



Top 5 Public Safety Workforce Trends of 2026

**The Interconnected Factors
Driving a Widening Readiness Gap**

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Executive Summary

Nearly **2,000 public safety professionals** responded to this year's survey. The responses were wide-ranging, but the theme was consistent—a workforce under constant pressure. The data pointed to a recurring pattern: a gap between what agencies know they need to do and their ability to execute it.

This report examines five trends widening that gap in 2026:

- ✓ **Workforce strain is now structural.** Staffing shortages, high vacancy rates, and increased overtime are no longer temporary disruptions. They're the new operating environment.
- ✓ **Hiring friction limits recruiting.** Agencies are losing viable candidates to slow and complex internal processes.
- ✓ **Efficiency depends on data and visibility.** Most agencies want to improve operations, but lack the systems and analytics to do it consistently.
- ✓ **AI adoption is outpacing readiness.** Early experimentation is growing, but governance, policy, and training are not keeping up.
- ✓ **Change fails at execution, not awareness.** Agencies know what needs to change. The limiting factor is the capacity and infrastructure to follow through.

The disparity between awareness and execution is called the **readiness gap**. Closing it is the defining challenge for public safety leaders in 2026.



The Public Safety Readiness Gap

Public safety agencies in 2026 are navigating a workforce crisis that goes beyond staffing numbers. Recruiting is harder. Operations are strained. New technologies are arriving faster than agencies can keep up. And the **pressure to do more with less** has never been greater.

Most agencies understand these challenges. The problem is acting on them effectively. That distance—between knowing and doing—is the readiness gap, and it **isn't driven by a single cause**. Across all five trends examined in this report, the same factors appeared consistently:

- **Capacity constraints:** Staffing shortages and heavy workloads leave little room for new initiatives. When teams are stretched thin, progress competes with daily operations.
- **Lack of systems and processes:** Many agencies have clear strategies but lack the tools, workflows, and standardization needed to execute them consistently.
- **Misalignment between leadership and staff:** When leaders and frontline staff see the same problems differently, even the best initiatives can stall during implementation.
- **Policy and training gaps:** Agencies move faster than their policies and training can support, especially in areas like AI adoption and change management.
- **Limited operational visibility:** Inconsistent use of data and analytics means many agencies make decisions without a full picture of what's working and what isn't.

These factors don't operate independently. They reinforce each other, making it harder for agencies to gain traction, even when the direction is right.



Who We Heard From

This report draws on responses from **1,975 public safety professionals**. The respondents span a wide range of agency types, with law enforcement making up the largest share at 65.9%, followed by corrections, emergency communications, and fire/EMS. Agency sizes range from small departments to large, multi-jurisdictional organizations.

Figure 0.1

Distribution of Respondents by Agency Type

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

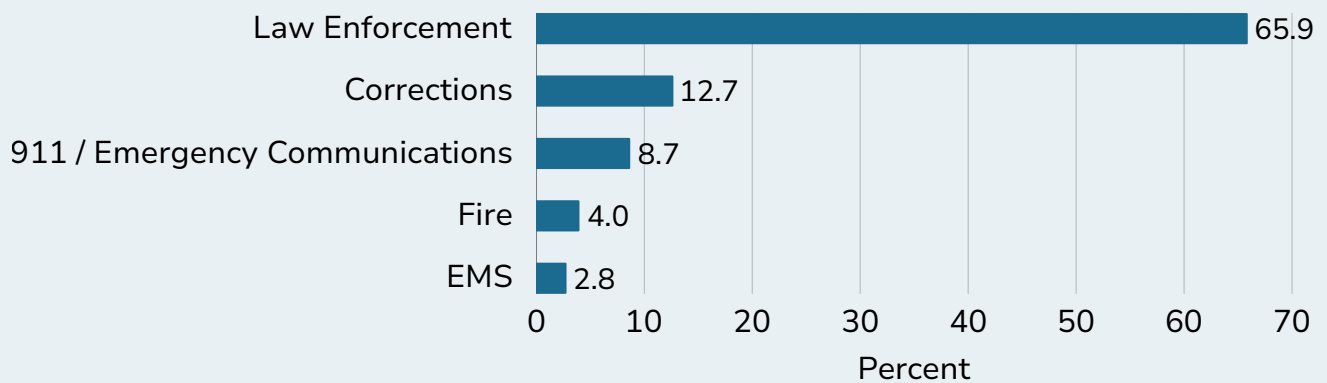


Figure 0.2

Distribution of Respondents by Agency Size

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

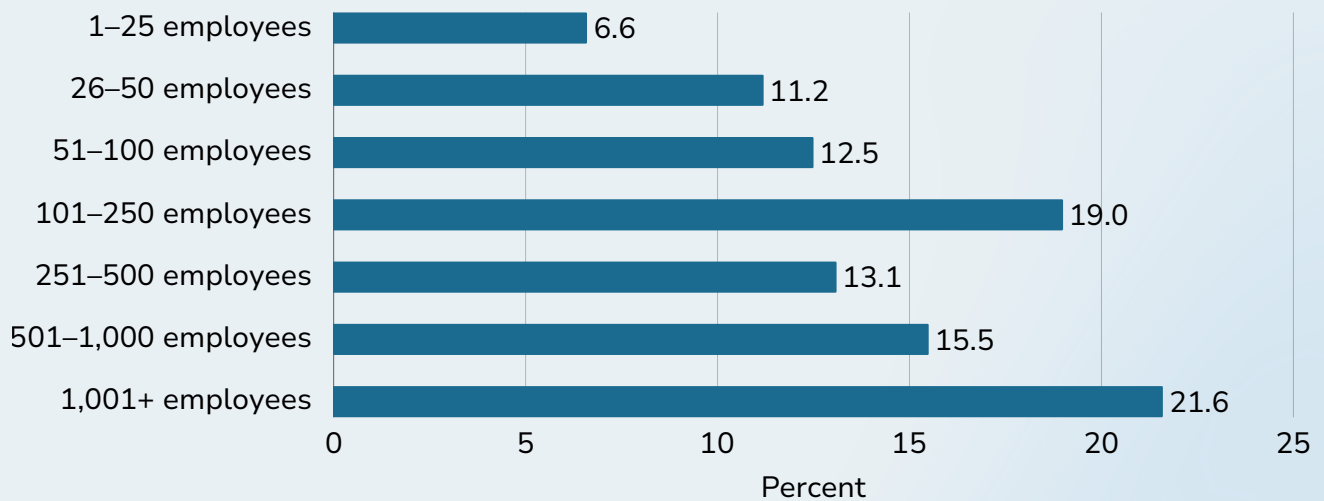
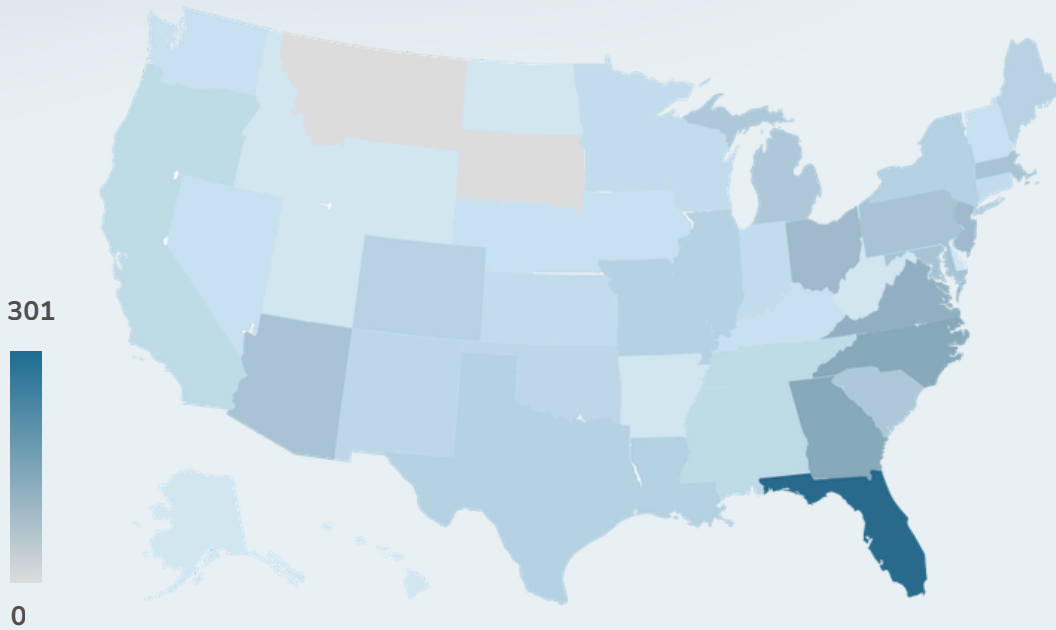


Figure 0.3

Distribution of Respondents by Agency Location

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Perspectives were captured across the full organizational hierarchy, including executive leadership, command staff, frontline personnel, and administrative staff. Tenure levels vary as well, spanning newer employees and seasoned professionals alike. That range matters. Our findings reflect both the strategic view from leadership and the operational reality on the ground.

