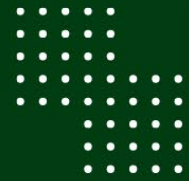




# Police Staffing Observatory MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY



## **BUILDING EFFECTIVE POLICE RECRUITMENT PROGRAMS**

Organizational, Unit and Individual  
Considerations

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In partnership with



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# Institutional Partner Support

Workforce management is among the most important challenges police agencies face. For the approximately 17,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies employing more than 700,000 sworn officers, effective staffing is critical for providing quality service to communities, facilitating the well-being of officers and professional employees, and meeting performance objectives. Recruitment and retention are crucial for building strong, effective, quality workforces—as are allocation, work scheduling, deployment, selection, training, promotions, supervision, succession planning, leadership, culture, organizational learning, and still so much more. These are complex concepts that have multidimensional interactions and effects. Historically, practitioners have had few accessible, evidence-based resources to guide their workforce planning processes.

The Police Staffing Observatory (PSO), administered as part of the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice and drawing on nearly five dozen staffing experts from around the world, helps police organizations navigate and plan for their dynamic workforce challenges. Through its research, outreach, and collaboration with the local-global law enforcement community, the PSO helps bridge the gap between scientific rigor and the operational realities of policing. The PSO is actively developing a large body of knowledge and resources offering practitioners actionable lessons on creating and sustaining their workforces.

Like the PSO, our associations prioritize staffing, and we have worked diligently with our members to understand and address the workforce needs of the law enforcement community. With this in mind, we are pleased to be institutional partners of the PSO. Working together, we can create and share resources that advance workforce science in ways that provide practical value for police agencies in meeting their staffing needs. This report is just one example of our collaboration. It demonstrates the utility of academic-practitioner partnerships for addressing public safety needs and improving the police profession. We hope you find some helpful guidance in this resource, and we encourage you to avail yourself of the many others developed by the PSO.

With our greatest support,



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# Preface

Law enforcement agencies have long struggled to identify the best ways to establish a robust pipeline of quality staff who can help meet their needs and those of their communities. Research in this area has been somewhat thin and uneven, providing little evidence-based guidance to the leaders and decision-makers charged with building and maintaining police workforces. The body of existing research, while growing, focuses largely on recruitment strategy, considering the effectiveness of activities such as marketing campaigns, financial incentives, and changing standards in attracting wider pools of applicants. While such strategy and tactics are critically important for recruitment, they alone are not enough for supporting organizational functions.

This guide aims to offer a more comprehensive approach to building a recruitment program from the ground up. It summarizes research conducted by the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory with support from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) and in collaboration with institutional partners. This research identifies and explores the many components needed for establishing and operating effective and efficient recruitment programs. Drawing from the research literature and directly from a broad sample of practitioners with direct experience in administering recruitment programs, it provides insight into a wide range of dimensions agencies should consider at the organizational, unit, and individual levels. This guide will be particularly useful for police executives who oversee and support the recruitment function as well as practitioners responsible for recruitment.

## The Recruitment Problem

Recruitment has long been a challenge for police agencies but has become a more acute problem in recent years. A 2023 analysis of police agencies across the nation found that 65 percent had recently experienced an increase in retirements, 66 percent an increase in resignations, and 69 percent a decrease in applications, causing staff levels to drop by an average of 5 percent (Police Executive Research Forum [PERF] 2023). Police agencies have expressed increasing concerns over finding a sufficient number of qualified candidates, as well as a need to find more candidates with varying qualities and attributes, prompting them to recruit in unconventional places (Copple 2017; PERF 2023; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015).

Contributors to this staffing challenge range from changes in generational preferences and qualified applicants to retirements among an aging population and a competitive economy (Kramer 2021; Morison 2017; PERF 2023; Schuck and Rabe-Hemp 2018; Wilson and Grammich 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the recruitment problem by forcing agencies to freeze new hiring, alter their recruitment processes, and increase the workload for sworn staff when civilian positions were cut due to financial constraints (PERF 2020). It also pushed many academies to close or delay their classes, which severely impacted the flow of new officers into departments (PERF 2020). Finally, the pandemic brought with it many unique stressors that affected officers on the job and led to burnout and attrition (Wright et al. 2023). Police organizations have responded to these circumstances in varying ways, with some, for example, offering an array of incentives to attract applicants and others relaxing certain standards for hiring (Keegan 2021; Santos, Jaynes, and Thomas 2024; Schuck and Rabe-Hemp 2018).

Legitimacy concerns have also plagued the profession, especially through high-profile cases such as those of George Floyd and Tyre Nichols. Younger generations may be apprehensive about joining a profession viewed negatively by a community while current officers may feel like they lack public support and are targets of media scrutiny (Copeland, del Carmen, and Semukhina 2022; Rhodes and Tyler 2021; Rossler and Sheer 2024). These legitimacy issues have contributed to officer resignations, affecting both local departments and the profession at large (Mourtgos, Adams, and Nix 2022). Calls to reform the police have urged departments to change their style of policing to better prioritize community needs and other issues; such changes could affect the future of policing generally and who is recruited into it specifically.

Efforts to address these issues are hampered by a lack of field- and evidence-based lessons. What little research there has been has focused narrowly on recruitment methods and activities. Departments often lack context on components of an effective recruitment program. These issues have forced us to reconceive our conception of what it means to recruit and how recruitment *programs* can ameliorate staffing concerns. Programs can be multifaceted, dynamic, and connective. Recruitment programs should have similar elements to increase their chances of success and broaden the scope of their efforts to multiple areas within a department.

## Objective

The goal of this report is to develop a guiding framework to help practitioners build effective recruitment programs, a framework that goes beyond strategies and takes a more comprehensive approach to recruiting. Typically, recruitment efforts focus on deploying broad strategies, such as marketing and outreach, or more specific tactics that comprise the strategies, such as social media blitzes and attendance at community and recruitment fairs. The limited research that takes a broader approach to recruitment programs to analyze their other important features shows that for a recruitment program to be effective, it must be well-rounded and incorporate a variety of organizational dimensions. By viewing recruitment through a more complete lens and creating a recruitment program accordingly, agencies increase their recruitment success. This report synthesizes the broader work on recruitment, drawing from practitioner insight to flesh out field-based nuances, to develop a fully integrated framework for developing and managing effective recruitment programs.

The components we review of a comprehensive recruitment program are intended to be used as a starting point for agencies to develop their own programs. These components relate to agencies of all sizes, though they may be implemented or applied differently. Each organization will have unique needs, resources, and goals that will influence the development of its recruitment program. As a result, the guiding framework we present must be contextualized according to an agency's environment. The program dimensions and elements we list are all important, but how they are implemented largely depends on the agency's resources and needs. Our framework offers a robust foundation for stakeholders to conceptualize recruitment programs through a systematic and comprehensive approach.

## Approach

To develop a guiding framework for recruitment programs, we conducted a thorough review of academic and practitioner literature from 2010 to 2024. The goal of the literature review was to identify common dimensions and elements associated with successful recruitment programs. We used these to construct an outline of an effective recruitment program. Our literature review yielded 10 commonly cited program dimensions that we organized into three distinct levels: organizational, unit, and individual (see figure 1). The organizational level initially consisted of three dimensions—leadership, budget allocation, and recruitment goals—with a fourth, culture, later added after practitioner input. The unit level initially included three dimensions—strategies, metrics, and organizational learning—and the individual level comprised four: recruiter attributes, recruiter training, recruiter incentives, and recruiter types.

Figure 1: Levels and Dimensions of Recruitment Programs



After developing the anatomy of an effective recruitment program, we sought input from a sample of subject matter experts familiar with recruitment and program-building to assess its accuracy and to provide additional dimensions and elements that were missing from the literature review. This sample included individuals holding different positions in their agencies (executives vs recruitment personnel), from different types of agencies (local, state, university), from different sizes of departments (small, medium, large), and residing in different regions of the country (West, Midwest, South, and Northeast). Interviews took place from June to September 2024. We asked subject matter experts whether each dimension we identified was relevant for building an effective recruitment program, and if so, to explain which elements of the dimensions were most important. We did this for every dimension highlighted in our literature review. We also asked participants to identify other important program features that were missing from our literature assessment. At the conclusion of interviews, we asked participants to rank the three most critical components for effective and efficient recruitment programs. Our findings do not reflect all potential dimensions and elements of a successful recruitment program but rather represent common program features mentioned in the literature and in interviews. See the appendix for a full description of our methodology.

