

Youth Law Enforcement Experience Programs as a Police Recruiting Tool

Over the past decade, law enforcement agencies (LEAs) across the United States have faced recruiting problems. Crises such as the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the death of George Floyd have increased negative public perceptions of police and reduced interest among young people in entering law enforcement. Adding to this, LEAs compete for workers in an economy with high employment and confront the changing work preferences of young adults, which translate into reduced applicant pools. The police workforce is also shrinking because of ongoing baby-boom-generation retirements and officers choosing to leave for other opportunities. Increasing successful recruitment in response to these forces has become imperative for LEAs.

Youth Law Enforcement Experience Programs as Recruiting Tools

Youth law enforcement experience programs offer one promising avenue for improving police recruitment. These programs comprise a range of initiatives that offer concrete opportunities for young people to learn about and experience law enforcement activities, with an eye to increasing young people's interest in the profession.

To increase LEAs' capacity to implement innovative youth programs that promote careers in law enforcement, the Community-Oriented Policing Service within the U.S.

KEY FINDINGS

- Youth law enforcement experience programs are a relatively unexplored avenue for police recruiting. These programs allow youth to experience police activities and can heighten their interest in law enforcement careers.
- A RAND research team identified more than 3,500 of these programs and distilled lessons for law enforcement agencies that wish to develop such programs.
- The RAND team highlighted the potential of pipeline programs, which offer opportunities for students to connect to law enforcement and continue uninterrupted along the path toward a law enforcement career.
- The team also recommended that law enforcement agencies use a multipronged recruitment approach for youth that includes social media, word of mouth, and well-crafted marketing to generate interest from youth, students, and parents.

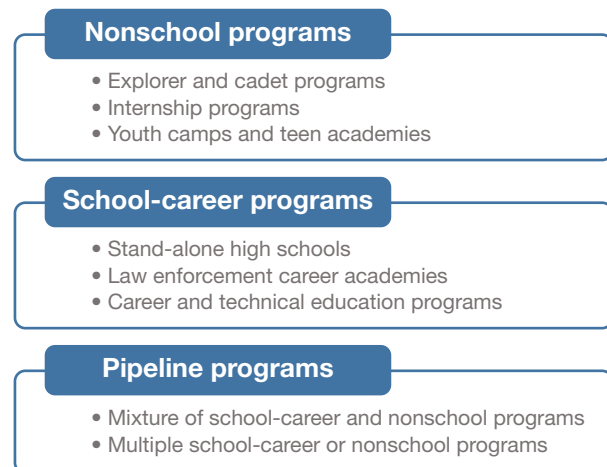
Department of Justice commissioned the RAND Corporation, in partnership with the Law & Public Safety Education Network, to create resources to help police implement youth law enforcement experience programs and refine LEA efforts to use these programs in developing recruitment pipelines. Researchers developed a census database of youth law enforcement experience programs in the United States and created a guide to present the results of the census and help police develop and implement innovative programs.

To develop the census and the guide, the research team convened a technical advisory group (TAG) comprising representatives from major law enforcement associations and youth law enforcement experience programs. The TAG refined the definitions of the different types of youth law enforcement experience programs, developed criteria for identifying programs to include in the census database, gathered existing lists and directories, and identified programs for more in-depth information-gathering.

Together with the TAG, the research team identified three types of youth law enforcement experience programs in the United States: nonschool programs, school-career programs, and pipeline programs (Figure 1).

The two main groups are (1) nonschool programs (such as internship programs, explorer and cadet programs, and youth camps or academies) typically managed exclusively by one LEA as a pipeline for recruitment and (2) school-career programs (such as stand-alone high schools, law enforcement career academies, and career and technical education programs).

FIGURE 1
Program Categories



In addition, there are pipeline programs that typically include middle, high school, or post-high school students and consist of two or more unique, sequential programs. Pipeline programs can include a mixture of school-career and nonschool programs or multiple school-career or nonschool programs.

The searchable census database lists more than 3,500 youth law enforcement experience programs that span the three types of nonschool programs and school-career programs (Table 1).¹ It also contains information on each program’s structure and contact information for getting in touch with program managers.

The guide also describes program features across a set of 18 example programs and profiles nine of these programs for agencies interested in implementing similar programs.

