

Officer Retention in Small Police Departments: Identifying Issues While Offering Solutions

David Hubbard

Abstract

Retaining quality police officers is an ongoing issue with all law enforcement agencies. Small police departments, such as Eustis Police Department, traditionally have to work harder to retain quality officers while competing with larger agencies that have more to offer with higher salaries, more internal transfer opportunities, and more promotional opportunities. Information was gathered by surveying Florida police officers who are currently employed with small police departments, those employing 35 to 65 sworn officers. Surveys were also given to police recruits attending Florida police academies. This paper will identify factors that cause officers to leave small agencies and discuss those findings. Career expectations of police recruits will be identified and analyzed. By identifying factors contributing to retention issues with-in small departments, suggestions will be offered to increase retention and minimize the exit of quality officers.

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges facing law enforcement organizations today is the successful recruitment and retention of highly qualified employees. Community safety can be compromised when substantial experience and training is lost through staff turnover and vacancy (McKeever & Kranda, 2000). A study focusing on North Carolina law enforcement agencies showed larger police agencies reported an average attrition rate of 10.2% while their smaller counterparts report an attrition rate of almost twice as high at 18.2% (Yearwood & Freeman, 2004). It should be noted that the study did not provide the equation used to determine the attrition rate. There is no universal formula used to determine attrition rates.

The problem becomes more prevalent when large law enforcement agencies purposely recruit experienced officers from other agencies. An example of this would be Houston Texas Police Department where a \$7000 signing bonus is offered to any experienced police officer who moves there and completes a 12-week modified training academy. The idea is to lure experienced officers from other Texas law-enforcement agencies so the city will not have to spend as much time training them. In return, the relocated officers will receive financial credit for up to five years of experience elsewhere (Axtman, 2006). Currently, the Miami Gardens Florida Police Department is recruiting officers from other departments with lateral transfers for those who qualify. In addition, Miami Gardens offers a \$12,000 signing bonus, a \$7,000 moving allowance and

other monetary incentives according to the police department's web site. (Unknown, 2007)

Small police departments are losing the battle of retaining quality police officers. The City of Eustis Police Department has 45 sworn officer positions. However, to keep fully staffed is an ongoing issue. Studying the past twenty-five year history of officers employed at the Eustis Police Department revealed since January 1982, one-hundred-twenty-six officers have separated employment. Of those officers fifteen percent did not complete the field training program for various reasons. In 2007 eleven officers separated employment with Eustis Police Department, which translates to 25% of the workforce. To put this into perspective, Captain Al Greco of the Hillsborough Sheriffs Office stated there are approximately 1295 deputies employed. This would equate to Hillsborough County Sheriffs Office losing 323 deputies, a 25% reduction in the workforce over the course of a year.

A 2005 study of California law enforcement agencies found that 25% of the officers who left one agency for another made the transition to the second agency by 1.5 years of service with the first agency. Fifty percent made that transition by 3.8 years of service and 75% had made that transition by 8.5 years (California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, 2006).

In order to address the retention problem, one must understand why officers choose to leave one agency for another. An officer's reason to leave one agency for another may be as individual as the person themselves. However, it is believed by this writer that there are identifiable reasons that cause the majority of officers to make the move to other agencies. One report suggests that while compensation can be a contributing factor for an employee leaving, it typically is not the primary factor. Usually there are other factors of greater importance (Switzer, 2006). Whether it is a "push" or "pull" factor, officers leave an agency because an issue is either "pushing" them away or some factor is "pulling" them away. By identifying the major factors that are causing officers to leave, small departments can move toward strategizing ways to implement programs and/or benefits that place value on quality officers and make staying more attractive and beneficial. Once programs and benefits are implemented that are viewed as personally advantageous towards the officer, he or she will be more likely to remain with the department.

A 2004 study published in The Police Chief Magazine revealed that 44.4% of the 55 police departments that responded cited specific job duties as a causal factor for officers leaving police agencies. Of the 55 agencies responding in the same survey, 43.5% cited lack of fringe benefits as a causal factor for leaving an agency (Yearwood & Freeman, 2004). There were factors with higher percentages shown in the survey study, however, those factors could not be controlled or affected by agency administrators. Some of those factors included budget restrictions, retirements, agency location, agency size and cost of living.