Figure 0.4

Distribution of Respondents by Role Category

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

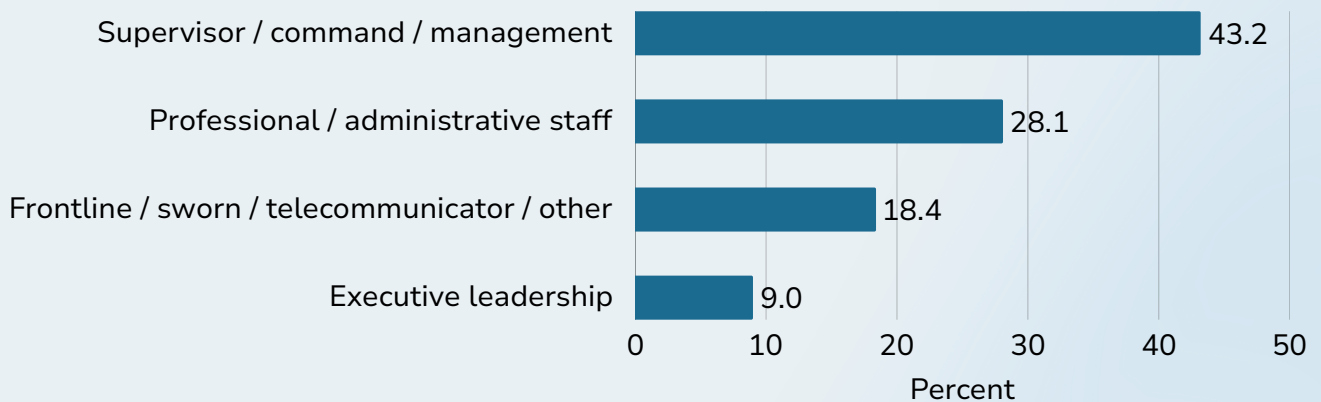
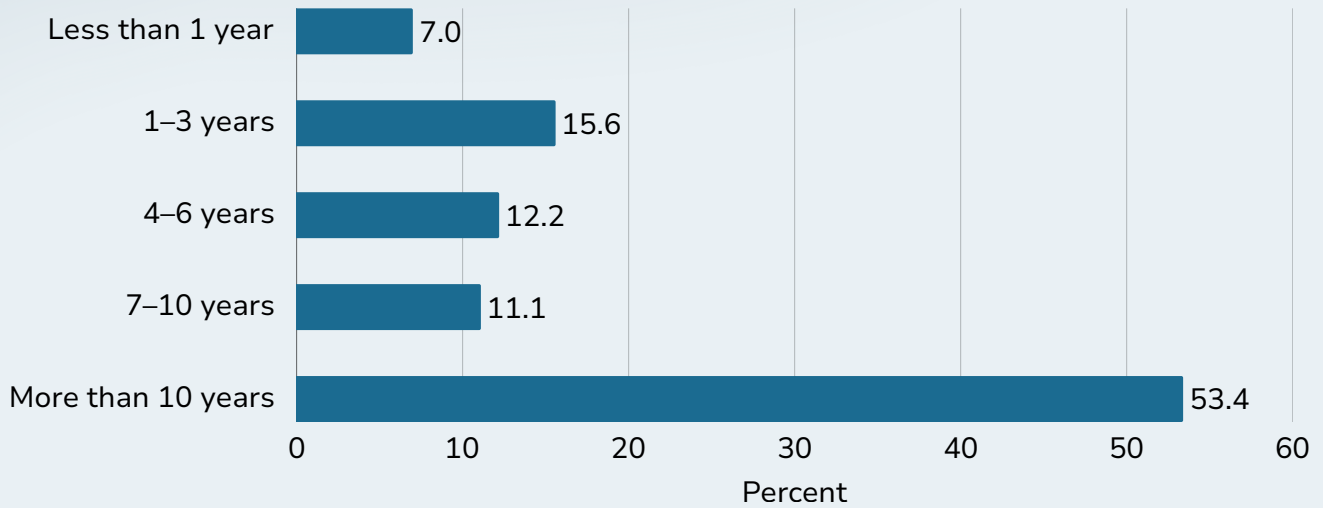


Figure 0.5
Respondent Tenure at Agency
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



What to Expect

The five trends that follow examine where the readiness gap is widening, what's driving it, and what leaders can do about it. Each trend is grounded in survey data, informed by the voices of public safety professionals, and focused on the implications that matter most for your agency this year.

Note: All data percentages provided in this report are calculated based on valid responses for each question, excluding 'unsure' and non-responses where applicable.



Trend 1

Workforce Strain Is Structural

Trend 1 Workforce Strain Is Structural

Staffing challenges in public safety aren't getting better. In fact, **chronic understaffing has become the baseline**. Shortages, high vacancy rates, rising retirement eligibility, early-career exits, and increased overtime are **indicators of workforce strain** happening concurrently, and the survey data reflects it.

A majority of respondents (60%) are experiencing unexpected staffing shortages. About one-third report vacancy rates above 11%. For 36% of respondents, over 10% of their workforce has retired in the past five years. Meanwhile, **43% have staff working 10+ hours of overtime per week**.

Figure 1.1

Agencies Experiencing Staffing Shortages

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

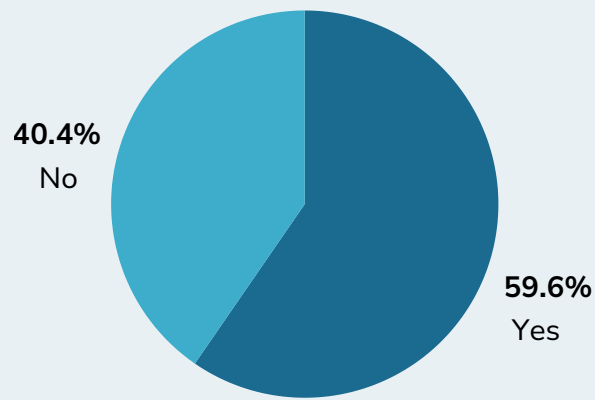
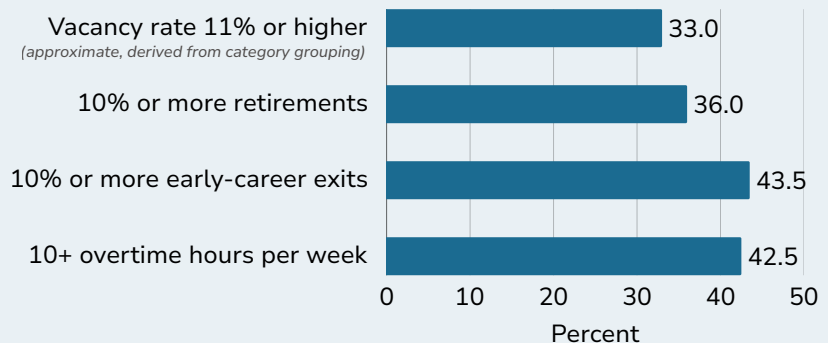


Figure 1.2

Workforce Strain Indicators

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



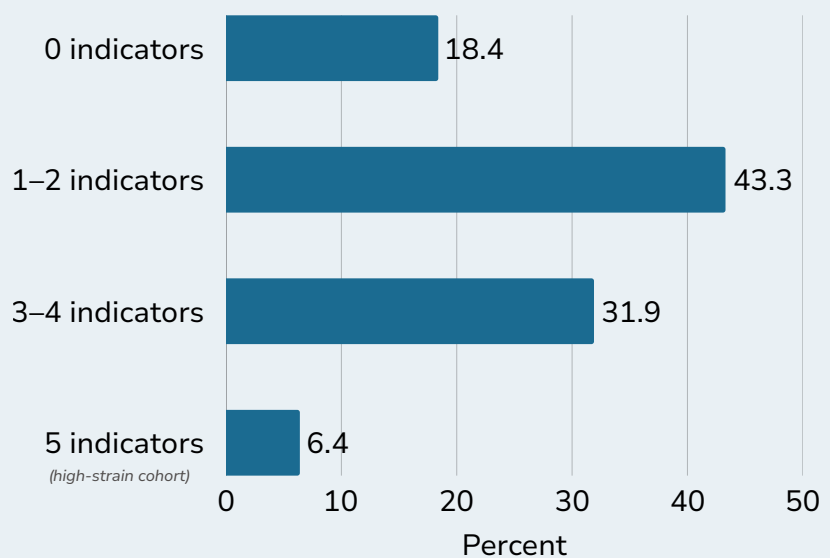
Trend 1 Workforce Strain Is Structural

The implication is daunting. This isn't a temporary setback that will resolve with time or a stronger recruiting push. It's a structural problem. Just over 43% of respondents are facing 1–2 workforce strain indicators, and 32% are dealing with 3–4. Looking at it another way, **82% of agencies have at least one workforce strain indicator.**

Figure 1.3

Workforce Strain Exposure


Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



“

*We have not been fully staffed for several years, which has required officers to work many extra hours of OT, leading to **officer wellness issues and burnout** among some officers.*

– Chief of Police, Survey Respondent



Trend 1 Workforce Strain Is Structural

Workforce strain is compounding, and the effect is far-reaching. From top to bottom, **the entire organization is impacted**. It affects operational resilience, employee wellbeing, service delivery, and even your agency's ability to implement change. It also causes many of the challenges facing agencies today, including recruiting difficulty, burnout, and retention.

Research published by the *Harvard Business Review* found that high-performing employees in strained environments often internalize expectations and overextend themselves by **taking on more tasks to prove their value** (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2017). But this can cause them to feel trapped, becoming less innovative and engaged, and more burnt out – ultimately pushing them to leave.

Workplace Strain Impact

Workforce strain doesn't affect all agencies the same way. Where an agency falls on the “strain spectrum” has a **direct bearing on what's driving their losses**, and what they can do about it.

In lower-strain agencies (0–2 indicators), workforce loss is driven primarily by **retirement**. That's a difficult reality, but it's largely external and predictable. In higher-strain agencies (3–5+ indicators), turnover is often driven by **burnout, compensation, and competition** from other agencies.

To some degree, these factors are within your control. The most common drivers of staffing shortages are not enough qualified candidates (33%), high turnover (29%), additional strain on existing staff (23%), and budget constraints (22%). Drilling deeper into turnover shows the main reason is retirement (49%), but moving to other agencies (41%) and higher pay (41%) follow closely behind. That's **not inevitable attrition**. Some of it is **preventable turnover**.

According to an article published by Emerald Insight, research shows that perceived **community support is a critical buffer against burnout** (Beck et al, 2023). Officers who feel supported by their communities experience lower burnout and higher engagement, while negative perceptions increase emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Beck et al, 2023). This highlights the importance of actively measuring and improving community sentiment, not just internally but externally.

