

**The Bill Blackwood
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How Detectives Are Made

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ABSTRACT

While uniformed patrol officers are often referred to as the “backbone” of police work, plain-clothes detectives also play an essential role in the overall effectiveness and success of a law enforcement agency. Thus, the manner in which an agency selects its detectives contributes to (or hinders) the overall effectiveness and success of the agency. What selection method (or combination of methods) is most likely to turn out the highest performing detectives? In exploring this question, the author reviewed several literary sources, conducted a written survey of Texas law enforcement agencies and researched personnel motivation theories. The literature researched for this project mostly supported the overall manner in which detectives are selected in the Texas law enforcement agencies surveyed. However, the opinions of the law enforcement managers representing those agencies differed almost completely from current practices concerning the position and status of detectives relative to the rest of the agency and to the career paths of future supervisors and managers. Although no “best method” solution was found for selecting detectives, the research pragmatically identified motivation and past work history as indicative factors of officers with the potential to become effective and successful detectives. Finally, the author emphatically advocates that the coveted title of “detective” can reward superior performance while inherently developing the careers of future police leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

Thousands of law enforcement agencies throughout the nation use a number of different methods to select and assign officers for the role of detective. Those methods include: interviews, oral boards, direct appointments, written examinations, seniority, and assessment centers, to name a few. Many departments use a combination of these to identify potential candidates and to sort through them and choose the most suited for investigative work. What is the best method, process, or system to select the right personnel for assignment as detectives? Are some methods better than others? Or, is a combination of methods best? The author perceives three major points of discussion related to these questions. The first two points revolve around how a chosen method affects the department as a whole, and the third point takes into account the individual officers involved in the process.

The first element of this issue is obviously the consideration of which method, or combination of methods, will produce the most effective and successful detective, thereby influencing the overall effectiveness and success of the department. The second point evaluates the potential gains or improvements the department could realize (or miss) in terms of career and professional development of its officers. Last is the question of how opportunities for assignment, promotion, or transfer to a detective position or specialized unit within a police department might impact the moral and motivation of patrol officers.

The focus of this research project will be to examine the different detective selection methods throughout law enforcement in an effort to understand how varying

methods affect a police department as well as individual police officers. This will be accomplished through academic research and career field inquiry.

In addition to reviewing academic literature and resources related directly to this topic, research of personnel motivation theories will also be done to determine their correlation, if any, to how detectives are selected in a police department. The author will conduct a survey of police commanders and supervisors throughout Texas in an effort to gain facts about their department's detective selection methods along with their opinions about selecting and assigning detectives.

Finally, the author will compare the findings of this research project to his own agency's detective selection practices. The author is a lieutenant with the Lubbock, Texas Police Department. Lubbock is an isolated city of about 211,000 residents in West Texas and is served by a police department of over 400 sworn officers. The agency employs a large Investigations Division to which officers are assigned almost solely by seniority.

The author anticipates that beliefs and concerns presented will be validated through the research and methods of inquiry. The author further hopes that through the findings a suggestion of a system for selecting detective candidates can be made and be feasible for most any type and size of law enforcement agency. Although police agencies must remain independent and employ the personnel processes that work best for their organization, the author hopes this research project will provide a resource from which law enforcement administrators, commanders, supervisors and officers can garner information related to this topic.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The author researched literary sources for information regarding two general areas pertaining to the issue of selecting police detectives. The first area concerned the position of detective itself and how it was obtained, and the second area involved the possible affects on individual officers hoping to obtain such a position. The author first reviewed subject matter related to common duties performed by detectives, desired characteristics of detective candidates, and current methods of selecting detectives. Next, the author explored available research of personnel motivations and desires in hopes of determining their potential impact, if any, on individual officers in regards to detective selection processes in a law enforcement agency.

For the purpose of this research project, the terms “investigator” and “detective” are synonymous. The term detective seems to be the more preferred title by working officers, whereas investigator was more commonly used throughout the examined literature. Swanson, Chamelin, and Territo (2003) defined an investigator as “someone who gathers, documents, and evaluates evidence and information” (p. 28). This given definition for a detective would easily apply to patrol officers conducting preliminary investigations as well; however, Cohen and Chaiken (1987) differentiated the two according to their generally assigned tasks: “Investigators specialize in activities primarily related to law enforcement, whereas patrol officers also routinely expend efforts on order maintenance and the provision of general services [such as] emergency aid, finding lost children, traffic control....” (p. 13).

