Troops to Cops: Changing Uniforms, Changing Missions?

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Introduction

The more than 17,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies are highly heterogeneous. Though all employ sworn personnel and embrace some minor variation of the duty to "protect and serve," variability still dominates. One piece of common ground since the mid-1990s has been a constriction of qualified applicants within hiring pools. In this essay, we posit that general shortfalls of applicants will remain for the foreseeable future, absent markedly increased shrinkage of the overall job market. While we could dwell on various reasons or excuses for the emergence of this problem, the assertion is not much in dispute except by those inclined towards wishful thinking. Law enforcement agencies across the country are much interested in improved methods to meet their staffing needs. For many, interest in former members of the military as prospective employees may have increased. There are several possible advantages to employing former military personnel in policing, making them an attractive (and possibly easy-to-access) pool from which to draw future employees. The purpose of this chapter is to lay out some of the pros and cons of such an approach.

We do not attempt to predict or even list alternative futures for policing agencies because they are so variable, and we expect that variability to remain. Some agencies may become more oriented toward "combat" policing and some less so; some agencies may acquire more enlightened leadership and some less so, etc. What some agencies see as the benefits of hiring former military personnel will to others serve as disincentives to this practice. Overall, we believe agency characteristics will be a wash. Thus, we leave it to the reader to evaluate how the following can best be applied to recruitment and general human resources functions in the reader's agency.

Policing has long relied on a nexus with military practices and behaviors, including the hiring of former military personnel. Though some have argued the extent of the nexus is overstated and misapplied (Cowper, 2000), there are clear patterns of similarities between the two institutional environments. Hiring retired or former military personnel has been a common practice in policing for several reasons. First, there are significant similarities between military and policing environments. Second, many policing agencies have found that former members of the military have worked out well as police officers. Both environs rely on comparable rank and control systems, require the wearing of uniforms and carrying of firearms, place primacy on a set of somewhat similar values, and may attract similar personalities. For the police, hiring former military personnel may seem natural, as it is assumed these prospective employees already have knowledge and habits that will translate well into policing organizations.

Many U.S. policing agencies perceive a shortfall in their recruiting pools (Koper, Maguire, & Moore, 2001; Taylor et al., 2005). In prior eras, the military was viewed as a "go to" source for prospective employees. Anecdotally, many officers hired in the late 1960s and early 1970s began a policing career after serving in Vietnam. These officers were often drafted at a young age, trained to wear a uniform and use a firearm, and, upon

their return to America, policing may have seemed an easy transition given their existing skill sets and training. The hiring of former military personnel has been a less visible practice in recent decades, though, certainly, exceptions abound across the more than 17,000 U.S. agencies. The purpose of this chapter is to take what has become a relatively small area of human resources within policing (the military as a source of applicants) and suggest how best we can take advantage of present opportunities.

Why Are Military Personnel An Attractive Recruiting Pool?

For years, police agencies have turned to the military as a preferred source of new employees. This was particularly common during the Vietnam era, as returning soldiers traded one uniform, weapon, and mission for another. Many individuals who have served in the armed forces are likely to find appealing our society's traditional notions of policing, including values toward service, mission, duty, and protection. Policing may have a comfortable "feel" that makes it attractive to those preparing to complete a term of military service. The Army values (loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage) seem reasonably consistent with civilian policing.[1] An oddity is that while the military services are quite serious about infusing values throughout organization and function, we in policing do not intentionally teach or model consistent values to frontline employees. We then wonder why some police officers do not discriminate right from wrong in their own behavior. While police departments could and should increase their teaching of appropriate values, an infusion of military veterans might help balance and fill the present void.

Military veterans bring to the job a number of skills and abilities that make them attractive as new employees. In the short run, veterans are used to wearing uniforms and maintaining their personal appearance. They know how to keep their shirttails tucked in during the performance of their duties and will not question policies regarding hair length and facial hair. Veterans are familiar with weapons and defensive tactics, though usually not the varieties employed in policing. The current emphasis on urban warfare means many veterans understand how to read an area and make tactical choices, though they are frequently geared toward a different set of outcomes. Veterans may have gone through leadership training and development. It is no coincidence that military values and policing cultures both place primacy on duty, honor, and allegiance to agency and peers, although, as noted above, policing is not very good at making those values happen.

Many policing agencies have experienced a recent decline in qualified applicants, while anecdotal media reports suggest men and women leaving military service are sometimes having trouble finding quality employment.[2] Policing offers reasonably attractive material benefits: good pay relative to educational requirements, job security, early retirement, and respectable health care benefits.

From the outside, the structure and operation of policing might also seem consistent with military settings, making it appear the transition from one to the other might be relatively smooth.

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[1] http://www.goarmy.com/life/living_the_army_values.jsp

[2] http://sptimes.com/2006/07/16/Business/Young_veterans_new_ba.shtml

Although such benefits and conditions may have been appealing to those of the baby boomer generation (those born from 1943–1960), we cannot discount their relevance for “X”ers (those born 1961–1980) or “Next”ers (those born 1981–2000) (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). In each generation, there will be members who prefer the structured environment that policing presently requires. Those are the target population for police recruiters. Unfortunately, that population may be smaller in the more recent generations.

