Ideas & Insights: Research on Civilians in Policing

Megan Alderden, Director of Research, Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, and

Wesley G. Skogan, Professor, Political Science, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, Illinois

This article is the first of a pair of articles for *Police Chief*'s Ideas & Insights feature. Read the response article.

Civilian employees are an important resource in policing, but they have been largely overlooked by researchers. The biggest focus has been on the growth in their numbers—civilian employees grew from approximately 7–8 percent of law enforcement employees in the 1950s to 15–20 percent in the 1970s.[1] The numbers have not changed much since

then; in 2008 (the most recent year from which data are available), civilians accounted for slightly more than 26 percent of police personnel in the United States.[2] The data presented here were collected in 2011 through online surveys of law enforcement agency employees conducted by the National Policing Research Platform.

The rationales for employing civilian staff include the assumption that civilians are cheaper and easier to hire than sworn personnel, they can be assigned more flexibly, and they might bring with them particular skills that law enforcement agencies need. Despite these benefits, police administrators have struggled to fully incorporate civilians into their agencies in a way that capitalizes on their skills and knowledge. The lower salaries and limited promotional opportunities that highly skilled civilians often encounter can make retention difficult. Their jobs can also be more at risk because civilian positions can be more contingent on budgetary ups and downs. While civilians may be easier to hire, they are often also easier and politically safer to fire than are their sworn counterparts. In the survey described here, civilian respondents in more than half of the agencies involved in the study reported that the Great Recession had led to a reduction in civilian positions. In addition, their status as non-sworn members can make these employees feel like outsiders in the workplace. Also, law enforcement executives do not always pay sufficient attention to personnel issues specific to civilian employees.

This article presents findings from a survey of 472 civilians employed by 19 U.S. law enforcement agencies. The survey focused on how workplace factors such as pay and benefits, work-related stress, perceptions of workplace equality and diversity, and perceptions of the acceptance of civilians are associated with job satisfaction. The article ends with suggestions for how law enforcement agencies can improve civilian employees' job satisfaction and the integration of civilians into their organizations.

Job Satisfaction: Why It Matters

Job satisfaction is the most-studied aspect of organizations because it is associated with a wide range of positive and negative factors in an organization's success. Employee dissatisfaction can lead to low productivity; low job commitment; absenteeism and tardiness; abuse of sick leave; psychological withdrawal; anger; hopelessness; sadness; cynicism; workplace deviance (theft and related acts); and acts of workplace revenge, sabotage, and retaliation. Workgroup cohesion and performance and organizational

innovation might also be stifled, and highly skilled employees might seek employment elsewhere.[3] The elements that influence job satisfaction are numerous, but can include employee satisfaction with pay and benefits, career growth, workplace stress levels, and perceptions of fair treatment and acceptance by fellow employees. Each of these factors is discussed.

Pay, Benefits, and Career Growth

The reason most often cited for hiring civilian staff is budget constraints; yet, little is known about how law enforcement agencies attract and retain civilian employees. While civilians might cost less to hire, lower pay and benefits can negatively impact their job satisfaction. In the survey, civilians were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with pay and benefits. Slightly over half of respondents indicated they were satisfied (46 percent) or very satisfied (9 percent) with their pay and benefits. Research indicates that opportunities for career advancement is a highly ranked reason for entering policing among sworn officers, but, on this topic, the divide between civilians and sworn is notable. Most police agencies have limited opportunities for civilian advancement and promotion, and management positions are generally held by sworn members.[4] Perceptions of limited career growth held true for the civilians surveyed. Only 28 percent of the civilians surveyed indicated that they believed career advancement opportunities were available to them.

Workplace Stress

Numerous studies have highlighted the stressful nature of police work, but all of them have focused on the stress experienced by sworn members. The causes of civilian workplace stress likely vary by job tasks. Some aspects of traditional police stress, for instance, might be experienced by civilian staff; for example, shift work and interactions with community members, two sources of stress for sworn officers, are common features of some civilian work (e.g., traffic aids, lockup personnel, and dispatchers). The reductions in civilian staff due to budget shortfalls noted earlier could require that the remaining employees take on additional work and responsibilities, which might increase stress.[5] Lack of training, resources, and other support can also play a role. Indeed, 60 percent of civilians surveyed reported feeling burned out from work at least once a month, and 27 percent indicated that this feeling occurred at least once a week or more. Civilians also reported being frustrated and emotionally drained—nearly two-thirds of respondents reported being frustrated at least once a month, and 36 percent reported being frustrated at least once a week. Over half of those surveyed (57 percent) reported feeling emotionally drained at least once a

month, and 35 percent reported this feeling at least once a week. These percentages varied considerably from agency to agency, indicating that stress for civilian employees at law enforcement agencies does not necessarily have to be high.

