

Wanted: A few good men -- and women and minorities: Canadian police forces have joined to fight a triple whammy -- a glut of retirements, officers quitting mid-career and too many white males

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With a mass exodus of people retiring from police departments every day, there is a growing concern among Canada's police ranks that there are not enough recruits to fill the spaces.

There is a lack of qualified replacements, and those who are qualified sometimes opt for different careers. There is also a growing trend where trained officers are treating policing careers as "stepping stones" to other careers.

This is why a new organization, the Canadian Police Sector Council, has set out to recruit men and women of all backgrounds, to better represent the country's changing demography.

With \$150,000 in funding from the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, the sector council set out in 2001 to learn more about the staffing concerns -- like recruitment and retention -- facing police departments -- and to find ways to meet these needs.

Ottawa Police Association president Charles Momy says he believes the problem of officers leaving for other jobs is simply a "sign of the times."

"I think that's a phenomenon that's happening everywhere," said Mr. Momy.

"Younger people are not staying in career positions for 30 years; they are staying in a career for five or 10 years, and the next thing you know they (a police officer) are a teacher."

The council is led by a 30-member board of directors and co-chaired by OPP Commissioner Gwen Boniface and Dale Kinnear, director of labour services for the Canadian Professional Police Association.

After the council's first meeting this summer, Ms. Boniface said: "The Canadian police sector is vulnerable -- more so than at any other time in recent memory.

"We're at risk of finding ourselves one day without the sufficient numbers of officers with the necessary experience and competencies to meet the needs and expectations of the communities we protect."

However, since then, she sees the mass exodus of retirees as an opportunity to build forces that are more representative of the public. This plan includes hiring more women, aboriginal and minority groups over the next 10 years.

"As we move forward, the police force really has to be able to reach into the community.

IMAGES



Chris Mikula, the Ottawa Citizen

When acting inspector Kai Liu joined Ottawa police in 1986, he was only the third member of a visible minority on the force.

"Look at the number of languages (spoken), say, in the Greater Toronto Area," said Ms. Boniface, who also puts technology skills at the top of the list.

"It will be important to be able to have officers to have the capacity in an investigation, or dealing with a victim, to be able to speak a first language."

On one hand, a growing number of applicants do not possess the skills and abilities to meet future demands, let alone current needs. And, increasingly, good candidates are lured away by other organizations or attracted by other careers.

"Police officers and new recruits are saying to me 'you know what? this (working as a police officer) is a really good stepping stone to the career that I really want'," said Mr. Momy. "You would never hear that 20 years ago."

A national survey of 1,600 youth taken earlier this year by Ipsos Reid showed only five per cent of respondents identified policing as a top career choice, compared with 19 per cent for health care and 18 per cent for teaching and the trades.

However, more than one-third (37 per cent) said they would consider a career in policing. The overwhelming majority agreed it is meaningful work (94 per cent) and a rewarding career (88 per cent), although more than half (57 per cent) believe the work is too dangerous.

The sector council has been working with other leaders from police agencies, unions, police boards, training institutes and all levels of government, to find solutions to these problems.

Another issue affecting recruitment is the growing number of retirees.

At the end of the Second World War, there was a huge influx of young men applying to work as police officers. The bulk of those men retired in the mid-'70s, and at that time, a large number of police officers were hired.

"Now, you look 30 years later, there is a massive influx of retirees, so that means there's a massive influx of new people that have to be hired to replace those retirees, as well as an increase in population," said Ottawa police Staff Sgt. Syd Gravel, who has been managing the force's Outreach Recruitment Project for three years.

When Staff Sgt. Gravel joined the force 30 years ago, the average age of a new police officer was about 20 years old because many young men were just graduating from high school or coming from the military. Now, he says, the average age of a recruit in Ontario is 29.

Today, most officers have post-secondary education and, sometimes, even another career under their belt. For this reason, police organizations are finding candidates with life skills more attractive. That makes it harder for younger applicants to make the cut.

"We have people, for example, who are applying to become police officers, who are nurses, who are social workers, who are teachers, bankers, lawyers," says Staff Sgt. Gravel.

"We are finding, for example, that if you have a high school education and you've got eight years of experience of life skills, then, generally, you are attractive to us."

It is also more complicated to become a police officer than in the 1970s, with a standardized recruitment application process to ensure competency in self-control, physical fitness, analytical thinking, achievement orientation and education.

While the education requirement is still Grade 12, most recruits have post-secondary education in the Algonquin College Police Foundations course or a university degree.

Because the Ottawa police have recognized the looming trend, Staff Sgt. Gravel says he is "not worried" about Ottawa's force because the beefed-up marketing over the past two years has piqued the interest of potential recruits.

He said he noticed a significant decline in recruits in 2004. But because of aggressive campaigning at schools, the number of recruits was on the rise again in 2005.

There were 97 new officers hired in 2002; 78 in 2003; 64 in 2004; and 39 in 2005.

All recruits hired in Ontario, no matter the municipality, go to the Ontario Police College, where three recruitment classes are held each year -- in April, September and December.

When Ottawa police started holding monthly information sessions at colleges and universities in 2004, they had trouble filling the space. It took about one year to get the interest built up again.

"The complexity of recruiting for such a diverse community as Ottawa now becomes more complex when trying to hire candidates who are not only qualified but also bring with them an awareness or connection with the community," said Staff Sgt. Gravel.

"The more complex the demographics of the community, the more complex the requirements expected of our candidates. With a community that boasts over 70 languages and over 61 ethnic groups, the harder it is to fill the spaces."

In a 2004 interview with the Citizen, Staff Sgt. Kai Liu, who became Ottawa's first Asian-Canadian police officer in 1986, said that "when I first came on, a police officer in Ottawa was a white male."

"When I got out of the car, people would come to a dead stop because they were so surprised to see someone who was non-white," recalled Staff. Sgt. Liu, now an acting inspector. He was only the third member of a visible minority to join Ottawa's police force.

Now that aggressive campaigning is part of the reality in policing, Staff Sgt. Gravel has made it his job to go to schools and speak to potential recruits about the benefits of the job, in terms of financial security, job satisfaction, and a continuing education for life.

"There's security, with good income, benefits but, on top of that, there are other things that are attractive about policing," said Staff Sgt. Gravel.

"I've worked in at least 14 different sections in my 28 years, and every time I got transferred to a section, it's like a new job -- fraud is very different than drugs, than human resources, than professional development, than courts -- so where else can you work and get 14 different new jobs?"

Illustration:

• Photo: Chris Mikula, the Ottawa Citizen / When acting inspector Kai Liu joined Ottawa police in 1986, he was only the third member of a visible minority on the force.

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