

Recruitment, Diversity, and Retention

POLICY ASSESSMENT MAY 2021

The skills required to serve capably as a police officer are wide-ranging. In addition to handling traditional patrol and investigative responsibilities, officers need to address social problems such as domestic altercations, substance use overdoses, mental health issues, and homelessness in a compassionate manner that defuses potentially volatile situations. As such, a crucial element of effective police reform is that departments employ and promote high-quality officers with diverse skillsets. Agencies that improve their recruitment, diversification, and retention practices aim to attract and retain officers who comply with department policies, engage respectfully with community members, prevent the escalation of adverse events, and promote more equitable public safety.

SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

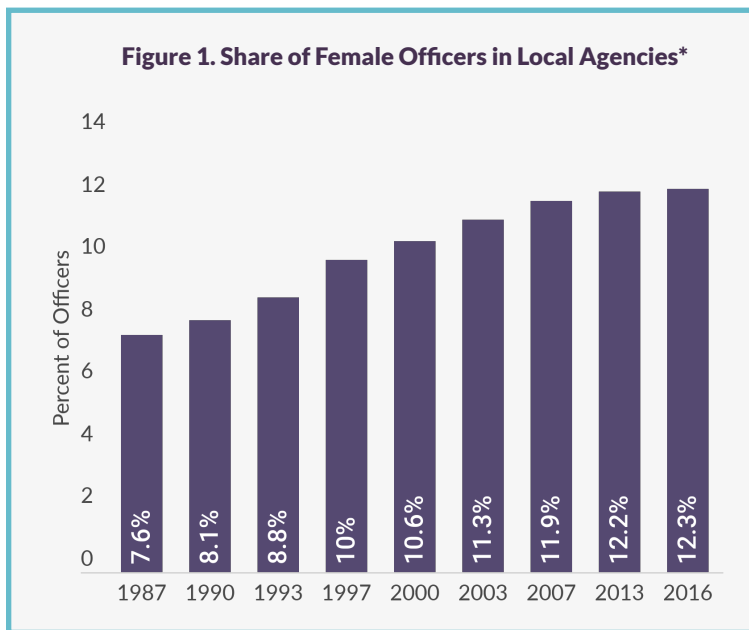
- + The composition of most municipal police departments in the United States does not reflect the population in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity. While greater shares of female, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx officers are serving now than they were 30 years ago, diversification has come slowly, and the share of both female and Black officers has been stagnant in recent years.
- + Female officers are more likely to rely on communication skills in their encounters with community members. Compared to male officers, they may be less likely to discharge their firearms and they receive fewer public complaints, both of which can reduce adverse outcomes and promote trust.
- + Research has yielded mixed findings on the impact of increasing the share of officers of color in police departments with regard to various performance outcomes. However, two recent studies suggest that officers of color are less likely to use force, particularly when they represent a meaningful share of the police workforce.
- + Entry-level physical fitness requirements that applicants cannot complete satisfactorily, schedules requiring 24/7 coverage, policies that are not family friendly, lack of childcare resources, hostile work environments, and sexual harassment are all key barriers to increased recruitment and retention of female and police officers of color. These challenges are exacerbated by increasing distrust of police by people of color.
- + The departmental culture and climate plays a role in officer stress levels and may be associated with an agency's ability to retain officers. However, more research is needed on this relationship.
- + Tailoring communication messages can expand applicant pools, but additional empirical research on effective recruitment and retention strategies is needed.



Current Practice and Research

Many in policing leadership recognize that it is desirable for law enforcement personnel to more closely reflect the demographic composition of the communities they serve, and a growing number of departments are adopting strategies to increase the share of women and officers of color in their ranks (PERF, 2019).

Representation of women in policing has improved since the 1970s, when they accounted for just 2% of sworn personnel (Price, 1996), but the share of female officers has remained notably stagnant since the early 2000s, hovering around 12% (see Figure 1). Such underrepresentation is even greater in higher ranks, as approximately 8% of mid-level supervisors and 3% of chiefs or executives were female in 2016 (Hyland and Davis, 2019). Unnecessary fitness requirements, police department policies that are not family friendly, hostile work environments, and sexual harassment all contribute to the underrepresentation of women in the profession, and create retention problems (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019; U.S. Department of Justice, 2021; Corder and Corder, 2011).



Source: Law Enforcement Management and Statistics Series, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
* Excludes state agencies and sheriffs' departments.

Lesbian and gay officers face the additional structural barriers of homophobia and sexism within the workplace (Colvin, 2008; Colvin, 2012).

