

# THE STATE OF RECRUITMENT: A CRISIS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT



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Law enforcement agencies across the United States are struggling to recruit and hire police officers. Though agency-specific needs exist depending on size or locale, the difficulty with recruitment is a significant problem that is broadly affecting the field of law enforcement—it is not simply a result of poor agency management or localized failures.

Law enforcement is not the only occupation facing severe shortages of qualified job seekers, particularly within the United States. There is a worker shortage—not a shortage of work.<sup>1</sup> Other occupations such as nursing, teaching, construction, and the military are all experiencing a skilled labor shortage.

The U.S. unemployment rate as of September 2019 is at 3.5%, which is the lowest it has been since December 1969. The number of job openings in the United States has reached 7.1 million, which exceeds the number of unemployed people by 1.3 million.

these challenges have had on agencies and the communities they serve.

The IACP survey on recruitment demonstrates that the difficulty in recruiting law enforcement officers and employees is not due to one particular cause. Rather, multiple social, political, and economic forces are all simultaneously at play in shaping the current state of recruitment and retention. They are both systemic in nature and reflect individual-level considerations, making solutions to the problem particularly challenging.

The survey also makes it clear that, if agencies are unable to recruit new officers to replace those who have retired or otherwise left the law enforcement profession, it will significantly increase the strain on police organizations and officers. As vacancy numbers increase due to the inability to fill positions and as more officers continue to become eligible for retirement, existing officers are becoming overworked and burned out. At a time when the importance of officer mental wellness is more widely recognized, powerful efforts to recruit, hire, and retain officers become increasingly important. Law enforcement agencies need to thoughtfully amend recruitment and hiring practices without lowering the standards for officers that their peers and communities have come to expect.

In September 2019, the International Association of Chiefs of Police conducted a membership survey to better understand the extent of the recruiting crisis, the factors that underlie current difficulties, and the impact

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# RECRUITMENT BY THE NUMBERS

**A**cross the United States, there are approximately 18,000 law enforcement agencies spanning federal, state, local, and tribal levels. These agencies have more than 1 million employees, of which approximately 70% are sworn officers and 30% are non-sworn, civilian employees.<sup>1</sup>

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, despite an increase in the raw number of law enforcement jobs, a more considerable growth in U.S. population has actually led to a slow decline in the ratio of residents to police officers.<sup>2</sup> As a result, officers are responsible for serving more people—often with fewer resources.

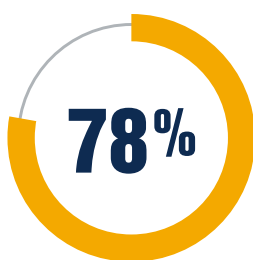
In order for police agencies to match an adequate number of officers to the growing population, many agencies are routinely looking to hire additional individuals.

Though it is challenging for many agencies to reach or maintain 100% of their staffing levels, it should be a goal of the field to come as close as possible to adequately staffing officer ranks. Research shows that operating below authorized staffing levels leads to low officer morale and job satisfaction. This is also true if employees perceive the agency to be understaffed.<sup>3</sup>

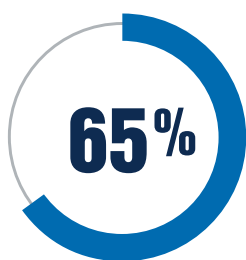
The IACP survey found that the challenge of recruiting law enforcement is widespread and affects agencies of all types, sizes, and locations across the United States.

In addition, the survey results clearly demonstrated that the challenges of recruitment are having a direct impact on the way law enforcement agencies are managed by law enforcement executives. Half of the responding agencies (50%) reported having to change agency policies in order to increase the chances of gaining qualified applicants.

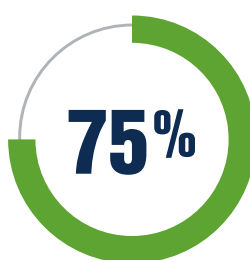
Beyond highlighting the challenges of identifying and hiring qualified recruits, the survey also shined a light on how consistent understaffing of an agency taxes existing resources and personnel. Of even greater concern is the impact that the recruitment crisis – and the related understaffing of agencies – is having on the ability of agencies to provide certain services. A quarter (25%) of the responding agencies reported having to reduce or eliminate certain agency services, units, or positions because of staffing difficulties.



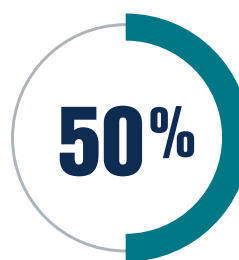
of agencies reported having difficulty in recruiting qualified candidates



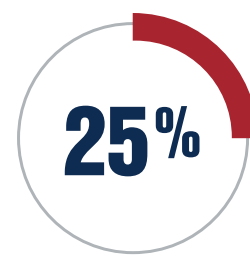
of agencies reported having too few candidates applying to be law enforcement officers



of agencies reported that recruiting is more difficult today than it was five years ago



of agencies reported having to change agency policies in order to increase the chances of gaining qualified applicants



of agencies reported having to reduce or eliminate certain agency services, units, or positions because of staffing difficulties

1 Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, “Police and Detectives,” *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/police-and-detectives.htm> (accessed June 12, 2019).

