Behavioral Insights for Building the Police Force of Tomorrow
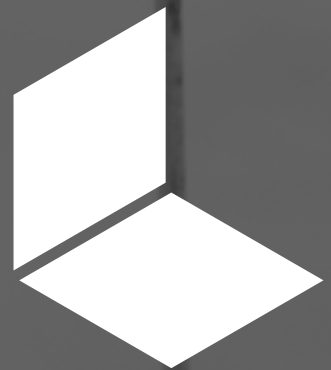
THE
BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS TEAM

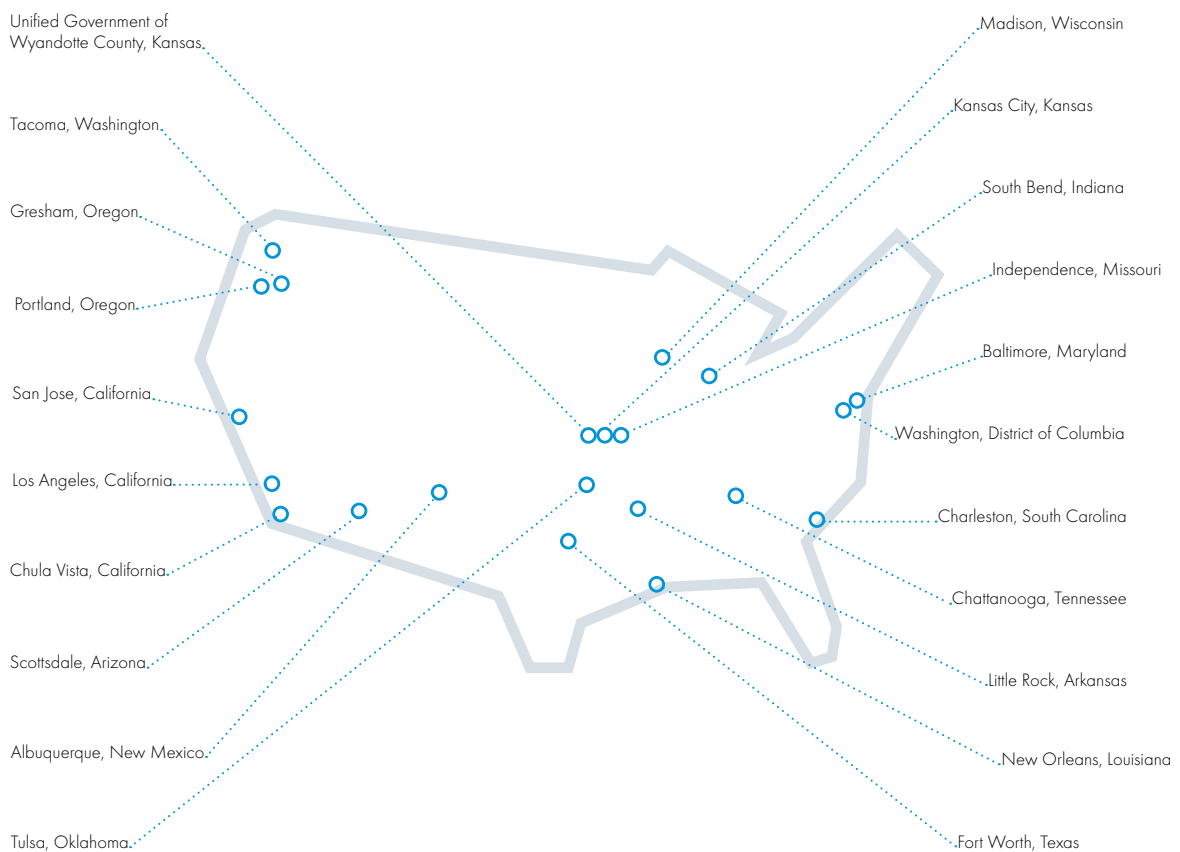# Contents

About The Behavioral Insights Team

The Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) began in the UK as a government unit dedicated to the application of behavioral sciences. Today we work in a variety of countries as a social purpose company, partnering with local and federal governments to build a more realistic model of human behavior into the design of public services. We combine an expertise in behavioral science, a data-driven approach, and a pragmatic understanding of government affairs to develop and evaluate effective policy changes. In 2015, we conducted our first US trial focused on police recruitment in New Orleans, Louisiana, through Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities (WWC) initiative. It was clear that police recruitment was a pressing issue for jurisdictions around the US. Since then we have engaged with more than 21 cities and counties across the country. The vast majority of BIT's US work mentioned in this report was generously funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies through WWC.

