

With the increase in law enforcement responsibilities and decrease in monetary resources, plus the changing public perception of the police, the supply of qualified willing police officer candidates is at an all-time low. These factors have led to difficulties for many agencies in creating a workforce that represents their community demographics, providing their employees with the ability to have long-term law enforcement careers, and effectively executing the philosophy of community policing.

There are many reasons why recruitment is difficult, expensive and time consuming. Some believe the answer to this is lower the standards to becoming a law enforcement officer. There has been a slight adjustment to standards as now most agencies allow facial hair and visible tattoos. Given the changes in the American culture, this was a must as almost half of American adults have at least one tattoo or piercing.

The process of becoming a police officer can take from eighteen months up to two years from the time someone applies to the time they are able to work independently. This can cost upwards of \$100,000. An agency will need, on average, five years of service to get back the initial investment into a person they hire. This is why the retainment of officers is paramount to any law enforcement agency.

Nationally, police turnover is at 18%, with higher turnover in agencies that are smaller and located in the south, in rural areas, and in municipalities. It is estimated that the cost of losing a qualified candidate ranges from one to five times the salary of the

employee. These costs are higher for the police than for other organizations. In 2021, retirement rates rose to 45%.

There is numerous reason a police officer may choose to leave employment and the field of law enforcement. Some of these reasons are salary related but many are about job satisfaction. A study from 1990 of why officers voluntarily left municipal agencies in one state of Vermont, showed four reasons job (salary, benefits, and satisfaction); frustration with the department; frustration with the justice system; and job and family stress. These are in line with similar surveys from 2010. So why are officers leaving at record rates?

As side from salary and benefits, which is in the hands of the agency's governing municipality, satisfaction is the key to retainment. Leadership in organizations has almost complete control on employee satisfaction. A bad leader in the chain of command can have a catastrophe effect on office moral and retention.

Law enforcement is a career that includes a host of ambiguity. Every day, regardless of job position, is different. Changes in weather, road construction, events, critical mass incidents, protests, or even a Presidential visit can make any shift an uncertain time. This why an organization must have strong and capable leadership in place to help officers feel that there is a steady and solid administration to lean on if needed.

Studies have found that officers left the police service because they had issues with lack of enjoyment, nepotism, lack of opportunities after an injury, personal need for change and for practical considerations. Another study explored job satisfaction by connecting it to organizational justice. The fairness in which immediate and Command level supervisors treated their subordinates. According to other researchers, law enforcement officers likely have more psychological uncertainty about their job, therefore making the focus of fairness an important factor. Fairness in the organization helped showed a positive connection for those officers who were facing some type of uncertainty (negative publicity and general workplace uncertainty).

Job task characteristics (job variety, degree of variation in one's work, job autonomy, job stress, and role conflict) are also important factors related to satisfaction. When it comes to organizational commitment, supervisor support, group cohesiveness and promotional opportunities along with supervisor feedback and organizational support and strain are all associated variables.

All of the above studies, show practically the number one reason officers leave law enforcement is fairness. With the climate of their work environment out on the streets, officers need to feel that they will be treated the same as any other officer, good or bad.

The new generation of police officers also have different expectations than their predecessors for the job itself. No longer are people willing to trade their lives for a

career in law enforcement. Gone are the days, where officers had multiple failed marriages and drinking issues because the “JOB” always came first only to die, three to five years into their retirement, after serving thirty-plus years.

Today’s young officers expect and demand a work –life balance not enjoyed by their predecessors. And if an agency does not meet that expectation, they have no issue in leaving and finding another place to work in law enforcement. Because of this change in the employee dynamic, departments must get creative to entice people to get hired and stay.

Some departments are implementing more flexible schedules, daycare options and time on duty for officers to work out and keep a high level of fitness required for the job. Officers today are also in touch with their mental health in a way older officers are not and use their sick time benefits. It used to be seen as a sign of a good solid officer to never take a sick day, but we know now this is why officers die at a high rate after retirement.

The new generation of officers are keenly aware of public perception of law enforcement. Since the events in Ferguson, Missouri, surrounding the 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown, police, and the communities they serve have had a strained relationship. Younger officers are concerned about social justice and police reform since they grew up seeing this all played out in the media before becoming officers. Today’s

officers believe deeply in the culture and climate of where they choose to seek employment.

Retainment of officers is complicated but with more leadership training, clear and transparent promotional processes, discipline procedures, shift flexibility, more focus on personal wellness and stress management, there will be an up-swing in retention. If we can manage to gain the public trust and engage with the community this will help officer's feel safer in dealing with the public and not afraid of losing their jobs with every encounter. Happy employees are productive employees.

Recruitment is a long and expensive road, and retainment is a multi-faceted issue that departments need to understand better. Many officers serve for the sheer love of people and with a dream to make the world a safer place. Only with healthy budgets for recruiting and good, strong, and morale leadership for retainment, will the number of young people willing to sacrifice a lot, maybe even their lives increase.