



Police Staffing Observatory  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

# Police Selection

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## PRIORITIZING TACTICS TO MEET AGENCY NEEDS

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In partnership with



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# Institutional Partner Support

Workforce management is among the most important challenges police agencies face. For the approximately 17,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies employing more than 700,000 sworn officers, effective staffing is critical for providing quality service to communities, facilitating the well-being of officers and professional employees, and meeting performance objectives. Recruitment and retention are crucial for building strong, effective, quality workforces—as are allocation, work scheduling, deployment, selection, training, promotions, supervision, succession planning, leadership, culture, organizational learning, and still so much more. These are complex concepts that have multidimensional interactions and effects. Historically, practitioners have had few accessible, evidence-based resources to guide their workforce planning processes.

The Police Staffing Observatory (PSO), administered as part of the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice and drawing on nearly five dozen staffing experts from around the world, helps police organizations navigate and plan for their dynamic workforce challenges. Through its research, outreach, and collaboration with the local-global law enforcement community, the PSO helps bridge the gap between scientific rigor and the operational realities of policing. The PSO is actively developing a large body of knowledge and resources offering practitioners actionable lessons on creating and sustaining their workforces.

Like the PSO, our associations prioritize staffing, and we have worked diligently with our members to understand and address the workforce needs of the law enforcement community. With this in mind, we are pleased to be institutional partners of the PSO. Working together, we can create and share resources that advance workforce science in ways that provide practical value for police agencies in meeting their staffing needs. This report is just one example of our collaboration. It demonstrates the utility of academic-practitioner partnerships for addressing public safety needs and improving the police profession. We hope you find some helpful guidance in this resource, and we encourage you to avail yourself of the many others developed by the PSO.

With our greatest support,



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# Preface

Hiring for police positions can be extraordinarily difficult. Such difficulties may be compounded when organizations seek candidates with different backgrounds or specialized skills. Individual police organizations may find successful strategies to improve recruitment, but not all solutions will work the same way, nor will they work for all agencies. Furthermore, few agencies have the capacity or resources to develop their own lessons, and little information is available on the principles of a successful recruitment program. There are few useful toolkits that agencies can turn to in identifying and applying solutions that might work for their communities.

To provide practical guidance for agencies seeking to improve their staffing processes, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) provided support to the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory (PSO) in collaboration with institutional partners to identify and evaluate successful tactics for police recruitment, selection, and retention. The second in a series of three reports corresponding to each of these areas, this guide summarizes the PSO research on selection tactics. It reviews 49 tactics for selection and provides field evaluations of each. The evaluations, consisting of ratings by practitioners, include how the tactics perform not just in terms of affecting staff level, but also on metrics such as workload, time to implement, and cost, as well as effects on quality of policing and community-oriented policing. This guide will be particularly useful for police practitioners and planners seeking to improve their agencies' selection of officers.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## The Selection Challenge

Though not often cited specifically, particularly in comparison to recruitment and retention, selection of police personnel can be a critical component of addressing staffing challenges (Wilson and Miles-Johnson 2024). Recruitment can consume considerable resources and retention reduce the need for recruitment (Wilson et al. 2023). Selection may be the linchpin behind the success of both, given that police departments do not see a return on their “recruitment investment” for many years (Allisey et al. 2014).

From the 1970s through the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, police selection processes remained largely unchanged (Wilson et al. 2010). Selection represented a significant investment of police department resources, particularly for testing, review-board member salaries, background-investigator salaries, and medical, psychological, and drug screening. Selection processes usually started with a qualifying examination, then included a criminal records check and a fitness or agility test, followed by assessment center and practical tests, and final steps of a medical examination, psychometric test, psychologist interview, and drug test (Taylor et al. 2006). Over time, selection criteria could change given challenges of generational changes (Wilson et al. 2010) or demands of consent decrees (Taylor et al. 2006).

Among the challenges that traditional methods of selection encountered were an increasing number of potential recruits who had records of drug use, large levels of debt, or inability to pass fitness tests (Wilson 2012). While police standards differ from those of the military, and even by agency, it is noteworthy that in recent years 77 percent of youths of military recruitment age were ineligible due to failing aptitude exams, recent drug use, or health concerns (Kirkman 2023; Mongilio 2022), and, after many years of decline, the proportion of young Americans physically fit enough to enlist is below 25 percent (Philipps 2022).

Police departments require candidates who are mentally and physically capable of a career in policing (Annell, Lindfors, and Sverke 2015). Departments assess these candidates through a battery of tests. Selecting improper candidates can impair relations with the community, waste resources, lead to high turnover, and risk reckless behavior.

The qualities that make a good police officer, specifically, can be difficult to identify (Sanders 2003). Traits such as intelligence, common sense, dependability, and honesty appear more frequently than others in research, but there are two complications to selecting for these or other characteristics. The first is the difficulty in measuring job performance and linking job tasks to personality characteristics. The second is the importance of the police organization in influencing officer behavior, sometimes despite an officer’s personal characteristics. The ambiguities are such that one researcher suggests that there may not be such a thing as a good officer but only a good employee, and that police agencies should select officers using more general principles (Sanders 2003).

Regardless of how they choose officers, police agencies may need to select officers who represent qualities and attributes desired by their communities. Yet traditional selection tests can be subjective and susceptible to bias (Milam 2023). One way that police agencies can ensure their personnel reflect local needs is to seek community input on recruitment methods and marketing initiatives to reach “service-oriented candidates,” and revise their selection procedures based on this input (Scrivner 2006). Steering committees, for example, comprising representatives of law enforcement, city leadership, and community members, may meet periodically to review department practices in recruiting, community outreach, occupational testing and psychological screening to identify best practices in identifying and hiring service-oriented candidates. More generally, having a team of individuals discuss candidate merits can help ensure a cross section of staff hear and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of any given applicant.

