

# Washington State Law Enforcement and Corrections Workforce Needs

Executive Summary



June 15, 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 changes have been anticipated for decades and have been exacerbated by the fallout from the Ferguson Effect and the reputational challenges for the field.<sup>2,3</sup> This has cascading impacts on public safety and the community's relationship with the police.

Directed by the legislature,<sup>4</sup> the Washington State Board of 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*

- 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 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.
- 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 opportunities for students have dwindled.

#### *Students, Recruits, and New Officers*

- Students find the opportunity to **serve their community the most appealing** factor 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 wanted **more transparency and accountability** from agencies.
- The trainees and new officers who had criminal justice degrees indicated they found value in it because of the perspective they bring to the job.
- 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.

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## *Community & Technical College (CTC) Faculty*

- CTC faculty see the **value of a liberal arts education** in developing well-equipped law enforcement and corrections personnel.
- They are also interested and willing to support teaching the most **discrete skills (e.g., report writing)** and **knowledge bases (e.g., DEI/EDI, behavioral health training, mental wellness instruction)**.

## **Policy Implications**

**Improving relationships between local colleges and law enforcement and corrections agencies is critical for CTCs to play a role in stabilizing** the sector's recruitment and retention challenges. This will likely require additional staffing in both the colleges and agencies. Stronger relationships are necessary to implement any of the following recommendations.

## **Recommendations**

- CTCs can conduct targeted outreach to non-traditional students that highlight (1) similarities between related fields and law enforcement and corrections occupations and (2) the value of understanding the criminal justice system as an educated and informed citizen.
- CTCs can refine the criminal justice curriculum by integrating more sociology, psychology, and behavioral health aspects.
- With input from law enforcement, CTCs can create law enforcement-focused courses in select technical skills, particularly report writing, de-escalation, communication, and behavioral health.
- CTCs can rebuild the connections to agencies for internships, job shadowing, and other exposure opportunities.
- CTCs and law enforcement and corrections agencies can collaborate to develop an apprenticeship program targeting 18- to 21-year-olds.
- Expand CTC cadet programs to a Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program.
- CTCs could leverage their commitment to teaching and work with the Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC) to offer training on teaching to TAC officers.
- In collaboration with the CJTC, CTCs could package law enforcement-focused courses in select technical skills into certifications for professionals in the field.
- Like Bates Technical College,<sup>5</sup> other CTCs could develop law enforcement leadership track in public administration programs with courses in administration, management, and soft skills for professionals seeking advancement.

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## References

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