

Policymaker Summary

Law Enforcement Recruitment: Research-based Recommendations

Jane Wiseman

Institute for Excellence in Government

October 2021

Introduction

Many law enforcement agencies are facing a [hiring crisis](#). In some cases, retirements are [outpacing](#) even the most successful recruitment efforts. Meanwhile, the job is getting harder, as cybercrime and financial fraud rise, and with police often the social service provider of last resort for individuals struggling with homelessness, drug addiction, or mental illness. The decline in police applicants is likely driven by multiple factors – diminished public respect for the profession¹, a more complex and dangerous job², public scrutiny that’s often amplified by video from bystanders or body-worn cameras, and a post-pandemic desire for different ways of working that include remote work and flexible schedules - neither of which is typically available in law enforcement.

The events of 2020 inspired a national cry for racial justice and [fresh scrutiny](#) of the continuing gap between the diversity of police agencies and the communities they serve. In response, police leaders may seek new ways to attract and hire a diverse pool of candidates – not an easy task in any climate. What can a police leader do now to build a diverse force today and into the future? A multi-pronged response should address recruitment, training, and organizational culture -- recruitment alone can only do so much if disproportionate attrition drains the force of diverse staff. What follows are recommendations for hiring for diversity in law enforcement based on a review of research conducted in 2021 by this author and funded by the Massachusetts State Police, Executive Office of Public Safety and Security. The research review and all sources are available [here](#).

Hiring for Diversity in Law Enforcement Summary of Research-based Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Attract a greater volume of qualified candidates

Recommendation #2: Recruit more women and people of color

Recommendation #3: Retain more candidates during the selection process

Recommendation #4: Reduce pressure on recruiting with less attrition and new staffing models

Each recommendation is described in greater detail in the pages that follow.

¹ 91% of respondents to [this survey](#) noted that the public now treats them with less respect.

² 97% of respondents to this [survey](#) indicated they now are more worried about their safety than in the past.

Recommendation #1: Attract a greater volume of qualified candidates

When a fisherman brings in too few fish, he needs to cast a wider net, or to find a new spot with more fish. Attracting a larger volume of high quality recruits to law enforcement will require both net widening and finding new talent pools. Strategies that can “widen the net” and “find new talent pools” include the following:

Enhance traditional pipelines. Many law enforcement agencies already have partnerships with universities, particularly those with criminal justice programs. Research shows that exposure to the policing profession via internships and criminal justice coursework increases interest in policing among college students, so growing such partnerships is wise. After asking officers to develop recruiting relationships with the colleges they went to, the Arlington County Police Department saw its [largest applicant pool](#) ever, and an increase in the graduation rate from its academy.

Develop partnerships in nontraditional disciplines. Foreign language programs may help identify bilingual officers and sociology or social work programs may help identify recruits with an understanding of community relations who would be excellent on patrol. Technology and other specialized schools could provide a feeder for analytics and technology roles, while hospitality and management programs may identify those with good customer service, problem solving and administrative skills.

Reach younger age groups. Most recruiting programs focus on those age-eligible to apply, and few reach those still considering which profession to choose.

Research shows that many join law enforcement to fulfill a childhood dream, and many make the decision before they finish high school. Law enforcement agencies should build relationships with elementary schools for career exposure and with middle schools, high schools, and community colleges for career exploration via cadet programs, ride-alongs, job shadowing, internships, and the like.

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Consider experienced hires from other fields. Experienced hires are not common in law enforcement but are a reliable source of talent in other fields where their maturity and judgement are valued. For specialized fields in law enforcement, this may be particularly valuable in being able to hire individuals who already possess the expertise, rather than training recruits out of the academy for specialized roles (e.g. cyber, aviation, forensics, etc.). Individuals already serving in government are another untapped

source – the state of New Jersey sends an email blast to all state employees when the New Jersey State Police begins a recruitment effort, which may encourage state employees to apply.