While standards remain important, agencies may need to tailor them in some ways (Morison 2017). Physical fitness standards, for example, could be tailored to tasks that officers will perform. Rather than testing the number of push-ups a candidate can perform, agencies could test the ability of a candidate to control somebody who resists. They also may seek to develop a more holistic approach to officer well-being, rather than relying on arbitrary standards or numbers. Police agencies still need to screen out candidates, but such screens may need to consider broader context. Drug use screens may need to focus on recent rather than life-time use, and evaluations of financial responsibility may need to consider candidate age and other context. Conversely, police departments may seek to proactively select candidates, using face-to-face interviews to identify characteristics most needed in the force for the community. Recent research has underscored the importance of “screen-in” processes in addition to “screen-out” characteristics (Sun et al. 2022; Terpstra, White, and Fradella 2022). Agencies might include integrity, compassion, work ethic, empathy, and communication in their selection criteria. Other characteristics that police agencies might seek in officers include multilingual abilities, ability to relate to the communities they serve, or post-secondary education (Mayo 2006; McMurray, Karim, and Fisher 2010; Wilson et al. 2013).

Agencies may also adjust their selection tactics to assist qualified candidates who otherwise might drop out. This may include follow-up mailings to candidates who pass an initial screening (Linos, Reinhard, and Ruda 2017), re-evaluating parts of their hiring processes where many candidates drop out to ensure these elements are necessary (Donohue 2021), and offering tailored physical training as well as mentoring programs and support to candidates needing it (Roman and McGough 2024).

All selection methods have one goal: identifying the most ideal, dedicated, and mission-oriented candidates from the pool of applicants. Not all selection methods will be suited for every department (Wilson and Grammich 2023). Police departments may vary in mission and in what the “best” or “ideal” candidate for those missions may be. As a result, hiring and selection goals and standards should be established and communicated by senior leadership to set the foundation and continuity for the overall workforce management effort (Wilson and Grammich 2024).

Consistent messaging from senior leadership is also necessary to ensure continuity in hiring and selection standards are maintained and their goals are understood.

There are common dimensions that agencies need to address in selection, such as increasing staffing level and improving workload management. This work assesses selection tactics—i.e., specific actions that departments may undertake in choosing candidates for sworn positions—across several dimensions common to all agencies.

## Purpose

Building on our earlier research (Wilson et al. 2010), this work reviews 49 selection tactics identified from news articles, academic research, and practitioner reports and evaluates their effectiveness on several dimensions. Our review of academic research and practitioner reports focused on tactics identified since our earlier work (but also included our earlier work to capture tactics prior to that). Our search of tactics reported in the news focused on 2020 through 2022, when police agencies were, given the COVID-19 pandemic and some high-profile incidents of police misconduct, facing among the worst recruiting scenarios they had ever confronted. This work provides insights into how police agencies have sought to select personnel for more complex environments, including those of increasingly dynamic communities and expanding technology presenting challenges and opportunities for policing. Through review of these tactics, identification of the most appropriate ones, and adoption and modification where appropriate, policing organizations can continually improve their selection practices as a learning organization (Senge 1990; Senge et al. 1999; Örtenblad 2019; Wilson, Grammich, and Cherry 2024).

Ideally, this guide will help police agencies treat their selection challenge in a way that medicine treats patients: diagnose the specific issue or preexisting conditions, including context and limitations, then use an evidence-based treatment for such an issue. For example, a police agency may have an urgent need to increase its overall staff level while confronting funding shortfalls. What tactics can work within this set of circumstances? In this report, in addition to examining broad categories of tactics and their performance on different dimensions, we will explore similar scenarios and note what agencies may do in them. Where resources are lacking to implement preferred tactics, law enforcement executives can consider using the lessons in this guide as support for funding requests through their governing bodies.

## Approach

For our assessment, we identified tactics from academic studies and professional organizations and government agencies published from 2010 through 2022, and news articles published from January 1, 2020 through December 31, 2022. The broad list of terms we used to search for resources yielded 151 relevant academic articles, 73 practitioner reports, and 353 news articles, from which we identified 49 unique tactics that departments might use to select candidates. (A companion report, *Police Recruitment: Prioritizing Tactics to Meet Agency Needs*, discusses 225

unique tactics that a department may use to recruit candidates.) **We defined a selection tactic as any activity or process associated with choosing candidates from among those who applied.** Importantly, some selection tactics may also support recruitment because they improve the attractiveness of seeking employment, such as simplifying or speeding up the hiring process; such tactics are considered in the analyses for both this report and the companion report on recruitment tactics. Overall, the tactics we considered cover a broad range of practices associated with administrative, financial, outreach, and other strategies.

Once we identified the tactics, we asked practitioners with direct staffing experience and knowledge about staffing processes to evaluate their effects, such as their likely effects on the number of staff and workload management as well as ease of implementation (see box summarizing performance dimensions and their scales). We created a broad sample to rate the tactics, including practitioners with executive and personnel program experience, from different-sized (small, medium, large) and types (local, state, university) of departments, and from varying geographic regions (note the sample size precludes the representation of each stratum and substratum for each specific tactic). Tactics were randomly assigned such that each tactic was sent to three practitioners for assessment. Practitioners completed their assessment between June and October 2024. We retained for each analysis only tactics where at least two respondents provided assessments for each performance dimension considered, and we averaged the ratings. We generally did not expect practitioners to rate tactics equally on all dimensions. Rather, we assumed these results would point to different tactics that agencies should use in different circumstances.

## Performance Dimensions

We asked respondents to rank each tactic using the following scales:

- Would the tactic decrease or increase the number of staff?
  1. Large decrease (5% or more over a year)
  2. Modest decrease (less than 5% over a year)
  3. No change
  4. Modest increase (less than 5% over a year)
  5. Large increase (5% or more over a year)
  6. Unsure
- Would the tactic make workload management less or more effective?
  1. Much less effective
  2. Somewhat less effective
  3. No change
  4. Somewhat more effective
  5. Much more effective
  6. Unsure
- Would the tactic have a delayed or immediate impact on department staffing levels?
  1. Very delayed (more than 24 months)
  2. Somewhat delayed (13 to 24 months)
  3. Somewhat immediate (3 to 12 months)
  4. Very immediate (within 3 months)
  5. Unsure
- Would the tactic be difficult or easy to implement?
  1. Very difficult (significant staff time and coordination over a year)
  2. Somewhat difficult (moderate staff time and coordination over a year)
  3. Somewhat easy (modest staff time and coordination over a year)
  4. Very easy (little staff time and coordination over a year)
  5. Unsure
- Would the tactic increase or decrease agency costs?
  1. Greatly increase (\$50,000 or more over a year)
  2. Somewhat increase (less than \$50,000 over a year)
  3. No effect
  4. Somewhat decrease (less than \$50,000 over a year)
  5. Greatly decrease (\$50,000 or more over a year)
  6. Unsure
- Would the tactic reduce or increase the quality of police work?
  1. Greatly reduce
  2. Somewhat reduce
  3. No effect
  4. Somewhat increase
  5. Greatly increase
  6. Unsure
- Would the tactic impede or advance the goals of community policing?
  1. Greatly impede
  2. Somewhat impede
  3. No effect
  4. Somewhat advance
  5. Greatly advance
  6. Unsure