## Outline

We present our findings by level, beginning with the organization level and then discussing unit and individual levels. Each section draws on both the available literature and practitioner experience for the level's corresponding dimensions and elements. The last section summarizes what practitioner-experts contend are the most critical components of a recruitment program. We close with some brief remarks and ideas on next steps for using our work.

## Organizational-Level Dimensions of Recruitment Programs

Recruitment programs must be promoted at the broader organizational level to set in place relevant structures and mechanisms that can facilitate their operation. At this level, we consider the dimensions of leadership, culture, budget allocation, and recruitment goals.

### Leadership

Leadership is instrumental to effective and efficient recruitment programs. To successfully design and implement such programs, leadership must have several important elements. The first element is heterogeneity *in leadership roles*. Heterogeneity in upper management helps recruits see that the organization values a wide range of staff within the agency and promotes variation in the officers who lead it (Bureau of Justice Assistance [BJA] and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services [COPS Office] 2023; Nowacki, Schafer, and Hibdon 2021; PERF 2023).

Nearly half our interviews noted the importance of heterogeneity in leadership. One supervisor of a large municipal organization in the South said, “It’s important to have diversity and to have it reflect the people that you’re serving. That’s important and something our department has worked really hard to have.” Other participants recognized the lack of heterogeneity within their ranks but understood that having variation in workforce composition increased their chances of recruiting more candidates with greater variation in qualities and attributes.

A sergeant of a recruitment and selection division in a large municipal agency in the South cautioned against overemphasizing heterogeneity in leadership roles. She explained that “leadership is definitely important to recruitment. I think leadership, no matter what the person looks like, depends on how they treat people. That is the ultimate leadership style that must be followed. You have to have a genuine care for people succeeding. And then you have to find what motivates people in order to keep them engaged and wanting to stay in the profession.”

A second important leadership element is that *leadership should understand recruits’ goals*. The executive command staff should have a thorough understanding of the shifting generational values and preferences that younger recruits have so that the agency can incorporate these preferences into its daily operations and have a stronger appeal to recruits (Lauer 2020; PERF 2023; Williams and Sondhi 2022; Wilson et al. 2010). For example, Millennials and Generation Z workers place a higher emphasis than older generations do on work-life balance, a flexible schedule, and the reputation of the employer (Kramer 2021; TeamStage 2024). Some participants acknowledged the importance of leaders understanding recruits’ goals and values. These participants explained that leaders must recognize the needs of newer recruits to better understand how the organization can help them succeed in their role and how they can help the organization. As one police chief of a medium-sized local agency in the West stated, “The old way of onboarding employees was you

kept your mouth shut and did your job for two or three years. But now we tell recruits that you're part of this organization, and if you have ideas, bring them to us. We make that part of the recruitment process as well. We're looking for new ideas, new ways to do things, to be better. That's one of the benefits to bringing on people that align with our department and want to become part of our team."

**[N]ow we tell recruits that you're part of this organization, and if you have ideas, bring them to us.**

### **Field Spotlight: Flexible Work Schedules in New York**

Recognizing that it was burdening its officers with forced overtime, the New York Police Department launched a pilot program in 2023 which offered officers the option of 10- or 12-hour shifts (Katersky 2023). Such schedule flexibility is intended to improve officer morale and address staffing concerns.

*Improving the police image* is vital for successful recruitment programs. The chief executive should continuously promote a positive relationship between the agency and its community; the need to facilitate this relationship has become even greater in recent years (BJA and COPS Office 2023; Rhodes and Tyler 2021; Rossler and Sheer 2024). If the department has a positive reputation in the community, it will be able to recruit more candidates locally. As one respondent, a staffing commander of a large local agency in the West, said, a department must have a positive relationship with its community to attract candidates from it.

An element that we did not identify in previous research but that all 26 participants noted was that *leadership should provide the direction for the recruitment program*. Practitioners agreed that leaders set the tone for the recruitment program by instilling throughout the ranks the organizational values, ideals, and recruitment objectives. Ultimately, the agency leader decides the direction of the organization and the types of individuals who should comprise the force. As a human resource director of a large state-level agency in the West said

Leadership is the pivotal cornerstone for recruitment. Without understanding what is needed by the leader, the policing community, and the profession, the leader cannot advocate for the organization. Recruiting has to occur from the line level all the way to the top. But there has to be a direction that's given at the executive level all the way down through each supervisory rank, so that everyone understands what the goal is, what the intent is, what the standards are, and what is required of the police officer in general.

**Leadership is the pivotal cornerstone for recruitment.**

## Culture

Though it is not discussed systematically in the literature, more than one-third of our participants considered *an overall healthy organizational culture* to be an important organizational-level dimension for recruitment. They viewed a healthy organizational culture as one that makes new and old employees feel comfortable, accepted, and optimistic.

A police chief from a medium-sized local agency in the Midwest described how his organization's culture contributed to success in recruiting laterals (i.e., sworn officers already licensed, often currently working for another police department). This chief said that potential lateral hires

talk to people they know here. And those that come here say it's the culture, the culture of family, of caring about them. We invest in mental health services. There are 15 different things that we do to ensure the mental health and wellness of our officers. We're very invested in those programs.

Having a culture in which the organization truly values and takes care of its officers will make it more appealing to newer recruits, especially given the preferences of younger generations relative to personal health and work-life balance (Lauer 2020; PERF 2023; Williams and Sondhi 2022; Wilson et al. 2010).

### Field Spotlight: Officer Wellness in North Carolina

To foster a healthy work culture and demonstrate the agency's concern about officers' well-being, the Holly Springs (North Carolina) Police Department expanded its wellness programs to include mental health, fitness, and training (PERF 2023). It has also promoted a culture of family and belonging by hosting family days and events that enable officers to build relationships with one another.

Millennials and Generation Z workers are not as attracted as older generations to paramilitary organizations and their cultural traits. Instead, they place a higher emphasis on a healthy work-life balance and a positive employer reputation (Kramer 2021; TeamStage 2024). A sergeant from a large Southern local agency described the consequences of having a negative organizational culture when recounting how she recruited a young explorer to her agency.

Last night I stole an explorer from another agency. I told him to come to our agency for an internship and to compare the cultures. He talked to the other agency, and they really bashed us and badmouthed us. So, he decided to come to our department because of the way that the recruitment unit carried itself. And he's been happy with us. He's been happy with the relationships, the kindness, and how our organization culture speaks for itself. When an organization has a culture of doing all that, it will be successful.

## Budget Allocation

A third important dimension at the organizational level is budget allocation. Recruitment programs are more likely to be successful when the organization has an *allocated budget and resources* specifically dedicated to them (Jones 2019; Schulker et al. 2020; U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO] 2024). Departments may need personnel (i.e., recruiters) as well as materials (e.g., banners, cars, flyers, media advertisements, overnight expenditures) for recruitment. These components require financial investments and resources. Allotting specific resources from the organization’s overall budget to recruitment programs can ease recruitment costs and vary recruitment activities (Asch 2019; GAO 2024; Gendron 2023b; Jones 2019; Schulker et al. 2020). Therefore, an *allocated budget and resources* can facilitate recruitment by ensuring that programs have the personnel and capacity to plan for and implement a range of necessary recruitment components.

Interview participants generally saw value in allocating a budget and resources to recruitment programs. As one assistant chief of a large local organization in the South put it, “You gotta have a budget. You gotta spend money.” Respondents recognized the competitive nature of the current recruitment environment and understood that resources are needed to create comprehensive recruitment programs. One police chief of a medium-sized department explained that to effectively recruit, agencies had to travel locally and out-of-state, which can be expensive even if necessary in an increasingly competitive environment.

**You gotta have a budget. You gotta spend money.**

### Field Spotlight: Budgeting for Recruitment in Virginia

Understanding the importance of budget allocation for recruitment services, the Fairfax County (Virginia) Police Department dedicates a portion of its recruitment budget to transforming its cadet program (PERF 2023). Cadet programs can offer a pipeline into the department. The department plans on changing its part-time cadet program into a full-time apprenticeship program to increase the likelihood of recruiting qualified candidates.

Respondents from smaller organizations, however, did not always agree that budgets were necessary for recruitment. A police chief of a smaller local agency in the West said,

We haven’t taken the opportunity to dedicate a lot of resources to this, aside from just going out to local police academies. We have school officers teach criminal justice classes in our high schools, but we haven’t had a budget for billboards and advertising. That’s not something we’ve delved into much, and, frankly, we’ve been finding good candidates without those efforts.