Detectives are most commonly responsible for follow-up investigations of crimes initially reported to patrol officers. Follow-up investigations often include reviewing initial

reports, gathering further information, evaluating physical evidence, interviewing witnesses, identifying suspects for interrogation and arrest, and preparing cases for prosecution (Thibault, Lynch, & McBride, 2007). This detective job description echoes that provided nearly 20 years before by Cohen and Chaiken (1987): "Detectives gather crime information, effect arrests, and prepare cases for prosecution and trial" (p. 13). Descriptions such as these give rise to the image of detectives as great sleuths who painstakingly track down and apprehend perpetrators in a Sherlock Holmes fashion. Rather, much of the detective workload actually involves monotonous, routine tasks that quite often do not result in a conviction or even an arrest (Thibault et. al., 2007). In fact, Jan Chaiken and other researchers (1977) referred to a Rand Corporation study in which detectives were shown to spend the majority of their time on post-arrest processing activities of crimes that were already solved by patrol officers upon the initial response (as cited in Hughes, 2002). All of the current and past research seems to agree that although both detectives and patrol officers investigate crimes, detectives are able to devote more time and resources to solving crimes involving suspects not promptly arrested in conjunction with the initial response. This helps to understand the actual purpose and need for specialized detectives.

Awareness of tasks and activities performed by detectives helps to realize officer attributes sought after for investigative assignments. Chappell, Gordon, and Moore (1983) conceded, "In general...it is widely acknowledged that no one really knows what qualities make a good investigator" (p. 273). Nevertheless, nearly all of the literature consulted for this project provided a laundry list of traits and characteristics considered necessary for police officers to possess that might indicate potential success and

effectiveness in a detective assignment. These included: motivation, street knowledge, intelligence, perseverance, intuition, sound judgment, and strong communication skills. Specifically, several sources cited motivation as a key attribute in identifying the most viable detective candidates. Highly motivated officers tend to take more pride in their work and go above and beyond, often with only intrinsic satisfaction as a reward (Cohen & Chaiken, 1987).

In addition to characteristics and traits of detective candidates, most of the reviewed writings discussed qualifications of officers essential to success as an investigator, including experience as a patrol officer and education. While three to five years was the agreed upon average of prerequisite patrol experience, researches and practitioners differed somewhat on how much, if any, formal education should be required, and if required, how much weight it should carry. Adams and Evans (1994) emphatically asserting that a college education was of paramount importance when selecting officers to fill investigative positions. Cohen and Chaiken (1987) stated “at least a year of college...[is] logically and empirically related to overall superior police performance, specifically to investigative performance” (p. 16). Ironically however, law enforcement administrators do not seem to consider education as crucial as empirical research has lauded it to be. In their study of Canadian law enforcement agencies, Chappell et al. (1983) found that detective selections tended to favor the street-wise, veteran cop over the college-educated, professional cop. Hughes (2002) noted in his survey of police commanders and supervisors across the United States that education was considered behind report writing ability, observation and memory skills, tenacity, maturity, and previous training when selecting and assigning detectives. The author

holds a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and is currently pursuing a post-graduate degree. The author strongly believes that his formal education has enhanced his performance previously as a detective and in his law enforcement career overall.

Regardless of what characteristics, traits, and qualifications an agency considers vital to investigative success, identifying the individual officers within the agency who possess and consistently demonstrate them has proven to be an arduous task. Less difficult to assess, and perhaps a more accurate predictor of future job performance, is a detective candidate's past work product (Adams & Evans, 1994). This would obviously include the wide array of all police activities; however, Cohen and Chaiken (1987) emphasized focusing on candidates' previous arrest activities. More specifically, these researchers pointed out that arrest *quality* should be considered over arrest *quantity*, stressing the importance of arrests that result in convictions. They describe officers with higher convictions per arrest as more motivated (as mentioned above) and more dedicated in their work and in fact suggested measuring conviction rates as part of the detective selection process. The author agrees with this assessment based on his own previous roles as a detective and as a detective supervisor.

