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ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF RECRUITING AND RETENTION IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ Challenges affecting the recruiting and retention of qualified police officers are contributing to rising crime rates and social dysfunction in communities.
- ★ Police departments and local communities must adopt policies that incentivize careers in law enforcement.
- ★ More police can mean fewer crimes, and leaders at the federal, state, and local levels must prioritize addressing the personnel gap affecting police departments across the Nation.

Introduction

The law enforcement profession is enduring a generational crisis in recruiting and retention. Many large, urban areas throughout the Nation are facing critical shortages of police officers, exacerbating rising crime rates and social dysfunction within these communities. The lack of sufficient police resources has also forced many

departments to shutter proactive policing units designed to curb violent crime and stem quality-of-life issues affecting their communities ([Philadelphia Inquirer, 2022](#)). All Americans deserve to live in safe and secure communities, and the challenges affecting the law enforcement community are making that reality more elusive.



Developing and maintaining a qualified and diverse workforce of highly skilled police officers capable of addressing the increased demands of a career in law enforcement is becoming more difficult as public scrutiny and social justice advocates' criticisms of the profession grow.

Through the first half of 2022, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) saw a 38% increase in the number of officers that resigned or retired over the same period in 2021. When compared to the same period in 2020, the increase in the loss of officers jumped to 46% over those two years ([New York Post, 2022](#))

At the same time, the overall number of uniformed NYPD officers declined in 2022 to under 34,000, far below its peak of over 40,000 officers in 2000 ([Balsamini, 2022](#)).

Corresponding with the reduction in NYPD officers over the past few years has been a marked increase in crime across nearly all categories of offense in

New York City ([NYPD](#)). Overall index crimes (the eight crime categories used by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to calculate the crime index) rose by nearly 6% in October 2022 relative to the same period a year prior, and grand larceny auto jumped a whopping 19% over the same time period ([NYPD, 2022](#)).

In 2020, at the behest of activists calling for a reduction in funding for the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), the Los Angeles City Council voted overwhelmingly to cut \$150 million from the police department budget and reduce the number of authorized police officers to under 10,000, the lowest number in over a decade ([LA Times, 2020](#)). Not surprisingly, shootings in Los Angeles have spiked 69% since 2020, along with a significant uptick in homicides and other criminal activity throughout Los Angeles ([Fox News, 2022](#)).

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 (PERF) 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).

With a diminished pool of job applicants comes the attendant difficulty in hiring. A June 2021 workforce survey by PERF found that hiring within medium- and large-sized police departments had decreased by 29% and 36%, respectively, over the prior year (PERF, 2021).

Equally troubling has been the difficulty in keeping officers within the workforce after recruiting, training, and deploying them into the field of service. PERF found that the two most common reasons given for an officer's decision to separate from a police agency were to seek a job at another department, followed closely by the desire to pursue other work entirely outside of the law enforcement profession (PERF, 2019).

Attrition motivated by the loss of officers to law enforcement competitors offering more lucrative benefits or better working conditions is understandable but the rise in qualified individuals either removing themselves from the profession altogether or not viewing police work as a viable employment option is a more disturbing trend.

The continuing crisis in police officer recruitment and retention will further exacerbate rising crime rates and the attendant social dysfunction that accompanies it unless police departments



and local communities commit to reversing course and adopting policies that incentivize qualified individuals to seek and sustain employment within the law enforcement profession.

Recruiting

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.

While the needs of each community and individual law enforcement agency may vary, commonalities in the recruitment process nonetheless remain.

Recruiting Recommendations

Increase Department of Justice (DOJ) grant funding to assist state and local agencies in the hiring of new police officers. The Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Program within the DOJ administers the bulk of federal funding to state and local law enforcement agencies for the hiring of police officers. Authorized by Congress in 1994, the COPS office has seen its annual budget fluctuate over the years, reaching its nadir during the Obama Administration. While appropriations for the COPS office have increased in recent years, the specific amount of money within the overall COPS budget that has been designated to support hiring programs has remained roughly the same since FY2018, an amount approximate to the total appropriated in FY2013, prior to the intervening cuts by the Obama Administration ([CRS, 2022](#)).

Funding to allow for state and local law enforcement agencies to hire new officers should increase, with the caveat that such funding should be accompanied by a prudent off-ramp ultimately shifting



the financial burden of retaining the newly hired officers onto the state or local jurisdictions themselves.

The Biden Administration's emphasis has been less on the hiring of new officers and more on using the COPS office to pursue police reform measures such as anti-bias and diversity training. President Biden himself stated that "...As a condition of the grant, hiring of police officers must mirror the racial diversity of the community they serve" (CRS, 2022).

Rather than placing external conditions on the distribution of grant funding, an emphasis should be placed on the overall hiring of qualified officers at the state and local levels. Police departments are dealing with a significant crisis in recruiting and retention, which itself is having an impact on public safety.

The COPS program has contributed greatly to the overall expansion of the law enforcement community since its inception by contributing to the hiring of

over 135,973 police officers since 1994 (COPS, 2022). Given the current law enforcement staffing crisis afflicting the Nation, increasing the size and scope of funding opportunities for the hiring of police officers through the COPS program is a prudent measure that should be pursued.

Provide financial incentives to encourage qualified applicants to pursue a career in law enforcement.

Financial incentives are among the many considerations affecting a potential applicant's willingness or desire to pursue a particular career. The same applies to the law enforcement profession. Given the difficult climate facing police officers today, financial incentives may not be the determining factor in an applicant's decision-making process, but the prevailing law enforcement salaries in any given area need to be competitive enough to ensure that qualified applicants consider the opportunities.