About our partners

The research described in this report was conducted
in conjunction with these cities and counties:

Unified Government of
Wyandotte County, Kansas

Tacoma, Washington

Gresham, Oregon

Portland, Oregon

San Jose, California

Los Angeles, California

Chula Vista, California

Scottsdale, Arizona

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Madison, Wisconsin

Kansas City, Kansas

South Bend, Indiana

Independence, Missouri

Baltimore, Maryland

Washington, District of Columbia

Charleston, South Carolina

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Little Rock, Arkansas

New Orleans, Louisiana

Fort Worth, Texas

Conversations on the topics in this report were also
held with the representatives of many other cities
passionate about police recruitment and diversity.

Acknowledgments

"It's a key focus of my administration to have a Portland Police Bureau workforce that reflects our community. With What Works Cities' technical assistance, we were able to evaluate our outreach strategies and test our assumptions about what helps us attract diverse candidates, and— most importantly—what doesn't. This kind of evaluation is critical to the success of our community-based policing strategy we are working towards in Portland."

Mayor Ted Wheeler

Throughout this report, you will find anonymous quotes taken from the responses of 1,194 current police officers about why they chose to become an officer.

Introction

Attracting great candidates from diverse backgrounds is crucial to building a government workforce that can serve communities effectively and build trust among residents. This need is especially urgent in law enforcement agencies, where there has been a renewed focus on how to attract and retain candidates, especially those from backgrounds that are currently underrepresented within the police.[1] Police forces are often working with tight budgets, strong unions, and political pressures. These factors make structural solutions, such as redefining job roles or changing pay and benefits, extremely difficult. To make an impact today, many agencies are in need of a different set of solutions that can correctly identify and convert latent interest from prospective applicants within the existing constraints of the job.

In this report we share the results of work with 21 US jurisdictions to understand the motivations of those currently in the police force and to apply lessons from the science of human decision-making to the process of attracting and recruiting new police officers.[2] From deciding to express interest in a job to showing up for testing to assessing candidates fairly, the recruitment process involves a number of decision points that can make or break successful hiring. This report aims to demonstrate how behavioral insights can be applied to improve police recruitment and to share the lessons we have learned from this work.

"Police departments need to be more reflective of the communities they serve, including having more women in patrol and leadership."

Our work reveals three key themes, which structure the body of this report:

1. **Tap into new sources of motivation:** Reasons for joining the police are varied, and standard advertising of policing jobs often focuses on a narrow set of motivational messages. Even small changes in how jobs are advertised can make a real difference to both the total number of applicants and the diversity of those applicants.

2. **Process matters:** Once a candidate shows interest in joining a police force, they must jump through a series of administrative hoops that cause many eligible candidates to drop out of the process. While many agencies focus on drawing in new candidates, improving these procedural pain points not only makes recruitment more efficient but can also keep great candidates in the process.

3. **Your next recruit may not be where you're looking:** While police departments spend immense effort and resources in outreach to specific neighborhoods and colleges, sometimes potential recruits are not where we would expect. Reaching out to those who have already shown some interest in public service may be particularly effective, and reaching out to targeted neighborhoods may backfire.

We hope this report provides practical tips for those working in police recruitment and workforce development. We also hope that it provides a launch pad for future research that links recruitment to better policing outcomes.

Insights

Insight one:

Tap into new sources of motivation

"To Protect and Serve"—it's a great tagline, right? More than that, it seems to reflect the reality of why people go into policing. We asked 1,194 active officers to assign scores to a range of different reasons for taking the job, and a desire to "help people in the community" came out on top. It's no surprise then that most police departments use a message about serving the community or "answering the call" in their recruitment. When it comes to real application decisions, however, the story begins to unravel; our work with nine cities across the US shows that job ads emphasizing other motivations are often the most effective for soliciting applications.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, we found that postcards asking "Are you ready to serve?" were no better at soliciting applications than never sending a postcard at all. In contrast, postcards that asked "Are you up for the challenge?" or "Are you looking for a long-term career?" attracted three times more applicants than the no-postcard group and drove a fourfold increase in applications from people of color.[3]

> *"I saw that law enforcement would challenge every aspect of me—physically, intellectually, and spiritually."*

Are you up for the challenge?
Apply to be a police officer today!
Paid for and approved by the City of Chattanooga

Hi <First_Name>,

We're hiring new police recruits and I hope you consider applying.

