

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN FLORIDA SHERIFFS' OFFICES — 2023 & BEYOND

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BACKGROUND

For many years, law enforcement agencies had little difficulty filling vacant positions or retaining qualified personnel. A policing career appealed to those with a strong sense of public duty and offered job security, benefits, and an early retirement.¹ The number of applicants outnumbered available positions, and some agencies didn't even need recruiters to fill open positions. It wasn't unusual for hundreds of applicants to apply for a handful of positions.

Most people who become police officers do so for similar altruistic and practical reasons: to help people, to enforce the law, and for job security (Ermer, 1978; Charles, 1982; Powers, 1983; Meagher and Yentes, 1986; Bridges, 1989; Raganella and White, 2004). Job security, job benefits (i.e. medical/pension), and early retirement were listed as the top three motivators in becoming a police officer among both sexes (White et al., 2010).

Agency budgets, though, have historically struggled to offer competitive pay and benefits. The Office of Community Oriented Policing (COPS) was created within the U. S. Department of Justice in 1994. Since then, the COPS program has funded over \$14 billion to hire police officers, enhance technology, and provide training. By 2013, this allowed three-quarters of the nation's law enforcement agencies to hire 125,000 new officers.²

From 2008 to 2018, the number of sworn law enforcement personnel increased almost 10% nationally. During the same period, civilian law enforcement employees increased 86%. The nation's almost 3,000 sheriffs' offices increased their sworn ranks by 5.1% and civilian staff by 8.7%.³

In Florida, from 2011 to 2020, the ranks of sworn personnel at sheriffs' offices grew by 3,500 deputies, an increase of 8.4 percent.⁴ Most agencies increased the number of deputies significantly, with 8 doubling in size. Just three agencies saw a decline during this period. But that growth began to change dramatically in 2019.



¹ As cited in Gibbs, J. C., Lee, J., and Bachnak, B. (2020). Low Police–Public Social Distance as the Key to Recruiting. *Policing: A Journal of Policy & Practice*, 14(1), 181–190.

² Department of Justice, 2014. The COPS Office: 20 Years of Community Oriented Policing. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/Publications/cops-p301-pub.pdf>.

³ Gardner, A. and Scott, K. 2022. Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies, 2018—Statistical Tables, pg 5. Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/cslea18st.pdf>

⁴ FSA analysis of annual FDLE Criminal Justice Agency Profile reports on Officer Population.

THE HIRING AND RETENTION CRISIS

Many attribute the COVID-19 pandemic and increased public resentment towards law enforcement to the hiring and retention crisis. One study found a 5% decrease in hiring, an 18% increase in resignations, and a 45% increase in retirements during this period⁵.

HIRING

In a profession that state and local government officials call the hardest to fill,⁶ the confluence of a pandemic and negative portrayals and attitudes toward police worsened the emerging trend of decreased hiring and higher resignation and retirement rates. Compounded by a generation with changing career expectations, a more competitive public service labor market, and fewer applicants able to meet stringent hiring standards, law enforcement agencies across the country found themselves in a workforce crisis. Demand for officers was increasing due to the expansion of their responsibilities in community policing, homeland security, and emerging crimes.⁷

In 2019, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) found that 41% of agencies across the country had a greater shortage of full-time personnel than in 2014.⁸ The same study found an average 7% vacancy rate and a 5% reduction in hiring. A more recent PERF survey found that police hiring picked back up in 2022, while resignations and retirements were still elevated. As a result, total sworn staffing dropped nearly 5 percent from 2019 to 2022.⁹

Florida's population growth compounds the problem. Florida's population grew 14.6% from 2010 to 2020, the 6th highest growth rate in the country,¹⁰ pushing it to the 3rd most populous state. In 2020, 167% more people moved to Florida than those who left the state.¹¹ As population outpaced the number of deputies by almost 6%, the ratio of full-time deputies per 1,000 population in 2021 fell to 2.02, the lowest since 2014.¹² At the same time, the demand for police services continues to expand and evolve. Identity theft, cybercrime, human trafficking, mental illness, homelessness, the opioid epidemic, and social unrest, and reform efforts have forced agencies to rethink their local public safety role while improving coordination, information sharing, and partnership building.¹³ Traditional order-maintenance duties are no longer the main focus of policing.

Florida's sheriffs' offices experienced almost zero growth in sworn deputies from 2019 to 2021 when the number of deputies increased by just 224. In 2022, sheriffs' offices reported an average vacancy rate of 7% for sworn deputies, 10% for corrections officers, and a staggering 26% for dispatchers.¹⁴ In some counties, the shortage of qualified dispatchers is so critical they have been forced to ask other agencies to dispatch their calls for service.

⁵ Police Executive Research Forum, 2021. Survey on Police Workforce Trends. <https://www.policeforum.org/workforcesurveyjune2021>.

