



How Do Cops Choose Their Specific Departments?

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It is widely known that many law enforcement agencies today are struggling to recruit qualified applicants to fill their law enforcement officer vacancies. In previous articles, we have completed a detailed examination of the factors that led existing law enforcement officers to pursue their careers in law enforcement. In short, most officers were drawn to the career out of a desire for exciting and interesting work, as well as a desire to address injustice within society and help people. Besides having these internal desires, a majority of existing officers were also drawn to the career by already knowing police officers, seeing the police at work in their community, and by watching portrayals of the police in the popular media. It is important to note, however, that this does not indicate what attracted these officers to their particular police department. To date, we have only discussed what attracted people to the profession generally.

In this article, we begin to examine what factors specifically led officers to select the particular law enforcement agency where they are currently employed. Hopefully the answers our survey respondents gave can help law enforcement agencies in their recruiting efforts by illustrating what workplace characteristics are most important to those who have already been drawn to the law enforcement profession.

The Sample

Sworn law enforcement officers who attended the various training courses offered by the Dolan Consulting Group (DCG) from August 2018 through 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 was 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 achieved, 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% 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 their Law Enforcement Agency

The survey respondents were presented with a list of twenty-five potential factors that might have influenced their decision to apply and accept employment with their current employing law enforcement agency. For each of these 25 factors, the respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) regarding the extent to which each factor influenced their choice to join their specific agency over other possible agency opportunities. The results are displayed in Table 1 below, showing the percentage of respondents who answered *agree* or *strongly agree* with each statement.

As Table 1 reveals, **two-thirds of the respondents indicated that the department's or the community's size was an important factor**. Keep in mind that the officers surveyed came from a wide assortment of agencies, ranging in size from less than 10 officers to some of the largest city, county, and state agencies in the nation. Our survey suggested that **while the officers differed dramatically in the size of agency or community in which they wanted to work, individual size preference mattered more than any other factor**.

Next in importance came the pragmatic concerns regarding the department's benefits package, retirement plan, and starting salary. More than half of the respondents indicated that they considered these factors when weighing employment with one law enforcement agency over another. Ranked in fifth place was whether or not the agency or community was an exciting place to work, followed by the department's perceived level of prestige. The last factor that more than half of the respondents selected was the ability to remain local to where they were living at the time they applied.

Almost 45% indicated that the department’s promotional and career mobility opportunities mattered in their decision, and approximately 44% indicated they selected their agency because it was the first agency to hire them. This suggests that law enforcement agencies with excessively long selection processes are losing quality candidates to other agencies because these other agencies offer employment sooner. To a lesser extent, such factors as the community’s level of crime or call activity (i.e., excitement level), and quality of life issues (the safety and affordability of the community) mattered to more than a third of the survey respondents.

In our earlier articles we noted how important personal connections with existing law enforcement officers was to influencing people to pursue a law enforcement career. In terms of selecting a specific agency for employment, 35% indicated that they were influenced by a friend or family member recommending the department. Another 33% of the respondents indicated that they already had friends or family members serving on the department. Personal connections and invitations clearly continued to matter in the decision to select a law enforcement agency.

Table 1. Reasons for Joining your Specific Department

Reason	Percent Agreed or Strongly Agreed
1. The department or community’s size	65.8%
2. The department’s benefits package	60.8%
3. The department’s pension plan	58.5%
4. The department’s starting salary	57.2%
5. This is an exciting place to work	53.5%
6. The department’s professional reputation or prestige	53.1%
7. This is the community near where I lived at the time	50.5%
8. The department’s promotional or career mobility opportunities	44.5%
9. This was the first agency to offer me a job	43.9%
10. The community’s level of crime or call activity	40.8%
11. This is a safe place to live	40.7%
12. This is an affordable place to live	37.5%

13. A friend or family member recommended this department	35.0%
14. This is the community where I grew up	34.7%
15. I had friends or family already on the department	32.6%
16. This is the community near where my spouse / partner lived at the time	28.5%
17. This is an exciting place to live	26.7%
18. This is the community where my spouse / partner grew up	19.1%
19. This is an area of the state / nation to which I had always wanted to move	17.4%
20. Lacked other job offers or opportunities at the time	13.8%
21. The color, style, or design of the department's uniforms or cars	10.4%
22. Had been a part of a police-sponsored youth program (PAL, explorers, etc.) hosted by this agency	8.0%
23. A police recruiter recommended this agency	5.4%
24. Saw a television or internet advertisement about this agency	5.2%
25. Saw an advertising brochure, poster, or billboard sign about this agency	3.8%

In summary, beyond financial considerations, the most important factors that influenced the respondents' choices to join their current agency reflected an interest in seeking an agency that was a good cultural fit for them (size, prestige, and activity level), provided well for them, and offered them employment in a reasonable amount of time. We were interested in examining, however, if differences existed in the responses of officers hired during different eras.

