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P A P E R

Police Personnel Challenges After September 11

Anticipating Expanded Duties
and a Changing Labor Pool

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Summary

Police officers are a unique set of public servants, vested with the public trust and, if necessary, the authority to use force against the citizenry to maintain order and enforce societal laws. The police function is an important contribution to the functioning of democratic societies.¹ Over the past century, policing has evolved into a high-profile, professional, 24-hour, 365-day public service. Today, police administrators assume an array of responsibilities, including public safety, community relations, law enforcement, human resource management, and information and fiscal management.²

Serving on the front lines, personnel are a police department's most important and most valuable resource. Police work relies upon the judgment of officers and their ability to determine the appropriate response to a given situation. Citizens' interactions with individual police officers are a primary factor in shaping their perceptions of the quality of their local police department. Indeed, research indicates that informal contacts with the police can improve citizens' perceptions of police job performance even when negative factors such as crime and disorder are present in their communities.³

With personnel playing this critical role, the process of personnel selection, training, monitoring, and support is key to a successful police department. Good police management is therefore essentially good personnel management.⁴ Every police manager and supervisor shares in the responsibility for recruiting, developing, and retaining high-quality individuals. Illustrating this important responsibility, the International Association of Chiefs of Police has called staffing a priority issue for 21st-century policing.⁵

Police departments today face many issues in recruiting and retaining high-quality employees. Changes in local communities and homeland security concerns are affecting the nature of policing, and agencies are struggling to predict the future need for services. At the same time, agencies are trying to anticipate what the potential labor pool will be. Because of the localized nature of policing, law enforcement agencies vary greatly in the development of recruitment and retention strategies with few systematic models to guide police managers' efforts. We describe these issues in more detail below.

The nature of policing has broadened to a more diverse range of missions requiring a complex set of skills from officers. Population shifts, particularly those that result in greater

¹ Goldstein, 1987.

² Geller and Stephens, 2003.

³ Maxson, 2003.

⁴ Goldstein, 1987.

⁵ International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1999.

cultural diversity, create demand for police officers who have the ability to work with different types of people. The adoption of the community policing model requires departments to be more representative of and responsive to the communities served. Departments are increasingly called upon to conduct systematic problem solving to address root causes of crime problems rather than simply respond to calls for service. New technologies can increase the capabilities of departments, but also require departments to add technology training to an already long list of officer training requirements.

In addition, responsibilities for law enforcement agencies at all levels are changing in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. A new homeland security mission increases the demand for local police in many jurisdictions in the country. In some ways, homeland security needs draw on traditional police skills, such as guarding places and people. But this new mission brings much greater attention to duties such as serving on joint intelligence task forces and training to execute emergency preparedness plans. Thus, many police managers see this role as requiring increased staffing.

In short, the expanded responsibilities for local police require an expanded set of police skills, and perhaps a different type of officer.

The population from which police agencies recruit has also changed in the past several decades. Some trends may restrict the potential labor pool while others may increase it. Factors decreasing the size of the potential labor pool have to do with changes among American youth, such as higher levels of indebtedness (a factor traditionally considered in police screening), poor physical fitness, and prior drug use. Moreover, while data are not yet available to assess this issue, it is reasonable to expect that competition may be increasing from other organizations for similar recruits to meet growing demands for individuals to perform homeland security work and overseas military operations. The national military response to terrorism also influences the availability of existing police officers to meet traditional and new police missions, particularly in small and rural police departments where the “call-up” for military service of even one or two officers who serve in the National Guard or Reserves can have a noticeable impact.

Even if a police department fully understood its future personnel needs and could identify adequate numbers of appropriate personnel to fill the needs, its ability to meet force management objectives is often complicated by budgetary difficulties at the local, state, and federal level. For example, the economic condition of a city can quickly fluctuate and police departments may have to make unplanned cuts, including reducing the authorized number of recruit slots. Federal grants are sometimes available to hire new police officers, but these grants expire and cities cannot always take on the increased cost for the new officers. Such difficulties can constrain the department’s ability to recruit new officers to cover the range of local, state, and national missions requested of them.