Although available literature differed widely on terminology for various detective selection systems and processes, three basic methods of choosing officers to become detectives were identified. These were competitive tests (such as written exams and assessment centers), oral interviews, and simple appointments. All of the research materials related to selection processes advocated reviewing candidates' backgrounds, and most suggested using a combination of methods to identify those best suited for detective work. Worth mentioning were some stark contrasts in the literature

concerning written exams. Adams and Evans (1994) wrote: “prepared written examinations have not proven predictive in the selection of outstanding candidates for the position of investigator. Indeed, the written examination does little more than identify a ‘good’ test taker” (p. 12). Conversely, Cohen and Chaiken (1987) contended that written tests were especially useful in identifying desired detective candidate attributes. In evaluating their research, they reported:

The most striking finding is that written civil service examinations best predicted arrest activity and investigative skills, including gathering evidence and crime scene management. These behaviors are crucial for the successful performance of investigative functions.... The [written] civil service tests are designed to measure cognitive abilities or the capacity to know, perceive, and think. These traits lead in turn, to creativity, abstract reasoning, memory, and intelligence, all of which are considered vital for recreating crime scenes, pursuing crime leads, and organizing crime information logically and clearly (p. 17).

They went on to say that written exams were one of only two success predicting factors that reached the level of validity set in their research. The author supports the value of written exams, specifically in agencies governed by civil service laws. In his experience and opinion, such tests are completely objective and allow for level competition between candidates for promotions or assignments.

After reviewing literature concerning the role of detectives and how they are chosen, the author turned his focus to how an agency’s detective selection process might provide a useful tool in relation to the motivations of patrol officers interested in becoming detectives. Although motivation theories abound throughout management

resources, the author found the most relevant to selecting detectives was Fredrick Herzberg's Hygiene/Motivation Theory.

Herzberg's theory divides work factors into two categories: those that involve the work environment and those that involve the work itself. The first group, referred to as "hygiene" factors, deal with such things as working conditions, policies, and salaries and do not create job satisfaction. Rather, these factors simply prevent dissatisfaction when positively maintained. The second set of "motivating" factors revolves around intangible stimuli such as achievement, opportunity for growth and development, increased responsibility, and advancement. These rewards are the ones that result in job satisfaction and often drive officers to perform in a superior manner (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001; More, Wegener, & Miller, 2003; Bennett & Hess, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to answer the question of which method or combination of methods most effectively resulted in the selection of successful detectives, the author conducted independent research in the law enforcement career field. The author believed that few agencies use seniority as the sole criteria for selecting detectives as his own department does. Furthermore, the author believed assignments to detective positions could provide an opportunity that qualified officers should be allowed to compete for based their work record, individual traits and characteristics, formal education, etc. Additionally, the author believed that investigative experience enhanced the professional development of officers destined to become supervisors and later commanders.

By surveying large and small law enforcement agencies around the State of Texas, the author hoped to determine which methods of selecting detectives are most common, to find out how detectives were classified and to see how detective assignments are used in career development, as well as to garner the opinions of police managers in these areas. The survey included questions regarding the types and sizes of the polled agencies as well as facts about their detective selection methods and detective compensation compared to that of patrol officers. Additionally, the survey solicited opinions from the responding agency representatives pertaining to the fairness of different detective selection methods and whether or not a detective should hold a distinctive rank rather than be simply a lateral extension of patrol officers. The author believes that most agencies' practices are rarely in line with the opinions of many police managers.