Examining Era Differences

We examined the top ten responses of the 233 respondents who had become law enforcement officers within the last five years, and compared these to the top ten responses of the respondents who joined law enforcement more than five years ago. The results of this comparison are displayed in Table 2 below. While both groups rated highly both exciting / interesting work and practical financial issues, the results did reveal a few notable differences.

Table 2. Reasons for Joining your Specific Department by Hiring Era

Hired within the last 5 years (233 respondents)	Hired more than 5 years ago (1,440 respondents)
1. This is an exciting place to work (69%)	1. The department or community's size (62%)
2. The department or community's size (68%)	2. The department's benefits package (61%)
3. The department's pension plan (60%)	3. This is the community near where I lived at the time (60%)
4. The community's level of crime or call activity (58%)	4. The department's starting salary (59%)
5. The department's promotional or career mobility opportunities (55%)	5. This is a safe place to live (59%)
6. The department's benefits package (53%)	6. The department's pension plan (58%)
7. This is the community near where I lived at the time (52%)	7. This was the first agency to offer me a job (54%)
8. This was the first agency to offer me a job (50%)	8. The department's professional reputation or prestige (53%)
9. The department's professional reputation or prestige (49%)	9. This is an exciting place to work (51%)
10. The department's starting salary (45%)	10. This is an affordable place to live (45%)

The responses of those hired within the last five years placed slightly greater emphasis on the work environment and slightly less emphasis on the financial or pragmatic aspects of employment. The responses of those hired within the last five years ranked work excitement, the community's size, the agency's activity level, and a diversity of career mobility opportunities among the top five factors that attracted them to the department. The pension plan was the only financial or pragmatic aspect that made it to the top five spots. In comparison, among those hired more than five years ago, the practical concerns of starting

salary, benefits package, not having to move, and the area being a safe place to live all made the top five spots for things that drew them to their particular department.

Approximately 58% of those hired within the last five years considered the community's activity level, compared to only 37 of those hired more than five years ago. Similarly, 55% of those hired within the last five years considered the department's career mobility options, while only 37% of those hired longer ago did so. While 59% of those hired more than five years ago considered the safety level of living in the community, and 45% considered its affordability, neither of these concerns made the top ten spots for the more recent hires.

Recommendations

Our research has revealed that the things that attract people to the law enforcement profession are a desire for interesting work, a desire to help people, a personal connection to or interactions with existing law enforcement officers, and exposure to popular media portrayals of police work. Once the individual has made the decision to pursue a law enforcement career, other factors come into play when deciding to which law enforcement agencies the individual should apply, and which job offer the individual should accept.

What is clear in the study's findings is that pay and benefits and pension *do* matter. But, assuming that every recruiter and agency leader wishes they could improve these financial realities and that any shortcomings in these areas are not due to lack of trying, we have focused on recommending strategies focused on *what you can do* in light of these realities. To capitalize on the factors that influence agency choice, we recommend the following:

“Truth in Advertising”—Clearly and Positively Communicate the Day-to-Day Realities of Your Agency and its Operations. The agency size, call activity level, and career mobility opportunities were all extremely important to the respondents in this survey. Some applicants are interested in fast-paced work with a large agency that offers a higher degree of action and the ability to move around to different units within the department. Large agencies—which often cannot match the pay and benefits of wealthy suburban departments—should emphasize these aspects of their department.

If you can't compete with the pay and benefits of other agencies, can you promote the high call volume and specialized units that are a substantial part of your agency operations? *This is an exciting place to work* was the fifth most common factor cited by officers in choosing a particular agency. There are many large departments where burnout and fatigue are substantial problems due to the call-to-call nature of the job—but one thing this work *cannot* be reasonably called is boring. ***“Are you ready to work? Are you up to the challenge of combating violent crime? Are you interested in working on specialized units? If so—this is the place for you.”***

If your agency is small, serves a low-crime community, and has few opportunities for specialization or promotion, it might be beneficial to emphasize these characteristics to potential applicants—with an emphasis on the opportunities to engage in community policing strategies

that are generally abundant in these departments. Such smaller agencies should look for candidates who are most interested in “jack of all trades” patrol work and the community service aspects of the job.

