Strategies for Police Recruitment: A Review of Trends, Contemporary Issues, and Existing Approaches

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The recession beginning in 2008 caused many unprecedented difficulties for sustaining police workforces throughout the United States (Police Executive Research Forum [PERF], 2013; Wilson & Grammich, 2012; Wilson & Heinonen, 2012; Wilson & Weiss, 2012). These included budget and workforce reduction, consolidation, and even organizational disbanding. Further compounding these challenges, over time, law enforcement has experienced increased responsibilities and difficulties attracting and hiring qualified, diverse, and skilled personnel (Wilson, 2012). These changes will most certainly be felt for years to come. While personnel planning has always been a staple of police management, the dynamic nature of the contemporary workforce environment suggests greater attention is required to ensure it is evidence-based and best meets the needs of individual departments.

Despite the volatility of the environment affecting personnel planning, some concerns remain consistent or at least recurring. One such concern is recruitment. Many departments found it difficult to recruit officers prior to the recession and went to considerable efforts to do so. The economic downturn mitigated this problem for many as resources shrunk and recruitment opportunities became out of reach. Yet recruitment remains important. In fact, even in 2008, nine out of ten police departments actively recruited applicants (Reaves, 2012). Systemic issues and trends—including those in qualifications, generational preferences, and attrition—affecting police recruitment transcend economic conditions. Improving economic conditions will likely exacerbate these issues, particularly as more departments lift hiring restrictions and seek to build their forces. Regardless of economic conditions, departments have historically had difficulty recruiting and maintaining a workforce that reflects their communities.

These facts call for an evidence-based and methodical approach to personnel management that involves assessments of staffing need, allocation of staffing resources, distribution of staff attributes and qualities, recruitment, retention, and opportunity costs and implications of implementing personnel management strategies for other parts of the organization. The focus of the present article is on one such concern—recruitment. It synthesizes research about promising practices for recruitment, focusing on empirical studies, to identify lessons on recruiting police personnel. It explains what is known about various strategies, drawing heavily on the policing literature but supplementing that on occasion by highlighting the effectiveness of these strategies in the military, medicine, education, business, and other professions. This review can help police practitioners and local officials—each of whom will face unique circumstances—identify what has been tried elsewhere and might be applicable to their own communities. While some gaps remain in the literature, and much of the literature is based more on anecdote than empirical
research (thereby precluding meta-analyses and other formal assessments), this review can help police practitioners and local officials understand what is and is not known.

The Recruitment Challenge

Throughout the past decade, police officer recruitment has concerned police executives and administrators from departments of varying sizes and locales. Early in the decade, the nation’s largest departments, including those in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, reported problems recruiting qualified applicants (Butterfield, 2001). Half of all departments and two-thirds of those serving at least 50,000 residents also reported staffing problems stemming from a lack of qualified applicants (Koper, Maguire, & Moore, 2001). In 2004, California police chiefs identified recruitment and retention as their second-most pressing issue, trailing only funding (California Police Chiefs Association, 2004) and reflecting concerns of earlier years (California Police Chiefs Association 1994, 2001). Even as recent economic conditions have led to an increased number of applications, police departments might still find a shortage of applicants qualified for their work (Castro, 2009; Chambers, 2009).

Identifying sources of the recruiting challenge remains problematic because symptoms might vary by jurisdiction. Nevertheless, departments can identify dimensions and categorize them as external to policing, such as economic and social conditions and work-life changes, or specific to the profession or departments, such as low pay or benefits. The recruitment challenge appears to be deepening over time as generational preferences and conceptions of work and career change and as other trends work to reduce the pool of qualified candidates. Whereas departments have had historical difficulties recruiting women and minority applicants, their inability to grapple with generational differences has shown the profession to be underprepared for the rapidly changing and uncertain economic and social landscape (Jordan, Fridell, Faggiani, & Kubu, 2009; Orrick, 2008; Wilson, 2012; Wilson & Grammich, 2009). Previously unconsidered issues, such as the pull of more lucrative careers and negative images of policing, might further deplete the applicant pool, particularly as the economy improves (Cavanagh, 2003; Flynn, 2000; Koper et al., 2001).

The recruitment challenge is a product of several rapidly changing trends, which departments appear ill-prepared to address, in the way police recruiters and potential applicants view each other. Lacking organized recruitment programs, objectives, or strategies, police departments have placed themselves at a growing disadvantage in recruiting qualified officers, losing them to other industries and fields at a quickening rate (Scrivner, 2006; Taylor et al., 2006).

