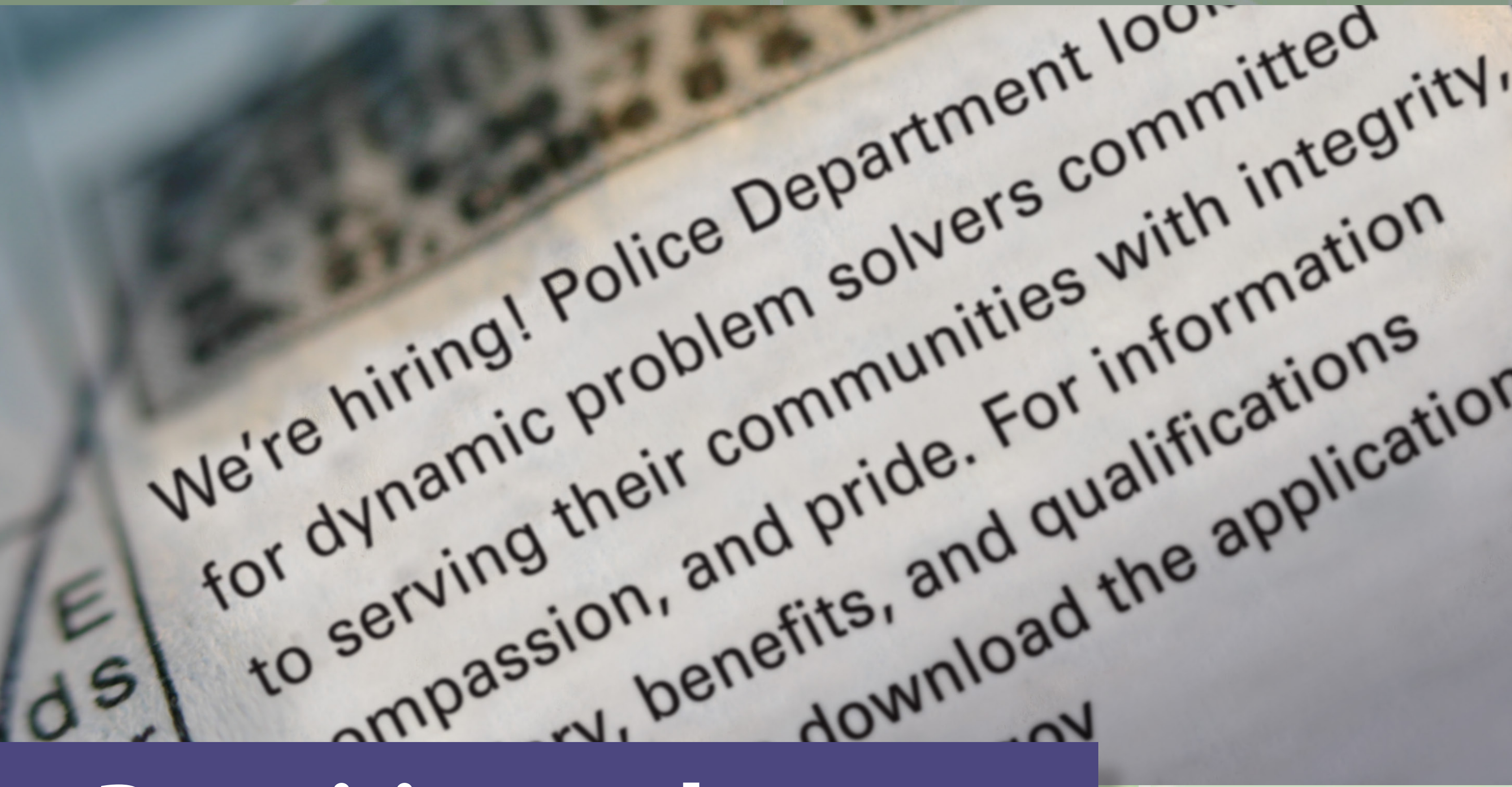

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IN SMALL AND RURAL AGENCIES

Kelly D. Bradley

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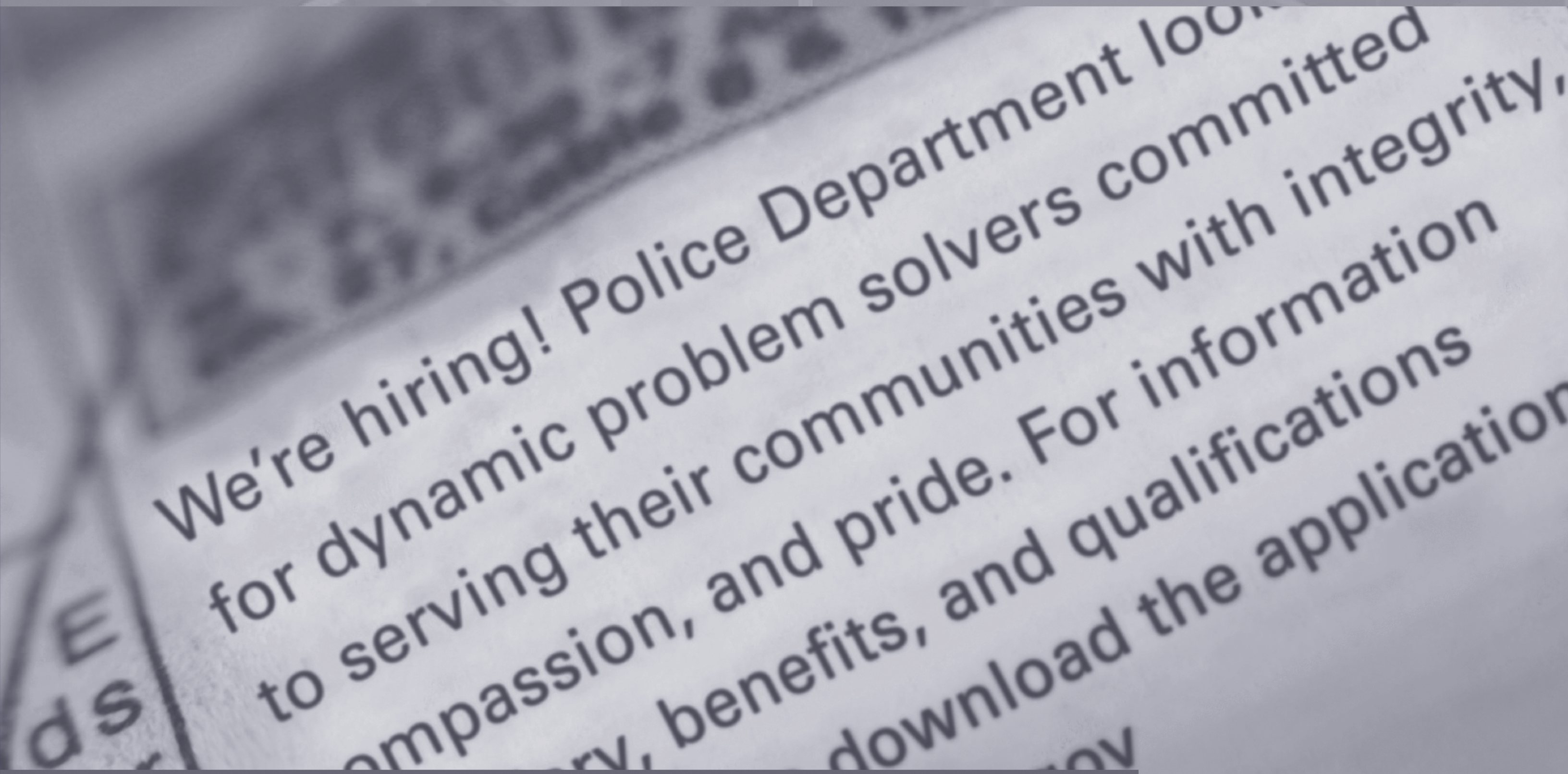

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The opinions contained herein are those of the forum participants and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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Letter from the Director

Colleagues:

In December 2019, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services held a day-long forum to discuss recruitment and retention challenges for smaller and more rural law enforcement agencies. These agencies often handle a broader array of duties than urban departments and, owing to their small size, tend to spend more time per officer on service and crime prevention.

