

# Best Practices for Optimizing Law Enforcement Job Descriptions to Recruit Diverse Candidates

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FROM RESEARCH TO REALITY:  
RECRUITING MORE WOMEN  
INTO THE POLICING PROFESSION

Job descriptions play a key role in socializing potential applicants to law enforcement agency culture, particularly as it relates to gender inclusivity. Research has shown that subtle wording choices can affect how prospective applicants perceive the advertised jobs with impacts on who applies. Masculine wording like “superior” and “competitive”, can result in women perceiving they would not feel a sense of belonging in a work environment.<sup>1</sup> The policies, practices, and norms that are directly described or alluded to (as well as content that may be absent from the description) can provide signals about the inclusivity of the organization. For example, job descriptions that reference long work hours but do not mention benefits related to child care or flexible shift assignments, may inhibit candidates with primary family care responsibilities (who are disproportionately women) from applying.<sup>2</sup>

Research has long recognized the need to improve job descriptions to facilitate law enforcement recruitment<sup>3</sup> but there has been little research done on this topic. Prior research led to the development of a checklist for writing police job descriptions but did not empirically test the impact of different wording or content.<sup>4</sup>

## Research Design and Findings

In a study conducted by RTI International, variations on job descriptions were presented to over 600 research participants. They were asked to read one of three job descriptions:

- **Standard** – Included the minimum information typically found in policing job descriptions. This included the nature of the job, the typical tasks that officers perform, and general information regarding benefits (i.e., health insurance, wellness program, competitive salary).
- **Diversity-oriented**– Included information in the standard description and language that alluded to the agency’s commitment to recruiting diverse applicants (“We are looking for dependable and diverse problem solvers”) and an equal opportunity employer statement.
- **Policy-oriented** – Included information in the standard description and highlighted the agency’s commitment to work-life balance (“We offer an excellent benefits package that helps to support healthy officers and effective work-life balance”), listed parental leave under described benefits, and included academy programs that support trainees to meet the physical requirements.

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<sup>1</sup> Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., & Kay, A. C. (2011). Evidence that Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(1), 109.

<sup>2</sup> Catalyst (2015). Vital signs: Determining Actions for Inclusive Policies and Practices: Understanding Your Recruitment, Development and Advancement, and Retention Strategies. Retrieved April 01, 2023 from <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/vital-signs-determining-actions-inclusive-policies-and-practices>.

<sup>3</sup> Prussel, D., & Lonsway, K. (2001). Recruiting Women Police Officers. *Law and Order*, 49(7), 91–96.

<sup>4</sup> Harrington, P. (2000). *Recruiting & Retaining Women: A Self-Assessment Guide for Law Enforcement*. National Center for Women and Policing.

Findings suggested that the content of the job description was related to several important aspects of applicant perceptions of policing jobs. Women participants were especially impacted by changes in job description language. For example, women found the job described in the diversity-oriented condition to be more challenging and require more skill. Jobs that are more challenging and require more skill are generally considered to be better for longer-term career satisfaction and retention. Further, both women and men participants believed the organization described in the diversity-oriented condition to have a more positive diversity climate. Diversity climate refers to employees' shared perceptions that an employer utilizes fair personnel practices and socially integrates underrepresented employees into the work environment.<sup>5</sup>

## Recommendations for Job Descriptions

Agencies can take immediate action to improve job descriptions to ensure that they are more supportive of diverse candidates.

1. **Highlight diversity and describe desirable candidates' characteristics** – The job description should highlight the agency's commitment to diversity. Interpersonal and intercultural skills that are essential to successful police work should be featured prominently. Do not overemphasize the physical demands of the job.
2. **Ensure language is gender neutral and minimizes overly masculine words** – Overuse of masculine words can discourage women applicants. Wherever possible, replace masculine words with gender-neutral synonyms.
3. **Emphasize the public service aspects of policing** – Recent research has found that many applicants are motivated to enter policing careers because of their desire to help the community. Job descriptions should describe how the agency and officers support healthy and safe communities.
4. **Explain resources that support work-life balance** – The challenges associated with establishing healthy work-life balance can have a larger impact on prospective women applicants. If the agency has instituted strategies for improving work-life balance, these should be described.
5. **Describe how the agency cares for its officers with financial and non-financial benefits** – Applicants may be concerned about their long-term health and wellbeing in a policing career. Agency strategies for assisting officers should be described. This may include both financial and non-financial benefits that are part of a total compensation package.
6. **Clarify how the agency supports applicants before and during academy attendance** – Details about academy attendance will be a mystery for many potential applicants. Where possible, clarify the type of academy and how the agency supports applicants before and during the academy. Physical fitness requirements are often of greater concern for women applicants. Describe how the agency supports applicants in meeting physical fitness requirements.

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<sup>5</sup> McKay, P. F., Avery, D. R., & Morris, M. A. (2008). Mean racial-ethnic differences in employee sales performance: The moderating role of diversity climate. *Personnel Psychology, 61*, 349–374.