## Outline—and How to Use This Guide

Using the answers from practitioners, we consider the tactics in three ways. In Chapter 2, we identify tactics that perform well on each of these dimensions, with some attention as well to how tactics perform across dimensions. In Chapter 3, we review tactics agencies in different circumstances, e.g., needing to balance cost and timing, or quality and community policing, may wish to consider. We summarize our findings and their implications in Chapter 4.

We again note that not all tactics will apply to all departments in all scenarios. Similarly, we note that our analysis is of tactics that agencies may wish to use. Tactics (e.g., host “hiring days” where candidates complete multiple hiring steps at once) are actions that agencies may wish to undertake to implement a broader, strategic goal (e.g., decrease the time needed to hire an officer). Readers may wish to identify the specific situation they encounter or their specific departmental limitations (e.g., need to reduce costs, or to increase staff quickly with tactics easy to implement) and review the relevant sections on the most effective tactics to achieve their broader goals (e.g., increasing staff). Because some tactics are ranked highly across multiple dimensions, they appear repeatedly in our discussions. Our repeated mention of such tactics is not an endorsement of them—only individual departments can decide what will work best for their communities—but rather reflects our decision to have discussion of dimensions be self-standing.

The core of our discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 revolves around identified dimensions (e.g., top-rated tactics for increasing staffing level) or combinations of dimensions (e.g., tactics that may help increase staffing levels with minimal time, cost, and effort needed for implementation). In each section, we present a table with the tactics receiving the highest rating by the specified dimension, and some select discussion of what previous research or media reports say about it. Callout boxes also present details of some recent applications for tactics discussed in Chapter 2. Readers may skim for the dimensions of most concern to them and review those sections only.

## Chapter 2: Prioritizing Tactics Based on Key Performance Dimensions

Police agencies may seek to improve their selection practices in different ways. Nevertheless, there are several common steps in the selection process, such as multiple examinations and screenings for disqualifying characteristics. To encourage candidates of particularly desirable characteristics to join the force, police agencies may “screen in” for such characteristics. They may also seek to expedite selection processes so that qualified candidates can join the force more quickly—and so that an agency may minimize the loss of such candidates to other, more quickly developing opportunities.

Police agencies may also face differing demands in selection at different times. Some may need to increase staff generally and rapidly. Others may need to increase staff without substantially increasing expenditures. Still others may wish to improve their implementation and practice of community policing.

Below, we consider the highest-rated tactics for each dimension we consider relative to the selection of qualified candidates for police positions. For each dimension, we present a table listing all those appearing above a cutoff score, ranked by their effectiveness and their number of evaluations. For the highest-ranking tactics, we also present some context on their practice. When an agency chooses tactics for implementation, they must account for organizational context and potential effects on other components of the staffing ecosystem (Wilson and Grammich 2024). Tactics require appropriate planning and assessment, potentially necessitating other support such as dedicated staff, training, and senior leadership buy-in and oversight to ensure effective implementation. For example, redeploying staff to support background investigations requires assessing the potential impact (such as that regarding workload or morale) on the originating units of staff and communicating this change to affected staff and units carefully. Likewise, streamlining training must be pursued carefully to ensure staff continue to receive the most important and highest quality training possible, reducing applicant processing time calls for understanding the tradeoffs of different options to do so, and hiring ahead of vacancies requires knowledge about the existing ability to do so in terms of funding and training capacity. Any tactic chosen for adoption should be reviewed thoroughly and implemented carefully to maximize its effectiveness. And any changes should be accompanied by consistent messaging from command staff to ensure continuity in hiring and selection standards are maintained and agency goals are understood.

### Staffing Level

Our respondents identified eight (8) tactics that would have a modest to large positive effect on staffing level over the course of a year. Table 2.1 lists these, the number of respondents evaluating each, and the average rating of these responses. Recall that, for assessing the effect on the number of staff, a rating of ‘5’ indicates an increase of at least 5 percent over a year, and a rating of

4 indicates an increase of less than 5 percent. Of the tactics shown, all exceed a rating of 4 (meaning at least one reviewer gave it a '5').

**Table 2.1: Top Rated Tactics for *Increasing Staffing Level***

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>n</b>
Streamlining the hiring process, e.g., combining steps where possible	4.67	3
Adding exam or other preference points for desired characteristics	4.50	2
Easing financial requirements	4.50	2
Allowing lawful permanent residents to apply	4.50	2
Modifying hiring standards to reflect current needs	4.50	2
Easing physical appearance requirements	4.33	3
Establishing lateral hiring procedures	4.33	3
Reducing processing times from application to hire	4.33	3

The tactic receiving the widest and deepest support for increasing the number of staff was *streamlining the hiring process*. Two of three reviewers gave this tactic a rating of '5', indicating it would generate a "large increase," or an increase of at least 5 percent in staff over the next year, and a third gave it a '4,' indicating it would increase staff by no more than 5 percent over the next year.

### **Field Spotlight**

A police department can easily streamline the hiring process and reduce processing times by allowing applicants to do everything on-site simultaneously on a designated date (Elkins 2019). These procedures make the entire process more manageable and less burdensome for department staff. One reported effort to streamline police hiring was placing campus police officers in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education under the auspices of the Pennsylvania Municipal Police Officers' Education Training and Commission (MPOETC) for certification, commission, and training ("Bill to Hire Campus Police at PASSHE Schools Heads to Governor's Desk" 2022). Previously, campus police officers needed to gain MPOETC certification and then await certification from the governor via the state department of education. Eliminating the need for additional certification allowed campuses to employ police more quickly and eliminated a disadvantage they faced in hiring officers.