## Recruitment Goals

Recruitment goals can guide the organization in achieving objectives that align with its values and principles. Agencies should recruit using a *performance-based approach*. In other words, rather than trying to fulfill a pre-established quota of personnel, they should analyze their workload (i.e., calls for service) and performance objectives (e.g., community policing, discretionary activities) to discern exactly how many officers they need and what attributes they should possess (Wilson and Grammich 2024; Wilson and Weiss 2014). One interviewee, a commander of a recruitment and training division in a small agency for a university in the West, noted the importance of using a performance-based approach when recruiting, stating, “evidence-based [approaches] determine the reality of how many police officers are needed in each community, which may be a little bit different from community to community and department to department.”

**[E]vidence-based [approaches] determine the reality of how many police officers are needed in each community.**

A second vital element of recruitment goals is that *recruitment goals should match community needs*. Leaders within a department should analyze the needs and expectations of their community for policing, including style of policing and desired skills for officers (BJA and COPS Office 2023; PERF 2023; Harvey 1996). Organizations can meet with community members one-on-one, host town hall meetings, or attend community events to gauge their opinions and expectations. Most of our interviews emphasized the need for organizations to understand community needs and recruit accordingly. They discussed how their policing style is determined by what the community needs and wants, which ultimately affects who they recruit into the agency. For example, the interim commander of a large state-level department in the West explained

the need is what the community expects in the levels of service. So, if your community expects that when they pick up a phone, they're going to see a car pull in their driveway or up to their apartment or their store to talk to them, then you have to staff your levels adequately to meet that expectation . . . Your goals and your objectives are set by community expectations.

**Your goals and your objectives are set by community expectations.**

### Field Spotlight: Town Hall Meetings in Georgia

The Warner Robins (Georgia) Police Department hosts several town hall meetings each year to understand community concerns and adjust its policing objectives to community needs (Lee 2024). The department also uses these meetings to connect with younger generations and demonstrate that the police can help them in times of need.

A third element of recruitment goals is that *recruits should reflect the attributes of the community*. Proper workforce composition can benefit the agency, officers, and community in a multitude of ways, such as fewer violent encounters with the public, clearer communication among non-English-speaking residents, and higher levels of trust between the police and the community (Harvey 1996; U.S. Department of Justice 2019; PERF 2023; President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015; Schuck and Rabe-Hemp 2005; Taniguchi et al. 2023). Most participants agreed that workforce composition goals are important, but they also emphasized that they want to recruit the best possible candidates regardless of any specific attribute. One sergeant overseeing a recruitment and selection division of a large local agency in the South stated, “the goal should be to get people who are empathetic, compassionate, interesting, innovative, kind. And those types of people come in all shapes . . . [W]e should be talking about the intrinsic values of the people that we bring to the table.”

## Summary of Organizational-level Dimensions

- **Leadership** that is heterogeneous, understands recruits’ goals, and improves the police image can significantly facilitate the implementation of a comprehensive recruitment program.
- **Culture** of the work environment positively impacts recruitment when it is welcoming and fosters an atmosphere of care and belonging.
- **Budget Allocation** for a recruitment program can facilitate the planning and implementation of its activities, yet smaller agencies may not deem this dimension as important for a comprehensive program.
- **Recruitment Goals** that prioritize performance-based approaches, facilitate meeting community needs, and help reflect the composition of the community provide the program with specific objectives to meet that align with department and community values.

## Unit-Level Dimensions of Recruitment Programs

While the organizational level of a recruitment program is responsible for developing the structures and mechanisms to facilitate its implementation, the unit level is primarily concerned with the program's day-to-day operations. In other words, the unit level is less focused on larger agency structures and more on the recruitment program itself and its administration. The three main dimensions we consider at the unit level are strategies, metrics, and organizational learning.

### Strategies

Previous research highlights many strategies, of which we highlight a few of the most commonly identified. The first element we highlight is *removing application barriers*. Applications that are lengthy, costly, or unable to be completed online create barriers that can hinder the recruitment and hiring process (BJA and COPS Office 2023; Comrie 2020; PERF 2023). In fact, more than half of our interviews acknowledged that application barriers often hindered qualified applicants. For example, a human resource director from a large state-level agency in the West said, “barrier removal is the single largest thing you can do . . . Your basic exam costs money to take. So how does an organization offset that for those who have an economic challenge? We let those who test only for our agency take the test for free.” A commander of a recruitment and selection unit of a large state-level agency in the Midwest echoed this sentiment and illustrated how his agency has helped remove key application barriers:

We've tried to remove those application barriers and any of the difficulties that applicants have getting into the process and having the proper paperwork. We have implemented hiring events where you get application assistance. There's literally a recruiter, a staff member, sitting right there helping you complete your application because they can be confusing. Law enforcement applications have so many attachments.

**Barrier removal is the single largest thing you can do . . .  
We let those who test only for our agency take the test  
for free.**

A second strategy element is *expediting hiring practices*. Departments should streamline the hiring process by eliminating any unnecessary tests, conducting background investigations in a timely manner, and automating certain practices to guarantee efficiency (BJA and COPS Office 2023; Comrie 2020; PERF 2023). One director of a recruitment division for a large local agency in the West believed that the most effective strategy involved updating recruitment and testing processes to streamline the hiring process. Similarly, a commander of recruitment services in a large state-level agency in the Northeast explained that her agency removed oral boards from its hiring process because the agency believed that they slowed the hiring process while not being cost-effective.

Respondents believed it is crucial to streamline the hiring process to secure recruits in an extremely competitive hiring market. One commander of a large local agency in the Northeast explained the urgency in the current recruitment climate:

We have to move faster because of the competitiveness of the workforce and the way people change their mind today. People back in my day would wait a year, a year and a half to get a job. That's not going to happen today because the job opportunities are out there, and when people are interested, they want it right away.

**We have to move faster because of the competitiveness of the workforce and the way people change their mind today.**

#### **Field Spotlight: Streamlining Hiring in Washington, DC**

The Metropolitan (D.C.) Police Department has shortened its hiring process from 18 months to under four months by eliminating redundancies in its process and outsourcing certain components (PERF 2019). For example, it consolidated the medical review and background review to occur at the same time, and it outsourced its polygraph and psychological evaluations. This allowed the agency to streamline the hiring process without overburdening its recruitment staff and budget.

Some additional strategies that participants mentioned were maintaining constant communication with the recruit, reimbursing college tuition, having a competitive salary, and providing training academy sponsorship. Most respondents emphasized the importance of recruiter engagement with the applicant. They explained that when a recruiter is attentive to the needs and concerns of the recruit, the recruiter demonstrates that the organization truly cares about and values the candidate. One commander from a small agency at a university in the West explained that recruiters must adopt creative ways of communicating with the candidate. Whether it be through email, social media, or in person, the recruiter must keep the applicant engaged. This is consistent with a high-touch recruitment process where staff invest significant time with each recruit as they progress through the hiring process (Wojslawowicz et al. 2024).

Another element, mentioned by one-third of the sample, was having tuition reimbursement programs. This strategy can help attract recruits by demonstrating that the agency values officers who pursue higher education and allows them to advance through the ranks because of their educational investment (BJA and COPS Office 2023; U.S. Department of Justice 2019; PERF 2023). One supervisor of a large local agency in the South said

It can be incredibly important to have educational incentives like tuition reimbursements. That's why we're focused on scholarships. We have a huge educational incentive. If you stay with us for two or two and a half years, you get an 18 percent raise for having a master's degree or a 12 percent raise for having a bachelor's degree. People come to this department for that reason, because they're like, yep, I have a college education, I have a master's degree, I know I'm going to get paid for it there. And it also encourages our officers to educate themselves as they're here.

## Metrics

The literature suggests that metrics can help recruitment programs monitor progress and identify areas for improvement. One such metric is *first-year attrition*. This metric can help identify whether the job description is accurate, if recruitment is transparent, or whether there are internal or cultural issues that cause recruits to leave (Dertouzos and Garber 2008; Kushary 2024; Lever 2024; Tannian 2022). More than one third of our interviewees believed first-year attrition is a crucial element for tracking a recruitment program's progress. As a chief of a medium-sized local agency in the South told us,

[we] do look at retention rate, and how long recruits are retained—whether they stay that first year, whether they leave, and what are their reasons for leaving. Is it because there was something that was unknown to them when they went through the hiring process? [We] recently had somebody leave because he complained the family insurance costs were higher than he thought they'd be. So that's something that [we] can go back to look to make sure that people actually know these are the benefits, these are the dependent costs, this is how much the city pays toward it, this is what you'll have to pay.

