

# Simple Changes to Job Ads Can Help Recruit More Police Officers of Color

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The United States is experiencing a human capital crisis at all levels of government. Even among graduates of public affairs programs, the [interest in joining the public sector is dwindling](#) as Baby Boomers retire and Millennials [look elsewhere to make an impact on society](#).

But this is more than a numbers issue. For public services to be delivered more effectively, the government workforce needs to diversify. [Studies](#) have shown that when public servants more closely match the communities they serve, outcomes improve either because the public servants themselves act differently or because beneficiaries respond to them differently. For police forces across the country, the need is particularly urgent since [almost 75% of officers are white](#).

So how do we encourage *more* and *different* people to apply for public sector jobs, and to the police in particular?

It certainly is not easy. Police departments don't have the same tools available to them that private companies might — no signing bonuses, limited flexibility in job descriptions, and a multitude of other restrictions. What they *do* have is [a strong mission](#) and an existing workforce that reports high levels of public service motivation. Because of this, it's no surprise that police departments lean on public service messaging to recruit. Of the police forces that are running any active recruitment efforts, the majority use some version of a “service” message: Potential candidates are often asked to “come serve” or “answer the call to serve.”

I argue in my work that the people who are motivated by public service alone are already interested in public sector jobs. If we need new people to join them, we need to capture the motivations of those individuals who could be great in public service but aren't currently applying. We know from behavioral science research that even small changes to how an opportunity is framed can significantly change who engages and when. And so I wanted to test whether reframing the recruitment message for police forces might nudge a more diverse group of people to consider a career in law enforcement.

In collaboration with the [Behavioral Insights Team](#) and the [What Works Cities Initiative](#), I ran a [field experiment](#) aimed at opening up the applicant pool to those who may not have considered a career in law enforcement before. We selected almost 10,000 people at random between the ages of 18 and 40 and sent them postcards encouraging them to apply to the police department.

We wanted to see whether a postcard could entice people to apply in greater numbers, compared with a randomly selected control group that received no such postcard. Importantly, we also created four variations of the postcard that emphasized a different motivation to join the police, to see what would be most effective at getting more applications through the door.

Each postcard was personalized to the sender, and included a photo of a current male African-American police officer on one side, with a message signed by him on the other. The only difference between the four versions was a few lines in the message and the tagline.

The version aimed at capturing a more traditional service motivation read:

*I love being part of the police because I feel I can really make a difference in Chattanooga. If you're the kind of person who is ready to serve, you're just the kind of person we're looking for.*

An alternative service message that more clearly emphasized impact read:

*I love being part of the police because I feel I can really make a difference in Chattanooga. Just think what it would mean to you and your community if you became a police officer.*

We then wanted to test whether we could spark individuals' intrinsic motivation by talking about how hard it is to be a police officer. This was based on [evidence](#) that framing something as a challenge often leads underrepresented individuals to perform better. The challenge message read:

*I love being part of the police because you never know what to expect: it's challenging but rewarding work! If you're the kind of person who thrives in challenging environments, you're just the kind of person we're looking for.*

But we also wanted to test the benefits of extrinsic motivation — hinting at job security in the police, because this is a [clear benefit of government jobs](#). The career message read:

*I love being part of the police because I'm constantly developing my skills: this isn't just a job, it's a career. If you're looking for a long-term career, you're just the kind of person we're looking for.*

The results were striking. The traditional service message was no more motivating at encouraging people to apply than not receiving a postcard at all (the control). In contrast, the challenge and career messages more than tripled the likelihood that someone would apply. For people of color and women, the impact was even larger. People of color who saw the challenge message were four times as likely to apply to the police. Importantly, there was no indication that the quality of the applicant pool was negatively impacted by the increase in numbers. We followed each candidate through the hiring process and found that their scores on the tests required to become an officer looked statistically similar to those who were in our control group.

Police forces across the country are starting to use these insights, rigorously testing their approaches to recruitment and learning what works for their communities. For example, now

we're working with the Los Angeles Police Department's personnel department and the mayor's innovation team to combine the power of behavioral science with the promise of social media to test new ways to attract candidates using Facebook.

This is just the beginning. The challenge of building more-diverse police forces may start with attracting new applicants, but it also requires rethinking how we select candidates. De-biasing interviews and other selection tools is particularly important, but even small tweaks in the process can have a disproportionate impact. In [another study](#), my coauthors and I showed that changing the language around testing can close the racial gap in pass rates, ensuring that more black and ethnic minority candidates continue through the process. If we can also reduce the administrative burden placed on candidates, who often have to wait more than a year to get hired, we might be able to improve the overall applicant pool.

We must also carefully study how to support these new candidates when they finally make it through the hiring process and start the job. If we're leaning on them to change decades-old culture and improve relationships with the surrounding community, we'll need more than just an influx of new faces. We'll need to ensure they have the personal and institutional resources to help make a change while still protecting their own health and well-being.

Organizations don't change overnight. But experiments like ours can help us learn what works at each stage of the process, in order to ultimately create more-diverse workplaces and to support the communities they serve.

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