Concerns about recruiting minorities and women that dominated police recruitment discussions decades ago have now expanded to concerns that the profession is failing to market itself to a new generation of workers (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services [COPS], 2009). Personnel costs comprise 75 to 85% of police department budgets, underscoring the importance of hiring, recruiting, and selecting the best candidates, even in uncertain times (Orrick, 2008; White & Escobar, 2008; Wilson, Rostker, & Fan, 2010). Departments have little guidance for recruitment strategies, so difficulties persist. Jordan et al. (2009) found that only one in five departments had targeted recruitment strategies for women and minorities. Yet, Reaves (2012) and Wilson et al. (2010) found that, among large departments, about four in five had targeted strategies for women and minorities. White and Escobar (2008) lament police departments’ unwillingness to “sell themselves” (p. 120) when recruiting for diversity. As the diversity and breadth of the communities that departments serve expand, departments might face difficulties in recruiting officers for positions that are increasingly complex, require new competencies, or require interaction with communities whose needs they do not always know or understand.
Police Recruitment in Historical Context

In 1931, the National Committee on Law Observation and Enforcement (commonly known as the Wickersham Commission), appointed by President Herbert Hoover to study enforcement of Prohibition, detailed advances needed in the professionalization of policing, including the elimination of the spoils system for recruitment and hiring (Alpert, 1991; Walker, 1997). As police departments moved toward merit-based hiring in the 1940s and 1950s, the dual problems of liability for law enforcement behavior and increasing concerns over discrimination in police work fueled the use of more scientific methods, such as psychometrics and standardized psychological testing, in recruitment (Fyfe, Greene, Walsh, Wilson, & McLaren, 1997; Hogue, Black, & Sigler, 1994). These culminated in the formation of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) in 1967, which sought to implement Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines in the hiring of law enforcement officers (Scrivner, 2006). The LEAA aligned selection methods with perceived job duties to create more valid external analyses of demonstrated skills for police work. By the end of the 1960s, departments nationwide used scientific and career-specific methods of testing, evaluating, and examining potential recruits on the basis of departmental perceptions of what one needed to know to be a good police officer.

This system was challenged in the mid-1970s when Goldstein (1977) examined what police did on patrol. He found that most officer time in uniform was spent in human service roles such as helping citizens, negotiating disputes, or interacting with diverse community members in nonenforcement roles. The skills required for this work were incompatible with those for which recruits were screened, trained, and tested. This realization (coupled with many other factors and developments at the time) led to a reorientation of police work toward community policing. The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) put forth recommendations for diversifying personnel to reflect the community (White & Escobara, 2008), although selection practices remained inconsistent with the new police role into the 1980s. Evaluation processes might either “select out” candidates (i.e., discern disqualifying flaws in a candidate) or “select in” candidates (i.e., identify positive qualities that make an applicant an attractive candidate). Controversies over the two approaches and their merit have persisted since the advent of the community policing era (Scrivner, 2006). It is unclear what skills departments should identify for “selecting in” candidates given rapid changes in community needs and demographics (Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, Canadian Police Association, PricewaterhouseCoopers, & Human Resources Development, 2000; Woska, 2006). The “selecting out” or hurdle process of recruitment remains attractive because many departments cling to an outdated perception of the police role (Scrivner, 2006).

Nevertheless, rigidity is giving way to some experimentation and innovation. The Community Policing Consortium, through its Hiring in the Spirit of Service program, has sought to align hiring practices with individual department needs regarding officer duties and skills. The results might help departments attract a wider range of officers for open positions (Scrivner, 2006). The use of assessment centers and hurdle approaches might be incompatible with career needs and goals of new generations of recruits (DeCicco, 2000; Orrick, 2008; Taylor et al., 2006). At best, the current climate of police recruitment consists of a lack of uniformity, little widespread use of data or research to guide recruitment efforts, and a fragmented approach to understanding the crisis and planning a response to it (Orrick, 2008; Scrivner, 2006; White & Escobar, 2008).

How these fractured approaches have affected recruiting in recent years is unclear. Strawbridge and Strawbridge (1990) provided one of the first systematic efforts to describe the recruitment environment across jurisdictions, surveying 72
local police departments with 500 or more sworn officers about their recruiting, screening, and training practices. Among their findings was the need for a computerized database to facilitate communication about best practices given societal changes and resource limitations.

Langworthy, Hughes, and Sanders (1995) conducted a second survey of 60 of these departments in 1994. They found decreasing use of television for recruiting, maximum age requirements, preemployment standards, and state subsidies for training. They also found increased use of intelligence tests, psychological reviews, and duration of academy training and little change in probationary periods.

Taylor et al. (2006) conducted a national survey of nearly 1,000 departments in 2002, including 32 of those in the earlier survey by Strawbridge and Strawbridge (1990). They found little evidence to accept or reject hypotheses of a growing “cop crunch” but did find that some departments had developed a severe shortage of officers, with more than 10% of their allocated slots vacant. In 2007, vacancies were still high for many departments—the average large department had 73 (Wilson et al., 2010). Both studies found that many departments had developed targeted recruiting strategies for minority, female, veteran, college grad, and experienced candidates, but that they had difficulties in hiring sufficient numbers of female and minority candidates.

