



Recruiting the Next Generation of Cops

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Many seasoned law enforcement officers seem to increasingly see the next generation of applicants as a “new breed” compared to applicants of the past. Often times, these differences are inevitably described in a negative light. But if there *are* significant generational differences, the fact remains that young men and women in their 20s and 30s comprise the pool of candidates from which the future of law enforcement will be drawn. So these differences need to be understood and agencies must make reasonable adjustments.

But, before formulating approaches to attract the next generation of applicants to policing, we must answer a fundamental question: is there any hard evidence of generational differences? As many law enforcement agencies today are struggling to recruit enough quality applicants to fill law enforcement officer vacancies, the profession needs evidence-based information about the current generation that might be useful in recruiting efforts. This seems particularly true when considering changes that could be based solely on anecdotal evidence of “kids today”.

Dolan Consulting Group (DCG) recently conducted a large survey of existing law enforcement officers from across the nation in order to determine what factors influenced them to pursue a law enforcement career. **We surveyed existing law enforcement officers, knowing that all of these participants had already successfully become law enforcement officers, proving they had the necessary backgrounds and skills to successfully gain employment in the field.** We were interested in determining what factors influenced these officers to choose their current profession, and examine if any differences existed between those hired within the last five years and those hired more than five years ago.

The Sample

All sworn law enforcement officers who attended the various training courses offered by DCG **between August, 2018 and March 2019**, were given the opportunity to participate in our DCG Police Recruiting and Hiring Survey. A total of **1,673 sworn personnel** took the survey, of whom 286 (17.1%) were female and 1,387 (82.9%) were male. The racial composition of the respondents were 83.4% White (non-Hispanic), 6.8% African-American, 5.4% Hispanic, 1.4% Multiracial, 1.0% Native American, 0.4% Asian, and 1.6% all other groups. In terms of highest education level, 30.8% had less than an associate's degree, 18.2% had an associate's degree, and 51% had a bachelor's degree or higher. A total of 52.8% of the respondents held the rank of officer, deputy, or trooper, while another 10.0% held the rank of detective. About 23.0% held first-line supervisory ranks (corporal or sergeant), 4.5% held middle-management ranks (mostly lieutenants), and the remaining 9.7% held command staff ranks (captain or higher). Approximately 65% of the respondents were assigned to the patrol division of their agency, 14% to investigations, and 14% to command administration. The remaining 7% indicated other assignments such as training, community policing unit, or media relations. These respondents came from 49 different states and agencies ranging in size from less than a dozen officers to agencies with thousands of officers.

Reasons for Selecting the Career

The survey respondents were presented with a list of 17 factors that might have influenced them to pursue a career in law enforcement. The respondents were asked to reflect on their own lives and indicate if each of these factors played a role in shaping their decision to become a law enforcement officer. For each of these 17 factors, the respondents were to indicate their level of agreement (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) on the extent each factor influenced their career choice decision. As was revealed in our earlier article published on July 9, 2019, [Why do People Become Cops?](#), only seven of these factors played a notable role with 25% or more of the sample saying these factors were an influence. The remaining ten factors were each identified by less than a quarter of the respondents. The seven factors that mattered most are displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Reasons for Selecting a Law Enforcement Career (Entire Sample)

Reason	Percent Agreed or Strongly Agreed
Wanted a career with interesting or exciting work	77.9%
Wanted to help people or serve society	68.0%
Saw the police at work in my community and interacting with citizens	44.6%
Knowing an officer personally (family, friend, neighbor, etc.)	42.8%
Seeing injustice in the world and wanting to correct it	41.3%

Having a friend or family member recommend the career	35.0%
Seeing popular media portrayals of police work (TV, movies, etc.)	26.7%

Next we compared the responses to these seven reasons by the respondents' length of tenure. Because less than 1% of the respondents in our survey began their careers within the last year, we had to include the next tenure category (served between 1 and 5 years of service). This gave us a sample of 233 respondents who had five or fewer years of service, and a comparison group of 1,440 respondents who had more than five years of service. We compared the two groups by the percentage of respondents that said these top seven factors influenced their decision to pursue a law enforcement career. The results of this comparison are found below in Table 2.

As Table 2 reveals, **those hired within the last five years were more likely than officers hired longer ago to say that wanting a career with interesting/exciting work attracted them to the career.** To put this into perspective, about 90 out of every 100 officers hired within the last year, and 76 out of every 100 officers hired before that, said that this influenced their career decision. This result suggested that the desire for interesting and exciting work is of more importance to the current generation than for applicants of years past.

