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Police Recruiting and the Shrinking Applicant Pool

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ABSTRACT

One of the biggest challenges facing police agencies today is attracting a sufficient number of quality applicants for police employment. Police agencies have found that their need for officers has grown while the number of quality applicants is on the decline. What are the causes that may have reduced the applicant pool? What can be done to expand the applicant pool? These are questions that were examined in this research.

Research included a synthesis of literature, statistics, and prior studies. Also, a sample of police administrators and a sample of generation “Y” were surveyed. The survey was conducted in order to assess attitudinal differences between police administrators, often of the “Baby Boomer” generation, and younger workers from generation “Y”. The survey indicates that police administrators often have an inaccurate perception of the younger generation of workers and what may attract them to a particular career field. While certainly inaccurate perceptions can play a role in a department’s ability to recruit quality applicants; research indicates that there are a variety of factors that must be considered.

It is concluded that many factors influence an agency’s ability to recruit and the “silver bullet” does not exist. An agency must be proactive and comprehensive in its approach; establishing itself as one of the leading employers in the field. It is a team effort that starts at the top.

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Sherman has an approximate population of 40,000 and covers about 40 square miles. The city is experiencing steady growth at the present and anticipates rapid growth in the near future. With growth, comes the need for increased public services. Like Sherman, growth has posed a challenge for many cities across the nation as they compete for an important resource, people. An especially difficult challenge for cities is finding viable candidates for hire as police officers.

Slightly more than half of police agencies grew in officer strength from 1996 to 1999. The availability of grant money, concerns about crime, calls for service, and population size drove much staffing growth during that period (National Institute of Justice, 2004). Along with these factors, communities and police departments now face homeland security issues which have also increased the need for new law enforcement employees. Homeland security needs have also increased competition among local, state, and federal agencies in recruiting new officers. Many municipal agencies experienced this first hand, as they lost officers to the federal air marshal program shortly after the terrorist attack on the world trade towers in 2001.

The City of Sherman, as many other cities across the nation, has experienced a decline in the applicant pool in the past 10 years. In 1990, when this author took the civil service exam and applied for a police officer position, nearly 80 others applied as well. It was common at this time to have nearly 100 people apply for a police officer position. For a town of about 32,000 people at the time, the department was quite satisfied with 100 applicants. As the city has grown and its need for more officers has grown, it now may have as few as 15 people apply for an opening. This is an example of a nationwide problem, or crisis as some have described and is regularly written about in police publications, journals, magazines, and text books. National statistics

tracked by the Department of Justice are grim: in the past three years, New York City has seen the number of its applicants plummet from 32,000 to 15,000; in the next five years, Minnesota expects to retire half of its police forces statewide, as just two examples of the challenge facing law enforcement across the country (Kelly, K. & Rivera, E. 2000). The decline in police applicants is occurring while the complexity of the job requires the applicants to be more skilled and educated, further narrowing the pool of viable candidates.

The problem is clear: the need for more law enforcement officers is growing, while the pool of viable candidates is on the decline. What are causes that may have reduced the applicant pool? What can be done to expand the applicant pool? These are questions that will be examined through a synthesis of literature, statistics, and prior studies. Also, surveys will be conducted of police personnel and segments of generation “Y”. One purpose of the survey will be to identify what younger generations are looking for when considering career possibilities as opposed to what police administrators may believe they are looking for. The research will also review methods of recruitment and deficiencies in recruitment.

The struggle to fill vacancies is prevalent among most agencies across the nation including municipal, county, state, and federal. As “Baby Boomers” retire and the younger generations fill the work force, recruitment practices must move past tradition and take a new look at methods of attracting new police employees. What attracted the “Baby Boomers” to police work will not necessarily entice “Gen-X” or “Gen-Y” to join the ranks. It is anticipated that the research will accentuate the need for better understanding and insight concerning the evolving work force, as well as emphasizing the necessity for agencies to be proactive and innovative in their recruiting efforts.

This research will benefit the community, police agencies, and officers by providing

objective information about common recruiting deficiencies, workforce characteristics, and by identifying effective methods of attracting new police applicants. Departments become more efficient, communities better served and officers less stressed when departments are working at full strength with quality employees. The ability to achieve this rests solely upon each department's ability to attract sufficient numbers of quality applicants from the available workforce.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

People are the most valuable resource any organization can have. *Highly qualified* people are of the utmost value and are a highly sought after commodity, which police organizations across the country are finding extremely difficult to find. Many administrators yearn for the day when selecting recruits was comparatively simple. The draft and military service were at their peak. Military veterans, innately possessing *common sense* and a work ethic developed through service and maturity, were knocking on department doors looking for work (Tate, 2000). The supply of good police recruits was down throughout the nation during the summer of 2000. More than half of small agencies (those serving populations of under 50,000) and two-thirds of large agencies (those serving populations of 50,000 or more) with recent vacancies reported that a lack of qualified applicants caused difficulties in filling those slots (Koper, 2004).