Trend 1 Workforce Strain Is Structural

Figure 1.4

Top Causes of Staffing Shortages

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

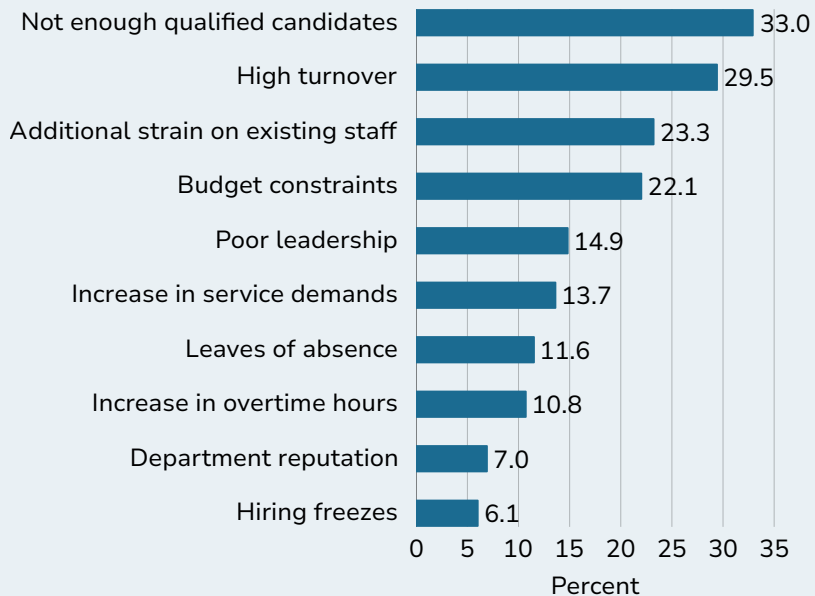


Figure 1.5

Top Reasons for Turnover

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



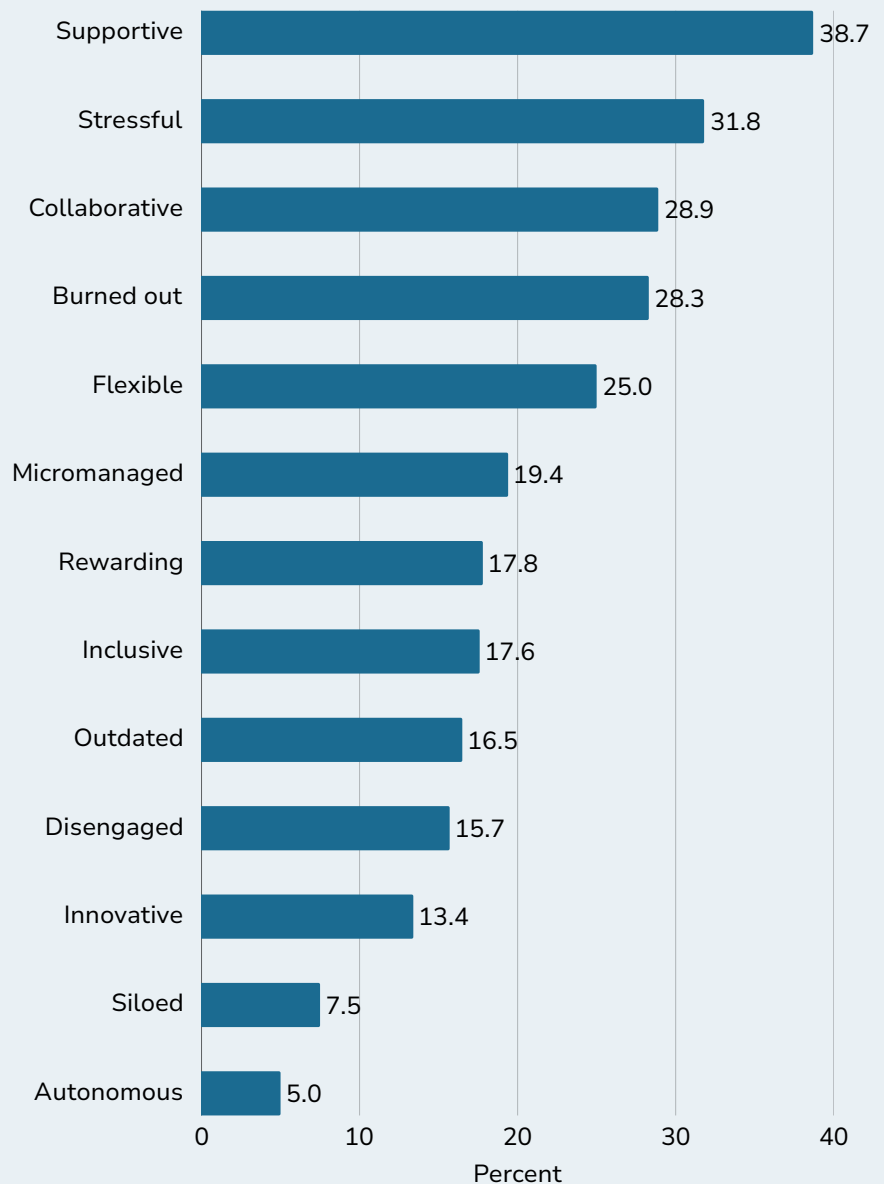
Trend 1 Workforce Strain Is Structural

Workplace culture tells a similar story. Agencies are described as both supportive (39%) and stressful (32%), collaborative (29%) and burned out (28%). Positive team dynamics and workload pressure are coexisting, which suggests that **culture alone isn't enough to offset chronic understaffing.**

Figure 1.6

Workplace Culture Descriptors

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data





As workforce strain intensifies, what starts as manageable staffing challenges can evolve into a **self-reinforcing cycle of turnover and workload pressure**. The healthiest agencies intervene before the cycle takes hold.

Our staff is very busy with tasks. If we can make everything smooth, there will be more time for incidentals that come up throughout the day without causing chaos or disruption to the daily work flow.

– Director, Survey Respondent

Key Takeaway

Most agencies recognize that retention is a priority, and many are responding with culture initiatives, wellness programs, and engagement efforts. Those are good investments. But they **may not be enough**.

The data suggests a core issue is a mismatch between the problem and the solution. High levels of vacancies, overtime, and exits **point to a capacity problem**, and culture initiatives alone can't fix it. When the structural conditions driving people out aren't addressed, even the best engagement efforts have limited impact.

Action Steps

Strategy 1

Conduct a time-drain audit across all ranks.

Survey staff to identify the top 10 administrative tasks consuming time that could be spent on core mission activities. Quantify hours spent per week on each task. Target: Complete audit within 30 days, identify 15-20 hours per employee per month that can be reclaimed through automation.

Strategy 2

Create real-time visibility into workload and certification status.

Deploy dashboards that show leadership which staff are approaching overtime limits, whose certifications are expiring, and where coverage gaps exist. This enables proactive scheduling rather than reactive crisis management.

Dashboards in [PowerDMS](#) software solutions provide real-time visibility into training compliance, certification status, and policy acknowledgment across the entire organization, allowing leadership to identify gaps before they become crises.

Strategy 3

Implement a systematic approach to deferring non-critical work.

Create a formal process for identifying which tasks can be delayed, delegated, or eliminated during high-strain periods. Document decisions to protect staff from criticism for not completing lower-priority work.

Strategy 4

Build administrative task redundancy through cross-training.

Ensure that critical administrative functions (payroll, scheduling, compliance reporting) can be performed by multiple people. This prevents single points of failure when key personnel are out.

Action Steps

Strategy 5

Connect staffing levels directly to service delivery metrics.

Establish clear thresholds (e.g., "when staffing drops below X, response times increase by Y minutes"). Use data to make the invisible costs of understaffing visible to decision-makers and budget authorities.

Strategy 6

Measure and improve community perception as a retention strategy.

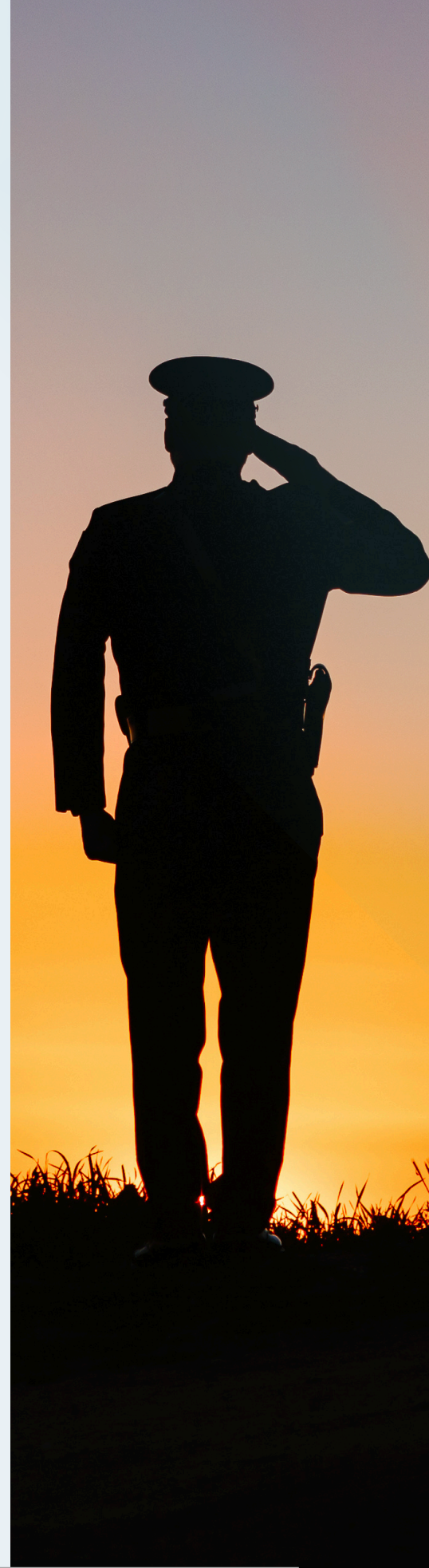
Systematically collect community feedback through surveys, track sentiment trends over time, and use this data to identify areas for improved engagement. Connect community perception metrics to officer wellness initiatives—when officers see that the agency is actively working to improve community relationships and can demonstrate positive sentiment trends, it reinforces their sense of purpose.