Use the information in this table to create a job description informed by the best available evidence:

Description	Example Content
<p>The <b>opening paragraph</b> should have a direct statement about the agency's commitment to, and recognition of, the value of having diverse employees.</p>	<p>We are looking for dependable and diverse problem solvers. Our approach empowers each employee to have a voice in a collaborative, adaptive work environment. We think creatively and strategically together as a team.</p>
<p>Provide a <b>general description</b> of police work. Highlight the role of community partnerships, if possible.</p>	<p>Under general supervision, the candidate will perform a wide variety of patrol and related duties including building strong police-community partnerships; the prevention of crime; the protection of life and property; the enforcement of laws and ordinances; conducting investigations; assisting in the preparation of cases and testifying in court; and providing assistance to the public.</p>
<p>Describe the <b>desired skills and abilities</b> of applicants.<sup>6</sup> Highlight the interpersonal skills that are critical to effective policing.</p>	<p><b>Desired Skills and Abilities:</b> If you are committed to excellence, high quality service, leadership development and a great place to work, this may be the opportunity for you.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to communicate with diverse community members</li> <li>• Ability to organize and work cooperatively with diverse communities</li> <li>• Skill to handle conflicting priorities</li> <li>• Ability to empathize with people of different cultures, backgrounds, experiences, and sociodemographic characteristics</li> </ul>
<p>Describe the <b>typical tasks</b> of a patrol officer. Ensure that the description includes elements of work that are consistent with service to the community, such as problem solving and forming and maintaining partnerships.</p>	<p><b>Typical Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patrols the City to secure life and property and deter crime.</li> <li>• Responds to emergency calls for service to protect public safety and property, resolve problems, diffuse situations and enforce laws and ordinances.</li> <li>• Develops and maintains effective working relationships with the community, including the elderly or school-age youth.</li> <li>• Engages with the community in problem-solving activities to reduce crime and victimization.</li> <li>• Provides information, directions and assistance to the public in a variety of situations.</li> <li>• Observes, monitors and controls routine and unusual traffic situations.</li> <li>• Makes arrests and serves warrants and subpoenas; takes individuals into custody as required.</li> <li>• Secures crime scenes and evidence; interviews suspects, victims and witnesses; collects and preserves evidence.</li> <li>• Assists in preparing, documenting, and developing prosecution cases; testifies in court.</li> </ul>

<sup>6</sup> Listed items adapted from Prussel, D., & Lonsway, K. (2001).

Description	Example Content
<p>Provide information on the <b>monetary and non-monetary benefits</b> of employment. Highlighting resources that can support healthy work-life balance is useful for all applicants but can be especially important for women applicants.</p>	<p><b><u>Benefits include but are not limited to:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health Insurance (including Medical, Dental, Vision, and Prescription Drug Coverage)</li> <li>• Wellness Program (including gym membership, mental health counseling, and peer support program)</li> <li>• Mentoring Program</li> <li>• Child Care Support</li> <li>• Parent Employee Resource Group</li> <li>• Group Life Insurance</li> <li>• Wellness Program</li> <li>• Employee assistance program (EAP)</li> <li>• Defined Benefit Retirement Plan</li> <li>• Competitive salary</li> <li>• Extensive career advancement opportunities</li> </ul>
<p>Describe <b>paid time off</b> so that applicants better understand the ability to create work-life balance.</p>	<p><b><u>Paid time off including:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vacation</li> <li>• Sick leave</li> <li>• Comp time</li> <li>• Parental Leave</li> <li>• Holiday pay bonus if working federal holidays</li> </ul>
<p>Many candidates may be unfamiliar or have misconceptions about the <b>academy</b>. If appropriate, be clear that academy attendance is paid time. If your academy is non-residential, highlight that attendees get to return home daily.</p>	<p><b><u>Fully Paid Academy:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support and training to meet physical fitness requirements</li> <li>• Non-residential academy means you go home at the end of the day</li> <li>• Pre-academy orientation to make sure you can maximize your experiences</li> <li>• Salary and benefits apply while attending the academy</li> <li>• No haircut requirements</li> </ul>
<p>Include the standard <b>language for equal opportunity employers</b>.</p>	<p><b><u>Equal Opportunity Employer</u></b></p> <p>The City is an equal opportunity employer to all, regardless of age, ancestry, color, disability (mental and physical), exercising the right to family care and medical leave, gender, gender expression, gender identity, genetic information, marital status, medical condition, military or veteran status, national origin, political affiliation, race, religious creed, sex (includes pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and related medical conditions), and sexual orientation.</p>

RTI International is a non-profit research organization. With funding from the National Institute of Justice, RTI is conducting research to identify, test, and implement best practices in law enforcement recruitment. This research includes testing messaging strategies, exploring advertising outlets and formats, and optimizing the hiring processes. More information about this work can be found at: [www.recruitwomenpolice.org](http://www.recruitwomenpolice.org) and [www.rti.org/impact/recruiting-female-police-officers](http://www.rti.org/impact/recruiting-female-police-officers). This research is being carried out in partnership with the National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives ([www.nawlee.org](http://www.nawlee.org)).

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