Solving Police Recruitment and Retention Issues

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LD 850 Integrated Capstone

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March 20, 2022

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Biography

Thomas Hennessey is Chief of Police in the town of Hopkinton, New Hampshire, where he resides with his wife and three children. He received his Bachelor's Degree in Sociology and a Minor in Justice Studies from the University of New Hampshire and his Master's Degree in Leadership from Granite State College. He is interested in the difficulties of recruiting and retaining officers due to his firsthand experience as Chief of Police.

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Abstract

Police departments across the United States are having trouble finding good candidates to become police officers to fulfill the void of officers that retire, resign, or leave for other agencies. As of 2022 there has been a significant increase in the number of officers retiring or resigning and a slight decrease in hiring. Studies have shown there is no dominant reason officers are leaving their current departments and therefore not a specific benefit that will help with retention. It is the responsibility of police department administrators to determine the reasons why officers are leaving. Once reasons are established, they may be in a position to make accommodations for retention.

Previous studies have given numerous reasons why officers leave departments. Case studies and surveys were used to try to determine why, exactly, officers are leaving departments and determine if the problem can be rectified. Findings show there is not a quick fix to end the retention issues within police departments. The best way to retain officers lies within the administration and their willingness to adapt to new policies and procedures. Thus, combating both issues of retention and recruiting officers. What municipalities do not understand, is that it costs a lot less money to retain officers than it does to recruit, hire, and train. Nevermind the wealth of knowledge which is lost when veteran officers leave a department.

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Introduction

There are almost 700,000 police officers in the United States today (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Many police departments around the country are struggling to hire and retain officers to keep that number from declining. Unfortunately, these efforts have not worked for numerous agencies. Right now, officers are leaving the profession faster than agencies can fill those positions. Departments can try to retain officers by offering certain perks, but depending on the officer, it may not always work. "Within their first year on the job, 29% of officers resign and within five years, 69% have left their departments" (*The Workforce Crisis*, 2019 p. 22*).* Only 21% of officers lasted 15 years or longer. (*Law Enforcement Personnel Retention,* n.d.) Police departments and municipalities need to understand that it would cost less money to compensate current officers and retain them, than to train brand-new officers.

Since 2005, the Hopkinton, New Hampshire Police department, a department of eight full-time officers, has had twelve officers leave for other agencies. Calculations show that it costs approximately $100,000 to train a new officer. Since twelve officers have left the Hopkinton Police Department, that equates to roughly 1.2 million dollars' worth of training, experience, and knowledge taxpayers have lost. What is behind the reason for officers leaving and can something be done to retain them? This paper will explore reasons officers leave and the attempt to retain them.

To combat the hiring issues, departments need to focus on retention which will help alleviate some of the need for recruitment. They also need to be more adaptive and attentive to different officers' needs. Officers from different generations, diverse backgrounds, and different points in their career, are each looking for different benefits due to their circumstances. To recruit and retain officers, these departments need to look at the individual and not the whole

department. This research paper will use case studies and surveys to try to determine what an

agency's police administration can do to help with recruitment and retention of officers.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to synthesize case studies and articles that pertain

to the retention of police officers and the recruitment of new officers. Hiring qualified officers is

an important first step in retention. Since the average cost is $100K to on-board, cities should put

effort into retaining these officers instead of letting them leave for another department.

> A police department also can save money by hiring an officer from another agency as
>
> opposed to hiring a new recruit, because an experienced officer who is already certified
>
> can begin work without a lengthy and costly training period. (Forrest, 2020 p. 32)

Departments incur costs for recruiting, hiring, putting new recruits through the academy and

field training. This process is time-consuming and an expensive effort for the department. If a

newly hired officer decides to leave in two or three years, their department has lost all that

training, experience, and more importantly, the knowledge they learned about their work

environment, just leave. "Every officer that you convince to stay is money saved and institutional

knowledge preserved" (*Law Enforcement Personnel Retention,* n.d., p. 3). Studies suggest that

there is no one benefit, policy, technique, or blanket answer that will end the current recruitment

and retention issues. Departments need to be creative and individualize their technique for

retention, this will cost less than hiring a new officer.

> While some commonalities can be found between policing and the professions
>
> where these employee retention strategies were proven to be effective, policing
>
> remains a unique profession. Therefore, police administrators must analyze these

retention strategies to develop strategies that may be implemented within a police

department. (Forrest, 2020, p., 65)

Departments need to transform their current ways of managing and focus on internal problems. Once established they can create programs to help recruit and retain those officers. This review will cover the information found in the literature that will assist in the recruitment and retention.