In this case, the recruitment process may have lacked transparency, which pushed this recruit out of the organization.

A second element that recruitment programs should consider measuring is *quality of hire*. Quality of hire can be measured through a variety of performance assessments and interviews to determine if the recruit is completing the job adequately and in accordance with the department's goals and objectives (Dertouzos and Garber 2008; Kushary 2024; Lever 2024; Tannian 2022). For example, agencies can track citizen complaint data against new officers or assess the new recruit's probationary period in accordance with key indicators of success, such as positive community engagement (Meade 2016). Quality of hire is also related to organizational fit and the degree to which new recruits integrate into the agency's culture and peer network (Meade 2016). Departments can interview new hires after their first year to discuss their fit within the organization and also collect peer feedback regarding their teamwork and job performance (Officer Survey 2025). Though all participants expressed a desire to hire high-quality recruits, they struggled to develop concrete ways to measure "high quality." One director of a recruitment division in a large local agency in the West summarized the dilemma most participants faced: "I think the big factor . . .

. is identifying what is considered a quality candidate. There are so many variables to quality. Everyone thinks that they know, but what is it?”

**There are so many variables to quality. Everyone thinks that they know, but what is it?**

A third element that can be crucial to forming recruitment programs is *cost-per-hire*. The importance of this metric is in its indication of program value, i.e., how much an agency spends on recruiting efforts and the return it receives on this investment (Kushary 2024; Lever 2024; Tannian 2022). Are there ways the department can minimize its recruitment spending and still effectively recruit high numbers of candidates or increase recruitment yield given available resources? The metric of cost-per-hire can lend insight into the efficiency of the recruitment program and advise agency staff if they are optimizing their time and financial resources. More than half of our respondents agreed that cost-per-hire was an important metric to track. As a human resource director from a large state-level agency in the West explained, “You gotta understand cost-per-hire. Otherwise, you’re just throwing good money after bad [candidates]. If you don’t know what it costs to hire an individual, then you don’t know how much to allocate towards a recruitment task.” At the same time, the director of a large local agency in the West suggested that her department is willing to invest any necessary resources to recruit quality candidates through its pre-hire program. In this program, the agency pays candidates six months in advance simply to ensure they stay within the organization. It also provides candidates with adequate resources to succeed in the academy and during their first years of employment.

**If you don’t know what it costs to hire an individual, then you don’t know how much to allocate towards a recruitment task.**

**Field Spotlight: Tracking Cost-Per-Hire in Kansas**

The Topeka (Kansas) Police Department places a strong emphasis on cost-per-hire by tracking how much it spends on each recruiting initiative and the number of recruits who are hired from these efforts (Cobb, 2022). In so doing, it can measure which initiative yields the highest return on investment and estimate an average cost-per-hire that helps it guide its resources toward high-yielding recruitment tasks.

Another metric that our interviews consistently mentioned is *measuring where you lose applicants throughout the process*. One police chief of a medium-sized local agency in the Midwest explained

that it is important to know who you lost, the attributes of those you lost, and when and why you lost them. Another sergeant of a recruitment division in a large local agency in the West echoed this sentiment, explaining that he realized he was losing participants during the physical agility test. This, he said, prompted his agency to reassess the accuracy of the agility test and ensure it focused on skills needed to do the job, which in turn had a positive impact on attrition rates. In short, practitioners believe that an effective recruitment program must track where it is most likely to lose recruits and, if necessary, seek to modify agency practices.

## Organizational Learning

A rich literature suggests recruitment programs can benefit from adopting principles of a learning organization. The main element associated with this dimension is *continual review and innovation* of processes to promote improvement within the program itself. Learning organizations are ones that consistently analyze their operations and functions to find weaknesses that must be ameliorated and strengths that should be promoted (Akinci and Saddler-Smith 2019; Bedford and Mazerolle 2014; Filstad and Gottschalk 2013; Garvin 1993; Ortenblad 2019; Senge 1990; Senge et al. 1999; Sugarman 2010; Wilson, Grammich, and Cherry 2024). The processes of review and improvement can help recruitment staff determine which strategies are effective, what they can do to make the program more effective and efficient, and how they can innovate their strategies in ways that reflect the latest evidence-based lessons (Akinci and Saddler-Smith 2019; Bedford and Mazerolle 2014; Filstad and Gottschalk 2013; Ortenblad 2020; Sugarman 2010; Wilson, Grammich, and Cherry 2024).

All our interviewees agreed that the principles of a learning organization are an important dimension for recruitment programs. They acknowledged that a recruitment program must continually evolve and review its processes to understand how well it is performing and optimizing resources. As a human resources director of a large state-level agency in the West explained,

If you're not a learning organization, you're a dead organization. Your communities are always evolving. Every generation changes. There's new technology, there's new needs, new desires. You've got new influences, new people coming into your city or your county or your jurisdiction that changes the demographic or makeup of what's there. Crime changes as well. So, if you're not a learning organization, you're in big trouble. And you're also not going to recruit people because you're stuck in the Stone Ages.

A police chief of a large local agency in the South informed us that “you have to be willing to fail. You have to be willing to try something new. It may not work out, but you have to keep learning things.” All participants understood the value of tracking a recruitment program’s activities because it is through this analytical and monitoring process that they can learn and grow their programs to make their recruitment efforts more effective and efficient.

**If you're not a learning organization, you're a dead organization.**

### Field Spotlight: A Learning Organization in South Carolina

The Charleston (South Carolina) Police Department has embraced the principles of a learning organizations, particularly in its Recruitment and Retention Unit (Wilson, Grammich, and Cherry 2024). The unit has thoroughly examined its hiring process through various data collection means to identify areas for improvement and innovation. From these efforts, the unit was able to develop and refine marketing and recruiting strategies as well as make substantial improvements to the overall application process.

## Summary of Unit-level Dimensions

- **Strategies**—such as removing application barriers, expediting the hiring process, and providing tuition reimbursement—can create a more effective and efficient program.
- **Metrics** that assess the program’s success and identify areas for improvement facilitate program effectiveness. Such metrics include first-year attrition, quality of hire, cost-per-hire, and tracking where in the process applicants are lost.
- **Organizational Learning** enables personnel to consistently review the program’s activities, mitigate its weaknesses, promote its strengths, and innovate in its initiatives.

## Individual-Level Dimensions of Recruitment Programs

The individual level of a recruitment program is the most granular, focusing on the personnel who directly implement the program's activities. Although a recruitment program may have team members in a variety of roles, the dimensions we considered at this level focus not on roles but on the individuals who engage in recruitment practices. These dimensions are recruiter attributes, recruiter training, recruiter incentives, and recruiter types.

### Recruiter Attributes

Individual-level dimensions primarily concern the day-to-day implementation of recruitment programs by the individual recruiters who comprise them. The first dimension associated with the individual level is recruiter attributes. There are many elements (i.e., attributes) that a successful recruiter should possess, including *communication skills, emotional intelligence, cultural competence, a strong work ethic, goal-orientation, and self-initiative* (Dertouzos and Garber 2006; Gendron 2023b; Harvey 1996; PERF 2023; Werber and Ridgeway 2008). Recruiters should have very strong communications skills to interact in a friendly and captivating manner with an audience, listen with emotional intelligence to the perspectives of future applicants and make them feel understood and valued, and show cultural competency with a variety of candidates from different backgrounds. Additionally, when recruiters have a strong work ethic, are goal-oriented, and have a high level of self-initiated activity, they feel very motivated to develop and implement new recruitment strategies and can be left unsupervised to accomplish their tasks (Gendron 2023b; PERF 2023).

Our interviewees also acknowledged these elements as important attributes for recruiters. The elements most frequently mentioned by our interviewees were strong communication skills, emotional intelligence, and a strong work ethic. Respondents believed it was crucial for recruiters to have the ability to talk to a variety of candidates of differing backgrounds. A commander of a recruitment and training division in a small agency at a university in the West explained that the most important attributes a recruiter can have are the abilities to communicate with the community, to share identities, and to humanize officers. One supervisor of a large local agency in the South believed that a "recruiter has to be dynamic and an emotionally intelligent personality to be able to adapt and respond to what that particular person needs or wants." Emotional intelligence entails recruiters being aware of the candidate's thoughts, feelings, and desires so as to best accommodate and integrate candidates into the agency. Participants believe that recruiters should be hard workers because of the freedom often given to them. A Midwestern police chief from a medium-sized local agency explained that recruiters "have to be hardworking because you have to give them autonomy to work [on their own terms] and trust that the work is getting done."

