidates and financial assistance to students entering their academies (Lora, 2021). This article also points to the George Floyd protests in Minneapolis as a primary contributor to the attrition and recruitment crisis throughout the country.

Another area that a modern-day law enforcement entity must consider when changing their recruitment strategies is through a change in their reputation. Candidates seeking employment in certain jurisdictions may be afraid to sign onto an embattled agency. Take the Minneapolis Police Department, for example; their reputation has been harmed so badly that their very existence is being put on the ballot for dissolution in 2021 (Brown, 2021). Law enforcement agencies must actively work on their reputation to build confidence in the community and potential recruits. There are many ways to accomplish this that range from programs such as Coffee With a Cop to community engagement events such as National Night Out and actively working with civic groups on building confidence, trust, and a positive image through various media venues.

Finally, a robust marketing campaign is essential to lure prospective applicants. Unique concepts such as on-duty workout time, take-home vehicles, education assistance, and peer support groups are just a few ideas an agency can tap into to sell their brand (Friese, 2019). At the Crow Wing County Sheriff's Office, they offer paid workout time for all staff, college tuition reimbursement, take-home squad cars, and a peer support group that contracts with Marie Ridgeway and Associates to work with all staff on mental health issues that may arise to the complex job.

**Retention: The Neglected Strategy and Missed Opportunities**

Leaders in organizations must look to develop effective recruitment and retention strategies. Conversely, a concerted effort should also be made to analyze how an agency can increase efficiencies within their organizations. Advancements in technology enable law enforcement agencies to rethink how they conduct the day-to-day business of law enforcement. By leveraging technology and being innovative, law enforcement leaders will likely discover new ways to maximize the personnel under their charge.

There are a variety of reasons that officers decide to leave an organization. Several external factors have an impact on whether officers stay or separate (Orrick, 2015). One factor is economic reasons (Orrick, 2015). When the economy is good, jobs are plentiful, and employees can pick and choose where they want to work. However, when the economy is struggling, government budgets tighten, and jobs are harder to come by. The incredible societal and political pressures law enforcement faces right now have caused officers to leave the profession at an unprecedented rate. Numerous internal factors can cause an employee to become frustrated and seek employment elsewhere. Ineffective and toxic leadership can have a profound negative impact on an organization (Watt, 2017). So, what can be done to retain good officers?

Many times, police departments focus all their budgetary resources only on recruitment. Having a robust recruitment strategy is very important. Equally important is a comprehensive plan for how the law enforcement agency plans to retain its current officers. Exit surveys should be utilized to try and identify why officers choose to separate from the agency. Many agencies do these surveys as employees retire or resign. As much, or even more, effort should be invested into strategies aimed at surveying current employees on why they choose to stay with an agency. Agencies should also be asking their employees: What is keeping you here?

Orrick (2015) states,

By surveying and conducting 'stay' interviews with high performing veteran employees; the agency can likely determine factors that influence their decisions to remain in the agency. As part of this process, the goal is to determine factors that are pulling individuals into the agency and individual traits in persons who are more likely to stay and fit within the agency. The agency should identify what employees want and provide it (p. 9).

An essential way to retain good employees is to provide exceptional leadership and supervision. Often, the lack of communication is a contributing factor to employee dissatisfaction and eventual separation. Encouraging consistent and effective communication helps to build trust and relationships within any organization.

Too often, law enforcement agencies focus only on wages when trying to retain employees. Competitive compensation will result in more employees deciding to maintain employment. Specialty duty pay is a creative way to provide Officers with additional wages. Leadership and Police Unions should work collaboratively on how to add wage incentives for their officers. At the Rochester Police Department, Command Staff and the Officer's Union worked together to establish Master Patrol Officer pay. This additional classification and enhanced pay are substantial enough that non-promoted officers strive to attain the status. Still, there are sufficient opportunities to receive this pay, so that this is a realistic goal for many. Financial compensation is undoubtedly a key component of retention, but it is not the only one.