More recently, Castaneda and Ridgeway (2010), in a survey of 1,619 law enforcement recruits from September 2008 to March 2009, found pros and cons often vary by personal characteristics. Older recruits, for example, cited job security as an attraction more than younger recruits did, while Hispanic recruits and those with prior law enforcement experience were attracted to public service, and black recruits were attracted to the prestige of the profession. Conversely, new recruits cited the possibility of death or injury as a drawback to the job (though police officers have lower fatality rates than such workers as farmers, drivers, construction workers, and bartenders).

Recruitment Considerations

Organizations must consider several issues for attracting candidates. First, they should understand the function of research and data gathering in the personnel selection process (Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police et al., 2000; Chien & Chen, 2008; Switzer, 2006). This can inform each aspect of the process by examining it as a larger endeavor of matching individual talents to departmental goals and objectives. Second, they should craft recruitment goals that reflect an ethic that is visible to applicants (McKay & Avery, 2005; Orrick, 2008). Decision rules about qualities of good candidates should spring from the department’s climate as revealed in the earliest stages of the needs assessment and be linked to the attraction strategy. Third, when examining strategies for attracting candidates, departments should remember their success might depend on departmental budget, commitment, personnel resources, and effectiveness in targeting the specific subgroups the department seeks to recruit.

Internal Strategies for Attracting Candidates

The best recruiters for a department are often its own personnel (Baker & Carrera, 2007; Haggerty, 2009). Indeed, Castaneda and Ridgeway (2010) found “friends or family working at the department that recruits ultimately joined were responsible for first prompting more than 40 percent of new recruits” (p. 69), and that an “additional 20 percent were prompted by friends and family at another agency” (p. 69).

Building professional networks within the department to support recruitment can enhance community outreach efforts by making recruitment an overall philosophy rather than a task to be performed. Internal strategies that emphasize interaction, relationship building, and partnerships with the public can enhance perceptions of diversity and boost hiring of women and minorities (COPS, 2009; Taylor et al., 2006). Without a climate that reflects legitimate and credible organizational beliefs,
recruitment for diversity can be seen as false and might even increase turnover (McKay & Avery, 2005). Having a department-wide outlook that emphasizes recruitment potential in public interactions can help overcome negative or unrealistic impressions of what police work entails and contribute to a larger strategic recruitment plan. Recruiting can become a part of the department’s everyday interactions with the public (Baker & Carrera, 2007; Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police et al., 2000).

Build Employee Referral Networks

Referrals by family, friends, and employees strongly influence individual decisions to apply for careers in public service (Baker & Carrera, 2007; Castaneda & Ridgeway, 2010; Slater & Reiser, 1988; Switzer, 2006; Yearwood, 2003). Relationship-based recruiting can also dispel myths about police work and build associations across different groups (Baker & Carrera, 2007). Applicants who are referred and sponsored by an existing employee are more likely to complete the hiring process (Barber, 1998).

Two important influences on the decision to apply for police positions are department reputation and exposure to the varied tasks that police perform; these can be solidified with employee referrals and community activism (Baker & Carrera, 2007; Slater & Reiser, 1988). Personal referrals can also provide a realistic portrayal of how a law enforcement career affects family life (Ryan, Kriska, West, & Sacco, 2001), which has been a particular concern of female recruits (Castaneda & Ridgeway, 2010). To boost referrals, departments should consider compensation and other incentives for them (Haggerty, 2009; Lachnit, 2001; Switzer, 2006). Relationship-based and employee referral strategies help increase applicant pools and provide balance to other recruitment strategies, such as online processes, that lack human interaction.

Create a Department Recruitment Unit

A recruitment unit can be separate from recruitment teams that perform hiring needs assessments or are linked interdepartmentally (Geis & Cavanagh, 1966; Orrick, 2008; Whetstone, Reed, & Turner, 2006). Recruitment units oversee internal and external strategies devoted to recruitment such as testing, advertising, coordinating outreach programs, media relations, and recruiting events (New York City Commission to Combat Police Corruption, 2008). By establishing such a unit, departments can better ensure that recruitment reflects department needs, goals, and philosophies, and that it enhances the credibility and openness of recruitment efforts (Breaugh & Starke, 2000). Departments should consider structuring the team and mentoring team members so as to best improve quality and efficacy; this can include integrating background investigative and personnel staff into the recruitment team (Lim, Matthies, Ridgeway, & Gifford, 2009; Switzer, 2006). Departments should also consider using incentives for recruiting-team participation and success (Switzer, 2006; Whetstone et al., 2006).

Look Within the Department for Potential Recruits

Referral networks might consider a department’s civilian staff for sworn positions, a strategy that would create “feeder” networks of existing employees (Ridgeway et al., 2008). Auxiliary and reserve ranks have frequently been an internal source of personnel (Yearwood, 2003). Because such employees are already part of the organization, this process reduces hiring costs, time, and procedures (Jordan et al., 2009).