Rethink entrance requirements. For most agencies, entrance requirements have changed little in the last half century and should be assessed on their connection to success in the profession. In a recent [survey](#) by PERF, the most common change to entrance requirements was relaxing standards for prior drug use. Companies like [IBM](#) and [JP Morgan Chase](#) are recognizing the importance of hiring based on skills rather than a college degree, which

can be more of a signal of racial/ethnic and class background than skill. Entrance requirements for law enforcement agencies have not been reassessed in light of current needs for greater communication and public engagement and would benefit by a fresh assessment of the skills required for the job and the best way to determine how those skills should be demonstrated.

Eliminate fees. Many law enforcement agencies charge fees for testing, for background checks, or for other steps in the selection process. Even small fees may prevent some individuals from applying, and this may disproportionately impact low income applicants.

Recommendation #2: Recruit more women and people of color

Hiring women and people of color has been a challenge for some law enforcement agencies and reaching these candidates may require new strategies. According to [PERF](#), “Trying to recruit and hire only candidates who have the same life experiences and outlooks as those currently in the profession is a recipe for failure.” Recruiting and retaining increased numbers of women and people of color may improve police legitimacy, according to the theory of [representative bureaucracy](#). This theory posits that individuals act in ways that advance the interests of their group (racial, ethnic, gender, etc.) and that visible increases in representation among diverse groups will translate into greater esteem for the organization across those groups. Specific actions to support recruitment of more females and people of color include:

Designate a senior leader to track diversity goals. A recruitment strategy should designate a senior leader for diversity efforts, [given that](#) “One of the strongest factors influencing increases in organizational diversity is establishing positions with responsibility for diversity efforts.” A documented strategy should include metrics of success each year and quarter.

Create targeted outreach programs to reach diverse audiences. [National data](#) shows that agencies with a specific outreach program to recruit female officers of officers of color are more successful in hiring a diverse force than agencies without such dedicated outreach programs. According to Dr. Lorie Fridell, national expert on fair and impartial policing, “Outreach to diverse communities is an important part of an agency’s efforts to

produce fair and impartial policing.³ Such outreach efforts should incorporate specific attempts to build connection, trust, and interest in law enforcement among a diverse group of candidates.

Use targeted digital marketing.

Digital marketing enables delivery of customized messages to specific groups at costs far below traditional advertising. One state police agency seeking to recruit more Black troopers used geofencing to send its recruiting ad to every attendee at a graduation ceremony at a local Historically Black College. Low cost digital marketing offers the opportunity to target women, people of color, or any other group underrepresented in a department.

Ensure prospective candidates can see themselves in the role. Women or people of color may be turned off by recruiting messages that show only or predominantly white male officers and may see this as an indicator that they won't fit in with the organization if hired. Some may self-select out of the process before even applying. Some law enforcement agencies feature on their web sites the photographs of recruiters who span a wide range of groups and create a welcoming literal "face" of the agency. Making recruiters who are women and people of color visible to candidates via events specifically for women and for people of color is another successful strategy. Further, given that research shows that after personal communication with a recruiter,

recruitment videos are the next most effective recruitment medium, departments should carefully examine the message sent via their recruiting videos. A [study](#) examining 206 police recruitment videos found that 8% showed no officers of color and 15% showed no female officers, and that for videos showing female officers, the amount of time they were speaking was half of that of the men.

Review job postings and messaging for unintended language biases. [Research](#) shows that when a job description includes words that connote masculinity (e.g. competitive) rather than words that are associated with femininity (e.g. cooperation), women are less likely to apply. Other research shows how language used in the selection process can suppress the success of minority candidates. One [experiment](#) in the UK modified the tone of the email inviting applicants to take a test from an authoritarian to a welcoming one, resulting in improved test scores for all while closing the gap between whites and candidates of color.

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³ Fridell, Producing Bias-Free Policing: A Science-Based Approach, page 72.

Provide one-on-one support to applicants from diverse backgrounds. Personal connection to a recruiter and the encouragement of that individual have been shown to increase retention in the recruitment pipeline. Candidates of color, whose families are **more likely to disapprove** of the career choice than white recruits, might be especially helped by mentoring. Scholars recommend recasting the recruiter in a “football coach” model - meeting with the family, exercising with the candidate, building rapport, and opening lines of communication.