I love being part of the police because you never know what to expect: it's challenging but rewarding work!

If you're the kind of person who thrives in challenging environments, you're just the kind of person we're looking for.

To apply, go to bit.do/CPDBeChallenged and submit before March 28, 2016.

Good luck!

Worlie Johnson
Police Officer, Chattanooga Police Department

<Full_Name>
<Owner_Address>

Looking for a long-term career?
Apply to be a police officer today!
Paid for and approved by the City of Chattanooga

Hi <First_Name>,

We're hiring new police recruits and I hope you consider applying.

I love being part of the police because I'm constantly developing my skills: this isn't just a job, it's a career.

If you're looking for a long-term career, you're just the kind of person we're looking for.

To apply, just go to bit.do/CPDcareer and submit before March 28, 2016.

Good luck!

Worlie Johnson
Police Officer, Chattanooga Police Department

<Full_Name>
<Owner_Address>

It should, perhaps, not be surprising that the message emphasizing public service was ineffective in Chattanooga. While active officers rated helping people in the community as most influential on their decision to join the police, new messaging could serve two purposes:

1. **To attract attention:** Research tells us that novel stimuli attract our attention.[4] Potential recruits have likely already heard that police serve the community, but they may be less familiar with other aspects of the job, such as the new challenges that come up every day. By introducing messages with new information, we may be able to pique the interest of people who have stopped paying attention to more traditional messaging.

2. **To reach a new audience:** If some people are attracted to jobs because of their desire to serve, others may choose jobs for other reasons. If we have already reached all the people who are looking for jobs purely based on the service component, using new messages may reach a new audience who are looking for a job that provides something else—such as a long-term career.

Indeed, recognizing that there are many dimensions to being a police officer may make the job seem like a better fit for some people. In South Bend, Indiana, for example, we tested postcards that referred to aspects of a police officer's identity at home and at work to show that there are many sides to being a police officer. This approach was powerful, with recipients of this postcard being seven times more likely to complete an application than those who were not prompted.

I am a hard worker. I support my family. I am a police officer.

Apply to be a police officer today!

Dear <First Name>,

We're hiring new police recruits, and I hope you consider applying.

Many things are important to me. My teammates know that, and that's why I'm proud to be a South Bend police officer.

If you know police officers are more than just their jobs, you're just the kind of person we're looking for.

Apply now at **bit.do/SBPDapp** .

Good luck!

Officer Sienna Valdez-Sears

South Bend Police Department

<Full Name>
<Address>

We ran a similar set of experiments focusing on identity with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), targeting Facebook ads at predominantly black communities. The identity messages were particularly effective again, this time suggesting that holding multiple identities alongside that of being a police officer might be effective for black officers. In Tacoma, Washington, a similar approach told people "You Belong Here," suggesting that there are many types of people that can find a home in policing. This proved to be an effective strategy, boosting applications fourfold compared to the status quo.
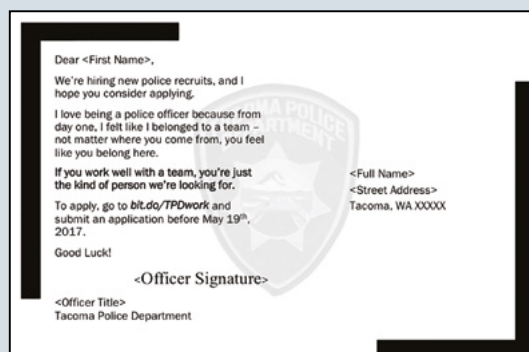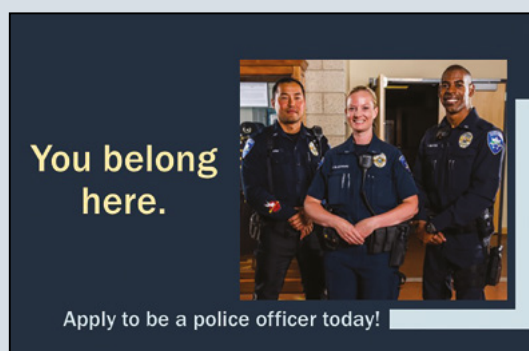
Understanding that motivation varies across applicants and between departments is part of the puzzle of working out how to attract more officers, and especially how to bring in candidates from underrepresented groups. Yet there are some commonalities between all these success stories. All postcards were **personalized**, addressing the postcard recipient by their first name. Personalization has been shown to catch people's attention when they may not otherwise pay any notice to a communication.[5] It is also important to choose a **messenger** with whom potential recruits can identify. Previous BIT trials on recruiting army reservists showed that a message from someone in the service who spoke about his/her experience could be important in motivating people to apply.[6] Similarly, evidence suggests that people may be more motivated by role models in mid-management positions than by top executives, as they find it easier to visualize themselves in that role in the short-term.[7] Based on this evidence, the postcard messages came from a specific real person in the department, often a new recruit. All postcards also included **simple and clear instructions** and deadlines to make it easy for recipients to respond.