PowerEngage by PowerDMS provides structured ways to collect community feedback, track sentiment trends, and measure the impact of engagement initiatives. Community perception becomes a visible, actionable metric rather than anecdotal information. This lets agencies demonstrate positive community sentiment to their workforce, which directly impacts retention and well-being.

As workforce strain continues, agencies are placing greater emphasis on recruiting. However, the data indicates that recruiting challenges aren't just about the lack of candidates. They're also caused by internal hiring processes and friction points.

Trend 2

Hiring Friction Limits Recruiting



Trend 2 Hiring Friction Limits Recruiting

Public safety agencies are investing heavily in recruiting, but many still struggle to bring people on board. Notably, **67%** of agencies cite finding qualified candidates as their top recruiting challenge. That's the conventional framing and it's not wrong. But the data points to something else as well. **Agencies aren't just losing candidates before they apply, but after.**

Figure 2.1

Top Recruiting Challenges

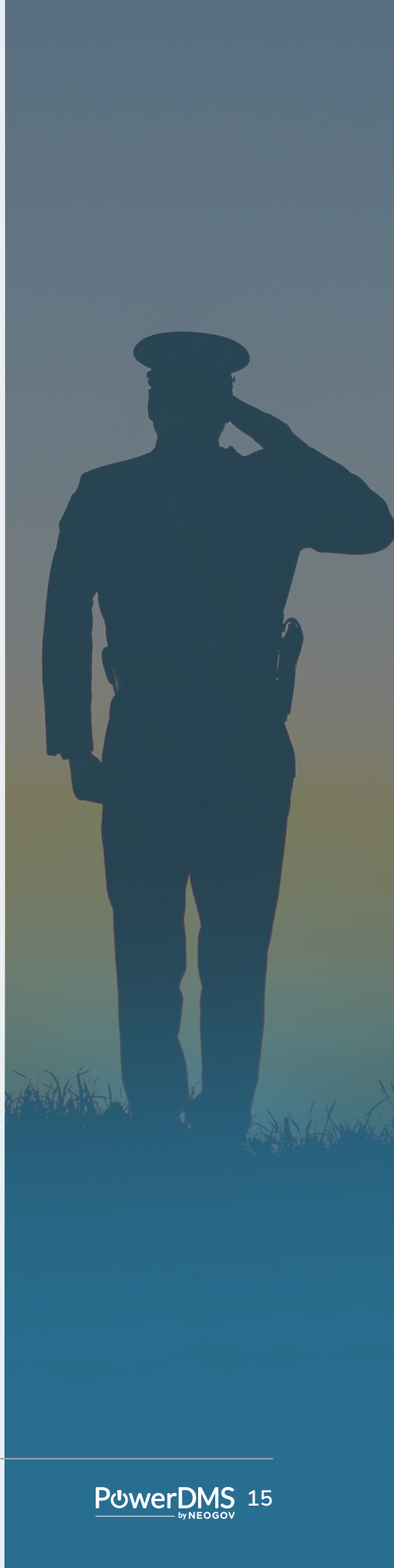
Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



It is impossible to accomplish any goal without the resources needed to get the job done. Our job cannot be done without proper staffing.

- Lieutenant, Survey Respondent

Slow hiring timelines, complex screening processes, and lengthy background investigations are creating friction that costs agencies viable candidates. When a motivated candidate waits three months for a background investigation to clear, **the risk of losing them is real.**



Trend 2 Hiring Friction Limits Recruiting

In other words, the recruiting problem in public safety **isn't only a supply problem**. It's a conversion problem. If you can't convert candidates into hires effectively, your efforts to attract candidates will only go so far.

The Conversion Problem

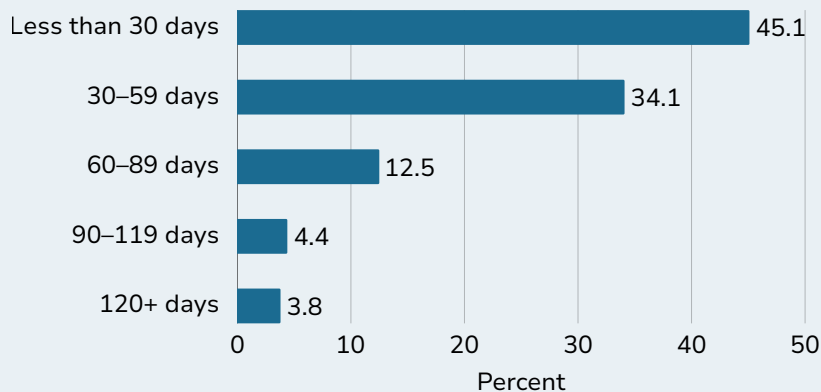
Where the Process Slows Down

Background investigations are one of the most time-intensive steps in the hiring process—and for many organizations, **one of the least optimized**. Nearly half of agencies (47%) take 30 to 90 days to complete them, and 9% take longer than 90 days. Only 45% complete investigations in under 30 days.

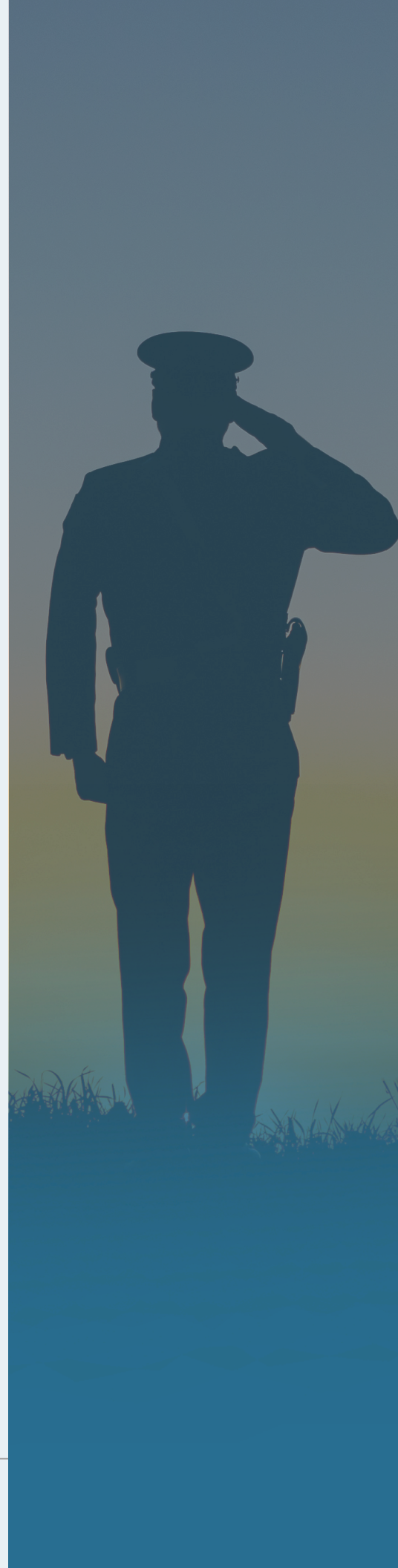
Figure 2.2

Background Investigation Time

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



The assumption might be that faster agencies have simply gone fully digital, but the data doesn't support that. Agencies completing background investigations in under 30 days are **more likely to use hybrid processes and tend to be mid-sized**—large enough to have dedicated resources, but without the layers of bureaucracy that slow larger agencies down. Speed more often comes down to process, not technology.

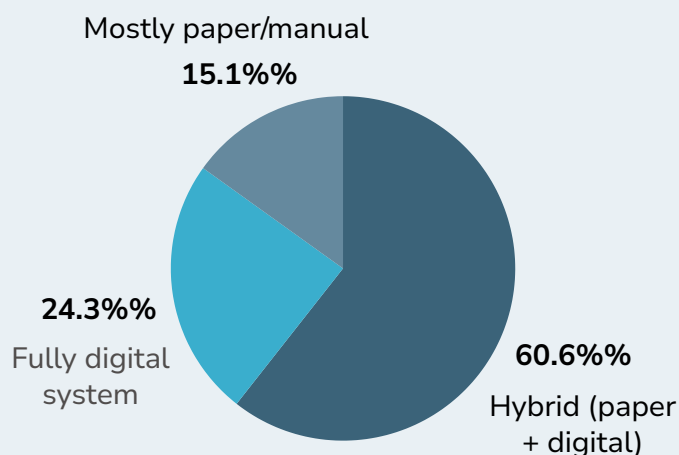


Trend 2 Hiring Friction Limits Recruiting

Figure 2.3

Background Investigation Process

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

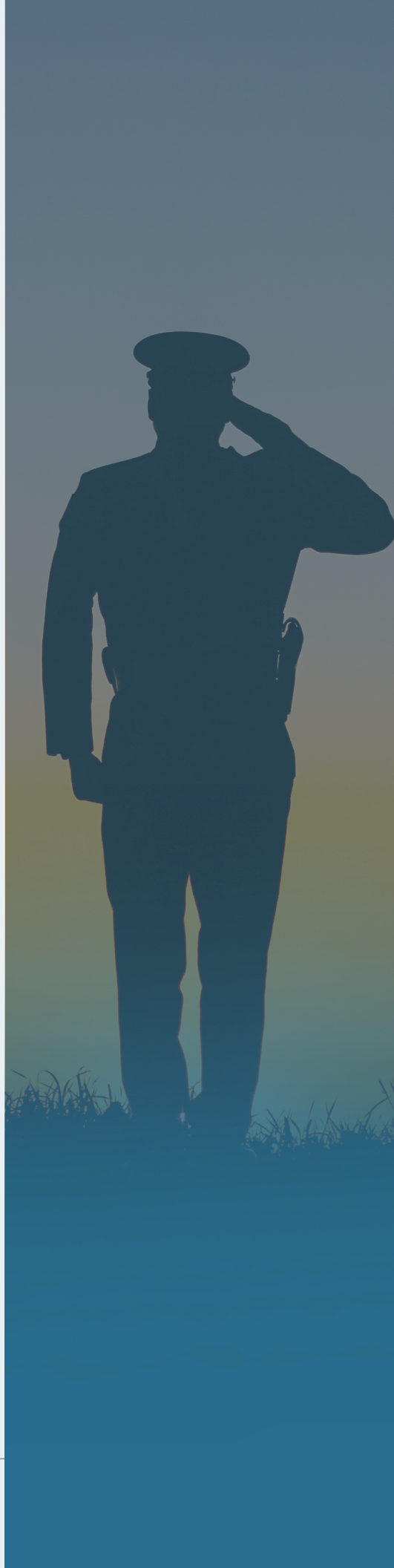


Digitization is a worthwhile investment, but it isn't sufficient on its own. Agencies must also examine where the process slows down, whether in approvals, handoffs, or scheduling, and address those inefficiencies directly.