The forum's 32 participants included police chiefs, captains, lieutenants, academic experts, researchers, and agency directors of state police standards. This small but diverse group allowed for a wide-ranging discussion that focused on the qualities that make an effective police officer, reasons why officers retire early or switch departments, and not only the departments' significant recruitment and retention challenges but also the strategies they use to attract and keep officers. The resulting exchange of ideas and success stories highlighted in this publication reflect the unique regional and size differences between the departments. In short, the participating departments display how to be responsive to the community served and flexible in meeting the needs of staff. They demonstrate that small, incremental change can make a big difference.

The participants also emphasized how poor leadership can be particularly destructive for an agency's ability to recruit and retain its workforce, whereas strong leadership that values community support and fosters the department's reputation can greatly aid recruitment and retention. Moreover, leadership that takes time to interview not only those officers who leave but also (and arguably more importantly) those who choose to stay with their department can learn critical information about what makes their agency a satisfying place to work and leverage that information for future recruitment purposes.

Sincerely,

Phil Keith

Phil Keith
Director
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without the contributions of a team of people who made the forum a success. This includes Dr. Penny Phelps for her skilled meeting facilitation, Mark Damitio of the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training for assisting in the search for a location, and Mike Sherlock of the Nevada Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training and Brian DeMunnik of the Regional Public Safety Training Center in Reno for hosting the event. Diane Michault and Mark Gifford of SIDEM coordinated all meeting logistics, and Dr. Kelly Bradley of LaSierra University captured the conversation and drafted the report.

Thanks also to Chief Jim Porter (ret.) of Bend, Oregon, and Dr. Elizabeth Linos of the University of California, Berkeley, for their presentations on the day, Jennifer Styles of the International Association of Chiefs of Police for her guidance on discussion topics and participants, and Deborah Spence and Helene Bushwick at the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services for their leadership and support of this project.

Introduction

On December 10, 2019, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) held a day-long forum on recruitment and retention in law enforcement. The COPS Office brought together a total of 32 participants: 25 police chiefs, captains, and lieutenants from smaller and more rural law enforcement agencies and 7 academic experts, researchers, and state police standards agency directors. The departments were selected in part because they have been tackling, with varying success, one of the difficult issues that policing faces in the 21st century—namely, the recruitment and retention of officers.

The forum's small size allowed for a wide-ranging discussion that focused on the qualities that make a good police officer, an in-depth examination of why people leave a department, the most significant challenges to recruiting and retaining officers, and a brainstorming session on the range of strategies these departments use to attract and keep officers. The result was an exchange of ideas and success stories that reflected the unique regional and size differences between the departments. The different strategies shared provided proof that, in the words of Deborah Spence, an assistant director of the COPS Office, "if you build an organization where people feel valued, people will want to come work there."

This publication is not the first to address recruitment and retention. Prior reports by the COPS Office and other entities have also focused on the concerns and challenges of hiring police officers today (Wilson, Dalton, Scheer, and Grammich 2010), have laid out the downward trends in hiring (PERF 2019), and discussed possible strategies for improving departments' successes in both recruiting and retaining officers (Copple 2017; Morison 2017).

However, the COPS Office recognized that while we have a sizable body of knowledge on what could and should be done for recruiting and retaining officers, the focus on such efforts has not necessarily examined smaller and rural departments. Consequently, it is worth exploring if smaller departments are engaging in qualitatively different strategies than larger departments. The purpose of the December 2019 meeting was to bring together leaders from these departments in order to document the challenges they face and exchange ideas on how they have been able to respond to the needs of their communities while encouraging and nurturing their staff.

What Does a Good Officer Look Like?

> *"Officers now carry more gear, use more technology, and face greater scrutiny than previous generations."*

Having a career in law enforcement today is both more complicated and more complex than in previous generations. Law enforcement is often tasked with counterterrorism and homeland security duties, in addition to responding to calls for service and emergency calls, patrolling neighborhoods, controlling traffic, apprehending and arresting offenders, investigating crime, as well as being "the first responders to a whole range of social issues" (Flynn and Harrington 2015, p. 3). In addition, officers now carry more gear, use more technology, and face greater scrutiny than previous generations (Blumberg, Schlosser, Papazouglou, Creighton, and Kaye 2019). Considering the challenges facing policing and recognizing the need to define *quality* policing to help create a roadmap for the type of officers agencies are trying to recruit and retain, meeting attendees were asked, "What does a good officer look like?" All attendees participated in this brainstorming discussion.

In the article "New Directions in Police Academy Training: A Call to Action," the authors contend that cognitive, emotional, social/interpersonal, and moral skills are essential for officers facing the challenges of modern policing (Blumberg et al. 2019). They define cognitive skills as involving decision-making and judgement, impulse control and attention to safety, conscientiousness and dependability, and adaptability and flexibility; emotional skills as emotional regulation, stress tolerance, and emotional intelligence; social skills as social competence, teamwork, and assertiveness and persuasiveness; and moral skills as integrity, ethics, and spirituality. The views of the meeting attendees largely align with this categorization (see table 1 on page 4). Attendees were in complete agreement on all the attributes put forth, but they especially resonated with trustworthiness and integrity, initiative and work ethic, common sense and analytical ability, emotional intelligence, and social skills as critical qualities.

Table 1. Attendee answers to "What does a good officer look like?"

Cognitive skills	Emotional skills	Social / interpersonal skills	Moral skills
• A critical thinker who understands procedural justice, is committed to community policing, and reflects the community we serve • Ability to think outside the box • Adaptable • Better than minimum—no more meeting minimum standards • Common sense • Decisive • Drive to grow and learn • Fast on their feet yet slow when needed • Good judgement • Multi-tasker • Prepared • Proactive • Problem solver • Procedurally just and fair • Self-starter • Strong work ethic • Tactically sound • Understands their role in our criminal justice system	• Appropriately engages in confrontation when needed and be a gentle giant the next minute • Be empathetic • Calm confidence • Calm under pressure • Caring and smart • Courageous • Has compassion and is dedicated • Have emotional maturity • Resilient—the ability to deal with internal and external stressors in your life • Satisfied • Understanding and patience	• Acceptance of differences • Community focused • Culturally competent • Desire to be part of the community and be a partner with members of the department • Effective communicator • Good listener • Self-aware • Servant mindset • Strong sense of commitment to their community • Teamwork • The heart of a saint and the spirit of a warrior • Willingness to see value in others	• Committed • Ethical • Fair and transparent • Open-minded • Strong integrity • Strong moral compass • Trustworthy • Unquestioned character

Note: Of all the statements made by the attendees, only two do not fit within these categories: "be physically fit" and "a good fit with the department."

Interestingly, the responses bear a striking similarity not only to responses by law enforcement personnel in other forums sponsored by the COPS Office but also to the professional literature. In a previous COPS Office forum on law enforcement recruitment in the 21st century, those attendees identified 11 characteristics of the “ideal recruit” (Copple 2017, p. 5):

1. Analytical
2. A skilled communicator
3. Streetwise and possessing common sense
4. A problem solver
5. A change maker
6. Adaptable
7. Culturally competent
8. Strong advocate for human rights
9. Well-educated
10. Compassionate
11. Visionary

A COPS Office forum that focused on hiring for the 21st century identified seven fundamental characteristics of police officers: integrity, service orientation, empathy, communication and human relations skills, self-control, team orientation, and problem-solving skills (Morison 2017). Moreover, the professional literature describes many of the same characteristics as the December 2019 meeting attendees and previous forums described. For example, the “ideal police officer” is one who not only exhibits honesty, financial responsibility, stable employment, and a clean police record but also shows other qualities, including initiative, sense of ethics, respect for law, good communication skills, common sense, and a service mentality (Capps 2014), while the “essential attributes” of police leadership include education, active listening, attention to detail, service, and humor (McLean n.d.).

Clearly, the law enforcement executives at this meeting, previous COPS Office meetings, and professional publications are all in agreement about the desirable characteristics of police officers. Not so clear are the best mechanisms for recruiting personnel with these qualities and retaining them. As discussed in subsequent sections, the December 2019 meeting participants shared their challenges with recruitment and retention and the lessons they learned about why officers leave their departments.

While officers and practitioners, including those at the meeting, look at the characteristics of high-quality law enforcement and those of a good officer, policing scholars and researchers do not; they generally focus on the attributes of poor policing—i.e., what makes for a bad officer—and think the focus should primarily be on measuring police performance. According to a journal article, this focus is largely due to a lack of consensus on what constitutes quality policing, while scholars and researchers are in agreement that "nonfeasance, excessive use of force, discourteous and aggressive actions as well as other behaviors [represent] traits of bad officers" (Henson et al. 2010, p. 9). In addition, researchers may focus on bad officer performance because it is easier to operationalize and measure poor attributes than strong ones. That is, quantifying good policing requires operationalizing the concept of good, which is difficult because departments have different needs and different definitions of success. Consequently, what one jurisdiction identifies as good policing will not necessarily work in another.