Insight two:

Process matters

The work we have done in many cities shows that just changing how we talk about a career in law enforcement can change who is attracted to these jobs. And that's important. But *applying* to become a police officer is really just the beginning of a long and often very complicated process of *becoming* a police officer. The average amount of time from application to appointment in US police departments is 43 weeks,[8] with many departments taking more than a year to complete the selection process.

Given the length and complexity of each stage, it is no wonder that voluntary drop-out rates are particularly high in police recruitment; in many departments, more than half of candidates will drop out of the process without having ever failed a test or being otherwise disqualified. As behavioral scientists, we don't think about deciding to join a police force as a one-time decision. Rather, we think of it as a series of micro-decisions at each stage in the process, where a candidate can choose to persevere to the next step or decide that the opportunity cost is too high and the hurdle too large to keep going. In the current strong economy, keeping top candidates engaged during a lengthy process is no easy feat. Small changes to how candidates experience each stage of the process may be the difference between them sticking with it or finding something else to do.

A recent survey of candidates who had dropped out of the New York Police Department selection process showed that candidates felt the length of time and lack of clarity had impacted their decision to withdraw.[9] In Los Angeles, we worked with the personnel department to simplify the process for applicants to submit their Personal History Statement (PHS)—a long but crucial form that launches the background screening process. This was the stage in the process when most people, 35 percent, dropped out. By revamping the email candidates received inviting them to turn in their PHS and reminding them with a short text message, we increased the number of people who submitted the form by 15 percent and the number who submitted it in less than two weeks by nearly 40 percent.

Yet we are still learning how and when to nudge people to move to the next stage in the selection process. In preliminary analyses of a trial conducted in both Tacoma, Washington, and Fort Worth, Texas, reminder emails—sent two days before an applicant was scheduled to take a police exam—did not appear to be effective. While there may be benefit in continuing to test reminders (testing whether text messages are effective where emails are not, for example), these results suggest that there may be larger barriers to testing that small nudges alone cannot overcome.

For example, we conducted another trial in Chattanooga in which inactive applicants were sent a link that allowed them to set a date for their written test. We found that 11 percent of inactive applicants who received the link scheduled a test, compared with 5.9 percent who were not emailed. Although these results were promising, they did not translate into an increased turnout at the exam itself, a result we also saw in Baltimore, Maryland. In Baltimore, Chattanooga, and San Jose we also saw that many "inactive" candidates noted that they were still preparing for the test, had scheduling conflicts with work or school, or were traveling in from other cities.

These results suggest that more extensive interventions may be required to encourage candidates to complete cumbersome application steps such as preparing for and completing an exam, or getting into shape. Such interventions may include providing potential applicants with study materials or training sessions, supporting applicants to make their travel arrangements, or providing alternative testing times for people who have full-time jobs or caretaking responsibilities. For example, the LAPD offers a Candidate Assistance Program, which helps applicants to prepare physically and mentally for the police academy, and an Associate Community Officer Program, which helps those aspiring to a career in the LAPD to retain and build skills before they become eligible to join at age 21.

Insight three:

Your next recruit may not be be where you're looking

Most police departments spend significant resources in outreach programs, going to career fairs, trying to attract students and recent graduates, and targeting specific neighborhoods in their cities from which they hope to attract candidates. Other departments try to reach out to future recruits through referral programs. While these approaches definitely have merit, our work across the country has exposed some surprising results. It turns out motivated candidates may not be where recruiters are looking.

