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Strategies for Improving Officer Recruitment in the San Diego Police Department

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Prepared for the San Diego Police Department



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Summary

The San Diego Police Department (SDPD) has been operating below its authorized size in recent years. For instance, in February 2007, the department had 1,901 sworn officers, and 51 of these officers were recruits enrolled in the academy. This means that the department was operating with 208 fewer officers than authorized at that time. To bridge this personnel gap, the department needs to maximize its recruiting while minimizing officer attrition. To accomplish this goal, the department sought assistance from RAND to improve its recruiting efforts. In addition, the department asked RAND to suggest ways to improve the diversity of its recruits. This monograph describes the effort to assist SDPD's recruiting program.

We conceptualize that six key factors influence the number of SDPD recruits: (1) job seekers' propensity to join SDPD; (2) local labor-market conditions; (3) the opinions of community and influencers toward SDPD; (4) recruiting resources, such as the number of recruiters and the advertising budget; (5) efficiency of the department's recruiting process; and (6) recruiter and resource management. While SDPD cannot directly control the first three environmental factors, it can optimize the recruiting process and manage recruiters and resources to achieve the maximum number of recruits, even if recruiting resources may be constant for the near future. In fact, studies on military recruiting have shown that the military can increase the number of enlistments with little or no cost by effectively managing existing recruiters and recruiting resources.

Therefore, we concentrate on SDPD's recruiting process, which attracts applicants and then converts applicants into recruits. We first assessed several strategies to expand SDPD's applicant pool. Then, we evaluated the effectiveness of the written-test process. Finally, we reviewed the fitness exams and background checks. We collected qualitative data through in-person interviews, participatory observations of SDPD's recruiting processes, and review of recruiting materials from SDPD and other law-enforcement agencies. In addition, we collected and analyzed quantitative data from surveys and administrative databases.

Based on results from the qualitative and quantitative analyses, we have specific recommendations to improve SDPD's recruiting efforts:

1. Target recruiting resources more effectively to reach a broader pool of applicants.
2. Improve efficiency in the screening process.
3. Revise recruiting and testing practices.

Target Recruiting Practices to Appeal to a Broader Range of Applicants

Produce Marketing Materials That Highlight the Benefits of a Law-Enforcement Career with SDPD

Increasing the number of police-academy graduates starts with increasing the number of applicants participating in the screening process. To accomplish this, we recommend that SDPD marketing and outreach materials (e.g., brochures; print, radio, and outdoor advertising) emphasize primarily the personal satisfaction and financial benefits of employment with SDPD. Our findings indicate that applicants are strongly motivated by a desire to serve the community, the pride that one derives from being a police officer, and an interest in securing stable employment at a good salary. SDPD starting salaries are comparable to salaries of college graduates in the San Diego area. Nonetheless, current marketing materials highlight the job eligibility requirements and the hurdles and barriers to becoming an SDPD officer. While informa-

tion of this sort is certainly relevant in the screening process, the intent of marketing materials should be to motivate an interested person to begin the process of discovering why he or she can become a police officer rather than give them reasons why he or she cannot. Formal eligibility requirements and exclusions can be communicated to applicants after they have made an affirmative decision to get more information on their own—for example, in conversations with an SDPD recruiter or in a frequently asked questions section of the SDPD recruiting Web site.

Modernize the SDPD Recruiting Web Site

Today, most job seekers rely on the Internet to acquire information about employment opportunities. We therefore recommend that SDPD modernize its recruiting Web site. The site need not be a spectacular multimedia experience, but it should at least reflect the professionalism of SDPD itself. Our analysis of the current Web site found the quality of information and ease of use to be fair, while the aesthetic value was generally poor. Immediate improvements to the quality of information could be made by providing SDPD Recruiting staff substantial control over content, including working with a professional Web-design firm, regularly updating test dates, and providing prospective applicants with a sample written test.

Focus Recruiting Efforts Close to San Diego and in Carefully Selected Sites Nationally

SDPD has conducted some recruitment activities outside the San Diego area and has expressed interest in expanding these efforts. Based on our analysis of U.S. internal migration data and a review of scientific literature on geographic mobility, we conclude that SDPD's recruiting resources should be targeted in local areas closer to San Diego. Research on migration suggests that moving for employment is a relatively rare event. In addition, in recent years, the San Diego area is experiencing more emigration than immigration. Even among people who would be willing to relocate a long distance for a career in law enforcement, our analysis shows that SDPD's basic pay is not necessarily as attractive (in terms of what non-degree holders can expect

to earn or adjusted for costs of living) as what can be earned at other agencies in California. Together, these factors suggest that SDPD will have a difficult time convincing prospective applicants to move to the San Diego area from far away.