Considering what the ideal police applicant may be, we can consider the following composite created from comments supplied by several law enforcement administrators:

- Be at least 5' tall (female) or 5' 9" (male)
- Weigh no less than 100 pounds (female) or 150 (male) and no more than 250 pounds
- Have at least a two-year college degree, preferably in criminal justice

- Be between 21 and 45 years of age
- Have no criminal record
- Be able to pass psychological and polygraph testing

It would also be beneficial if applicants spoke a second language fluently, had experience in the use of firearms and could pass rigid physical fitness tests. Unfortunately, some departments are finding it difficult to find any qualified applicants today, let alone the ideal one (Sharp, 1994)!

A literary review of studies, surveys, and research, clearly reflect a common dilemma facing police agencies across the country today; the challenge of recruiting and maintaining a qualified pool of applicants. The dilemma is a common one, but the approach to a solution is not common and varies from department to department. The approach may be proactive and creative at some progressive departments, while other departments are absent of any approach at all. Some departments seem to have difficulty shaking the dogma that can be associated with law enforcement. Although history reflects a slow to change police culture, we know that our society in general is changing quickly and profoundly, which includes our workforce. It is important to see the correlation between the rapid change of society and the dogma of law enforcement, as well as how it relates to the recruiting dilemma. Although the work force has changed, society has changed and what younger workers are looking for in a career has changed; in most cases law enforcement agencies have not adapted accordingly.

Often, agencies do not consider generational differences when seeking new employees and have found themselves behind the curve in their efforts to attract the current workforce. Baby Boomers were born in the post World War II era and currently hold many of the senior command level police positions. They entered the police field when aggressive recruiting was

not typically necessary and there were ample candidates knocking at the door. Typically, the candidates were white males with high school educations and prior military experience. They felt comfortable with the paramilitary environment of police work, were attracted to the job security and the ability to earn a decent wage.

The workforce has changed and diversified. What attracted the “Baby Boomers” may not attract the younger generation of workers, Generation X and Generation Y respectively. Generation X is considered those Americans born between 1965 and 1976 and Generation Y being born between 1977 to 1997.

Today’s younger generations are better educated, they live at home longer and information and communication is at their fingertips. Patience is a 56K modem. Recognition and immediate responses are expected. To those entering the current work force, the once envied assets of a law enforcement career; stability, security, and long-term promotion, do not compare to high entry-level reimbursement, flexible schedules and the casual work environment. The end result has been a drastic reduction in quality applicants in a period of law enforcement expansion (Tate, 2000).

Such a dramatic attitudinal shift toward work will have far-reaching implications for society at large. Generation Y is one of the most closely watched age groups because it’s among the largest – almost three times the size of Generation X. They’re 70 million strong and are also known as the “echo boomers” because they are the closest in population size to the 75 million baby boomers. This is a generation whose career choices and behavior are driven, first and foremost, by their quest for opportunities to play meaningful roles in work that helps others. In essence, they want to be “paid volunteers,” joining an organization not because they have to, but because they really want to, because something significant is happening there (Gogoi, 2005).

The economic boom that followed the cash-depleted early 90's created an atmosphere of four percent or less unemployment, a mobile and selective job seeking population and high entry level dollar return for little effort. The private sector caters to this trend by both ignoring a work history that shows numerous employers and encouraging separation in lieu of promotion. Reducing midlevel management numbers and keeping salaries flat is a goal. Performance and production equates to bonuses and instant reward.

Law enforcement, on the other hand, requires commitment and effort from the very beginning. The hiring process alone is cumbersome and suffers from the tyranny of time. Paying ones dues is vital to advancement, as is organizational loyalty (Tate, 2000). The screening process can often take six months to a year and can be a detriment to attracting this younger workforce that desires quick results. Quality applicants often can choose between a number of employers and may go with the agency that provides the quickest results.

National Institute of Justice research reflects other possible factors that may contribute to law enforcement's struggle to find qualified applicants, such as:

- The strong economy may have lured good candidates and experienced officers away from law enforcement into better paying jobs.
- Increasing educational requirements for applicants.
- High attrition rates as baby boomers retire.
- Negative publicity over such matters as racial profiling and excessive force incidents.
- Law Enforcement expansion through community policing grants during the mid 1990's may have helped to deplete available law enforcement candidates.