In small police departments specialized assignments or units are not as available as they are in large law enforcement agencies. However, by changing the way administrators address specialized assignments could be a factor in retaining officers. The people who become police officers are not typically those

who like to stay in one position for years on end without challenges. They want assignments that will challenge them. Administrators need to look at cross training officers, temporary assignments and assigning multiple sets of responsibilities to officers who want to accept the challenge. Officers need to be challenged and given opportunities for promotion and personal growth (McKeever & Kranda, 2000). A noted suggestion was that employees be afforded opportunities to fill in behind other employees in specialized areas for up to six months in order to learn more about that area, develop an appreciation for how his/her regular assignment could better interface with the specialized area, and create a desire to continue professional growth (California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, 2006).

Many departments, small and large, tend to “hire and forget” officers. Officers get hired with an agency, then trained and sent to road patrol where they are forgotten until they make a mistake and bring attention to themselves. Many times officers are not recognized for their extra efforts. The extra efforts are recognized only as the officer was “doing their job”. People want to feel good about the work they do and the people they work with and for. They want to feel good about the organization, the culture, and receive recognition for their contribution (California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, 2006).

Research Method

This research was initiated to identify major reasons or causal factors of why officers leave one agency for another. Police departments were identified with-in the state of Florida similar in size to Eustis Police Department which has 45 sworn positions. The Florida Department of Law Enforcements web site contained data that identified 49 police departments as having between 35 and 65 sworn officers. Of the 49 departments identified, 31 departments had a designated web site or email system to address the survey email. The sample size was estimated at 1477 sworn officers employed by the 31 departments which received a survey email. The email was formatted as a cover letter and sent to police chiefs of the identified agencies with email capabilities explaining a research survey was being conducted reference officer retention with-in small police departments. Included in the email was a link to a survey web site that would collect the data and generate a report.

A second survey was designed targeting the career expectations and goals of academy recruits. The survey sample of academies were chosen to be Lake County Institute of Public Safety, Lake County; Daytona Beach Community College, Volusia County; Seminole Community College, Seminole County; Sante Fe Community College, Alachua County and Withlacoochee Technical Institute, Citrus County. The state of Florida has 41 law enforcement training academies. The five police academies listed were chosen because there were an adequate number of recruits who were currently in the academy to have a broad sample of individuals and a sufficient number of participants. In addition, the named

academies were chosen because they were convenient for travel and the recruits could be spoken to personally.

Some questions asked on the sworn officer survey were:

- How long employed with the current agency?
- How many years with an agency when first applied with another agency?
- Why did the officer want to leave?

The recruit survey asked questions such as;

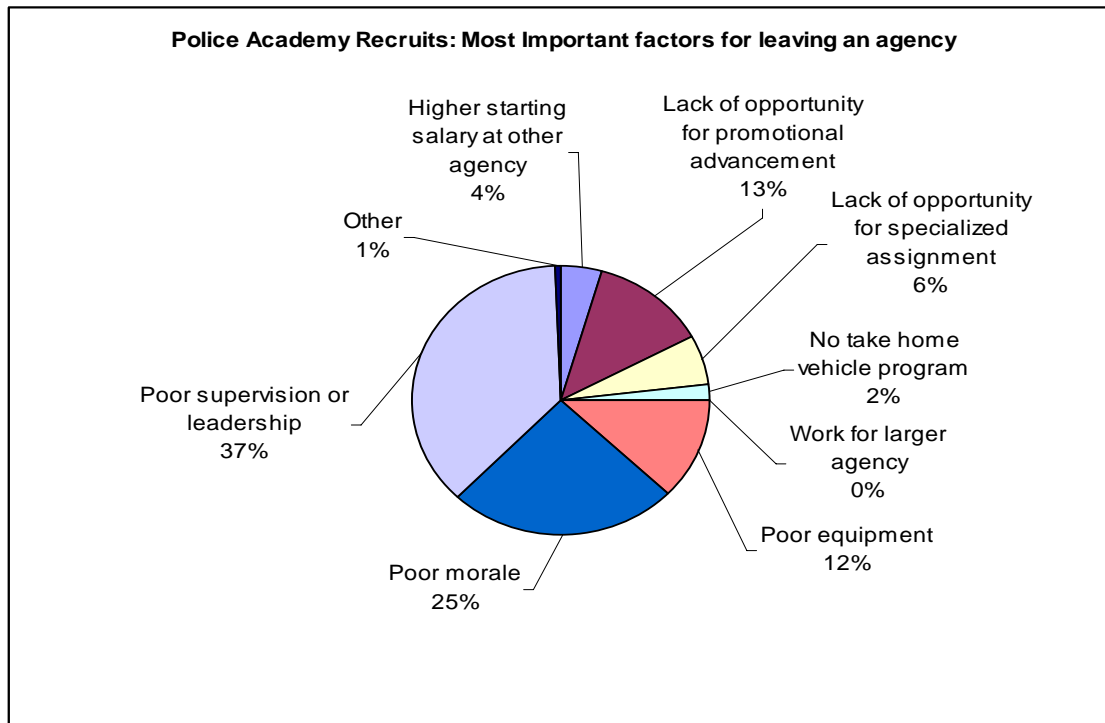
- What is the most significant reason that law enforcement was chosen as a career?
- What are the most important factors that were used in determining which agencies to apply with?
- What are the most important factors that would cause one to leave an agency?

