

**The Bill Blackwood
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**The Shortfall of Qualified Applicants and the
Generational Implications that Impact Law Enforcement**

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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement agencies across the United States are experiencing a reduction of qualified applicants for the entry level police officer position. This is a growing concern not only among law enforcement executives but also many citizens within the community. Many factors have been discussed and researched as to the possible cause of the growing disinterest in a law enforcement career. Some of the more cited reasons are negative media coverage surrounding use of force incidents with minorities, change in societal values and beliefs, and the growing millennial generation entering the workforce. If this growing problem is not addressed, the communities will begin to suffer by seeing an increase in crime and slower response times to calls for service. In order for police agencies to accomplish their missions of public safety, law enforcement executives must begin to explore innovative strategies and potential policy changes based on the changes of societal values and beliefs.

Two areas that can be explored and evaluated are visible tattoos and the effects of legalized marijuana on police recruitment. Law enforcement executives must recognize that the values of the communities in which they serve are evolving rapidly, and, thus, changing the dynamics of law enforcement interactions; therefore, agencies must begin to adapt to these societal shifts. Ignoring these changes and continuing to adhere to a rigid or traditional approach may prove to be detrimental to recruitment and retention efforts. Chief law enforcement executives should begin to explore and examine the growing changes in society and weigh the cost of modifying policies to more closely reflect the new societal views to attract new law enforcement recruits.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	4
Counter Position	7
Recommendation	10
References	13
Appendix	16

INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies across the United States are experiencing a reduction of qualified applicants for the entry level police officer position. With news headlines such as the following: “Police Face Severe Shortage of Recruits”, “Police Officer Recruitment: A Public-Sector Crisis”, and “Law Enforcement Agencies Pursue Elusive, Qualified Recruits”, the public can quickly understand the growing concern among law enforcement executives. The growing disinterest in the law enforcement field can be attributed to a host of factors. Two of the most commonly discussed and researched are negative media coverage surrounding use of force incidents and interactions with minorities and an ever-growing millennial generation entering the workforce. From the largest police department, New York City, to small rural police departments, fewer and fewer people are looking to join law enforcement agencies, which is forcing departments of all sizes to rethink how they replenish their ranks (Libaw, 2015). Libaw (2015) further stated, “A decade ago, there were 3,000 applicants for 10 openings with the Seattle police, the department says. Now there are 1,000 applicants for 70 positions – a drop of more than 90 percent” (para. 9).

In recent years, law enforcement has been the subject of several high profile and controversial use of force cases in the national media. Many of them were regarding the use of deadly force on unarmed black men and the mentally ill. These situations have not only increased the overall scrutiny of the involved officer and his/her department but has also increased the scrutiny on the law enforcement profession as a whole. These incidents sparked national debates on an use of force, body cameras, race relations, and even created a national movement called Black Lives Matter.

In the first quarter of 2015, the millennial generation surpassed Generation X in workforce participation, becoming the largest segment currently in the workforce today (Fry, 2015). Currently there are four generations in the workforce; silent, baby boomers, Generation X, and millennial. The silent generation is the oldest participants in the workforce and are quickly becoming extinct. The silent generation is commonly defined by those persons born between 1928 and 1945, making them 70-87 years old. The baby boomer generation are people born between 1946 and 1964, making them 52-70 years old. Generation X is defined as people born between 1965 and 1980, so they are currently between 36 and 52 years old. The millennial generation are those people born between 1981 and 1997, which makes them 19-36 years old. At 34% or 53.5 million people, the millennials now own the largest share of the labor force, and those figures are expected to grow. Millennials are projected to surpass the baby boomers not just in the labor force but also as the nation's largest living generation and in record time (Fry, 2015).

There are vast differences between the different generations and their mindset as it relates to recruitment and retention. Millennials grew up "plugged in" in the sense that they do not know a world without computers, internet, and cell phones. They grew up in a world with instant access to information, 24-hour news, and live video streaming in the form of Google, Facebook, and iPhones. Generation X had to adapt to the growing technology to continue to stay relevant and competitive in the work force. Millennials respond and seek a job that is more networking rather than a hierarchical organization ("Generational Differences Chart", n.d.). Millennials grew up in a time where body art such as tattoo's and piercings are no longer taboo but rather an

expression of one's self. Furthermore, they saw the legalization of medical and recreational marijuana.