Compounding the challenge of defining and implementing these concepts is the problem policing faces with not having a clear mandate, which is unique among professions (see White 2008). In the research article "Identifying Good Cops Early," the author argues that policing involves a wide array of responsibilities, including preventing and controlling crime, apprehending offenders, traffic and crowd control, and helping people in need of assistance, thus accurately assessing quality police performance is very difficult (White 2008)—an assertion that many academics and policing professionals would likely agree with.

Some policing scholars argue that the way to assess police performance is through evidence-based policing (EBP).[1] According to a Police Foundation article, "evidence-based policing uses research to guide practice and evaluate practitioners. It uses the best evidence to shape the best practice" (Sherman 1998, p. 4). Proponents of EBP believe that it provides a practical mechanism for making policing more effective because of the focus on using policing practices that work and discarding those that do not (Cordner 2020). EBP pushes departments to move beyond doing things as they have always been done, or, in the tongue-in-cheek words of the forum moderator, not being the department known to have "100 years of tradition uninterrupted by progress."

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[1] For a detailed report on assessing police performance using EBP, see Cordner 2020.

From the EBP perspective, data, analysis, research, and evidence are important and guide sound decision-making, thus enabling an agency to efficiently achieve real-world results. In terms of measurement, EBP can focus on both outcomes (e.g., maintaining safety and order) and outputs (e.g., number of arrests) in order to make a department more effective (Cordner 2020). According to proponents, EBP is particularly useful because it leverages research knowledge to develop and implement policing strategies, resulting in smarter crime control at lower cost to cities and municipalities (Bueerman 2012). Meeting participants, while not explicitly discussing EBP, acknowledged its potential usefulness through comments such as that made by one participant who stated, "We forget we are in a labor-intensive field. We are publicly funded. We have an ethical duty to give the public the biggest bang for their buck." Advocates for EBP would argue the best way to do that is through sound scientific decision-making.

However, some argue that a focus on EBP loses the craft aspect of policing in which quality of work is more important than quantity of measurements (Willis and Mastrofski 2018). According to a Police Foundation publication, craft-style policing is "the culmination of knowledge based on hands-on experience" (Willis 2013, p. 2), and this publication argues that officers view their profession as craft, not science. In particular, these scholars believe that EBP places too much emphasis on decision-making based on scientific evidence, while a craft focus acknowledges the significant skill and expertise policing requires (Willis and Mastrofski 2018). While not dismissing the use of EBP, the craft-perspective argues that, in practice, officers are more resistant to using scientific-based decision-making and more likely to use their own experience and knowledge about people, places, and events (Willis 2013). The meeting attendees implicitly acknowledged the value of a craft-perspective through such statements as "a good officer is someone who can relate, who can understand what someone is going through, who can listen and then problem solve."

Neither policing scholars who advocate for increased use of EBP nor those who embrace the craft-perspective argue that the other view is not useful. Undoubtedly there is room in the policing toolbox for both evidence-based and craft-style policing. Attendees provided evidence of this duality when asked to describe what a good officer looks like, as some of the attributes attendees stated are essential to an evidence-based perspective, and some are essential to the craft-style perspective. Specifically, the analytical and common-sense statements are particularly useful for learning the evidence-based style, and the resiliency and seeing-value-in-others type statements are more relevant for engaging in the craft style.

“I can train anyone to be a cop, but I can’t train integrity.”

Meeting participants agreed that the key to recruitment and retention of officers in smaller and rural jurisdictions is finding, fostering, encouraging, and nurturing the qualities outlined above. The main sentiment can be summed up in the words of one participant: “I can train anyone to be a cop, but I can’t train integrity.”

Why Do People Leave?

In addition to discussing attributes of ideal officers, the meeting participants held a brainstorming session on why people leave the department or force for reasons other than retirement. The attendees' ideas on this topic can be grouped into two broad categories: (1) officers who leave for an entirely different job or profession and (2) those who leave for other agencies. The attendees noted a distinction between the types of officers who leave the profession; some leave early in their career, either during or shortly after the academy, and others leave much later in their careers as a result of burnout and stress. The attendees stated that officers who choose to switch to a different department usually do so to seek more opportunities in larger departments to develop a specialized skill set or advance their career, to get better pay and benefits, to leave poor leadership within the previous department, or because of external pressures such as family obligations.

According to policing scholars, the nature of turnover in policing is not a well-researched area (Smith, Wareham, and Lambert 2014; Haarr 2005). Researchers distinguish between officers who leave voluntarily and those who leave involuntarily (see Wilson et al. 2010). In the brainstorming discussion, the attendee responses focused on the problem of voluntary turnover, likely because researchers generally find that officers are more likely to voluntarily leave than involuntarily (Smith, Wareham, and Lambert 2014). Research on officer turnover shows that usually there is not a single driving event that leads to officers leaving a department, nor an overarching theory for why officers leave (Wilson et al. 2010).

Nevertheless, the findings of a study that modeled the "five main influences" of officer attrition—other opportunities, compensation, personal characteristics, organization issues, and employee needs—largely mirror the reasons the attendees discussed (Wilson et al. 2010). In a similar vein, other research posits four theories on police turnover: job satisfaction, burnout, confluency, and cognitive dissonance (Haarr 2005; see the below sidebar).

What are confluency and cognitive dissonance?

"Confluency theory attributes police turnover to an absence of pre-employment job awareness and to incongruencies between job expectations and realities."

Cognitive dissonance theory results from the discrepancy between police work as idealized by the officers, how it was taught during training, and the reality of such work in practice.

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* Source: Haarr 2005

> *“The attendees also expressed concern about police departments that might not be preparing officers for the realities of the job.”*

Early career departures

A small number of meeting attendees were more concerned about officers who leave early—i.e., during the academy or shortly thereafter—as opposed to after one’s career is already established. In general, attendees felt that, for these officers, the job “does not meet their expectations,” which aligns with confluency theory (see Haarr 2005). Some felt that these officers realize “they do not have the necessary skill set” and thus move into different professions, such as “a guy left to go sell insurance.” The officers who leave early seem to be the most confounding to the attendees, many of whom guessed that perhaps those officers do so simply because they’re “just not cut out for it,” and “those get weeded out pretty early.” The officers who leave early seem to be the most confounding for the group. As one participant stated, “I still struggle to understand how someone jumps through all those hoops to get hired and then quits the first week of the academy.” And another stated, “In the academy, we lose more the first week than we do for the rest of the 6 months”—the duration of the academy. While a third stated, “It’s weird that you can spend all that time getting into the profession and then figure out in five days that it’s not what you thought it was.”

The attendees also expressed concern about police departments that might not be preparing officers for the realities of the job. As one attendee stated, “I think some of the agencies are doing a disservice by not truly explaining what the job entails. Some of these young men and women come in with a different mindset of what police work looks like. Educating them upfront is important. Some think they are only going to drive cars fast and shoot guns.” Another stated, “those we’ve lost in our [field training officer] program, there is a lack of critical thinking and multi-tasking ability. They get really overwhelmed when they get out on their own and are dealing with multiple issues at once.”

While the attendees may have been perplexed by the officers who drop out during the academy or shortly thereafter, some researchers would likely not be. A 2005 study examined why police recruits leave police work within the first 16 months, finding that those who left voluntarily, which was the majority cause of turnover in the study, did so because they “experienced conflict and a state of dissonance when their experiences in the training academy, field training, and police work were inconsistent with or contradictory to their sense of self and their cognitions about what police work should be” (Haarr 2005, p. 449).

> *"A study on factors influencing turnover in small, medium, and large agencies found that pay incentives reduced voluntary turnover in smaller agencies but not in medium- and large-size departments."*

Some attendees mentioned that officers later in their careers seem more likely to leave the profession because of illness, injuries, or job burnout. One attendee mentioned that officers are "losing hope on society, on the people we serve. They get discouraged." Others mentioned that it is "unavoidable stuff, like illnesses and injuries."