Police departments may also choose to give less consideration to disqualifying factors related to finances (Police Executive Research Forum 2021). These disqualifiers do not necessarily represent characteristics that would indicate a lack of fit to be a successful police officer. Finally, revising department standards to permit tattoos as long as they are not offensive may provide an example of modifying standards to reflect needs and easing physical appearance requirements to permit selection of more candidates (Police1 Staff 2025).

## Workload Management

Our respondents identified six (6) tactics that would have a modest to large effect in improving workload management. Table 2.2 lists these, the number of respondents evaluating each, and the average rating of these responses. Recall that for increasing the effect on workload management, a rating of '5' indicates a tactic would make workforce management "much more effective" and one of '4' would make it "somewhat more effective." Of the tactics shown, all exceed a rating of 4 (meaning at least one reviewer gave it a '5').

**Table 2.2: Top Rated Tactics for *Improving Workload Management***

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>n</b>
Hiring ahead of vacancies	4.67	3
Increasing staffing in background units	4.67	3
Easing financial requirements	4.50	2
Establishing lateral hiring procedures	4.33	3
Reducing processing times from application to hire	4.33	3
Streamlining the hiring process, e.g., combining steps where possible	4.33	3

Two tactics—*hiring ahead of vacancies* and *increasing staffing in background units*—received average ratings of 4.67, indicating two of three reviewers of these tactics gave them a '5' and the third gave it a '4'. *Hiring ahead of vacancies* may be particularly helpful when an agency is anticipating a wave of departures. For example, Spokane, Washington implemented a hire-ahead program that allowed the department to hire a position, even if the department was fully staffed, so that it could start training candidates for a pending retirement (Shanks 2022; Mason 2022). Previously, the department had to wait for separation before it could hire a replacement—meaning the department would be short that officer while the replacement was trained. The hire-ahead program provides a more seamless transition while maintaining the number of officers on the department.

Hiring ahead of vacancies and increasing staff in background investigations should be done cautiously, particularly if this involves redeploying resources from other parts of the agency. Failure to communicate to affected units the reasons for this redeployment, for example, can adversely impact agency morale.

**Field Spotlight**

By streamlining application processes and adding positions to its background and investigations unit, the Atlanta Police Department was able to stabilize its numbers after a period of increased resignations and retirements (Schrade 2021). Short of adding staff to its background unit, the Baltimore Police Department partnered with a consultant to conduct background checks and reduce selection time (Anderson 2020). The East Point (Georgia) Police Department condensed many recruitment, application, and selection processes by holding a job fair in which potential candidates were interviewed on-site, and background checks were conducted the same day (Murchison 2022).

## Timing of Effects

Our respondents identified four (4) tactics that, on average, might have at least a somewhat immediate impact, that is, an impact within 12 months of implementation.<sup>1</sup> Table 2.3 lists these, the number of respondents evaluating each, and the average rating of these responses. Recall that for measuring the timing of impact on department staffing levels, a rating of ‘4’ indicates a “very immediate impact,” i.e., one having an impact within three months of implementation, and a rating of ‘3’ indicates a “somewhat immediate impact,” i.e., one having an impact within three to 12 months.

**Table 2.3: Top Rated Tactics Based on *Immediacy of Effect***

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>n</b>
Increasing education requirements	4.00	2
Modifying hiring standards to reflect current needs	4.00	2
Increasing screening standards, e.g., for drug offenses	3.67	3
Streamlining the hiring process, e.g., combining steps where possible	3.67	3

Two tactics received a score of ‘4’ on this dimension from two reviewers. These were *increasing education requirements* and *modifying hiring standards to reflect current needs*.

By *increasing education requirements*, departments may establish a minimum threshold for candidates and turn their attention to other hiring criteria (Hilal, Densley, and Jones 2017). They may, for example, turn to a review of candidate volunteerism as a signal for altruism and empathy, second language skills as a signal for communication and cultural competency, and client-facing work experience as a signal for communication and customer service skills.

Our raters noted varying effects on staff levels from modifying requirements. Two of our raters, for example, suggested that *increasing education requirements* would lead to a large decrease in staff

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<sup>1</sup> Excluded from the discussion are two tactics that received a ‘4’ rating from a single subject matter expert on timing of implementation. These were *hiring an outside agency for leadership* and *reviewing candidate social media history*.

levels. At the same time, two of our raters noted that *modifying hiring standards to reflect current needs* could lead to a substantial increase in the number of sworn staff. For example, the Metropolitan Nashville (Tennessee) Police Department modified its standard by reducing the required period of non-use of marijuana from 2 years to six months (Bottema and Telep 2021). Yet this, too, can have offsetting effects, with two of our raters suggesting that modifying requirements can reduce the quality of police work, a view supported by earlier research suggesting that more lenient hiring standards may reduce the quality of officers joining the force (Kane and White 2009; White and Kane 2013).

### Field Spotlight

The Philadelphia Police Department has modified its hiring standards by waiving the residency requirements for its police officers (Westoff and Moshtaghian 2022). Amid a critical staffing shortage, the department decided the requirement was hindering recruitment more than improving it. Some departments may choose to both increase screening standards and streamline the hiring process by targeting applicants who are most capable of qualifying for the position (Arcuri 2019). For example, selecting past police officers or military members may be more productive because they have already completed a screening process and were accepted. A police department can streamline the application and hiring process by automating everything from start to finish (Elkins 2019). While software tools can help in automating applications, they are also expensive. In such cases, additional hands can also help: the Anna (Texas) Police Department reduced the processing times from application to hire to less than 90 days in part by having a recruitment team reduce the number of steps in the application process and developing a step pay plan allowing for lateral entry options. (Caponera and Kuhn 2020). This change reportedly reduced the number of applicants dropping off during the lengthy waiting period.