Where the Strategy Falls Short

The data also reveals a **discrepancy between the recruiting tactics agencies use most often and those they report as most effective**. Signing bonuses were considered the most effective recruiting tactic, but only 23% of agencies use them.

Similarly, health and wellness benefits were the second most effective tactic, but only used by 29% of respondents. Budget constraints may explain the gap for some agencies, but the disparity is worth noting.



Trend 2 Hiring Friction Limits Recruiting

Figure 2.4

Most Used Recruiting Tactics

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

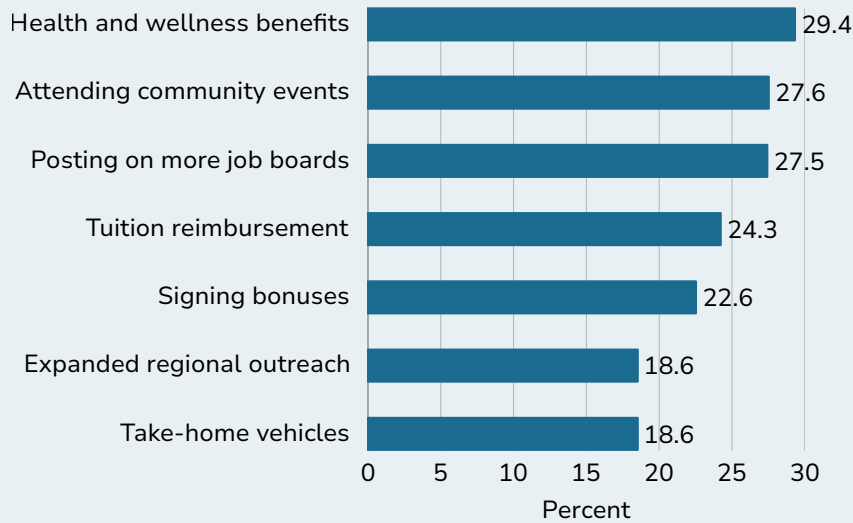
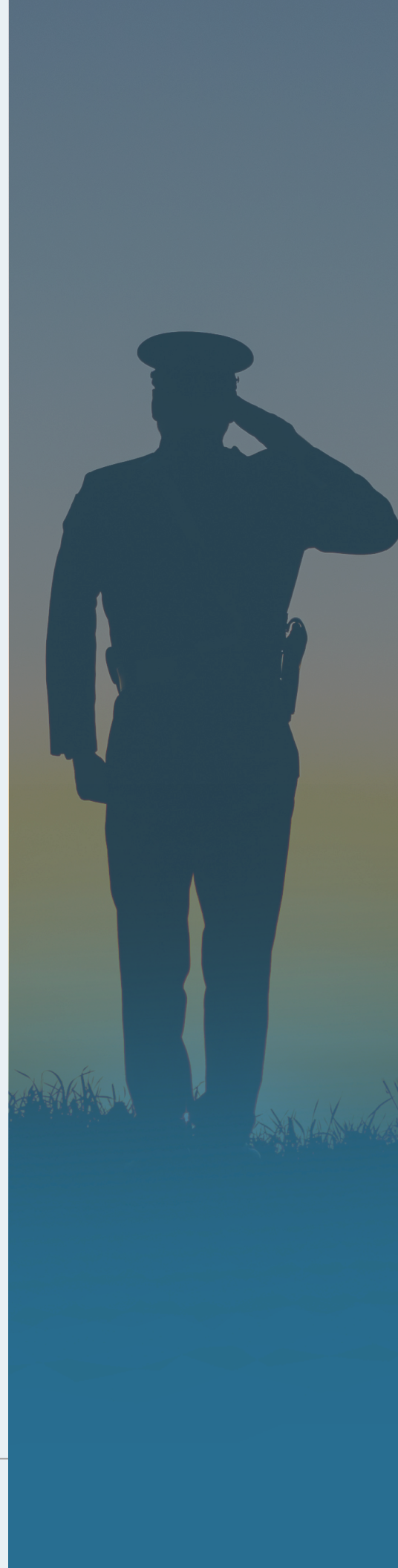


Figure 2.5

Most Effective Recruiting Tactics

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

(e.g., tattoo rules, requirements)



Trend 2 Hiring Friction Limits Recruiting

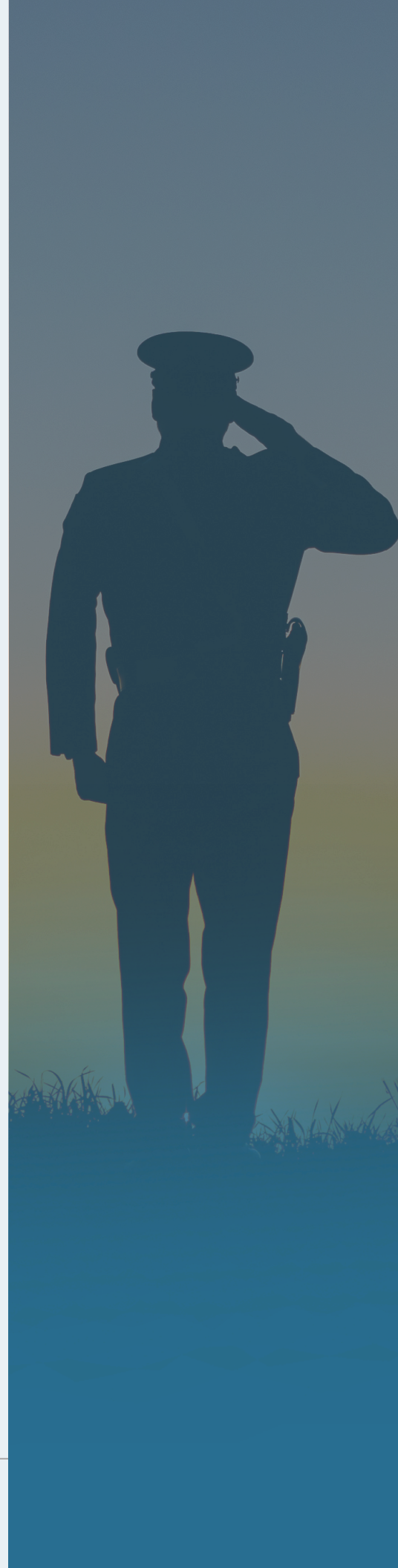
Some agencies are responding to hiring shortages by lowering selection standards—but research by the *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* suggests agencies should **be careful of introducing long-term risk**. While staffing gaps are urgent, lowering standards can lead to downstream impacts including performance issues, increased misconduct risk, and higher turnover—ultimately compounding the workforce crisis (Inwald and Thompson, 2021).

Survey respondents also report attending community events (28%), expanding job postings (27%), and improving benefits, all reasonable strategies. But these tactics are all focused on attraction, not conversion.

Key Takeaway

Most agencies invest in attracting candidates via job postings, community outreach, signing bonuses, and better benefits. Meanwhile, hiring timelines, background investigations, and internal approval processes remain slow. In a competitive job market, that's a liability. Candidates have options, and **a slow process gives them reasons to walk away**.

The result is a bottleneck that **limits the return on your recruiting investment**. If your hiring process is inefficient, getting more applications doesn't produce proportionally better hiring outcomes. Agencies are filling the pipeline without fixing the leaks further down.



Action Steps

Strategy 1

Map your current hiring process end-to-end and identify bottlenecks.

Document every step from application to first day, including who touches the file, how long each step takes, and where delays occur. Identify what needs to be fixed before scaling recruitment to ensure your hiring system can handle the volume. When you make improvements, invest in the most proven tactics. Target: Reduce time-to-hire by 30-50% within 12 months by eliminating bottlenecks.

Strategy 2

Digitize background investigation workflows to eliminate manual handoffs.

Move from paper-based personal history statements and document collection to digital forms that applicants complete online. Eliminate the time spent printing, mailing, scanning, and filing documents.

Vetted, background investigation software by PowerDMS, provides digital personal history statements that applicants complete online, with documents uploaded directly into the system. Background investigators access everything in one centralized location rather than managing paper files and email attachments, reducing investigation time by 30–40%.

Strategy 3

Create a hiring process dashboard visible to all stakeholders.

Show how many candidates are at each stage, average time at each stage, and where bottlenecks are occurring. This creates accountability and enables proactive intervention when candidates are stalled.

Action Steps

Strategy 4

Establish service-level agreements for each hiring stage.