Table 2. Reasons for Selecting a Law Enforcement Career by Years of Service

Reason	Hired Within the Last 5 Years (233 respondents)	Hired More Than 5 Years Ago (1,440 respondents)
Wanted a career with interesting or exciting work	89.7%	75.9%
Wanted to help people or serve society	84.6%	65.2%
Saw the police at work in my community and interacting with citizens	47.6%	44.1%
Knowing an officer personally (family, friend, neighbor, etc.)	42.6%	42.8%
Seeing injustice in the world and wanting to correct it	56.8%	38.9%
Having a friend or family member recommend the career	32.6%	32.7%
Seeing popular media portrayals of police work (TV, movies, etc.)	31.2%	23.3%

An even greater margin of difference was revealed with regard to a desire to help people and serve society. Whereas roughly 85 out of every 100 officers with less than five years of service was attracted by this aspect of the job, only 65 out of every 100 officers from earlier generations felt this was a career influence.

A third important difference dealt with seeing injustice in the world and wanting to correct it. While 57% of officers with less than five years of experience agreed this attracted them to a

police career, only 39% of those hired longer ago agreed that this was an influence. To a lesser extent, those hired within the last five years were more likely to have been motivated to join the profession by popular media portrayals of the career.

The responses of the two groups of officers were generally similar with regard to the role seeing the police at work in their communities, knowing an officer personally, or having someone close to them recommend the career. These three factors seemed to influence the career choice decisions of both the current generation, and older generations, to similar extents.

Conclusion

It is obviously difficult to lump *all* people of a particular age group into a uniform group without recognizing that individual motivations vary for reasons that have nothing to do with generation or era of hiring. It is also possible that as individuals progress through a law enforcement career, they become more jaded and cynical about the altruistic reasons they once had for pursuing a law enforcement career. As a result, it may be that most of the respondents with more than five years of experience were just as attracted by altruistic aspects of the job when they began their career, but those recollections have dimmed with time. **Regardless of whether the new generation is truly different, or all generations are similar and law enforcement experience changes people's recollections, the actionable take-aways from these findings would be the same.**

The findings suggest that today's applicants were most influenced to pursue a law enforcement career out of a desire for interesting work, exciting work, a desire to help people, a desire to serve society, and a desire to correct societal injustices. **Recent recruits were not primarily driven to a career in law enforcement by an interest in steady work, financial opportunities or retirement plans. These practical concerns may well impact which agency they choose, but the findings indicate that the next generation is similar to the last in that they were not drawn to the profession for money or benefits—there are easier, less stressful and less dangerous career options. Rather, they were drawn to law enforcement for altruistic reasons**—exciting work where they have a chance to serve society and play a role in creating a more just society.

Agency recruiting efforts and individual officers' recruiting efforts, which are best carried out by individual officers encouraging those in their life to consider the career, should emphasize these aspects of the job when talking up the profession to young people. **What is probably toxic to recruiting the next generation is the public venting that often takes place in media interviews and kitchen table conversations—the job isn't what it used to be, society doesn't support us like they used to, policing is an impossible job under today's microscope. New officers are joining the ranks to help people and make a difference, so receiving the message that policing is now a futile enterprise is one of the most effective ways to convince young people *not* to apply.**

Agency advertising and one-on-one recruiting efforts should focus on the noble aspects of the profession that have been drawing recent recruits. And agencies should designate recruiters and

spokespeople who joined the profession for the same reasons and can communicate that message to potential applicants. Also, agency advertising should strike a balance between the adrenaline pumping aspects of the job that emphasize that policing is exciting and interesting work (SWAT operations, foot pursuits, vehicle pursuits) and the more community-oriented aspects of the job that emphasize that policing is about serving society and helping people (“out of car experiences” with members of the public and assisting victims).

Young officers indicate that they were drawn to law enforcement for the opportunity to take on exciting work in which they can serve society and make a difference. This is good news for the profession, because it indicates that the next generation of officers are joining the ranks for noble reasons. And it is good news for the recruits, because they will have a unique opportunity to make a difference as cops. **Agencies need to make certain that young people looking for a chance to make a difference consider a career in law enforcement as a way of helping people and serving society.**