In terms of the racial and ethnic diversity of police departments, the share of Black officers has increased by 2 percentage points from 1987 to 2016, at which time Black people made up 11.4% of police personnel and 13% of the U.S. population. By contrast, the share of Hispanic and Latinx officers has quadrupled during the same period, rising from 4.5% to 12.5% of officers by 2016, but remains lower than the share of Hispanics/Latinos in the general population (18%) (see Figure 2).

However, racial and ethnic representation of officers as compared to

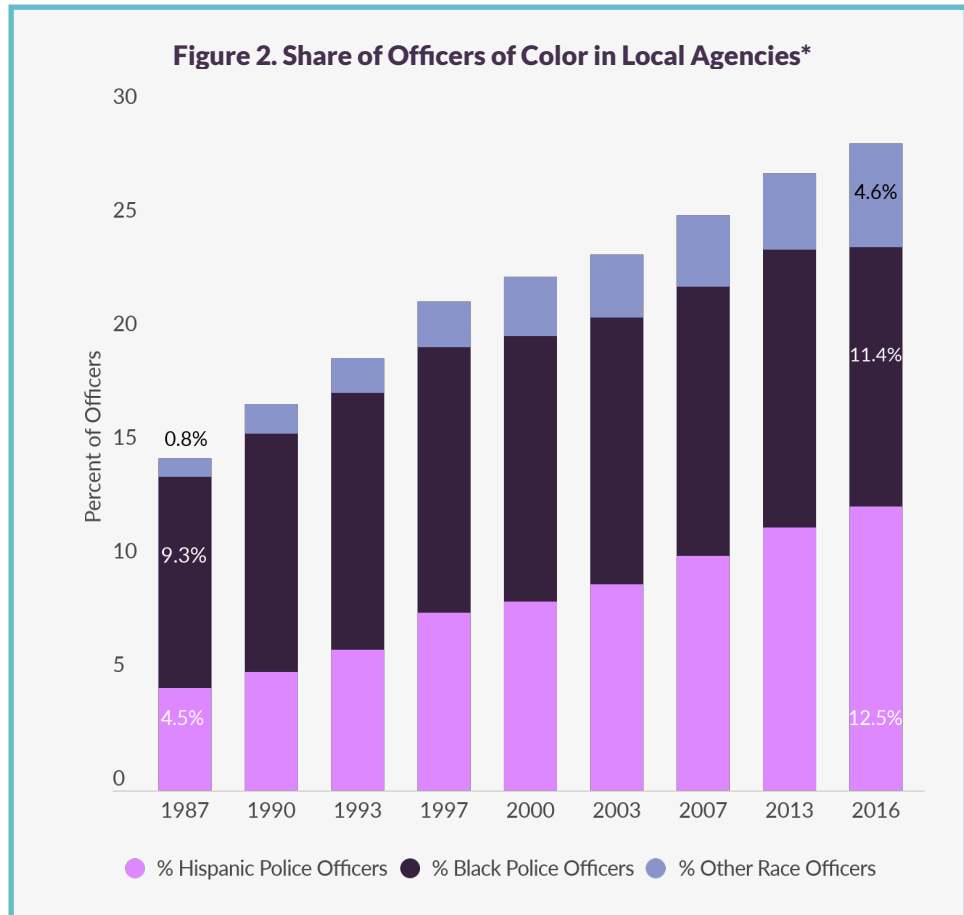
the local population varies by agency size and geography (Leatherby and Oppel, 2020). For example, police departments serving larger populations have higher shares of both women and officers of color, with 18% female officers and 48.5% officers of color in jurisdictions with a population of one million or more (Hyland and Davis, 2019). Overall, police agencies have struggled to keep up with an increase in diversity in the communities they serve (Leatherby and Oppel, 2020).

Diversity at the top of police organizations is particularly low. As of 2016, the most recent year for which data on police personnel by position were collected, about 3% of police chiefs were female – the same percentage as in 2013 (Hyland and Davis, 2019). Also in 2016, 4% of chiefs were Black, 3% were Hispanic/Latinx, and 2% were of other races. However, the share of female and chiefs of color increases significantly with the size of the jurisdiction. Among agencies serving jurisdictions of 250,000 or more residents, 8.5% of chiefs were women, 19% were Black, and 13% were Hispanic/Latinx in 2016 (Hyland and Davis, 2019).



These diversity challenges exist within a larger context of structural barriers to police recruitment in general. A survey of 411 police departments found that 63% experienced a reduction in the number of applicants in 2019 (PERF, 2019). Such shortages in applicant pools are occurring at departments of all sizes and all regions of the country (PERF, 2019), ultimately resulting in high levels of vacancies. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects over 59,000 job openings for police officers and detectives in the coming decade (BLS, 2021).