An attendee stated that the "demands of the job wears down officers." To help alleviate such strain, this department has increased its focus on mental health and well-being by implementing peer support after critical incidents, which has "really helped with the mental health aspect." Some attendees believe that an "unaddressed lack of support for trauma faced on the job" leads veteran officers to "leave law enforcement all together" rather than leaving for another department. A study on work-family conflict, stress, and burnout in law enforcement found that higher levels of officer stress are significantly related to greater burnout. The authors point out that burnout in officers can have a range of detrimental effects, including increased absenteeism and leaving the job (Griffin and Sun 2018).

Switching agencies

Attendees noted several reasons why officers leave for other law enforcement positions. The most noted reason was for better pay and benefits. According to one attendee, "A lot of people will chase the dollar; they are always looking for the next higher paying job." While another stated, "Salary has not kept pace with the skill demands of the police. Applicants must have high emotional intelligence, computer skills, combat skills." A third attendee added, a "big reason for leaving is monetary. We are surrounded by municipalities that have significantly higher pay scales. When we pushed through higher pay scales, that's when we started seeing retention. Folks like working for us; they want to stay, so when we were able to give them a decent living, they started staying."

A study on factors influencing turnover in small, medium, and large agencies found that pay incentives reduced voluntary turnover in smaller agencies but not in medium- and large-size departments (Smith, Wareham, and Lambert 2014). These researchers concluded that the lack of pay results in increased strain in smaller agencies and argue that agency size is a factor in reasons for turnover.

According to a law enforcement best practices guide, salary is “the most frequently cited reason by police executives of why officers leave,” but the guide also states that while “money is not a motivator, [. . .] absence of money is a de-motivator” (Orrick 2007, p. 7–8). The guide makes roughly the same point as stated by the attendees, who argued that salary is important when officers cannot meet their expenses. However, one study argues that turnover is often about more than salary and that focusing on compensation “can distract from other substantive and more deeply embedded issues, such as organizational culture, leadership, and employee engagement” (Wilson 2010, p. 36).

Another reason officers leave is due to the more limited opportunities in smaller and rural departments. In particular, attendees felt that opportunities are not always commensurate with ambition. “We can’t provide them much specialization; we can’t send them off to a task force,” said one attendee. Another stated that officers leave his department because they “want to do some fun things, want to be K-9 officers, but we’re limited in our ability to provide that.”

Policing research has also shown that lack of promotional opportunities is a reason officers leave a department (Smith, Wareham, and Lambert 2014), and larger departments will “poach exceptional officers from smaller departments” (Orrick 2007, p 9). In addition, smaller departments are less likely to be able to provide specialty positions and the level of sophisticated technology seen in urban departments (Holmes, Painter, and Smith 2017).

Attendees acknowledged that these factors are largely uncontrollable for the smaller departments; however, these agencies do have some benefits not shared by large departments. For instance, one attendee from a rural area stated that they do find officers who find that ruralness “is for them because they like to hunt and fish.” Meeting attendees also noted that while they do lose some to bigger agencies with more opportunities, they have officers from the larger agencies “coming to us because of the lack of family feel [in big departments]; they feel like a number instead of somebody important.”

While acknowledging that smaller departments are better at providing a “family feel,” which attracts officers and makes retention easier, several of the law enforcement executives in attendance noted that poor leadership can drive people away from the department. Many agreed with the comments of one who stated, “It’s not always about the money; if your folks are well taken care of, they will stay. Often it is that they have lost confidence in leadership, or they don’t feel they are taken care of.” Another added, “When I came in as chief, a couple of people were in the process of leaving. They said, ‘Sorry, we wouldn’t have left if we knew you were coming in. We lost all confidence in leadership and the city manager.’ They felt completely unwanted and unloved, so they bailed.”

The importance of leadership can be critical both to officer retention and well-being. Regarding the former, research contends that loss of trust and confidence in leadership makes it harder to retain officers in the department (Wilson et al. 2010) and that an employee's relationship with his or her manager is a critical reason for leaving the agency (Orrick 2007). Research also points out that when officers are promoted to supervisor roles, they are not given training on their new role (Orrick 2007)—a point made by the attendees. As one attendee stated, "We give them [new officers] a lot of effort early on in their career and get them trained up, and then throw them the keys and say, 'Good luck.' They don't get extra training. It is hard for them to get the training needed to meet POST [Peace Officer Standards and Training] standards. The supervisors are the least trained in our department. You don't give them any training, and then they don't train the new people; they don't know how to."

As for well-being, a study of German law enforcement found that a health-oriented leadership[2] approach is effective in reducing burnout, depression, and physical health problems of the police workforce (Santa Maria et al. 2018). The Bend (Oregon) Police Department has undertaken extensive efforts to improve officer well-being, implementing a style of leadership that aligns with "health-oriented" (see the below sidebar).

A focus on officer wellness in Bend, Oregon

Chief Jim Porter of the Bend (Oregon) Police Department gave a presentation on his agency's efforts to improve the health and well-being of its officers by implementing a wide variety of tactics and programs that are responsive to the needs of the officers and their families. The city of Bend, with a population of 97,500, is a resort town that sees 4,200 overnight accommodations per year. The police department has 106 sworn officers and 34 non-sworn, with 100,000 calls for service in a year.

Chief Porter rose through the ranks to become chief in 2014 after the previous chief was fired. The department was in crisis. Patrol teams were at minimum staffing 65 percent of the time, and patrol teams were below minimum staff 22 percent of the time. The patrol division completely relied on overtime to ensure safe staff levels—meaning officers could not get time off unless they called in sick. In addition, some people saw the department as "a drag on the city budget, rather than an investment." The department had a number of other challenges: it could not attract qualified lateral applicants, and entry-level applicants struggled with the field training process and were washing out at a rate of 20 to 30 percent. The cost of living in the resort town was quite high, and morale in the department was quite low. A staffing survey revealed that only 37 percent of staff supported leadership, 22 percent would recommend the department as a place to work, and 53 percent expressed satisfaction with their job (see table A on page 14).

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[2] Health-oriented leadership emphasizes staff-care, promotes healthy working conditions, and supports protective health measures such as work-life balance and reducing work-related stressors (Santa Maria et al. 2018).

Table A. Anonymous employee survey

	2014	2015	2016*	2017	2018
Trust in leadership	37%	58%	N/A	70%	82%
Workforce satisfaction	53%	63%	N/A	73%	80%
Recommend BPD as a place to work and enter law enforcement	22%	46%	N/A	75%	84%

Source: Bend (Oregon) Police Department's HR staff

* The department did not take an internal survey in 2016.

However, within the first year as chief, the department experienced two significant events: (1) A major wildfire threatened the city; yet it also created a bond among department staff and fortified the department's already good relationship with the fire department; and (2) the sudden death of a beloved sergeant on the force, who, with an undiagnosed heart condition, had a heart attack after a stressful day at work. That loss served as a catalyst for change, resulting in Chief Porter undertaking what he calls the Sergeant John Lawrence project, which provides in-depth medical assessments and treatment for 45 officers per year.

The department also conducted a survey on physical and mental health stressors, finding that more than half of officers struggle with fatigue and trying to stay fit, and nearly half struggle with shift work, lack of family time, and being able to eat healthily on shift. For their mental health stressors, the department found that nearly 40 percent had trouble sleeping or trouble with hyper alertness, one third struggled with feeling cut off or distant, and nearly one-quarter struggled with episodes of irrational anger or repeated disturbing and unwanted memories.

The department used the results of the physical and mental health survey, as well as their recognized need to improve hiring, by putting together a range of solutions. In order to attract highly qualified lateral hires with more than three years' experience, they offered several incentives, including the following:

- $7,500 signing bonus
- $1,000 for moving expenses
- 40 hours each of sick leave and vacation upon hiring
- Entry at top salary step
- Enrollment in salary incentive plans

To improve hiring more generally, the department made the following changes:

- Streamlined the hiring process to 90 days
- Switched from a field training to police training officer process, which allows for more mentoring and coaching
- Provides active assistance to families with moving, home relocating, school district choices, physicians, and dentists

To address officer health and well-being, the department offers the following:

- Family support programs
- Spousal training days on weekends, covering topics such as nutrition, financial and will planning, insurance and benefits, and weapons training
- Mental and physical wellness programming, which includes the following:
    - 45 minutes for on-duty workouts with their team at the end of the shift, coupled with mindfulness sessions offered at the end of the shift, so that officers are more refreshed in their transition from work to home
    - On-duty yoga offered twice per week
    - An in-house psychologist who does not provide treatment but connects officers to appropriate services
    - Balanced warrior training
    - Mindfulness retreats in conjunction with the Hillsboro (Oregon) Police Department
    - An on-duty restorative rest room where officers can take a 20-minute nap
- Family-friendly schedules that include time for required training
- Community-enhancement program

Officers like the community-enhancement program because it gives them positive interaction with the community and gives them a break from service calls. With this program, officers who complete 21.5 hours of positive police contacts in a year get a 2-percent bonus. The department defines positive police contacts as interactions with veteran's groups, foot patrols without enforcement, retirement centers, boys and girls clubs, and all the schools.