## Ease of Implementation

Our respondents identified 10 tactics that, on average, they rated as at least “somewhat easy” to implement.<sup>2</sup> Table 2.4 lists these, the number of respondents evaluating each, and the average rating of these responses. Recall that for ease of implementation a rating of ‘4’ indicates “very easy,” i.e., require little staff time and coordination over a year, and a rating of ‘3’ indicates “somewhat easy,” i.e., require modest staff time and coordination over a year.

<sup>2</sup> *Loosening citizenship requirements* and *reducing height requirements* each received a rating of ‘4,’ indicating “somewhat easy” to implement, but only from one reviewer. We therefore exclude them from discussion here.

**Table 2.4: Top Rated Tactics Based on *Ease of Implementation***

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>n</b>
Easing physical appearance requirements	3.67	3
Easing residency or proximity requirement	3.67	3
Modifying fitness requirements	3.67	3
Creating a statewide database on officer misconduct to restrict hiring elsewhere	3.50	2
Easing financial requirements	3.50	2
Easing education requirements	3.33	3
Establishing lateral hiring procedures	3.33	3
Giving preference to those with military experience	3.33	3
Increasing screening standards, e.g., for drug offenses	3.33	3
Modifying hiring standards to reflect current needs	3.33	3

Of the tactics shown, three (3) have a rating of 3.67, meaning that two of three reviewing it gave it a score of '4' with the third giving it a '3'. These were *easing physical appearance requirements*, *easing residency or proximity requirements*, and *modifying fitness requirements*. Raters noted varying other effects for these tactics. They suggested *easing physical appearance requirements* would help increase the number of staff. They suggested *easing residency or proximity requirements* would lead to a modest increase in agency costs while having a modest adverse impact on community policing. They suggested *modifying fitness requirements* would also lead to a modest increase in agency costs.

### Field Spotlight

The Akron (Ohio) Police Department eased its grooming standards and is now allowing male officers to grow out their beards and goatees (Warsmith 2022). An official from the department stated that several potential applicants mentioned this as a concern. The Hoboken (New Jersey) Police Department amended its policies to permit non-residents to apply to be police officers (Israel 2023). Hoboken still gives preference to residents, but the department can also select applicants from a larger pool of applicants.

## Agency Costs

Our raters suggested that most selection tactics would increase or have no effect on agency costs. This is not surprising: all else equal, more staff, the goal of many improved selection processes, will cost more money. Nevertheless, there were five (5) tactics that, they suggested, could, on average, modestly reduce agency costs.<sup>3</sup> Table 2.5 lists these, the number of respondents

<sup>3</sup> *College student pathway programs* received a rating of '4' but only from one respondent. We therefore exclude it from discussion here.

providing an evaluation of each, and the average rating of these responses. Recall that for the dimension on agency costs a rating of ‘5’ indicates a tactic that would “greatly decrease” agency costs, i.e., reduce agency costs at least \$50,000 per year, a rating of ‘4’ indicates a tactic that “somewhat decrease” agency costs, i.e., lead to savings of less than \$50,000 per year, and a rating of ‘3’ indicates a tactic that would have “no effect” on agency costs. Of the tactics shown, all have a mean rating of at least 3.33, indicating at least one respondent indicated the tactic would at least “somewhat decrease” agency costs.

**Table 2.5: Top Rated Tactics for *Decreasing Agency Costs***

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>n</b>
Easing financial requirements	4.00	2
Reducing or condensing training	4.00	3
Establishing lateral hiring procedures	3.33	3
Reducing processing times from application to hire	3.33	3
Streamlining the hiring process, e.g., combining steps where possible	3.33	3

The highest rated tactics on this dimension were *easing financial requirements* and *reducing or condensing training*. *Easing financial requirements* received relatively high marks across several dimensions. As noted earlier, previous research has suggested that financial requirements may best be considered within context of individual applicants and their experiences. Agencies that undertake *reducing or condensing training* should be careful to ensure that officers still receive the highest quality of training possible.

### Field Spotlight

Virginia officials have sought to increase lateral transfers from out-of-state by offering a shortened training course for them (Burchett 2022). Such “Option 5” training is available to lateral applicants who can attain a waiver, determined on a case-by-case basis in part by a review of employment records, for having met the state’s Compulsory Minimum Training Standards and Performance Outcomes (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services 2026). The Lansing (Illinois) Police Department has developed a lateral hiring policy that allows for incentivizing officers (Bootsma 2021). The department offers an additional payment of nearly \$12,000 for lateral hires in comparison to the starting pay for new recruits.

Our raters also suggested that *reducing or condensing training* may have some modest adverse effects on the quality of police work or efforts to advance the goals of community policing.

## Quality of Policing

Ideally, new officers would improve the quality of the existing force. We therefore asked three of our raters to evaluate the selection tactics we identified for their impact on the quality of police work. They identified 11 tactics that, on average, would at least “somewhat increase” the quality of

police work.<sup>4</sup> Table 2.6 lists these, the number of respondents providing a rating for each, and the average rating of these responses. Recall that for the dimension on quality of police work, a ‘4’ indicates “somewhat increase” and a ‘5’ indicates “greatly increase.”

**Table 2.6: Top Rated Tactics for *Improving Quality of Policing***

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>n</b>
College student pathway program, e.g., those meeting qualifications get entry-level jobs	4.33	3
Hiring ahead of vacancies	4.33	3
Easing residency or proximity requirement	4.00	2
Emphasizing math skills	4.00	2
Emphasizing reading comprehension	4.00	2
Emphasizing reflective skills for recruits	4.00	3
Establishing lateral hiring procedures	4.00	3
Increasing education requirements	4.00	2
Increasing staffing in background units	4.00	3
Seeking accreditation and aligning with external standards	4.00	2
Streamlining the hiring process, e.g., combining steps where possible	4.00	3

Perhaps not surprisingly, education or training is a common theme in several of the tactics—*college student pathway program; emphasizing math, reading comprehension, and reflective skills; increasing education requirements*—rated to have a positive impact on quality of policing. *Hiring ahead of vacancies* also scores relatively well on increasing the level of staffing, improving the effectiveness of workload management, and advancing the goals of community policing. While *hiring ahead of vacancies* can be effective if done in a thorough and collaborative manner, it does require agencies to have the fiscal capacity to add the positions, to ensure the academy can accommodate such hires, and to gain approval from funding authorities.

