Current Hiring Challenges in Law Enforcement Organizations

LeQawn McDowell, DBA

Center for Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Research

University of Phoenix

Abstract

Law enforcement organizations face challenges finding high-quality candidates due to strict qualifications, low salaries, and negative perceptions of police. The strict qualifications result in potentially excellent candidates being overlooked due to their past drug use. Low salaries, while not the primary deterrent, play a role in candidates' decision-making. Negative media portrayals of the police also significantly impact individuals considering a career in law enforcement. To address these issues, law enforcement organizations need to review their internal qualifications, especially in light of the decriminalization of marijuana in many states. Additionally, increasing starting salaries could help attract a larger and more qualified pool of applicants. Building positive partnerships and interactions between the police and diverse community members is crucial, as it could lead to better-quality candidates seeking careers in law enforcement.

Table of Contents

Introduction

There is a need to further the conversation about why hiring challenges exist among law enforcement organizations seeking to find suitable candidates for employment. This discussion is crucial as it helps to understand the complex factors contributing to the recruitment crisis and deteriorating public-police relationships in the 21st century (Semukhina et al., 2024). Many factors may contribute to disqualifying applicants for employment. These include fatal shootings of African Americans (Copeland et al., 2022), qualifications that vary from agency to agency, starting salaries, and negative perception of law enforcement. A comprehensive understanding of these issues is essential for addressing the recruitment crisis organizations are currently experiencing.

Qualifications

The public's attitudes towards the police have been scrutinized in various cities within the United State (Vitro et al., 2022). Efforts to reform police agencies have gained prominence following controversial shootings of unarmed African Americans (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown), leading to civil unrest and what is known as the *Ferguson Effect* (Rhodes & Tyler, 2020). This resulted in stricter recruiting guidelines and new hires' need for more advanced skills. While hiring standards across law enforcement organizations differ, the most commonly required qualifications include a clean credit history, physical fitness, a drug-free record, and no felony or domestic violence convictions (Williams & Sondhi, 2022). Bottema and Telep (2020) explored the impact of pre-employment drug use on potential new hires. They found that strict hiring standards regarding past drug use, particularly marijuana, may lead agencies to overlook suitable applicants with the necessary skills.

Evaluating drug use is crucial to ensure the suitability of candidates and is one of the factors considered during the rigorous hiring process. Scholars also found that law enforcement executives (67.3%; n=66) and students (78.9%; n=900) have the proper perspective on the current standards of drug and narcotics use during the hiring process (Bottema & Telep, 2020). Investigating past drug use is vital to prevent the hiring of problematic officers (Linos & Riesch, 2020)—as police enforce the same laws regarding illegal drug use that applicants may have previously violated. Despite ongoing debates, marijuana remains illegal at the federal level. For aspiring police officers, a history of drug use is one of the many factors that are explored prior to securing employment. Financial history also significantly affects the disqualification of African American applicants (McDowell, 2023), resulting in fewer hires and creating challenges for law enforcement organizations during the hiring process.
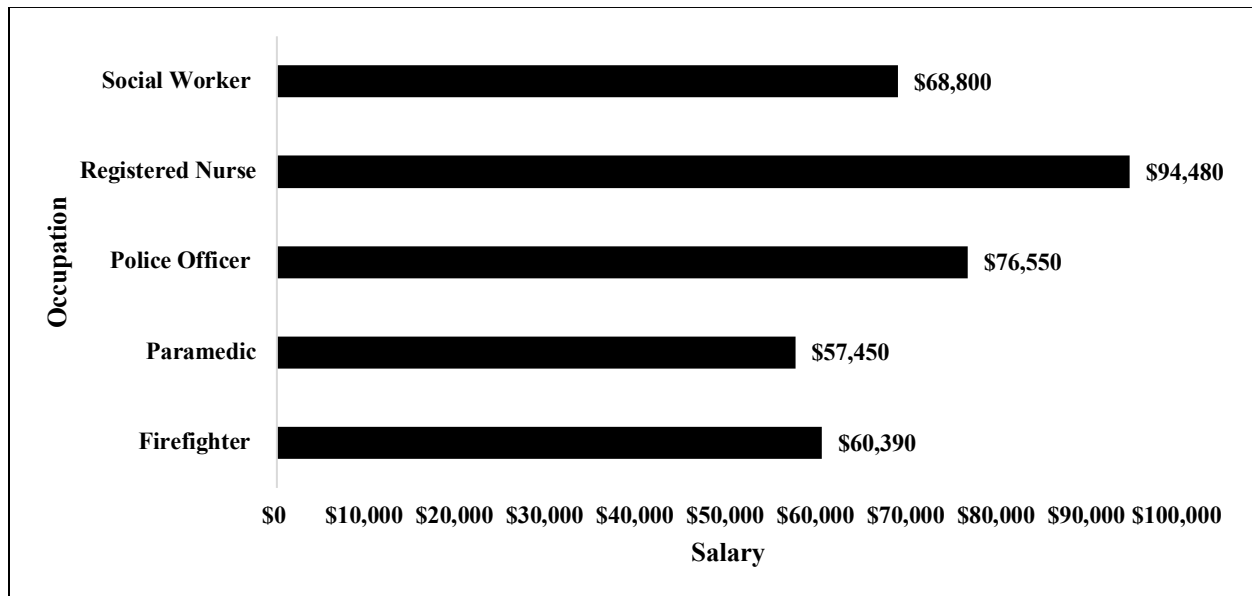
Police Salaries and Negative Perception