Recruiting new officers is becoming more difficult. A Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) survey found that the number of applicants had decreased significantly (36%) or slightly (27%) over the past five years (*The Workforce Crisis, 2022, p., 8).* Police Executive Research Forum also found that in Nashville Tennessee, their online applications have dropped 60%. Natalie Todak, an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, interviewed students enrolled in the criminal justice program. In her interviews, the students believed that the public's negative perception would create significant challenges for them. Due to the students believing they would be disliked, they expected to encounter hostility and disrespect every day on the job (Todak, 2017). Despite their perceptions, students were still eager to be a law enforcement officer. That same negative perception is one of the reasons departments are having a challenging time recruiting and retaining officers. "Agencies strongly believe that public perception of law enforcement limits interest in the profession and is a sizable barrier to effective recruitment" (International Association of Chiefs of Police, n.d., p. 4). "Negative news stories about police use of force and other issues may have also turned some young people away from consideration of working in policing" (*The Workforce Crisis, 2019, p. 22).* Policing has been given a bad image lately. They have been portrayed in such a negative light, on social media especially, potential candidates are not applying.

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In a recent survey on police workforce trends for a period between April 2020 to April of 2021, conducted by PERF and published June 11, 2021, they found that on average only 93% of the agencies are filling their authorized number of positions available. What was more staggering was resignations and retirements, which increased 18% and 45% respectively from the same time period the year before. Additionally, the Police Executive Research Forum found that there was only a 5% decrease in hiring rate which leads to a decrease of 1.56% of the departments filled positions (*Survey on Police Workforce Trends, 2021, p., 4)*. With such an increase in resignation and retirement hiring needs to increase. A 5% decrease in hiring will not fulfill the gap of officers leaving. In another study conducted by Officer.com, 54% of the departments surveyed said that retention is a problem but only 29% of those departments implemented steps to improve the issue. Retention problems were an even larger problem in small agencies.

There is no doubt that more officers are retiring and resigning than are being hired. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the number of full-time sworn officers in the U.S. law enforcement agencies declined by more than 3% between 2013 and 2016. Police departments need to try to produce a plan to curb this from happening.

> Employee turnover is a problem for police departments across the United States. Not only does employee turnover have a negative financial impact on police departments, but it can also result in the loss of institutional knowledge and valued relationships between department personnel and community members. (Orrick, 2008)

Departments realize something needs to be done. It is the governing body of the town or city that needs to understand it is much less expensive to keep officers than it is to recruit, hire, and train new officers.

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Retention issues are not a new problem, recruitment, on the other hand, is. If departments cannot retain officers, they will have to continually try to recruit more officers. Solve one of the issues and agencies are most likely to solve the other.

> It's financially inefficient for the state to invest $100,000 to recruit and prepare police officers for duty, only to have them leave within a couple years because of pay inequity. The state could save tens-of-thousands of dollars per officer position by simply adjusting their initial base salary to parity with their counterparts at the local level and retain the officer for several years. (Klein, 2021)

We know retention is much less expensive than recruitment. Studies by PERF and Police Science and Management conclude that there are a variety of reasons that people are not applying to become police officers and current officers are leaving current departments. Pinpointing the reason is difficult. "Police officers voluntarily resign from police departments for a wide variety of reasons" (Lynch & Tuckey, 2004). Departments need to consider why each officer is leaving and take into consideration when to implement new strategies to help recruit or retain the officers. Considerations to keep in mind are how long officers have been on the job, generational differences, do they have a young family, how large the agencies are they work for, how well their supervisors are, is there opportunity for professional development and several other areas.

Studies suggest departments adopt a less ridgid style of management. Dealing with different generations and simply different people overall, agencies need to start conforming to innovative ideas. The younger generation is looking for more flexibility and a comfortable work life balance. "Many in the new generation assign a greater value to finding a balance between their work life and their personal lives" (*The Workforce Crisis, 2019)*. Officers now entering law

enforcement are looking for police departments to be more welcoming with less of a strict policy on how they should be managed. Generation X, who may be toward the end of their career are looking more towards retirement and healthcare benefits. The younger generations are not typically thinking far ahead and are focused more on the now, can I get nights and weekends off. Can I get comp or flex time? And they do not want to work overtime. "Right now, millennials want what is best for them now, not later. They want a better work life balance" (Hilal & Litsey 2019).