Consider modifying physical fitness requirements. Research has found that fitness standards that overemphasize upper body strength not only discriminate against female candidates, these standards discourage women from even applying. To address this, some departments are altering fitness tests to measure upper body strength **using rowing**, which tends to have gender neutral success rates compared to pushups.

Screen out candidates who exhibit biases. As pointed out by Dr. Lorie Fridell, national expert on fair and impartial policing, as important as hiring a diverse force is the screening out of potential officers who exhibit biases that make them unable to police all populations fairly. Methods may include reviewing candidate social media posts and speaking to friends,

neighbors and coworkers in the background investigation process⁴.

Partner with women’s colleges, HBCUs and other institutions serving students of color. Many law enforcement organizations already collaborate with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Partnerships with institutions serving women and people of color are a good way to target diverse audiences.

“Increasing the number of traditionally underrepresented people in your workforce does not *automatically* produce benefits.” (Ely and Thomas)

Assess organizational culture for any barriers to belonging. Lack of diversity can create a culture less welcoming for new entrants who are female or people of color, but as Harvard Business School scholars Ely and Thomas **point out**, “increasing the number of traditionally underrepresented people in your workforce does not *automatically* produce benefits.” Ely and Thomas suggest that organizations will only improve effectiveness when they foster inquiry, egalitarianism, and learning and give historically underrepresented groups a true

⁴ Fridell, Producing Bias-Free Policing: A Science-Based Approach.

voice and the ability to help influence how work gets done. Specialists in diversity, equity and inclusion can help not only identify issues, but can also develop and document a path forward to create a more inclusive organizational culture.

[Strengthen policies that prohibit harassment.](#) Attrition of women and

people of color has been tied anecdotally to the lack of enforcement of policies that prohibit harassment. For some, rather than wait hours to speak with internal affairs, wait years for a lawsuit to be adjudicated, or participate in processes they feel are tilted toward the agency, they simply leave the profession.

Recommendation #3: Retain more candidates during the selection process

Police hiring processes can be lengthy, and candidates with other opportunities may not wait. Retaining more candidates through the process may require both providing more support to candidates during the process and improving to the process itself. Strategies that provide support to candidates include the following:

[Create a high-touch process.](#)

Providing one-on-one support via mentors, navigators, or advisors can help applicants maintain momentum and stay on track with all steps in the process, and can make them feel more connected before they join. In a survey of college students in criminal justice programs, [70% agreed](#) that having a mentor would make a difference in their choosing a career in policing.

[Identify when applicants are most likely to drop out of the process and target support accordingly.](#) The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) found that one-third of those who dropped out did so when it was time to write their personal statement. Working with the [Behavioral Insights Team](#), the LAPD used text messages to encourage applicants to continue and achieved a [15% increase](#) in the number completing the process.

[Provide support and technology to keep candidates fit.](#) Some candidates take themselves out of the process because they can't meet fitness standards or because they fear they can't. Providing candidates with access to a fitness tracking app to track their progress against fitness requirements would be a simple and inexpensive way to improve overall fitness of the candidate pool, and potentially to promote long term fitness for those accepted into the academy and then the agency. Many agencies now also make online and in person fitness classes available to recruits – a low cost way to boost fitness success rates. In [Baltimore](#) in 2017, 20 percent of applicants failed the fitness test, [including 55 percent of women](#). To address both the rate of failure of the test as well as the disparate outcomes by gender, the Baltimore PD created a boot camp called "Fit to Serve" which brought recruits to the academy for regular

workouts that current officers could join as well.

Strategies that [improve the process itself](#) include the following:

[Streamline the process to reduce hiring time.](#) While many law enforcement agencies believe they cannot shorten the process without sacrificing quality, it can be done. Washington DC reduced its hiring time from 18 months to four, by leveraging technology and allowing multiple processes to occur simultaneously. Mapping each of the 35 steps identified how efficiencies could be gained – automating clerical and repetitive processes, closing the wait times in between steps, and gathering background investigation information from candidates electronically - background investigations now take an average of 40 days.

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[Give candidates visibility into their status.](#) One of the common complaints among candidates for law enforcement positions is that it is hard to know where they are in the process and how much longer it will take. Using an applicant tracking system allows a candidate to see where they are at all times and lets recruiters see where bottlenecks are. One

easy way to stay in touch with candidates is via text message - New York State Police recruiters send individual or group text messages to candidates to keep them updated on their status and next steps.

