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# Today's Police and Sheriff Recruits

Insights from the Newest Members  
of America's Law Enforcement  
Community

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# Summary

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## Introduction

The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services in the U.S. Department of Justice asked RAND to conduct a survey of recent police officer and sheriff's deputy recruits to aid the law enforcement community in refining its recruitment practices and improving recruitment results. The request was motivated in part by the hiring challenges the law enforcement community, particular large municipal agencies, faced in 2007 and in part by the desire to develop a larger workforce well suited to community-oriented policing. RAND's survey, fielded from September 2008 through March 2009, targeted new law enforcement recruits themselves, reaching a national pool of respondents representing 44 of the United States' largest police and sheriff's departments.

Survey questions pertain to recruits' reasons for pursuing a career in law enforcement, potential disadvantages of such a career, influencers on a career in law enforcement and employment within the recruit's chosen agency, and the perceived effectiveness of both actual and potential recruiting strategies. The survey benefited from a high overall response rate (80 percent), and the 1,619 survey respondents included a notable proportion of women (16 percent) and racial/ethnic minorities (45 percent). Moreover, the survey sample was large enough to extract some information from small subpopulations, such as Asian recruits (3 percent). This report provides the results of the survey, including both findings about the overall survey sample as well as those focused on groups often of particular interest to law enforcement recruitment professionals: women, racial/ethnic minorities, older recruits, recruits

from immigrant families, college graduates, recruits with military experience, and recruits with prior law enforcement experience. Some departments have developed strategies to increase their workforce diversity, specifically by hiring more women and racial/ethnic minorities, as part of efforts to improve police-community relations and more effectively implement community-oriented policing. Recommendations informed by the survey results are also featured in the report.

## **Pros and Cons of Law Enforcement Careers**

When asked to indicate their primary reasons for entering law enforcement, recruits gave the greatest emphasis to job security and helping the community. After such background characteristics as age, gender, and education were taken into account, older recruits (age 26 or older) tended to focus on job security more than younger recruits did. In addition, Hispanic recruits and those with prior law enforcement experience gave greater weight to public service aspects of law enforcement. Compared with white recruits, black recruits were more attracted to the prestige of the profession.

Turning our attention to the negative aspects of working in law enforcement, new recruits most frequently identified the threat of death or injury and insufficient salary as drawbacks of working in law enforcement that were salient during their decision process. Women cited some potential barriers that law enforcement careers may pose for women in particular. Women were more likely to cite fitness requirements and family obligations as barriers to joining law enforcement, and they generally rated the public service aspects of the job as more important than they did salary. However, a large majority (nearly 80 percent) of black women rated salary as more important than they did the public service aspects of the job. Overall, black recruits were considerably less likely than white recruits to cite insufficient salary as a key disadvantage. On the other hand, college graduates were much more likely than recruits with less education to report that inadequate pay was a concern during their decision process.

In the survey, recruits were also asked to think of a family member or friend close to them in age and consider why he or she opted not to pursue a career in law enforcement. The characteristics of working in law enforcement that recruits believed dissuaded their peers were somewhat different from the downsides they themselves considered. While similar numbers of recruits noted that insufficient salary factored into their own decisions as well as their peers', when it came to their peers, recruits were inclined to report that their peers' perceptions about the threat of death or injury inherent to law enforcement, competing career interests, long hours, lack of physical fitness, and personal negative views about the police were key barriers to their pursuit of a law enforcement career. Women tended to report that their similarly aged peers were deterred from entering law enforcement by its fitness requirements and perceived difficulties they would encounter meeting family obligations. Black recruits were the least likely of any racial/ethnic group to believe that fitness requirements would be a barrier for their similarly aged peers. Asian recruits, on the other hand, tended to note that their friends and family members found other career options more appealing, suggesting that this is a barrier for departments to overcome when trying to increase Asian representation.

## **Influences on Recruits' Career Decisions**

Given the significant role that an individual's family, friends, and other acquaintances can play in influencing his or her choice of occupation, we provided recruits with a list of potential influencers on their decision process and asked them to indicate whether each individual provided an opinion about their decision to pursue a law enforcement career. Recruits were also instructed to note whether the potential influencer is or was involved in law enforcement and how favorable the opinion offered was. We found that mothers and fathers are key influencers on this decision, with about 80 percent of survey respondents reporting that parents weighed in on their career choice. The majority of recruits also reported that siblings and friends close in age offered opinions. Generally, potential influencers offered neutral to

supportive views. Mothers tended to be less supportive than fathers overall, and the nature of their opinion varied more. In addition, half of new recruits received input from law enforcement professionals, and those law enforcement professionals gave the most support for their law enforcement career choice.