As a group, military veterans are more physically and mentally fit than their peers in the general population. The military has done policing the courtesy of assuring that these candidates are pre-filtered on at least some variables, such as education, intelligence, a degree of altruism, criminal behavior, reasonable mental health, ability to negotiate organizational behavior, and ability to function as a team member under duress. Assuming honorable discharge, a recent veteran is likely to do well in traditional police testing and screening processes, as well as in training academies.

Military veterans are increasingly familiar with situations of violent conflict, physical danger, psychological duress, and competing missions and values. In many urban areas, such working conditions are common dimensions of policing. Military veterans may be more adept at addressing rapidly changing circumstances to achieve an acceptable outcome to a given situation. Will military veterans be more likely to understand that “stuff happens” and be able to cope with it in a preferred fashion? We expect that the veterans will do well because the military likely would have filtered out people who were less able to perform when bad things happen. For these and many other reasons, military veterans are a pool from which police agencies might continue to draw prospective applicants.

What Questions Might There Be About Hiring Military Personnel?

We do not see clear reasons that would make military personnel an “unattractive” recruit pool. Rather, in considering the interface between military and policing organizations, operations, missions, and tactics, some questions emerge. These questions do not have definitive answers. Individual agencies will have to examine their objectives, contexts, and resources in determining their individual answers.

Police agencies have often assumed that there was a clear, smooth, and linear transition from military to policing services. Because both kinds of careers involve uniforms, firearms, and service, it has been assumed that the transition from one to the other would be simple for employees. In reality, there are critical distinctions in the missions and tactics that should lead agencies to be a bit cautious about hiring military veterans. This is not to say that veterans make inadequate employees; in fact, we suspect they are on balance considerably more functional than typical recruits. Rather, all new employees (former military or not) must be given an explicit understanding of how policing differs from military services in areas, such as strategies, tactics, methods, and outcomes. Each of these four dimensions needs tending, but exactly how they must be inculcated and what specific content should be included will vary significantly from one police agency to the next.

Values represent another dimension that needs careful attention. The soldier’s

creed[3] would seem, on the surface, to be consistent with civilian values. However, military values may conflict with values expected in civilian policing. For example, the very notion of an enemy is inconsistent with modern civilian policing. Civilian policing requires use of the minimum necessary force. The military constructs of proportional response and rules of engagement do not have exact civilian versions. "Warrior" does not fit what we expect police to do, even though we do talk about combat policing. "I stand ready to deploy, engage and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat"[4] is inconsistent with any policing model with which we are familiar.

Conflicts are not apparent when one looks at the values taught in the U.S. Navy.[5] The Air Force core values[6] and those of the Marine Corps[7] also seem to be, on the surface, compatible with policing. However, implicit values may be problematic, because shifts in context often have unintended consequences. If nothing else, one might expect conflicts between the military veterans who have been taught to appreciate values and the non-veteran police who may have picked up conflicting values or no particular orientation toward organizational values at all. Conflicts over values can, of course, be addressed through targeted training and education. Whether these conflicts will be addressed and whether the training and education will be effective, are open questions. Over time, we would expect employees to adopt a level of value convergence toward existing police agency norms, regardless of the employee's prior veteran status.

The Coast Guard[8] is explicit about one value that may conflict with organizational culture in much of policing: "We encourage creativity through empowerment." Police chiefs may vary in the extent to which they seek creative and empowered employees; police organizations will vary in their capacity to allow such individualization. Some civilian law enforcement leaders may not be aware of how far the military has moved toward empowering its lower echelon troops. Policing might well benefit from creative and self-motivated employees, though many policing agencies are not oriented toward supporting this type of employee conduct.

In a military context, we condition people to be courageous, ready, and vigorous warriors while also seeking to create engineers, agriculture specialists, social workers, and various other job characteristics to support the military's emerging nation-building and peace-keeping model. In many military settings, proportional responding is expected. In contrast, many police agencies want officers to use the minimum amount of force necessary to overcome resistance. These standards are not the same. It is possible that veterans may, under stress, revert to their previous standard. Though that prior standard may not be appropriate in policing applications, it is likely the military did a better job training the officer to operate within those parameters versus the often-mediocre training police agencies provide officers in making appropriate decisions under field conditions of duress.

In many agencies and contexts, we want police warriors who are disinclined to use the maximum level of allowable force—we seek what one chief has

[3] http://www.army.mil/thewayahead/creed.html
[4] http://www.army.mil/SoldiersCreed/flash_version/index.html
[5] http://www.chinfo.navy.mil/navpalib/traditions/html/corvalu.html
[6] http://www.usafa.af.mil/core-value/cv-mastr.html
[7] http://www.marines.com/page/Core-Values.jsp
[8] http://www.uscg.mil/DIVERSITY/values.htm

termed “reluctant warriors.” This term is not universally appealing across the range of American police agencies. There are, however, a growing number of agencies and executives who would prefer that their officers show restraint in the use of force due to liability, philosophical, or other concerns (see Carter, Sapp, & Stephens, 1989).