One element our interviews cited that was not mentioned in the literature is *belief in the organization*. The recruiter must have a positive perception of the organization, have faith in the future of the agency, and be able to convey that positivity and passion to the candidate. One

Northeastern police chief of a small local agency explained that if a recruiter does not believe in the organization, does not believe in its values, and does not think the department has a good culture, then this negativity will be reflected in their recruitment efforts. Agencies should select recruiters who have a passion for the agency and accurately represent its values, culture, and principles.

**Agencies should select recruiters who have a passion for the agency and accurately represent its values, culture, and principles.**

### **Field Spotlight: A Successful Recruiter in California**

The Chula Vista (California) Police Department selected its recruiter for his genuine belief in and passion for the agency (Church 2007). With an extensive background in sales and marketing, the recruiter also possessed strong communication skills which allowed him to stay in touch with many applicants. His communication skills, coupled with his sincere belief in the organization, allowed him to have meaningful exchanges with applicants that facilitated successful recruitment.

## Recruiter Training

The literature indicates that recruiter training is an important dimension for recruitment programs. The field routinely discusses training for new recruits, but little is said about training the recruiters who do the actual recruiting. One element of recruiter training is *mentorship programs*. A mentorship program can consist of a new recruiter shadowing an older, experienced recruiter in an array of settings to fully understand the mechanisms of recruitment as well as the overall functioning of the agency (Recruit CRM 2023a).

More than one-third of our interviews viewed mentorship programs as valuable elements of effective recruitment programs. Participants explained it was crucial for experienced recruiters to show new recruiters how the program typically works. A human resources director of a large state-level agency in the West believed that if “you have existing recruitment staff, when it’s time to replace those individuals, you need to have them mentor the next group coming in, not after they’ve left, because you need to be able to have them pass on that information and to mentor and grow the next person coming in.” An interim commander of recruitment and selection services in a large state-level agency in the Midwest also noted that experienced recruiters often feel pride in showing new recruiters who they have brought into the agency and how impactful recruitment can truly be. He stated,

You go to a graduating class, and you see your recruiters there. And they will identify which ones they brought into the program. They're proud, and they're excited about it. And so that mentorship [is important] to bring somebody along so they have an understanding of what it means to be a recruiter and what impact you can have on somebody's life for the rest of their life.

**If you have existing recruitment staff. . . you need to have them mentor the next group coming in.**

A second element suggested by the literature is *confidence training*. This is training in which recruiters practice recruitment presentations and “hooks” and are given extensive knowledge of the department (Recruit CRM 2023a). About one-fourth of our interviews noted confidence training as crucial to ensuring recruiter success. These participants emphasized the importance of roleplaying to prepare recruiters for potential questions and scenarios they may encounter in the field. For example, a police chief of a medium-sized local agency in the Midwest described a dilemma his recruiters face:

Our recruiters are so young, and they're still relatively new. They aren't really adept at anticipating questions like ‘what do you like best about working there?’, ‘what's your favorite part about the job?’, ‘what do you like the least?’, ‘do you work 12-hour shifts and why don't you work 12-hour shifts?’, or ‘why don't you have a full-time SWAT [Special Weapons and Tactics] team?’ So, we have quarterly meetings with them, and some of the things we do are role-play trainings, like what kinds of questions can you anticipate and how would you answer these questions.

A third element that can help with training recruiters is *knowledge repositories*. These should consist of quick and easy guides with important information about the department (Recruit CRM 2023a). When recruiters are well-informed about the agency they represent, they will be more confident and more able to accurately answer questions for candidates. Nearly one-fourth of our participants saw value in knowledge repositories.

An operations bureau commander of a medium-sized agency at a Southern university detailed how his agency provides recruiters with a script so that they can communicate a consistent message to candidates. The script contains information on the hiring process, the salary, and the benefits offered by the agency, as well as other key messaging opportunities to sell the department. A police chief of a large local agency in the Midwest explained the consequences of not having accessible recruiting materials: “If you have to spend too much time trying to dig to find what you're looking for, people are going to get frustrated and just move on. So, you have to have your materials in such a way that people can easily access them.”

**When recruiters are well-informed about the agency they represent, they will be more confident and more able to accurately answer questions for candidates.**

A fourth element identified by participants that was not discussed in the research we reviewed is *training recruiters on technical skills, such as social media management*. More than one-fourth of our respondents believed it was crucial for recruiters to boost their recruitment efforts through social media platforms and often sent recruiters to be trained on these technical skills. A commander of recruitment services in a large state-level agency in the Northeast told us that at the time of her interview one of her recruiters was at a social media conference to acquire skills for maximizing social media engagement and recruitment tactics.

While most of our interviewees mentioned at least one element of recruiter training, about one in three did not believe that trainings were an important dimension for recruitment programs. Such respondents believed that it is not possible to train recruiters to have strong communication skills, because “either they have them or don’t.” These participants believe that it is important to pick the right recruiters from the very beginning and ensure that they already have all necessary characteristics, such as an outgoing personality and strong communication skills, important for effective recruitment.

## Recruiter Incentives

Previous research identifies recruiter incentives as an important dimension for individual recruiters. Nonfinancial incentives can be particularly motivating for recruiters. One such incentive is *professional development opportunities*. Agencies can budget to pay for recruiters to attend conferences, career-related workshops, or online courses (Recruit CRM 2023b). This type of incentive can be cost-effective and emphasizes the agency’s interest in advancing the careers of their officers. Nearly one-fourth of our sample viewed professional development opportunities as necessary components to building and maintaining effective recruitment programs. Participants who saw this element as valuable believed that it could help further educate and expand recruiters’ perception of both recruitment programs and policing in general. For example, a commander of recruitment and training division of a small agency at a Western university said,

I’m a big fan of exposure to conferences. With conferences comes a much broader view of what’s going on in police departments and policing within the nation or the state. I think oftentimes most officers work at one department, and they don’t get exposure outside of that department. That department is one small view of what policing is like and it can be drastically different across the country. So, understanding that, I think, is really powerful. So, going to conferences that expose the recruiters to people outside their organization is really important.

## Going to conferences that expose the recruiters to people outside their organization is really important.

A second element of recruiter incentives noted in the literature is *recognition and award systems*. Many agencies may not have the budget to pay for career advancement projects, but they can recognize an effective recruiter through a newsletter or department-wide email (Recruit CRM 2023b). Agencies can also give recruiters small gift cards to local coffee shops or restaurants (Recruit CRM 2023b). This type of recognition and award system is not extravagant, but it does commend officers for their ability to recruit candidates. This is especially relevant to smaller agencies with limited budgets that cannot afford more costly incentives. Nearly one in four of our participants viewed recognition and award systems as crucial components to efficient recruitment programs. Among participants who saw value in this incentive, most rewarded their best recruiters through an award ceremony. Specific awards included an Officer of the Year Award or a Distinguished Performance Award.

### Field Spotlight: Recognizing Effective Recruitment in Virginia

The Vienna (Virginia) Police Department presented its recruiter its “Employee of the Year” award in recognition of his relentless recruiting efforts amid a staffing shortage (Woolsey 2023). The recruiter was able to hire 10 officers—roughly one-fourth of the department’s 41 sworn positions—within two years.

Most interviewees did not view incentives as an important dimension for recruitment programs. Some participants even believed that incentives could jeopardize the integrity of the recruitment process by encouraging recruiters to fill the agency with poor candidates just to receive a financial bonus. A sergeant from a large local agency in the South believed that the “best incentive is to tell them they’re doing a good job. But if you start giving bonuses, I think they start to try to fill quantity over quality. If they’re self-motivated and challenge themselves and are goal-oriented, they don’t need incentives to do recruiting.” Other participants believed that the greatest incentive recruiters should receive is the satisfaction of filling the department with good officers who can improve the overall organization. A staffing lieutenant of a large agency at a Southern university said,

The first incentive that comes off the top of my head is the incentive that I want to make sure we hire enough people so I can take a day off if I need it, or I can go somewhere. That’s big. That’s the biggest factor that makes everybody know the importance of being fully staffed or staffed up, because that will help them out.