⁶ State and Local Government Workforce: 2019 Survey. <https://slge.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/slge-workforce2019.pdf>.

⁷ Department of Justice, 2010. Police Recruitment and Retention for the New Millennium. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/Publications/cops-p199-pub.pdf>.

⁸ Police Executive Research Forum, 2019. The Workforce Crisis, and What Police Agencies are Doing About it. <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/WorkforceCrisis.pdf>.

⁹ Police Executive Research Forum, 2023. PERF survey shows police agencies are losing officers faster than they can hire new ones. <https://www.policeforum.org/staffing2023>.

¹⁰ United States Census Bureau. Historical Population Change Data. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/dec/popchange-data-text.html>.

¹¹ Florida ranked among most popular states for move-ins during pandemic, survey says. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/florida/os-ne-florida-ranked-one-of-most-popular-states-for-move-ins-pandemic-20220126-esu452skarbodizshvqe5bjx7m-story.html>.

¹² Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Statewide Ratios. <http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/CJSTC/Publications/CJAP/Statewide-Ratios.aspx>.

¹³ Wilson, J. (2022). Reframing the Police Staffing Challenge: Strategies for Meeting Workload Demand. https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/01-2022/police_staffing_strategies.html#ftn1.

¹⁴ FSA Vacancy Rate Survey, 2022.



Many agencies have made changes to their recruiting and hiring practices. Some now offer signing bonuses, free academy training, relocation assistance, childcare assistance, and other incentives as they compete for the small pool of qualified applicants.⁵ Others have relaxed or revised standards for tattoos, education, and physical fitness to encourage more people to apply.

As vacancies increase, officers become overworked and burned out. Furthermore, the epidemic of police suicide and importance of officer mental wellness are starting to be recognized, hiring and retention have become more and more important.¹⁵

RETENTION

Compounding the challenges of hiring comes a dramatic increase in employees separating from agencies. As hiring slowed, resignations and retirements further exasperated the increase in vacancies. One study reported an 18% increase in resignations and a 45% increase in retirements.¹⁶ New officers are resigning after just a few years' service, and experienced officers are retiring as soon as they become eligible.¹³ Studies suggest new officers are most likely to resign within the first 5 years of service, and those leaving later in their career most often do so due to dissatisfaction with the job or agency.⁶

¹⁵ International Association of Chiefs of Police, (2019). The State of Recruitment: A Crisis for Law Enforcement. https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/239416_IACP_RecruitmentBR_HR_0.pdf.

¹⁶ PERF Survey on Police Workforce Trends. June 11, 2021. <https://www.policeforum.org/workforcesurveyjune2021>.

FLORIDA SHERIFFS ASSOCIATION HIRING AND RETENTION ROUNDTABLE

On September 13, 2022, the FSA Research Committee hosted a roundtable discussion on the current state of hiring and retention. Panelists included Sheriff Rob Hardwick (St. Johns County), Sheriff John Mina (Orange County), Sheriff Bobby McCallum (Levy County) and Sheriff Timothy Cameron from Saint Mary's Maryland Sheriffs' Office.

Sheriff Cameron opened the discussion stating that he has experienced fewer applicants and many new deputies leaving the agency within the first three years. He has had some success, though, in filling vacancies by re-hiring retirees. Retirees, who have job skills and abilities from their work experience, can be hired under a contract for a specific position. They must remain in that position for two years, when the contract can be renegotiated.

Sheriff Mina has also faced hiring difficulties. His agency has a 9% vacancy rate, which is higher than that found by both PERF and the FSA study. But he attributes higher vacancies not to national issues but more deputies reaching retirement. According to Sheriff Mina, when President Bill Clinton's crime bill was passed in the 1990s, it added about "100,000 law enforcement officers. All those people are coming up on 30 years, and so you have 100,000 law enforcement officers across the United States at that retirement mark." Sheriff Mina also mentions he has "been able to hire about 140 deputies per year. The problem is, during that same time frame, we lost 532."

Sheriff Hardwick has adopted a military recruiting and retention model. A team of deputies work with applicants to find needed resources such as housing and daycare. He has hired a mental health team that includes clinical psychologists, and the agency's attorney provides legal services for deputies. Additionally, the sheriff plans to hire a financial advisor to help deputies manage expenses and prepare for retirement.

When it comes to dispatch retention and attrition, the numbers are much more startling. Nationally, dispatch vacancies are about 26%, with Sheriff McCallum reporting a 50% vacancy. To quote, "I have a much smaller dispatch center... but I was down to 50%."

Other factors impact the retention and hiring rates for Florida sheriffs' offices, such as the cost of living in some Florida counties. Deputies working in Sarasota, St. John's, and Monroe counties, for example, often cannot afford housing in those areas and must live in another county. Sheriff Hardwick said the median price of a home in St. John's County has increased from \$300,000 to \$585,000 pricing his deputies out of the market.