A new way of supervising officers is at the forefront and departments are becoming aware that it is not the old, militaristic style of policing. "Most younger officers, and future generations of officers, do not find the rigid, militaristic-style of policing agencies desirable." (King 2018) There needs to be a shift in the way we recruit and retain officers. This evolving style needs to be implemented soon to slow and hopefully stop the recruitment and retention crisis from getting to the point that it cannot recover.

> The most effective law enforcement agencies of the future will be those that seek
> out and embrace the next generations of officers and will adjust their
> organizational models and practices to adapt to the changing dynamics of
> policing." (*The Workforce Crisis*, 2021)

Change needs to be made and the departments that realize this and react accordingly. will be the departments that will have good retention and good officers.

Methodology

Research will be conducted using case studies within the last eight to ten years. These were based on recruitment and retention of officers, gathering data from surveys to colleagues

and police departments around the United States. Surveys will include both multiple choice questions and open-ended questions to try to obtain good data relevant to the topic The survey will be posted to a Facebook group of over 33,000 law enforcement officers from all over the world and will target officers that are known to have left other departments. The survey will start with demographics then ask questions about longevity, how many police departments they have worked for and why they left or why they stayed. Along with the author's personal experience as a Chief of Police, the data collected by both case study and survey will then be analyzed and used to answer the research question.

Findings

For this research paper a survey was distributed via email through the New Hampshire Chiefs of Police Association and posted on Facebook; specifically on the page for LEO or Law Enforcement Officers only. The survey consisted of 11 questions which were answered anonymously. The survey was posted on February 23, 2022 and closed on March 1, 2022. In that period 201 surveys came in using the Facebook link while 2 came in using email totaling 203 surveys.

Out of 203, 17 responses were male and 31 females. The vast majority of the respondents, 100, had over 21 plus years of experience and 11 had 0-5 years' experience. In reference to what state each respondent worked in, 40 out of the 50 states are represented in the survey. These were broken up into geographical locations, most of the responses coming from the northeast with 106 respondents, 33 from the southeast and the northwest rounding out with

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the least amount at 4 respondents. 71

respondents were from a department smaller

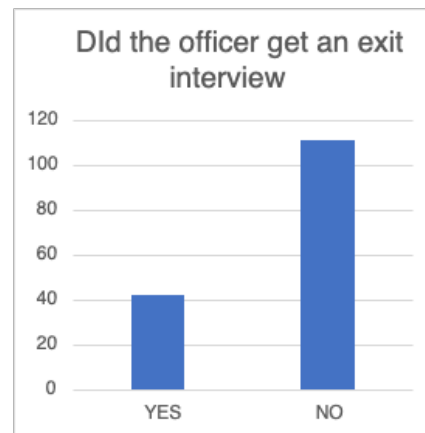than 25 officers followed by 51 in departments
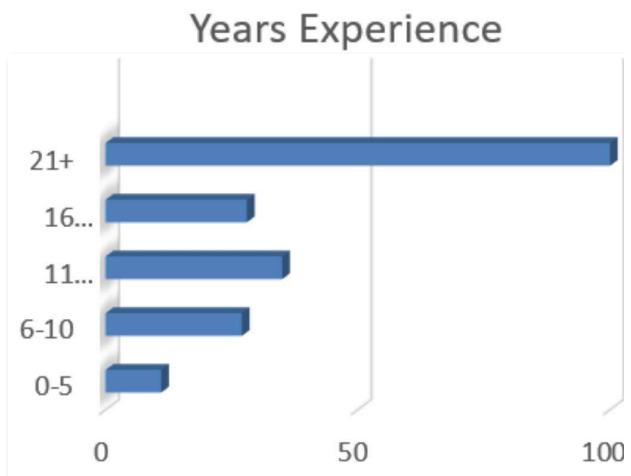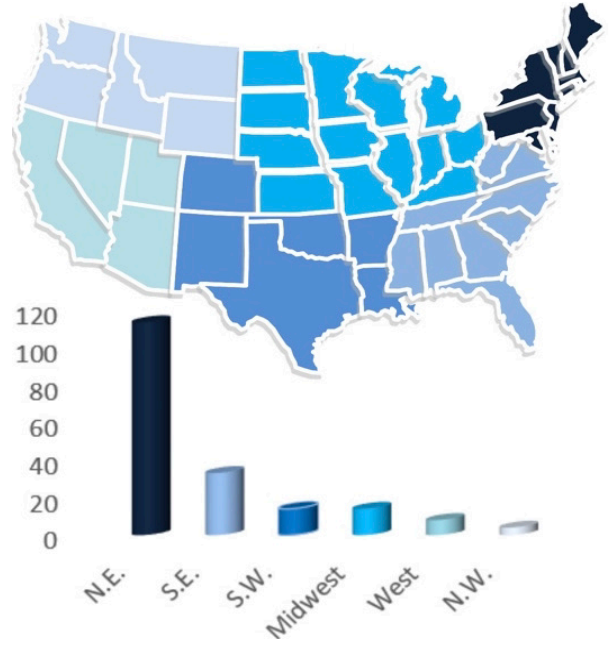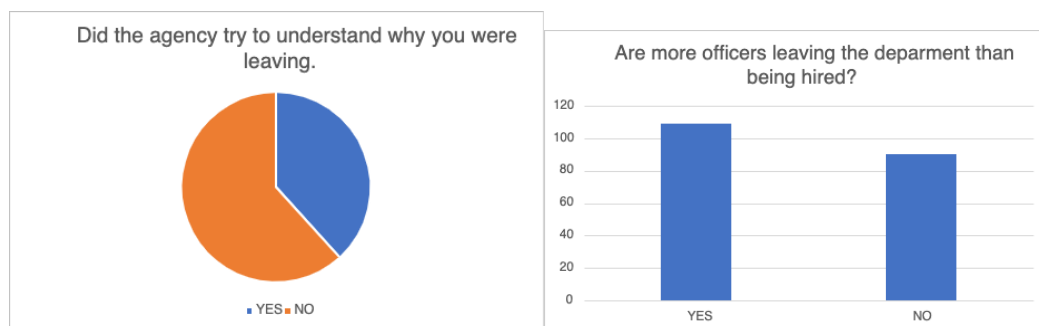
with 26-50 officers.