In Washington, DC, we worked with the Metropolitan Police Department and The Lab @ DC to design and send postcards to 30,000 registered voters in pre-targeted, primarily black neighborhoods. Overall, the postcards were not effective in driving interest, largely because messages describing the challenge of the job and featuring a male police officer actually made the men in these neighborhoods significantly less likely to apply than if they had received no postcard at all.
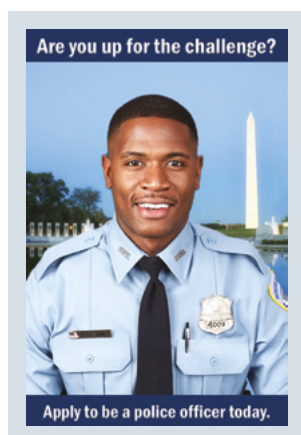
The trial in Washington, DC, also gave us valuable insights into response rates by gender, however. Overall, postcards were effective for women with one—featuring a female police officer and describing a policing job as "your next step"—tripling the number of female applicants.
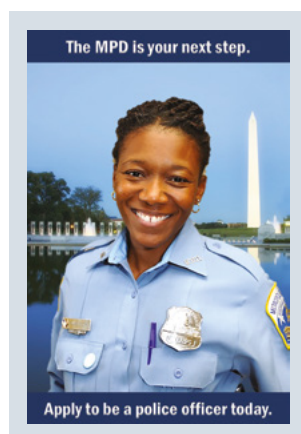
As in Washington, DC, our trial in Portland, Oregon, targeted specific neighborhoods whose residents were underrepresented in the police force. We were surprised to find that the combination of targeted neighborhood outreach with a postcard including the line "Your Neighborhood, Your Police" may have backfired, soliciting no applications or National Testing Network (NTN) exam completions (a national test for frontline law enforcement) at all from its recipients. In contrast, emphasizing the salary and benefits associated with a policing job was more effective than a neighborhood emphasis in boosting applications and completion of the NTN exam.

"Law Enforcement offers a sustainable career path with advancement opportunities."

While the message touting pay and benefits may have addressed some of the real concerns of residents, the message "Your Neighborhood, Your Police" actively put off similar candidates. Our survey results provide clues as to why this might be. The motivations for joining the police that are reported by officers in underrepresented demographics differ from those of their white male colleagues. For example, black officers and female officers are—compared to officers who, respectively, are not black and are male—more likely to state that they joined the police to "create change within the policing profession," suggesting that messages in this vein may be better received by underrepresented communities. We worked with the City of Los Angeles to test messages that appeal to this sentiment, using Facebook ads to ask people to apply to the police so they could help to drive change. Our results are promising, confirming this to be one of the best performing messages to drive applications from Los Angeles zip codes with a large proportion of black residents.

In Scottsdale, Arizona, we sent emails inviting applications from three groups: those who had already applied to the police in the past, those who had expressed interest in city jobs, and current or recent community college students preparing to enter the labor market. Rather than seeing the greatest interest from community colleges, which is what many might expect, we found that previous applicants were a much more responsive group to outreach and communication. Our emails more than doubled the number of applications, with 222 new applications coming from previous applicants.

"The best way to have better police officers was to become one."

"I did not see any officers of color while growing up and I wanted to be one for my community."

Hi [NAME],

Are you up for a challenge?

I love being a police officer because no two days are the same. It's challenging, but I feel like I'm my best self every day.

Scottsdale Police has changed its recruitment process, and we are looking for new officers to join our department. I hope you consider re-applying. **If you thrive in a challenging environment, you're just the kind of person we're looking for.**

To apply, go to https://www.governmentjobs.com/careers/scottsdaleaz/jobs/1688869/police-officer-recruits-laterals-waivers?keywords=police%20officer&pagetype=jobOpportunitiesJobs#, and submit by April 9th.

Good luck!

Marcos Garcia
Police Officer, Scottsdale Police Department

Hi [NAME],

You belong with the Scottsdale police department.

I love being a police officer because from day one, I felt like I belonged to a team - no matter where you come from, you feel like you belong here.

Scottsdale Police has changed its recruitment process, and we are looking for new officers to join our department. I hope you consider re-applying. **If you work well with a team, you're just the kind of person we're looking for.**

To apply, go to https://www.governmentjobs.com/careers/scottsdaleaz/jobs/1688869/police-officer-recruits-laterals-waivers?keywords=police%20officer&pagetype=jobOpportunitiesJobs#, and submit by April 9th.

Good luck!