Annual surveys conducted by the city show a significant improvement in trust, satisfaction, citizen confidence, and fewer workplace injuries (see tables B and C on page 16). In addition, new hires rate the department's proactive culture of employee and family support as important to their decision to join the Bend Police Department. Chief Porter and the department are an example of an agency that is not afraid to tackle seemingly intransigent problems by trying new things; embracing a culture of transparency; and fostering trust within the department, city leadership, and residents of Bend.

Table B. External community survey

	2014	2016	2018
Citizen confidence in BPD	57%*	80.6%	85%
Citizen trustworthiness in BPD	N/A	78%	84%

Source: Portland State University

Note: No external survey was conducted in 2015 and 2017.

Table C. Workplace injuries costs and lost time

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number of injuries	14	21	14	27
Lost workdays	213	278	77	92
Cost	$107 K	$115 K	$75 K	$65 K

Source: Bend (Oregon) Police Department

Officers also leave for reasons unrelated to the profession or the department as a whole; they leave because of external pressures. Often, according to the attendees, these pressures include “a job-family conflict” or “commuting 70–100+ miles.” One attendee explained, “We lose the young kids who want to go back home after they get a couple of years in, and they then get on with an agency closer to where they live.” Some attendees addressed the importance of the spouse, saying that if the spouse is unhappy, the officers then say, “We’re done, and we’re out.” Thus, “if the spouses don’t like them working here, I try to make sure that the spouses get good jobs and a good social circle too.”

Policing scholars have pointed to the challenges of work-life balance within law enforcement because of the nature of the job, which often requires mandatory overtime, an inflexible work schedule, and changing shift work (Hilal and Litsey 2020). As a group, the meeting attendees were aware of the challenges of work-life balance. One stated that when officers “can’t get their leave like they want, working tons of mandatory overtime, they will look for a different position.” And another added, “We have lots of mandatory assignments that you have to do. Everyone has to work Christmas break. We ask a lot of our guys; there is mandatory overtime. I’m very sensitive to how we treat our guys. If you don’t treat each other with respect, how can we expect them to treat our citizens?”

Last, the group did not think that officers leaving was necessarily a bad thing. A large number of attendees pointed to the benefits of problem officers choosing to leave. As one stated, “Not all attrition is bad. We tend to think it is, but some is good. If you are producing really great officers and others are trying to poach them, that spreads the word. Sometimes it is poor performers who are leaving.”

Regarding agency culture, an attendee stated, “People who have left, left to other agencies because they were not a good fit with our department culture. I think that was very helpful for the police leadership for them to self-weed.” Another added that some officers leave because “the employee made a decision that was contrary to the values of the department. Even if they don’t lose their job over such behavior, they choose to go somewhere else or leave the profession because of their poor decision-making.” Echoing this sentiment, one stated, “The mid-level guys we’ve lost usually come from another agency where they had a conflict or an issue, and they land with us, and then they move on. I suspect they will leave that agency for the same type of reason.”

One chief of a smaller department stated they lost some “lateral hires” who had come from a much larger department. The chief acknowledged the limits smaller departments have sometimes in hiring, stating, “They were shady people to begin with. They did not disclose a lot of their background and personnel history as we should have demanded. They were not good hires.” Many in the group agreed with the sentiment that some officers choose to leave because “for the first time, they were being held accountable to a higher standard, which they chose not to adapt too.” This police chief, referring a small group of problem officers who left a year after his arrival, stated, “morale skyrocketed when they left.”

Role of Training

> *"Waves of retirements by the baby boomer generation, coupled with budgeting crises experienced by many jurisdictions, generational differences in work preferences, and changing skill sets, has led to both recruitment and retention challenges."*

Of the range of topics covered during the day's discussion, the subject of police academy training generated a short but robust debate. This discussion centered on the best type of police academy training and caused a difference of opinion. The principal mechanism for training police officers is through a combination of police academy and field training. The process is designed to teach recruits the formative knowledge and skills needed in preparation for a challenging career. Traditionally, police academies have placed great emphasis on recruit discipline in a paramilitary format (Blumberg et al. 2019), which the meeting attendees referred to as a "stress academy." On the other side, attendees referred to an "adult-based academy," which emphasizes the adult-learning theory concepts of critical thinking skills, effective communication, and emotional intelligence (Blumberg et al. 2019).

The attendees agreed that the police academy is a major source of attrition; however, they did not agree that this was necessarily a problem. Supporters of the stress academy approach argued that academy training should be the place where those who aren't going to make it get weeded out. As one trainer said, "You may have a few more who quit because they decide that the stress involved in policing is not something they want, which is not a bad thing." The same trainer added, "We are moving back to a stress academy; it is a far more disciplined academy. From a training perspective, our job is to produce people who can move into the field training and have the ability to make legal, moral, and ethical decisions under stress. We, as trainers, have an ethical duty to ensure that we have at least tested that ability."

Advocates for the stress academy believe it also better emulates policing in general. Given how stressful a law enforcement career can be, one attendee asked the group to consider when would the best time be for recruits to realize they might not be able to handle such stress: "Do we want recruits to figure that out on the street where there is crowd control and they're getting spit on? We don't. We want them to figure that out at basic training."

On the other hand, supporters of the adult-based academy approach believe that stress academies are a fairly big source of dropouts. As one attendee stated, "Traditionally, a stress academy was designed so that 50 percent quit on their own accord; that is not what we do." Some were concerned that stress academies set up recruits for failure. One attendee explained that his problem with the stress academy was "seeing a lot of academic failures. We are seeing problems with honesty. The recruits get put on the spot and in a moment of weakness say the wrong thing, and they get kicked out of the academy. We are losing good people who are put in a stress environment and have never been put in a stress environment ever. Sometimes in the stress academy, we are setting up these young men and women for failure, and I just don't like that."

According to another attendee, "I don't like when you ask recruits a question that you know the answer to, that you ask in a way that is almost goading them to lie. And then when they take the bait, they are now out of the profession. I don't want people who are going to lie in our profession, but if you train them and give them an opportunity to work with seasoned officers, they can understand better."

Research supports the important role seasoned officers can play in working with recruits. A study on Australian police recruits concludes that misconduct can be reduced if recruits are properly trained with the "right mentoring" because "senior officers may sway recruits' perceptions of professional conduct (and misconduct) during police engagement" (Miles-Johnson 2019, p. 11).

Despite the disagreement on the best type of academy structure, the attendees widely agreed on several issues, such as that "it costs a lot to recruit and hire" and that "we are under a lot of pressure; we don't want to lose people." Understanding what leads recruits to drop out after enduring a rigorous screening process is a potent avenue for future research. More studies are needed to understand the dropout and failure rate of both academy and field training, as well as the differential impact on female recruits (Cordner 2020).

The attendees also agreed that the terminology of "stress academy" and "adult-based academy" is flawed. As one stated, "I don't like the word stress academy," and another replied, "I agree, stress academy is the wrong term." This view is understandable, as academies generally do not aim to cause stress for stress sake or to avoid it entirely;

rather, they aim to prepare recruits for the conditions they will face on the job while also building a high level of knowledge and esprit de corps. In reality, fully one-third of academies in this country work to balance both learning modalities (Reaves 2016).

Many in the group, regardless of training academy type, experienced similar reasons for attrition: lack of physical fitness and inability to pass qualifying exams. According to one attendee, “We lose far more to an entry physical fitness test than to academic. It is far more likely for us to lose a 21-year-old male recruit for failing the physical fitness standard than it is a 35-year-old male. We lose more males than females. It is really frustrating for us.” And another stated, “We have people who just cannot get through firearms training, which is kinda surprising to me.”

