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# Recruiting and Retaining America's Finest

Evidence-Based Lessons for  
Police Workforce Planning

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Jeremy M. Wilson, Bernard D. Rostker, Cha-Chi Fan

Supported by the National Institute of Justice



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## Summary

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A critical but oft neglected function of police organizations is personnel management. While much attention is given to recruiting and retention, these are only tools for accomplishing a larger, more important, and less discussed goal: achieving and maintaining the profile of officers by experience and rank that satisfies agency needs and officer career aspirations. Police agencies often have little ability to assess their organization and environment, and they receive little guidance on how best to build and maintain their workforces.

In this work, we sought to fill the gap of information on practices available to police agencies through a survey of police agencies on their recruitment and retention practices and how they can affect the profile of officers at differing ranks of service. The survey, sent to every U.S. police agency with at least 300 sworn officers, sought to document such characteristics as authorized and actual strength by rank, officer work and qualifications, compensation, and recruiting efforts. We used these data to provide an overview of current recruitment and retention practices, how they affected police personnel profiles, and to identify future research needs.

### Agency Characteristics

We sent the survey to 146 agencies; 107 responded, yielding a 73-percent response rate. We limited the survey to agencies of at least 300 officers because we sought lessons on the largest personnel systems where cohort or year-group management comes into play. Unfortunately,

many agencies failed to provide complete information. Response rates regarding questions on recruiting costs, attrition, and some departmental statistics were substantially lower. For many of these questions, we received responses from less than half the 146 we sought to survey.

Most of the agencies in our survey had 300 to 1,000 sworn officers, while a handful had more than 4,000. Nearly half had fewer than two officers per 1,000 residents, but nearly one in four had three or more per 1,000 residents.

Most of the responding agencies had a formal recruiting goal based on filling vacancies or hiring a specific number of officers by attribute, such as race/ethnicity, sex, education, or prior experience. Collective bargaining and hiring restrictions may influence how vacancies are filled. Nearly three in four surveyed agencies had a collective bargaining agreement, and one in ten had a legal hiring restriction, such as a consent decree or court order.

Reported recruiting budgets varied widely, from \$0 to \$2.2 million in 2007, with a mean of \$67,491 and a median of \$9,500. The mean recruiting budget in 2007 was about 40 percent higher than that in 2006. The proportion of agencies with a recruiting budget also increased from 58 percent in 2006 to 63 percent in 2007.

Most of the vacancies these agencies sought to fill were, not surprisingly, at the rank of officer. Nevertheless, on average, these agencies also sought to fill about ten vacancies per year in ranks above officer through captain.

The greatest difficulty agencies reported in filling vacancies was a lack of qualified applicants; nearly four in five agencies cited this as causing "some" or "much" difficulty for them. Time between application and employment offer was also cited as a difficulty by two in three agencies.

Most applicants, and hires, were white males; white males were even more represented among hires than they were among applicants. White females constituted about one in ten applicants and hires, while males and females of other races constituted smaller proportions of applicants than hires.

Nearly all agencies reported an educational requirement, typically high-school graduation. Other typical requirements included

- psychological testing (99 percent)
- medical test (99 percent)
- driver's license (98 percent)
- U.S. citizenship (97 percent)
- vision testing (93 percent)
- physical agility testing (91 percent).

Agencies also reported disqualifying candidates for a wide variety of reasons. Among the most common disqualifications were

- felony conviction (93 percent)
- suspended driver's license (93 percent)
- serious misdemeanor conviction (81 percent)
- excessive points on driving record (79 percent).

On average, more than one in three new hires had prior military experience, and one in five had prior law enforcement experience. More than two in five responding agencies reported giving credit toward seniority, compensation, or retirement for prior civilian law enforcement experience, and nearly one in three did so for military experience.

Not all hired eventually “hit the street.” Some do not complete the academy or their probationary period. In 2007, agencies providing such information indicated that, on average, 87 percent of candidates completed the academy and, of those hired, 83 percent completed probation. On average, it took about 1.33 hires to put one officer “on the street” in 2006 and 2.23 hires to do so in 2007.

Agencies used a wide variety of recruiting methods. Among the most popular were

- career fairs (94 percent)
- Internet (89 percent)
- newspapers (81 percent)
- community organizations (79 percent)
- college outreach (75 percent)
- walk-in office (71 percent).

Most agencies reported targeting specific groups in their recruitment, including

- racial/ethnic minorities (80 percent)
- women (74 percent)
- college graduates (67 percent)
- military veterans (65 percent)
- candidates with prior police experience (53 percent)
- foreign-language speakers (50 percent).

Only 12 percent of agencies claimed not to recruit for any specific group.

Nearly every agency reported using some form of incentive in recruitment. Among the most popular were

- uniform allowance (95 percent)
- training salary (82 percent)
- reimbursement for college courses (73 percent)
- pay rate by assignment (62 percent)
- salary increase for college degree (56 percent).