The job of a police officer is a dangerous profession (Elntib & Milincic, 2020); there is much risk involved with being a police officer that may sway or deter many from seeking law enforcement as a profession. With the dangers facing the police—one of the concerns that applicants consider when entering and remaining in law enforcement is pay alignment with voluntary police turnover (Skaggs et al., 2022). Gibbs (2019) found that salaries and benefits were the least cited reasons among those sampled as a motivating factor when applying for police positions. The conflicting research on the impact of salaries and benefits on motivation to join law enforcement, as presented by Gibbs (2019) and Skaggs et al. (2022), is of particular interest. These factors provide a nuanced understanding that influences the decision to pursue a career in law enforcement. Although conflicting research exists (Gibbs, 2019; Skaggs et al., 2022), police salaries are steady compared to other public service occupations (i.e., Social

Worker, Registered Nurse, Paramedic, Firefighter). In May 2023, the annual starting salary for Police officers nationally was $76,550, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Public Service Occupations and National Salaries

Note. Figure 1 depicts the national wage estimates of public service occupations' average salaries in 2023.

The portrayal of the police in the media and their interactions with the public have led to a negative societal perception (Campbell & Valera, 2020; Nix et al., 2019; Radburn et al., 2020). Researchers in 2020 posited that social media has significantly shaped the public's view of increased police brutality (Campbell & Valera, 2020). Scholars agree that these perceptions influence public opinion about the police, contributing to the defund the police movement (Campbell & Valera, 2020; Radburn et al., 2020). During this challenging time, negative media coverage has increased, impacting attitudes toward law enforcement, which has spread to other organizations (Nix et al., 2019). On the other hand, police attitudes toward citizens can vary and are visible during interactions with the public (Nix et al., 2019). These interactions have a lasting

impact due to the negativity displayed during the encounter, leading bystanders to record and share these encounters using social media (Stringer & Murphy, 2020). Such negative depiction of the police, by way of social media and other platforms, influences the decisions of those wishing to join the police force.

Despite the prevailing belief in low salaries and the negative portrayal of police, a few applicants continue to apply for positions as police officers. Understanding the motivating factors behind this decision (Diaz & Nuño, 2021; Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; Stringer & Murphy, 2020) cannot be overstated. Research has shown that the media's negative portrayal of the police can motivate individuals to join the force (Diaz & Nuño, 2021). Another significant motivator is the altruistic desire to protect and serve in one's community (Clinkinbeard et al., 2021). Although media negativity exists (Campbell & Valera, 2020; Nix et al., 2019; Radburn et al., 2020), the presence of gender and ethnic-diverse role models and positive media influence play a crucial role in inspiring individuals to pursue careers in law enforcement (Stringer & Murphy, 2020).

Recommendations

Law enforcement organizations should internally review the qualifications for potential recruits. While minimum standards (i.e., high school diploma, no felony or domestic violence convictions, being at least twenty-one years of age, and completing an extensive background check) are required, they increase as applicants move through each phase of the hiring process. It is essential to consider marijuana use in light of its decriminalization (Stanton et al., 2021)—organizations should consider historical use prior to disqualifying candidates, which may alleviate one hiring challenge when examining factors such as the extent of drug use and the most recent usage. Increasing the salary to attract applicants can motivate and lead to higher-

quality applicants. Conversely, research has shown that low wages discourage individuals (Skaggs et al., 2022) from pursuing careers in law enforcement. However, it is essential to note that raising the starting salary does not guarantee that candidates will be motivated to apply (Elntib & Milincic, 2020). Establishing a strong partnership between the police and members of all ethnic backgrounds within the community can create a clear and positive perception of the police. Moreover, people of color have less favorable views of the police than Whites (Boehme et al., 2020), and this perception may vary based on ethnic and geographical differences. Encouraging positive interactions between law enforcement and communities with less favorable views can help address the trauma inflicted by those who protect and serve.