### **Field Spotlight**

Based on the previous pace of attrition, the Los Angeles Police Department hires retired officers to proactively fill upcoming gaps in staff (Jany 2023). The plan mentions hiring as many as 200 retired police officers to assist in filling approximately 600 expected vacancies resulting from retirements and resignations. Sturgeon Bay (Wisconsin) Police Department applicants no longer must reside within 15 miles of the city to be considered for hire (Door County Pulse 2024). This allows the department both to select applicants from outside municipal limits and to retain current officers who want to move outside these limits.

<sup>4</sup> Two tactics—*pre-screen skills test* and *focusing on mental health or well-being*—received a rating of ‘4’ from one respondent, but “unsure” from the others on this dimension. We therefore do not include them in our discussion here.

## Community Policing

Selection also offers a means for agencies to advance their practice of community policing. As local agencies shift from enforcing laws to community engagement, as well as toward accepting greater responsibility for social issues and new types of crime, they require officers with communication, interpersonal, and technological skills in addition to the traditional ones in physical fitness and firearms.

We asked our respondents to rate tactics by their likely impact on community policing. As throughout, we asked different groups of three respondents to rate each tactic on this dimension. There were 15 tactics that, on average, received a mean rating of “somewhat advance” or better for the goals of community policing. Table 2.7 lists these, the number of respondents providing a rating for each, and the average rating of these responses. Recall that for the dimension of community policing, a ‘4’ indicates “somewhat advance” and a ‘5’ indicates “greatly advance.”

**Table 2.7: Top Rated Tactics for Advancing Community Policing**

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>n</b>
College student pathway program, e.g., those meeting qualifications get entry-level jobs	4.33	3
Streamlining the hiring process, e.g., combining steps where possible	4.33	3
Adding exam or other preference points for desired characteristics	4.00	2
Emphasizing communication abilities in recruits	4.00	2
Emphasizing reflective skills for recruits	4.00	3
Establishing lateral hiring procedures	4.00	3
Focusing on mental health or wellbeing	4.00	3
Hiring ahead of vacancies	4.00	3
Modifying hiring standards to reflect current needs	4.00	2
Reducing processing times from application to hire	4.00	3
Relaxing age requirements	4.00	2
Reviewing candidate social media history	4.00	2
Seeking accreditation and aligning with external standards	4.00	2
Soliciting community on desired qualities for officers	4.00	3
State regulation of the hiring process or "contingent measures" for shortfalls	4.00	2

Many tactics noted here were noted earlier for performing well on other dimensions. These include *college student pathway programs*, *streamlining the hiring process*, *emphasizing reflective skills for recruits*, *hiring ahead of vacancies*, *modifying hiring standards to reflect current trends*, and *reducing processing times*. While this does not suggest any particular selection tactic for advancing the goals of community policing, it does suggest that the best selection tactics will also support community policing.

### **Field Spotlight**

The Dallas Police Department offers a pathway program for students pursuing college credits while still in high school (Dallas Police Department, n.d.) The program allows students to pursue paid internships and entry-level jobs once they graduate. The Detroit Police Department has partnered with Wayne County Community College to instruct students on police strategies, criminal justice policy, and weapons training (Newman 2021). Adults who go through the program can obtain a certificate, which will accelerate their progress through the police academy. In prioritizing and emphasizing communication abilities, police should select from and reach out to audiences where these skills are most present (National Policing Institute 2022).

## Chapter 3: Prioritizing Tactics Based on Common Scenarios of Needs and Strategy Preferences

Police agencies may have varying goals in selecting officers. These may include improving the quality and management of their work, attracting new skills to their force, and, ideally, accomplishing their goals with little additional expenditure. As the discussion of the previous chapter notes, tactics to achieve some goals may limit the achievement of others. Put another way, police agencies may need to recognize and choose among tactics that match their top goals, while also recognizing their effects on other goals.

Furthermore, police agencies may wish to undertake some tactics for other reasons but also wish to know their effect on selection. For example, an agency may wish to *hire ahead of vacancies* in the face of a pending wave of retirements but want to know how this will affect selection and costs. Alternatively, a department may consider a *college student pathway program* to improve the quality of its staff but want to know how this will affect costs.

The objective of identifying what is considered “best” is obscure when tactics affect several different components of the department in distinct ways. An agency cannot assume that tactics are “one-size-fits-all” for any department, time, or circumstance. The scenarios we consider, however, can be tailored to the unique needs of a department.

This chapter considers several scenarios in which agencies may wish to choose among tactics in pursuing broader strategies related to selection or other issues. It compares ratings of tactics among related groups (e.g., workload level and quality) on differing dimensions. Our analyses consider staffing level, workload management, or work quality as the primary dimension, and then examine how the tactics vary by other dimensions. Our goals are two-fold: to demonstrate the different issues that agencies may wish to address in choosing selection strategies and tactics, and to explore some common, specific scenarios that agencies may encounter.

### Staffing Level, Timing, Cost, and Implementation Ease

We first consider possible tradeoffs along dimensions for timing of effect, cost of tactic, and ease of implementation. While our raters identified several tactics that are likely to boost staffing levels, these may vary in the timing of their effects, their costs, and their ease of implementation. How agencies may want to trade off among effectiveness in selection, timing, costs, and implementation effort may also vary. Table 3.1 helps illustrate these tradeoffs.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Similar to our analyses in the previous chapter, if a tactic we review receives fewer than two ratings on any dimension shown in a table in this chapter, we exclude it from discussion.