Providing practical, relevant, and state-of-the-art training opportunities to keep officers physically, mentally, and financially whole has a definite impact on retention. When leadership actively seeks feedback from officers on department operations and initiatives, it helps create

buy-in and ownership for department goals. It helps everyone know that they are part of the team and contribute to the organization's success. Every department should make leadership and career enhancement opportunities a priority for all of its employees. Also, making formal recognition a consistent event creates excitement and motivation for each officer to achieve. This can be done by making sure to document good work in personnel files and also by scheduling award ceremonies to publicly recognize exceptional work. There are several additional ways to retain employees, such as career assessment and counseling. Recruiting and encouraging Officers to be department certified instructors helps build a broader sense of purpose for Officers. They also become more knowledgeable in critical areas and help them reach a level of mastery for particular necessary skills.

Additionally, police agencies can leverage social media to increase collaboration and innovation between employees. According to Bizzi (2018), 76% of employees using social media throughout their work took an interest in organizations they located on social media, leading to greater employee engagement. Bizzi (2018) also reported a greater significance in connections between employees and other associated organizations using social media to connect. Leveraging the opportunities social media presents can lead to an increase in workplace dynamics and increased morale.

Police Department leadership should strive to implement some of the retention strategies listed above and build an environment that encourages teamwork and commitment to the common goals of the department.

### **Organizational Leadership Defined**

Prince (1988, p. 7) defines leadership in organizations as "a process of influencing human behavior to accomplish the goals prescribed by the organizationally appointed leader."

Leadership, in other words, is a critical component of an organization's ability to accomplish goals (Prince, 1988). Since organizations have a purpose and performance expectations, plans exist to support this purpose, and leaders must take responsibility for goal accomplishments to meet the organization's performance standards (Prince, 1988). Therefore, the definition of effective leadership is subjective to "the criteria established by the organization" (Prince, 1988, p. 8). Further, organizations comprise members who possess assets and liabilities and seek to fulfill their needs through organizational membership (Prince, 1988). It is the leader's responsibility to balance the needs of the individual with the needs of the organizations and to "meet the demands of both the organization and the subordinate" (Prince, 1988, p. 11).

Recruitment and retention are of utmost importance for law enforcement agencies today, and the law enforcement leader must make these personnel and organizational needs a top priority.

### **Navigating Change in Complex Organizations**

Developing and retaining exceptional leaders is not enough if organizations cannot evolve to keep up with broad social and organizational change. Over time, ingrained routine patterns may move the organization toward decay and stagnation when the environment changes or becomes turbulent (Long, 2017b). When this happens, the organization loses its alignment with the changing external reality, so recurring patterns must be modified or replaced (Long, 2017b). Furthermore, when internal and external alignment is lost, the organization faces erosion if it does not adapt and change (Long, 2017). As we discussed earlier, this is clearly evident in current recruitment and retention trends.

Deep change is revolutionary and "requires completely new ways of thinking and behaving" (Long, 2017b). It involves a high level of risk and highlights a need to realign

organizational values and priorities, a process that initially causes disequilibrium and increases stress for everyone involved (Long, 2017b). Deep change allows organizations to find root causes of problems and thereby requires that they break away from the past to forge a new path (Long, 2017b). This is often uncharted territory for both administrators and employees as there are no guarantees that initial efforts will be successful (Long, 2017b). Deep change is a process that initially shakes the organization's foundation to its core and progressively evolves into a stabilizing force that turns into an ongoing improvement strategy as a part of the organizational culture (Long, 2017b). Because it has such a profound effect on organizational and individual identity, not to mention wide-ranging operational consequences and unpredictable early results, organizations rarely welcome or initiate deep change (Long, 2017b).

Leaders must light the way toward strategically managed change and innovation that responds pro-actively to new opportunities and future-trend threats (Anderson, 2017).