## Recruiter Types

The last dimension the literature identifies at the individual level is recruiter types. *Effectively structuring recruiter experience* may promote more effective recruitment efforts. For example,

*pairing more senior staff with recruits* can positively influence recruitment. Seasoned officers are more experienced and knowledgeable of the agency. They can accurately answer questions about the department, work setting, and realities of being an officer. At the same time, staff with less experience may be closer in age to potential candidates and better able to explain current or recent hiring processes and experiences (Gendron 2023a). Additionally, *coupling developers and closers* can help recruitment programs. Developers are recruiters with strong communication skills who can captivate an audience and begin the recruitment process; closers are recruiters who spend significant time with recruits and walk them through each step of the recruitment process. If these skills cannot be differentiated among multiple recruiters, they can be sought or developed within a single staff member.

Our interviewees were split on the importance and feasibility of recruiter types. They saw the value in capitalizing on the strengths and weaknesses of recruiters and pairing them accordingly, but many did not have experience with programs incorporating multiple recruiters, precluding differentiation of recruiters. As a police chief of a medium-sized agency at a Midwestern university said

Department size comes into play, because not everybody has multiple people doing this. So, for an agency like us, we have only one person doing it. You need to find somebody who can present in front of a large crowd or a group to be comfortable, to hold people's attention, but to also have that one-on-one connection with somebody. We would look for those characteristics in the same person.

Other participants explained that recruiter types develop naturally within their department because they do not have a designated full-time recruiter. For example, officers who are extroverted may volunteer to attend recruitment fairs while officers who prefer one-on-one interactions will eagerly volunteer to lead ride-alongs.

### **Department size comes into play, because not everybody has multiple people doing this.**

A small portion of our participants did not believe that differentiating recruiter types was important for having an effective recruitment program. These participants believed that having separate persons as developers and closers could confuse recruits who would not be consistently communicating with one person. They also noted the greater chance of administrative “disconnect” with multiple recruiters for a recruit. A captain of an operations division for a medium-sized agency at a Southern university said there should only be one recruiter mentoring the candidate throughout the entire hiring process because “handing them off is a weird message to send and . . . a lot of information can get lost in translation.”

## Summary of Individual-level Dimensions

- **Recruiter Attributes**—such as strong communication skills, emotional intelligence, a strong work ethic, cultural competence, and belief in the organization—should be prioritized when selecting effective recruiters.
- **Recruiter Training** can help prepare recruiters for the job through mentorship programs, confidence training, knowledge repositories, and preparation for social media management.
- **Recruiter Incentives** can increase recruiter productivity, though they may compromise the integrity of the recruitment process by encouraging recruiters to focus on quantity over quality for the sake of personal reward.
- **Recruiter Types** can be distinguished, allowing agencies to capitalize on the strengths and weaknesses of individual recruiters by pairing them according to specific characteristics, such as newer and more experienced recruiters.

## The Most Critical Components of a Recruitment Program

We asked participants to identify what they consider to be the three most important features of a recruitment program. In this section, we discuss (1) the five most important program features as identified by at least five participants for each, (2) other program features viewed as important by one to four participants, and (3) the most critical components of a recruitment program by department size, type, and region.

### The Five Most Important Components Identified by Participants

The most frequently cited component, identified by 15 of our 26 participants, was *having the right team and recruiters*. Participants strongly believed that for a recruitment program to be effective, it needed to have a team of individuals committed to the recruitment process and invested in the organization's overall success. This group needs to believe in the agency's mission and philosophy so it can collaboratively work together to recruit individuals who can help the department achieve its goals (Baker and Carrera 2007; Breaugh and Starke 2000; Wilson et al. 2010). Participants viewed individual recruiters as essential components of a recruitment program. As a police chief from a medium-size local agency in the West said, the "recruiter needs to understand the vision of the organization and have total buy-in to it. They have to be able to communicate that effectively and communicate not only how the recruit can benefit the organization but what the organization can provide for the recruit."

**The recruiter needs to understand the vision of the organization and have total buy-in to it.**

The second most frequently cited component was *having executive support and guidance*. According to a commander of a recruitment division in a large state-level agency in the Midwest, the chief executive officer should be able to provide direction and focus because they "have to say, this is what our goals and objectives are with our recruitment program." To do this, leadership must be able to identify the organization's core values, because these values are the foundation of the department's operation and determine what characteristics a recruit must have to fit well with the agency (Orrick 2008; Wilson et al. 2010). In addition to providing guidance, leadership must also support the recruitment process and individual recruiters. A police chief from a small local agency in the Northeast said that "leadership must view recruitment in a positive light in order to be able to support the process financially, motivate the recruitment team, and provide the team with the freedom to creatively recruit individuals."

**Leadership must view recruitment in a positive light in order to be able to support the process financially,**

**motivate the recruitment team, and provide them with  
the freedom to creatively recruit individuals.**

The third most cited program component was *allocating a budget and resources* to a recruitment program. As noted, recruitment programs may require a variety of resources to reach their objectives (Asch 2019; GAO 2024; Gendron 2023b; Jones 2019; Schulker et al. 2020). These resources can include personnel as well as recruitment materials, such as banners, flyers, advertisements, and cars. These resources require organizational investments which can be facilitated by an allocated budget. One respondent, a commander of a recruitment and selection division in a large state-level agency in the Midwest, noted a paradox that many agencies must overcome, observing “you cannot expect the recruiting program to work without adequate resources. In law enforcement, you typically get asked to do more with less. Well, in recruitment, I don't think that that is a viable option.”

The fourth most frequently identified program component is *having a competitive salary*. Organizations offering higher wages than the local average market can attract a higher number of candidates, providing them with a larger pool from which to select quality recruits (Harvey 1996; Orrick 2008; Recruit CRM 2023b). A police chief from a medium-sized agency at a Midwestern university stressed the importance of competitive wages and properly compensating officers for their work, noting that surrounding agencies have increased their salaries by about \$10,000, which has severely impacted his own department’s recruitment efforts. Organizations must recognize the value that recruits place on salary and make their pay rate competitive within their region.

The fifth most frequently cited program component was *marketing and selling the organization’s brand*. An employer brand can be crucial to a recruitment program because it conveys the department’s reputation and communicates to the potential recruit what it is like to work for a particular agency (Ellis et al. 2005; Gendron 2023b; Orrick 2008; Sartain and Schumann 2006; Wilson et al. 2010). An operations commander from a medium-sized agency at a Southern university claimed that departments can market their brand by advertising unique agency features. For example, this commander’s agency offers very flexible schedules to officers and pays for their gym memberships, demonstrating that the agency is concerned with the officer’s overall well-being. A Southern police chief from a medium-sized local agency summarized the importance of branding and marketing by stressing that “you need to market your brand. If you do not have a good brand, no matter how holistic your recruitment approach is, no matter how good you are at those three levels of recruitment, if your brand is not good or you are not marketing it, you will always have problems.”

**You need to market your brand. If you do not have a good  
brand . . . or you are not marketing it, you will always  
have problems.**

In sum, our interviews suggested recruitment programs should have:

1. The right team and recruiters.
2. Executive support and guidance.
3. An allocated budget and resources.
4. A competitive salary for recruits.
5. Savvy ways to market and sell the organization's brand.

## Additional Program Components

Four additional program features were identified as important by at least one respondent. These were a culture in which every officer views recruitment as their duty, promoting organizational learning, having an expedited recruitment and hiring process, and having autonomy to creatively recruit.

Four respondents believed it was important for a recruitment program to have a culture in which every officer views recruitment as their duty. They stressed the importance of officers feeling invested in the agency and wanting to recruit to have good coworkers. Some of these participants do not have a designated recruiter in their department, and consequently recruitment often occurred informally. One chief of a medium-sized agency at a Southern university explained that in his agency, the human resources department had charge of the entire recruitment and selection process, and therefore there was no active recruiter among police officers. As a result, he believed that “everybody in the organization, from top to bottom, should always be recruiting.” In creating this department-wide culture, officers are more likely to see public interactions as an opportunity to recruit individuals into the agency, making positive impressions with the public more likely (Baker and Carrera 2007; Wilson et al. 2010).