At times, SDPD has developed good contacts and inside information at out-of-state venues. Our recommendation should not discourage SDPD from taking advantages of such opportunities. In fact, to aid SDPD with this type of targeted effort, we have identified several criminal-justice programs nationally that produce a large number of graduates that the local law-enforcement labor market cannot likely absorb.

Utilize SDPD's Internal Labor as a Pool of Candidates

We recommend that SDPD develop a broader recruiting vision that formalizes a process for using some of its civilian workforce as a pool for recruits. As with people referred by police officers, SDPD will have more relevant information on the character, motivations, and work habits of these candidates than they will of people whom no one in the department knows personally. Those interested in SDPD recruit positions who are not yet eligible for employment (e.g., they do not yet meet age requirements, they need to resolve credit or financial solvency issues, they have not reached the time limitations on past minor drug use) should be actively recruited into nonofficer positions within the department—for example, in traffic management or records. SDPD already implements this informally when possible, such as with recruits who decide that they are not yet ready for police work. Employment in these kinds of positions can help sustain their interest in SDPD until they become eligible to enter the academy, while the department benefits from their service as civilian employees and from the opportunity to evaluate their officer potential firsthand. This recommendation may have limited impact because, at SDPD, many of these positions require the applicant to pass the same background checks, such as criminal, drug, and credit histories. But for recruits with too many traffic tickets, several years in a civilian position at SDPD can give the applicant the chance to demonstrate the ability to maintain a clean driving record,

relieve SDPD's demand for civilian labor, and keep a potential recruit nearby.

Offer Cash Incentives for Officers Referring New Applicants and Recruits

Current SDPD officers and civilian staff are potentially the most effective recruiting resource available to the department. Our findings indicate that almost half of written-test takers were first prompted to consider SDPD employment by a friend or relative in law enforcement. A cursory review of recruitment efforts by another big-city police department also shows personal referrals to be much more efficient at producing hires than are other efforts, such as advertising and formal recruitment activities. Prospective applicants clearly value insights from practicing professionals whom they regard as having inside information about the job and the department. To maximize these social-network advantages, we recommend that SDPD institute a cash referral incentive to current SDPD officers and civilian staff. SDPD has already developed a proposal to implement such a program, and we believe that such a proposal should get serious consideration. Details of the program remain an issue, and we recommend some variations that we believe will maximize the program's effectiveness. As a starting point for discussion, we recommend considering a \$50 bonus for referring someone who passes the written exam, a \$1,000 bonus for the first referred applicant who successfully joins SDPD,¹ \$3,000 for the second successful referral, and \$2,000 for each successfully referred applicant thereafter. We observed people coming to the written test in small groups and propose the \$50 referral-to-test bonus to further cultivate that effect. The current SDPD bonus proposal for referring a successful recruit suggests \$2,000, equivalent to the signing bonus given to lateral hires when they complete field training. Restructuring it as \$1,000 for the first and \$3,000 for the second is designed to give additional incentive for each officer to seek that second hire. Tracking of applicants and

¹ The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) currently offers a \$1,000 cash reward for bringing in a successful recruit. SDPD recruiting managers indicated that a program that cost \$2,000 per recruit was a good return on investment.

the associated SDPD staff who referred the applicant requires care and oversight. LAPD has opened participation in the bonus program to local nonprofit organizations and has garnered a handful of additional recruits in the process.

Signing bonuses have become popular but can be inefficient because many of the officers would have joined without the bonuses. However, they can instantly attract the media's and the public's attention. We recommend that SDPD initiate the referral bonus plan first, and, if that does not meet the department's needs, that plan can be supplemented with targeted and general signing bonuses if necessary.

Improve Efficiency in the Screening Process

While increasing the number of applicants is essential, keeping as many qualified applicants in the screening process is also a necessary condition for improving department recruiting. Table S.1 gives an overview of the recruiting process and the rates at which candidates drop out or are screened out. Overall, 7 percent of the applicants for SDPD officer positions complete the process and enter the academy.

Table S.1
Percentage of Applicants Who Drop Out or Are Screened Out in Stages of SDPD's Recruiting Process

Stage	Pass (%)
Written test	62
Sergeant's background review (of those who passed the written and physical tests)	54
Clear full background check and medical and psychological exams, and get hired (of those who passed the sergeant's review)	22
Overall probability of hiring	7

SOURCE: SDPD recruiting database.

