

Predicting Interest in a Police Career for those in Underrepresented Communities

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Abstract

With ever-growing tension between police and the community, both police organizations and communities are recognizing the need and working toward increased representation in police organizations (Brunson, 2007; Szeto, 2014). Despite the effort of many police organizations over the years, the problem of underrepresentation has not improved (Jordan, Fridell, Fagiani, & Kubu, 2009). It has become clear that there is something that has yet to be identified and/or studied preventing underrepresented populations from being interested in or recruited into police organizations. The U.S. Department of Justice and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's 2016 report on Advancing Diversity in Law Enforcement identified three factors that may impact the recruitment of those in underrepresented communities into police organizations. These factors include lack of trust in police, the reputation or operational practices of police organizations, and lack of awareness of career opportunities in police organizations. While these factors were identified in the report, there was a lack of research supporting the factors. In an effort to gain a better understanding of what is preventing underrepresented groups from joining law enforcement, participants' perceptions of trust, culture/policies/practices, and career opportunities in police organizations will be measured. Additionally, motivation to become a police officer and interest in a career as a police officer will be measured to increase the understanding of what does or does not contribute to underrepresented communities being interested in a career as a police officer. Regression analysis will be performed to predict interest in becoming a police officer by using the variables of trust, culture, policies/practices, and career opportunity.

Today, there are few police organizations where the demographics of the organization match that of the community they are serving. Some police organizations are closer to representing their communities equally – the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Police Department, for example, which is about 66% African American in a community that is about 58% African American (Weitzer, Tuch, & Skogan, 2008). However, other places, such as the state of Arizona, have a wider gap in representation, with less than 55% of the state’s population being White alone (i.e., not Hispanic or Latino) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017) and over 75% of the police officers in the state being White (St. Clair & Spearing-Brown, 2018). These ratios lead to two questions – why is equal (or approximately equal) representation important and what is causing unequal representation in police organizations? Previous research has focused on the question of importance and findings indicate that one of the many reasons is that police officers with a more diverse background are likely to be more knowledgeable and understanding of cultural differences within the community (U.S. DOJ & EEOC, 2016; Szeto, 2014). The question left then is what is inhibiting the increase of representation in police organizations?

Building upon the framework described in the recruitment section of the 2016 report on Advancing Diversity in Law Enforcement (U.S. DOJ & EEOC, 2016), a survey has been developed to answer this question in four parts - Are people who have a lack of trust in police less likely to consider a career as a police officer? Are people who perceive police organizations less welcoming to people of diverse backgrounds less likely to consider a career as a police officer? Are people who perceive police organizations to have unfair policies or practices less likely to consider a career as a police officer? Are people that do not see police organizations as having career opportunities less likely to consider a career as a police officer? The survey, which will be used to collect data from students at a large southern university and potentially students at other universities around the United States, will include four adapted measures, three measures developed for the study, and a demographic questionnaire. The four adapted measures include the Perceptions of Police Scale (Nadal & Davidoff, 2015), which has two sub-scales – General Attitudes toward Police and Perceptions of Bias, the Attitudes Towards Police Legitimacy Scale (Reynolds, Estrada-Reynolds, & Nunez, 2018), which was initially developed to capture information on the following factors: bias, quality of interpersonal treatment, trustworthiness, motivation, quality and organizational integrity, being part of the community, and normative alignment, the Modified Workplace Prejudice/Discrimination Inventory (James, Lovato, & Cropanzano, 1994), and the Reasons Questionnaire (Lester, 1983). These four measures were adapted to focus on police if they were not already and to add items asking about personal identities (e.g., “In police organizations, some people get better treatment because of their gender identity.”) The three measures developed for the study ask participants about their perceptions of acceptance of different identities (i.e., Asian, Atheist, Muslim, Female, Bisexual, etc.) in police organizations, about their interest in becoming a police officer (e.g., “Yes, I am interested.” or “I would like to know more.”), and the last scale asks participants the extent to which various aspects of a police career or themselves hinder them in their pursuit of a career as a police officer (e.g., “Being a police officer would be too dangerous for me” and “Not feeling confident about my ability in a police position”).

The regression model created will help to identify which variables are providing the most predictive of people being interested in becoming a police officer. This will help to focus future police organization recruitment on the factors that are most important to various groups of people so that representation can increase.

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