

Washington State Law Enforcement and Corrections Workforce Needs

Executive Summary



September 5, 2024

Introduction & Key Findings

Washington State has long had one of the lowest rates of law enforcement officers per capita in the US.¹ In recent years, this rate has fallen due to recruitment challenges and accelerating exits from the field. These changes have been anticipated for decades and have been exacerbated by the fallout from the Ferguson Effect and the reputational challenges for the field.^{2,3} This has cascading impacts on public safety and the community's relationship with the police.

Directed by the legislature,⁴ the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) sought to understand how the community and technical college system could better support the state's law enforcement and corrections workforce. This includes an outreach strategy to inform and attract students in non-traditional program pathways.

Key Findings:

Law Enforcement and Corrections Perspectives

- Many agencies are understaffed, and all agencies are seeing far fewer applicants for positions than in fewer years.
- Agencies have strong preferences for applicants with **good communication, emotional intelligence, and solid writing skills** and indicate that applicants with military background or experience in customer service roles are typically well-prepared for employment in the sector.
- Most law enforcement and corrections professionals interviewed in this study **do not see particular value in a criminal justice degree**. They would encourage someone wanting to enter the field to get another degree, though most entry-level positions do not require any post-secondary education.
- The recruits and new officers with criminal justice degrees found value in these degrees because of **the skills and perspectives they help them develop and bring to the job**.
- Labor market data indicates that advancement is associated with a college degree.
- **Law enforcement and corrections agencies do not have significant relationships with community colleges** and perceive higher education in general to be hostile to police, particularly in Western Washington. Thus, **community colleges are not seen as a resource or recruiting venue**.
- As a result, exposure and **work experience opportunities⁵ for students have dwindled**.

Students, Recruits, and New Officers Perspectives

- Students find the opportunity to **serve their community as the most appealing** factor about law enforcement and corrections. They also identified **job stability, pay, and benefits as attractive** aspects of those careers.
- Students were most concerned about the impact of law enforcement and corrections jobs on mental health.
- To consider law enforcement and corrections as career paths, they wanted **more transparency and accountability** from agencies.

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- Work exposure and direct connection to a police officer were cited as key factors in recruits' and new officers' decision to pursue a career in law enforcement, emphasizing the need to develop more exposure opportunities for students.

Community & Technical College (CTC) Faculty Perspectives

- CTC faculty see the **value of a well-rounded education** in developing well-equipped law enforcement and corrections personnel. They pointed out that general education requirements were critical in providing law enforcement and corrections professionals with the tools they need to do the job: communications, critical thinking, writing, cultural awareness, and historical context
- Interviewees strongly supported **working closely with local agencies** to provide curricula that develop desirable skills for their local context.
- They are interested and willing to support teaching **discrete skills (e.g., report writing)** and **knowledge bases (e.g., DEI/EDI, behavioral health training, mental wellness instruction)** to augment academy training.

Recommendations

The central recommendation emerging from this research study is to rebuild relationships between the institutions that educate public servants and the local agencies that employ them. The following recommendations build toward or depend on stronger relationships between CTCs and law enforcement and corrections agencies.

Partnership

- Revitalize and engage Criminal Justice Advisory committees, recruiting early-career officers, recent program graduates, and agency recruiters.
- Invest in work exposure opportunities, particularly paid internships, to increase equitable access and provide students with more entry points to the field.
- Partner with the CJTC, providing how-to-teach training and support to Training, Advising, and Counseling (TAC) officers to improve the delivery of BLEA and retain more recruits.
- Partner with CJTC to expand education and training pathways for incumbent officers.

Curriculum

- Work with agency representatives to build on the CTCs' Criminal Justice work group's 2015 core curriculum and update the alignment of criminal justice programs.
- Work with agency leadership to create targeted courses to address in-demand, non-core skills for policing for pre- and post-academy.
- Cross-list criminal justice courses with related disciplines to allow students to take criminal justice programs while still meeting the requirements of their declared major.
- Develop more leadership tracks for law enforcement and corrections in organizational management and public administration bachelor of applied science programs.^{6,7}

Outreach

- Develop targeted outreach strategies to specific but overlapping audiences.
- For students prioritizing service, highlight how law enforcement or corrections careers offer opportunities to positively impact their communities.

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- For students who prioritize obtaining employment, promote the sectors' wages and benefits.
- For students planning to follow a four-year degree pathway, highlight educational pathways, industry benefits, and opportunities to limit or avoid accumulating student debt.

Policy

- Expand credit for prior learning to attract students with more diverse work backgrounds to criminal justice programs and career paths.
- Develop a stackable criminal justice degree program to allow incumbent officers to pursue degrees in discrete blocks while working.
- Bridge the gap between the ages of 18 and 21 when interested youth graduate high school and when they meet most agencies' eligibility age requirements by building out an apprenticeship program or reserve officer training corps where youth are employed by the agency, participating in extensive classroom learning, and gaining on-the-job experience before they become sworn officers.

You can find the full report, policy brief, and interactive dashboard [here](#) or by scanning the QR code below.



References

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