While agencies continue to expand their benefits and assistance programs to compete with private sector jobs and increase desirability, the increasing attrition rates demonstrate that this is not addressing the root cause of leave. Thus, more research will be needed to determine what benefits impact attrition, what impacts retention, and what agencies can do fiscally to improve the desirability of serving as a law enforcement professional.

CONCLUSION

In 2014, Jeremy Wilson wrote:

The demand for new officers will increase as agencies experience employee turnover. Officer attrition is likely to increase, sources of new recruits will probably decrease, and officer responsibilities will continue to expand¹⁷.

Wilson's prediction held true. Although law enforcement attracted a steady source of applicants for many years, the convergence of a pandemic, negative public opinion toward officers, and more have had a significant, detrimental effect on recruiting and retention. Many agencies can no longer count on having more applicants than vacant positions to fill. Similarly, veteran officers are leaving the profession at higher rates than in recent years. With more officers leaving the profession or retiring early and fewer being hired, many agencies are operating with higher-than-normal vacancy rates in a time when the demands on law enforcement services are dramatically changing and increasing.

The law enforcement profession is deeply rooted in long-standing organizational systems and processes, and change tends to come about slowly. In his book on dealing with change, Dr. Spencer Johnson uses a simple parable of two mice who discover they must change the way they find cheese. One embraces change and says, "If you do not change, you can become extinct. The quicker you let go of old cheese, the sooner you find new cheese"¹⁸.

In that spirit, many sheriffs are finding new and innovative ways to improve the hiring process and improve services for current employees. Some sheriffs are moving to a military hiring model while others are urging community members to offer incentives to their employees. Still others have hired in-house attorneys, financial planners, and mental health professionals to provide skilled services to employees.

Sheriff Mina, though, sees the crisis as an opportunity to increase employee benefits, call for raising salaries, and make improvements to the state retirement system. As a first step, Governor DeSantis signed HB 3 to support recruitment and retention. The bill provides state funding for pay bonuses and training (See Text Box).

On average, vacancies at Florida's sheriffs' offices are similar to the high rates seen nationwide. Florida's sheriffs, though, are dedicated to hiring and retaining the most qualified employees possible. Despite the current crisis, their focus on public safety and service cannot, and will not, be compromised to increase staffing levels. With a focus on improvement, recruiting and retention practices can be enhanced to attract and keep the best law enforcement professionals in the country.

¹⁷ J. Wilson, (2014). Articulating the Dynamic Police Staffing Challenge: An Examination of Supply and Demand. *Policing: An International Journal* 37, no. 1.

¹⁸ Johnson, Spencer and Blanchard, Kenneth (1998). *Who moved my cheese*. Penguin Putnam.

GOVERNOR DESANTIS AND FLORIDA LEGISLATURE LEAD THE WAY IN RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION EFFORTS WITH PASSAGE OF HB 3

HB 3 was sponsored by Representative Tom Leek and included several provisions aimed at bolstering law enforcement officer recruitment and retention, including providing one-time bonuses of up to \$5,000 to new officers in Florida and the creation of the Florida Law Enforcement Academy Scholarship Program to cover basic recruit training expenses.

The bill was spearheaded by House Speaker Chris Sprowls, with strong support from Senate President Wilton Simpson. The legislation was strongly touted and advocated for by Governor Ron DeSantis both before and during the 2022 legislative session. In addition to the bonus funding and scholarships for training expenses, HB 3 also:

- Created a reimbursement program to pay for up to \$1,000 of equivalency training costs for certified law enforcement officers who relocated to Florida or members of the special operations forces who become full-time law enforcement officers in Florida;
- Made dependent children of law enforcement officers eligible to receive a Family Empowerment Scholarship to attend a private school;
- Exempted veterans and applicants with an associate degree or higher from taking the basic skills test as a prerequisite to entering a law enforcement officer basic recruit training program;
- Required the Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission to develop, and law enforcement officers to receive as part of their initial certification training and continued employment training, training in health and wellness principles;
- Allowed law enforcement officers or former law enforcement officers to receive postsecondary credit at Florida public postsecondary educational institutions for training and experience acquired while serving;
- Encouraged each district school board to establish public safety telecommunication training programs and law enforcement explorer programs in public schools; and finally
- Designated May 1 of each year as “Law Enforcement Appreciation Day.”

Any one of these provisions would have been a step in the right direction to recruit and retain the best law enforcement officers in Florida, but taken together in their totality, it will make Florida the most law enforcement friendly state in the country.

To build on HB 3, Governor DeSantis has provided bonuses of up to \$1,000 after taxes, to first responders in Florida for two years in a row. These bonuses provide an important recognition and reward to our first responders and play an important role in bolstering the recruitment and retention of our officers here in the state of Florida.



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