Conduct an Internal Assessment of Employee Engagement Strategies

Google, the Internet search-engine company, publishes a list of benefits called the “I bet you don’t have that where you work” list (Sullivan, 2006). The list details Google’s employee engagement strategies, which range from perks (on-site dry cleaning, a wine club, and yoga classes) to more traditional benefits (e.g., flexible hours, vacation benefits, and health counseling). While obviously more restrictive than private industry, police leaders should ask themselves what they
present that will attract the best possible officers or “Why would I want to work for this department?” (McKeever & Kranda, 2001). Conducting an inventory of benefits can be the first step in assessing those that work best in attracting candidates, those that are weak, and how they appear from the applicant’s perspective. This is a crucial step in department marketing and outreach efforts (Orrick, 2008). An inventory of benefits can also bolster department pride in recruiters who speak to candidates. The inventory could be conducted both to attract candidates and to prevent turnover (Jordan et al., 2009; Sullivan, 2006; Switzer, 2006).

External Strategies for Attracting Candidates

Departments have used myriad outreach strategies over time to attract candidates, albeit with minimal research on their effectiveness. These have included advertise-and-wait, “word of mouth” social networking, traditional job fairs, and proactive community partnerships.

Use Internet Media in a Variety of Forms

Increasing use of the Internet has lured departments seeking to attract officers. Castaneda and Ridgeway (2010) found 18% of recruits in their survey were first motivated to contact their current employer because of an Internet advertisement, and that 80% of respondents reported accessing the Internet at least daily.

The interactive potential of Internet media has increased beyond simple advertising, and it continues to do so in ways that outpace empirical study (Russell, 2007). Websites have been seen as the top tool in attracting qualified applicants (Switzer, 2006). Internet presence should maximize department resources. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) recruitment website helped increase recruitment in a year when advertising budgets were cut (Lim et al., 2009). The Internet has also helped smaller departments compete with larger ones for candidates (McKeever & Kranda, 2001). Nevertheless, use of the Internet only to place advertisements online and without any overall marketing strategy can be ineffective (Yearwood, 2003).

Contemporary Internet tools have magnified the importance of “word-of-mouth” tactics that new generations expect in their job search (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007; Verhoeven, Mashood, & Chansarkar, 2009). Social networking sites (along with law enforcement networking sites such as Officer.com and Police Link) have come to be the social cornerstone of many young people’s lives (Russell, 2007). These websites enable connections across audiences, including students and recent graduates, military personnel, professionals, former and current law enforcement, police supervisors, and job seekers from other fields (Universia Knowledge@Wharton, 2006; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007; Verhoeven et al., 2009). Podcasts, blogs, and “really simple syndication” (RSS) feeds have increased job seekers’ sophistication, allowing them to process growing amounts of information and network more efficiently (Kolbitsch & Maurer, 2006; Martin, Reddington, & Kneafsey, 2009; Orrick, 2008).

Use Electronic Media Other than the Internet

The Internet’s overall effect on police recruiting varies, but departments using it have been able to present their organizations in ways that influence applicants (Cable & Yu, 2006), dispel negative images (Ellis, Greg, Skinner, & Smith, 2005; Orrick, 2008; Syrett & Lammiman, 2004) and transmit positive ones (Ellis et al., 2005; Verhoeven et al., 2009), showcase their technological abilities (Charrier, 2000), and recruit in ways that resonate with new generations of applicants (Gubbins & Garavan, 2008). Despite the generational differences that might separate police command staff from young recruits, using Internet media could sell policing in messages that potential recruits hear very personally (COPS, 2009).
other visual technology can also help attract new generations of recruits. Many simulation-based video games mimic interactive problem-solving activities such as probing and telescoping, exploratory analysis, and critical thinking (Harrison, 2007). Beyond games, the use of emotional video clips in a structured reality show format can help attract candidates (Lim et al., 2009). Interactive electronic media restructure traditional communications with workers, which could be a boon to departments with advanced technological capabilities (Ellis et al., 2005; Harrison, 2007). Use of electronic media can present a paradox: If emotional vignettes of police life are used to attract candidates, specifically by representing department diversity and work life, the department must ensure that such “simulations” are consistent with the realities of their work.

Brand Your Department and Your Profession

A department’s advertising message constitutes its brand and identity for applicants. In the first episode of the LAPD’s Internet-based recruitment video series, a variety of images designed to present information to recruits include a black female police sergeant, a diverse workforce of Hispanic and Asian officers, and fast-paced and adventurous police work (LAPD, n.d.). These and other branding images attempt to foster a deep, emotional attachment to the department and its supposed values—in this case, diversity and opportunities for advancement by minority applicants (Orrick, 2008; Sartain & Schumann, 2006). Branding also sells policing by aligning positive impressions of police work with applicants who might feel a “calling” to human services careers (COPS, 2009; Ellis et al., 2005; Scrivner, 2006; Slater & Reiser, 1988). The LAPD video series displays officers attempting to calm disputes, dealing with family problems, and working closely with community members in emotionally charged situations (LAPD, n.d.). These reality-based images are expected to resonate with Internet-savvy and video-oriented applicants who are seen as socially aware, brand loyal, and susceptible to cause branding (Syrett & Lammiman, 2004). Branding must be sincere and emotionally consistent with police work or the department risks appearing out of touch with its audience (McKay & Avery, 2005; Wilson & Grammich, 2009).