By using the internet to facilitate the survey of current sworn officers supported the anonymity of officers which encouraged honesty in answering questions. If the survey would have been sent to individual agencies and collected by department administration, officers may have felt an obligation or pressure to answer more favorably to questions. One criticism expressed via email by a participant was that the survey questions were too narrow in scope and did not let officers explain their answers more freely. Survey questions were written with designated options so that numerical values could be placed on the answers. It was believed that numerical data was easier to evaluate from a large number of responses. If each separate response was explained at length it would have been extremely difficult to interpret the true intent of the answer. This could create an opportunity for bias by those reading or interpreting the answers. The internet officer survey yielded a 15.5 percent return rate.

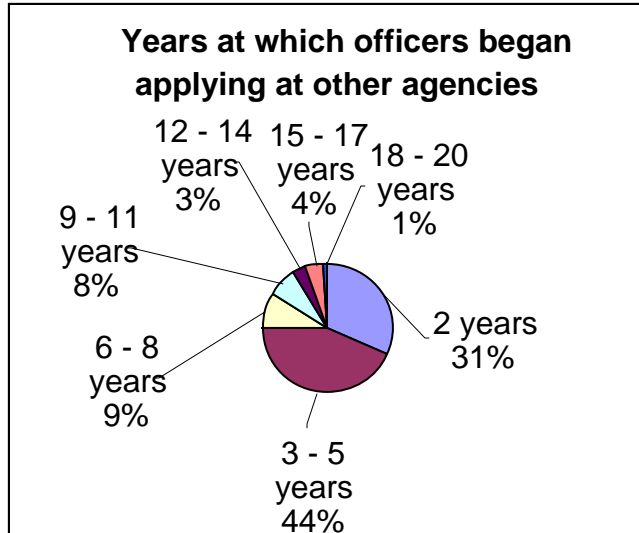
The second survey was given to classes of recruits at various stages of the academy process. By going to academies there was an opportunity to survey persons beginning their career in law enforcement before being employed by an agency; instead of surveying new hires. If newly hired officers had been surveyed they possibly could have adopted certain attitudes and influenced by the police culture that would not allow them to express their true reasons for beginning a law enforcement career. This could also create bias in their views on what would make them want to apply for one agency over another one. One weakness noted about using recruits in a classroom setting is that they may have felt pressured to participate wanting to be a part of the group. Thus the survey not being taken truly voluntarily and possibly not answered honestly. Although it was emphasized to recruits that participation was not mandatory and they had an option not to participate this survey resulted in a 100 percent return rate. The impact of personally going to the academy classes helped in receiving a 100 percent return rate. The return rate of the officer survey probably would have been much higher if I personally had gone to police departments and met with officers through patrol briefings and other arranged meetings.