With more and more boomers reaching retirement age and leaving the work force, Generation X'ers in middle management will be advancing to the chief executive level. With Generation X'ers in charge of law enforcement agencies, they will be responsible for shaping directives to reflect new societal shifts in the community and leading the development of new and innovative efforts to attract officers entering the work force from the millennial generation. Police and sheriff departments, particularly those ranks with the authority to shape policy, should explore and evaluate the changes in commonly accepted societal shifts and, if necessary, adjust department recruiting and retention guidelines to more closely reflect their community's values, thus expanding the applicant pool. National Public Radio's Laura Sullivan states, "Police officials estimate that as many as half of all people who attended high school from 1980 on used drugs while in school. Others simply have bad credit or even very visible tattoos" (Inskeep, 2006, para. 8).

If the decline of applications continues on the same trajectory, the challenge then becomes striking a balance between the lowering of standards and requirements and maintaining the high quality level of service that community policing has accustomed the citizenry to; this will be done while law enforcement remains under severe media and public scrutiny that demands officers be better trained. The purpose of this paper is to encourage law enforcement executives and stakeholders to begin to evaluate and explore potential policy changes before the problem of fewer qualified applicants begins to negatively affect public safety in the communities they are sworn to protect. This

paper will explore two areas that could be re-evaluated based on societal shifts, the millennial mindset regarding visible tattoo's and the growing number of states legalizing medical or recreational marijuana.

POSITION

Improvise, adapt, and overcome is a common mantra used in the United States Marine Corps. Law enforcement must transition to this mindset to overcome the growing problem of recruiting new officers. Society is evolving at such a rapid pace that law enforcement agencies are struggling to keep up with these constant societal shifts and match their community's values and beliefs. One area that law enforcement executives can look to make adjustments is grooming standards, more specifically visible tattoos. Most law enforcement agencies have policies prohibiting visible tattoos and some ban them altogether. Regarding strict tattoo bans for applicants, Captain Notte with the Vermont State Police says, "We're losing a lot of good applicants" (Jones, 2014, para. 1).

From the late 1990's to early 2000's, in the interest of professionalism, police departments across the country began instituting visible tattoo bans and required existing officers to wear long sleeve shirts or apply a covering makeup to their tattoos. This ban brings about safety concerns for officers working in tropical climates. The Phoenix Law Enforcement Association suggested that long sleeve shirts, in addition to body armor and a gun belt in 100 plus degree temperatures, might increase the chance of heat stroke ("Honolulu Police," 2013). Due to the loss of an average of one officer every three days, the New Orleans Police Department is reconsidering its tattoo policy. President of the New Orleans Police Association, Mike Glasser, said, "I don't know if it

makes for a more professional appearance, but it doesn't make for more professional policing" ("Honolulu Police," 2013, para. 13).

Military service men and women have traditionally been a big source of law enforcement recruits. However, with the United States engaged in the ongoing war on terror, many candidates are serving longer tours overseas. Military veterans have a rich history of proudly displaying their ink and are generally one of the best pools to recruit from ("Honolulu Police," 2013). A 2010 Pew Research Study found that only 2% of millennial males are military veterans, despite two active wars. Looking at the Generation X'ers, baby boomers, and the silent generations during the same stage of life, it was found that 6% of Generation X, 13% of baby boomers, and 24% of the silent generation were military veterans ("Millennials," 2010).

The largest segment of the labor force, the millennials, view tattoos as self-expression and often have them prominently displayed. A 2012 Harris poll asked 2,016 adult participants about tattoos and found that 21% of adults have at least one tattoo. Among 18 to 29 year old's, who are millennials, the Pew Research Center found that the percentage was closer to 40 (Jones, 2014). In 2015, three Chicago police officers, who are also former U.S. Marines, sued the city by citing a first amendment free speech violation from the Chicago Police Department that requires visible tattoos to be covered up (Bohner, 2015).