Use Community Liaisons to Reach Potential Recruits

Community liaison efforts have been a cornerstone of many community policing strategies for decades, with notable impact on recruitment of diverse populations (Skolnick & Bayley, 1988). These liaisons need not be involved in direct recruitment efforts. Liaisons could be any employees conducting community outreach, especially with targeted populations. Liaisons can be embedded in many ways. The Detroit Police Department’s Recruiting Ambassadors program uses not only departmental employees but also community representatives for its recruitment efforts, with incentives for community “ambassadors” to help recruit (Haggerty, 2009; Scrivner, 2006). Liaisons are often a critical part of outreach efforts to reach diverse populations but can also reflect diversity within the department in the eyes of potential candidates (Switzer, 2006). Liaison visibility and subsequent community relationships can enhance recruitment efforts with female candidates (Donnelly, 2005; Harrington, 2000) and in traditionally hard-to-reach ethnic and religious communities (U.S. Office of Justice Programs, 2008) and other isolated urban populations (Cunningham & Wagstaff, 2006).

Open Department Doors and Allow On-Site Visits

Community policing can improve community visibility and, in turn, bolster recruitment efforts (Haggerty, 2009). When community partnerships are merely superficial, they risk alienating applicants who might see hypocrisy in branding and advertising when such activities are inconsistent with the realities of the job (Syrett & Lammiman, 2004). Outreach must be meaningful, genuine, and
reflect a departmental desire to build true relationships with future employees (Baker & Carrera, 2007; McKeever & Kranda, 2001; Switzer, 2006). Realistic job preview strategies, by providing accurate representations of the department, can influence a candidate’s interest in an organization (McKay & Avery, 2005). Making outreach partnerships sincere requires going beyond traditional public appearances and might require imaginative techniques, such as site visits, to enhance connections with targeted populations (McKay & Avery, 2006). Such tactics can enhance applicant interest beyond initial attraction stages (Breaugh, 2008; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991) and might be particularly important for recruiting female and minority candidates when such persons occupy important positions within the department (Avery & McKay, 2006; COPS, 2009). Site visits that expose work climate, employee demographics, and physical environments that differ from department recruitment media can reduce interest (Breaugh, 2008). Departments should make the interactions between candidates and staff meaningful and take time to introduce important individuals within the department to the applicants.

Attend Career and Job Fairs

Face-to-face interaction and fostering human connections can make recruitment more meaningful and personal for both the department and applicants (Whetstone et al., 2006). Many of these opportunities are available through local college and university placement offices and in military and civilian settings (Orrick, 2008). Attending job and career fairs is often an expense for the department, involving travel and creative marketing techniques for mixed results, although maximizing these opportunities can boost departmental visibility and recruit targeting (Switzer, 2006; Whetstone et al., 2006; Yearwood, 2003). One potential benefit for departments attending such events is gaining firsthand insight on employment trends and overall staffing outlook in peer departments; one drawback is that job fairs are largely limited to applicants currently looking for work (Breaugh, 2008).

Consider Youth Programs in Recruiting

Explorer programs, internships through local schools, cadet academies, and mentorships with youth foster special relationships between young adults and departments (Whetstone et al., 2006; Yearwood, 2003). From the development of the Department of Justice’s Police Corps in the mid-1990s through the diffusion of similar scholarship, education, and training programs nationwide, youth outreach efforts have been a tradition of law enforcement organizations.

Nevertheless, for many reasons, these efforts often produce few results for recruiting. Most youths entering policing decide prior to their high school graduation to do so (Slater & Reiser, 1988; Switzer, 2006). Consequently, results for recruitment efforts vary widely (Whetstone et al., 2006; Yearwood, 2003). Costly and time-intensive efforts, such as Explorer programs, might misdirect resources that could be used to entice undecided youths.

Nevertheless, beyond identifying specific candidates, such programs brand the profession for young persons in the community (Presman, Chapman, & Rosen, 2002; Ridgeway et al., 2008). They might also acquaint the department with newer generations of applicants, including their work-life preferences, expectations, and career visions. By forging partnerships with a wide variety of youth, the value of such programs might extend beyond recruiting. At the same time, such programs help those already contemplating a police career develop qualifications within a police organization (COPS, 2009).

Target Second-Career Applicants, But Assess and Train Them Appropriately

With the economic downturn of the late 2000s, some police departments noted an increase in applicants seeking a second career in policing emerging from fields as diverse as automobile manufacturing, steel fabrication, marketing, and business administration (Crowe, 2009; Currier, 2009). The Virginia State Police noted
a surge in applications of individuals laid off from private sector jobs in 2009, a trend that appeared to normally follow economic downturns (Sidener, 2009). Older recruits may seek the stability and retirement benefits that a career in policing may offer (Castaneda & Ridgeway, 2010).