Set targets: applications reviewed within 5 business days, interviews scheduled within 10 days of application, background investigations completed within 30 days. Track performance against these targets and address bottlenecks immediately.

Strategy 5

Reduce background investigation scope for lower-risk positions.

Not every position requires the same level of investigation. Establish tiered background check requirements based on position risk and access to sensitive information.

When recruiting alone can't close the gap, agencies have no choice but to shift their attention where they have more control: operational efficiency.



Trend 3

Efficiency Depends on Data and Visibility

Trend 3 Efficiency Depends on Data and Visibility

As staffing and hiring challenges continue, many agencies are turning inward. Their focus is shifting to operational improvement—finding ways to do more with the people and resources already in place.

The numbers back this up. Respondents identified communication (48%), training and development (44%), and recruiting and hiring processes (41%) as the top areas for efficiency improvement. To accomplish this, agencies are turning to data, analytics, and automation. After all, **when you can't add more people, productivity has to come from how work is organized, measured, and executed.**

Figure 3.1

Top Areas for Efficiency Improvement

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



We need better systems to track and manage our work. It's too fragmented right now.

- Public Safety Professional, Survey Respondent

However, **interest and execution aren't the same thing.** While many agencies report using public safety software, 35% still rely on paper and 23% on spreadsheets for key operational areas like training and compliance. Many agencies are pursuing efficiency without the systems needed to achieve it consistently, which is a gap worth examining.

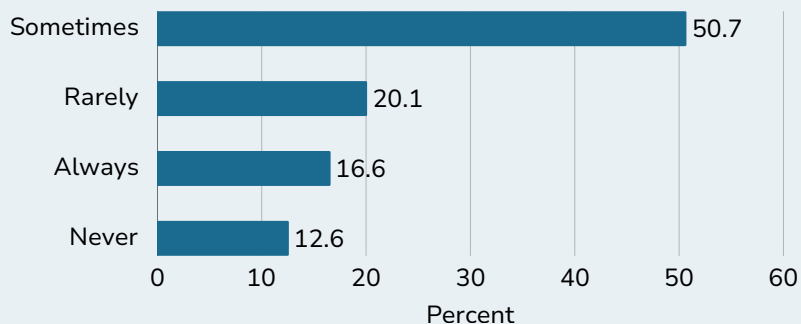
The Visibility Gap

How Agencies Use Data

Agencies are already working harder. The question is **how to work smarter**, and most are still figuring out the answer. Only 17% of respondents report always using data and analytics to guide decisions, while 33% use them rarely or never. The majority fall somewhere in between, using data inconsistently or only for specific purposes.

Figure 3.2
Analytics Usage Frequency

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



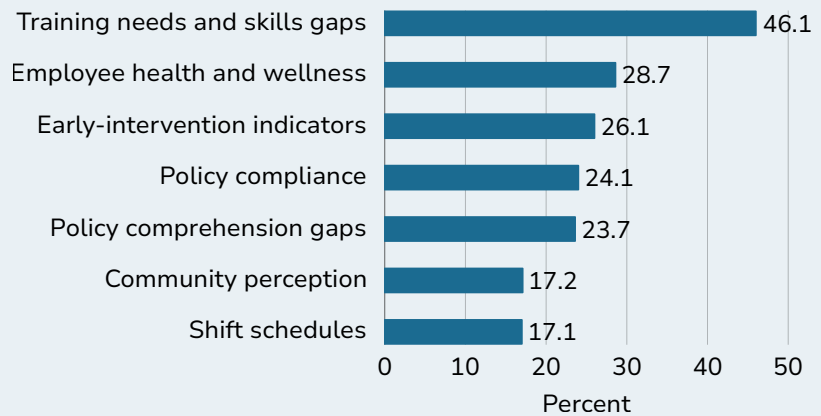
Agency size plays a role. Larger agencies are nearly twice as likely to use data and analytics (21% compared to 12% in smaller agencies). This suggests that **data maturity is tied to organizational size**, and that smaller agencies face a steeper climb toward consistent, data-driven operations.

What agencies want from data is also telling. Nearly half (46%) report needing **more insights into training needs and skills gaps**. Employee health and wellness (29%) and early-intervention indicators (26%) follow. Agencies aren't just trying to be more efficient—they're trying to **become more proactive**. They want data that helps them predict problems, prevent issues, and improve workforce outcomes.

Trend 3 Efficiency Depends on Data and Visibility

Figure 3.3
Areas Where Agencies Need More Data Insights

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Interest in wellness and early-intervention data aligns with research showing that **burnout is influenced not only by workload, but also by social and organizational factors** such as perceived support and visibility into performance and expectations. Community perception is a social influence that may be under-prioritized relative to its impact. Research shows community perception directly influences officer well-being, engagement, and performance outcomes (Beck et al, 2023).

How Agencies Manage Training

Training data is a priority for public safety leaders (46%), and it's important to understand why. Many agencies **don't know the status of their own workforce**. They don't know who is fully trained, where skill gaps exist, how training connects to performance, or where risk is emerging.

“Training must keep pace with the new laws, technology, and best practices. Maintaining readiness, professionalism, and adaptability will keep our training efficient and relevant.”

- State Police Corporal, Survey Respondent

Trend 3 Efficiency Depends on Data and Visibility

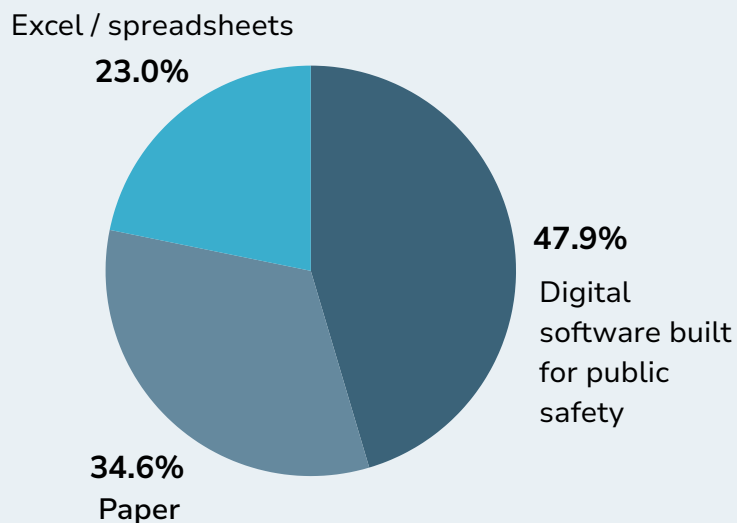
The training management tools used by many agencies aren't helping. Field training and documentation are still managed through a mix of paper-based processes (35%), spreadsheets (23%), and public safety software (48%)—creating fragmented records and incomplete visibility.

The result is agencies **managing compliance rather than capability**. They track **if training happened, not if it's working**.

Figure 3.4

Field Training Documentation Methods

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



As workforce strain increases, agencies face two challenges: **fewer resources to deliver training**, and **ensuring staff are fully prepared**. Automation offers a partial solution. The administrative burden is often highest for training and certification tracking, policy development and management, and background investigations. Automating these three areas is a natural starting point.

Key Takeaway

Public safety professionals **aren't satisfied with how work gets done**. Manual processes, duplicative workflows, and administrative overhead are consuming time that could be spent on higher-value work. They know what needs to change. The challenge is getting there.

Agencies want to operate more efficiently, but many lack the systems, data, and infrastructure to do so consistently. This creates a gap between intent (optimizing operations) and capability (making it happen).

We do a lot of manual work that could be done faster with the help of programs/AI.

- Administrative Professional, Survey Respondent

Action Steps

Strategy 1

Prioritize training and certification visibility as the first data modernization target.

With 46% of respondents wanting better training data and 35% still using paper, this is the highest-impact area. Implement a centralized training management system that tracks completions, certifications, and expiration dates in real time.

Strategy 2

Replace paper-based policy management with digital distribution and tracking.

Move from printed policy manuals and signature sheets to digital policy distribution with electronic acknowledgment. This provides instant visibility into who has read and acknowledged policies, which is critical for compliance and liability protection.

PowerPolicy by PowerDMS centralizes all policies, procedures, and SOPs in one searchable repository with automated distribution, electronic signatures, and compliance reporting. The side-by-side comparison feature shows employees exactly what changed in policy updates.

Strategy 3

Establish data governance standards for the three critical data domains.

Define standards for how training data, policy compliance data, and personnel data are collected, stored, and reported. This ensures consistency and enables meaningful analysis across the organization.

Strategy 4

Move from reactive to predictive analytics for certification management.

Don't wait for certifications to expire—set up automated alerts 90, 60, and 30 days before expiration. Track trends: which certifications expire most frequently? Which staff consistently let certifications lapse? Use this data to improve processes.

Action Steps

Strategy 5

Link training completion to operational readiness metrics.

Establish clear connections: "When training compliance drops below 85%, incident response times increase by X%." Use data to demonstrate the operational impact of training gaps, not just the compliance risk.

Strategy 6

Automate compliance reporting for accreditation and audits.

Set up automated reports that pull essential data for accreditation reviews and audits. Review these on regular intervals and make them visible to supervisors and command staff so they can make proactive adjustments rather than discovering problems during audits. This eliminates the weeks of manual data compilation that agencies currently experience.

PowerStandards by PowerDMS provides pre-built compliance reports and audit trails that can be generated instantly, reducing audit preparation time from weeks to hours.

As agencies optimize and explore automation, many are evaluating artificial intelligence as a way to extend capacity and improve performance. But AI is advancing faster than they can keep up.

