

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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Directed Police Hiring: Can police departments increase officer retention rates by hiring applicants of a particular age group or experience level?

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ABSTRACT

The retention of police officers, particularly in small departments, is a major concern of police administrators because high turnover rates correlate to financial problems and increased levels of community dissatisfaction. The author's police department (the twenty-eight officer Rice University Police Department in Houston) was facing a period in which turnover rates were four times higher than the national average. The author sought to determine if factoring age and experience into the hiring process could reduce the department's turnover rate. The author studied professional articles and research and reviewed all members of the Rice University Police Department. The author compared the age, experience and tenure of the officers and finally conducted a survey directed to law enforcement executives to see how starting age and experience shaped their careers. The author also asked the surveyed officers if they believed the aforementioned factors could influence retention rates at their respective agencies. It was found that the Rice University Police Department could significantly lower its turnover rate by hiring officers near the age of thirty with at least two years of police experience. The author also discovered that three-fourths of the police executives surveyed preferred hiring experienced officers at their respective agencies when retention was the major factor.

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INTRODUCTION

A vast amount of research is available in the areas of recruiting and retention of quality police officers. Members of academia, researchers and police administrators have looked at the importance of salaries, fringe benefits and access to new technology as ways of attracting qualified officers and retaining their service for the long term. It has been learned that starting salary is the chief eye-catcher of new recruits. Also, departments need to provide an availability of overtime pay, education and training, an assortment of assignments, and a chance of promotion to keep new officers content.

What can be done when this doesn't work is an issue. A department which has competitive pay, excellent benefits, cutting-edge technology, ample overtime opportunities, near unlimited education and training, broad assignments and promotional opportunities may still be losing line-officers at a very high rate.

The author was faced with this problem at his police agency, the Rice University Police Department in Houston. His twenty-eight officer department offered the above incentives, yet was dealing with turnover rates four times higher than the national average for agencies of similar size. The author wondered, can specific, numeric factors be used to assist administrators when looking at hiring officers with retention in mind.

Police departments generally grade candidates in areas such as education, credit rating, physical agility performance and interview skills. This paper will examine whether it is beneficial for police departments to focus on two numeric and measurable factors in hiring new recruits. The purpose of this study is to answer the question: Can

police agencies increase their retention rates of new officers by focusing on a particular age group or experience level?

Research methods will include a review of books, journals, and periodicals discussing the subject of recruiting, retention and adult vocational development. A survey of current police supervisors will also be conducted to determine how age and experience factored into their police careers and how they feel the two factors affect new officers' retention rates. An in-depth look will also be made into how the factors of age and experience affected officer retention over the past five years at the Rice University Police Department in Houston.

It is expected that the author will find both a preferred age and experience level for newly hired police officers, when the goal of the department is retention. It is not expected or recommended that departments use the following as the sole or even primary factor in hiring officers. Regardless, it is anticipated that research will show that departments can increase their retention rates of new officers by hiring candidates who are near thirty years of age and/or those coming to the new department with two or more years of police experience.

Law enforcement agencies can benefit from this research by using the combination of age and experience level in hiring new officers when retention is a primary concern. This paper will not address the above factors as they relate to performance, promotion or professionalism. But agencies can use the factors in conjunction with typical hiring criteria to recruit well-rounded candidates who will be quality officers and remain at the department for a number of years.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before delving into the proposed need for and research into the use of data, specifically age and experience, as predictors of retention rates, the importance of retaining officers should be highlighted. In his 1991 study, Michael Hyams, Ph.D. reports the recruitment, selection and retention of a sufficient number of qualified personnel as the most important present and future concern of police organizations. (Hyams, 1991).

The need for increased retention rates is largely due to financial concerns. It simply costs police departments a great deal of their budget to reach the final product of that 'complete officer' who is ready to patrol on his own. The new officer's department spends money during her recruitment, background check, equipment allotment and training program. A United States Department of Justice study explains the process of screening and training new officers takes an average of 31 weeks in small departments and 43 weeks in large departments. (Koper & Moore, 2000). If a department is able to retain this officer for only two years, before he transfers to another agency or leaves law enforcement, an approximate one third of his time on the force was spent operating at a less-than-optimal rate. As the department increases the length of retention, this fraction of one third grows smaller, as does the financial impact of this training period.