The increase in second-career applicants presents opportunities for departments to expand their workforce to include individuals with prior experience in diverse careers, but the diversity does not end with these applicants’ previous career choices. Individuals with prior careers outside law enforcement might present unique challenges by having differential training needs and abilities, previous work experience, levels of commitment, competing work values, familiarity with and attachment to wide varieties of perceived job benefits and rewards, and concepts of professionalism. Many of their attitudes toward work have been learned and ingrained through previous career experience, and organizations should be cautious in measuring the advantages and challenges of such candidates (COPS, 2009).

The professional development of second-career police officers requires transferring previous career experience in a manner that suits both the department and the candidate’s unique needs. In education, a profession with many second-career applicants, several principles of learning guide the transfer of outside professional experience to new career paths. Extracting appropriate practical and professional expertise from previous career experience, adapting it to new work dimensions, and integrating these new employees into the organization to maximize their expertise poses numerous challenges (Bolhuis, 2002; Tigchelaar, Brouwer, & Vermont, 2010). Second-career applicants have different motivations and values, which can simultaneously invigorate and strain organizations unfamiliar with their special needs, and their levels of commitment might be used to organizational advantage (Pennington, Congden, & Magilvy, 2007). In medicine, second-career applicants have been attractive because their life experiences and successes, as well as their perceived maturity, might enhance organizational mission with other applicants (Kohn & Truglio-Londrigan, 2007). Models of career transitions have described the potential effects of integrating second-career workers as mutually transformative, with organizations offering experienced persons previously unattainable potential for actualization in exchange for experience and maturity (Bandow, Minsky, & Voss, 2007; Cooper & Torrington, 1981).

One solution to the complexities of hiring individuals with diverse previous experiences is to diagnose how their values fit with the organization. Schein’s (1990) model of career anchors can be used to examine values and career priorities among workers from different fields and to assess their self-perceptions of talents, abilities, and values from prior experience (also see Danziger, Rachman-Moore, & Valency, 2008). For example, a second-career applicant with technical competence might struggle with service-oriented components of police work. An individual who seeks challenges might thrive on constant stimulation and not fit well in smaller departments with limited opportunities. This model might help determine where training for second-career applicants should be focused. For example, for a former social worker appearing to be strong on public service qualifications, training might focus on technical and tactical issues.

**Bolstering the Supply of Candidates**

Some law enforcement departments have decided to “open the faucet” of supply by eliminating many traditional restrictions. Easing qualifications and hiring restrictions have often proved politically volatile and attracted criticism for being short-sighted (Maki, 2008; Spolar, 2009). For many departments, the short-term concern for filling “empty chairs on test day” (Domash, 2002, p. 34) can be remedied by relaxing requirements. However, this leads to charges that departments are lowering hiring standards.
Some departments have sought to “open the faucet” by relaxing residency restrictions. This can negatively influence public perceptions of the police by leading to admission of applicants who have little knowledge of the communities they are to serve (DeMasi, 2003; Murphy & Worrall, 1999; Spolar, 2009). Some departments have also eased educational requirements, rekindling debate about the desirability of degree holders as officers. Departments might also ease educational requirements to compensate for any exclusionary effect resulting from traditional barriers for minority and female applicants (Decker & Huckabee, 2002; White & Escobar, 2008).

Some have relaxed minimum age requirements to attract more candidates, raising concern about the readiness of younger applicants for police work (Taylor et al., 2006). In 2013, the Chicago Police Department lowered its exam age requirement to 18 from 25 to boost diversity, reversing a decision by a former superintendent who had increased it in 2010 to increase officer maturity (Main & Spielman, 2013). The Memphis (Tennessee) Police Department relaxed its educational requirement, and, in 2008, was considering a second revision to its residency requirement (Maki, 2008).

Some departments have become more tolerant of experimental drug use, bad credit history, and minor arrest records to attain larger numbers of applicants (Lee, 2005; Taylor et al., 2006; Woska, 2006). According to Reaves (2012), more than four in five would hire applicants with credit problems, three in four would hire applicants with a misdemeanor conviction, and nearly half would hire applicants who have used illegal drugs other than marijuana. In large departments, 28% would not disqualify an applicant for being terminated by another law enforcement department (Wilson et al., 2010).

Often, relaxing such restrictions interferes with the department’s ability to build community confidence in the quality of its officers (Decker & Huckabee, 1999; Katz, 2000). At the same time, it can be seen as a rejection of the screening-out approach of candidate selection. Because of the potential organizational, political, and social ramifications of relaxed restrictions for departments and the communities they serve, before employing them, departments should carefully consider their effect on recruiting, as well as the signal they send about hiring standards.