[Walk in the shoes of the candidate.](#) Looking at each step from the perspective of the recruit, with input from current candidates or recent hires, may help identify bottlenecks. For example, an experiment in San Jose asked recruits who had dropped out of the process to provide feedback, and to consider reapplying, and [125 reactivated](#) their applications. Also, developing new models for careers in policing with on-ramps and off-ramps may help attract a new generation for service of something less than a full career, given how few of the current generation see themselves as staying in one job their entire career.

[Experiment with various recruiting approaches, and focus on what works best.](#) Testing things out can bring incremental improvements – for example, Google [tested forty-two](#) different colors before choosing the one for their toolbar that based on their experiments would optimize click-through rates and revenue. Police departments don't need to try 42 different recruiting messages, but trying a few and using the ones that work makes sense. A number of cities in the Bloomberg Philanthropies [What Works Cities](#) program were given access to the [Behavioral Insights Team](#), a group of researchers who run mini experiments and test behaviorally-informed “nudges” to encourage activities like staying engaged in the recruitment process. After working with a handful of cities on

recruitment messaging, one finding from their research is that helping others was the most consistent top reason to enter the profession, but was seldom an effective recruiting message alone, so multiple messages should be used. An experiment from the Behavioral Insights Team in South Bend, IN tested sending postcards to potential recruits that referred to officer's identity at home and at work, and found them [seven times](#) as effective as not sending a postcard at getting people to apply. Tacoma, WA had a [fourfold increase](#) in applicants after adopting the "You belong here" message in its marketing, using personalized postcards. Postcards had simple, clear instructions and came from new officers or mid-management, not senior leaders, so that potential recruits would have an easier time seeing their future selves in the role.

[Seek input and ideas from outside the police department.](#) Several years ago, [Seattle convened](#) a team from the police department, the city council, and the city's innovation office to develop a strategy to address declining numbers of recruits. The work involved qualitative and quantitative data, and broke the hiring process down into 17 steps so that each could be examined for its efficiency and effectiveness. A survey gathered input from all police department staff, and over 1,000 ideas were generated in facilitated discussions. Historical analysis of applications by race and gender and by step of the hiring process helped identify patterns of greatest concern. Similarly, analysis of separation data helped narrow in on the officers most at risk of attrition and reasons for departure so that preventive measures could be devised.

Recommendation #4: Reduce pressure on recruiting with less attrition and new staffing models.

If fewer staff leave, fewer replacements must be recruited. This may be the lowest cost way to relieve pressure on recruiting, and it can boost morale as well. Specific ideas to decrease attrition include:

[Give recruits a realistic job preview to reduce early career departures.](#)

Recruits who understand what the profession truly entails are less likely to leave early in their careers. As [noted](#) by Professor Christy Lopez, Georgetown University Law Center, "We know we're losing people in part because of the disconnect between what the recruits

thought the job would be and what it is." Recruits should be exposed to the full range of duties, including the less glamorous ones, so they are not disappointed once deployed. Ride-alongs, pre-academies, mentorships, job shadowing, and video blogs (vlogs) have been effective ways to achieve this⁵.

⁵ For example [Miami](#) PD has an informative and amusing vlog.

Create flexible and family-friendly work models. Retention may be increased with more flexible staffing models, such as [on-site day care](#), or the [career intermission program](#) that allows military employees to take a pause of one to three years to pursue educational, family or career options, and then return to active duty.

Conduct exit interviews to uncover reasons for attrition. Standardized exit interviews can identify common reasons for departure, and solutions that can address problems. Any exit interviews should reach a sufficient number of women and minorities to identify practices or policies

that could be changed to reduce their attrition. Some agencies have found ways to continue part time employment for those who had planned to retire based on what was learned in exit interviews.

Analyze why staff stay on the job and include this insight in recruiting messages. While exit interviews are routine in many organizations, it is far less common to study why public servants stay in their careers. So-called “stay” interviews can be valuable for both sworn and civilian staff to understand and document key drivers for retention, which can inform messaging to new recruits.