Last, many attendees agreed that there is not any long-term data on what type of academy works. In the words of one of the scholars at the meeting, “We have very little evidence, from a research perspective, on what the long-term consequences of these different academies are. Our measurements are very short term. Are there strategies happening in academies that are very successful for one type of cop but are leaving out other people who could be just as good? You can have a very successful process that gets you the same kind of people and, because of voluntary dropouts, completely takes out a portion of the population that you would wish were cops.” Another attendee added, “We need to be aware of what success means for each department. Are we creating a situation where we are designing out potential success?”

These last potential avenues of future research—what leads recruits to drop out after enduring a rigorous screening process, what is the differential impact on female recruits, and what are the long-term consequences of these different academies—would be beneficial to more than just the smaller and rural departments represented at this meeting. Regardless of reasons why officers leave a department or the profession or what type of police academy they were trained at, the views of the attendees can be summed up in the sentiment of one, who stated, “They leave because we fail them.”

Challenges to Recruitment and Retention

Many law enforcement executives would agree that "there's no management issue more perplexing and difficult than recruiting and retention" (Moore 2007, p.14). Both the policing community and the U.S. Department of Justice have taken an active role in examining the twin problems of recruitment and retention in policing by holding meetings and releasing reports examining the particular challenges with these issues (see Orrick 2007; Wilson et.al. 2010; Copple 2017; Morison 2017; ICMA and Vera Institute of Justice 2018; PERF 2019). These reports provide a clear picture of the difficulties law enforcement faces in finding qualified applicants, shepherding them through training, and maintaining police workforce levels in numbers sufficient for meeting the increasing demands on departments.

According to the Center for State and Local Government Excellence, jurisdictions have a harder time filling law enforcement positions than any other public sector position (SLGE 2019). Furthermore, in 2019, the Police Executive Research Forum published its extensive analysis on the policing workforce, which found a triple threat in that agencies are experiencing significant declines in officer applications, losing officers before retirement age, and losing a growing number of officers to retirement (PERF 2019). Research also reports that waves of retirements by the baby boomer generation, coupled with budgeting crises experienced by many jurisdictions, generational differences in work preferences, and changing skill sets, has led to both recruitment and retention challenges (Wilson et al. 2010). All of these issues can be especially challenging for smaller and rural departments.

While some research notes that the increasingly negative view of law enforcement by the community presents the biggest challenge to recruitment (Copple 2017), other research finds that law enforcement executives and other stakeholders recognize the need to hire officers who reflect the values of the community, improve the efficiency of the hiring process, and aim for greater diversity and inclusiveness (Morison 2017). In addition, a survey—comprising responses from city managers and county administrators, police officers and chiefs, and community members in 25 jurisdictions representing a cross section of small, medium, and large communities—found that building community trust was considered the most important priority for police departments (ICMA and Vera Institute of Justice 2018).

> *"Smaller and rural agencies are similar in that they have smaller staffing levels than their urban counterparts; otherwise, they can be very different from one another."*

Efforts to characterize problems with recruitment and retention have pointed to officers and agencies not fitting well together; generational differences; problems with screening; and challenges filling vacancies because of competition, officer attrition, and retirement. These studies have largely focused on the common challenges departments face across the policing spectrum, from major urban police forces, to county sheriffs, to suburban departments, to rural agencies. However, while some challenges are universally experienced by departments of all sizes and jurisdictions (e.g., attracting qualified applicants), some are exacerbated by being smaller and more rural (e.g., lack of adequate housing).

Smaller and rural agencies are similar in that they have smaller staffing levels than their urban counterparts; otherwise, they can be very different from one another. One study on policing in small-town departments notes a "big-city bias" in policing research, with small departments often lumped into a "single non-urban" category (Leiderbach and Frank 2003). The same study also notes that small departments are not a homogenous group, and thus the nature of policing differs significantly across these smaller departments.

The law enforcement agencies represented at the meeting illustrate the diverse nature of smaller departments. Some are small and rural with large coverage areas, some are in expensive resort towns, some are isolated and largely inaccessible, and some are small but surrounded by bigger departments. In addition, policing scholars note that smaller departments often handle a broader array of duties and tend to spend more time on service and crime prevention as opposed to the law enforcement duties that consume much of the time of officers in urban police departments (Holmes, Painter, and Smith 2017; Leiderbach and Frank 2003).

The attendees discussed the specific challenges their respective departments were experiencing in recruiting or retaining officers. When asked about the biggest obstacles and challenges, attendees largely focused on the problem of fit and culture. Research on smaller and more rural police departments finds that they are more likely to be viewed positively and are more trusted when they are located in socially integrated areas and seen as safe by the community (Holmes, Painter, and Smith 2017). In addition, officers in smaller and more rural areas are more likely to have encounters with people they know and are more likely to be seen as a part of the community that they patrol (Leiderbach and Frank 2003).

Given that community interactions are often qualitatively different than in large departments (where officers are not as socially enmeshed with the community they serve), it is not surprising that a majority of the law enforcement executives at the meeting stated that finding recruits who are a good fit and adapt to the particular culture of the department is particularly challenging. The attendees wondered, “Are recruits coming into the profession with the right purpose?” Many felt that officers should approach law enforcement as a calling. As one stated, “This is a true calling. There are a lack of individuals listening to that call into this noble profession.” Another stated, “You have to have a preponderance of your officers view the job as a calling.”

On a similar note, attendees felt that character was also important. One stated, “We hire for competency, and we fire for character. Recruitment needs to place more emphasis on character. We don’t focus on that when we hire, on the intrinsic draw. We are still focused on the competency side of the house. Maybe we should shift our perspective.”

However, attendees also felt that the culture of the department—i.e., having a strong sense of community among staff—is important as both a recruitment and a retention tool. As one attendee said, “It’s that strength of that community within your organization that keeps them there, keeps them well, embraces them when they need it most.” Furthermore, that level of pride in and commitment to a department is visible externally. That’s when, as one attendee stated, “everyone in our agency is a recruiter.”

Some attendees emphasized the importance of the agency reflecting the community it serves. “My ultimate goal,” said one attendee, “is to have a department that looks like a mirror of our city, where people look into it and see themselves. Quite frankly, that is difficult to do, so we focus on cultural competency and work with our psychologist to try to find those people who fit our profile.” Another added, “if recruits embrace the diversity of the agency and the community, they tend to stay. They have to have the emotional intelligence piece. They are able to connect with others who don’t believe like they do. Recruits who can’t do that self-weed themselves out and go to other agencies.”

Many agreed with one attendee's statement that "if they fit, then they stay" and felt that the key to achieving this fit is through community connection. According to one, "When I took over the agency that I'm currently at, the officers there were pretty convinced that the community hated them, that the city council hated them. When you have that sense of dire in your mind going to work, you're not going to survive. We changed that by getting them involved in the community, rewriting the narrative, and owning the narrative with the community. We've seen a 180-degree shift in the thought process in the officers about how they are looked upon in their own community."

Returning to the idea of "if they fit, then they stay," research argues that different communities have different views on what policing means for them, and thus departments should be aggressive in "selecting-in" those who fit rather than "selecting-out" those who do not (McCafferty 2003, p. 86). In addition to selecting-in, departments should try to understand who stays and who leaves. Research contends that departments should focus their attention on understanding the reasons the best officers in the department stay, rather than worrying about why people are leaving (Miller 2018). Then departments should use this information to personalize the recruiting process in order to find the people who best fit the department (Miller 2018).

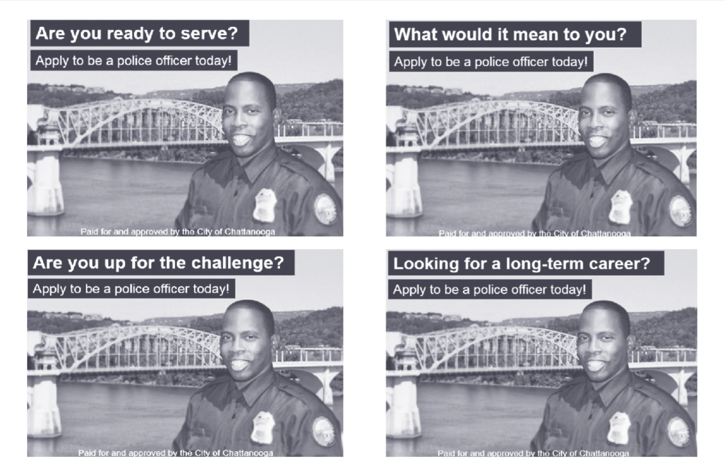
In addition, a survey of small, medium, and large law enforcement agencies recommends that in order to achieve a diverse workforce, departments should use a range of recruiting methods (ICMA and Vera Institute of Justice 2018). These methods include using both widely broadcast strategies (such as print, online, and billboard) and more narrowly targeted strategies for specific populations (such as women, veterans, and Latino and Black communities).