**Selecting Candidates**

Often, the process of candidate selection becomes confused with the exercise of attracting applicants (Breaugh, 2008; Ellis et al., 2005). For the candidate, the selection process requires patient navigation of physical, mental, and aptitude screening examinations, interviews, and meetings and submitting to a thorough background investigation. The crucial task for departments is to use selection methods that reveal the best possible recruits for department needs (Cavanagh, 2003; Scrivner, 2006).

Because screening and selection play pivotal roles in narrowing a large, generalized pool of interested persons to a manageable cohort of applicants, departments often examine their selection procedures to ensure that the testing and screening process is consistent with what they seek in new officers (Searle, 2006). Efficiency, accuracy, and fairness are but a few of the concerns for departments in structuring this crucial task in the recruitment process. Yet, departments have changed their selection procedures very little since a 1973 review of police selection procedures by the National Advisory Committee on Criminal Justice Standards (Doerner, 1998; Langworthy et al., 1995), even as departments seek to increase recruiting among women and minorities (Lim et al., 2009; Wilson & Grammich, 2009).

Possible reasons for the relative stagnation of reforms of the selection process include the need for departments to pattern their selection procedures after state mandates (Bradley, 2005), an overall practitioner attachment to more reactive models of selection (Scrivner,
and the difficulty in modifying a procedure without incentives to do so (Tuomey & Jolly, 2009). Community policing and generational differences have driven a reexamination of the selection process by forcing departments to rethink what specific characteristics they seek in their officers (DeCicco, 2000; Scrivner, 2006).

Although alternatives, such as the assessment center, to traditional hurdle approaches of selection have blossomed, evidence on them is mixed (DeCicco, 2000; Kolpack, 1991; Reuland & Stedman, 1998). Scores on assessment center examinations are positively correlated with academy and patrol performance (Dayan, Kasten, & Fox, 2002; Hogarty & Bromley, 1996; Pynes & Bernardin, 1992) and supervisor performance (Ross, 1980) in preliminary empirical tests.

Nonetheless, when considering the challenge of recruiting qualified applicants from younger generations, departments should consider restructuring the process to account for both applicant perceptions and departmental goals. Applicants’ top two reported frustrations about the selection process were the length of time and impersonality of the procedure, items that departments can correct (Switzer, 2006). Some departments are also considering restructuring the order of selection tasks to ensure a diverse applicant pool and cut costs by eliminating unnecessary and redundant screening procedures (Haggerty, 2009). In structuring a protocol for selecting the best candidates, departments should consider aligning selection procedures with what they consider to be important job dimensions (Scrivner, 2006). For example, if a department identifies residency as one of the most important job dimensions for applicants, screening for applicants’ residence would take place before screening for other skills and abilities.

As selection procedures become more scrutinized, predicting candidate success at various stages of the recruitment process has become increasingly important. The Las Vegas (Nevada) Metropolitan Police Department recently adopted a testing program designed to maximize department time and resources by processing only applicants who display a high probability (85%) of completing the process (Wilson & Grammich, 2009). The LAPD has similarly streamlined its selection process to use predictive models (Lim et al., 2009). As departments increasingly use predictive models, traditional hurdle approaches are slowly being infused with more empirically based selection processes, especially for targeted populations of recruits.

Screening Processes

Since the early 1970s, the structure of police screening procedures has revolved around three basic tests: (1) physical agility testing, (2) psychological testing, and (3) a medical examination (Ash, Slora, & Britton, 1990; Langworthy et al., 1995). The exact prevalence of these screening procedures for police candidate selection is unknown, but some studies indicate that they are used in at least 90% of departments (Ash et al., 1990; DeCicco, 2000; Ho, 1999; Langworthy et al., 1995; Reaves, 2012; Wilson et al., 2010). Despite the emphasis on these screening procedures, they have varied widely in their predictive value on a number of outcome measurements (White, 2008). Their chief effect is often to select out applicants from further consideration, meaning that tighter or more rigorous selection processes will reduce the number of applicants.

Interview Procedures

Personal interviews are a nearly universal means police departments use in selecting candidates (Reaves, 2012). Interview processes are beginning to incorporate diverse stakeholders in order to examine for a broader “cultural fit” (Wilson & Grammich, 2009), including values and beliefs consistent with the department and community mission. Such interviews often take the form of an “oral board” protocol (Doerner, 1998). Some researchers have warned against relying heavily on oral board interview techniques for reasons ranging from the lack of training...
for many interview board members to the use of ambiguous and invalid rating dimensions (Gaines & Kappeler, 1992).

Some studies indicate that newer generations of recruits have been able to perform better on oral portions of the selection process than on written examinations, which might indicate the need for pretesting and access to practice written testing by computer (Whetstone et al., 2006). The assessment center approach has also been effective in yielding task-specific interview questions, shifting interview focus from a standard question-and-answer format to interactive simulations and roleplay (Dayan et al., 2002; Hogarty & Bromley, 1996).