2 Shelley Hyland, *Full-Time Employees in Law Enforcement Agencies, 1997-2016*, Statistical Brief NCJ 251762 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2018), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ftelea9716.pdf>.

3 Jon Shane, “Organizational Stressors and Police Performance,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, no. 4 (June 2010): 807–818.



# WHAT IS DRIVING THE RECRUITMENT CRISIS?

**R**eports from surveyed agency executives tend to fall into two categories: (1) factors that are problematic within the current applicant pool and (2) factors that may explain why certain types of candidates are or are not applying to work in law enforcement.

Issues most frequently cited by survey respondents were that there is a low number of individuals applying to agency vacancies and that, among those who do apply, the quality of the applicants is often poor. It is not uncommon for applicants who appear to be strong candidates to fail a background check or divulge disqualifying information later in the hiring process. Additionally, agencies in regions where multiple law enforcement agencies are geographically close often find themselves in fierce competition to attract and secure the best candidates in the area.

Other key findings from the survey include the following issues.

## Generational Differences

Millennials and Generation Z—loosely defined as individuals who range from high school age to their late 30s—are more apt to value work-life balance than their Baby Boomer counterparts. This translates into young people hoping for more flexible hours and guaranteed time off. Mandated overtime and missing holidays with family are less appealing to Millennials and members of Generation Z. Other shifts in U.S. culture, such as student loan debt, child care challenges for complex schedules, and the need for double incomes makes police work a stressful occupation for families today.

There has also been a shift away from people being hired, staying, and retiring from a single agency, or even in the same profession. For younger people, leaving a job after a few years is commonplace, and moving from job to job is often

how younger generation U.S. workers move up the ladder in their careers.

## Public Image of Law Enforcement

Agencies strongly believe that public perception of law enforcement limits interest in the profession and is a sizable barrier to effective recruitment. Scrutiny of the police, cellphone recordings of interactions between the police and public, media coverage, and popular entertainment portrayals of police have led many young people to view police differently than their parents may have.

Overall, a majority of police officers feel their jobs have gotten more difficult since high-profile use-of-force incidents have dominated the national conversation.<sup>4</sup> Line-of-duty deaths have also become more highly publicized, including the killings of police due to community tension such as the mass shooting of Dallas police officers in 2016.

Each of these factors contribute to the negative perception of policing as a career opportunity for potential recruits.

## Hiring Process Challenges

Among IACP survey respondents, issues of applicant quality often coincided with challenges to getting recruits through the entire hiring process. Some agencies noted that passing a background check is a huge barrier in hiring individuals, as is meeting all the necessary criteria to be a police officer.

Furthermore, while the multistage hiring process is helpful for agencies to weed out recruits who do not make the cut, the recruiting process can be long and arduous. Of the respondents to the IACP recruitment survey, 47.5% reported having a hiring process that lasts anywhere from four months to over a year. Depending on the needs of

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<sup>4</sup> Rich Morin et al., *Behind the Badge: Amid Protests and Calls for Reform, How Police View Their Jobs, Key Issues and Recent Fatal Encounters between Blacks and Police* (Pew Research Center, 2017), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/01/11/behind-the-badge>

the applicant, potential recruits may be unable or unwilling to wait that long.

Some agencies have taken to evaluating current policies that could be creating an initial barrier to applicants, such as a no-tattoo policy. Other policies, like strictly disqualifying anyone with a past use of controlled substances, are also starting to be reconsidered. As states begin to decriminalize marijuana, some executives realize that years-old drug use is less indicative of what can make a good police officer than other factors.

## Challenges to Civilian Recruitment

While much of the national discussion is centered around police officers, agency operations depend as much on civilian employees as they depend on sworn employees. Given that the qualifications to be a civilian employee will vary depending on the position, recruiting civilians for certain roles may be particularly challenging.

Approximately 30% of respondents experience moderate to major challenges in recruiting for non-sworn positions. Of all types of civilian employees, agencies reported that dispatch positions are among those most difficult to fill.

# IMPACT ON THE PROFESSION

If law enforcement agencies continue to lose officers without bringing in a number of qualified recruits to replace them, communities will soon begin to feel the effects. Longer wait times for calls for service, fewer crimes solved and cleared, and on-duty officers who are burned out and overworked threaten the quality of life in our communities.

If the loss of police officers and employees continues, along with a lack of hiring, agencies will continue to take on more strain at both the organizational and individual levels. As vacancy numbers increase, officers become overworked and burned out. In an era when the epidemic of police suicide and importance of officer mental wellness are starting to be recognized, thoughtful hiring and workforce retention become more and more important. Law enforcement agencies need to thoughtfully amend recruitment and hiring practices without lowering the standards for officers that communities have come to expect.