Results

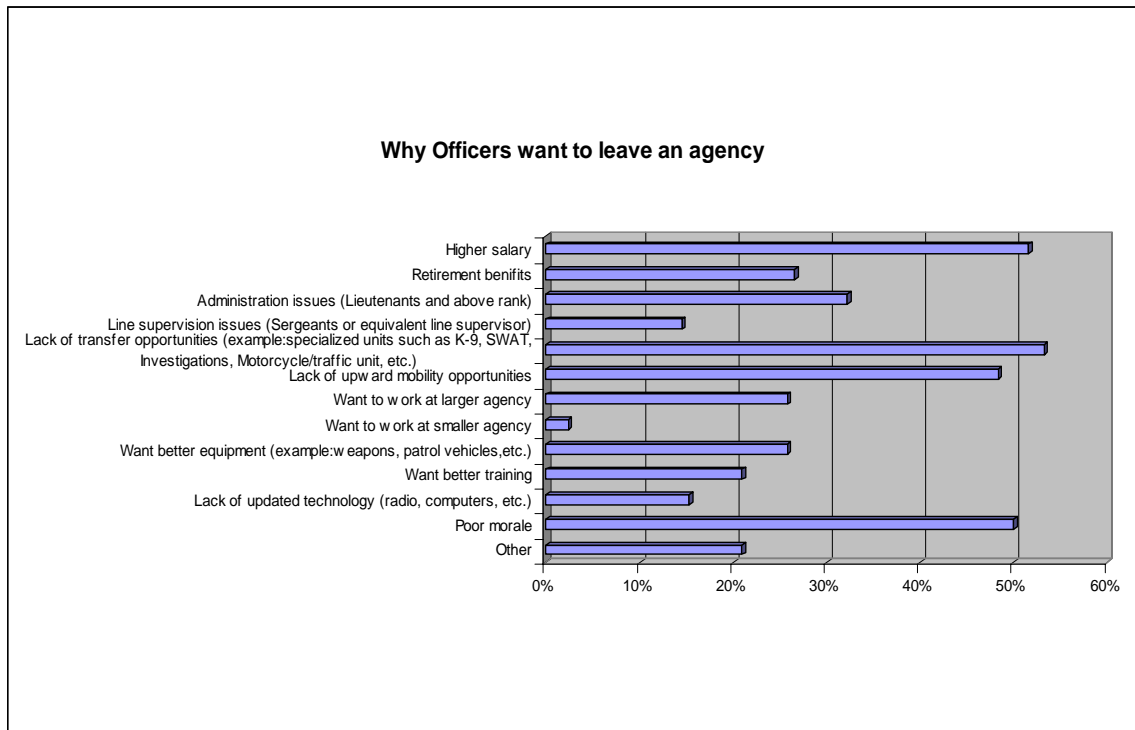
Ninety-six percent of the police academy recruits surveyed has never been employed as a sworn law enforcement officer. When asked what the most significant reason a career in law enforcement was chosen, the majority, 30.8% chose opportunity for excitement. When asked to rank what is most important when applying to a law enforcement agency, recruits cited reputation of agency, 36.1% as most important. The least cited was assignment of a take home vehicle, 1.9%, and size of agency, 2.6%. When ranking reasons that may cause them to leave an agency, 37.4% of the recruits cited poor supervision/leadership. Just over 27% chose poor morale as the second leading reason for wanting to leave an agency. (See Figure 1)



The survey of currently employed police officers revealed almost 52% had applied at another law enforcement agency. Those officers who applied elsewhere did so after being employed for an average of approximately 5 years. When asked why they wanted to leave their agency four reasons stood out above the rest: (1) higher salary, (2) lack of lateral transfer opportunities, (3) lack of promotional opportunities, and (4) poor morale. The officers participating in the survey were allowed to answer all that applied, resulting in an average of 50% of the officers choosing the aforementioned reasons. Of those officers who wanted to leave their agency, 31% were applying at other agencies by 2 years of employment. By 5 years on the job, 74% of the respondents were applying elsewhere.



It should be important to note, 32.26% of the officers surveyed cited “administration issues (Lieutenants and above rank)” and 14.52% of the officers cited “line supervision issues (Sergeants or equivalent line supervisor)” as reasons they wanted to leave their agency. If you combine the totals of the two choices it equates to almost 47% of the officers surveyed had issues with the leadership of their agencies.