These factors may vary in degree on how much they affect individual departments, but must be considered.

Data reviewed from studies, research, and articles reflect a common problem; a shrinking pool of qualified applicants. Also reflected are deficiencies in recruiting and recruiting methods; recruiting often being a misnomer, with some departments just waiting for applicants to show up at their door or simply posting a notice for employment in the local paper.

METHODOLOGY

What are causes that may have reduced the applicant pool? What can be done to grow the applicant pool? These are questions that challenge many police agencies across the nation and are the focus of this research paper. It is believed that many departments are behind the curve when it comes to adapting to the rapid change of today's society. This rings true in the arena of recruiting. It is believed research will show that often a passive approach, lacking innovation, is taken by departments; *recruiting* being a misnomer in many cases. It is also believed that police administrators often do not consider generational differences and may make inaccurate assumptions about the young workers of today's workforce.

A synthesis of literature including police journals, governmental studies, news articles and publications provided valuable information concerning these research questions and helped to identify, review, and evaluate a number of factors relating to this issue. Surveys were also conducted in the form of questionnaires. It is believed that the survey will identify that many departments are passive in their recruiting and/or deficient in their methods. Police administrators, who often do the hiring, often make inaccurate assumptions about the younger generation of workers and what attracts them to a particular career field.

Twenty five police administrators were surveyed from random departments across the state. The departments range in size from 25 officers to 3500 officers. It is believed that the random size of the police departments will better reflect the scope of the recruiting problem and

how it may affect the law enforcement field as a whole. All 25 department administrators surveyed responded. Also surveyed were 29 youth, ages 17 and 18, with all responding. The youth were of various backgrounds and ethnicity and were public school students.

The police administrators were asked 5 questions relating to their departments recruiting efforts, or lack thereof. They were also asked to rank in order what they believed to be things that would most likely attract a young person to a particular career field.

The 29 youth were also asked what would most likely attract them to a particular career field, ranking in order the following:

- Exciting Job
- Interesting Job
- Ability to Serve Community
- Opportunity for Achievement/Recognition
- Job Security
- Money/Fringe Benefits
- Good Work Environment
- Fame
- Challenging Job

It is hypothesized that police administrators, many of whom are “baby boomers,” have an inaccurate perception of what younger generations are apt to look for, concerning a career field. It is also hypothesized that many departments are passive and/or deficient in their efforts to recruit. Survey results will be used to compare what the youth identified, as their priorities concerning a career field with what police administrators believe are youth priorities concerning a career field.

FINDINGS

Literature and studies reviewed during research indicate the same thing: a shrinking applicant pool and increasing challenges in recruiting viable candidates for police service. A survey of 25 police administrators supports these findings. Of the 25 administrators surveyed, 21 state that their department has experienced a decline in viable police candidates in the past 5

years, as is the case of this author's department.

An important dynamic to be considered concerning recruiting is generational differences. This is a dynamic that police departments are typically "*behind the curve*" on. The work force has appeared to change faster than law enforcement in general. The younger generations are more educated, more diverse, are comfortable with and enjoy new technology, take pleasure in jobs that are meaningful, and are likely to be impatient with the typical police application process. In many cases, police administrators have misconceptions about what a younger generation of workers look for when considering career opportunities. When police administrators were asked in a survey what they believed would most likely attract a young person to a particular career field, the most common answer given was money and fringe benefits. In comparison, when the group of 17 and 18 year olds were asked what would most likely attract them to a particular career field, money and fringe benefits were not even in the top 3 answers. The top 3 answers given were:

1. Exciting Job
2. Interesting Job
3. Good Work Environment

"*Young people are only looking for money*", is a misconception that reflects a lack of understanding on behalf of police administrators concerning a younger generation of workers. Many other employers would agree the younger generations seem to be more motivated by personal fulfillment opportunities on the job than by traditional monetary rewards (Hacker, No Date). Understanding your target group is imperative if an agency hopes to be successful.

A hypothesis which may not be supported by the survey is the belief departments are often passive in their recruiting efforts. The survey of police administrators reflected that 18 of 25 agencies believe they are aggressive and proactive when it comes to recruiting. This would

indicate that recruiting difficulties may be centered more on the method of recruiting and lack of innovation, rather than the lack of recruiting. A deficiency in the method of recruiting may be supported by the police administrator's apparent lack of understanding of the younger workers they are targeting. You cannot effectively recruit without first having a clear profile and understanding of the people you hope to target.