Monetary waste isn't the only reason cited in law enforcement literature as a need for increased retention rates. As departments are stressing community policing, citizens expect and deserve to know who "their" police officers are. A rotating door of police officers does not allow officers and the community to develop a relationship.

Hyams (1991) asserts there is a direct correlation between higher turnover rates and increased community dissatisfaction in police service.

Accepting the above, large and small police departments know the advantages of retaining officers, is the job of retaining officers being done? Are departments targeting applicants with a mindset of retention? The answer from departments nationwide is, “no.” Across the board, police departments are struggling with this issue.

The reason could be as simple as the subtitle of Arthur Sharp’s article in *Law and Order*, “The ideal police officer candidate does not exist.” (Sharp, 1994, p.101.) Rather than put the fault with the potential applicants, Doerner (1995) believes the policing community could be to blame as law enforcement is notorious for a reluctance to embrace meaningful personnel reform.

Doerner (1995) was speaking of the integration of black and female police officers into the ranks, but the same reluctance to change can be seen in the need for new approaches to retaining officers. Perhaps departments refuse to admit that retention is a problem, claiming instead that their officers are “stayers.” In a survey conducted by Sharp, over one half of respondents believed police departments nationwide were having problems with recruitment of quality applicants. Surprisingly, only one third of the same group confessed this was a problem at their departments. If these police executives are professing to have no new-officer problems at their agencies, then they are operating as if the old recruiting techniques work, with no reason to develop new ones. (Sharp, 1994).

Despite the above, research bears out the fact of retention problems being a serious burden for all departments. Hyams (1991) reports the problem of staffing

inadequacies is a potential disaster for the law enforcement community. He also reminds police administrators that recruitment, selection and retention are intertwined issues for the agency. If a department wants to retain officers, particular attention needs to be paid the traits of incoming recruits and whether these traits lead to longevity. The two traits discussed in this paper are age and level of law enforcement experience. What age should the new officer be and how many years of experience should he bring to the department?

Rob Alderson, Assistant Training Director for the Spokane, Washington Police Department, believes departments should stay away from the very young applicants. Alderson's experience is that "a high percentage of 21-23 year-olds are too immature to perform law enforcement work" (Sharp, 1994, p. 107). While Alderson bases his recruiting techniques on his police work in Washington State, scientific research in the area of adult development has proven that his intuition is correct.

German psychologist Else-Frenkel Brunswick describes the age range of 25-48 as the culmination period. At this stage in life Brunswick states people can make a definitive choice of vocation. According to Dr. Brunswick, this is contrasted with the pre-25 age range when such choices are still preparatory in nature. (Morgan, 1980). In a similar study, psychologist D.B. Bromley found the age of 25 to be an important milestone in determining a career. Dr. Bromley (1980) lists 25 years of age as the beginning of middle adulthood, marked by the consolidation of the adult's occupational and public roles.

The research of Frenkel-Brunswick and Bromley was conducted in the 1960s, but a study in the late 70s brings us similar information. Gail Sheehy, now a professor

at Texas Christian University, in her book, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, reports the ages of 21-22 as being a time when we only know what we do not want to do, the years of 22-29 as a time our thinking about what we're supposed to do and the range of 29-32 as the time when we are finally doing what we want to do. (Sheehy, 1976).

As police departments seem to be ignoring the studies mentioned above, Virginia Commonwealth University's former Director of Public Safety, James P. Morgan wonders if knowledge in the area of adult development has been ignored by police administrators. (Morgan, 1980).

Along with age, this paper will address experience as a factor in retention of police officers. Research indicates commitment, or the lack thereof, is a stumbling block to a new officer's success. Finding a recruit just entering the work force who wants a long-term police career is difficult, as they can find the hiring process cumbersome. (Tate 2000). Hyams (1991) suggests in order to avoid these applicants who don't have the commitment to endure a simple selection process we should focus on applicants who have shown some degree of preparation for the job.

Hyams (1991) suggests this preparation could include college-level criminal justice course work, riding in patrol cars with officers or merely the absence of a criminal record. This paper will offer that when retention rates are the focus, the level of preparation on the part of new hires should be two years of law enforcement experience.