Another potential area that law enforcement executives can explore is the growing number of states that are legalizing medical and recreational marijuana. This is happening primarily in states along the west and east coasts, but is rapidly moving across the nation, thus giving police agencies in the middle of the country adequate

time and resources for review. This affords current law enforcement executives time to begin to explore what may be effective in those states and what has not been successful. In 1996, with Proposition 215, California became the first state to legalize medical marijuana with 56% of the vote. Two years later Alaska, Oregon, and Washington became the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th states respectively to legalize medical marijuana. By 2014, just 18 years after California legalized medical marijuana, nearly half of the states in the country, 23 total states, passed laws legalizing medical marijuana. Those states include: California, Alaska, Oregon, Washington, Maine, Hawaii, Colorado, Nevada, Montana, Vermont, Rhode Island, New Mexico, Michigan, New Jersey, District of Columbia, Arizona, Delaware, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, and New York. Most recently Washington, Oregon, Colorado, and Alaska have passed laws allowing for the recreational use of marijuana ("Historical Timeline," 2013).

Law enforcement agencies have had very strict marijuana use policies. For many years, any marijuana use was an automatic disqualifier. Gary Delanges of the San Francisco Police Officer Association indicated that the number one issue that law enforcement has to deal with, nationally, is the growing drug use. He further expressed that the law enforcement recruiting crisis shows the need to revise old standards to fit the new generation of police applicants (Tyler, 2008). Several candidates have been disqualified for past drug use; one applicant to the Seattle Police Department was a veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He had been briefly prescribed marijuana for pain management (Kaminsky, 2012).

With the first states legalizing medical marijuana in the late 90's, young millennials are looking for careers in law enforcement but they are finding their law enforcement aspirations not being realized due to past marijuana use. Millennials grew up during a time when many states were legalizing marijuana to some degree. Now millennials are migrating across the country after college and being automatically disqualified for past marijuana use. This past usage that may have been used legally or even medically prescribed in one state, but it is illegal in different state. Regarding prior drug use, the Washoe County, NV Sheriff's Department is dedicated to hiring officers from a diverse cross-section of society. Captain Janice Blue of the Washoe County, NV Sheriff's Department stated their goal is "striving to obtain a variety of employees that will represent every local race and culture, both men and women, without prejudice toward any person for any reason than the content of their character and their evaluated potential to succeed" (Sharp, 2003, p. 82-83).

COUNTER POSITION

Law enforcement agencies are para-military organizations and are structured as such. Police agencies take pride in their professional uniform appearance. Professional dress appearance is often the way that an organization presents its brand or image. Lawyers and CEOs wear a suit to fit the mold or project status within their given industry. Similarly, in law enforcement, a clean, neat, and polished officer represents not only his department but his municipality or county. Officers are often told that looking professional and well put together is an important aspect of command presence ("Improving," 2011). The look of an officer with visible tattoos is commonly believed by many law enforcement executives to detract from the professional

appearance that an officer is expected to project. Visible tattoos present another challenge for police agencies because they have to decipher what is considered offensive, obscene, or even gang related (Jones, 2014). This task can add another challenge to overcome for the growing list of responsibilities that police departments face. What may not be construed as offensive upon hire may then become offensive years later as social norms continue to evolve. The medical field has similar tattoo policies as law enforcement agencies; they also require no visible tattoos. Most medical facilities require tattoos to be covered up during work hours because projecting professionalism is the key to gaining a patient's trust (Hennessey, 2013).

With the millennial generation growing and entering the workforce and planting roots in communities across the nation, police departments have to evolve to continue to provide public safety services to the citizens, commensurate with the values and beliefs of the community. Millennials are serving their country in active combat zones around the world. Many service members get tattoos to memorialize a fallen soldier, or to show what unit they served in, or just to proudly display their service to this country. Many others may memorialize the death of a family member or the survival of a family member who battled cancer with a tattoo. A service member's skill set blends well with law enforcement because they are accustomed to an organized rank structure and following orders in a chain of command. The wife of a returning service member wrote an op-ed article expressing her frustration with the Manchester Police Department's tattoo policy because it excluded her husband who had a United States Army tattoo on his forearm. Manchester, NH Police Chief Nick Willard read the article and recognized that recruitment was down, in addition to good candidates being excluded simply

because of a tattoo. Chief Willard changed the Manchester Police Department's policy on tattoos to allow for visible tattoos; however, they had to be documented and evaluated by the background investigator to confirm that nothing racist, gang-related, or obviously offensive was present (Vincent, 2015). Tattoo policies across all industries vary but for many progressive companies focusing on diversity and inclusion, tattoos are becoming less and less problematic (Hennessey, 2013). Some officers have said that their tattoos have been a way to strike up conversations with the citizens ("Denver Police," 2014). Officers working in gang ridden neighborhoods and school resource officers have said that their tattoos have proven to be useful tools in striking up conversations with at-risk youth. In the current era of community policing, officers are encouraged to get out of the patrol car and engage with the community at large. Discussing tattoos is one way that those officers with tattoos can meet their community policing goals and possibly cultivate relationships that can lead to the employment of future officers.