Workplace Equality and Acceptance

Many law enforcement agencies have also struggled with workforce diversification and integration, and this struggle can particularly affect civilians because a significant proportion of civilians hired by police agencies are women and racial or ethnic minorities.[6] In the survey, civilian staff were questioned about their perceptions of equality and diversity, as well as whether they felt accepted by their sworn peers, and 64 percent of civilians reported that they felt employees were treated the same regardless of gender, and 74 percent felt employees were treated the same regardless of one's race or ethnicity. Overall civilians reported relatively high rates of equal treatment, but perceptions differed by the race and ethnicity of the respondent. Racial and ethnic minorities were less likely to feel employees were treated equally by race than whites (59 percent of Latinos and 36 percent of African Americans versus 85 percent of whites). No differences were found by respondent sex.

Discussion of police culture often highlights the perceived clannish and distrusting nature of police officers, which might lead officers to be resistant to working with or being supervised by civilians. Other factors, such as concerns over the "civilianization" of desirable job assignments and general indifference to civilian co-workers by the sworn staff, might result in civilian law enforcement employees feeling underappreciated and undervalued. This perception was reflected when the surveyed civilians were asked how their status impacted acceptance within the organization and by their sworn peers. Only 30 percent of respondents felt that civilian and sworn personnel were treated the same, and only two-thirds of civilians surveyed felt that the department culture was accepting of civilian professionals; 67 percent felt valued as a team member. A high percentage (55 percent) of civilians also reported feeling that they needed to constantly prove themselves to sworn members of the organization. Civilians also reported feeling that their expertise (44 percent) or experiences and opinions (38 percent) were often dismissed by sworn employees.

Figure 1: Perceptions of Civilian Acceptance in the Workplace
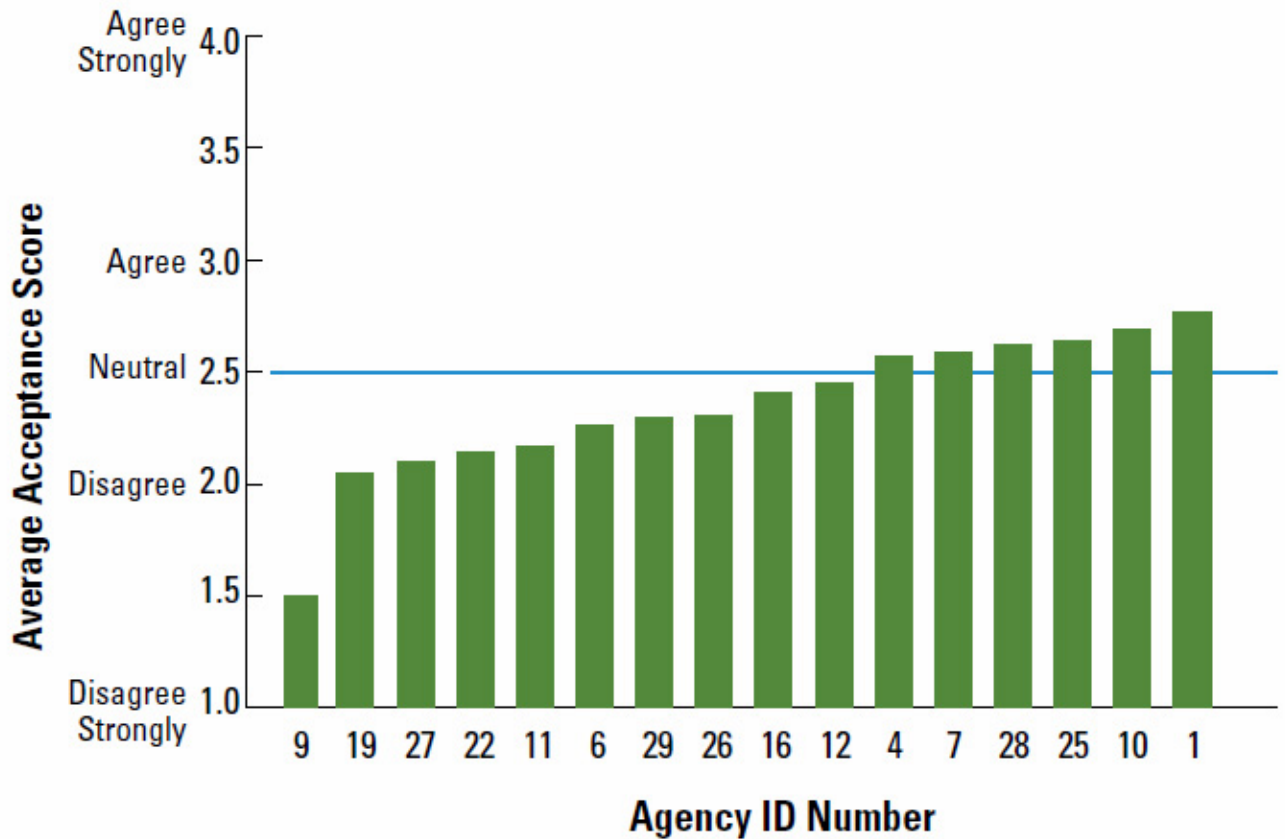
Note: *Three small agencies were eliminated from the figure due to small sample sizes.*