One presenter at the meeting, Dr. Elizabeth Linos, an assistant professor of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, shared how departments can make a small change to their recruitment methods to experience a significant impact using a "nudge" approach. In particular, Dr. Linos's research shows that traditional methods for recruiting officers emphasizes characteristics, such as readiness to serve, that do not necessarily expand the pool of recruits. However, when departments target other intrinsic motivations, such as looking for a long-term career, they can expand the recruitment pool (see the sidebar on page 27).

Using a "nudge" approach to recruit for public service

Dr. Elizabeth Linos, an assistant professor of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, is an expert in the area of behavioral sciences and has combined the study of psychology and econometrics to assist others in making data-driven decisions in order to understand what works and what does not work in recruiting and retaining people for government positions. In particular, she studies how using a "nudge" approach, which examines identifying and tweaking small pain points in a process, can prompt significant improvement within an area such as recruitment. In law enforcement recruitment, the process includes deciding to apply, passing tests and assessments, completing training, and working as an officer. Dr. Linos has studied the first point in the process, and the decision to apply is affected by a series of systemic factors often beyond the control of the department, such as salary, job market competition within law enforcement and the private sector, and organization factors such as, "Will I belong, will I make friends, and what will I actually do every day?"

Figure 1. Postcards to help nudge diversity


Are you ready to serve?
Apply to be a police officer today!
Paid for and approved by the City of Chattanooga
What would it mean to you?
Apply to be a police officer today!
Paid for and approved by the City of Chattanooga
Are you up for the challenge?
Apply to be a police officer today!
Paid for and approved by the City of Chattanooga
Looking for a long-term career?
Apply to be a police officer today!
Paid for and approved by the City of Chattanooga

(Photo: Courtesy of Dr. Elizabeth Linos)

In a study for the Chattanooga (Tennessee) Police Department (CPD), Dr. Linos examined if it was possible to nudge diversity. The majority White, majority male department had been trying with little success to increase its diversity to better reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of the community. In an effort to broaden the scope of who might consider a career in policing, Dr. Lino's team sent one of four postcards to all registered voters in Chattanooga (see figure 1). The postcards featured a Black officer in the department and were identical except for the message on the front and back of the card. The messages were as follows:

- Are you ready to serve?
- What would it mean to you?
- Are you up to the challenge?
- Looking for a long-term career?

The postcards with the "are you ready to serve" and "what would it mean to you" messages did not increase applications to the department, but those who received the "are you up to the challenge" and "looking for a long-term career" postcards were three times more likely to apply, and African-Americans were four times more likely to apply. Dr. Linos contends that when it comes to the decision to apply for a job in law enforcement, those who want to serve their community are already applying; thus, departments should tap into the other intrinsic motivations for applying. Furthermore, it is possible to use this data-driven approach to test every single part of the recruitment process, examining where the drop-offs are happening and what small tweaks can be made to fix it.

Another area in which culture and fit intersects with recruiting and retention challenges is in generational expectations. Some attendees wondered if generational differences explain the lack of calling and difficulties associated with fit and culture in the smaller and more rural departments. One chief noted, "I think that for our generation or older, that life calling was a singular purpose: 'I'm going to be a police officer and that will be my focus.'" Another added, "For the next generation, it's not so singular. They want to be great friends, great parents, in addition to the calling. We need to prove that we can give them that work-life, that we can respect that they're passionate about police work but that they are also passionate about other aspects of their life." Dr. Penny Phelps, the meeting moderator, framed the issue of generational expectations by asking, "Is our profession keeping up with the times?" She added, "The belief that you are going to hire somebody and you are going to keep them for 20 years so they can retire with a gold watch—you need to rethink that."

Understanding generational differences, especially millennials, seemed to confound some in the group. They wondered if younger generations are not as ready to handle the demands of policing. One attendee stated that the millennial generation is "emotionally immature. They've been sheltered by the helicopter parents and are simply not ready to be spit on, yelled at, hit in the face. They've been told their whole life you can't box, can't fight, can't even defend yourself in school nowadays without getting expelled." Another attendee added, "They are the 'why' generation; they want to know why they have to do something before they do it. Sometimes you just need to follow."

Others in the group, however, argued that millennials bring a strength to departments because they are not afraid to question traditions. According to one attendee, "Millennials are coming in asking, 'Can policing be different?' Not asking to work less, but differently." The group also noted that this generation is not afraid to push for change: e.g., asking, "Why can't I job share?" Millennials are also less likely to accept the answer of "this is how it's always done." Attendees also noted that millennials "have a free-flowing thought process, and we can't shut that down."

Research argues that each generation of officers is defined by unique attributes specific to that generation (McCafferty 2003). The baby boomers (born 1946–1964),[3] growing up in the Cold War between the U.S. and Russia, value discipline and respect for authority (McCafferty 2003). Generation X (born 1965–1980), having been raised in an environment where crime, gangs, and drugs were more prevalent than previous generations, are not idealists but are "practical strategists and good negotiators" (McCafferty 2003, p. 80).

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[3] All generational birthdate ranges are those used by the Pew Research Center 2015.

Millennials (born 1981–1997) value high ethical standards and “are committed to being the next great generation to turn around all the ‘wrong’ they see” (Darst 2016, p. 23). Research also argues that millennials’ embrace of technology means they offer a range of skills that make them appealing recruits (Darst 2016). Understanding the unique characteristics of each generation would allow departments to adapt their hiring and workforce expectations to the strengths of that generation, allowing them to keep up with the times.

Compounding the generational divide is the lack of opportunities for younger generations to advance to senior-level positions. Some in law enforcement are working longer, 30–40 years, rather than the norm of retiring after 20 years (Darst 2016). Thus, not only do younger generations of officers have fewer opportunities to move into upper management, but there are also fewer openings in the field (Darst 2016). Research also contends that the paramilitary model of policing, embraced by baby boomers, is outdated and that policing needs to adapt to “the talents of the new generation, such as involving them in community engagement and problem solving and encouraging use of social media to get real-time information out to the public” (Batts, Smoot, and Scrivner 2012, p. 13).

What Works? Building a Roadmap to Attract Applicants and Retain Officers

After an extensive discussion on the difficulties the departments face in recruiting and retaining officers, the meeting attendees turned their attention to an idea exchange on the successful practices they use to attract applicants and retain those they have hired. The group uses a variety of strategies that are centered on three basic themes:

1. Foster community support.
2. Reputation matters.
3. Use all the tools at your disposal.

If the meeting participants were to sum up what works, they would invariably say that the key is being responsive to those you serve and flexible in meeting the needs of your staff. As a group, they provide proof that small, incremental change can make a big difference.

The meeting participants also recognize the importance of fostering community support as a key to their departments' success. The group stated several practices they use to foster such support: e.g., "showing off our staff to the community and letting the community get an inside look at the department" through such avenues as a citizen's academy, citizens on patrol, monthly community meetings including coffee with a cop and pizza with the police, annual open houses, and encouraging volunteers to help within the department. In addition, these departments nurture positive community connections through strong relationships with the local faith organizations and being "very intentional in encouraging the city council to get into the department."

Some pointed to efforts within the training academy to instill an appreciation for differences across the community. One department, in addition to state-mandated training and before field training, requires another 16 weeks of training during which recruits receive classes on generational poverty from a local college and complete placements in service organizations throughout the city, such as homeless shelters and soup kitchens, so they are "exposed to some different walks of life." Several other attendees mentioned programs they use that bring in community members from marginalized communities so that recruits can have a bilateral exchange and internalize "whatever comes out as a direct result of the people in the room." Another attendee added that they bring community members into the academy classroom to "get their perspective, and it is brutally honest."

In some of these jurisdictions, many of the officers live in the community, and attendees saw that as positive. According to one, "They feel like they are valued as a community member and as a police officer." Another attendee shared how the department encourages its officers to attend family events, such as a kid's basketball game, and stated, "We give them the opportunity to go and do those things, and if a call comes out, go take the call. But if there's no calls pending for service, I don't expect you to be anywhere except with your family. We are a tight-knit community, so people like the officers siting in the stands. Being small, everyone knows everyone else. Sometimes tempers flare at the baseball game; people feel better having an officer sitting in the stands."