Implementing Youth Experience Programs

Researchers distilled essential lessons for LEAs seeking to implement youth experience programs from discussions with program leaders of the example programs and the TAG:

- Recognize the implications of state and local police officer hiring requirements in each state or locality, including minimum hiring age and education requirements.
- Consider pipeline programs, which offer opportunities for youth to stay connected to LEAs and continue uninterrupted along the path toward a law enforcement career. Pipeline programs are especially important in dealing with the “gap years” after high school and before being eligible to enter a police academy.
- Employ a multipronged approach to recruit youth participants that includes social media, word of mouth, and a carefully crafted marketing effort to generate interest from youth, students, and parents. Engaging with marketing and recruitment professionals can assist in this process.
- Recruit program staff with hands-on experience in public safety positions and experience working with youth.
- Develop performance monitoring systems to track youth progress and inform continuous quality improvement efforts for program implementation. This type of tracking system can

TABLE 1
Distribution of Program Categories in the Census Database

Program Category or Type	Number of Programs	Percentage of Total
Nonschool programs	1,482	40.0%
<i>Explorer and cadet programs</i>	1,092	29.6%
<i>Internship programs</i>	185	5.0%
<i>Youth camps and teen academies</i>	205	5.6%
School-career programs	2,207	60.0%
Total	3,689	

show the effectiveness of a program, especially when there is a change in governmental or law enforcement administrations or when community discussions over funding occur.

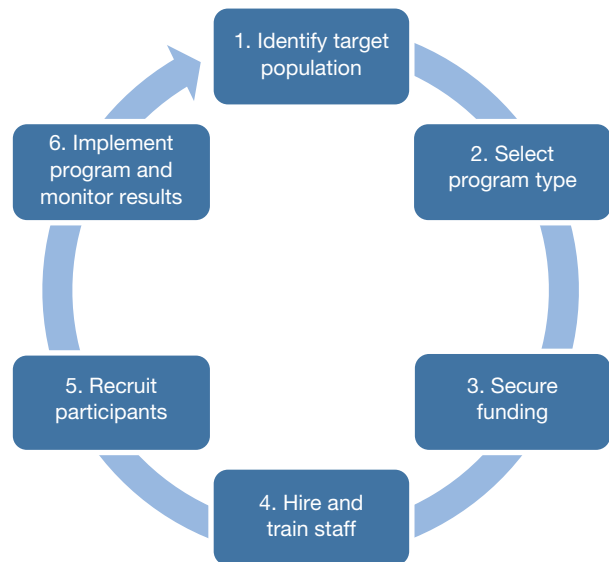
- Focus on sustainability. Funding for youth law enforcement experience programs is critical to their overall and long-term success. To maintain support over time, ensure that the program aligns with both LEA leadership (which may change) and community demands.

In developing a youth experience program, researchers recommended a six-step approach (see Figure 2) to help ensure that a youth law enforcement experience program maximizes its impact.

The first two steps are identifying the target population and selecting the program type; these decisions are interrelated. For example, if law enforcement or community members want to improve police-community relations, they should target groups that typically have strained relations with law enforcement, such as younger teenagers. The next step is securing funding on the scale required by the program, accounting for program size, staffing, and resource needs. The fourth step is hiring and training staff. The interviews reinforced that selecting program staff with experience and the ability to work with youth is important. The fifth step is recruiting participants. This can be done through formal and informal channels. The final step is implementing the program and monitoring results. The review of youth programs showed that monitor-

ing of results seldom occurs. When LEAs hire directly from their own programs, performance can be more easily measured, but metrics, such as improvements in perceptions of police or employment in the criminal justice system, can often be challenging to track. Formalizing an approach for measuring outcomes and tracking participant performance can help shed light on and advance progress toward the outcomes of these programs.

FIGURE 2
Steps for Launching a Youth Law Enforcement Experience Program



Note

¹ Law & Public Safety Education Network, “LAPSEN Directory of Youth Law Enforcement Experience Programs,” undated. As of May 31, 2023:
<https://lapsen.org/searchable-program-directory/>

This brief describes work done in RAND Social and Economic Well-Being and documented in *Youth Law Enforcement Experience Programs as a Potential Recruitment Pipeline*, by Dana Schultz, Richard H. Donohue, Rebecca Ann Lawrence, Joseph Coffee, and Lois M. Davis, EP-70427, 2024 (available at www.rand.org/t/EP70427). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA2281-1. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**[®] is a registered trademark.

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