These views varied a great deal across agencies, however. Figure 1 plots agency-by-agency average scores on a measure of acceptance of civilians in policing that is based on the previously described questions. (Three small agencies with few civilian employees are excluded from the chart.) A horizontal line delineates the neutral point on the scale, halfway between "disagree" and "agree." Figure 1 illustrates two main points. First, there was noticeable variation between these departments in the extent to which civilians felt marginalized; their acceptance in the policing workplace was better in some places than others. Second, virtually all variation was somewhere in the negative range. A fair summary would be that nowhere were civilians particularly encouraged by how they were accepted; they varied only in the extent of their unacceptance.

Job Satisfaction: What Matters

The survey examined whether pay and benefits, work-related stress, perceptions of workplace equality and diversity, and perceptions of acceptance of civilians were

associated with civilian job satisfaction. Overall, job satisfaction reported by civilians was relatively high, with 79 percent of respondents reporting being satisfied to some extent with their present job and 78 percent reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their department. However, as with the acceptance of civilians, large differences exist across departments in this regard, confirming that organizational differences matter. Statistical analyses indicated that frequent emotional work-related stress was associated with less job satisfaction, while greater satisfaction with pay and benefits, less perceived workplace discrimination, and greater feelings of acceptance by the organization were associated with more job satisfaction.

The findings suggest some steps law enforcement agencies can take to improve civilian job satisfaction and, as a consequence, potentially improve organizational functioning. What is notable is that while satisfaction with pay and benefits was associated with job satisfaction, it was not the most important factor. Rather, emotional stress and feelings of acceptance were statistically more important. To address workplace-related stress, law enforcement agencies could capitalize on existing programs and support systems already available to sworn personnel by making these also available to civilian personnel. Police agencies could provide additional training and support for civilian personnel who are tasked with management functions, particularly when the role involves supervising sworn members. Educating and training front-line supervisors on how to support civilian staff can mitigate workplace stress, while also increasing civilian employees' feelings of acceptance. More effort might be needed to fully integrate civilians within policing, but the current emphasis on procedural justice in many agencies could also inform this process. Organizational processes and interactions that emphasize dignity, provide a voice, and build trust between sworn and civilian employees are key tenets of procedural justice. They could also increase feelings of acceptance. Such efforts, however, will require command staff commitment, as these changes will necessitate a cultural shift in many law enforcement organizations.

Conclusion

In sum, civilians represent an underutilized resource in law enforcement. Executives contemplating developing this resource within their agencies should consider the additional training, support,

A longer and more academic version of this research summary appeared as "The Place of Civilians in Policing," in *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 37, no. 2 (2014), 259–284.

and other organizational changes that might be needed to fully integrate civilians into the workforce. This investment could not only improve the retention of valued civilian employees and employee productivity, but might also facilitate other positive organizational outcomes, such as improved workgroup cohesiveness, loyalty to the profession, and organizational innovation. ♦

Notes:

[1]Dorothy Guyot, "Bending Granite: Attempts to Change the Rank Structure of American Police Departments," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 7, no. 3 (September 1979): 253–284; Timothy A. Judge and John D. Kammeyer-Mueller, "Job Attitudes," *Annual Review of Psychology* 63 (2012): 341–367.

[2]William King, "Civilianization," in *Implementing Community Policing: Lessons from 12 Agencies*, eds. Edward Maguire and William Wells (Washington DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services), 65–70.

[3]Kimberly A. Lonsway et al., *Equality Denied: The Status of Women in Policing, 2001* (Beverly Hills, CA: The National Center for Women & Policing, 2002).

[4]Major City Chiefs Association, *Civilianization: Risks and Rewards* (Washington DC, 2009).

[5]Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, *The Impact of the Economic Downturn on American Police Agencies* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).

[6]Brian A. Reaves, *Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies, 2008* (Washington DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011).

Please cite as: