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Hiring and Keeping Police Officers

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Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, the Urban Institute, or the trustees of the University of Pennsylvania.

This summary report is based on the full technical report by Christopher S. Koper, Edward R. Maguire, and Gretchen E. Moore, *Hiring and Retention Issues in Police Agencies: Readings on the Determinants of Police Strength, Hiring and Retention of Officers, and the Federal COPS Program*, Research Report, Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, October 2001, NCJ 193428. Available on the Web site of the National Criminal Justice Reference Service: <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/193428.pdf>.

The study was supported by National Institute of Justice grant 99-IJ-CX-0011 with funds from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Additional support was provided by the Jerry Lee Center of Criminology of the University of Pennsylvania.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

After several years of growth in police employment, fueled in part by Federal grants, police agencies now say it is hard to find qualified applicants. An NIJ-sponsored study also found that most recruits successfully complete their training, although training is taking longer because of the growing complexity of police work. Retaining new hires is a concern, because they account for many of the officers who leave police agencies each year.

more than half of actively hiring agencies had difficulty finding enough qualified applicants.

- Screening and training new officers typically took 8 to 11 months.
- Nine out of ten recruits completed their training.
- Many officers leaving their agencies in 1999 had served only a few years, and many left one law enforcement agency to work for another.

What did the researchers find?

- As a result of Federal funding and demands for service, slightly more than half the Nation's police agencies grew in officer strength during the late 1990s. However, in about 20 percent of police agencies (mostly small ones), officer strength declined, often as a result of fiscal or recruitment problems.
- Most agencies with Federal hiring funds keep the positions after the grants expire.
- Continued growth in hiring may not be sustainable at recent rates. By 1999,

What were the study's limitations?

The study did not include historical data that could show whether recent patterns differ from earlier patterns, and it did not examine specific practices in hiring, training, and retaining officers.

Who should read this study?

Police managers and executives involved in recruiting, hiring, and retaining officers; elected officials and policymakers responsible for public safety; teachers of police management courses; and policing scholars.

by Christopher S. Koper

Hiring and Keeping Police Officers

In the wake of rising crime rates of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. This omnibus legislation included the Public Safety Partnership and Community Policing Act (establishing the “COPS” program), which provided funding to put 100,000 additional police on the Nation’s streets. Approximately 61,000 of these officers were funded through hiring grants made to State and local police agencies. The rest were funded through grants for technology and civilians that enabled agencies to put more of their officers in the field and keep officers in the field for longer periods.

To help plan, manage, and assess the COPS program, and to provide information for police practitioners and scholars, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), at the request of the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), examined the recent experiences of police agencies nationwide in hiring and retaining sworn officers.

The NIJ study, conducted by the Urban Institute, looked at what determines the size of police agencies; the amount of time it takes to hire, train, and deploy officers and the problems encountered in doing so; officers’ length of service at an agency and reasons for leaving; and whether positions initially funded with Federal grants were retained after the grants expired.

Most agencies grew during the late 1990s

Slightly more than half of police agencies grew in officer strength¹ from 1996 to 1999, while most of the rest maintained their staffing levels. The availability of grant money and concerns about crime, calls for service, and population size drove much staffing growth during the period. For the minority of agencies whose staffing levels declined, fiscal constraints and a lack of qualified recruits were contributing factors. However, emerging patterns could change this overall upward trend in staffing.

About the Author

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Finding qualified applicants

The supply of good police recruits was down throughout the Nation during the summer of 2000. More than half of small agencies (those serving populations of under 50,000) and two-thirds of large agencies (those serving populations of 50,000 or more) with recent vacancies reported that a lack of qualified applicants caused difficulties in filling those slots. Many agencies reported staffing problems caused by unanticipated vacancies. Agencies that had difficulty filling open positions had roughly one unfilled vacancy for every three that were filled.

What might account for these problems of recruitment and retention? The researchers did not examine the causes of these trends in detail, but there are some possible explanations:

- The strong economy may have lured good candidates and experienced officers away from law enforcement into better paying jobs.
- Increasing educational requirements for applicants, particularly in larger police agencies, may have restricted the number of recruits. This effect likely would have been compounded by the economy's draw on prospective applicants who have a college education.
- Some departments may be facing unusually high attrition as baby boomers retire.
- Negative publicity over such matters as racial profiling and the excessive use of force may have discouraged some people from wanting to join the profession.
- Increased hiring during the late 1990s may have contributed to the shortage by draining the pool of potential police applicants and intensifying competition for recruits among police agencies.

STUDY METHODS

The researchers used three methods to study police staffing issues:

- A national survey of police agencies.
- A critical synthesis of the literature.
- An analysis of police employment data.

Survey of Police Agencies

The telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,270 police agencies was administered during the summer of 2000. Staff from the National Opinion Research Center interviewed chiefs of police (or their representatives) about their COPS program hires and their general practices and experiences in hiring and retention.

Large agencies and COPS grant recipients were intentionally oversampled in the survey design; estimates were weighted as appropriate to provide national estimates.

Types of agencies responding. Most agencies sampled (80 percent) were municipal or county police agencies; 13 percent were sheriff's offices; less than 10 percent were university or school police, State police, transit police, public housing police, park police, or others.

Sizes of agencies responding. The survey included respondents from 553 large agencies (serving populations of 50,000 or more) and 717 respondents from small agencies (serving fewer than 50,000).

Grant recipients responding. Most agencies (86 percent) had received some type of COPS grant, and 59 percent had received COPS hiring grants.