Trend 4

AI Adoption Is Outpacing Readiness



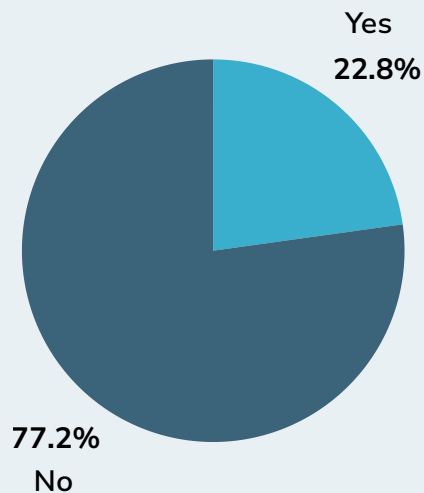
Trend 4 AI Adoption Is Outpacing Readiness

Artificial intelligence is already in use across public safety. Agencies are using it to automate routine tasks and boost efficiency. But **adoption and readiness are not the same thing**, and the gap between them is widening.

Nearly a quarter of the workforce (23%) is already using AI to support daily tasks. The most common use cases are practical: report writing, data analysis, and summarizing information. For agencies already stretched thin, AI offers tangible value—a way to **streamline administrative tasks and save time for higher-impact work**.

Figure 4.1
AI Adoption

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



AI deals with the workload that may slip through or is too much for current staff.

- *Administrative Professional, Survey Respondent*

But many public safety employees are adopting AI without the policies, training, or governance to guide it. The technology is moving faster than the organizations using it, creating an **imbalance between usage and responsibility**.

Adoption Without Accountability

The AI adoption data tells an exciting story, but the governance insights are more sobering. **Half of agencies don't have an AI policy in place, and 66% haven't provided formal AI training** to their workforce. For technology that is already in use—and carries real unknowns—that's a significant oversight.

Figure 4.2
AI Policy Status

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data

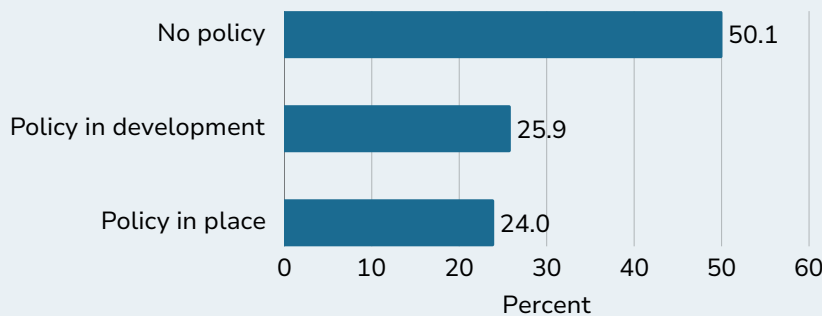
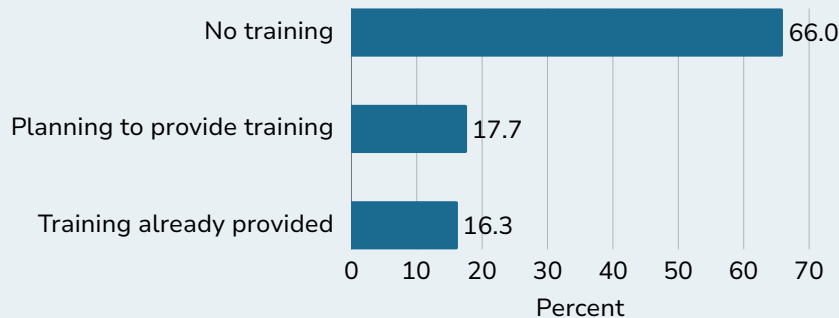


Figure 4.3
AI Training Availability

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



When asked about their concerns with AI, agencies cited accuracy of information (53%), data security (39%), compliance (33%), ethics (27.0%), and bias (19%). Awareness of AI risks isn't the problem; it's **the lack of safeguards to mitigate them.**

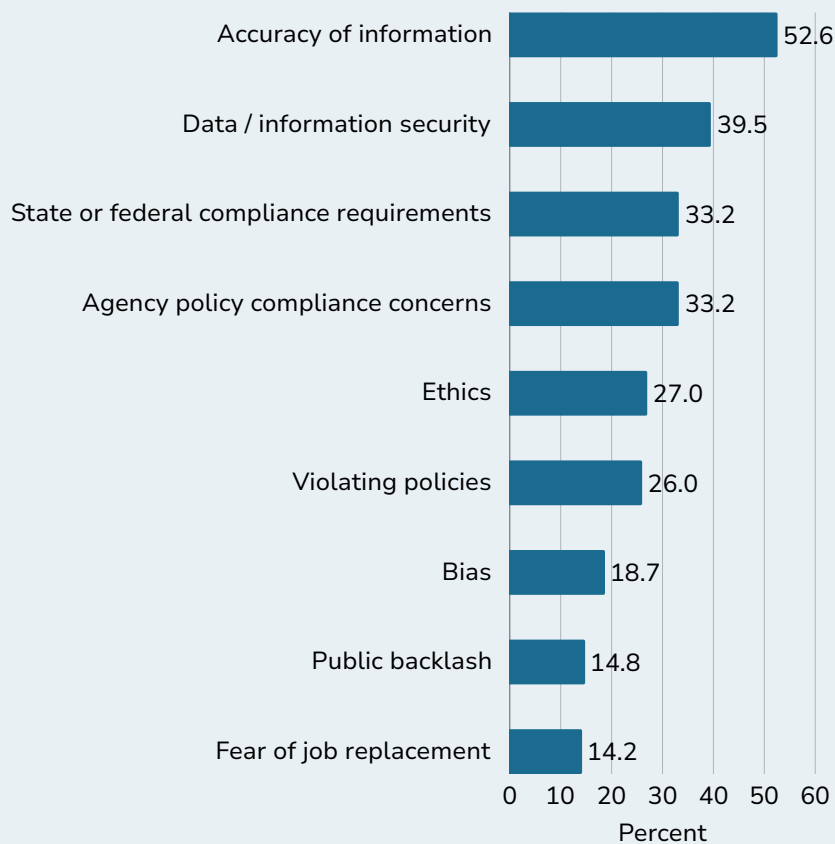
Trend 4 AI Adoption Is Outpacing Readiness

Findings shared in *Police Practice & Research* shows that concerns about **neutrality, transparency, and trustworthiness** directly influence whether the public supports AI in policing—making governance and communication as critical as the technology itself (Boke, Guler and Kula, 2025).

Figure 4.4

Top Concerns with AI

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Key Takeaway

AI is proving its value in public safety. Public safety professionals use it to save time on writing and documentation, and to assist with data analysis and research. In this era of staffing shortages, **AI is a productivity tool** helping agencies do more with less.

Trend 4 AI Adoption Is Outpacing Readiness

*AI has helped to make drafting communication more efficient, leaving employees with **more time for other pressing tasks/responsibilities.***

- *Administrative Professional, Survey Respondent*

However, AI's success in public safety will be determined less by capability and more by legitimacy. Most staff experiment with AI **without fully understanding how it should be used, managed, or scaled.**

Those gaps create risk, including inconsistent usage across the organization, lack of standards for data security, and the potential for misuse or misunderstanding. The technology is useful, but the guardrails aren't there yet.

Therefore, the central question is no longer whether AI adds value, but **how it is implemented responsibly.** Without clear governance, fairness, transparency, and accountability are difficult to prove and enforce. This approach to AI adoption risks undermining trust—even when it improves efficiency.



Action Steps

Strategy 1

Develop a comprehensive AI use policy before expanding adoption.

Address acceptable use cases, prohibited uses, data privacy requirements, human oversight requirements, and documentation standards. Don't let AI tools proliferate without governance. Target: Policy in place within 60 days for agencies currently using AI without policy.

Once the AI policy is developed, ensure 100% of staff who will use AI tools read, understand, and acknowledge the policy. Track compliance and provide refresher training annually.

Strategy 2

Create role-based AI training programs.

Develop different training modules for different user groups: executives need strategic AI literacy, supervisors need oversight training, end users need tool-specific training. Track completion and require refreshers.

Strategy 3

Establish an AI use documentation and audit trail system.

Require staff to document when AI tools are used in decision-making processes, what outputs were generated, and how human oversight was applied. This creates accountability and protects the agency in litigation.

Strategy 4

Create an AI governance committee with clear authority and accountability.

Don't make AI governance a side project for already-busy staff. Establish a formal committee with representatives from operations, legal, IT, and HR. Give them authority to approve or reject AI tool adoption.

Action Steps

Strategy 5

Implement a pilot-test-scale approach for new AI tools.

Require all new AI tools to go through a structured evaluation: pilot with small group, test against established criteria, scale only if successful. Document lessons learned at each stage.

Strategy 6

Link AI adoption to operational priorities, not technology trends.

Evaluate AI tools based on whether they solve real operational problems (reduce administrative burden, improve decision quality, enhance safety) rather than adopting AI for its own sake.

While AI offers potential solutions to workforce and efficiency challenges, its impact depends on your ability to implement change effectively. For many public safety agencies, that ability is still a work in progress.



Trend 5

Change Fails at Execution

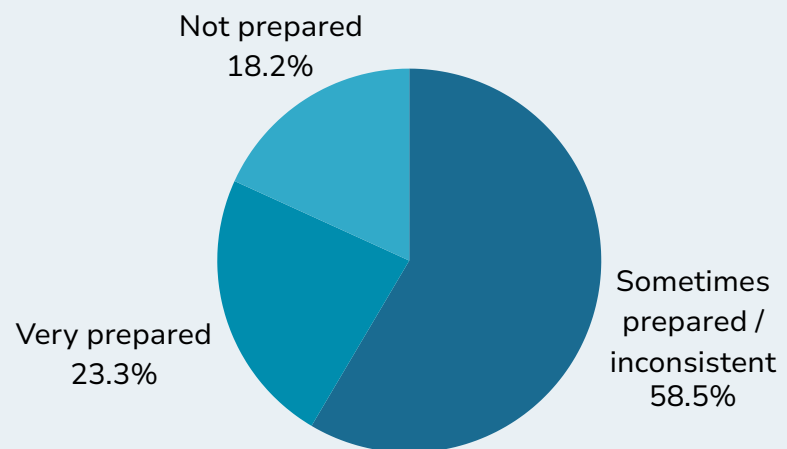
Trend 5 Change Fails at Execution

Each of the previous trends makes it clear that public safety agencies understand the challenges in front of them. Workforce strain, hiring friction, operational inefficiency, and the risk of AI are well recognized. The problem is doing something about it.