Police administrators should be careful not to allow retention rate probabilities to be the sole factor in recruitment of new officers. While retention is an important issue,

Hyams (1991) reminds us that sacrifices in quality made today in the name of retention, could be felt for many years in the future.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will examine whether it is beneficial for police departments to focus on two numeric and measurable factors in hiring new recruits. The purpose of this study is to answer the question, which considers whether or not police agencies can increase their retention rates of new officers by focusing on a particular age group or experience level.

It is believed the author's research will show that police department's can increase the retention rates of new officers by focusing on the two factors. The author believes he will find an increased retention level of officers who are hired at the minimum age range of near 30 and/or an experience level of at least two years in law enforcement.

Three methods of inquiry were used during this study. The author studied professional articles and research, reviewed members of his police department, comparing the age, experience and tenure of officers and finally conducted a survey of law enforcement executives to see how starting age and experience shaped their careers and how they believed these factors could influence retention rates at their respective agencies.

The periodicals reviewed were chiefly written by law enforcement executives and were geared toward problems in recruiting officers from Generation X. Authors of these studies include Michael Hyams, Ph.D. of the Newport Beach, California Police Department and James P. Morgan, Jr., M.P.A., a former police chief and F.B.I. agent.

Also cited were psychological studies geared toward adult development and occupational maturity.

The author also performed a comprehensive review of officers employed at his police agency, checking service time as it was related to the officer's age and experience level at his or her hire date. This information was available to the author via the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement's Data Distribution System (TCLEDDS.) The author identified twenty-five police officers employed at his agency upon his personal hire date in 2000 as the survey group. He identified officers with a total tenure of five years or more as "stayers."

Finally law enforcement executives were surveyed, by way of an anonymous survey, to determine the age and experience level that these successful peace officers began careers at their respective departments. Forty-five executives from forty-one police agencies across Texas were surveyed during their attendance at the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT.) There was a one hundred percent return rate on the surveys, with one survey discarded, as it was completed improperly.

It is the author's intent to combine the academic view on police officer tenure, retention successes and problems at his own department, and retention patterns of current police executives. With this information, it is believed the author can test the paper's thesis specifically (at the Rice University Police Department) and generally (among police executives across Texas) and compare this to academic research in the area.

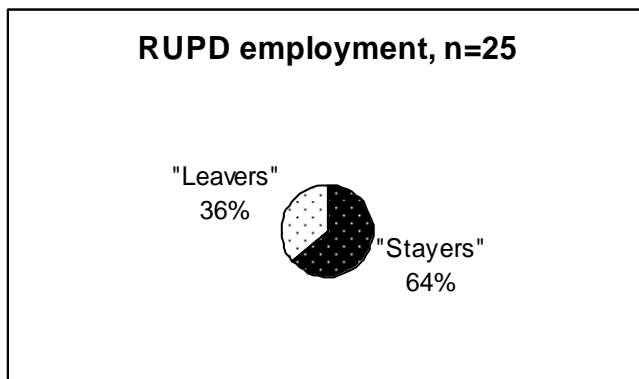
FINDINGS

The information gained from police journals and academic studies clearly indicated that departments should avoid hiring new police officers under the age of twenty-five and those without some form of police preparation when retention is one of the goals. Alderson specifically mentions the ages of 21-23 as an age bracket from which new police officers should not be hired. Hyams (2001) reports that new hires should be restricted to those with some form of preparation for the job.

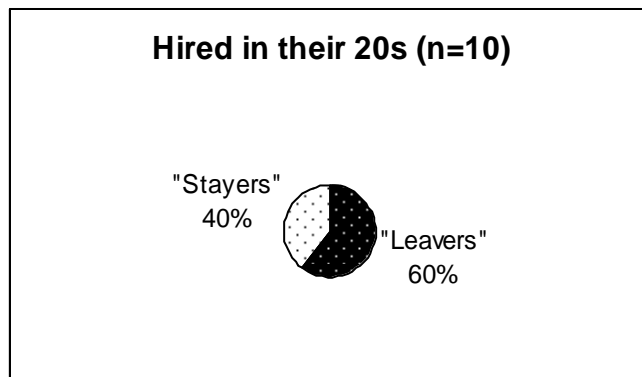
Scientific studies further pointed to the need for hiring more aged police officers. Frenkel-Brunswick's and Bromley's (1980) separate research each pointed to the age of 25 as a minimum age for adults to make definitive choices as to a vocation they could remain at for the long term. Sheehy (1976) found the age of twenty-nine to be the first at which adults are finally doing what they want to do.