Departments may be hesitant to support tattoos because they believe law enforcement agencies must represent a professional appearance at all times. Relaxing drug use policies can be seen as being hypocritical by the general public, which could result in the loss of trust. Personal integrity is mandatory for law enforcement officers. The unknown impact of marijuana use on an officer's credibility, integrity, and reputation is always a factor that must be considered during the hiring process. The law enforcement agency must decide how unlawful or unmoral past behavior will affect the officer and reflect on the police agency if recruitment policies are adjusted (Sharp, 2003).

With many states legalizing marijuana, this is a growing concern but not commonly discussed amongst chief executives and recruiting personal. Marijuana has been legalized in some fashion in 23 states over the last 20 years (“Historical Timeline,” 2013). During the next several years, some millennials entering the work force will have grown up their entire life with some form of legalized marijuana. The automatic disqualifications of applicants for prior drug use are likely to continue and possibly increase due to this fact. Some progressive agencies are beginning to evaluate their policies to reflect this societal shift. Gary Delanges, head of the San Francisco Police Officers Association, said, “Whether we like it or not, we are starting to have to acknowledge that recreational drug use was the rule rather than the exception for kids in their 20s and 30s” (Tyler, 2008, para. 4).

During the early 2000s, many police agencies changed from automatic disqualification to marijuana use prohibited during the last three years, prior to employment. This was done because recruiters were noticing more and more applicants indicating prior drug use. The Austin, Texas police department changed their policy to evaluate applicants based on the whole person rather than limiting drug use based off of an arbitrary number. Their drug use policy is based off of experimental versus habitual over an extended time frame (Woska, 2006).

RECOMMENDATION

Interest in law enforcement has been declining for several years. Many factors can be looked at as the cause, but at the forefront is the new millennial generation entering the workforce. Millennials’ view of society is vastly different than the two previous generations. Chief law enforcement executives should begin to explore and

examine the growing changes in society and weigh the cost of modifying policies to reflect the new societal views. Police officers are vital to society and the lack of interest in that field is something that every police chief has to address. Two issues that are viewed much differently in the millennial generation are tattoos and marijuana use.

Tattoos are seen as expression of art. Some people get tattoos to memorialize a fallen soldier and some get them as a reminder of beating breast cancer. Whatever the reason, more and more of the population are getting tattoos and displaying them prominently (Jones, 2014). Visible tattoos are prohibited in most law enforcement agencies but policies can be adjusted, like in Manchester, New Hampshire, to accommodate tattoos but restrict racist or obviously offensive tattoos. A consulting firm CEO, John Challenger, said this about tattoos: “Even in this tight job market, most companies are not going to view tattoos too harshly. Companies have a vested interest in hiring the most qualified candidate” (Hennessey, 2013, para. 3). This idea of hiring the most qualified candidate should also apply to law enforcement organizations.

Marijuana use is a controversial subject in law enforcement but the views of communities are what guides and directs law enforcement. More and more states are discussing some form of legalization, either for medical or recreational marijuana use. In 2016, Texas legalized, with tight restriction, a THC based oil for epileptic children. It is a rapidly changing area of the law, and police agencies must begin to evaluate their policies to reflect the community's values.

The disinterest in law enforcement began in the 1990s, and there has been no sign of reversing course. An estimated 80% of the country's 17,000 law enforcement agencies have police officer positions vacant. In Davis, California, 2,500 officers

graduated the police academy for 9,000 vacant positions (Woska, 2006). Police departments must begin now to examine new progressive ways to attract new applicants and retain the ones currently in the work force. Middle American law enforcement agencies have the advantage of reviewing police agency policies from the east and west coast and should take full advantage of those agencies' growing pains with these new issues and evaluate adjusting recruitment and retention practices along with departmental policies. Constantly taking the pulse of the community in which a police agency serves is important because good, qualified officers, both now and in the future, are vital to meeting the demands of public safety.