Clearly, the difficulty in recruiting law enforcement officers and employees is not due to a single reason or even a handful of reasons. Agencies will have to tailor solutions to their communities to ensure appropriate candidates are considered. Additionally, in order to maintain a healthy, satisfied workforce, agencies must be mindful of the things their employees prioritize, both while on and off duty. Amending or implementing policies and incentives that reflect people's priorities may be a huge leap forward in improving overall agency culture. Police leaders, working with their governing bodies, have the opportunity to improve recruitment outcomes.

This improvement occurs through innovative policies, new approaches to recruiting, and incentives for employees where they count.

# INNOVATIONS IN RECRUITMENT

Agencies of all sizes across the United States have implemented new strategies and approaches to improving agency recruitment.

■ **Opportunities to gain experience.** It is the case for some applicants that law enforcement work sounds enticing until they are hired, leaving the possibility that an agency invests in training the police recruit only to have him or her leave the agency soon after. Some agencies have taken to building bridges between the community and the agency by offering opportunities for members of the public to do physical training with officers. Ride-alongs and outreach to secondary schools and colleges are other ways current officers can bond with potential recruits and increase the likelihood of bringing in quality candidates who want to stay on the job.

■ **Compensation incentives.** Attractive compensation packages have begun to set some agencies apart. In some states, state money has been allocated for officer student loan payment. Other jurisdictions have partnered directly with colleges and universities to allow police recruits to trade their training hours for college credits. These types of programs give recruits a chance to build and pay for their education without the stress of adding additional student loan debt. These types of programs aimed at developing young people into professionals have the potential to entice them to begin a career. Other types of monetary incentives can include sign-on bonuses or salary increases when a police recruit moves from the academy to the field.

■ **Relaxing candidate disqualifiers.** Due to shifting culture among younger generations, some agencies recognize that older policies have been more of a hindrance to recruitment efforts than a help in the past few years. For instance, many agencies are now allowing officers to have visible tattoos. Other agencies no longer disqualify candidates for certain instances of past drug use, with some even

choosing not to address it with the candidates at all. Of course, changing policies to lower certain standards does come with risks, so agencies should assess their current policies to determine where the largest barrier to recruitment lies and how can it be revised in the most risk-averse way.

■ **Programs to address heavy time commitment.** Though applicants' reasons vary for preferring work with more flexible schedules, shorter academy training, and better life-work balance, the call to agencies is the same: make it easier for individuals to become law enforcement officers and to stay in the job. Some agencies have offered part-time officer positions, including part-time academy training, in an effort to entice female recruits who may be balancing motherhood with work. An example of this, is the Metropolitan Police Service in London. The Metropolitan Police's research showed full-time working hours deterred some women from considering a career in policing, so, in 2019, they began to allow new constable recruits to choose between full-time or part-time working hours. Prior to this shift, all new police constable recruits were expected to complete their training and then their probationary period on a full-time basis before they were able to apply for part-time work.

Other programs for rural or state agencies have begun to offer online versions of officer training so that recruits will not have to worry about the strain of traveling far from home for weeks on end to attend the academy. Another simple way agencies can address concerns about time commitment is offering flexible schedules, including using longer shifts to give employees additional days off.

■ **Web-based outreach.** A few agencies have ramped up recruiting efforts online by building out recruiting websites that are separate from the agency's main site. Here, agencies can clearly list employment criteria, testing dates,

and let the community know when recruiting events are taking place. The sites often include a list of “frequently asked questions” for potential applicants. Having a recruiting website not only improves transparency and communication within the hiring process, but it may even take some of the daily burden off human resources staff by readily providing answers to common applicant questions.

■ **Material perks.** Many agencies struggle to increase salaries or offer monetary bonuses, but that hasn’t stopped some agencies from providing other perks to their officers. Allowing officers to take their patrol cars home, offering a clothing allowance, and providing casual uniform options (e.g., polo shirts) for appropriate activities are some approaches agencies have taken.

■ **Innovative time leave programs.** Beyond offering flexible daily schedules for officers, some agencies have also begun to experiment with innovative leave policies. Agencies offering unlimited sick leave not only support employees when unavoidable illness befalls them or their family members, but also set a standard for agency culture that employee wellness comes first. If unlimited sick leave isn’t an option, having an official or unofficial policy of being understanding and accommodating in granting employee leave requests can be attractive to potential recruits.

■ **Recruitment campaigns.** Many agencies have moved beyond traditional recruitment campaigns that glorified policing by showing officers rescuing civilians in intense standoffs, SWAT-like images, etc. Agencies are trying to highlight the real day-to-day aspects of the job, which are often vastly different from how the law enforcement profession is viewed. Efforts of this nature are designed to both attract and retain candidates who are able to respond to daily service calls about persons affected by mental illness, help those with substance abuse disorders, aid people experiencing homelessness, and help someone who has a flat tire. By educating applicants that the day-to-day policing work does not typically involve hostage situations, a car chase, and stopping an active shooter, agencies can better retain applicants and avoid turnover.



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