The author then examined how retention rates were tied to the factors of age and experience level at his police department. At his hire date in November 2000, twenty-five police officers were employed by the Rice University Police Department. Comparisons were made among the officers as to age and experience level at date-of-hire compared to tenure. Officers reaching their five year employment anniversary were considered "stayers", while officers working less than five years were counted as "leavers." Tenure of five years or more was considered a success for the department, in the area of retention, while a stay of less than five years was considered a retention failure.

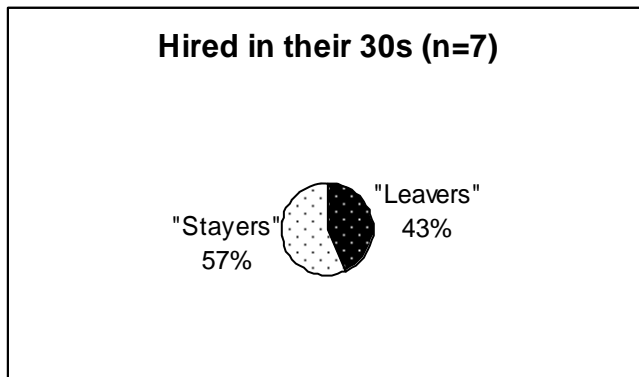
It was found that sixteen of these twenty-five were to remain at the department for at least five years, so were “stayers.” Conversely, nine of the twenty-five were “leavers”, having a less than five year employment.



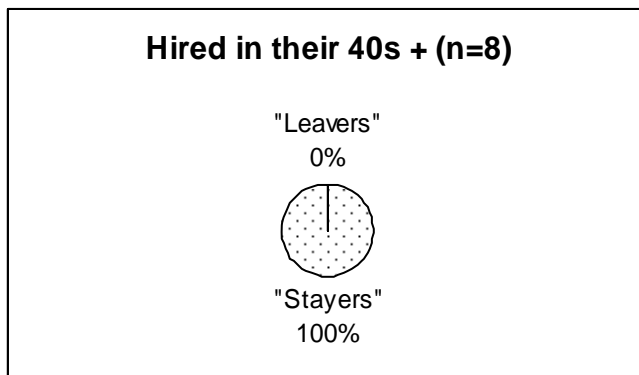
Of the twenty-five RUPD officers, it was found that ten were hired in their twenties, specifically between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-nine. In this group, only four were “stayers”, while six left the department before working for five years.



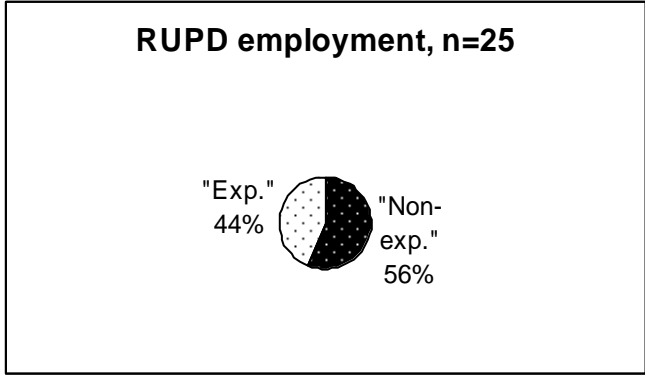
Seven of the twenty-five officers began working at the police department during their thirties. “Stayers” in this group numbered four while there were three “leavers”.



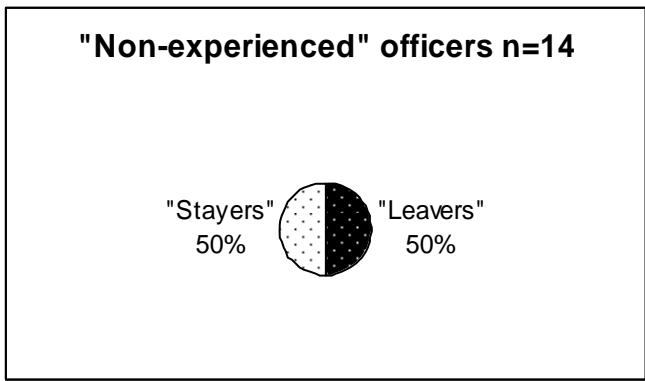
The final age group was those police officers hired in their forties and beyond. There are eight members of this group, all of whom are “stayers, serving five years or more.