**Background Investigations**

Traditionally, background investigations and character references have formed the backbone of police selection techniques (Fulton, 2000; Langworthy et al., 1995; Smelson, 1975). In early use, such studies correlated background problems with after-hire disciplinary issues (Cohen & Chaiken, 1972). Background investigations have proliferated in use as a screening tool, often being conducted at multiple stages by different levels of the organization (Ridgeway et al., 2008). The extent of these investigations varies by locale but can often involve a lifetime criminal history check, a credit bureau report, and examinations of close associates from the recent to the distant past (DeCicco, 2000; New York City Commission to Combat Police Corruption, 2008).

Younger generations pose unique challenges to such investigations. Younger applicants can be remarkably candid in disclosing personal information, but their impressions of what constitutes “character” might be startlingly different from those of evaluators (Russell, 2007; Verhoeven et al., 2009). For instance, social networking sites often display photographs of applicants in poses that older generations might think inappropriate. Conducting background investigations on candidates for whom computer use is a social reality can be inherently problematic for law enforcement departments because of the transparency with which younger generations are living their lives. Such transparency can also affect officers on the force. In one case, a Sandy Springs, Georgia, sergeant was fired for his Facebook postings, including one in which he divulged the possibility of a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) drug seizure (WSBTV, 2009). Similarly, financial background information on candidates might be of decreasing value in an era of increasing economic difficulties.

Recent research shows that biographical information gained from background investigations is of limited help in predicting subsequent officer termination (Brennan et al., 2009). As such, departments should proceed with caution and not place undue emphasis on a technique that appears to be steadily losing favor, especially for new generations of recruits for whom transparency is assumed.

**Predicting Future Success in Applicants**

Closely related to the issue of electronic background investigation is electronic surveillance for selecting candidates and its overall negative effect on recruiting. Recent research has indicated that a wealth of personal data about candidates can be obtained simply by searching the Internet for names, nicknames, e-mail addresses, street addresses, and social networking profiles (Searle, 2006). This power is increasing exponentially with the proliferation of electronic media and outpaces empirical study of its impact on recruitment efforts. Yet, preliminary research shows that with such ability comes equal responsibility for the human resources professional. Worries that such sensitive information might compromise individual freedom and privacy and adversely affect candidate selection have resonated with those concerned with civil liberties and organizational justice (Chapman & Webster, 2003; Harris, Van Hove, & Lievens, 2003; Truxillo, Steiner, & Gilliland, 2004). The Internet age has changed selection processes in ways that are still unclear for both job
seekers and departments looking for qualified applicants.

What is apparent is that traditional methods of selection might be losing reliability in the absence of more current data analysis on new generations of applicants and their changed career expectations, conflicting notions of privacy, and sustained cynicism about invasive and lengthy application processes. Placing these new recruits in uniform based on selection techniques that might not only be obsolete but also may be seen as invasive and irrelevant could be counterproductive. Recent research demonstrating that personal demographic and background information (such as age, gender, and race) can predict police academy performance (White, 2008) appears not only to be contradicted by empiricists’ inability to link academy performance to patrol behaviors, but also to be in widespread disagreement about what qualities might best befit “good police officers” (Sanders, 2003). A more proactive approach for selection would use department-specific benchmarks and performance measurements for determining what selection processes best fit the department and keeping departmental needs assessments current for staffing.

Summary

Many core problems that police departments face in recruiting have worsened in the past decade, even as changing economic conditions have led to temporary fluctuations in the numbers of recruits. Changing generational tastes for police work, increased prevalence of disqualifications (such as drug use or physical unfitness), and greater competition from other organizations (such as the military) have helped restrict the pool of qualified applicants. Further complicating recruiting efforts is the fragmented approach many departments take to recruiting.

Nevertheless, departments can take several modest steps to make their recruiting more effective. Once they determine the officer numbers, attributes, and skills they need, departments can devise strategies that will best help them attract candidates. Internally, departments can build employee referral networks, create a recruitment unit, identify potential recruits from auxiliary or reserve ranks, and assess the effectiveness of their employee-engagement strategies (e.g., identify reasons employees should want to work for the department). Externally, departments can use Internet and other electronic media, brand the department and its work within the community, use community liaisons to reach potential recruits, allow on-site visits, attend career and job fairs, and target both youth programs and second-career applicants. Such external marketing efforts should take care to ensure that department work is portrayed realistically; portrayals of work that do not match the reality can cause the department to appear insincere in its efforts to engage.

Departments might also wish to expand their recruitment possibilities by opening wider the “faucet” of supply for recruits. Such efforts can include relaxing age, education, or residency requirements and becoming more tolerant of experimental drug use, bad credit history, or minor arrest records. Such initiatives, however, might raise concerns about the quality of recruits. Departments also might wish to expand their supply of candidates by revamping their screening processes, interview processes, and background investigations. At the same time, streamlined selection processes, particularly those aided by electronic media, should be cautious about applicant freedom and privacy, as well as about identifying characteristics of applicants likely to have success.

References


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