New staffing models:

Even the most successful recruiting program may not close the gap between sworn strength authorized levels and new recruits ready to enter service. A fundamental rethinking of staffing and deployment models may be needed. Options include:

Rethink the career model. In a [review](#) of state police hiring, scholars Whetstone, Reed and Turner suggest that attrition might be reduced by creating a training model like the one used in the medical field, with a standard set of rotations among specialties to be completed in the first three years of service, and then allowing staff to choose their specialty. The scholars’ model of choosing among investigations, patrol, and management could be expanded to include technical areas such as forensics, digital evidence, or data analytics. Professional development along each of the tracks could allow those wanting to specialize in patrol to gain expertise in relevant skills such as community

engagement, learning a new language and the like. Creating a technology specialty track may have some appeal as a [survey](#) of law enforcement officers showed that the majority wanted to stay in the profession, and desire to stay was stronger among those who had an interest in learning digital skills. Enhancing opportunities to learn new technology and digital skills may increase the attractiveness of the profession while reducing attrition.

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Identify tasks that can be automated. A great deal of routine paperwork could be automated – [McKinsey](#) estimates that up to 30% of hours worked can be automated by 2030. Law enforcement agencies should leverage process automation so clerical tasks can be done with greater security and accuracy, enabling staff to focus on activities requiring human judgement. Speed cameras can reduce manpower needs for traffic enforcement while also providing a method to reduce actual or perceived bias in traffic stops. Drones and robots may free up additional manpower as surveillance and crime scene tasks become safer and more secure when automated.

Identify tasks that can be completed using flexible schedules or remote work. Some police departments enabled remote work during the pandemic, for example Charlottesville, VA enabled remote work for civilian administrative staff as well as for detectives. Some flexibility may be of value to attract and retain candidates for selected roles.

Examine roles that can be filled by contracted staff, part time or seasonal staff, or via volunteers or retirees. Contract staff do not incur the cost of benefits and pension liability and can be used for services that are not mission critical, such as cleaning and janitorial, food service, on site health and wellbeing services, and the like. Seasonal variations in workload exist in nearly every organization and an assessment of annual events or activities that create a surge in workload could identify opportunities to

deploy part time or temporary staff. For example, law enforcement agencies may have a surge of workload to process background checks of new recruits, which create bottlenecks and divert from core mission when done by full time staff. One solution for this is to bring back retired investigators or contracted staff to meet the surge. Loaned executives from corporate partners can on a temporary basis perform tasks requiring niche expertise and not sworn duties (e.g. cyber or data tasks). Another example is the [Police Now](#) program in the UK which brings in new recruits for a two year commitment to serve in high-need communities. 80% of program participants choose to stay in the profession after their initial commitment. Washington DC has created a [police reserve program](#) where part time volunteer officers supplement sworn staff. For 20-50 hours a month, these civic minded individuals contribute their talents, sometimes in patrol service and other times with specialized skills from their day jobs (e.g. technology, legal, etc.).

Identify roles that can be civilianized. With the rapid pace of change in areas such as technology and data, some roles are ideal for civilians. When a new technology replaces an old one, new civilian staff can be identified to fill those roles quickly, rather than waiting for a new recruit class to be recruited and trained, and for a newly trained sworn staff member to choose the role and be trained for it. Other tasks that can be completed by civilian staff include fleet management, public information and communications, planning, forensic analysis, crime scene evidence collection, community outreach,

and data analytics. While civilianization is difficult in an environment of collective bargaining, even small increases in the use of civilians can make a difference in being

able to prioritize the deployment of sworn staff to duties that require the full extent of their training and powers.

Conclusion

Now is the time for bold and innovative approaches to attracting new entrants to the field of law enforcement, and to re-examine even the most basic elements of a recruiting program. Police leaders can leverage the intense focus on policing in America and inspire those who want to serve. Reflecting on why he entered the profession nearly two decades ago, Worcester PD, Diversity Officer, Sergeant Derrick Leto said, “This is the best time to become a police officer because you can be part of the change. I was a teenager when Rodney King happened and that inspired me to get involved.”

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Sergeant Derrick Leto, Worcester, MA Police Department

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