**Everybody in the organization, from top to bottom,  
should always be recruiting.**

Three respondents believed *promoting organizational learning* was crucial for building and maintaining efficient recruitment programs. They explained that programs need to have processes in place that allow them to review their recruitment activities and to alter them if necessary. A sergeant from a large local agency in the West stated that a recruitment program should “have a learning mindset . . . to change pieces of your process, look at the outcomes, and have the courage to make changes while still keeping your culture intact.” These participants believed that innovation is crucial to a successful recruitment process, but that in order to innovate, a department must have mechanisms that help the recruitment team assess its operations and determine whether it is making efficient progress on key indicators (Garvin 1993; Ortenblad 2019; Senge 1990; Senge et al. 1999; Wilson, Grammich, and Cherry 2024).

Two participants emphasized the importance of *an expedited recruitment and hiring process*. They explained that the faster the process, the less likely they were to lose a candidate to a competing agency. A sergeant from a large Southern local agency said

A hiring process should be as quick as possible but still as thorough as needed. If police departments thought like empathetic people, [they would ask themselves], “if you are unemployed and needed a job, do you want to wait six months to figure out if you’re actually getting a job? Is that actually rational?”

**A hiring process should be as quick as possible but still  
as thorough as needed.**

Two participants believed that recruiters should have *autonomy to creatively recruit*. The key word to understanding this component is *autonomy*. Respondents believed that recruiters should have the freedom to be creative and innovative in their recruitment efforts. The organization should relinquish some level of control to recruiters who can then try new strategies and tactics for recruitment. As one commander of a large state-level agency in the Midwest said, “recruiters must have the autonomy to do things that are different. They have to have the ability to try new things, nontraditional things, things out of the norm to see if they work.”

Lastly, there were several program components identified by only one participant. These include *recruitment goals, exposing the recruit as early as possible to the organizational culture, the local and national image of police, flexible recruitment policies, high-touch communication with recruits, readily accessible recruiting materials, reaching as many applicants as possible, a sense of belonging, recruiter types, pipeline programs, a reward system for current employees, job rotation and enrichment, recruit training, recruiter training, respecting the recruitment process, creative recruiting, recruiting the correct applicant, and implementing policies for recruitment evaluations*.

## Critical Program Components by Department Characteristics

### Size of Agency

Practitioners representing small agencies (i.e., departments with fewer than 40 sworn personnel) identified three program features as essential for recruitment: *having leadership support*, an organizational-level component; *promoting organizational learning*, a unit-level component; and *having the right recruiter*, an individual-level component. While smaller agencies may not have the resources and budget to create highly complex recruitment programs, they still see the value in including key dimensions from all the levels of a recruitment program (Bradley 2020; Orrick 2008).

Those representing medium-sized agencies (i.e., departments with 40 to 99 sworn personnel) identified four critical components for effective recruitment programs: *having a positive organizational culture that uplifts all employees, allocating a budget and resources to recruitment,*

*marketing and selling the organization’s brand, and having the right recruiters and recruitment team.* Medium-sized departments differ from smaller departments in that they may have more resources to invest in a recruitment program. This, in turn, may lead them to acknowledge the importance of branding the department and knowing how to sell it as a key recruitment strategy. Financially investing in this strategy is critical for its success, as programs often use videos, social media platforms, and recruitment gear to market their brand and sell it to a wider audience (Ellis et al. 2005; Gendron 2023b; Orrick 2008; Sartain and Schumann 2006; Wilson et al. 2010). Moreover, *having a positive organizational culture* can further cultivate the organization’s brand by communicating that the agency has a positive reputation for uplifting its employees and supporting their career track.

Staff from large agencies (i.e., departments with 100 or more sworn personnel) primarily listed *leadership support, allocated budget and resources, and having the right recruiters and recruitment team* as the most critical components of a recruitment program. These features closely mirror the features identified by small agencies, but large departments were even more likely to highlight dedicating resources to their recruitment programs, citing the size and complexity of their agencies (Asch 2019; GAO 2024; Jones 2019; Schulker et al. 2020). As one supervisor from a large local agency in the South put it, “having that budget . . . allows you to seriously recruit, not just to put an ad in the paper. [There should be] enough money in that budget to be seriously doing a recruiting program.”

Perhaps as critical for recruitment efforts to consider are those components that are not specific to agency size. Having the right leadership, budget, recruiters, and team transcend agency size. While agencies may lack resources for all the components considered most important, they should ensure they are able to include these.

## Type of Agency

Practitioners from local agencies viewed the most important program components as *allocating a budget and resources, marketing and selling the organization’s brand, offering a competitive salary, and having the right recruiter and recruitment team.* The importance of offering competitive salaries that staff in local agencies noted may be a response to the low numbers of applicants many local agencies receive (PERF 2023). Local departments tend to compete with one another for a very small applicant pool and thus try to set themselves apart from their competition by increasing their salaries and benefits.

Those in state agencies identified four important program components: *having leadership support, allocating a budget and resources, having the right recruiters and recruitment team, and having the autonomy to try new things.* This last component is particularly relevant for state agencies because their recruiters tend to be spread throughout the entire state (Williams and Higgins 2023). As a result, they may have less supervision than recruiters for local or university agencies, and autonomy will be important in how they creatively recruit individuals into their organization.

Representatives from university agencies listed four main program components as well: *leadership support, competitive salaries, the right recruiters and recruitment team, and a culture in which every officer views recruiting as their duty.* Regarding recruiting culture, participants believed that every officer should be invested in the success of the organization and should make it their obligation to recruit during any opportunity they had with the public. A commander from a medium-sized agency at a Southern university stated that because his department does not have a sole recruiter, the program should have “a culture where everybody recognizes it’s their job to go out and find people who you want to work with.”

Participants from all three types of agencies noted *budget, salaries, recruiters and the recruiting team, and leadership support* as important for their efforts. Recruiting, like other work, needs resources and support. While competition for officers may be felt more keenly by local agencies, policing agencies of all types may find salaries important in competing for applicants with other opportunities.

## Region

Participants from departments in the Northeast had no common themes in their responses, finding many different program features to be important. These included *fostering pipeline programs to recruit young individuals, having a positive organizational culture, training new recruits properly, having an expedited recruitment and hiring process, demonstrating high-touch communication with the candidate, respecting the overall recruitment process, having leadership support, having the right recruiter and recruitment team, and having an allocated budget and resources.*

For agencies found in the Midwest, the most frequently cited program components were *having the right recruiter and recruitment team, allocating a budget and resources, marketing and selling the organization’s brand, having a positive organizational culture, and having autonomy to creatively recruit.*

Respondents from departments in the South identified three primary program components: *marketing and selling the organization’s brand, having the right recruiters and recruitment team, and a culture in which every officer views recruiting as their duty.*

Staff representing departments in the West identified four main components for an effective recruitment program: *having the right recruiters and recruitment team, promoting organizational learning, allocating a budget and resources, and having competitive salaries.* Competitive salaries and resources are particularly relevant for Western agencies given the high cost of living in this area. Departments must not only compete with their fellow agencies for limited applicants but also provide officers with sustainable wages in relation to the region’s economic environment (Harvey 1996; Orrick 2008; Recruit CRM 2023b).

Components cited as important across regions are *recruiters and the recruitment team and budget.* While some components, such as salary in the West, may be more important in some

regions, agencies throughout the country understand both the need for recruiting resources and the right personnel to use these resources.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Recruiting is a continual challenge for police agencies and one that has become more acute over the last decade. While there has been some attention to individual tactics that may help boost recruitment efforts, there has been less attention to building programs for addressing this endemic problem. Yet recruiting remains more than a collection of individual, isolated strategies, and therefore agencies must consider broader efforts and the infrastructure to support them.

Our work explores the organizational-level, unit-level, and individual-level dimensions of effective recruitment programs, blending the findings of previous research with insights from practitioners. At the organizational level, recruitment programs need supportive leadership, a healthy organizational culture, budgeted resources, and a performance-based approach to recruiting and goals that match community needs. At the unit level, recruitment programs need strategies to expedite processes, metrics to measure progress, and organizational learning processes to continually learn from and improve upon efforts. At the individual level, recruitment programs need recruiters with the right attributes for the job, such as communication skills and emotional intelligence, as well as tailored training and resources that support them in their work.

The importance of these components may vary by agency circumstances. But the broader point remains that recruiting must be a systemic effort. Only by building the broader infrastructure necessary for recruitment programs will police organizations be able to effectively address the dynamic staffing challenges they face.

