

# Is reducing the age requirement for officers addressing recruitment issues, or is this a band-aid solution?

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## **Abstract**

There is continuing controversy regarding the hiring age of law enforcement officers in the United States. To address the need for more qualified applicants, Ohio is reviewing a bill to lower the minimum age of law enforcement officers from 21 to 18 (Fahmy, 2023). The main question is – will the reduction in age limitations increase recruitment? There are certainly benefits and drawbacks to lowering the age limit.

One benefit of lowering the age limit is increasing the number of individuals applying who do not have negative work or financial issues (International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], n.d.). However, brain development is only complete once a person is in their late twenties (National Institute of Health [NIH], n.d.). Lowering the minimum age for an officer may increase applications but may not increase qualified applicants in the sense of maturity and life experience (NIH, n.d.). The plethora of tests and interviews that an applicant must complete that lead to a contingent offer of employment are exhausting (IACP, n.d.). Agencies try to recruit the most qualified candidates to reduce the potential for lawsuits. Thus, law enforcement agencies recruit based on the same principles as insurance companies when addressing risk. Insurance companies base the cost of an insurance policy on a person's age, health, driving, and criminal history - depending on what type of insurance someone requests. Recruiting law enforcement officers is a strategic risk assessment based on the battery of tests, interviews, and background information. Reducing the age limit for applicants may open agencies up to avoidable lawsuits.

Another negative aspect of lowering the age limit of a police officer is expecting an 18-year-old to make life and death decisions when scientific evidence shows that the prefrontal cortex of the brain where “planning, prioritizing, and making good decisions” (NIH, n.d., para. 2) is not mature until a person's late twenties (National Institute of Health, n.d.). Maturity is not the only issue with lowering the age limit; it is a person's ability to make sound decisions under stressful conditions (National Institute of Health, n.d.). A law enforcement officer develops good decision-making skills through life experiences, age, and training (experience counts when making decisions in a stressful situation).

Some bring up the adage that 18-year-olds can join the military and fight for our country; therefore, an 18-year-old should be able to become a police officer. A person can indeed join the military at 18 years old. However, these young soldiers are supervised in the field by a senior, more seasoned officer who directs their actions (Nightingale, 2019). In the military enlisted soldiers are to execute orders from their leaders with “the strict adherence to commander’s intent as the responsible agents for the men they serve—both above and below them” (Nightingale, 2019, para. 1). Therefore, the 18-year-old soldier does not have to make a decision directly affecting the outcome of a situation that a more seasoned officer would have foreseen, and thereby taking a different action based on their knowledge and experience (Nightingale, 2019).

As a former police officer and a current educator, the students currently enrolled in criminal justice courses find the content interesting. However, they are not interested in becoming law enforcement officers because of the negative stigmatism surrounding the profession. In addition, many students claim that the salaries need to be higher and making a living on these low hourly wages would be difficult. Others suggest there is too much paperwork and report writing, which does not interest them as much as the crime-fighting aspect, which statistically “makes up between 10 and 30 percent of the police officers’ on-duty time” (Birzer & Roberson, 2020, p. 211). Also, law enforcement agencies are competing with other companies that offer comparable starting pay, sign-on bonuses, and the ability to work remotely. If these factors remain, law enforcement and correctional departments will continue to have difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified applicants.

There are other avenues that 18 to 20-year-olds can take to get into law enforcement. For example, many sheriffs and other correctional agencies offer civilian specialist jobs, and some police dispatching agencies will hire 18-year-olds. However, making split-second decisions and mitigating conflict is sometimes challenging for younger individuals. Therefore, if 18-20-year-olds acquire training and experience through internships or jobs tailored to help build and develop skills to prepare them for a career in law enforcement, this would be more advantageous. For example, applying to become a security or loss prevention officer will help build skills in dealing with the public and documenting information. Also, signing up for internships with local law enforcement agencies and participating in a ride-along with a police officer or deputy sheriff will help possible recruits gain experience.

Law enforcement agencies in the United States face a multitude of issues when it comes to retention and recruitment. The barrage of negative media coverage exacerbates these efforts – the risks of lowering the age limit for recruits must be fully explored and weighed against the benefits before plunging headfirst into adopting this new policy. If this bill passes in Ohio and other states decide to reduce the age limitations for law enforcement officers, one suggestion to address this change is to add additional testing, for example, by creating a scenario-based multiple-choice questionnaire to address critical thinking skills, where the applicant does not need a background in law enforcement to complete successfully.

## About The Author

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“I started my career with the Johnson County Kansas Sheriff’s Department (10 years). I continued my law enforcement career as a patrol officer and SRO with Osawatomie Kansas Police Department. I was later recruited by the Blue Valley School District Campus Police, then started teaching criminal justice courses part-time until graduating with my master’s degree in 2014 with honors. After that, I started working full-time as an online instructor with Grantham University and went part-time with Osawatomie Kansas Police Department. I have completed all my coursework for my Ph.D. and am currently writing my dissertation at Walden University (Ph.D. Philosophy/Criminal Justice). I am the Criminal Justice Coordinator for the Kansas City Kansas Community College.”

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