With the leading reason for recruits wanting to leave an agency as poor leadership or supervision, the combined data from the two surveys could be interpreted as to the overall importance of good leadership in a police agency. This supports the importance of on-going leadership training such as the Senior Leadership Program and Executive Leadership Seminars facilitated by Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

Discussion

Research demonstrated that the current academy recruits are looking for excitement and to be a positive role model. Pay was the least of their worries. Job satisfaction and self fulfillment is priority. As to what was most important to recruits when applying at an agency, reputation was their priority. This echoed the positive role model answer given why they wanted to be police officers in the first place. Police recruits are eager to hit the streets however the majority seeks good leadership and a positive place to work.

Critical to a successful transition of the new officer is the experience of the first day. The chief should be available to meet and welcome the new employee personally. Agencies should select officers to meet and welcome each new employee. Let them be responsible for new hire orientations. This officer should acquaint all new hires with departmental policy and procedure, make staff introductions, answer questions and be a point of contact for the first week if possible. This attention to new employees communicates, "You matter to us" and demonstrates the department's commitment to provide each employee with the tools necessary to become productive and valued officers. (McKeever & Kranda, 2000)

Employed police officers demonstrated it only took an average of five years to apply elsewhere and more than 50% were applying. That shows more than 50% experience a poor or less than desirable work environment. A difference noted between the two survey sets was the importance of salary. While the police recruits did not place much importance on salary, the officers on the job, dealing with the stress, shift work and other issues that go along with the job placed greater importance on salary.

The recruits seem eager to fill a role they do not have real world knowledge of. While the officers already on the job have enough real world knowledge that career opportunities are important along with salary to take care of their families. It was learned during the literature review how agencies were offering sign-on bonus' to attract experienced officers. The bottom line is salary matters to police officers. However, the key is career opportunities along with salary. This creates a more total package of job satisfaction and seems to be an incentive for retention.

Some limitations should be noted with this study. More time to gather surveys from a larger number of recruits along with a large survey set of police officers would enhance the quality of data. Instead of using an Internet survey

instrument direct contact with police officers may have yielded a large number of participants. A suggestion for future study should be questions with answers worded the same so a better comparison could be done of the results.

Recommendations

The most effective way to build departmental commitment and loyalty is to demonstrate how the department values employees by providing them with the support and tools to effectively do their jobs. Any effort by management to transition employees into the department effectively and stress appreciation of their work will increase satisfaction and reduce turnover. (McKeever & Kranda, 2000)

With officers applying elsewhere on the average by the fifth year of employment it seems imperative to establish some type of retention strategy. The following are some recommendations for retaining officers.

Mentoring Program

Whether it is an informal arrangement between two individuals or a formalized, structured program sanctioned by the organization, mentoring involves the provision of wise assistance by a mentor to a protégé. Mentoring operates on the assumption that people relate more readily and positively to peer assistance than to supervisory direction. It provides a non threatening environment for learning and growth to occur. More employees successfully complete their probationary periods, and as a result of the increased job satisfaction that mentoring programs often foster, they stay on the job longer. (Williams, 2000)

Career Counseling

In the absence of a mentoring program career counseling could be the next best thing. Performance evaluations are usually scheduled once a year. Instead of waiting a year between meetings with an officer, a mid-year contact should be scheduled. This would not only serve as a mid-year performance appraisal opportunity, it could serve as a time when a supervisor can speak with an officer to learn what career goals and objectives the officer has of themselves. Once career goals were set specific steps could be identified while a specific timeframe could be determined to attain them. Feedback can be given to officers during the mid-year and yearly meeting for performance appraisal in addition to addressing any questions or concerns the officer may have on how his/her career is developing. An officer may request guidance on what to do in order to be more competitive for special assignments or promotions.

In-Service Training Program

By providing an organized and ongoing schedule of in-service training, an agency can demonstrate the commitment to developing skills and providing the tools necessary to enhance an officer's career. In-service training can ensure all mandatory training is completed in a timely manner while instructing officers on new skills. Also, by training officer's instructor techniques, they become more involved in the agency and feel more loyal as a needed component of the agency.

