What the Experts are Saying

About the Survey Creator

Dr. Natalie Todak is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She has a Ph.D. in Criminology and Criminal Justice from Arizona State University and nine years of experience conducting research with American police departments, studying topics like police technology, community relations, use of force, crime and misconduct, and diversity. She specializes in the use of mixed research methods, which combine quantitative (numerical) and qualitative (social) data to understand broad patterns and finer explanations of social issues.

Survey Development

Because very few existing studies have explored the issue of diversity in the U.S. National Security field, I developed this questionnaire to gather two kinds of data: descriptive and exploratory. Gathering these data is the very first step to learning about an under-researched topic and identifying the most important questions to ask in follow up studies.

Descriptive analyses are usually quantitative. Their purpose is to summarize broad patterns in your data to answer questions like: What are the main problems? How big is each problem? What form or shape does each problem take? To collect descriptive data in this survey, we asked respondents to indicate their levels of agreement with various statements and then reported the percent of the sample that agreed or disagreed with each statement. Using this approach, we can see which issues respondents feel are the most important and deserving of our attention in future research.

Exploratory analyses are usually qualitative. Their purpose is to gather details about a problem to understand its characteristics and explain or clarify any patterns we are seeing. To collect exploratory data in this survey, we provided space for respondents to explain their responses to the descriptive questions in writing at the end of each section. With these written responses, we are able to assess why respondents answered questions the way they did and roughly identify any explanations for our numerical findings.

Featured Result: Concerns with the Application Process

To conclude, I will draw on one example from our study to show how descriptive and exploratory findings can be used to guide future research inquiries into a particular topic.

From our descriptive questions, we found that prospective and current employees had concerns with the current application process in the national security field. As shown on pages 8 and 9 of the report, very few (2%) respondents thought the application process was well designed, while nearly 40% agreed "the entire process needs to be changed." When asked which stages of the process were most challenging, the written application and computer-based HR screening received the most votes. Furthermore, 87% agreed there should be more opportunities made available for underrepresented groups to navigate the application process.

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When asked to elaborate, many respondents expressed the belief that the process is shrouded in secrecy, particularly for people who are not well connected in the field already. They argued that job opportunities and instructions for navigating the process should be more readily accessible to everyone, and specifically for underrepresented groups who are less likely to be connected to resources and internal networks.

Our findings about the application process are illuminating. They suggest that, as currently designed, the process may be acting as a barrier to diversity in the national security field. They also offer important implications for future research questions. Namely, how is the application process currently set up? What are some promising avenues for improving the process as a whole? Why are the written application and HR screening components considered to be the most challenging? What specific challenges do individuals from underrepresented groups experience when attempting to apply for these positions?

This survey represents one of the very first empirical studies to investigate the persistent lack of diversity in the national security field. Moving forward, we are hopeful it will inspire an emergent body of research and, ultimately, a significant improvement in the representation, workplace experiences, and impact of underrepresented groups across all industries with the field of U.S. national security.