Conclusion

Law enforcement organizations grapple with ongoing challenges in hiring recruits. The strict qualifications related to prior drug use often lead to the oversight of suitable candidates, posing a persistent challenge. Despite conflicting research on pay, potential candidates make compelling decisions to consider their safety regarding the salaries offered for employment, even though some argue that it is not the main deciding factor. The criticism and negative attention directed at the police force impede law enforcement organizations from recruiting high-quality candidates. The negative perception held by potential candidates discourages them from pursuing careers as police officers, highlighting the urgency of addressing these issues. Organizations must strive to overcome these challenges. By modifying their qualifications, increasing starting salaries, and establishing and reinforcing solid partnerships to combat the negative perceptions in the community, they may experience a rise in the quality of applicants seeking a career in law enforcement.

References

Boehme, H. M., Cann, D., & Isom, D. A. (2020). Citizens' perceptions of over- and under-policing: A look at race, ethnicity, and community characteristics. *Crime & Delinquency*, *68*(1), 123–154. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128720974309

Bottema, A., & Telep, C. W. (2020). Examining views of police chiefs and college students regarding drug disqualifiers for the hiring of police officers in arizona. *Journal of Drug Issues*, *51*(1), 109–127. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022042620959331

Campbell, F., & Valera, P. (2020). "the only thing new is the cameras": A study of u.s. college students' perceptions of police violence on social media. *Journal of Black Studies*, *51*(7), 654–670. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934720935600

Clinkinbeard, S. S., Solomon, S. J., & Rief, R. M. (2021). Why did you become a police officer? entry-related motives and concerns of women and men in policing. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *48*(6), 715–733. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854821993508

Copeland, C., del Carmen, A., & Semukhina, O. B. (2022). Revisiting the ferguson effect: Law enforcement perception of recruitment in the post george floyd era. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 146135572210749. https://doi.org/10.1177/14613557221074988

Diaz, V. M., & Nuño, L. E. (2021). Women and policing: An assessment of factors related to the likelihood of pursuing a career as a police officer. *Police Quarterly*, *24*(4), 465–485. https://doi.org/10.1177/10986111211009048

Elntib, S., & Milincic, D. (2020). Motivations for becoming a police officer: A global snapshot. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, *36*(2), 211–219. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-020-09396-w

Gibbs, J. C. (2019). Diversifying the police applicant pool: Motivations of women and minority candidates seeking police employment. *Criminal Justice Studies*, *32*(3), 207–221. https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601x.2019.1579717

McDowell, L. J. (2023). *The Underrepresentation of African Americans in Law Enforcement Organizations: An Explanatory Case*. Available from Dissertations & Theses @ University of Phoenix; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Nix, J., Pickett, J. T., & Wolfe, S. E. (2019). Testing a theoretical model of perceived audience legitimacy: The neglected linkage in the dialogic model of police–community relations. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *57*(2), 217–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427819873957

Radburn, M., Savigar-Shaw, L., Stott, C., Tallent, D., & Kyprianides, A. (2020). How do police officers talk about their encounters with 'the public'? group interaction, procedural justice and officer constructions of policing identities. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, *22*(1), 59–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895820933912

Rhodes, T. N., & Tyler, D. H. (2020). Is it cool to be a cop? exploring the differential impact of ferguson on police applicants. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, *15*(1), 492–507. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paz013

Semukhina, O. B., Alexander Bowers, D., & Michael Reynolds, K. (2024). Challenges and opportunities for minority students at police academies: A national sample. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/14613557231218927

Skaggs, S., Harris, C., & Montgomery, L. (2022). The impact of police–community relations: Recruitment and retention concerns of local police agencies. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, *16*(3), 462–475. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paac029

Stanton, D. L., Makin, D., Stohr, M., Lovrich, N. P., Willits, D., Hemmens, C., Meize, M., Bowers, O., & Snyder, J. (2021). Law enforcement perceptions of cannabis legalization effects on policing: Challenges of major policy change implementation at the street level. *Contemporary Drug Problems*, *49*(1), 20–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/00914509211053660

Stringer, E., & Murphy, J. (2020). Major decisions and career attractiveness among criminal justice students. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, *31*(4), 523–541. https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2020.1814829

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024, April 3). *Occupational employment and wage statistics*. https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes333051.htm

Vitro, C., Clark, D., Sherman, C., Heitzeg, M. M., & Hicks, B. M. (2022). Attitudes about police and race in the united states 2020–2021: Mean-level trends and associations with political attitudes, psychiatric problems, and covid-19 outcomes. *PLOS ONE*, *17*(7), e0271954. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0271954

Williams, E., & Sondhi, A. (2022). A narrative review of the literature on the recruitment of younger police officers in age and in service: What are the implications for the police in england and wales? *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, *16*(4), 648–662. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paac001