Whether or not an agency maintains a formal recruitment unit, there are a few ways those looking to improve their recruitment programs may use our findings. Most simply, those administering a program could choose a dimension or two they feel it would be worthwhile to prioritize and take steps to further develop infrastructure in those areas. For example, if a program has not been particularly methodical or creative in the past, those charged with recruitment responsibilities may seek to become more innovative and data driven. In these circumstances, they may consider organizational learning principles they could integrate into their approach and formalize a series of performance metrics they could implement to help identify challenges and successes. As these areas are strengthened, staff can move onto additional ones for development.

More comprehensively, those overseeing a recruitment program may find it useful to map it against the guiding framework we present to illustrate their efforts relative to each dimension, identifying still other dimensions they may value. This would include identifying and assessing the substantive activities, features, components, issues, strengths, and weaknesses associated with each dimension. This would essentially provide a gap analysis to reveal where a program is robust or underdeveloped, both within and across the framework dimensions. Agencies may find value in forming a stakeholder group to guide and conduct this process. Working collectively, those with knowledge and experience at the organizational, unit, and individual levels of the recruitment process could provide a comprehensive assessment of the alignment between the existing

recruitment program and the guiding framework we present and define and prioritize areas for change that will enable the program to optimize its overall performance.

## Appendix

To build the anatomy of recruitment programs, we conducted a thorough review of practitioner and academic literatures in the criminal justice, business, military, and nursing fields from 2010 to 2024, drawing on earlier work for additional context where helpful. We searched the literature to identify key programmatic features relevant to building effective recruitment programs. In particular, we used the search engines of Nexis Uni, ProQuest, and Google Scholar to identify relevant studies and articles. Using search terms such as “police recruitment,” “recruitment programs,” “recruitment dimensions,” “recruitment elements,” “recruitment for the military,” “recruitment programs for nursing,” and “recruitment elements in business,” we found 47 relevant articles in the criminal justice field, 32 in the military, 17 in business, and 23 in nursing. Using a grounded-theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) approach, we employed an inductive process to identify dimensions in the data (Aksulu and Wade 2010). This involved identifying and grouping relevant program components into larger categories and subsequent levels.

Ultimately, we developed a taxonomy for recruitment programs that identified their

- elements, i.e., their basic building blocks;
- dimensions, i.e., major themes of common elements;
- levels, i.e., primary location of common dimensions.

We aim for this taxonomy to expand practitioner and academic perceptions of recruitment programs and to help them approach recruiting more holistically. That said, we did not include all dimensions and elements of recruitment programs because they can be very expansive and complex. We did, however, isolate key levels, dimensions, and elements that are common to successful recruitment programs and that can help practitioners customize programs to their organization’s needs.

We organized program dimensions we discovered in the literature into organizational, unit, and individual levels. The organizational level consisted of three dimensions: leadership, budget allocation, and recruitment goals. After practitioner input, we added culture as a fourth organizational-level dimension. The unit level included three dimensions: strategies, metrics, and organizational learning. The individual level comprised four dimensions: recruiter attributes, recruiter training, recruiter incentives, and recruiter types.

Previous research indicated each of these dimensions had one to three elements, which we discuss in our findings. These dimensions and elements should not be considered exhaustive. Rather, they indicate commonly identified features that are worth considering. Together, they suggest a broad approach to implementing an effective recruitment program.

To gauge how practitioners might view these dimensions and elements, as well as important features that may be missing from our characterization, we sought input from subject matter

experts. We used a modified quota sampling frame to identify subject matter experts for interviews. The strata and substrata of our sampling frame were as follows:

- Respondent's position and assignment within their organization
  - executive officers
  - program personnel, i.e., individuals who have direct, substantial roles administering and implementing the recruitment process
- Department size
  - small agencies (fewer than 40 sworn personnel)
  - medium agencies (40 to 99 sworn personnel)
  - large agencies (at least 100 sworn personnel)
- Type of department
  - local
  - state
  - university
- Region
  - South
  - West
  - Midwest
  - Northeast

We sought three participants per substratum, not for saturation purposes, but rather for adequate contextualization and assessment of the identified levels, dimensions, and elements. Our goal was not to have a representative sample, but to capture the perspectives of individuals with experience in program-building from a variety of agencies and department roles. That said, we were primarily concerned with practitioners' experience with and personal knowledge of program features, which would include knowledge from their current agency and others they have served. Altogether, our sample is a function of quotas being met by subject matter experts who have varying levels of knowledge about recruitment and program-building.

Based on our extensive outreach with the law enforcement community, we invited 37 individuals for interviews, of whom 26 participated, yielding a 70 percent response rate (see table 1). Though our sample size is too small for statistical analyses, there were no discernible patterns or differences between agencies of individuals who did and did not respond.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample Respondents (n=26)**

CHARACTERISTICS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
<i>Respondent Position</i>		
Executive Officer	10	38%
Program Personnel	16	62%
<i>Sworn Size of Department</i>		
Small (<40)	3	12%
Medium (40-99)	8	31%
Large (100 or more)	15	58%
<i>Agency Type</i>		
Local	18	69%
State	3	12%
University	5	19%
<i>Region</i>		
South	8	31%
West	9	35%
Midwest	5	19%
Northeast	4	15%

Note: Within groups, percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

We interviewed participants from June to September 2024 to obtain their assessment of the recruitment dimensions identified from the literature. Interviews were conducted by two members of the research team who met to review the interview instrument and ensure consistency in their respective interviews. Taking approximately an hour each, interviews occurred via video conferencing software which allowed for audio to be transcribed anonymously to ensure compliance with participation protocols. To conduct interviews, we developed an instrument based on the program dimensions identified, which we pretested with two subject matter experts. Specifically, we asked participants to describe whether each dimension was relevant for building an effective recruitment program, and if so, to explain which elements of the dimensions were most important. We did this for every dimension highlighted in our literature review: leadership, budgeting, recruitment goals, strategies, metrics, recruiter attributes, recruiter training, recruiter incentives, and recruiter types. We also asked participants to identify other important program features that were missing from our literature assessment. At the conclusion of interviews, we asked participants to rank the three most critical components for effective and efficient recruitment programs. Our findings do not reflect all potential dimensions and elements of a successful recruitment program but rather represent common program features mentioned in the literature and in interviews.

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Dr. Jeremy M. Wilson is Professor and Associate Director of the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University, where he founded and directs the Police Staffing Observatory. As a scholar, educator, advisor, and consultant, he has collaborated with a wide array of institutions, published more than 200 resources, and led more than \$15 million of research and outreach projects sponsored by the U.S. Congress, U.S. Departments of Justice and the Interior, foundations, governments, agencies, associations, and corporations. His policing research focuses on evidence-based personnel planning and developing a systems approach to police staffing, integrating aspects of workload demand, performance objectives, resource allocation and deployment, recruitment, retention, cohort management, workforce attributes and related areas. Among his staffing publications are *Reframing the Police Staffing Challenge: A Systems Approach to Workforce Planning and Managing Workload Demand*, *A Performance-Based Approach to Police Staffing and Allocation*, *Police Recruitment and Retention for the New Millennium: The State of Knowledge*, *Recruiting and Retaining America's Finest: Evidence-Based Lessons for Police Workforce Planning*, *Police Retention: A Systematic Review of the Research*, *Staffing Composition in Large, U.S. Police Departments*, and *Police Workforce Structures: Cohorts, the Economy, and Organizational Performance*. For his contributions to police research and practice, he was named a Distinguished Scholar by the American Society of Criminology Division on Policing, and the Police Section of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences honored him with the O.W. Wilson Award. To learn more, see <https://jeremywilson.org/>.

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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 the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice to promote evidence-based police workforce research, strategy and operations. Directed by Professor Jeremy M. Wilson, its primary aims are to advance police workforce knowledge and its application by

- conducting timely and innovative research on critical aspects of a wide-range of police staffing issues, resulting in scholarly and practitioner-oriented resources;
- creating a venue for the network of police staffing scholars to share opportunities, discuss ideas, and enable collaborations;
- facilitating researcher-practitioner partnerships;
- serving as a repository and dissemination vehicle for the research of collaborators so that it is easily discoverable by practitioners, policymakers, and others.

Through its facilitation of research and outreach, the PSO is a community of science that serves as a valuable resource for the community of practice. Hundreds of resources spanning police staffing systems can be accessed from the PSO website, <https://cj.msu.edu/community/pso>.