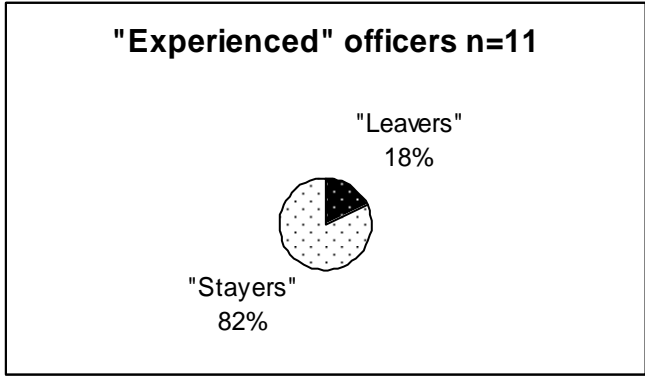
A review was then done of the twenty-five officers, comparing their levels of law enforcement experience. Those with two years or more of law enforcement experience were considered “experienced”, while those with less than two years were considered “non-experienced.” It was found that of the twenty five officers, RUPD had hired fourteen non experienced officers and eleven experienced.



Among the fourteen “non-experienced” officers, seven left prior to working five years, while seven were employed for five years or more.

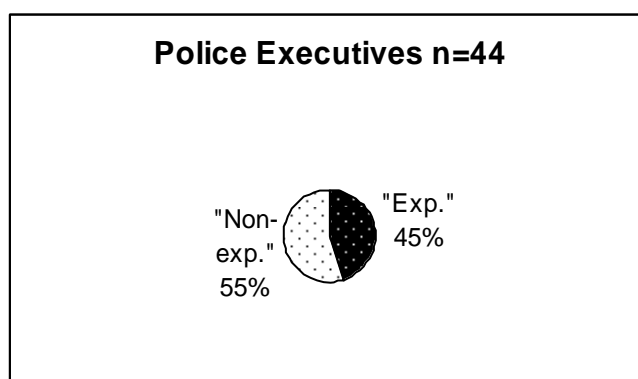


The officers hired with experience totaled eleven. Among this group, nine were “stayers” while two were “leavers.”



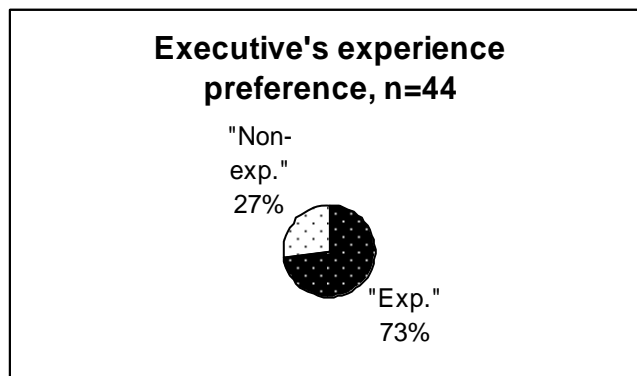
Among the forty-four surveys of Texas law enforcement executives, all of which had five or more years of experience at their respective departments, information was derived of their starting ages and experience level at those agencies. It was discovered that this group had a mean starting age at their department of 26.46 years of age, with a low starting age of 20 and a high of 40. The median age was 25 and the modes were 23 and 21, each appearing six times out of the 44 responses.

In this group of executives, twenty officers came to their current department with two or more years of experience while twenty-four did not.



When asked what starting age they wished for new recruits, with the goal of increasing retention rates, there were forty-three responses. This group preferred a mean starting age of 25.26 years, with a low choice of 21 and a high choice of 35. The median preferred age was 25 and the mode was 25, appearing in fourteen of the responses.

When asked what level of law enforcement experience they wanted in their new hires, when retention was the major factor, twelve favored inexperienced (<2 years), while thirty-two chose experienced (2+ years.)