The average salary for a police officer in the United States is \$67,600, just above the overall national average salary of \$51,960 across all employment, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics ([DePietro, 2020](#)). While slightly higher than the national average, the average police officer's salary is often uncompetitive against other employment options considering that working as a police officer is one of the most dangerous jobs in the country ([University of Delaware, 2020](#)).

Every community has different economic considerations to factor into the wages that are offered to employees; however, a more competitive salary in line with competing industries would make police work more lucrative to appropriately qualified candidates.

In addition to salaries, departments can offer prospective recruits signing bonuses to encourage qualified applicants to pursue a career in police work. Washington, D.C., one of the epicenters of anti-police conflict during

the summer of 2020, recently announced a \$20,000 bonus to recruit new officers ([Bowser, 2022](#)) as it continues to face difficulties in replenishing a depleting police workforce ([Wright Jr., 2022](#)). Added to a police recruit's first-year salary, a signing bonus can act as a significant incentive in recruiting qualified applicants.

Offer non-traditional benefits in addition to salary. According to PERF, many departments have begun to offer prospective police recruits non-traditional benefits outside of salary increases or signing bonuses. Among the more common incentives offered are college tuition reimbursement, take-home vehicles, and health and fitness incentives such as free gym memberships. A more recent phenomenon over the past 10 years has been the offering of childcare services or relocation reimbursement. These incentives may be able to reach better-qualified candidates whose familial or geographic considerations weigh heavily



on their employment decisions (PERF, 2019).

Retention

No matter how much effort is made—or success achieved—within the recruitment process, the acute concerns affecting the law enforcement profession will remain in place unless newly recruited police officers remain committed to a career in law enforcement. The difficulties in retaining police officers require a distinct set of actions separate from those required to draw public interest to the profession in the first place. These challenges have been particularly acute in recent years, with one PERF study finding an 18% increase in resignations in 2020–2021 compared to 2019–2020 (PERF, 2021).

Retention Recommendations

Political and community leaders must reaffirm their commitment to the law enforcement community. In the wake of widespread civil unrest and anti-police

violence that culminated in the riotous summer of 2020, the public’s perception toward the law enforcement community soured. This was driven in part by misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric propagated by anti-police activists and a complicit media.

Among the more absurd outcomes of the anti-police movement was the outgrowth of the “Defund the Police” phenomenon, which resulted in ill-conceived budget cuts affecting the policing capabilities of major law enforcement agencies throughout the Nation. This phenomenon only exacerbated the exodus of police officers leaving the profession for safer and more hospitable professional climates, with officer morale repeatedly cited as a key driver of resignations within the profession (PERF, 2021).

Dangerous or irrational rhetoric used by political and community leaders can have a significant—and pernicious—impact on public opinion. Words matter, and the tone set by a community’s leaders—whether related to law



enforcement or any other cultural or political issue—can impact how the public perceives such phenomena. Uplifting the law enforcement community by accurately representing the nobility of the profession will help foster a positive atmosphere conducive to officer retention efforts.

Providing new officers with realistic expectations about the job. Too often, recruiters focus on only the positive aspects of police work. Understandably, the actual work is far more difficult and complex than the romanticized depictions provided on television. Clarity on the front end of an aspiring officer’s career about the inherent challenges and opportunities within their upcoming career can forestall retention challenges further along the road. According to a report by the IACP, setting realistic expectations is an essential long-term retention strategy, and “both the agency and the recruit should have an accurate perception of what will be required of the individual and what each will provide in return” (Orrick, 2008).

Creating meaningful pathways to career development. Professionals of all stripes find job satisfaction through the availability of diverse internal opportunities and career development. Studies have found that job satisfaction and career development are strongly correlated with retention (Yarbrough et al., 2016). The same holds true for law enforcement.

Careers in law enforcement often begin in a highly structured manner, with attendance at a police academy followed by a formal field training process. After the intense period of cultivating a police recruit into a police officer concludes; however, an officer’s subsequent career becomes rote by comparison.

Departments that adopt more structured career progression planning mechanisms into their organization can help develop the next generation of leaders while also enhancing departmental retention efforts.



In addition to the sense of opportunity and stability that progression planning can offer, departments that routinely provide developmental opportunities through rotating job openings within specialized fields outside of basic patrol functions can also provide their officers with a greater sense of job satisfaction (Walker, 2019).

Creating developmental and career-progression opportunities must also accompany the realization that the demographic structure of the workforce is changing.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that millennials—those born roughly between 1977–1996—will comprise upwards of 75% of the workforce by 2030 (Mitchell, 2013). This cohort of workers, reared within a technologically savvy culture, are highly drawn to employment with embedded career progression opportunities, with Gallup finding that 87% rated “professional or career growth” as an important factor in

their job search (Adkins & Rigoni, 2016).

With the understanding that younger workers increasingly find job satisfaction within developmentally-rich work environments, one study posited that creating a temporary rotation program to allow patrol officers to serve within investigative units “could help millennial officers meet their professional goals and improve their overall job satisfaction” (Folmar, 2019).

Conclusion

Crime continues to weigh heavily on the minds of the American people and studies have shown that increased officer staffing and community presence lead to a reduction in crime (Guze, 2022).

Community leaders and law enforcement administrators can begin to address these concerns by focusing on rebuilding the profession’s ranks and drawing more qualified citizens into a career in law enforcement.



It will likely take years for the law enforcement community to overcome the staffing challenges that have stricken the profession over the past few years. However, with the adoption of innovative strategies toward the recruitment of new officers and the retention of existing ones, the law enforcement profession can emerge stronger and more capable of delivering on the public safety needs of their communities.



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