While hiring former military personnel has some potential benefits, a strong policing focus on hiring former military personnel might suffer from some significant limitations:

1. This pool of recruits is and will remain small relative to the former military pools from previous eras. Active-duty U.S. Military numbers have dropped significantly over the past several decades. The percentage of military participation is difficult to calculate, but one source provides evidence that the percentage of soldiers under arms during the Gulf War was about one quarter of that during the Vietnam War.[9] Total military recruits in 2002 were less than half that in any of the years from 1973–77.[10]
2. There is and will be considerable competition for that relatively small pool. The private sector and other governmental organizations are not ignorant of the advantages military service provides. Service-minded veterans interested in careers in law enforcement, intelligence, security, and homeland security will have myriad job opportunities in the public and private sectors. Medium and small agencies and even some large ones will have difficulty offering a work environment and benefits package that will compete. This situation may strain the existing problems medium and small agencies have recruiting and retaining female and minority applicants (Taylor et al., 2005). At the same time, the level of conflict and violence faced by many military personnel might make a “quiet” job policing Anytown, USA seem quite attractive to an individual preparing to complete a term of military service.
3. Some military veteran applicants will bring with them a variety of mental and physical disabilities. These disabilities will be to some degree because military recruiting and retention standards have varied from time to time and to a greater degree because of trauma incurred during service. Some of these concerns, particularly emotional problems, may not be obvious until specific policing situations provide a context for them. Traditional testing aimed at civilian applicants may or may not detect these conditions. While the United States Veterans Administration has significantly improved screening, assessment, and treatment standards for post-traumatic stress following combat related duty, there still exists a noteworthy potential for its presence. Moreover, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder can be delayed for 6 months or longer, increasing the likelihood of implications for policing.[11] Recent research (Cabrera et al., 2007) points out that exposure to childhood adversity dramatically increases the likelihood of post-traumatic stress disorder, whether soldiers had high-combat experiences or not. Based on other evidence (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998;

[9] http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/cwc/other/stats/warcost.htm
[10] http://www.dod.mil/prhome/poprep2002/appendixd/d_03.htm
[11] http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/information/

Dong et al., 2005), childhood adversity negatively affects the adult behavior, as well as the adult health, of civilian populations. Thus, the present authors recommend careful background investigations into the childhood of both veteran and non-veteran applicants.

4. In general, those with honorable discharges are not a random sample of young Americans. They are more fit, more stable, more mature, and more comfortable within a structured environment. On the other hand, there are specific and non-zero risks associated with these populations. Suicidal and homicidal propensities are not unheard of (Hill, Johnson and Barton, 2006), and various psychological responses to perceived trauma are not infrequent, particularly among soldiers who have been deployed multiple times or for extended periods to war zones.[12] We should not mistake soldiers as necessarily having maintained the physical fitness of trained athletes (e.g., Rubal, 1989), although overall their physical fitness likely exceeds that of the average police officer.
5. Veterans will be accustomed to higher quality training than is available in policing, a more ethical environment, more modern equipment, greater mission clarity, and an orientation toward team, rather than individual, performance. Police agencies may have difficulty retaining military veterans who become frustrated with constraints that are and are likely to remain a sad reality in many police agencies.
6. The fit of veterans with police departments will vary. Veterans, like police departments, are not all homogeneous. They bring different life experiences, work experiences, education, interests, and ambitions to policing. Some personnel will fit quite well in policing. Some organizations will be desirable work environments. The authors offer generalizations upon which police leaders might ruminate. In the end, the idiosyncrasies of individual officers and agencies will drive the fit of veterans in policing.
   Recruits with military experience must be taught that policing is a political enterprise and that they need to attend to opinions of stakeholders. Their early police training must provide them more sophisticated understanding of human resources law, including but by no means limited to, risk management.

Conclusion

In the private sector, organizations adapt or die. In the public sector, including policing, agencies and practices sometimes endure long past the point of usefulness. They get out-of-step with the times, they get disrespected, and they enter pointless conflicts with those they are supposed to protect and serve. The public sector may be missing existing opportunities, such as recruiting veterans. We know some of the futures we are likely to be facing, and we know what we must do to prepare for those futures. The infusion of military veterans into police agencies provides great potential. Veterans bring with them significant positive attributes. However, if police agencies are to maximize this opportunity, the agencies themselves will

[12] http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/83322.php

have to carefully consider the possible concerns with this strategy and examine whether their organizational environment does (or should) appeal to former military personnel.

As a practical matter, the question is not whether to hire from the pool of former military members. Instead the question is whether we can attract them. We are experiencing a nationwide shortage of police recruits. The limited quality of the civilian pool from which many agencies draw has been discussed ad nauseum at endless conferences and police bars. If someone with military experience walks up to the average police recruiter for the average agency, absent obvious disqualifiers that person will very likely be hired.

Thus, the dimensions discussed throughout this paper are presented to inform rather than to caution against hiring former military members. In addition, we encourage agencies to prepare for some associated challenges with which they may not have been familiar.

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