Another area of influence we explored in the survey was the factors that influenced recruits to accept employment at the agency that had sent them to training. Job benefits, namely health insurance and retirement plans, were prominent in recruits' decision to work at a specific agency. In particular, Hispanic recruits and older recruits viewed retirement plans as more important than did white recruits and younger recruits, respectively. The agency's reputation and variety in assignments also were widely regarded as important decision factors. Although not highly rated by the overall sample, affordability of housing emerged as a consideration for black recruits, Hispanic recruits, and those from immigrant families.

## **Recruiting Strategies**

The survey also provided insights regarding recruiting strategies that law enforcement agencies use or could use to attract new officers and deputies. When asked to indicate what first prompted them to consider working in their current law enforcement agency, recruits most often cited friends and relatives in law enforcement, particularly those already working in the same agency. Among the formal advertising outlets agencies typically used (e.g., television, billboard, newspaper, career fair), the Internet was by far the most popular among the recruits surveyed: 18 percent of respondents identified it as an information source that initially motivated them to contact their current employer.

In addition, recruits also evaluated potential actions and incentives that might improve recruiting for their law enforcement agency. Such financial incentives as a better pension, higher starting salary, support for the purchase of uniforms and other supplies, and a signing bonus were viewed as most effective by the overall survey sample. However, other strategies tended to be important to particular groups

of recruits. For example, female recruits, Hispanic recruits, younger recruits, and those with prior law enforcement experience viewed free training and exercise programs to help meet physical standards as more effective than did other recruits. Likewise, college graduates, recruits with military experience, and those with prior law enforcement experience rated choice in job duties or assignments more highly. These results suggest that law enforcement agencies may have options other than financial incentives at their disposal to attract recruits.

## Recommendations

The responses from this national sample of new police officer and sheriff's deputy recruits suggest some recommendations for departments developing recruiting strategies.

1. *Target the perceptions of would-be recruits and their potential influencers.* Agencies should emphasize the positive aspects of law enforcement and address negative perceptions, particularly those based on inaccurate information. Respondents noted that their peers likely avoided law enforcement because of a fear of death. The reality is that, in recent years, police officers have had lower fatality rates than farmers, truck and taxi drivers, construction workers, and bartenders. While policing is more dangerous than the average job, the safety record of modern policing deserves greater recognition.
2. *Recognize the value of both financial and nonfinancial motivators.* This survey corroborates past research in noting that many recruits are drawn to law enforcement for nonpecuniary reasons. We also found that the recruits surveyed did not seem dissatisfied with the salary and benefits offered by the agency with which they accepted employment. These findings suggest both that law enforcement agencies should not assume that salary is an insurmountable recruiting obstacle and that greater emphasis on the nonfinancial benefits of law enforcement is warranted.

3. *Fully engage current officers and staff in agency recruiting efforts.* Friends or family working at the department that the recruits ultimately joined were responsible for first prompting more than 40 percent of new recruits to consider the agency. An additional 20 percent were prompted by friends and family at another agency. Further, half of the new recruits surveyed sought out the advice of law enforcement members when they were considering their career choices. These findings suggest that those expressly tasked with recruiting should not be the only agency employees working to attract promising candidates. On the contrary, a department's current officers and civilian staff can be its most effective recruiters.
4. *Expand the agency's Internet presence.* When asked what first motivated them to contact their current employer, 18 percent of recruits surveyed cited an Internet advertisement. In addition, 80 percent of respondents reported accessing the Internet at least daily. Relatively low-cost or even free vehicles for increasing an agency's Internet presence are available, including job sites such as Monster.com and social networking ones such as Facebook, potentially enabling agencies to employ several of them. Such a multipronged Internet strategy may help make a specific law enforcement agency salient in the minds of prospective candidates.
5. *Develop strategies to recruit a workforce well suited to community-oriented policing.* Should law enforcement departments perceive a need to target certain types of recruits given attrition, workforce growth, or a shift in hiring priorities, the results of our survey provide the means to do so. Specifically, law enforcement agencies can appeal to what different types of recruit view as advantages or benefits of working in law enforcement in conjunction with addressing what they perceive to be downsides of a law enforcement career.
6. *Continue to learn from new recruits.* This study demonstrates the value in surveying not only law enforcement executives, as past efforts have done, but also the newest additions to police and sheriff's departments. The results of this survey can serve

not only as a source of ideas of recruiting strategies but also as a benchmark against which agencies may compare themselves over time.