Research Brief

RAND Center on Quality Policing

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Reinforcing the Thin Blue Line

Improving Recruitment for the San Diego Police Department

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Abstract

This research brief summarizes the results of an assessment of recruiting practices and policies in the San Diego Police Department (SDPD). The research makes three recommendations. SDPD should

- target recruiting practices to appeal to a broader range of applicants
- improve the efficiency of the applicant screening process
- strengthen the part of its workforce specifically devoted to recruiting.

In recent years, the San Diego Police Department (SDPD) has faced personnel shortfalls. For example, in February 2007, the department had 1,901 officers, 208 fewer than authorized. To bridge this personnel gap, the department needs to boost recruiting while minimizing attrition. To help it achieve these goals, SDPD asked RAND to examine its recruiting practices, identify areas for improvement, and make recommendations. A team of RAND analysts reviewed the research literature on promising recruiting practices, interviewed SDPD personnel involved in the recruiting process, and collected and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data on SDPD recruiting. The analysis reached three conclusions, presented in the form of recommendations. The SDPD should

- target recruiting practices to appeal to a broader range of applicants
- improve the efficiency of the applicant screening process
- strengthen the part of its workforce devoted specifically to recruiting.

Targeting Recruiting Practices to Appeal to a Broader Range of Applicants

A critical first step in recruiting more officers is to target recruiting more effectively and to reach a broader group of applicants. The researchers identified three ways to do this.

(1) Align marketing materials with the interests of prospective applicants. Analysis uncovered a disconnect between what motivates applicants to seek police work and current SDPD marketing materials and information (including brochures, its Web site, radio, and outdoor advertising materials). Surveys showed that applicants were motivated primarily by a desire to serve the community and the need for stable employment. Yet existing marketing materials emphasized job eligibility requirements and the hurdles and barriers to becoming a police officer.

(2) Focus recruiting efforts on the San Diego area. SDPD had focused some of its recruiting efforts outside the San Diego area, including areas out of state. Yet internal migration data suggest that relocation for police employment is relatively rare, so appeals closer to home are likely to be more effective.

(3) Take advantage of SDPD personnel and contacts. SDPD can do more to use its own personnel resources. First, the civilian labor pool within SDPD is a promising ground for recruitment to the police academy. Second, a high percentage of new applicants cite having a friend or relative in law enforcement as the main reason for their interest in police work (see figure). Offering a cash incentive to SDPD personnel for referring applicants would be a formal way to use personal channels to identify and attract promising recruits.

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Headquarters Campus
1776 Main Street
P.O. Box 2138
Santa Monica, California
90407-2138
TEL 310.393.0411
FAX 310.393.4818

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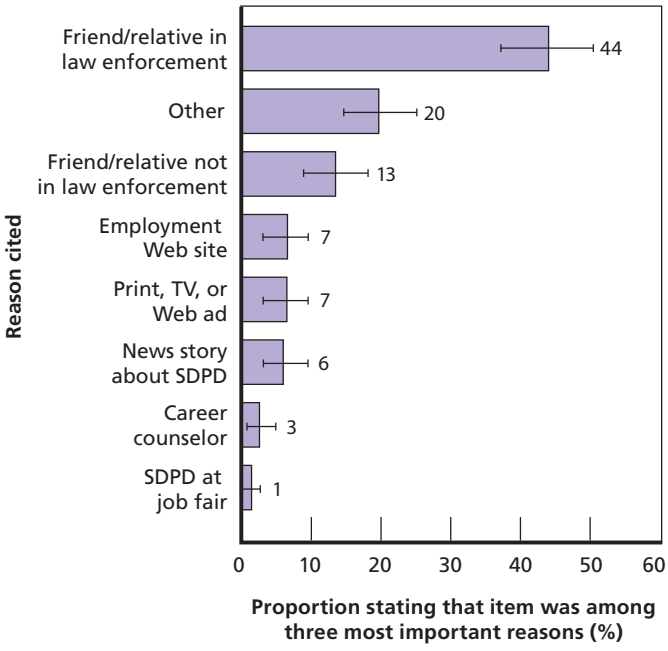
What First Prompts Recruits to Think About Working with SDPD?



NOTE: The lines represent 95-percent confidence intervals for the estimated percentages.

Improving Efficiency in the Candidate Screening Process

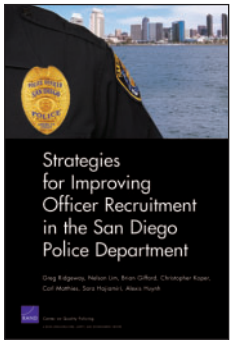
While increasing the number of recruits is critical, it is also important to retain desirable applicants in the screening process. SDPD's process for screening applicants is extremely rigorous, and a high percentage of applicants drop out or are screened out. The authors' analysis suggested that this process, while it reflects high professional ideals, might also be inefficient: It may intimidate some applicants and discourage them from pursuing the position. In particular, the written test may be weeding out desirable applicants. To address this issue, the authors recommended giving an online sample test to familiarize recruits with the kinds of questions they are likely to face on the written test. In addition, they recommended allowing other standardized tests, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), to substitute for the SDPD written test. Furthermore, analyzing SDPD's current written test for problematic questions could help ensure that the test is an effective screening tool.

Strengthening the Recruiting Workforce

In recent years, SDPD has beefed up the internal resources and staff devoted to recruiting, and these efforts have paid off: Recent graduating classes from the police academy have averaged 32 graduates per year. However, to make up for earlier staffing shortfalls, even greater efforts are needed on this front. As a first step, the authors recommended that the City of San Diego and SDPD establish a stable recruiting fund that would become a line item in the department's budget. In addition, more-assertive marketing and recruiting activities are promising. For example, the department can target for recruiting efforts those applicants who dropped out of the process for reasons other than disqualification. The authors found that 13 percent of applicants who passed the written test pulled themselves out of the process, sometimes for unknown reasons. Withdrawn applications from desirable candidates could be referred to recruiters for follow-up. Making recruitment activities more sustainable might also include creating a formal incentive system that rewards recruiters for success, as well as a succession plan that allows for recruiting staff to train their replacements as they move on to other assignments.

Final Thoughts

Bringing the number of SDPD officers up to desired levels will take a long-term effort. SDPD has already undertaken a number of steps to accomplish this, including fielding a new recruiting team that has adopted many of the promising practices identified in the analysis. By moving quickly to attract more recruits and strengthen recruiting practices, SDPD can have a comparative advantage over peer departments and other prospective employers competing for the same labor pool. Ultimately, achieving SDPD recruiting goals in policing is far more than a personnel issue. It means providing adequate public safety and service to San Diego residents, workers, businesses, and visitors. ■



This research brief describes work done for the RAND Center on Quality Policing documented in *Strategies for Improving Officer Recruitment in the San Diego Police Department*, by Greg Ridgeway, Nelson Lim, Brian Gifford, Christopher Koper, Carl Matthies, Sara Hajiamiri, and Alexis Huynh, MG-724-SDPD (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG724/), 2008, 160 pp., $35, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4517-1. The research brief was written by David M. Adamson. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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