Provide an Online Sample Test

The SDPD screening process reflects the high professional standards of the department. However, the standards may also be intimidating to prospective applicants. Presently, SDPD applicants enter the written test generally unaware of the material on which they are being evaluated. This may depress the test scores of applicants who do not perform well on some material that they encounter for the first time but that they could learn and apply with practice. Ostensibly, this is the rationale behind allowing applicants to take the written test multiple times. The unfamiliarity of the test materials may also dissuade some potential candidates from taking the written test at all. Therefore, it is important that SDPD do its best to demystify the screening criteria. Providing a sample test should be among SDPD's highest priorities in the area of improving the screening process. Sample tests can improve test scores, and there is some evidence that they are particularly effective in getting minority candidates to participate in the application process (Whetstone, Reed, and Turner, 2006).

Allow Other Standardized Tests to Substitute for SDPD's Written Test

Many of the aptitudes evaluated by the written test are also measured by other commonly administered standardized tests—such as the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) Reasoning Test, and the American College Testing program (ACT). SDPD and the City of San Diego should consider allowing an applicant's score on these standardized tests above a certain level to substitute for a passing score on the SDPD written test. This could provide a number of advantages. First, it will remove one formal step in the application process for high-aptitude individuals and therefore encourage them to take the next steps of appearing for the physical-ability test (PAT) and submitting a formal background questionnaire. Second, allowing the substitution of ASVAB scores will provide SDPD an opportunity to send a clear message to San Diego's large active-duty military workforce that it is seriously interested in them and credits them for accomplishments they have already achieved. Our analysis shows that SDPD (and maybe other law-enforcement agencies)

is already fairly successful in attracting applicants from this population. Allowing high-aptitude military personnel to bypass the first step in the application process will provide a potential recruitment advantage over other law-enforcement agencies that are competing for this population.

Conduct a Pilot Study to Find an Optimal Pass Point for the Written Test

One of the critical elements of a fair and informative test is the establishment of a pass point that not only excludes low-quality applicants but also includes as many applicants who are able to perform as a police officer. Currently, the written test screens out 40 percent of applicants at the initial stage of the recruiting process. Given the need for considerably more candidates at later stages of the recruiting process and the fact that academy classes in the 12 months preceding this writing have had only one academic failure, there is a compelling argument that the pass point is currently set too high. We recommend that the city complete a study to find a new pass point for the written test.

This action should not be interpreted as a lowering of department recruiting standards. Instead, it is an effort to find an optimal pass point that does not screen out capable applicants who may be rejected under the current pass point but who still have high potential for success at the academy and otherwise possess appropriate background qualifications. As we mentioned, only one SDPD officer recruit in the past year has failed the academy for academic reasons. A new pass point might increase the risk that new recruits will fail coursework at the academy; however, in light of personnel shortfalls in recent years, we feel that this risk is outweighed by the potential to expand the overall number of qualified academy graduates.

Analyze the Written Test for Problematic Questions

San Diego's city testing service uses a formal system to identify knowledge, skills, and abilities that police officers need and to develop test questions that measure abilities in those dimensions. Questions undergo careful review during test development. We recommend additional analyses of test questions using applicant test-score data to iden-

tify problematic questions. We have no evidence that such questions exist, but research on test development suggests that such analyses of test scores and test-item responses should be a regular practice, especially when fielding a new version of a test. For example, tests of differential item functioning (DIF) analysis can be used to flag test items that might have racial, ethnic, or other cultural bias. DIF analysis flags test items that, for example, nonwhite test takers are more likely to miss than white test takers who perform similarly to the nonwhite test takers on other items. Polishing such test items will help SDPD keep as many qualified underrepresented applicants as possible in the screening process. This will, in turn, increase the chances of improving the diversity of recruits.

Petition Peace Officer Standards and Training to Create a Written Examination Process That Meets San Diego's Police Testing Needs

The design of fair and informative tests is a challenging process, a burden that is best shared by a large number of departments. California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) offers such a written test, the POST Entry-Level Test Battery, as a service to member departments. However, the test items may not meet SDPD's standards, and delays in scoring the tests are currently too limiting for the test to be of use for SDPD's testing schedule. We recommend that SDPD, along with other California police departments, petition POST to create a written examination process that meets SDPD's standards and tight recruiting timeline. A potential disadvantage of using POST is that SDPD would lose its ability to closely interact with test development and management, a benefit that needs to be balanced with the cost of crafting fair and accurate written tests.

Strengthen the Recruiting Workforce and Practices

An SDPD internal analysis shows that, given the current levels of officer turnover and academy graduations, bringing the number of officers up to the desired level could be a long-term effort. SDPD projections indicate that, with 50 graduates from each academy, the department

will reach 2,000 officers some time in 2010. If the department cannot consistently produce 50 graduates per quarter, the department would not reach its authorized strength for several more years; with 40 graduates, SDPD would not reach its authorized strength until 2014. Starting in 2005, SDPD began conducting four academy classes per year and, since 2006, has graduated an average of 25 officers per class. This has allowed SDPD to maintain its size, but the inability to fill academy classes in 2003 and 2004 resulted in a current shortage of 100 officers. After fielding a new recruiting team early in 2007, SDPD has been adding an average of 32 new officers to its ranks with each academy class, with the next two classes projected to have nearly 50. Our recommendations in this section aim to strengthen SDPD Recruiting's capability to consistently attract more than 40 officers to each academy class.

