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Improving Police Recruitment and Retention

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 asked the RAND Center on Quality Policing to summarize information on promising practices for police recruitment and retention. (This information is also available at the Police Recruitment and Retention Clearinghouse website: http://www.rand.org/ise/centers/quality_policing/cops/).

A Metaphor for Police Staffing Challenges

Diminishing sources of recruitment, increasing causes of attrition, and broadening police responsibilities all shape questions of workforce supply and demand. A bucket metaphor can help conceptualize and delineate the distinct forces at work (see the figure).

In this metaphor, the size of the bucket represents the absolute need for police officers. The water level, which will rise and fall over time with accession and attrition, frequently does not fill the bucket. This is because the demand for officers exceeds the ability to meet it due to resource or other constraints. The difference between the need for police officers and the current level of officers represents unmet demand for them. 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. Allocation of officers is determined by such variables as workload, service orientation, and available resources.

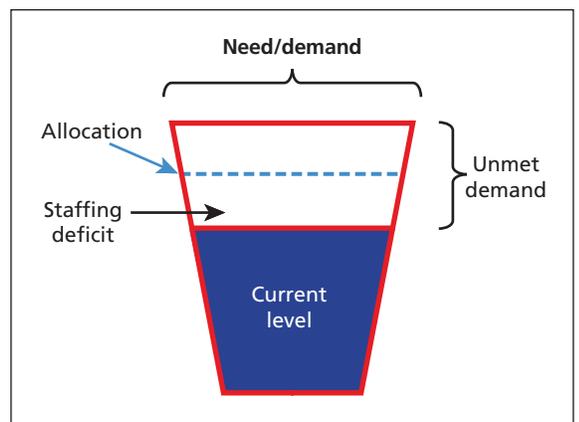
Abstract

Local police agencies face a threefold challenge in recruitment and retention: attrition resulting from budget crises and retirements, greater skill requirements and shifting generational preferences restricting the flow of applicants, and an expanding scope of duties requiring more officers with a greater breadth of skills. Although it has several gaps, existing research can help local officials identify what has been learned elsewhere and is applicable to their own situations.

Three forces can affect the bucket and the “water,” or supply of officers, 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. Some characteristics of the local police organization 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 depart-

The Bucket Metaphor and Demand for Police Officers



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ments. Increasing numbers of call-ups are requiring more officers who are also reservists to spend longer periods on nation-building and other military duties. Finally, younger generations of workers might be more likely 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 than they once were to flow from the “faucet” of supply into the “bucket” of officers. Changing generational preferences mean not only that workers might be more likely to change careers once entering policing; they may be less likely to enter policing at all. Increasing levels of use of illicit drugs, obesity, and debt have led to decreases in the pool of qualified applicants. 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 competition for them from other sources. 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. Finally, departments may fail to take full advantage of electronic media in their recruiting efforts.

Third, the width of the bucket is expanding as police work broadens, creating the demand for more “water,” or officers, to fill it. The adoption of community policing has broadened the duties of police agencies. It has increased the number of functions police undertake, especially in departments with larger jurisdictions. 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 advance-

ment, and greater awareness, the scope of crime that 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, but also new, occasionally militaristic roles, such as counterterrorism, information-sharing, and immigration enforcement.

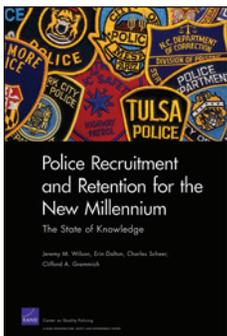
Filling the Bucket: How Can Police Agencies Improve Recruitment and Retention?

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

First, planning and analysis (including analysis of demographic trends), as well as surveys and interviews with officers about job satisfaction, can help agencies understand their prospects for attracting and retaining 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 decision-making and other evaluation and feedback opportunities. Improving organizational effectiveness through better hiring and management practices can improve an agency’s image with its employees and 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 with regard to their specific problems. Nevertheless, local officials may find much to adapt in existing research to their own situations. ■

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This research brief describes work done for the RAND Center on Quality Policing documented in *Police Recruitment and Retention for the New Millennium: The State of Knowledge*, by Jeremy M. Wilson, Erin Dalton, Charles Scheer, and Clifford A. Grammich, MG-959-DOJ (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG959/>), 2010, 152 pp., \$22, ISBN: 978-0-8330-5017-5. This research brief was written by Clifford A. Grammich. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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