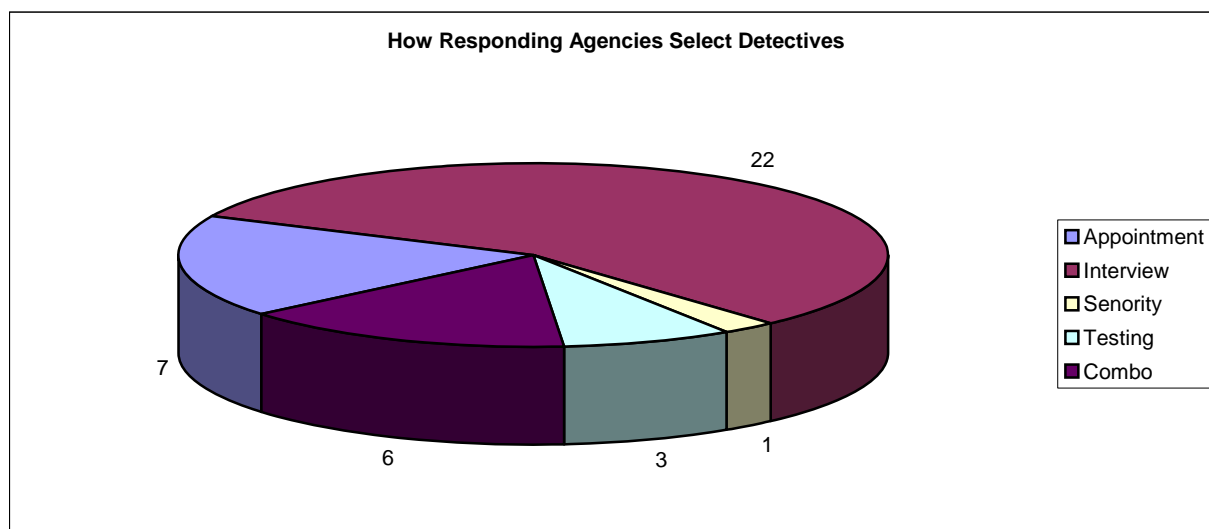
While all of the agencies polled returned the survey, two did not have a dedicated investigations division. These agencies' responses therefore were not included in the statistical findings. However, the opinions of the agency representatives regarding the selection of detectives were reported. Likewise, in the few cases when more than one respondent represented the same agency, the agency statistics were counted only once, but each respondent's opinions were calculated in the survey results. A copy of the survey utilized is included as Appendix A.

Finally, the author compared the results of his survey along with information from his review of literature to the system of selecting detectives within his own agency. The Lubbock Police Department began using a seniority based policy for selecting detectives in the late 1990's. Previously, officers were assigned to detectives after