Marcos Garcia
Police Officer, City of Scottsdale Police Department

A similar trial with those who had previously expressed interest in working for any one of a number of different city jobs for the City of Little Rock, Arkansas, had comparable results: 2.8 percent of those who received a standard email message applied, compared with 3.8 percent of those who received a behaviorally informed email. While the difference between the two emails was not significant (meaning that we cannot be sure this difference did not occur by chance), the upshot was that the police department received around 40 new applications just by engaging this untapped group through emails.

We also conducted a trial with applicants in San Jose who had dropped out of the process. After we reached out and asked them to give some feedback and consider reapplying, 125 potential candidates sent in their test scores, thereby reactivating their applications. Such an exercise can involve only a small investment of effort, and we recommend that

recruitment staff in police departments consider their prior applicant pool as potential future recruits. The bang for your buck on re-engaging with people who have already shown some interest in the police or in a different public service job may be higher than that for other outreach efforts.

Lastly, a word on referral programs. While such initiatives can be a cost-effective way to bring in new hires, it is worth proceeding with caution on these initiatives since tasking an existing workforce with recruiting from their networks may exacerbate an existing lack of diversity. In particular, our survey showed that female officers are less likely than their male counterparts to attribute joining to the fact they "have friends/relatives who were police officers." The results of the survey also suggest that direct outreach might be required to attract women as the results show that female officers are less likely to describe the job as a "lifelong dream or aspiration."

What's next?

What's next?

In studying decision-making, it is critical to step into the shoes of the decision-maker and build a full picture of their context and environment. Understanding how people see the police, their self-perception, and their other career options can make all the difference in whether an applicant's interest is piqued or not. There is no single answer here; in every city, in every neighborhood, even in every individual experience, there will be different contextualizing factors. From poor police–community relations to higher-paying neighboring police forces to feeling like they don't belong, there may be many reasons why those who could be suited decide not to apply. This plays out in our work, with certain recruitment tactics proving highly effective in some places and not working in others. More guidance for conducting this work with your police force can be found in the Practitioner Appendix of this report.

While attracting new and different candidates to apply to law enforcement jobs makes a valuable contribution to building effective and representative police forces, we recognize that this is just one piece of the puzzle. In our work to date, we have not looked at how to keep existing workers mission-driven, how to improve productivity, or how to ensure that residents feel the benefits of a different police force through better or more equitable service provision. For all of these areas, the lessons of this recruitment work ring true: we must understand what truly drives those working in the public service, closely examine the contextual factors that color day-to-day experience, and think about how to best use the talent we already have. Small tweaks at specific moments of decision-making can go a long way, but there is also a role for behavioral science in designing larger institutional changes, from pay and reward structures to proactive policing and improved community relations. Behavioral insights projects could also be used to:

- reduce bias in background checks and departmental interviews;
- reduce turnover and staff burnout in the first two years of service;
- create better peer support among officers and teams;
- improve how departments share information;
- change the way police decide who to stop, charge, and arrest;
- design community-policing training for new officers; and
- maximize the use of body-worn cameras and their footage.

We have just begun to scratch the surface. By drawing on topical expertise, proven research methods, and innovative thinking, we can continue to make changes in the fields of policing, public service, and public safety.

If you are interested in working with BIT on any of these topics, you can contact us at info@bi.team.

Endnotes

1   Libaw, O. Y. (2016, July 10). Police face severe shortage of recruits. *ABC News*. Retrieved February 5, 2018, from http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=96570&page=1

2   Details of the research discussed in this report can be found in the Technical Appendix.

3   Linos, E. (2018). More than public service: A field experiment on job advertisements and diversity in the police. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 28*(1), 67–85.

4   Loftus, G. R., & Mackworth, N. H. (1978). Cognitive determinants of fixation location during picture viewing. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, 4*(4), 565–572; Perry, J., & Wise, L. (1990). The motivational bases of public service. *Public Administration Review, 50*(3), 367–373. doi:10.2307/976618.

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6   Behavioural Insights Team. (2015). *The Behavioural Insights Team Update 2013–2015*. Retrieved August 1, 2018, from http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/publications/the-behavioural-insights-team-update-report-2013-2015

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9   Swarns, R. L. (2015, July 19). Black police applicant frustrated by opaque hiring process. *The New York Times*. Retrieved August 1, 2018, from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/20/nyregion/black-police-applicant-frustrated-by-hiring-process.html

10 See http://courses.behavioralinsightsteam.com/courses/course-v1:BIT+LCE+2016-0/about

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