Establish a Stable Recruiting Budget

We strongly recommend that the city and the department establish a stable recruiting budget at the beginning of each fiscal year. We support SDPD's contention that recruiting should be a line item in the department's budget. This sends a clear signal to all stakeholders that recruiting is an important mission of the department. This will also reinforce the recruiting team's recent successes and empower team leaders to plan and execute recruiting priorities for the fiscal year.

Make Written-Test Dates Marketing Events

We recommend that the department turn written test dates into marketing events that help applicants solidify the decision to follow through on the entire application process. Applicants appearing for the written test are clearly people of special interest to any law-enforcement recruiter. Many applicants pass the written and physical exams but later withdraw from the process, showing that the fact that they took the time and effort to take the exam does not mean that they have fully committed to a career with SDPD. The several times per month that these groups assemble offer SDPD recruiters an excellent opportunity to exhibit career opportunities at SDPD, including the K9 unit, the mounted division, and special weapons and tactics (SWAT), and

to present occupational specialties, such as child-abuse investigation and arson investigation, which might generate particular interest in the aftermath of the devastating 2007 fires.

An alternate strategy is to supplement SDPD's current program for the mornings of the monthly PAT. Currently at the PAT, recruiters work toward building the applicants' commitment to SDPD, in part with speeches designed to inspire applicants to stick through the process because a rewarding career lies ahead. In addition, SDPD officers cheer and root for every candidate through his or her attempt at completing the PAT. With a sufficient number of recruiters on hand, this can be supplemented with additional interaction so that every applicant has the opportunity to personally interact with at least one SDPD officer, receive an acknowledgment of their willingness to serve the community, and ask questions of SDPD's professional police officers. Many of those present will not pass the exam or the background process, but, for those who do pass, a good first impression of SDPD will give them less interest in considering other options.

Applicants Who Drop Themselves from the Recruiting Process Should Be Redirected to Recruiters

As stated, the department must make every effort to retain applicants during the screening process. For instance, applicants who do not complete their application materials or who fail to appear for interviews with background investigators are issued "constructive waivers," indicating that their applications have been formally terminated but that the reason for the termination is not due to an SDPD finding against the applicant. We found that 13 percent of applicants who passed the written test received constructive waivers and that women were more than twice as likely as men to receive a constructive waiver. Rather than terminating the application and issuing such notices, we recommend that those applications be referred first to a recruiter for follow-up. A call or visit from a recruiter may convert some of these applicants to recruits.

Establish a Formal Incentive System for Recruiters

The current recruiting team has made significant progress using an informal system that emphasizes teamwork and close interactions among recruiters and managers. For instance, the recruiting sergeant meets daily with recruiters, and recruiters keep daily journals, which the supervisor reviews. Managers qualitatively evaluate recruiters based on their contribution to the team. This informal system works well for the current recruiting team, whose members are specially selected to improve the recruiting conditions. The department needs to prepare for a future in which some (or all) members of the current team may no longer be assigned to recruiting duty. We recommend that the department establish a formal system to manage its recruiters, as the current system depends on qualitative judgments of managers.

Benchmarks and targets are essential parts of all successful recruiting programs. They clarify the mission for the recruiting team and set concrete goals toward which the team members should strive. In setting goals, the department can communicate clearly to recruiters what types of recruits are most needed. These types may include applicants with a college education or the ability to speak a foreign language.² As recruiters are given recruiting missions, SDPD should establish incentives, honorary or monetary if possible, for them. The department should design awards, such as plaques, achievement medals, and enhanced promotion opportunities. And the department should use objective performance measures, such as the number of applicants who pass the fitness test over some period. A recruiter who has successfully guided high-value applicants should receive more points than other recruiters. This implies that the department should develop and implement an applicant-tracking system that can track each applicant from the first contact through the recruiting process.

² Proposition 209, passed in California in 1996, prohibits public institutions from giving preferential treatment to an individual on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin. Preferential treatment includes the encouragement of recruiting from underrepresented groups for employment in public agencies.

Develop a Succession Plan for Subsequent Recruiting Teams

As we described, the current recruiting team has achieved measurable successes. It is essential that the department sustain this momentum by maintaining the quality of the recruiting team, as team members inevitably move onto new assignments. We recommend that the department develop a succession plan for subsequent recruiting teams. The plan should specify the selection criteria for recruiters, formalize a training plan for new members of the team, and set clear evaluation standards.