

Washington State Law Enforcement and Corrections Workforce Needs

Policy Brief



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.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 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:

- Most criminal justice majors are women, and most criminal justice graduates do not go into law enforcement.
- Likewise, 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.

Methodology

The research team interviewed seven subject matter experts (SMEs) and an additional 53 stakeholders. They also recruited two advisory groups and conducted seven focus groups of students and community members, with 51 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 a significant drop in interest, with far fewer applicants per position in recent years than in prior decades. Departments consistently reported understaffing during the pandemic. However, some departments have returned to full staffing, though they continue to have **far fewer applicants than in prior years**. This is

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compounded by a higher-than-typical exit rate from the occupation due to both retirement and career changes. Law enforcement professionals attributed this to a **hostile political environment and lack of support from political leaders**, though there is significant geographic variability in this.

The corrections sector is bifurcated. Like law enforcement agencies, corrections facilities are experiencing low interest. However, state facilities are fully staffed, likely because they offer comparatively high-paying jobs in their rural communities. In contrast, city and county jails struggle with staffing, with some exceptions.

The primary reasons identified for the lack of interest are **public sentiment about police and law enforcement** and pay. **Low pay** was primarily an issue for 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.

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. 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 enrollment numbers, with multiple programs canceled in recent years. However, community college faculty see a significant role for the community college in preparing and supporting the law enforcement and corrections workforce. Many 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 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 in recent years. 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.

Law enforcement and corrections professionals almost universally indicate that a **criminal justice degree, particularly the terminal degree, is of little value**. Many felt the transfer degree has little relevant instruction.⁵⁻⁷ In contrast, the terminal degree is redundant with the state Basic Law Enforcement Academy (BLEA), and there is no interest in allowing substitution for any part of the BLEA curriculum. Some acknowledge the value of a degree, particularly for advancement; they

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recommend that someone wanting to pursue a law enforcement career get a degree in almost anything else.

Students', Trainees', and New Officers' 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.⁸ 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. 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. 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 and were nuanced in their consideration, indicating that to consider a career in law enforcement, they wanted **more transparency and accountability**. Fear for physical safety was not a significant concern.

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. However, they did report finding the instruction to be **anti-cop**. The trainees and new officers spoke about the importance of quality training before, during, and after the academy and opportunities for improvement.

Policy Implications

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 vicious cycle in that they lack the staff to engage in the activities necessary to generate interest, which would, in turn, improve staffing.

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 college and agencies. Stronger relationships are necessary to implement any of the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Curriculum Changes

CTCs can refine the criminal justice curriculum:

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- Build on what trainees and new officers value the most from their criminal justice degrees by integrating more aspects of sociology, psychology, and behavioral health.
- Recruit students from "helping occupations" and those working in service and retail industries to introductory criminal justice courses to build interest and address the sector's reputational problem.
- With input from law enforcement, create law enforcement-focused courses in select technical skills, particularly report writing, de-escalation, communication, and behavioral health.

Work Experience Opportunities

- Rebuild the connections to agencies for internships, job shadowing, and other exposure opportunities.

Work with the Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC)

- Leverage CTCs' commitment to teaching and work with CJTC to offer training on how to teach to TAC officers.
- In collaboration with the CJTC, package law enforcement-focused courses in select technical skills into certifications for professionals in the field.
- Develop law enforcement leadership track in public administration programs with courses in administrative, management, and soft skills for professionals seeking advancement.

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