Recruitment challenges candidates of color include a long history of discrimination in the profession (See McCrary, 2007; U.S. Department of Justice, 2016), high levels of mistrust of the police in underrepresented communities (Cassady, 2020; PERF, 2019), lack of awareness of career opportunities in law enforcement (U.S. DOJ, 2016), and difficulties in passing background and credit checks (U.S. DOJ, 2016). These factors are likely exacerbated by the increased public scrutiny of police officers and malignment of the profession overall (Cassady, 2020; PERF, 2019), along with low levels of public confidence in police among Black people (Council on Criminal Justice, 2021).



Source: Law Enforcement Management and Statistics Series, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
* Excludes state agencies and sheriffs' departments.

Compensation can also be a barrier to both recruiting and retaining officers within the profession, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity. In 2013, the most recent year for which representative data on law enforcement salaries was available, entry-level local police department officers made an average of \$45,000, with larger agencies paying about \$10,000 more and the smallest agencies paying about \$10,000 less (Reaves, 2015). While this compensation level may not be competitive with other entry level positions, a survey of police agencies with 300 or more officers found that most agencies that increased their entry level salaries for police recruits observed no difference in their ability to meet recruitment goals (Wilson et al., 2010b). However, compensation may be important in terms of retention, as research shows higher salaries were significantly associated with lower turnover rates (Schuck and Rabe-Hemp, 2018).



Issues of competitive compensation may explain a 20-year trend of increasing numbers of officers electing to leave their agencies before they are eligible to retire (Wilson et al., 2010b; PERF, 2019). One study of police departments in North Carolina found that smaller agencies (which, on average, compensate officers at lower levels than their larger counterparts) experienced an attrition rate of 18%, twice as high as the rate among larger agencies (Yearwood and Freeman, 2004). High-performing officers may also choose to leave a department for a position at another agency (Wilson and Grammich, 2009) or for a specialized law enforcement position with higher pay (Bowman et al., 2006). At the same time, a wave of retirements is on the horizon. The 2019 PERF survey found that while 8.5% of the current workforce was eligible to retire in 2019, that share was expected to nearly double to 15.5% within five years.

Differing expectations around work among younger generations may also pose a challenge for recruitment and retention. Recent generations may be more likely to change careers and pursue jobs in the private sector for higher salaries, better advancement opportunities, and improved work-life balance (Wilson, 2010a). The militaristic nature of police work may be less appealing to younger generations and the cultural reasons behind reductions in youth joining the military also apply to policing (Wilson, 2010b; see also Bowyer, 2007).

An additional challenge is the presence of extremism within the ranks of American police agencies, a trend magnified by the January 2021 events at the U.S. Capitol (MacFarquhar, 2021; also see the Plain View Project). Police agencies' ability to screen for extremist views within their ranks is a pressing issue. In the absence of federal screening standards for the identification of extremist views, departments are employing strategies such as conducting more in depth background checks, administering recruit polygraph tests that screen for anti-government opinions, encouraging officers to report when they become aware of peer officer involvement in extremist groups, establishing policies that expressly prohibit affiliation with such groups, and offering more mental health services to reducing the likelihood of officers becoming easy targets for such groups (Crowell and O'Regan, 2019; MacFarquhar, 2021).

VALUE OF DIVERSIFICATION

Research shows that female police officers approach some important aspects of the job differently from men, relying less on use of force in general, and excessive use of force in particular (Schuck and Rabe-Hemp, 2005; Bolger, 2015; Ba et al., 2021; Lonsway and Wood, 2002). One study observed that female officers who use less force than predicted based on the situational and community member characteristics of an encounter are neither more nor less likely to experience an injury (Schuck and Rabe-Hemp, 2005). Female officers are also less likely to discharge their weapons (Morin and Mercer, 2017; McElvain and Kposowa, 2008) and be named in public complaints (Bergeron, 2008). In addition, the presence of female officers has been found helpful in preventing the escalation of domestic violence incidents (Miller and Segal, 2014).

A recent study of the Chicago Police Department, employing a detailed panel design study of 2.9 million patrol assignments, found that Black and Hispanic/Latinx officers made fewer stops and arrests and used force less often than White officers, especially in encounters with Black residents. The effects were largest in the majority-Black areas of Chicago (Ba et al., 2021). Another study examined 2015 data on officer-involved homicides in large U.S. cities and found that fatal encounters between police and Black residents decreased *only* when Black officers made up a "critical mass" of the department, in this case 26% (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017). In addition, an analysis of the 60 largest police departments from 2015 to 2020 found that rates of fatal



police shootings were significantly lower in jurisdictions that had Black police chiefs, controlling for both agency and jurisdictional demographics as well as historical crime rates (Wu, 2020).