**Table 3.1: Top Tactics for Increasing Staff Level by Timing, Cost, and Ease of Implementation**

Tactic	Level		Timing		Cost		Implementation	
	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	n
Streamlining the hiring process, e.g., combining steps where possible	4.67	3	3.67	3	3.33	3	3.00	3
Modifying hiring standards to reflect current needs	4.50	2	4.00	2	2.67	3	3.33	3
Easing financial requirements	4.50	2	3.50	2	4.00	2	3.50	2
Adding exam or other preference points for desired characteristics	4.50	2	3.50	2	3.00	2	2.50	2
Establishing lateral hiring procedures	4.33	3	3.33	3	3.33	3	3.33	3
Easing physical appearance requirements	4.33	3	3.33	3	3.00	2	3.67	3
Reducing processing times from application to hire	4.33	3	3.00	3	3.33	3	2.33	3

Our raters suggested the seven tactics listed above would all, on average, increase staff at least a modest amount over the next year. Yet the timing of implementing such tactics before they can have this effect varies. *Reducing processing times from application to hire*, for example, might take more implementation time and effort than the other tactics listed. *Modifying hiring standards to reflect current needs* may perform well in boosting staff and in timing and ease of implementation, but may also, in the view of our raters, increase costs. *Streamlining hiring processes* performs well on boosting staffing levels, timing for effects, and costs, but may require more effort at implementation than the other tactics listed. Still, if an agency most wants to increase staffing levels through selection tactics, it should focus on this tactic. If it wants to do so through the easiest tactic to implement, it might consider *easing physical appearance requirements*.

## Workload Management, Timing, Cost, and Implementation Ease

Police agencies may seek opportunities to better manage their workload. How quickly they wish to improve workload management, the cost they may wish to bear in doing so, and the work they want to do to improve workload management, may vary. We therefore next look at the selection tactics best rated to make workload management more effective, comparing these by their effects on timing, cost, and ease of implementation. Table 3.2 helps illustrate the tradeoffs among these dimensions.

**Table 3.2: Top Tactics for Workload Management by Timing, Cost, and Ease of Implementation**

Tactic	Workload		Timing		Cost		Implementation	
	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	n
Hiring ahead of vacancies	4.67	3	3.33	3	2.67	3	3.00	3
Increasing staffing in background units	4.67	3	3.33	3	2.00	3	2.33	3
Easing financial requirements	4.50	2	3.50	2	4.00	2	3.50	2
Streamlining the hiring process, e.g., combining steps where possible	4.33	3	3.67	3	3.33	3	3.00	3
Establishing lateral hiring procedures	4.33	3	3.33	3	3.33	3	3.33	3
Reducing processing times from application to hire	4.33	3	3.00	3	3.33	3	2.33	3

*Hiring ahead of vacancies* performs well across three of these metrics, although it may lead to a modest increase in costs. *Increasing staffing in background units* performs well on workload management and timing as well, although it may have more costs and implementation difficulties. *Easing financial requirements* received a slightly lower average rating on workload management, but its timing, cost, and implementation ease ratings were better than the two above it. *Streamlining the hiring process* similarly scored a little lower on workload management but higher than the top two tactics on timing of effect.

## Quality and Community Policing

Agencies may seek to improve the quality of their work by selecting officers with more, new, or different qualifications, attributes, and skills. One aspect of quality they may wish to improve is community policing. We therefore looked at tactics best rated to improve workload management by their effects on community policing. Table 3.3 helps illustrate the relationship between these dimensions.

**Table 3.3: Top Tactics for Improving Quality and Community Policing**

Tactic	Quality		Community Policing	
	Mean	n	Mean	n
Hiring ahead of vacancies	4.33	3	4.00	3
College student pathway program, e.g., those meeting qualifications get entry-level jobs	4.33	3	4.33	3
Increasing staffing in background units	4.00	3	3.67	3
Streamlining the hiring process, e.g., combining steps where possible	4.00	3	4.33	3
Establishing lateral hiring procedures	4.00	3	4.00	3
Emphasizing reflective skills for recruits	4.00	3	4.00	3
Seeking accreditation and aligning with external standards	4.00	2	4.00	2

*Hiring ahead of vacancies* received high average ratings on both dimensions shown here, as it did on other dimensions. A *college student pathway program* and *streamlining the hiring process* did not score quite as high as hiring ahead of vacancies on the quality dimension, but they did do slightly better on community policing. *Increasing staffing in background units* did not do as well as the other tactics shown on advancing community policing, though two reviewers still expected it to “somewhat advance” the goals of community policing.

## Chapter 4: Applying the Lessons

How should a police department use our findings? We suggest it consider three issues when choosing selection tactics.

First, a police department should use the tactic that appears to be most tailored to it and its circumstances. It should not simply choose what seems easy or has been done historically. The nearly 20,000 police agencies in the United States serve an enormous variety of jurisdictions, each with its own expectations and circumstances. No single tactic will be best for each one. Agencies should also ensure tactics treat all applicants fairly.

Second, a police department needs to know what works under its own circumstances. Just as there is no single tactic for selection in all departments, there will be no single selection tactic that is best for a given department in all circumstances. A department will need to choose a tactic or set of tactics based on its most pressing need or set of circumstances, such as increasing staff levels, improving staff quality, advancing community policing, or increasing staff in the most economical way possible.

Third, a police department should consider relevant combinations of dimensions. For a faster and inexpensive solution, for example, it should examine tactic speed and costs. To ease workload management, it may choose selection tactics that both reduce workload and have low implementation burden. The findings herein will likely hold value and relevance across varying challenges pertaining to selection.

The variety of tactics we explored can be adapted to different departments. Using the data, departments can focus on the multifaceted benefits or drawbacks of a tactic. They can begin or continue to solidify a hiring plan that is specific to their needs. The tactics and their categorization enable departments to visualize potential outcomes through a wider and more descriptive lens. It is up to different departments to select from among these in devising tailored solutions to their selection issues.

## Appendix

We identified tactics from several sources. The first was academic studies published from 2010 through 2022, identified from EBSCO, SSCI, and Proquest. From the academic studies, we identified sources that mentioned (1) polic\*, “law enforcement”, cop, or cops and (2) mentioned recruit\*, select\*, hire\*, short\*, staff\*, personnel, employee, workforce, applicants, or applications (to broaden the news search even further, we added additional optional terms, including turnover, attrition, retention, retain\*, or loss). The second source was news articles published from January 1, 2020 through December 31, 2022, identified from ProQuest US Newsstream and Nexis Uni. News articles offer a detailed and under-used source of information on police staffing. Given the importance of police staffing to communities, local media routinely cover recruitment and selection experiences and the innovative ways that police agencies seek to improve these. The third and final source was practitioner reports from professional organizations and government agencies, published from 2010 through 2022. For the practitioner reports, we manually searched the websites of organizations and agencies that work in the area to identify relevant content. After filtering for duplicate articles as well as those that did not address police recruitment or selection issues, we found 151 relevant academic articles, 73 practitioner reports, and 353 news articles.