Rotation of Assignments

In small law enforcement agencies special assignments and lateral movement opportunities are not always abundant. Agencies should look for ways to allow professional growth to keep employees engaged, to have a broader perspective of how the agency operates, create movement, and enhance skills. In the survey for this research many officers cited lack of lateral transfers or special assignments as a reason for leaving a department. By extending the opportunity to be reassigned, officers feel more challenged. Similar to rotating assignments is developing and opportunity to cross train or job shadow. This type of assignment would be for short periods of time and would enhance an officers understanding of different assignments. This type of temporary assignment could assist the officer in making career decisions. After a temporary assignment is completed an officer may realize the assignment is something that he/she does not want to pursue. This could assist in not making mistakes when requesting assignments not suitable or interesting to the officer.

Educational Reimbursement

The Eustis Police Department offers educational reimbursement to officers after they have completed the one year probationary period. Plans can vary on amount of tuition and books that is reimbursed. But the benefits that this type of plan offers can not be ignored. Officers who can not normally afford college would be able to attend college which in turn would help them become more eligible for promotions and special assignments. The education also engages the officer and provides goals for them to meet. College educated officers also benefit the agency by helping the officer become more professional which can help the agencies reputation. Reputation was a reason that academy recruits applied at particular agencies.

Employment Contracts

Employment contracts can be used to help in retaining officers. They are usually used to recoup costs associated with training and education. Although employment contracts are not a tool to gain employees loyalty, they do serve a

necessary purpose while representing expectations from the department as to the extent of employment after obtaining extended training and education.

Take Home Vehicle Programs

A take home vehicle program extended to those officers who are not in a specialized unit offers quite an incentive. This program assists some officers to receive discounted rent at certain rental locations. There is also a certain pride that goes along with a take home vehicle. This pride is not only towards the upkeep and care of the vehicle but extends to pride in ones department.

Competitive Starting Salary

A competitive starting salary is important and should not be overlooked. It is obvious that small departments can not always compete with large departments when trying to pay a higher starting salary. However, a competitive starting salary in addition to other long lasting career benefits remains a great retention tool. Competitive salary does not mean the highest in the county. Competitive salary refers to a salary that is in a close range of other agencies but is enhanced with additional career opportunities and benefits.

The listed recommendations can be limiting for small agencies. Some of the suggestions are cost prohibitive and difficult to implement. However, for small agencies to compete, creative ways need to be developed to enhance retention. There is not one single step an agency can take to retain officers longer. An inter-departmental survey could be used to solicit input from officers on what is important to them that would keep them at their current agency. From that survey, a strategy could be developed with the help of officers. This would help with the officers "buy-in" on the implementation of the strategy and therefore possibly help in the retention. By getting officers participation in the process it would create ownership of the problems, therefore creating a more unified effort in effecting change and improving overall retention.

Lieutenant Dave Hubbard has been in law enforcement with the Eustis Police Department since 1989. He has worked in both Patrol and Investigations. Currently Dave is the Administrative Services Commander for his agency. Dave has a bachelor's degree in Criminology from St. Leo University and a Master's degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Central Florida.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions Employed Sworn Law Enforcement Officers

1. Your age?
 - 18-22 **2.6%**
 - 23-27 **8.3%**
 - 28-32 **16.1%**
 - 33-37 **26.1%**
 - 38-42 **15.2%**
 - 43-47 **14.4%**
 - 48-52 **9.1%**
 - 53 or older **8.3%**

2. How many years have you been a sworn law enforcement officer in Florida?
 - 0-5 years **32.3%**
 - 6-10 **21.0%**
 - 11-15 **13.5%**
 - 16-20 **11.4%**
 - 21-25 **11.8%**
 - 26 or more **10.0%**

3. How long have you been employed with your current police agency?
 - 0-5 years **37.4%**
 - 6-10 **21.3%**
 - 11-15 **11.3%**
 - 16-20 **12.2%**
 - 21-25 **9.6%**
 - 26 or more **8.3%**

4. What is your rank or title?
 - Officer **43.0%**
 - Corporal **10.9%**
 - Sergeant **17.4%**
 - Lieutenant **7.4%**
 - Commander **.09%**
 - Captain **2.2%**
 - Major **.04%**
 - Other **17.8%**

5. Since being employed with a law enforcement agency have you ever applied at another agency?
 - Yes **51.5%**
 - No (If no skip to question) **48.5%**

