



Considering the Military Model for Recruiting and Retention in Law Enforcement

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For the last several years, law enforcement agencies have struggled with the challenge of recruiting and, just as importantly, retaining qualified officers. This problem was exacerbated for years by a healthy economy in which higher paying jobs were seen as a threat to recruiting and retention efforts. In recent months, the greater threat to recruiting and retention appears to be driven by the toxic national narrative surrounding the profession—including a barrage of negative public commentaries from the media, community activists and elected officials.

Who would want to do this job for 20 or 30 years? That seems to be the question. But we may be asking the wrong question. Instead, **why should we assume that the vast majority of our new recruits will stay beyond 5 or 10 years? And if we grapple with *this* question, we can look at a more sustainable model for recruiting qualified applicants, knowing that many—or even most—of those officers will not remain in the profession for 20 years or more.**

But how would this possibly work? How can we afford to function with this kind of built-in turnover? What would this look like? **Fortunately, we have an existing model to which we can look for guidance: the United States Military.**

What is the Military Model?

Joining the military means sacrificing personal freedom for a regimented and often dangerous job offering modest financial compensation. It is a career choice that many parents would not encourage their children to pursue. And one that, depending on the political climate, may even

result in disdain from those civilians whom you serve. Does that sound familiar to anyone in law enforcement?

A recent survey revealed that only 25% of mothers and 33% of fathers would want their children to join the military.ⁱ Military service entails a difficult lifestyle, with strict discipline, a loss of many personal freedoms and the constant risk of engaging in combat. Many military service members spend a great deal of time away from their families, creating additional personal hardships. In other words, military service members face many career hardships that are similar to those faced by law enforcement officers.

On average, the Department of Defense budgets approximately \$15,000 on recruiting costs for each soldier, sailor, airman or marine it plans to hire each year.ⁱⁱ After recruiting the individual, the military branches generally spend a few months and between \$18,000 and \$20,000 on the basic training of the individual—not counting the individual’s salary and roughly \$4,000 on equipment. After basic training, the new recruit completes his or her job specialty training course, which could range in costs from another \$18,000 for cooks and supply clerks, to more than a million dollars for enlisted aircrew members.ⁱⁱⁱ

After all that effort and expense, most military recruits will leave at the end of their first enlistment. According to official Department of Defense studies, the majority of both officers and enlisted members of the military will leave the service when their first contract is over. First-time re-enlistment rates vary from year to year and from one service branch to another, but **for several decades now only about 22% to 40% of first-enlistment service members re-enlist for a second term of service (22% Marines, 25% Navy, 26% Army, and 40% Air Force).**^{iv} The Department of Defense spends millions of dollars in retention efforts, with most of this money spent on re-enlistment bonus incentives.^v Nevertheless, military leaders also accept the fact that military service takes great personal sacrifice—a sacrifice most are not willing to make for their entire adulthood.

The available research reveals that the primary reason that service members do not re-enlist is that they have grown tired of the personal sacrifices and rigors of military life. They were willing to make that sacrifice for their nation for a time, but not for their whole adult life. They want to regain their personal freedoms and be home more often with their families. It is not fear of danger that drives their decisions, as retention tends to be higher during periods of war. And it is also not a financial decision, as most first-enlistment service members enter lower-paying jobs or become college students upon first leaving the military. They are simply burnt out with respect to the stresses that military service entails.^{vi} While military leaders undoubtedly wish things were different, they also understand that this is the nature of military service. It plans and operates under this reality.

The military has adapted to the idea that many who enlist will find the stressful, regimented work of being a service member to be a career choice that does not suit them as a decades-long calling. And the military presumably understands that it is in the best interest of the organization and the individual in question that those who do not want to be here leave in light of the stakes.

When Officer Retention IS THE PROBLEM

Officer retention is typically described as a good thing, and understandably so. Replacing a trained and certified officer with a new recruit is expensive and time-consuming. But, in looking to your experience in law enforcement, **how many officers who are ultimately branded as “bad apples” inside the agency or in the public eye actually began their career as serviceable officers? How often have you seen high-level performers become toxic as they hit the point of mid-career? Would those men and women better serve their agencies and their families, in the long run, by finding another line of work?**

According to the available research on police suicide, the general demographic profile of officers who commit suicide are male (91%), single or divorced (63%), between the ages of 40 and 44, and with 15 to 20 years of service. This profile describes officers who are likely experiencing mid-career burnout, but who feel that they have too many years invested in the job to change careers.^{vii}

Interestingly, one study of officers who were terminated from employment for having been convicted of a criminal offense found that the vast majority of these fired officers eventually found other professional or semi-professional employment outside of law enforcement. Despite having a criminal or drunk driving conviction on their records, most were working as accountants, real estate agents, small business owners, pilots, teachers, social workers, paramedics, nurses, college professors and even lawyers.^{viii} **The point here is that individuals who have the intelligence, courage and skills necessary to work in law enforcement can generally succeed in any profession they pursue. It is possible that if law enforcement agencies embraced the view that there is no shame in leaving the job, then more people would leave when they realize continued employment in policing is harming themselves or others.**

Embracing the Permanent Recruiting Initiative

The military does not stop recruiting and neither should law enforcement. The history of modern American policing is filled with cautionary tales of hiring frenzies and their unintended consequences. Rather than engaging in a cycle of revving up and cutting back down, agencies should look to creating continuous pipelines of qualified talent.

This requires a change in mindset—from seeing recruiting efforts as an annoyance that we undertake when numbers are low to seeing it as a permanent part of essential agency functions. The military model may well be worth considering in working towards a sustainable model for police recruiting and retention in the 2020s.

About the Author

Matt Dolan is a licensed attorney who specializes in training and advising public safety agencies in matters of legal liability. His training focuses on helping agency leaders create sound policies and procedures as a proactive means of minimizing their exposure to costly liability. A member of a law enforcement family dating back three generations, he serves as both Director and Public Safety Instructor with Dolan Consulting Group.

His training courses include [Recruiting and Hiring for Law Enforcement](#), [Confronting the Toxic Officer](#), [Performance Evaluations for Public Safety](#), [Making Discipline Stick®](#), and [Supervisor Liability for Public Safety](#).

ⁱ Burgess, Lisa. “Army reaches recruiting goals at increasing costs to taxpayers.” *Stars and Stripes*, September 6, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Buddin, Richard J. *Success of First-Term Soldiers: The Effects of Recruiting Practices and Recruit Characteristics*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005; Burgess, “Army recruiting goals.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Military Leadership Diversity Commission. *Retention Report*. U.S. Department of Defense, 2011.

^v Buddin, *Success of First-Term Soldiers*.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Nanavaty, Brian. “Addressing officer crisis and Suicide: improving officer wellness.” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, September 2015, pp. 3-8.

^{viii} Solomon, Starr & Johnson, Richard. “Subsequent arrests of previously arrested police officers: the influence of continued employment in policing.” *Law Enforcement Executive Forum*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2013), pp. 24-34.