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Police Recruitment and Retention for the New Millennium

The State of Knowledge

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Summary

Maintaining the police workforce level is continually one of the greatest challenges facing law-enforcement agencies. One indication of this challenge is the recent appropriation of $1 billion to the federal Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) to help stabilize law-enforcement positions. The program received more than 7,000 applications requesting more than $8 billion to support nearly 40,000 sworn-officer positions.

To help address these challenges and provide lessons for the law-enforcement community, the COPS office provided support to the RAND Center on Quality Policing to compile information on promising practices for police recruitment and retention. These are available at the Recruitment and Retention Clearinghouse website (RAND Corporation, 2010). This monograph summarizes for police practitioners lessons evident in these materials on maintaining diverse, effective workforce levels.

A Metaphor for Police Staffing Challenges

Diminishing sources of recruitment, increasing causes for attrition, and broadening police responsibilities all shape questions of workforce supply and demand. To conceptualize and delineate the distinct forces at work, we use the metaphor of a bucket (Figure S.1).

In this metaphor, the size of the bucket represents the absolute need for police officers. The water level, which rises and falls with accession and attrition over time, frequently does not fill the bucket because the demand for officers exceeds the ability to meet it due to resource or

Figure S.1
The Bucket Metaphor and Demand for Police Officers
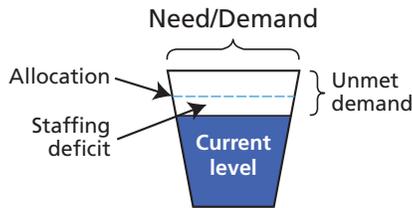
other limitations. The difference between the need and the current level represents unmet demand for officers. The authorized or allocated level of officers, representing the number of officers for which an agency is budgeted, is usually between the current level of officers and demand for them and is politically determined by such variables as workload, service orientation, and available resources.

Three forces can affect the bucket and the "water" in it. First, officers might be "leaked" through a hole in the bucket caused by attrition. Attrition can result from several sources. Budget crises might cause jurisdictions to reduce their number of officers. Organizational characteristics might become unappealing to officers who decide to pursue work elsewhere. A pending wave of baby-boom generation retirements threatens to reduce experience levels of police departments across the nation. Increasing numbers of military call-ups are requiring more officers for longer periods of time on nation-building and other military duties. Finally, younger generations of workers might be more likely than older ones to change careers to find the work they like best. Understanding these and other sources of retention problems is critically important. It is far more costly and time-consuming to recruit an officer than to retain one. Reducing retention problems can alleviate much of the need for recruiting.

Second, new officers might be less likely to flow from the "faucet" of supply into the bucket than they once were. Changing generational preferences mean that not only might younger workers be more likely to change careers once entering policing—they might be less likely to

enter policing at all. Furthermore, increasing levels of illicit drug use, of obesity, and of debt have led to decreases in the qualified applicant pool (Derby, 2008). Expanded skill requirements for police work further constrict the pool of qualified applicants. While many applicants (e.g., the college-educated) can meet these requirements, there is also competition from other sources for them. Just as budget crises can lead to increased attrition, so also can they lead to reduced salaries and benefit packages that are less likely to attract candidates to policing. Departments might also fail to take full advantage of electronic media in their recruiting efforts.

Third, the capacity of the bucket is expanding as police work broadens, creating the demand for more "water" to fill it. The adoption of community policing has broadened the duties of police agencies, which increases the number of functions police undertake, especially for larger departments. Increased emphasis on homeland security has also widened the responsibilities of local police officers, increasing the demand for them. Finally, as a result of globalization, technological advancement, and greater awareness, the scope of crime the law-enforcement community must now address continues to grow. In sum, local police roles have expanded to include not only benign order-maintenance duties, such as answering noise complaints and solving neighborhood disputes, to new, occasionally militaristic roles, such as counterterrorism, information-sharing, and immigration enforcement.

Filling the Bucket: How Can Police Agencies Improve Recruitment and Retention?

There is little that local police agencies can do to limit the scope of their work and the subsequent demand for officers. Nevertheless, there are some practices they can adopt to improve recruitment and retention and, hence, their ability to meet the demand for services.

First, planning, analysis (including analysis of demographic trends), and surveys and interviews with officers about job satisfaction can help agencies understand their prospects for attracting and keeping officers. Second, agencies can reduce turnover by offering realistic job previews

to candidates and requiring contracts with new employees. Third, agencies can attract and retain candidates by enhancing compensation and other benefits. Fourth, agencies can increase retention through greater employee engagement, including efforts to increase employee input in decisionmaking and other evaluation and feedback opportunities. Improving organizational effectiveness through better hiring and management practices can improve the agency's image not only with employees but also with the community.

Research on recruitment and retention is evolving and still has some significant gaps. Local agencies will need to identify what has been learned elsewhere and apply the lessons to their specific problems. This guide can provide a means for local officials to identify what has been tried elsewhere and what might be applicable to their own situations.