Appendix A (Continued)

6. If “yes” to question #5, how many years were you employed at your agency when you applied at another agency?
- Years **4.9**
7. If “yes” to question #5, what type of agency did you apply with? (Choose all that apply)
- City Police **45.8%**
 - County Sheriff **55.8%**
 - State Sworn Law Enforcement Officer **8.3%**
 - Federal law Enforcement Officer **10.8%**
 - Other (please specify) **2.5%**
8. Why did you want to leave your agency? (Choose all that apply)
- Higher salary **51.6%**
 - Retirement benefits **26.6%**
 - Administration issues (Lieutenants and above rank) **32.3%**
 - Line Supervisor issues (Sergeants or equivalent line supervisor) **14.5%**
 - Lack of transfer opportunities (example: specialized units such as K-9, SWAT, Investigations, Motorcycle/traffic unit, etc.) **53.2%**
 - Lack of upward mobility opportunities **48.4%**
 - Want to work at larger agency **25.8%**
 - Want to work at smaller agency **2.4%**
 - Want better equipment (weapons, patrol vehicles, etc.) **25.8%**
 - Want better training **21.0%**
 - Lack of updated technology (radio, computers, etc.) **15.3%**
 - Poor morale **50.0%**
 - Other **21.0%**
9. Have you ever resigned from a police agency and then returned to the same agency?
- Yes **6.2%**
 - No **93.8%**
10. If “yes” to question #9, why did you return to your original agency? Please explain.

24 separate responses

Appendix B

Survey Questions for Police Academy Recruits

1. Your age?
 - 18-22 **43.0%**
 - 23-27 **27.6%**
 - 28-32 **11.5%**
 - 33-37 **10.9%**
 - 38-42 **3.9%**
 - 43-47 **1.9%**
 - 48-52 **0%**
 - 53 – older **1.3%**

2. Have you ever worked anywhere as a sworn law enforcement officer prior to attending your current academy class?
 - Yes **3.9%**
 - No **96.2%**

3. What is the most significant reason you chose a career in law enforcement?
 - Job security **17.3%**
 - Pay **.06%**
 - Opportunity for excitement **30.8%**
 - Positive role model **23.7%**
 - Recommended by relative in law enforcement **4.5%**
 - Pension **9.0%**
 - Other(please specify) **14.1%**

4. Please rank each of the following as to what is most important to you when applying to a law enforcement agency?
 - Starting Salary **20.6%**
 - Opportunity for promotional advancement (Sergeant, Lieutenant) **16.0%**
 - Opportunity for special assignments (SWAT, Drug investigator) **17.9%**
 - Assignment of take home vehicle **1.9%**
 - Size of agency **2.6%**
 - Reputation of agency **36.1%**
 - Other **14.1%**

Appendix B (Continued)

5. Please rank each of the following reason that might cause you to leave a police agency.
- Higher starting salary at other agency **4%**
 - Lack of opportunity for promotional advancement **13%**
 - Lack of opportunity for specialized assignments **6%**
 - No take home vehicle program **2%**
 - Work for larger agency **0%**
 - Poor equipment **12%**
 - Poor morale **25%**
 - Poor supervision or leadership **37%**
 - Other **1%**
6. Which size police agency do you want to work at most?
- Small agency (100 or less officers) **22%**
 - Medium agency (100-300 officers) **62%**
 - Large agency (More than 300 officers) **16%**

Appendix C

Email Letter Requesting Research Assistance

Chief _____

I am Lt. David Hubbard with the Eustis Florida Police Department. I am currently participating in FDLE's Senior Leadership Program Class #12. I am doing a research study in an attempt to determine how better to retain sworn officers with small police departments. Small police agencies historically are the training grounds many times for officers who work for larger agencies. Officers only stay a few years and move on. I am trying to identify what officers are looking for in a career and what possibly we as agency leaders can do to retain good officers.

I am asking you to please forward the link included in this email to the sworn officers of your department. The link goes to a 10 question survey and does not ask identifying questions. When my research project is completed and submitted to FDLE later this year I will forward a copy of the results to all those this email was sent.

Thank you for your help, I do appreciate it.

www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=3110nlu7j60hLA4SbkM7QQ_3d_3d

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