An important aspect of recruiting is going where your candidates go. This seems logical, but it raises the question, "Where are they?" that is where understanding your target group comes in. Knowing the younger generation's propensity toward technology and their desire for instant results, indicates that the Internet would be an invaluable tool in recruiting efforts. Although some departments are beginning to utilize this opportunity, once again many departments are behind the curve. Police agencies are finding that the Internet can work for them not only in recruiting efforts and test preparation, but in the public relations realm as well. By having a strong presence on the Internet, local police agencies can promote themselves in very positive ways. An agency Web site should be inviting, informative, and easy to navigate. It should be a community wide resource that is kept current with frequent updates. Job information and the name of a contact person with the agency who can give the site visitor more information should be a part of the site (Brandon & Lippman, 2000).

Although 21 of 25 police administrators surveyed indicate a decline in their applicant pools, 4 administrators indicate no decline in their agencies applicant pool. This begs the question, "What is the distinction?" Although research reveals various factors that influence an agencies ability to attract candidates, we can look at the few agencies that are not experiencing a shrinking applicant pool and get an indication of what works. If it is the infamous "*silver bullet*" agencies are looking for in solving their recruiting dilemma, they are not likely to find it. It is

more than just a single approach; it is a comprehensive approach that set successful agencies apart.

Successful agencies have a reputation and are known in their profession and communities as being a good place to work. They are comprehensive in that, they do many things right. There are characteristics synonymous with these agencies. You will find that they are well managed agencies that are progressive, innovative, professional, and offer competitive wages. Not only are they progressive, innovative and professional in their dealings with the public but with their employees as well, hence the reputation as being a good place to work. On the other hand, agencies that narrowly focus their approach are not likely to be very successful. One example would be agencies that actively recruit by appointing a full time recruiter, visiting job fairs, running TV ads and utilizing the Internet but do not offer competitive wages and benefits. The problem would be the same if competitive wages were offered but the agency made no effort in the recruiting field. Clearly a comprehensive approach on the behalf of a well rounded department is the best bet for success.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

A shrinking applicant pool is a challenge for many agencies across the nation, including federal, state, county, and municipal law enforcement organizations. What are the causes that may have reduced the applicant pool? What can be done to expand the applicant pool? These are questions that were examined through a synthesis of literature, statistics, prior studies, and surveys. It was believed that deficiencies in recruiting and recruiting methods would be identified on the part of many agencies, as well as identifying possible methods of growing the applicant pool.

Is there a *silver bullet* when it comes to police recruiting and expanding the applicant

pool? Clearly the answer is “NO”. There are a number of factors that can impact recruiting and the applicant pool. Although there is no silver bullet, there are clearly things which can be done by agencies to improve their ability to recruit.

Competition for viable police candidates is such that departments must take a comprehensive approach and be proactive in their efforts. This starts with an objective evaluation of current recruiting methods, or lack thereof. This would include gaining knowledge about your target group and creating a profile. Your methods and efforts will be shaped accordingly. Lack of knowledge concerning a department’s target group, has been identified as a shortcoming for many departments.

One factor that will always have an impact on recruiting to one degree or another, is salary and benefits. Although not as important to the younger generation of workers as some administrators think, it will always be a factor. As young workers consider their career options, even though pay may not be a top priority, comparisons will be made with other departments. The ability to support oneself and family will always be a consideration. A department identified as low paying, when compared to other departments in the region, will almost always have difficulty attracting sufficient numbers of candidates. Regional competition for employees would dictate competitive wages are a necessary part of a comprehensive recruiting plan.

One significant recruiting challenge identified is generational differences. Generational differences clearly impact recruiting efforts and surveys would indicate police administrators probably have inaccurate perceptions of the younger generation of workers. As the workforce changes, so must our methods of attracting applicants. To change appropriately; we must be familiar with a changing work force. The research supported the hypothesis that recruiting methods are often deficient. Departments need to be more innovative and target oriented in their approach. This is especially true concerning our efforts to connect with a younger generation of

workers.

Applicant pools appear to be on the decline and research indicates a variety of factors that may be an influence. A department looking for the “*silver bullet*” is not going to find one. Even the best departments must be comprehensive in their approach; being flexible and innovative in their recruiting efforts.

This research will benefit police agencies by giving insight to recruiting methods and workforce trends and when taken to heart will enable agencies to be more effective in finding those highly qualified employees they need. Departments are more efficient, communities better served, and officers less stressed when departments are working at full strength with quality employees.

The single most important recruiting strategy is to have the reputation as being one of the leading employers in your field and within your community. That way, when people are thinking of changing jobs, or looking for new challenges, they naturally think of your organization. Positioning your organization as one of the community’s leading employers begins at the top and continues all the way down. It’s a team effort that involves everyone (Deems, 1999).

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