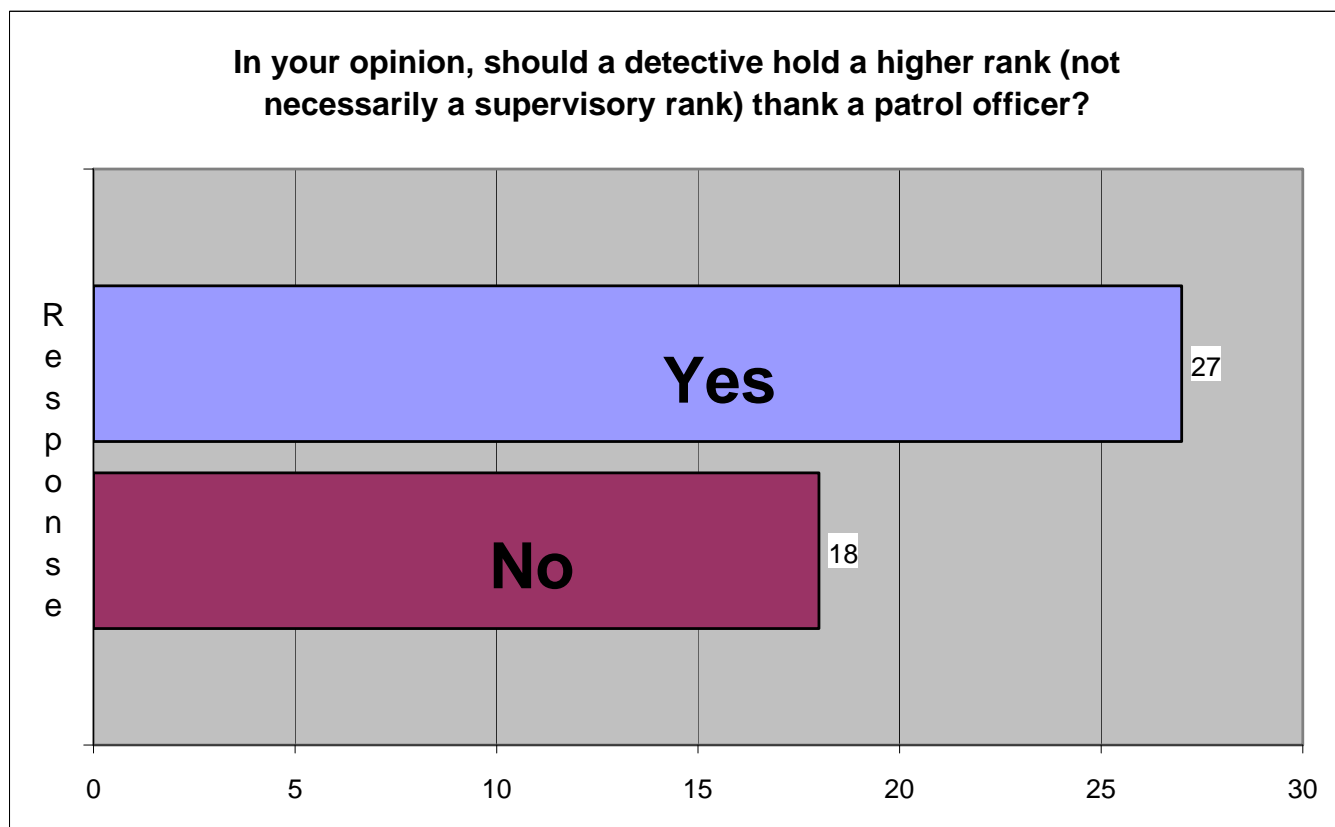
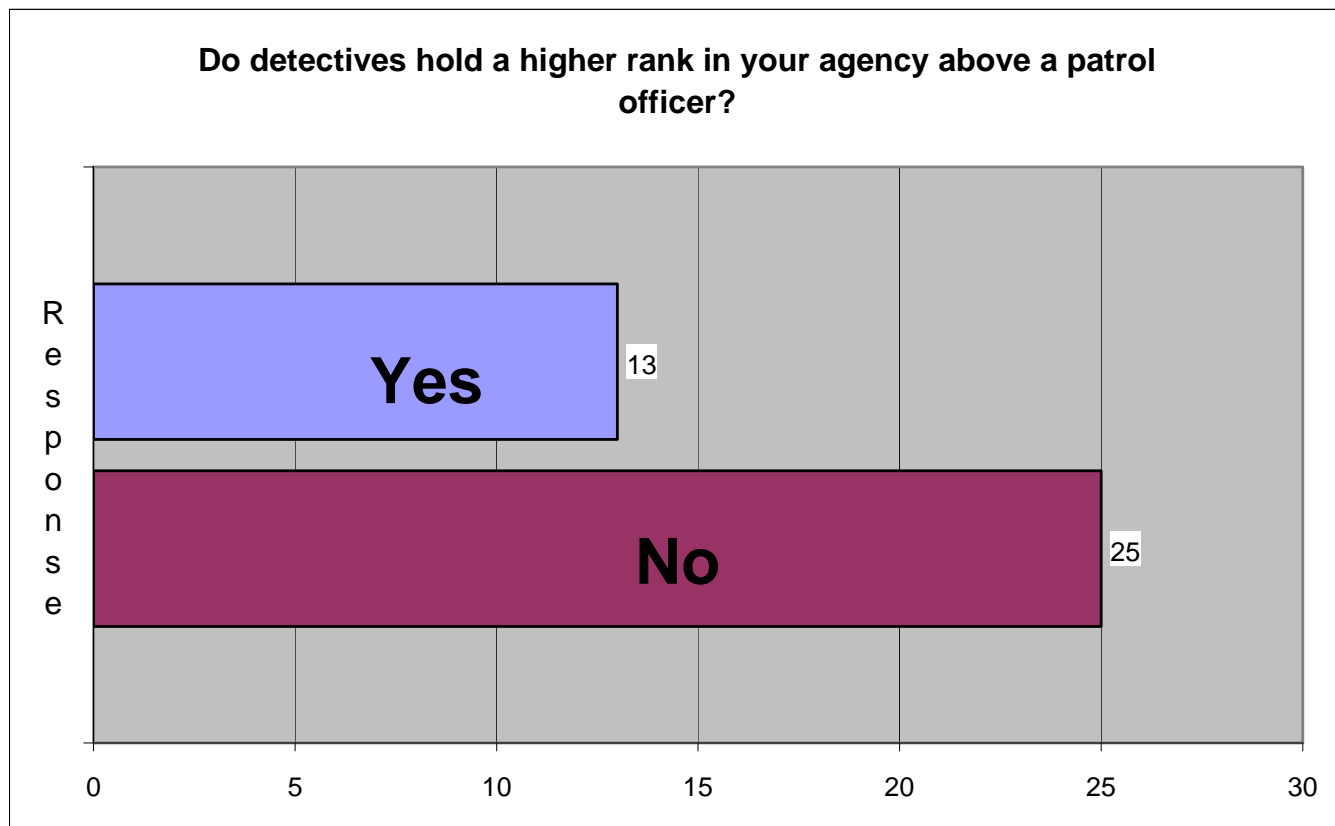
competing with other eligible candidates at oral interview boards. These boards reviewed the detective applicants' patrol work record, disciplinary/complaint record, and attendance records. They also judged the interviewees on appearance, supervisory recommendations, and their answers to questions posed by members of the board. These questions were based on operational situations as well as facts of law related to the type of detective position applied for as well as issues regarding the officers' motivations for applying for a detective assignment. Seniority was only considered as a tie breaker when two candidates were scored equally by the board.