Synthesis of Literature

The researchers also reviewed previous studies that attempted to identify factors influencing the supply of and demand for police resources, measured in various ways. These studies, generally based on statistical modeling of variations in resources by place and time, have produced inconsistent findings. They therefore provide little guidance for practitioners who are trying to forecast trends, recruit candidates, and retain officers.

Analysis of Employment Data

The researchers compared retention rates for federally funded positions with historical retention patterns in police employment from 1975 to 1994.

Training is taking longer

The process of screening and testing applicants, basic/academy training, and field training averaged 31 weeks in small agencies and 43 weeks in large agencies.

Since the mid-1990s, training generally has become longer and more complex: one-third of agencies reported that training time had increased by up to 3 weeks since 1995, while a quarter reported that it had increased by a month or more. Less than 4 percent of agencies reported a decrease in training time.

About a third of agencies who said training time has increased believe it is at least partly because community policing requires learning such skills as structured problem solving that are not part of traditional police training.

Most recruits complete the training

Approximately three-quarters of agencies reported hiring officers during the previous year—an average of 4.4 officers per agency. About 90

percent completed their training. Of those who failed, most failed in the academy rather than in field training.

About 12 percent of recent hires in large agencies and 36 percent in small agencies were exempted from academy training because they had previous experience or approved preservice training at colleges or vocational schools.

Keeping officers on the job

Overall attrition rates were not unusually high in 1999 (less than 8 percent), but unanticipated vacancies caused difficulty for about half the agencies. Retaining new hires seems to have been a significant part of this problem, particularly in small agencies, where two-thirds of departing officers had served for 5 or fewer years.² Half of the officers leaving large agencies were retirees; in small agencies, one-fifth were retirees.

It is not clear whether keeping officers has become more of a problem in recent years. Historically, small

agencies have generally had more difficulty retaining staff than large agencies.

About 45 percent of officers who left small agencies and 24 percent who left large agencies continued in law enforcement work. Whether this pattern has changed over time is not known. But these numbers are large enough to reinforce the notion that competition is getting stronger for both recruits and experienced officers.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings have implications for the work of police managers and policymakers.

Recruiting and retaining officers. It is hard to say how long the current hiring crunch will continue. The Nation's new concern with security is likely to create new personnel needs for all levels of law enforcement (Federal, State, and local) and private security. Many police recruiters and managers will need to assess the effectiveness of their recruiting methods and find ways to make working in

their agencies more attractive. Strategies might include improving pay and benefits, recruiting officers with the right skills for community policing, changing job roles to enhance officers' satisfaction, improving career development, changing residency requirements, and creating incentives for retirement-eligible officers to remain with the agency.

Becoming more efficient.

Greater use of technology and civilians can free more uniformed officers to work in the field for longer periods. When implemented carefully, this heightens police presence in the community without adding new officers and can enhance other aspects of organizational performance, such as solving crimes. Federal funding has encouraged this trend with grants for technology and civilian hires. Furthermore, research in preventing crime suggests that *how* officers are used is more important than *how many* officers are used. Police managers can maximize their effectiveness by, for example, concentrating police attention on hot spots that generate disproportionate amounts of crime.

MOST AGENCIES ARE KEEPING COPS OFFICERS BEYOND THE GRANT EXPIRATION

The Justice Department's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) aimed to add 100,000 police officers to the Nation's communities in the second half of the 1990s, largely through grants given to State and local agencies to hire new officers.

As of the summer of 2000, about three-quarters of agencies with expired hiring grants had kept their funded positions—in virtually all cases retaining the full complement—for at least 1 to 2 years without cutting other positions or relying on attrition. (These figures, however, are based on short-term followup data.)

Looking ahead, 74 to 80 percent of grant recipients who have nonexpired positions expect to keep at least some of them even after they expire. About two-thirds anticipate keeping all of them. Generally, agencies that anticipate retaining positions expect to keep them 5 years or more.

Overall, staff retention rates of COPS grant recipients appear to be fairly consistent with the retention patterns of police agencies during the 20 years before the program was established. Using that criterion, the hiring grants have been reasonably effective in raising police staffing levels beyond the life of the grants.

Setting hiring standards and screening applicants.

In the current environment, some agencies may feel pressure to lower standards or expedite the applicant screening process. Although higher recruiting standards, such as requiring a college degree, may contribute to applicant shortages, agencies must consider the demands of contemporary policing—including the need to work with new technologies,

conduct community policing and problem-solving activities, and navigate complex legal rules—in determining background requirements and planning organizational strategies to attract applicants. At the same time, rushing the screening process to fill positions can have adverse consequences, as some departments have learned after suffering through scandals arising from corrupt or abusive

officers who were inadequately screened and, in a few notable cases, had criminal records prior to their police service.

Benefiting from grants.

According to police officials, grant money was one of the most important factors contributing to growth in many police agencies and slowing staffing reductions in others during the 1990s. Federal money for law enforcement can help increase police presence on the street relatively quickly, lessen the immediate costs of staff expansion, or even cover the costs of new technology that could increase police efficiency. However, police officials should also consider nonfunded costs that may be associated with grants, such as the costs of training and equipping new officers, and of retaining officers beyond the life of the grants.

Planning Federal funding strategies.

Most recipients of Federal funding appear to be keeping their funded positions past the expiration of the grants. If, however, recruitment problems continue in law enforcement, grants that promote innovative strategies and the use of

technology and civilians to maximize efficiency could become increasingly important to practitioners.

Recommended reading

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Notes

1. Police strength is most commonly measured in terms of sworn officers, total police agency employees, or amount of police expenditures. In this study, police strength was measured as the number of sworn officers.
2. In large agencies, about one-third of departing officers left after 5 or fewer years of service.

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