CONCLUSIONS

The Rice University Police Department, an agency offering competitive pay, excellent benefits, cutting-edge technology, ample overtime opportunities, near unlimited education and training, broad assignments and promotional opportunities was losing officers through turnover at a rate much higher than the national average in the early 2000s. Nationwide, similar size agencies saw a turnover rate of 7% in 2000 (Koper & Moore, 2000), while RUPD's turnover rate that year was 26%. This turnover rate held steady in 2001 and 2002, recorded at 30% and 32% respectively. The year 2003 saw a drop in the turnover rate to 18%, still more than double the national average. In 2004, the year the author began his research, the turnover rate was in line with the national average, at 7%.

The purpose of the study is to assist police agencies in similar situations of extremely high turnover slow the loss of officers and the related time and financial losses by focusing on specific, numeric factors in the hiring phase. Specifically, can police department increase officer retention rates by hiring applicants of a particular age group or experience level?

The author believes his research will show that police department's can increase the retention rates of new officers by focusing on the two factors. It is believed he will find an increased retention level of officers who are hired at the minimum age range of near 30 and/or an experience level of at least two years in law enforcement. The author placed five years of service as the tenure at which police officers were labeled "stayers" and had given the department a sufficient return in its investment in them. Officers leaving prior to completing five years of service were termed "leavers."

Research found the author's thesis to be held true at his police agency, in both areas of age and experience. Officers hired in their twenties were more likely than not to leave the agency prior to attaining five years of service. Sixty percent (six of ten) of those hired in their twenties were "leavers." Conversely officers hired while in their thirties were most likely to stay at the department. Forty-three percent (three of seven) of these officers were "leavers", while sixty-seven percent served at least five years. Officers hired at the age of forty and beyond proved to be the most likely to remain at the department for an extended tenure. A total of 100% (eight of eight) officers in this category were "stayers."

In the area of retention related to law enforcement experience it was proved to be to the benefit of the department to hire officers who had worked for two or more years. Fourteen of the officers studied had less than two years experience before beginning work at Rice. This group was split evenly in the area of tenure. Seven were "stayers" and seven were "leavers." Compared to this, 81.8%, nine of eleven, officers hired with two or more years of experience remained in employ for at least five years. Interestingly, all nine "stayers" had attained the rank of corporal or above and seven of

nine became sergeants or higher, while both “leavers” remained at the rank of officer for all of their service time.

While the information gained from studying new-officer hires of the Rice University Police Department supported the author’s thesis, the surveys of current Texas police executives (all who were “stayers”) did not. Rather than find a common starting age of near-30 at their respective departments, a mean starting age of 26.46 and a median age of 25 years was found. The factor of experience was also contrary to the findings at the author’s agency. Among these executive “stayers”, the majority came to their departments with less than two years experience. 55% began at their agencies as non-experienced officers, while 45% started with two or more years of experience.

When asked, in reference to raising retention rates, these executives wanted new hires that mirrored themselves age-wise. Their ideal starting age for new officers was 25.26 years of age. However, when asked about experience levels, their answers supported the author’s thesis. The overwhelming majority of police executives thought an experienced new officer would stay longer at his department. 73% of the executives preferred an officer with two or more years of experience.

Limitations to this study can mainly be found in the area of quantity. The author could have studied all of the officers employed in the history of his department, roughly two hundred persons, and may have found a truer statement of retention patterns. Likewise, more police executives could have been studied by increasing his base beyond LEMIT students.

Law enforcement agencies can benefit from this research by using the combination of age and experience level in hiring new officers when retention is their primary concern. This paper does not address the above factors as they relate to performance, promotion or professionalism. However, agencies can use the factors in conjunction with typical hiring criteria to recruit well-rounded candidates who will both be quality officers and remain at the department for a number of years.

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APPENDICES

Directed Police Hiring: Can police departments increase the retention rates of new officers by hiring candidates of a particular age group or experience level?

Please answer the following questions, and return to **Gary Spears**. Thanks.

- At what age did you enter law enforcement? _____
- At what age did you begin with your current department? _____
- How long have you been at your current department? _____
- At what age do new officers typically begin work at your department? _____
- How many years of experience do they typically have? _____
- What age do you feel is best for new officers to start at your department? _____
- How many years of experience would you like these new officers to have? _____
- On average, how many years do officers stay at your department? _____