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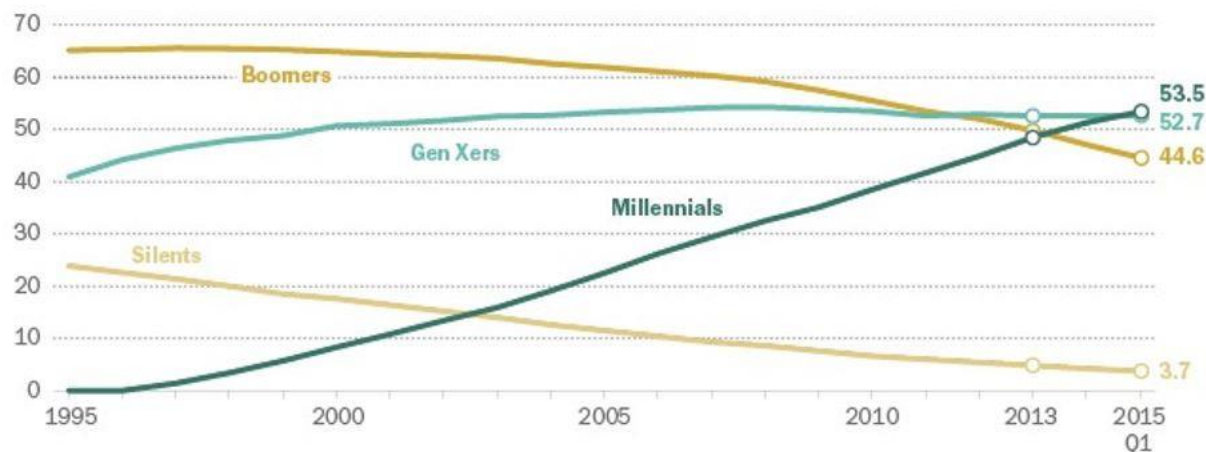
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APPENDIX A

U.S. Labor Force by Generation, 1995-2015

In millions



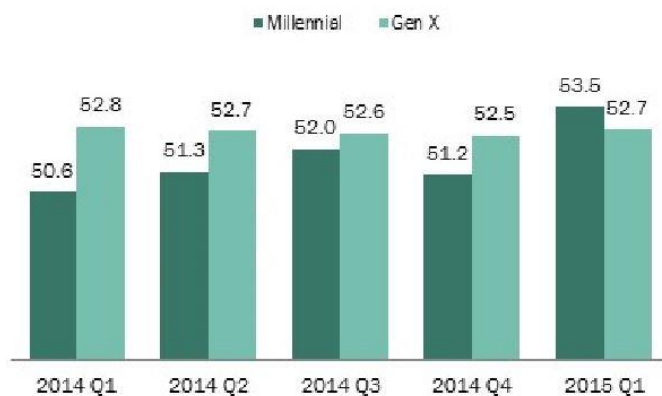
Note: Annual averages plotted 1995-2014. For 2015 the first quarter average of 2015 is shown. Due to data limitations, Silent generation is overestimated from 2008-2015.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of monthly 1995-2015 Current Population Surveys, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)

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Millennials Are Now the Largest Labor Force

In millions



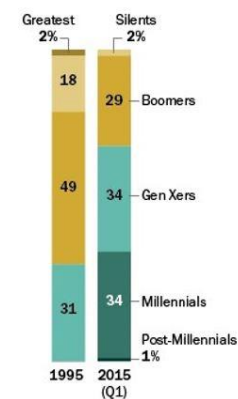
Note: Labor force refers to those working and looking for work. Millennials refers to labor force participants ages 18 to 34 in 2015. Gen X refers to the labor force participants ages 35 to 50 in 2015. Based on quarter averages.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of monthly 2014 and 2015 Current Population Surveys, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)

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Labor Force Composition by Generation

% of the labor force



Note: Shares are based on the annual average in 1995 and the first quarter average in 2015. Due to data limitations, Greatest generation not identified in 2015 and Silent generation is overestimated in 2015. Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of monthly 1995 and 2015 Current Population Surveys, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)

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