Many applicants, including experienced officers who have worked in larger agencies and are looking for a change, might find it appealing to work for a department in which the emphasis is on the “talking profession” and “helping profession” aspects of law enforcement. On the other hand, if conducting business checks, having non-enforcement action conversations with residents, and dealing with quality-of-life issues related to loitering and noise complaints is not appealing to an applicant, isn’t it best that they save everyone some time and trouble and apply to another agency?

What smaller agencies typically lack are the things that have tended to fill up police recruiting materials for years—K-9 units, SWAT teams, gang task forces, helicopters and frequent Priority 1 calls for service. What they generally *do* offer are opportunities for officers to know their community, feel that they make an impact on the lives of the residents and operate in an agency in which they are known personally by supervisors and even the Chief or Sheriff. ***“Are you interested in coming to an agency where your work is noticed and you’re not just a number? Do you want to make an impact every day, not just run from call to call to call? Do you want to know the people who live in this community and make an impact in their lives? If so—this is the place for you.”***

Regardless of your agency’s particular size, call activity, and mobility opportunities, consider focusing your recruiting efforts on finding men and women who are a good fit. Those who are a good fit are more likely to be drawn to your agency in the first place and stay longer once they are hired. The cliché “the grass is always greener on the other side” has some significance for law enforcement. **There are clear pros and cons to the daily realities of policing in a large agency, a small agency, a high call volume agency, a low call volume agency. Consider focusing on the benefits of the work realities in your agency. And consider making certain that your advertising—in person, online and in the media—fairly reflect those realities to those most likely to gravitate to them.**

Streamline Your Hiring Process. Law enforcement agencies must dedicate the appropriate time and personnel to ensure that all of their new hires meet standards. Hiring even one candidate who has demonstrated “red flags” of misconduct in their past, for instance, could endanger the reputation of the agency and the safety of the community they are sworn to protect and serve. However, the necessity of thorough vetting should not necessitate hiring processes that take six months, a year, or even longer.

Is your agency prioritizing a streamlined hiring process in the form of a user-friendly application process, cutting unnecessary bureaucratic “red tape”, assigning dedicated background investigators, scheduling multiple opportunities to take written and physical agility testing, and setting clear goals for processing applicants? If not, as the study indicates, you are falling behind. *This was the first agency to offer me a job* was cited as an

important factor by 43% of officers in our study and by 50% of officers hired in the last 5 years.

In today's environment, in which qualified law enforcement applicants will eventually have multiple options in choosing an agency, doing everything within reason to become the first agency to make an offer of employment is vitally important. For many officers, based on the study, an offer today from an agency that may have been their second or third choice is better than waiting around for an indeterminate amount of time for their first choice. And the opposite also appears to be true—you may be their first choice, but if you are months behind the competition there is no reason to rest assured that they will be waiting for you once you reach out with a job offer.

Remember that “Word of Mouth” and Personal Connections Still Matter. Online and traditional advertising as a part of your agency recruiting is *not* something that we would suggest abandoning. However, the study indicates that agencies should be careful not to *over-emphasize* the role of these more formal recruiting efforts, particularly at the cost of focusing attention on other facets of your long-term recruiting efforts. **Less than 6% of the officers we surveyed selected their employing department because they saw an advertisement about the department.**

Meanwhile, **35% had someone in their life personally recommend the agency to them and another 33% already knew someone on the department they decided to join.** This indicates that agencies should continually ask: *Do our officers act as recruiters for our agency on and off the clock? Are they “talking up” our department or are they actively discouraging friends and family from applying?* The answers to these questions are critical, as the study indicates that personal connections are a more frequently cited factor in choosing a particular agency than any formal recruiting material that you could distribute.

Whether accomplished through a formal retention and recruiting study or by simply talking to your officers as frequently and frankly as possible, it is vital to gage the level of job satisfaction in your department. **Job satisfaction among your officers is vital to countless facets of agency operations—and recruiting seems to be no different.**

About the Authors

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