Less rigorous studies on the effectiveness of a racially diverse workplace on disparities in stops, arrests, uses of force, and citizen fatalities have yielded inconsistent results. There is some evidence that Black officers are less coercive than their White counterparts (Paoline, Gau, and Terrill, 2016), while a more dated study found that Black officers are more likely to arrest Black residents than White residents (Brown and Frank, 2006). Research specific to vehicle stops has found that officers who pull over motorists are more likely to conduct a search if the race of the officer differs from the race of the driver (Antonovics and Knight, 2009). Similarly, another study found that officers were more likely to stop, frisk, and search people whose race differed from that of the officer, even when controlling for gang affiliation and arrest history (Fagan et al., 2016). Relatedly, research has found that police apply more severe sanctions to drivers who do not mirror their own race or ethnicity (Close and Mason, 2006). Finally, a study of traffic stops by officer race and ethnicity found that Black and Hispanic/Latinx officers conducted proportionally fewer searches than White officers yet uncovered a higher rate of contraband, suggesting they were less likely to be driven by bias (Close and Mason, 2007).

In addition to the role that race may play in officer behavior, some have hypothesized that a racially diverse police force will improve community trust and engender more positive sentiment towards police departments (Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009). Research evidence is limited on this question, with one study finding that the level of distrust Black residents feel towards police is similar regardless of the officer's race (Brunson and Gau, 2011), and another concluding that residents of color are more likely to perceive being stopped by an officer as legitimate when the officer is not White (Cochran and Warren, 2011). A study of Los Angeles neighborhoods found that residents were less likely to perceive injustice when officers in their neighborhoods were more diverse. That finding held regardless of the race or ethnicity of the respondent or the racial and ethnic composition of the neighborhood (Wang, Ready and Davies, 2019).

RECRUITMENT AND DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGIES

The recruitment of unqualified officers can pose a substantial risk of harm, such as excessive use of force, other forms of misconduct, and inequitable treatment of community members (White and Escobar, 2008; Henson et al., 2010). Law enforcement agencies are engaging in a variety of strategies to expand the size, quality, and diversity of applicant pools, such as removing conventional hiring restrictions related to facial hair, tattoos, or prior marijuana use (Cassady, 2020). But there is no empirical research on the advantages and potential unintended consequences of such strategies. Departments are also making efforts to more accurately portray the daily experiences of a typical police officer as a way to attract different types of applicants who are better suited for the job. This involves portraying police work as being about interacting with people and problem solving rather than about militarized enforcement (Cassady, 2020). Common strategies to expand applicant pools include improving officer compensation, building referral networks, establishing a recruitment unit, and engaging in youth programs (Wilson, 2010b). Other strategies involve revising occupational screening including the development of tools to assist candidates and establishing recruit mentoring, as well as revising psychological screening by using licensed clinical psychologists after conditional job offers were made (Scrivner, 2010).

Despite the importance of having a higher-quality and more diverse police workforce, and considerable efforts on the part of agencies to improve their recruitment and retention practices, only a few rigorous studies on recruitment strategies exist and no strong evaluations have been published on the impact of various retention



strategies. The recruitment-related studies evaluated strategies to make it easier to apply or make the position more attractive to desired candidates. A randomized field experiment with the Los Angeles Police Department found that reminder emails and text messages sent to applicants resulted in an 8% increase in the applicant pool compared to the control group that did not receive reminders (Linos and Riesch, 2020). Similarly, in a randomized controlled trial with the Chattanooga Police Department, prospective recruits in the treatment groups received postcards with messages about “being up for the challenge” of serving and emphasizing the career opportunities of the profession. Treatment group participants were three times more likely to apply compared to the control group, who received postcards with more traditional messages tied to the value of public service. Such messaging was particularly effective for women and recipients of color (Linos, 2018).

Another randomized controlled trial at a police agency in the United Kingdom altered the invitation language for a situational judgment test, with the treatment group receiving an email inviting applicants to take the test with text that was more concise, designed to reduce anxiety, and emphasized positive messages to prime a sense of success and belonging. Researchers found a 50% increase in the probability of passing the test for minority applicants in the treatment group, yet found no effect on White applicants (Linos, Reinhard, and Ruda, 2017). These findings suggest that careful attention to language in recruiting materials could help increase the size and the diversity of applicant pools.

