

# Washington State Law Enforcement and Corrections Workforce Needs

Policy Brief

September 30, 2024

## Introduction & Key Findings

Washington state has long had one of the lowest rates of law enforcement officers per capita in the US.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, this rate has fallen due to recruitment challenges and accelerating exits from the field. These long-standing factors mean staffing changes have been anticipated for decades but have been exacerbated by the Ferguson effect's fallout\* and the field's reputational challenges.<sup>2,3</sup> This has cascading impacts on public safety and the community's relationship with the police.

As directed by the Legislature,<sup>4</sup> the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) sought to understand how the community and technical college (CTC) 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:

- The criminal justice student body is more diverse than the law enforcement and corrections workforce, with 57% of CTC criminal justice and corrections credentials awarded to students who identify as women and 47% to students of color. In contrast, for commissioned law enforcement and corrections officers, Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) workers constitute 26% and 32% of the workforce, respectively, while for women, it is 16% and 31%, respectively.<sup>5</sup>
- Additionally, employment outcomes for CTC graduates from these programs are varied. Among those working in Washington and not enrolled in a four-year institution, the law enforcement and related public safety sectors (NAICS 9221) are the fourth most common employers behind restaurants (NAICS 7225), local governments and related public officers (NAICS 9211), and security services (NAICS 5616) in hiring CTC graduates.
- Most law enforcement and corrections professionals do not see particular value in a criminal justice degree, despite criminal justice curricula teaching many of the skills they identify as valuable. Though most entry-level positions do not require post-secondary education, they would encourage someone wanting to enter the field to get another degree in anticipation of career advancement requirements.
- In contrast, new officers reported that a criminal justice degree provided them with context and skills that helped them perform better on the job, and a review of the CTC criminal justice curriculum showed that these programs focus on skills that agencies value.
- Additionally, labor market data indicates a college degree is correlated with advancement, while past research<sup>6</sup> indicates that those with college degrees perform better on the job.

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- This indicates a perception gap between the skills law enforcement and corrections perceive as being delivered via a criminal justice education and the actual skills being delivered—such as sociology, psychology, communication, and writing—which were each identified as valuable skills by law enforcement and corrections professionals.
- The lack of significant relationships between law enforcement and corrections agencies and community and technical colleges is a potential explanation for this perception gap. Agencies also perceive higher education in general as critical of law enforcement, particularly in Western Washington. Thus, community and technical colleges are not typically considered resources or recruiting venues.
- As a result, students' exposure and work experience<sup>7</sup> opportunities have dwindled.

### Methodology

The research team interviewed seven subject matter experts (SMEs) and 53 stakeholders. They also recruited two advisory groups and conducted seven focus groups of students and community members with 46 participants. Finally, the research team worked with the SBCTC to access and analyze graduation and employment data to identify pathways to employment in law enforcement and corrections in the state.

### Findings

#### Staffing Issues

Law enforcement agencies across the state have experienced significant staffing issues in recent years. Departments consistently reported understaffing during the pandemic. While some departments have returned to full staffing, all departments report they continue to have **far fewer applicants than in prior years**. This is compounded by a higher-than-typical exit rate from the occupation due to both retirement and career changes.

The corrections sector is bifurcated. Like law enforcement agencies, corrections facilities are experiencing low interest from job seekers. However, state facilities report having recovered from the COVID-19 dip in staffing, likely because they offer comparatively high-paying jobs in their rural communities. In contrast, city and county jails struggle with staffing, with some exceptions.

Comparatively **low pay** reportedly contributes to staffing issues in state law enforcement agencies, smaller departments, and city and county jails. In contrast, most law enforcement agencies' comparatively robust pay and benefits packages are key factors in attracting and retaining staff.

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Law enforcement and corrections professionals attributed their staffing issues to negative public sentiment, **a hostile political environment, and a lack of support from political leaders**. However, there is significant geographic variability, with agencies in Western Washington more likely to report being impacted by negative public perception.

While law enforcement and corrections professionals highlighted these factors as significantly and negatively influencing recruiting and worker retention, researchers in the field **anticipated staffing challenges since the 1990s and early 2000s**. Researchers identified changes in demographics, career preferences, and job roles post-9/11 as the primary factors leading to lower recruiting numbers and higher attrition, long before high-profile police brutality events of the 2020s sparked public reactions to law enforcement and corrections.

Regarding workforce preparation, interviews with law enforcement and corrections professionals highlighted strong preferences for applicants with **good communication, emotional intelligence, and strong writing skills**. They expressed no strong preference for background or education, and most do not require any postsecondary education. However, they indicated that those with a military background or experience in customer service roles are typically well-prepared for these positions.

