

## GENERATIONAL CHANGE WITHIN LAW ENFORCEMENT

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### Generations

In both popular discourse and research, the term “generation” or “cohort,” refers to a group of people who were born during the same span of years (White, Foner, & Waring, 1988). Thus, the well-known Baby Boom Generation refers to individuals born approximately between the end of World War II and the early 1960s. The Baby Boomers illustrate the common lack of consensus about when one generation ends and the next one begins. Its beginning is identified as 1943 or 1945 by different authors, while its end is placed at somewhere between 1960 and 1965. Although there is not complete consistency, the span of a generation is usually identified as 20 to 25 years, the average time period that it takes persons born in the same year to mature and start having children of their own.

Although there are substantial commonalities between successive generations, the focus of writers and media pundits is more often on their differences, both presumed and real. Since Ryder (1965), it has been understood that generations will necessarily differ, in part because their members grow up at different times and share different experiences. For example, the Vietnam War is often presented as the most influential experience shared by the Baby Boom Generation, while members of Generation X who followed the Boomers have no direct memory of the conflict or the protests at home.

Because of increases in longevity, members of several generations co-exist at any single point in time. In the contemporary United States, most surviving members of the Silent Generation, born between 1925 and 1945, have either retired from the work force or will do so in the next few years. The Baby Boomers hold many of the most powerful economic and political positions in the U.S., e.g., Bill Clinton and George W. Bush were their first two Presidents. Successful members of Generation X born between the early 1960s and approximately 1980 are more likely to hold middle-level positions in business and government. The younger members of the following generation, referred to by several terms including Generation Y, Millennials, Echo Boomers, the Backpack Generation, and the YouTube

Generation, born between 1980 and 1994, are now entering the job market in record numbers. And, finally, the term Generation Z is increasingly used to refer to persons who are currently in the formative period between birth and junior high school.

The present paper will focus on Generation Y, or Millennials, and the two terms will be used interchangeably hereafter. The importance of this generation is obvious for meeting staffing needs in law enforcement agencies. They currently provide the bulk of new recruits for police organizations and will increasingly be the source for replacement of current police leaders during the next two decades (see also Finnie's chapter in this volume). Therefore, understanding the defining characteristics of Generation Y and how its members are likely to fit into law enforcement organizations is a central challenge facing policing.

### **Generational Change and Conflict**

Within an organization, generational change will naturally occur as current members are gradually replaced by individuals who are from younger generations. For most of history, generational change was slow, because the generational gap (i.e. differences in early life experiences) was small. This gap began to grow with the increased rate of social change that accompanied the Industrial Revolution in the late 19th century, however. Generation Y has been shaped by several events, including the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the Iraqi War, but the defining social marker (or common experience) for its members may prove to be the rapid changes in information technology that have occurred during the last two decades. This process was recently underscored by the release of three U.S. businessmen who had been held captive by Columbian rebels in isolated jungle locations. Although their period of captivity had lasted five years, a brief period in generational terms, in post-release interviews the former hostages expressed surprise at the technological changes that had occurred since their capture.

Whether generational change within an organization is more consensual or more confliction will depend on the differences in norms and values between the current employees that are often embodied in rules and regulations and those of the new recruits. These differences will partially depend on the number of generations separating the groups. And, although the media focuses on generational differences and downplays generational continuity,

generational shifts involve movement in central tendencies among a cohort's members. To say that Generation Y places less importance on work, a common assertion made by social commentators, does not mean that **all** of its members share the same orientation toward their occupational careers. Within each generation, there is variation on any criterion, whether it is altruism, respect for authority, or attitudes toward peers.

Similar to variation among members of a given generation, there are also differences between the norms and values that are embodied within an occupation or organization. Some employers will more easily assimilate members of a new generation than others based on the magnitude of the gap between organizational norms and values, and those held by recruits who are filling entry-level positions. Simply stated, transitions between generations will proceed smoothly in some organizations, while they will spark significant conflict in others.

### **The Millennials and Law Enforcement**

In terms of organization, the modal police agency maintains a clearly-defined hierarchical structure with well-defined roles or ranks that are similar to the military's. There is a command structure with clear lines of authority and an emphasis on following established procedures. Police officers are typically characterized as socially conservative and somewhat suspicious of the motives of outsiders with a corresponding strong sense of camaraderie that can become the basis for an "us versus them" perspective. Again, it is important to remember that this description is a presumed central tendency (i.e. the characteristics of the average police department) and there is significant variation between law enforcement agencies and between individual police officers within agencies.

Although there has been substantial commentary and speculation about the work-related values and habits of Generation Y, there has been limited empirical research (Asaro Gonzalez, 2006; Oliver, 2006). Consistent with the initial descriptions of most generations, much of the social portrait of Generation Y is negative. Members are described as being overly ambitious, seeking instant gratification, showing little loyalty to employers, changing jobs frequently, and having unrealistic expectations of employers. On the other hand, Generation Y is also described as flexible, team-oriented, and technologically sophisticated, characteristics

that may fit well within a netcentric organizational structure (see the chapter in this volume by Jackson, Myers & Cowper). Oliver (1996) provides some evidence that Generation Y's attitudes toward work are shaped by early jobs held during college, as employment has increasingly become a normal part of the undergraduate career. Of course, most college students hold entry-level service positions, receive low wages, and change jobs frequently. Loyalty to a specific employer is increasingly uncommon in this generation and this may become a central variable in the level of conflict experienced within police organizations.