Most agencies reported raising compensation to improve recruiting. Only one in three said increased compensation made recruitment easier, but, as noted below, increased compensation is among the strongest statistical predictors of recruitment success. On average, agencies are about five percent below their authorized number of officers and ten percent below their authorized level of civilian personnel. Attrition in a given year is most common among the most junior personnel, who may still be exploring career possibilities, and the most senior personnel, who are entering retirement.

## **How Agencies Attract Recruits**

To determine what attracts recruits to an agency, be it adventurous or nonroutine work or a desire or opportunity to help make a community safer, we constructed multivariate models accounting for labor-



market characteristics, “taste” for police work, and recruiting tools and incentives.

When controlling for number of police vacancies, city size, local labor-market conditions, police compensation, and compensation for other jobs, we found that only police compensation and city size had statistically significant effects on police recruiting. The likely appeal of compensation is obvious; we suggest city size is a proxy for the absolute number of candidates and variety of police work likely to be available.

Controlling for the above labor-market conditions plus crime rates showed crime rates also to have a positive effect on an agency’s ability to recruit candidates. We suggest that areas with higher crime rates may have more appeal to candidates with a “taste” for police work by providing more adventurous or nonroutine work opportunities or chances to make a difference in a community.

Controlling for labor-market conditions and recruitment advertising, we found little effect of advertising on the number of recruits. While police compensation and city size had positive effects on numbers of recruits in this model, the only statistically significant advertising effect was for television. While agencies offer a wide variety of recruiting incentives, we found none to have a statistically significant effect on recruiting. The results suggest that less emphasis on advertising and more emphasis on reaching out to and compensating targeted candidates may prove most beneficial to recruiting.

We also constructed separate statistical models of recruiting for men, women, whites, and nonwhites. The results of these were generally consistent with our overall model: Compensation matters most in attracting recruits.

## **Career Management Issues**

We used the results of our survey to identify career management issues that departments may be facing. Specifically, we identified agencies with more junior and more senior personnel than the sample average. On average, 48 percent of officers are in their first decade of service, 36 percent are in their second decade of service, and 17 percent are in

their third decade of service (rounding accounts for the sum of 101 percent). Departments that do not meet a typical profile are likely to move between “boom” and “bust” as cohorts of differing size progress through the system. Once such oscillations begin, they are difficult to stop. In order to gain control of the system, departments facing such oscillations will need to change the normal attrition patterns or fill the year-of-service and experience voids by hiring experienced officers from other departments.

Departments with higher proportions of junior personnel than typical are likely to face two problems. First, they will have a dearth of personnel for training and supervisory positions. Second, given competition among large younger cohorts, personnel within them will have fewer prospects for promotion and may face corresponding career frustration. Most departments that had high proportions of officers in their first decade of service did so to compensate for a lack of officers in subsequent decades of service.

Departments with higher numbers of senior personnel will face their own problems. In the most extreme cases, as senior officers retire, less-experienced cohorts will not suffice to fill their ranks, and the average age of the force will decrease. This may be desirable, but if the size of the first-decade force is too small, it will not be able to sustain the desired year-of-service and grade standards.

Controlling attrition can be tricky and costly. Attrition among less-experienced officers who do not have a substantial stake in their department can be particularly difficult to control.

## **Future Research Needs**

Unfortunately, limited information constrains the lessons we are able to draw from this survey. As noted, more than one in four agencies failed to respond to the survey. Many that did respond did not answer large numbers of questions. While we cannot identify every reason an agency failed to respond or answer a question, in providing technical assistance to those that did, we learn of several problems agencies have

in collecting and maintaining data. These include limited access to data, scarcity of resources, and narrow data collection scope.

Regarding access to data, we learned not all data are electronically available. Data that are electronically available are often not available in a single database or in databases that can be easily aggregated. Personnel authorized to access the data are often outside police agencies and have other duties to fulfill.

Regarding scarcity of resources, it is not surprising that, given demands on staff, police agencies can have a difficult time collecting data, let alone collating and providing it for external purposes. Staff who can overcome the problems of limited data access have limited time, and there are limited financial resources for technical innovations to overcome them.

Regarding lack of data collection, some departments do not collect specific personnel information about their staff and organization. Why they do not do so is not clear.

Several local and national efforts can help overcome these problems. Chief among these would be leadership and support for ongoing national data collection, facilitating comparative and longitudinal analyses of police staffing. While the expansion and increased frequency of administrative surveys would help, the best data would be comprehensive (such as via master personnel files as opposed to surveys) and gathered in real time. This could be incorporated as part of a National Police Personnel Data Center. Because data without analysis are of little value, support for local and national analysis would also be necessary to derive lessons for the law enforcement community. Analysis could focus on assessing if, when, how, and under what circumstances recruitment and retention strategies work, the career and personal needs of officers are met, and the administrative goals of management are accomplished.