When officers were asked what a department did to retain them, two answers had 27 responses; pay and promotion. These were the two highest benefits why the officer stayed at the department. Different schedule and additional benefits had 10 respondents each.

The last question of the survey was what one benefit/perk a department could offer the respondents to retain them. Most respondents, 50, responded that they wanted more supportive administration. Higher pay and a better work schedule were the next two at 40 and 20 respondents respectively. Albeit, when asked the reason they left a department they used to work for, professional growth was the biggest reason. Dislike of the department's administration and low pay rounded out the top 3. The top reason officers applied to a department that hired them was pay.

The questions inquiring if the respondent felt the department they were leaving tried to understand why they were leaving, 93 respondents said no and 113 said they did not get an exit interview when leaving the department.

Did the agency try to understand why you were leaving.

Are more officers leaving the deparment than being hired?

■ YES ■ NO

YES   NO

Conclusion

Data collected was in line with case studies that a police department's administration and higher pay is an especially important way to retain officers. An instructor for FBI-LEEDA training, Terri Wilfong, said, "People do not leave bad departments, they leave bad leaders". (T. Wilfong, personal communication, November 3, 2021) This seems to hold true based on survey responses. The administration should know why officers are leaving by conducting exit interviews every time. The fact that the data collected shows 73% of officers that left their department did not get exit interviews, is quite high.   Other statistics, for instance, only 38% of officers felt like the agencies they were leaving cared why and only 29% of the 54% of departments saying they had a recruitment problem tried to take steps to improve the issue. If departments want a fix for the issues at hand, there needs to be a sharp increase in departments putting effort into fixing the issues, not just a want. Once the administration figures out why employees are leaving, they can attempt to create strategies which will retain officers they need. "In some ways, every one of the causes for turnover and each recommendation for retention are the responsibility of agency leaders to correct and implement." (King 2018) There is not a one size fits all solution for this problem, it is based on the individual officer.

Low pay was the second reason for officers leaving a department and the number one benefit that would make them stay at their current department. It was also the number one reason why they stayed at their current agency and the biggest reason they applied to the department in the first place.

Being a police officer is one of the only professions that you can take someone's freedom away and potentially their life. They go to work every day not knowing if they will make it home at night. They are the first ones to get called when the worst is happening and while everyone is running from the situation, they are running to it. How can anyone look them in the eye and tell them their job is not worth a little more respect, an honest salary and a lot less hardship. Departments and municipalities need to understand how much time and money goes into recruiting a new officer and getting them up to speed. When an employee leaves a company, a two-week notice is usually suitable. That is not the case in law enforcement. The reason a two-week notice is in place is so they can hire your replacement, so the transition goes smoothly. It can take one year to recruit, hire, and train an officer to fill a vacancy. Law enforcement is a unique profession in many different ways. So most industry standards do not apply. Administration which is more attentive to its officers and increasing the pay are the two factors that will retain officers according to my research. If police departments solve the retention issue, they will automatically solve the recruitment problem.

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