Available research supports some of the hypotheses concerning work-related differences between Millennials and members of prior generations. Although Asaro Gonzalez (2006) did not find a decline in the work ethic among Millennials, they were more likely to place a greater emphasis on balancing work and family obligations. There is also some support for the contentions that work is not as important in the lives of Millennials and that they hold high expectations about the appropriate rewards associated with work (Oliver, 2006). According to Universum (2008), a company which surveys more than 250,000 graduating students every year about their ideal work environments, individuals in this generation are looking for more leadership opportunities, a clear path for advancement, good prospects for high future earnings and rapid promotion, challenging work, professional training and development, a variety of assignments, flexible working conditions, and a high level of responsibility. One student pointed out in the survey that this generation "wants the same things from employers as all of the previous generations; we're just the first to ask for it." Given what we now know about Millennials, it is clear that the possibilities for increased generational conflict in the workplace are abundant if consensus between law enforcement leadership and these new employees is not reached.

### **Implications for the Future of Policing**

At present, Millennials have yet to make their full impact on the law enforcement workplace, but it is estimated they will be the majority of new police officers and deputies hired in the coming decade. By the year 2020, most police officers will be members of the Millennial generation (Henchey, 2008). With this significant change, it is expected that numerous

opportunities and challenges will exist for police leadership. Remembering that members of Generation Y are not homogeneous, there is reason to be optimistic about those who lean toward a career in law enforcement. Researchers at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte who examined the values orientation of criminal justice students concluded that “the differences between those criminal justice students who are specifically interested in law enforcement and other criminal justice majors as well as nonmajors seem to support higher ethical standards among law enforcement students” (Bjerregaard & Lord, 2004). This study further suggested positive outcomes for Millennials in the policing arena in that, “Criminal justice students interested in law enforcement received the highest mean scores on the trustworthiness scale, the lowest mean scores on the likelihood to engage in unethical acts, and the highest mean scores on the rating of the seriousness of police unethical behavior. It is the researchers’ personal experience that most criminal justice majors who state they are interested in law enforcement specifically appear to have made that career decision early in their education and understand the values and standards necessary to work in law enforcement.”

While the time is right to recruit Millennials into the law enforcement arena, as noted previously, many of these individuals will only effectively embrace a public safety workplace with an emphasis on mentoring relationships and opportunities for the future. These mentoring relationships will not only be important to the development of law enforcement leaders from the Millennials but will also become a critical element in any generational succession plan (Henchey, 2008). Martin and Tulgan (2001) further emphasized this characteristic of the millennial generation: “They will always need the wisdom of older, seasoned mentors. And they crave the guidance of knowledgeable, confident managers and coworkers. But they also want to be appreciated. . . . They want their ideas to be heard by expert listeners who don’t outright discount [generation] Yer’s simply because they’re young.”

Three significant threats law enforcement leaders will encounter in recruiting and retaining Millennials are the presence of blind adherence to tradition in policing agencies, linear thinking, and cynicism. In some agencies, outdated policies and procedures will likely need to be revised in order to incorporate the need for Millennials to have a sense of honor as well as

flexibility. Henchy (2008) explains that more entrepreneurial and adaptable careers will need to be provided by law enforcement, or the profession will be unable to effectively attract and retain the best of the millennial generation for leadership positions in the future.

Linearism, or linear thinking, is also consistently present in policing agencies. This is the viewpoint that time proceeds in a purposeful and inexorable manner, always forward into the future and is a never-repeating process of events and occurrences (Henchey, 2008). Howe and Strauss (2000) observed, "Yet the biggest obstacle now blocking a better adult appreciation of Millennials is one that today's adult generations did not face in their own youth. It is the obstacle that derives from straight-line thinking, from a near-universal adult consensus that, since the last two generations have defined a negative youth trend, the next American generation must necessarily follow that path." Because of this type of resistance, law enforcement leaders and trainers, due to their adherence to past belief systems and procedures may miss golden opportunities to successfully define a future plan that meets the career needs and demands of Millennials.

For many in the millennial generation, the view of the future is positive and hopeful. There is a real threat posed by the cynicism that is often found in law enforcement as a whole, as well as the human beings whose influence serve to guide Millennials today. Pessimism and a constant wave of negative criticism about members of this generation will raise mistrust and stifle their natural predisposition towards optimism, which is, so far, a defining characteristic of this generation. Ultimately, the lasting effect could be to cripple their generational can-do mentality and harm their progression to leadership positions in all areas of policing (Henchey, 2008).

One of the central challenges facing future police leaders is the ability to incorporate flexibility and motivation into a system, which has typically balked at such change. Motivation is clearly a key ingredient as well as the ability to motivate through instilling positive morale and excitement for specific assignments. Generation Y police officers need to feel that their views are seriously considered and that they as individuals actually mean something to the organization. Although difficult at times, police leaders must be transparent and able to clearly explain ideas and the thinking behind them from an organizational perspective. The future of

policing will also hinge on the change from an absolute management approach, which can create an atmosphere of mistrust and discontent and is not conducive to effective leadership. The Generation Y police officer will seek to be informed and thus gone will be the days of blind obedience. Furthermore, this approach will serve to build an understanding that police work in the new millennium is truly a team approach.

### **Final Note**

The most likely scenario is that Millennials will be integrated into most police organizations with minimal problems, as were the generations that preceded them. Those police departments and sheriffs' offices that are willing to make creative changes in work structures and consciously incorporate at least some of the goals of Millennials into altered career paths will experience the fewest problems. Meeting the Millennials part way will be the most productive approach to follow.

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