### **Sustainable Recruitment and Retention Strategy: Ethical Leadership**

As stated previously, leadership development and strategic use of power are essential. Influential leaders have the wisdom to understand that each power base has its advantages and that using them in combination will produce better results than using one by itself. They know how to develop a balance in people's perceptions delicately. When entrusted with legitimate power, they continue to gain knowledge and expertise in their profession. They become a trusted and reliable resource to their employees, expanding on legitimate power and adding expert power to their repertoire. They also pragmatically use reward and coercive power, calculating each decision to ensure they are consistent, firm, and fair. In time, if they exhibit leadership qualities that their subordinates look up to, they gain the highest form of respect by becoming a

role model and a mentor. People follow them not because they must but because they want to (Long, 2017c).

Credible leaders are ethical and authentic. They respect autonomy, defend justice, and make decisions that follow a path of least harm (Long, 2017a). Credible leaders "exhibit principles, beliefs, values, and behaviors that promote honesty and mirror their actions with those values and beliefs" (Long, 2017). They understand that "trust is the most important component of establishing credibility" (Long, 2017a). Our officers and communities deserve nothing less.

Increased interest in ethical leadership is attributed to recent government scandals, increased resource competition, and competitive recruitment and retention strategies (Long, 2017a). Ethical leaders are more effective, have more robust, retain longer relationships, and are ultimately more credible (Long, 2017a). In short, ethical leadership is the foundation of credible leadership, and in order to recruit and retain top candidates, agencies must adapt credible leadership principles.

Public safety agencies also have a responsibility to develop comprehensive strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of human factors on officer performance and community safety. The concept of *human factors* takes into consideration "how the brain interacts with our body and our decision-making ability during stressful incidents" (Harrington, 2017). The three primary human factors influencing officer performance are physical conditioning, stress, and fatigue (Harrington, 2017). "The more that is understood about how [human factors] affect performance, the more can be done to improve training, performance, and safety" (Harrington, 2017). Doctor Harrington (2017) suggests that agencies should "identify a lead person or team to facilitate this process." Incorporating wellness initiatives into the fabric of agency culture will only work if the programs are implemented and developed by credible leaders who recruit the talents and

expertise of a dedicated team. Wellness committees should also enhance the agency's mission and approach the subject with an open mind (Harrington, 2017). Organizations must take this seriously and incorporate human factor mitigation strategies into the fabric of their culture to improve retention efforts.

Educating officers about emotional intelligence, coupled with unwavering support from law enforcement leaders, can enhance employee wellness. Finding ways for officers to feel safe to talk about their emotions will help, and one way to do that is to teach emotional intelligence skills. Implementing emotional intelligence training will subsequently help address the mental health crisis in this profession. However, before we can do that, our leaders must expect, encourage, and support training on emotional intelligence.

### **Conclusion**

If we hope to move the pendulum back towards historic recruitment and retention numbers, we must learn to adapt to law enforcement candidates' current and future generations. The older generation of law enforcement leaders must embrace rather than expect change from those entering the profession. Instead, we need to brand and market ourselves to this group and promote progressive thinking to bring new ideas forward (Dietrich, 2018). We can learn a lot from the millennial and soon Generation Z by channeling their strengths into our agencies and giving them trust and ownership when appropriate.

Building trust both up and down the chain of command will become more critical in the future. To promote recruitment and retention, leaders must give trust up and down the chain of command. There are risks to this, but leaders within police organizations should relinquish projects and promote new concepts to future generations (Willink, 2020). Organizations' culture shifts should be ground zero for fostering trust; leaders must switch towards an inclusive versus



authoritarian leadership and management style. When appropriate, we must engage our officers in day-to-day operations and decision-making (Orrick, 2015).

Law enforcement agencies must be adaptive to creative ways to retain and recruit the new generation of officers. Agencies must portray that recruitment is one of their agency's most essential functions, from actual recruitment team members, branding, culture, and techniques to attract candidates (Orrick, 2015). An emphasis towards recruiting minority and female officers will help build trust within communities and provide an agency with a diverse makeup which will contribute to rebuilding confidence in the fragile relationships observed throughout the country. Agencies will thrive when they try to mirror the diversity within their community, retain officers through incentives and a flexible wellness program, and provide ongoing mentorships to advancement (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019).

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