From these sources, we identified 49 unique tactics that departments might use to select candidates. (As noted, a companion report, *Police Recruitment: Prioritizing Tactics to Meet Agency Needs*, discusses 225 unique tactics that a department may use to recruit candidates.) For the present purpose, we defined a selection tactic as any activity or process associated with choosing candidates from among those who applied. It is important to note that some selection tactics may also support recruitment. For example, we would generally consider adjusting hiring standards or speeding up the hiring process to be selection tactics, but these aspects can be communicated to potential recruits and ultimately encourage them to apply. Overall, the tactics we considered cover a broad range of practices such as modifying requirements, increasing staffing in background units, or hiring ahead of vacancies, which can be associated with broader administrative, financial, outreach, and other strategies.

Once we identified the tactics, we asked groups of practitioners knowledgeable about staffing processes to evaluate their effects, such as their likely effects on the number of staff and workload management as well as ease of implementation. We formed a modified quota sampling frame to identify subject matter experts for surveying. The sampling frame had four distinct strata that were further deconstructed into substrata. To create a more inclusive survey pool, we ensured each substratum had at least three participants. These strata and substrata were

- Respondent’s position and assignment within their organization, with two substrata
  - executive officers
  - program personnel, i.e., individuals who have direct, substantial roles administering and implementing the recruitment process.
- Department size, with three substrata
  - small agencies with fewer than 40 sworn personnel

- medium agencies with 40 to 99 sworn personnel
- large agencies with at least 100 sworn personnel.
- Type of department, with three substrata
  - local
  - state
  - university.
- Region, with four substrata
  - South
  - West
  - Midwest
  - Northeast.

Altogether, we asked 42 subject matter experts to participate; of these, 30 respondents agreed to rank the tactics, resulting in a 71 percent response rate. Surveys were completed from June to October 2024. Ten groups of three respondents each were given approximately 25 random tactics to evaluate, using scales to consider each (see box in Chapter 1). While there is benefit from the overall variation of the sample and that multiple ratings were requested for each tactic, the representation of each stratum and substratum is not possible for each specific tactic. This was a concession necessary given the extraordinarily large number of tactics requiring assessment. To limit the possibility of ratings being skewed by any single respondent's experience, we retained for each analysis only tactics where at least two respondents provided assessments for each performance dimension considered. Nonetheless, given variability in organization context and implementation experience, even results determined from three respondents should be interpreted cautiously and not considered representative for all agencies or what will occur in any specific instance. Other respondents could rate these tactics differently.

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## About the Authors

Jeremy M. Wilson, Ph.D., is Professor and Associate Director of the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University, where he founded and directs the Police Staffing Observatory. As a scholar, educator, advisor, and consultant, he has collaborated with a wide array of institutions, published more than 200 resources, and led more than \$15 million of research and outreach projects sponsored by the U.S. Congress, U.S. Departments of Justice and the Interior, foundations, governments, agencies, associations, and corporations. His policing research focuses on evidence-based personnel planning and developing a systems approach to police staffing, integrating aspects of workload demand, performance objectives, resource allocation and deployment, recruitment, retention, cohort management, workforce attributes and related areas. Among his staffing publications are *Reframing the Police Staffing Challenge: A Systems Approach to Workforce Planning and Managing Workload Demand*, *A Performance-Based Approach to Police Staffing and Allocation*, *Police Recruitment and Retention for the New Millennium: The State of Knowledge*, *Recruiting and Retaining America's Finest: Evidence-Based Lessons for Police Workforce Planning*, *Police Retention: A Systematic Review of the Research*, *Staffing Composition in Large, U.S. Police Departments*, and *Police Workforce Structures: Cohorts, the Economy, and Organizational Performance*. For his contributions to police research and practice, he was named a Distinguished Scholar by the American Society of Criminology Division on Policing, and the Police Section of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences honored him with the O.W. Wilson Award. To learn more, see <https://jeremywilson.org/>.

Clifford A. Grammich, Ph.D., is director of Birdhill Research and Communications, LLC. Dr. Grammich has more than 25 years of social science research and communications experience. Much of his experience has been as a communications analyst with the RAND Corporation, where his projects included police staffing and public safety, among other issues. As an independent contractor, Dr. Grammich has supported a wide range of projects, coauthoring more than two dozen publications on police organization and staffing, with additional peer-reviewed work on emerging crimes, communities, demographics, public opinion, and social policy. He is a partner of the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory, and past president of the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, for which he has overseen decennial county-level enumerations of hundreds of religious bodies.

Ethan M. Humphrey, M.S., is a Michigan State University doctoral student in criminal justice, where he also serves as a research assistant II and partner of the Police Staffing Observatory (PSO). Since joining Michigan State University, Ethan has developed multiple PSO Perspective research briefs and Office of Community Oriented Policing reports. His research interests include police staffing, community policing, crime reduction, and crime analysis. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in criminal justice from Radford University. During Ethan's tenure at Radford University, he served as a graduate research fellow in the Center for Police Practice, Policy and Research (CP3R) where he assisted with funded projects relating to community policing and evidence-based responses to shooting incidents.



## About the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory

The **Police Staffing Observatory (PSO)** is a global collaborative of academics, scholars, practitioners, and students working with the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice to promote evidence-based police workforce research, strategy and operations. Directed by Professor Jeremy M. Wilson, its primary aims are to advance police workforce knowledge and its application by

- conducting timely and innovative research on critical aspects of a wide-range of police staffing issues, resulting in scholarly and practitioner-oriented resources;
- creating a venue for the network of police staffing scholars to share opportunities, discuss ideas, and enable collaborations;
- facilitating researcher-practitioner partnerships;
- serving as a repository and dissemination vehicle for the research of collaborators so that it is easily discoverable by practitioners, policymakers, and others.

Through its facilitation of research and outreach, the PSO is a community of science that serves as a valuable resource for the community of practice. Hundreds of resources spanning police staffing systems can be accessed from the PSO website, <https://cj.msu.edu/community/psu>.