Despite the critical nature of police as a national resource and the substantial challenges faced by law enforcement agencies in adequately staffing and training their ranks, few resources are devoted to analyzing police recruitment and retention in a long-range and strategic manner. Most of the focus is on short-range and tactical planning. This focus can be traced to the nature of local governments, which operate on annual or biannual budgets, respond to emergent events, and adjust according to the local economic and political climate. Because personnel and equipment costs consume the majority of police department budgets, local agencies can make little investment in planning and analysis functions.

The present study is an effort to identify planning tools that might be adapted by police agencies to address some of the recruiting and retention challenges they face. In this effort, we sought to identify other large, analogous institutions whose force planning strategies could potentially benefit police. There are several types of organizations that hold lessons in this area.

One entity that clearly fits this role is the U.S. military. Police and military organizations have similar organizational structures and draw from the same labor pool. These organizations have similar career patterns; they recruit people with little relevant job training, provide intensive initial entry training, and specific job-related training on the job and throughout the career. Both expect to retain a portion of their force for a 20-year (military) to 30-year career, which is followed by a retirement and pension earlier than is available in most civilian occupations. In both cases, budgets are externally controlled and allocations can change and be influenced by politics and public images. Finally, both police departments and military units are being asked to take on new and different missions.

Of course, local policing and military organizations differ substantially in some areas as well. Military personnel are not unionized and do not benefit from the protections that unions afford; neither can they quit work at any time, due to multiyear service obligations. Police officers can work near their homes and stay in the same city their entire careers. Military service can involve frequent relocation. Police officers may also frequently change the type of police work they do within the department, whereas military services members are not as free to rotate through different work roles. There are also important differences between police and military organizations in the types of missions they fulfill, the communities in which they work, and the legal guidelines and rules of engagement under which they operate.

For the purposes of personnel planning, however, the military experience might offer lessons that could be adapted and used to benefit police departments. The military has a centralized planning structure and a long history of available funding to study both demand- and supply-side personnel trends. Armed service organizations are able to think in the longer term, continually adapting force management plans that estimate future demand for the size, seniority, and skill mix of military personnel, and analyzing how best to “grow” the kind of force they need. While these features are much different than the type of planning infrastructure that is available to local law enforcement, there may be opportunities for local law enforcement to adapt the knowledge generated by the military’s substantial investment in personnel planning.

The military services use a strategic approach to assess potential future demand for personnel. Based on perceptions of external threats or potential challenges to “national interests,” defense planners make decisions about future force size and mix, strategy and doctrine, and equipment acquisition needs.

Military force management planning begins by developing an articulation of anticipated future demand for military personnel, ties that projection to a request for resources, and ultimately operationalizes the projection through specific force shaping.

The prospect of thinking strategically about personnel management holds great value for local police. It is less critical that the predictions be highly accurate. The exercise of carefully thinking through the issues can aid decisionmakers in making difficult decisions regarding service priorities and resource allocation. Through this process, police personnel planning could be linked to a city’s or county’s strategic plan, which could lead to integrated

activities and likely economies of scale. Police managers could strengthen relationships with legislative and executive planners, leading to increased support for budget requests.

While the primary responsibility for personnel management falls on local leadership, some of the implementation challenges for personnel planning could be relieved by addressing them at a higher level. Two factors push toward this possibility: (1) Law enforcement agencies are increasingly being asked to take on duties that fall within the homeland security arena; and (2) there are economies of scale that would accrue by thinking about police personnel trends and needs at a larger level than could occur at the individual departmental level. A clear argument can be made for national leadership on police personnel management.

In the effort to fulfill the homeland security mission, agencies would benefit from more coordinated planning at the national level, perhaps by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Similarly to the way the Department of Defense (DoD) offers strategic planning for our national military, DHS could offer strategic planning for our nation's first line of defense against terrorism: police departments. Other federal agencies that might provide leadership could include the Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office or the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Federal agencies could spearhead the development of labor pool analysis tools and conceptual frameworks that could be used by local agencies. At a minimum, centralization of data would bring many benefits for police personnel analysis.

The field of policing is facing a unique moment in time. There is considerable flux in both demand for police services and supply of qualified personnel. There is a compelling need to reconceptualize local police as a national resource and for the federal government to take a larger role in the planning and development of this resource.