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Prioritizing Police Recruitment Tactics Based on Performance and Need

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Police agencies may employ a variety of tactics to improve their recruitment processes, with the primary goal of increasing their number of officers. Yet, as this *PSO Perspective* discusses, tactics perform differently within and across a variety of dimensions—some supporting other agency goals, but some not doing so. In selecting tactics, agencies should be mindful of these multiple effects, and choose those likely to produce the combination of effects they most desire.

Recruitment Tactics Come in Many Forms

Police staffing is a challenging issue for departments nationwide. To meet the demand for officers, departments may employ a variety of tactics. Common tactics include establishing a recruitment unit, increasing pay or benefits, marketing in myriad venues, streamlining application processes, modifying qualifications, or moving duties to civilian positions to reduce the need for new hires.

Understandably, agencies employing such tactics may prioritize recruitment to boost staffing levels. But such tactics can have differing, or even conflicting, effects. Increasing educational incentives, for example, may have a differing effect on the pool of recruits than modifying qualifications. Efforts to diversify the force through outreach to specific groups may have a differing effect than modifying residency requirements. In deploying a recruitment tactic, departments need to consider the myriad effects a tactic may have, as well as the specific circumstances they seek to address.

Recruitment Tactics Perform in Different Ways

The primary goal of recruitment tactics is likely to be to increase the number of staff, either overall or with a particular characteristic. Nevertheless,

before applying any specific tactic, agencies may wish to consider the effects a tactic may have on multiple dimensions. Altogether, agencies may wish to consider such dimensions as

- **Effects on the number of staff.** Would a tactic decrease or increase the number of staff? Tactics such as increasing pay or benefits may help boost overall numbers of recruits, but departments needing specific types of candidates or to improve standards may want to consider more targeted practices.
- **Effects on workload management.** Would a tactic make workload management more or less effective? Moving officers from other functions to patrol might help alleviate the immediate effects of a personnel shortage but complicate management of those functions.
- **Speed of effects.** Would a tactic have a delayed or an immediate impact on a department? Establishing lateral hiring procedures may help an agency fill vacancies immediately but complicate issues such as cohort management or even diversity efforts.
- **Ease of implementation.** Would a tactic

be difficult or easy to implement? An agency may be able to change a residency requirement quickly, but not see effects on its number of recruits for a while.

- **Cost.** Would a tactic increase or decrease department costs? Relying on overtime could alleviate short-term shortages, and increasing pay could long-term ones, but both are likely to increase department expenses.
- **Diversity.** Would a tactic reduce or increase representation of women or minority officers? Departments may find targeted or one-to-one outreach can help increase desired diversity but may need time to see such efforts have a substantial effect.
- **Quality.** Would a tactic reduce or increase the quality of police work? Targeting college graduates or providing education incentives may help improve quality but require investments of money or even time to have effects.
- **Community policing.** Would a tactic impede or advance the goals of community policing? Reducing proactive activities with community stakeholders can ease pressure on staffing but decimate community policing efforts.

Choosing and Selecting Tactics—and Goals

Our point is not that one tactic is better than another but, rather, that agencies may need to consider competing demands when choosing how they wish to address staffing issues. Agencies

with resource constraints will choose one set of tactics, such as streamlining recruitment processes or even clawing back incentives from those leaving a department before a specified period. Those seeking an immediate fix may rely on shifting personnel to patrol, increasing overtime, or reducing patrols. Those seeking to improve community policing may wish to increase their community outreach in recruitment or even solicit community input on the characteristics that community members desire in police officers.

No single tactic or even group of tactics is likely to provide every agency a panacea for all recruitment and selection difficulties. But this is because every agency and community differ in what they seek from police work. Not every agency needs the same solution. Rather, an agency needs the solution that is going to work for it and its circumstances. There is a variety of tactics that agencies may use, some of which may address other issues—or pose unintended difficulties. In choosing tactics, or combinations of tactics, agencies should consider the multiple effects a tactic may have and choose those that can best address the combination of unique circumstances they face.

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About the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory

The [Police Staffing Observatory \(PSO\)](#) is a global collaborative of academics, scholars, practitioners, and students working with Michigan State University to promote evidence-based police workforce research, strategy, and operations. It aims to advance police workforce knowledge and its application through research and its dissemination, including practitioner partnerships.