Others noted that not being able to live in the community can pose hardships for their officers. Some of these officers, especially those who work in resort towns, cannot afford the cost of housing and thus have to commute significant distances. Others noted that for family reasons, their officers are residing in outlying areas. As noted in the section "Switching agencies," these long commutes can be a reason why officers leave the agency.

However, some of the agencies have found workarounds for those who commute long distances. One agency offers different work schedule options for their officers, giving them the choice of three 12-hour days or four 10-hour days per week. They have found that those who live in outlying areas prefer the three-day schedule. Another attendee noted that they have a two-bedroom apartment bunkhouse donated by the city for officers who commute long distances. In this particular jurisdiction, they created the bunkhouse in memory of an officer who was killed in a car accident after working a long shift and then falling asleep on the commute home.

Attendees also recognized the importance of reputation as a tool for attracting applicants and retaining officers. One stated, "Our reputation in the state is pretty strong. Last testing for one position, I had 73 apply and a list of 10 great candidates. We are a very good agency and always have been." Echoing the importance of reputation, another attendee added, "We surveyed the last 12 people we hired and asked them what was the number one reason they chose our department over others. Nine of the 12 said reputation of the department, so legitimacy matters. You need to have legitimacy in your department before you can have legitimacy in your community."

The group felt that the importance of fostering community relationships equaled that of fostering "pride in ownership" within the department. Participants pointed to creating a team mentality within the department by "developing people." For example, one attendee said departments need to encourage officers to do more than "just write tickets and handle calls, [because] who wants to do that all the time? The recruits coming in are intelligent kids; they want to be challenged. If you don't give them something to challenge them, then they will go find something else that does. Give them that pride in ownership."

In order to challenge recruits and cultivate pride, the group pointed to the importance of using all the tools at their disposal. In addition to prioritizing officer wellness (see the sidebar “A focus on officer wellness in Bend, Oregon” on page 13), the participants emphasized having open communication, leveraging a department’s size to create opportunities for specialization, using budget allowances in creative ways, using both media appearances and social media to promote their departments, and providing perks to the officers when possible. Regarding the first emphasis, those in attendance have found that encouraging open communication is an important tool in their arsenal. Attendees noted that communication needs to start with the chief, which sets the tone and then filters down from leadership to sergeants to officers. One chief stated, “You get good, valuable information for why employees are leaving, but I look at why are they staying? I’m meeting with my officers and entire staff one-on-one every six months. It is confidential, stays within my office. They feel like their opinions are valued, and this gives me the opportunity to see what is keeping them as opposed to waiting until they leave to find out why they’re leaving.” Related to open lines of communication is having the command staff, including the chief, work the midnight patrol shift every six months; “it gives us an opportunity to interact and have face time with the officers.”

Some attendees were able to reframe a systemic challenge their department faces—having limited ability to provide specialization—into a net positive. Some leverage the size of their agency to promote opportunities for specialization. For example, one chief stated, “We’ll have a candidate say ‘I want to be a K-9 officer’ right off. While we cannot give them that, we can guarantee that they work with the K-9 unit as soon as they are done with the FTO program. If a candidate is interested in investigations, they’ll go with a detective to the homicide conference. Whatever they want to do, we help them get there. If that means we have to change their schedule or what have you, we want them to specialize.”

Those from larger departments acknowledged they cannot provide the same opportunities, but they use other techniques to provide the ability to specialize. One of the bigger departments stated that they require two years on patrol, but they use those two years to build “a foundation on how to be a good police officer. We can offer a lot of diversity: we have K-9, detective bureaus, community service officers, bike officers. We try to find out what they want to do, give them the foundation, and then we offer that opportunity to work within those sections.” Another department puts term limits on their specialty teams, allowing 3–5 years on a team in order to create turnover, as well as giving officers one to two weeks a year to try different assignments. Other departments use a “career development matrix” and mentoring to provide officers with the ability to develop their career in the manner they want.

Some law enforcement executives in the group have found that budget transparency has been an effective tool in fostering trust in the department. One chief explained that his department takes advantage of any end-of-year monies, when available, to pay bonuses to the officers. The chief noted that they do not always have these monies to distribute, but the officers appreciate the bonus and the budget transparency. This executive feels that this bonus system also allows the department to compete with private sector jobs. Several attendees stated that all the officers in their departments have their own training budget to use as they see fit. One stated, “If they better themselves, it betters us. We’ve seen a huge turnaround in our officers since establishing individual training budgets. It has attracted applicants to us. The last three guys to finish the academy said, ‘The ability to have access to a fund that I can control where my career goes is huge.’”

Regarding media appearances and social media, several meeting participants use them to engage the community and bolster the reputation of the department. These tools include posting on social media accounts, doing the lip sync challenge, and buying their own domain for the department so they have a “one-stop shop where you can learn about the department and apply for jobs.” Some have empowered officers across the department to post to social media, which according to one attendee, “sometimes feels risky because most departments only let two or three people post. But now, instead of just my voice, I have all those voices.” Another law enforcement executive noted that he is “on the news at least once a week” and “never says no to an interview, which helps with recruiting because they feel like they know us, what we stand for.”

Meeting participants found that providing perks is also important for cultivating pride. Some departments provide cellular phones so officers can post directly to social media. Others have noticed that new recruits, especially younger recruits, will judge a department based on the quality and age of the equipment. One stated, “Our guys get new cars and new rifles with all the ammo they could desire. The lateral guys notice that too.” Others use a take-home car policy, which they find “has been very successful as a recruiting tool, and data shows it boosts longevity of the cars because they take better care of them now.”

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, all meeting participants would agree that there is “no simple formula for improving police recruitment and retention efforts” (PERF 2019, p. 12). Indeed, through discussion and an exchange of ideas, it is clear that not a single system or practice can suit every department. The key to improving recruitment and retention is flexibility and adapting to the short- and long-term needs of the department and the community.

Throughout the meeting, the fact that recruitment and retention are not distinct issues was clear. The decisions agencies make to help them retain their top talent are the same ones that help them attract top applicants. And it was noteworthy not only that many of the leaders conducted exit interviews with officers who resigned to better understand why they leave, but also that some made a point to regularly talk with their existing staff to understand why they stay. Without this second piece, it can become easy to dismiss departures as something the agency cannot control—especially when many relate to external factors such as family or promotional opportunities. But the officers who stay, especially those who could be successful elsewhere, provide critical information on what makes an agency a good place to work, and that information can likely be leveraged for recruitment purposes.

The agencies that were successful in both recruiting and retaining officers recognized that while an officer’s fit with a department is largely agency specific and dependent on the department’s culture, on the community, and on the interests and talents of the officers themselves, there are some universal qualities that departments seek in officers. These qualities include integrity, strong interpersonal skills, emotional maturity, and good judgement. And these same qualities are the ones that meeting attendees expressed the most frustration about, recognizing that hiring criteria and processes are often misaligned with the internal characteristics that make for an excellent officer.

Those in attendance also emphasized the importance of leadership within the department. In particular, poor leadership can be particularly destructive for an agency’s ability to recruit and retain its workforce. However, strong leadership that values community support and fosters the department’s reputation is seen as a key to successful recruitment and retention.

The departments represented at this meeting, all small and rural agencies, were examples of those who are not firmly rooted in past practices at the expense of innovation, nor are they embracing change for change’s sake. Rather, these agencies recognize that a good law enforcement agency reflects the community it serves, takes care of the people who work for it, and understands there is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

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About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than $14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office–funded training organizations.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.
- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, round tables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, www.cops.usdoj.gov. This website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.

In December 2019, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services held a day-long forum to discuss the challenges of law enforcement recruitment and retention and specifically focused on these issues in relation to smaller and more rural law enforcement agencies. The 32 participants included police chiefs, captains, lieutenants, academic experts, researchers, and agency directors of state police standards.

The forum's small size allowed for a wide-ranging discussion that focused on the qualities that make an effective police officer, an in-depth examination of why people leave a department, the most significant challenges to recruiting and retaining officers, and a brainstorming session on the range of strategies these departments use to attract and keep officers. The result was an exchange of ideas and success stories that reflected the unique regional and size differences between the departments.

COPS
Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice

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