RETENTION STRATEGIES

“Best practices” for enhancing officer retention are based on anecdotal evidence from police management and survey data. While these strategies align with those commonly suggested in other professions (Das, 2013; Kynndt et al., 2009), their effectiveness in retaining skilled officers is unclear. Strategies for reducing turnover include improving organizational effectiveness through leadership training, intervening with at-risk officers, developing clear and transparent organizational processes, and eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy (Wilson, 2010a; Hilal and Litsey, 2020). Departments may also consider providing financial incentives (Wilson, 2010a), promoting officer wellness through support services, such as individual counseling or peer support groups (Hilal and Litsey, 2020), and implementing employee engagement strategies, such as surveying job satisfaction, rotating assignments, offering shift flexibility, and recognizing high-quality work (Wilson, 2010a; Hilal and Litsey, 2020).

In addition, psychological research indicates that a procedurally just agency climate—one in which officers feel they are treated respectfully and that policies are applied fairly—is related to greater perceptions of organizational efficiency and legitimacy (Trinkner, Tyler, and Goff, 2016) and more positive attitudes towards serving members of the public (Myhill and Bradford, 2013). While no research has confirmed a causal link between officer perceptions of such internal procedural justice metrics and retention rates, it stands to reason that they are connected.

Critical Policy Elements

- + Hiring for a more diverse police workforce alone will likely not result in meaningful changes in practice unless leadership also undertakes efforts to improve agency culture, internal equity, and accountability measures.
- + To compete for high-quality employees, policing agencies should consider offering a comprehensive package of compensation, incentives, and work environment, and develop communication strategies that accurately depict what law enforcement is about.



- + Given shifting norms in American culture overall and habits of younger generations specifically, agencies might revise certain employment restrictions associated with misdemeanor arrests, tattoos, and cannabis use while maintaining restrictions that are correlated with job performance.
- + Diversifying the policing workforce should not be framed solely as a strategy to address underrepresentation of certain demographic groups, but also as a means to improve the culture of policing.

Expected Impacts

PREVENTING MISUSE OF FORCE

Increasing gender diversity could reduce misuse of force, as women are more inclined to use communication skills in lieu of physical force. However, ultimately, misuse of force is prevented through strengthening police practices and accountability systems.

ENHANCING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

It is unclear whether improving recruitment and retention or increasing the diversity of police ranks would enhance transparency and accountability.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY TRUST

Improved recruitment and retention of officers who are well-suited for community engagement and hiring officers to reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of the community could increase trust insofar as those officers are also trained, supervised, and held accountable in ways that engender trust.

REDUCING RACIAL DISPARITIES

Increasing the quality and diversity of police recruits should result in a police workforce that is less likely to engage in racially disparate policing.

ENSURING OFFICER SAFETY

Female officers are more likely to use verbal communication than their male counterparts, and de-escalation training, which relies heavily on verbal communication, has been associated with reductions in use of force and officer injury. As such, increasing the share of female officers could improve officer safety. However, more research is needed to confirm this relationship.

PROMOTING PUBLIC SAFETY

While many would anticipate that there is a relationship between the composition or quality of police ranks and public safety outcomes, this has not been formally studied.

Endnotes

1 Officers of color includes 16.3% Black, 26.5% Hispanic/Latinx, and 5.7% "other," which includes Asians, Native Hawaiians, Other Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Alaska Natives, or persons of two or more races.

2 Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, American Indian, Alaska Native, or two or more races.

3 In addition to posing a barrier to diversity, these challenges may also result in lawsuits against departments in response to violations of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. These violations include: failing to advertise officer openings in ways that are likely to reach a diverse pool of candidates; utilizing screening procedures, including written tests, physical tests,



educational requirements, and background and credit checks, that discriminate against female applicants or applicants of color; and departmental policies around tattoos, head coverings, and facial hair. For more, see the 2016 U.S. Department of Justice and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission report, “Advancing Diversity in Law Enforcement.”

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About The Task Force

The independent **Task Force on Policing** was launched in November 2020 by the **Council on Criminal Justice**. Its mission is to identify the policies and practices most likely to reduce violent encounters between officers and the public and improve the fairness and effectiveness of American policing. The **11 Task Force members** represent a diverse range of perspectives and experience and include law enforcement leaders, civil rights advocates, researchers, a former mayor, and community members who have lost loved ones to police violence. The Council staffs the Task Force, and the **Crime Lab** at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy is serving as its research partner.

The Task Force on Policing thanks Dylan Fitzpatrick, Sarah Lawrence, and Charlotte Bailey for their contributions to this brief.