



PSO Perspective

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The Interplay of Recruitment and Retention

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This PSO Perspective highlights that police recruitment and retention carry equal weight and are best understood as interconnected. Treating them as distinct challenges risks missed opportunities; integrating strategies helps agencies address root causes, sustain staffing, and strengthen long-term workforce investments.

Hire Your Officers and Keep Them Too

Police agencies across the United States continue to face serious staffing challenges, often framed as either a recruitment problem or a retention problem. Leaders may say, *"We don't have a recruitment problem—we have a retention problem,"* but in reality these issues are inseparable. What draws people into policing also shapes whether they remain, and what drives officers to leave influences future applicants. Recruitment and retention are interdependent parts of one staffing system. Addressing them together helps agencies tackle root causes, sustain their workforce, and achieve greater impact with fewer resources.

Current Challenges

Police staffing challenges today reflect pressures on both recruitment and retention:

- **Recruitment difficulties.** Application rates have declined compared to prior decades, leaving agencies with fewer qualified candidates.
- **Retention concerns.** Attrition has increased, with retirements and mid-career resignations affecting agencies of all sizes.
- **Compounding effects.** These pressures reinforce one another: high attrition drives more recruitment, while weak recruitment

pipelines strain remaining officers and accelerate departures.

Treating these challenges separately is costly. Recruitment requires significant time and resources, and when officers leave prematurely, agencies lose that investment and must restart the cycle. Replacing one officer can cost well over their annual salary. High attrition also erodes morale and agency reputation, making future recruitment even more difficult.

Why Recruitment and Retention Interact

Recruitment and retention are interconnected:

- **Shared motivators.** Pay, career opportunities, and workplace environment influence both joining and staying.
- **Reputation.** Officers' experiences shape how outsiders view the agency—strong retention aids recruitment, while high turnover deters it.
- **Systemic effects.** Poor retention conditions undermine recruitment, while weak pipelines increase strain and departures.

Agencies that design these strategies in isolation risk short-term fixes rather than sustainable solutions.

Risks of Separating Recruitment and Retention

Addressing recruitment and retention independently creates several risks:

- **Lost investments.** Recruitment is expensive; without retention, agencies repeatedly lose that investment.
- **Workforce imbalance.** Overemphasis on recruitment can create uneven cohorts and strain supervision, promotions, and workload.
- **Lower morale.** Neglecting retention drives turnover and damages agency reputation.
- **The “leaky bucket.”** Recruiting while attrition continues leaves root causes unaddressed.

Agencies that separate these strategies risk a revolving door of staffing rather than building a stable workforce.

Integrated Strategies

Agencies can strengthen recruitment and retention simultaneously through strategies such as:

- **Career development** – clear advancement pathways that attract and retain talent.
- **Mentorship** – early-career support and leadership roles for senior officers.
- **Compensation** – competitive pay and benefits that sustain commitment.
- **Leadership** – effective supervision that builds satisfaction and loyalty.
- **Workplace culture** – equitable and respectful treatment that widens applicant pools and improves retention.
- **Wellness and balance** – policies that reduce burnout and support officer well-being.

- **Community reputation** – strong public trust that aids both recruitment and pride in service.

These strategies demonstrate how one investment can yield “double the reward” across the workforce cycle.

Conclusion

Recruitment and retention should not be treated as separate problems but as connected parts of a sustainable staffing system. By integrating strategies, agencies can invest more efficiently, reduce the revolving-door effect, and strengthen both morale and reputation. Future scholarship should also devote greater attention to retention, which has been less studied than recruitment.

Agencies that approach recruitment and retention together will be best positioned to build stable workforces and meet today’s public safety challenges.

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About the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory

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