### Community & Technical Colleges (CTCs)

In parallel with the decline in interest in law enforcement careers, criminal justice programs have been suffering from dwindling completion numbers, with multiple programs canceled in recent years. This trend is not unique to criminal justice but reflects declines in overall graduations from CTC workforce degrees. Still, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have had a greater negative impact on the number of criminal justice graduates than on all workforce degrees.

CTC faculty sees a significant role for the community and technical colleges in preparing and supporting the law enforcement and corrections workforce. Many see the **value of a well-rounded education (including psychology, sociology, problem solving and critical thinking)** in developing well-equipped law enforcement and corrections personnel. They are also interested and willing to support the most **discrete skills (e.g., report writing)** and **knowledge bases (e.g., DEI/EDI, behavioral health training, mental wellness instruction)**.

However, the colleges' connections with law enforcement have atrophied recently. Apart from the required advisory boards, the **relationships between colleges and local departments have dwindled**. Law enforcement agency representatives confirm this. Most agencies do not use colleges as a resource or recruiting venue, and **exposure opportunities for students (e.g., internships) have dramatically declined** despite the widespread recognition that exposure is critical to recruiting people who are a good fit for the profession.<sup>7</sup>

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Law enforcement and corrections professionals also feel that a **criminal justice degree is of little value**. While some acknowledge the value of a degree, particularly for advancement, they recommend that someone wanting to pursue a law enforcement career get a degree in almost anything else to acquire a greater breadth of skills (accounting, communications, etc.) useful in more advanced positions. This points to a **perception gap** given that the criminal justice programs have incorporated feedback from law enforcement and corrections professionals and focus on skills and contextual knowledge law enforcement and corrections leaders say they value.

### Trainee and New Officers' Perceptions

The finding that law enforcement and corrections leadership do not particularly value a criminal justice degree is also in tension with the perception of new officers with a criminal justice degree, who believe it gives them perspective and skills that help them on the job. However, they did report finding the instruction to reflect an overall critical view of law enforcement.

The trainees and new officers also discussed the importance of quality training before, during, and after the academy. They identify opportunities for improvement, particularly better instruction at the academy.

### Students' Perceptions

Most criminal justice majors are women, a departure from the sector's demographics, which are less than 30% female across all of the sector's primary occupations.<sup>5</sup> Many criminal justice students are not interested in a career in law enforcement but enrolled out of interest in social justice or for another law-related career or are still exploring career options. Likewise, a minority of criminal justice graduates find employment in law enforcement or corrections. Instead, most people employed in law enforcement and who attended a CTC majored in something other than criminal justice.

Students, both criminal justice majors and non-criminal justice majors, trainees, and new officers, find the **opportunity to help their community most appealing** about law enforcement and corrections. They also identified **job stability, pay, and benefits as attractive** about those careers.

Students were most concerned about the impact of law enforcement and corrections jobs on mental health. They spoke to the public perception of law enforcement. They were nuanced in their consideration, indicating that to consider a career in law enforcement, they wanted **more transparency and accountability from law enforcement and corrections agencies**. Fear for physical safety was not a significant concern.

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### Recommendations

Low staffing in law enforcement and corrections is a much larger issue than underinvestment in education and training pathways at CTCs. A significant societal and generational shift exists in the relationship between communities, police, and policing. CTCs alone cannot solve this staffing crisis but can play a role in this transition.

However, both CTCs and law enforcement agencies are experiencing a negative feedback cycle in that they lack the staff to engage in the activities necessary to generate interest, which would, in turn, improve staffing.

**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 Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC) to provide how-to-teach training (adult learning and development methods) and support to Training, Advising, and Counseling (TAC) officers, thus improving the delivery of the Basic Law Enforcement Academy (BLEA) and retaining more recruits.
- Partner with CJTC to expand education and training pathways for incumbent officers.

#### *Curriculum*

- Work with agency representatives to build on the CTC system's 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.<sup>8,9</sup>

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### 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.
- 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 — the time when interested youth graduate high school and when they must 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



### \*Ferguson Effect

Ferguson effect in this context is a *hypothetical* causal chain wherein (1) hostile media coverage of the police has (2) caused civilians to distrust, resent, and disrespect police and (3) officers to fear being falsely accused of wrongdoing. This, in turn, (4) reduces officers' morale and impacts performance, leading to de-policing, and (5) increases turnover and difficulty recruiting. This culminates in (6) higher crime and reduced public safety. The research into the impact of the Ferguson effect indicates there is no widespread de-policing or increase in homicides as a result of the media coverage and public response to high-profile events. However, there is evidence that it has impacted officers' perceptions of civilians, crime, and their self-legitimacy, which in turn may result in burnout and attrition.

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