Only 23% of agencies report being very prepared to manage change. The remaining 77% describe their readiness as inconsistent or nonexistent. That disparity doesn't indicate a lack of intent. It shows that **the structures, resources, and processes needed to implement change effectively are often not in place**. Simply put, change management is more of an operational problem than a strategic one.

Figure 5.1
Change Preparedness

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Where Change Breaks Down

According to survey participants, **the top change management challenges are operational**, not conceptual. Unclear communication (44%), workload and burnout (36%), employee buy-in (33%), and limited resources (32%) are more than just side effects; they are **primary barriers to change adoption**.

Strained employees are more likely to disengage, resist change, and experience reduced performance (Beck et al, 2023). Ultimately, these are day-to-day realities that can derail even well-planned initiatives.

Trend 5 Change Fails at Execution

Figure 5.2
Top Change Management Challenges

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



Leadership and frontline workers experience change differently. Leaders are focused on strategy, planning, and organizational alignment. They're **thinking about the plan**—what change looks like on paper.

In practice, frontline staff are experiencing communication breakdowns, workload pressure, and lack of support during implementation. They're **living with the execution**.

Workers are resistant to change when it is too frequent and they do not feel fairly compensated and/or supported due to the staff shortage.

- Professional Staff, Survey Respondent



Trend 5 Change Fails at Execution

Change isn't won at the strategy level. It's won or lost at the point of execution, where staff are expected to adopt new processes while managing existing workloads.

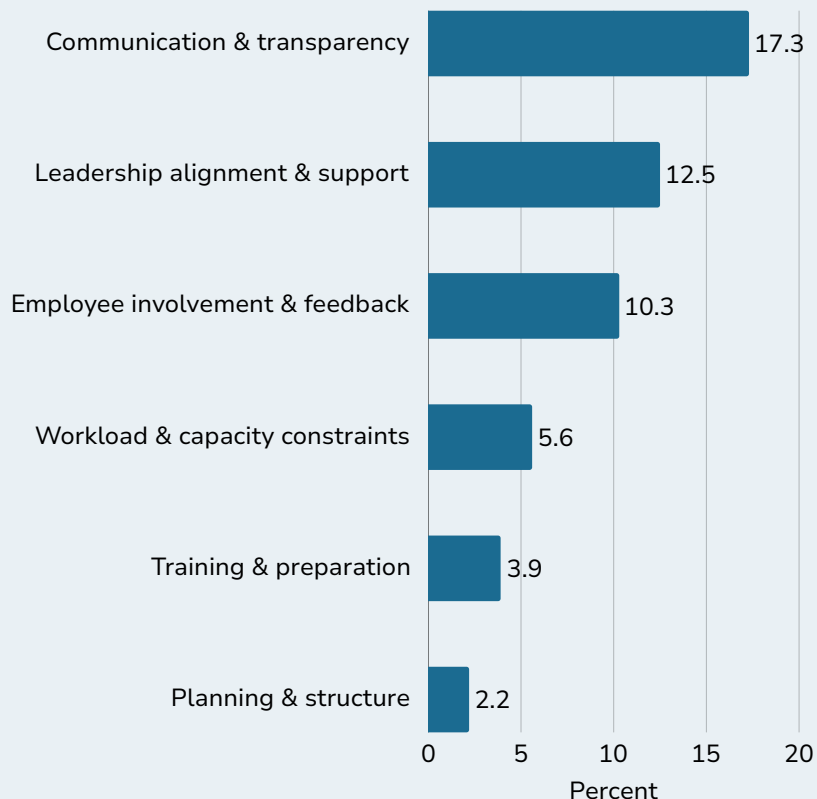
In high-pressure environments, staff may also hesitate to speak up or challenge initiatives due to perceived expectations—further widening the gap between strategy and execution. **When leadership and frontline perspectives are misaligned, implementation stalls**, regardless of how good the plan is.

When asked what needs to improve, respondents pointed to three key areas: **communication and transparency** (17%), **leadership alignment and support** (12%), and **employee involvement and feedback** (10%). These findings were mirrored in the open-text responses. None of them are sophisticated interventions. They're the fundamentals, but remain elusive for many agencies.

Figure 5.3

Top Areas for Improvement with Change Management

Source: NEOGOV Survey Data



*When employees **understand why a change is being made** and how it supports operational effectiveness or officer safety, they are generally more willing to support and adopt the change.*

- Professional Staff, Survey Respondent

Key Takeaway

Public safety agencies recognize the need for change. But most aren't fully prepared to implement change effectively. Not because they lack awareness or intent, but because they **lack the capacity and capability to follow through.**

The distinction matters. It shifts the solution from strategy development to something more grounded: building systems that support consistent execution.

Poor change management compounds across every other trend in this report. In each case, it's **a gap between knowing and doing.** Without effective change management, it's difficult to close the readiness gap.

Action Steps

Strategy 1

Establish a standardized change communication framework.

For every change initiative, require: (1) clear explanation of what's changing and why, (2) specific impacts on different roles, (3) timeline with milestones, (4) training and support resources, (5) feedback mechanisms. Make this a template that all change initiatives must follow.

Create templates for change planning, communication plans, training deployment, and progress tracking. This will standardize change management workflows across the organization and ensure consistent execution across all change initiatives.

Strategy 2

Implement a centralized communication platform for change initiatives.

Stop relying on email chains, bulletin boards, and word-of-mouth. Use a system where change communications are centralized, trackable, and accessible to all staff.

PowerPolicy serves as a communication infrastructure for change initiatives by providing a centralized platform where change-related policies, procedures, and communications can be distributed with confirmation that every employee has received and reviewed them. The discussion features enable two-way communication and feedback collection.

Strategy 3

Deploy training for new processes and procedures with completion tracking.

Don't assume that announcing a change means people know how to execute it. Provide specific training on new processes, track completion, and require demonstration of competency before full implementation.

Action Steps

Strategy 4

Create visibility into implementation progress with real-time dashboards.

Track adoption metrics: How many staff have completed training? How many have acknowledged new policies? What percentage are using new processes? Make this data visible to leadership so they can intervene when adoption stalls.

Strategy 5

Build change management capacity through dedicated resources.

Stop treating change management as an additional duty for strained supervisors. Designate change champions in each division with protected time to support implementation, answer questions, and provide feedback to leadership.

Strategy 6

Implement a structured feedback loop during change rollouts.

Create formal mechanisms for staff to report implementation challenges, suggest improvements, and ask questions. Respond to feedback within 48 hours and adjust implementation plans based on frontline input.

Account for capacity constraints by phasing implementation. Don't try to implement everything at once. Prioritize changes based on impact and feasibility, phase rollouts to avoid overwhelming staff, and build in recovery time between major changes.

Ultimately, the ability to execute change is the thread that connects every trend in this report and determines whether agencies can close the readiness gap.

Closing the Public Safety Readiness Gap

Public safety agencies operate under increasing pressure, but they struggle to address it consistently and effectively. Challenges like workforce strain, recruiting, and operational inefficiencies don't exist in isolation. They are **interconnected forces reshaping how agencies function**. Together, they point to a widening gap between what agencies need to do and their ability to do it.

The readiness gap isn't an awareness issue. Agencies understand their challenges and, in many cases, actively work to address them. Instead, **the gap is a structural and operational issue** that makes execution difficult: insufficient staffing, slow hiring processes, fragmented data and systems, ungoverned technology adoption, and lack of change management processes.

As these pressures compound, the ability to execute consistently separates agencies that adapt from those that fall behind.

What the Trends Reveal

In this report, we've explored five trends shaping the public safety workforce this year. Together, they reveal challenges that affect the entire organization:

- Agencies recognize what needs to change but **can't execute** effectively.
- Workforce strain **limits capacity** to take on new initiatives.
- Differences in size, resources, and systems mean agencies **need tailored solutions**.
- The gap between leadership intent and frontline experience often **undermines new initiatives**.
- Workforce, process, and technology **challenges compound each other**. Solving one in isolation rarely works.

These challenges are connected and **must be addressed together**. If leadership tries to fix the hiring process but doesn't consider the frontline experience, the initiative will fail. The problems reinforce each other, and so must your response.

The data also challenges some **common assumptions**. Recognizing the following patterns puts you ahead of the curve:

- Hiring more won't fix a broken hiring process.
- Culture programs alone won't stop people from leaving.
- Adopting AI without guidelines creates new problems.
- Without data and systems, inefficiencies are easily hidden.
- Good strategy alone doesn't guarantee successful execution.

Moving Forward

The pressures shaping public safety in 2026 aren't temporary. There's no returning to the way things were, but there is opportunity to **view these challenges as a catalyst, rather than a burden**.

New tools and strategies matter. But the agencies that adapt most effectively will build the systems and processes to execute consistently. It's not about solving a single problem. It's about developing the capability to solve multiple problems continuously, despite your constraints.

The work ahead is demanding. For public safety agencies willing to do it, **closing the readiness gap is the most important investment you can make** for your staff and your communities.



Citations

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PowerDMS by NEOGOV serves over 5,500 law enforcement, fire, EMS, and emergency communications agencies annually with tools for managing, training, and supporting employees across their careers.

Over the next decade, thriving public safety agencies will be defined by their ability to be creative in their recruitment strategies, proactive in their turnover mitigation efforts, and committed to the well-being of their responders. Agencies will increasingly rely on AI and integrated systems to improve their data-driven decision-making and overall operational efficiency.

5,500+

Public Safety Agencies

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