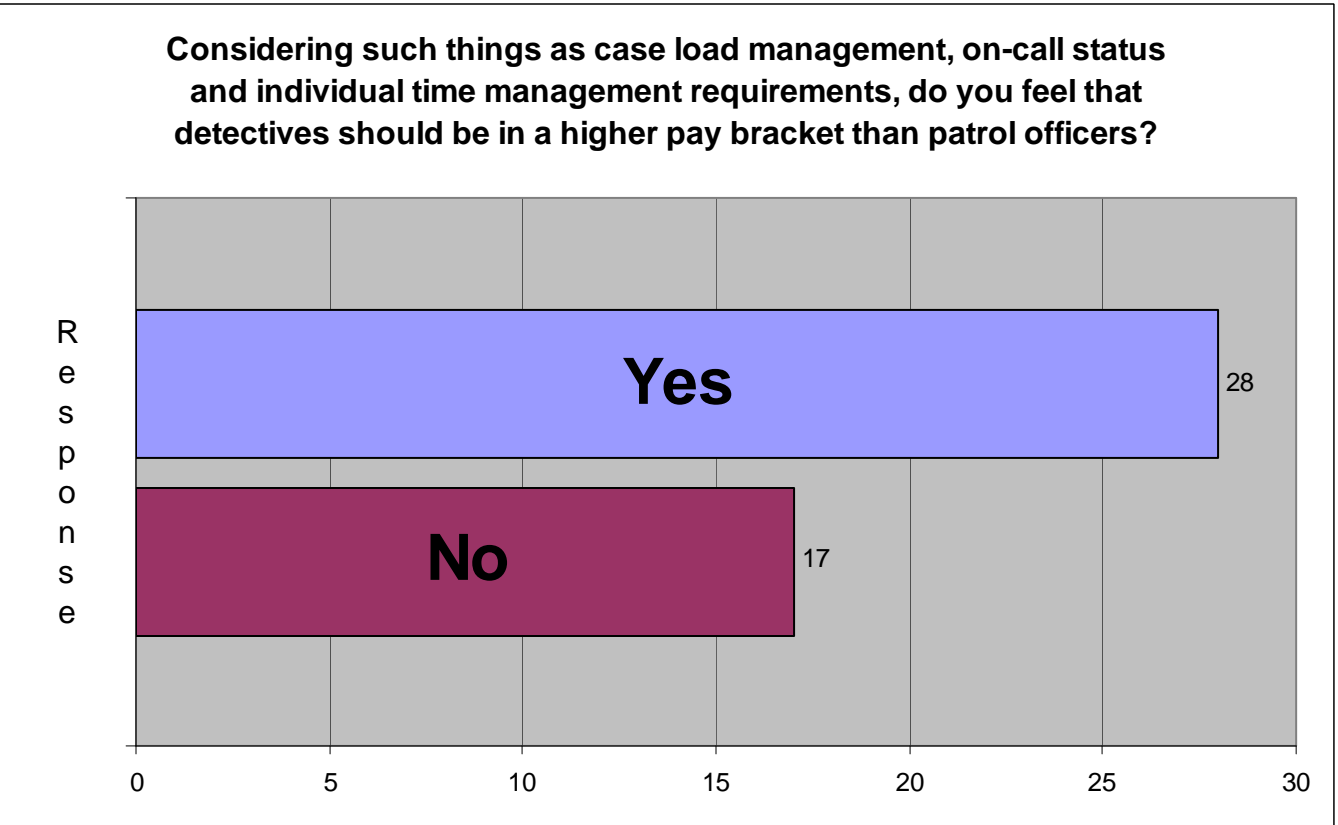
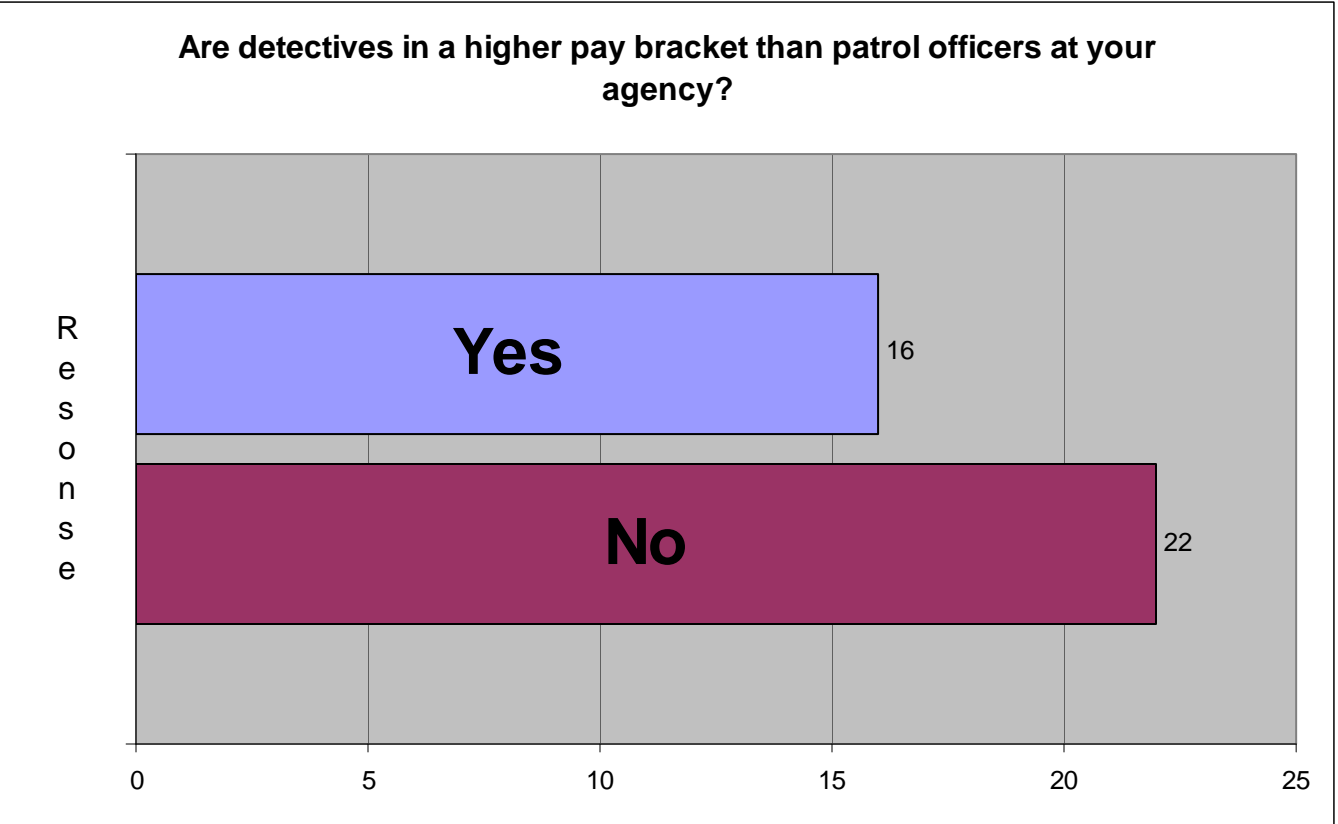
FINDINGS

The following charts represent the responses to the survey used in this research:

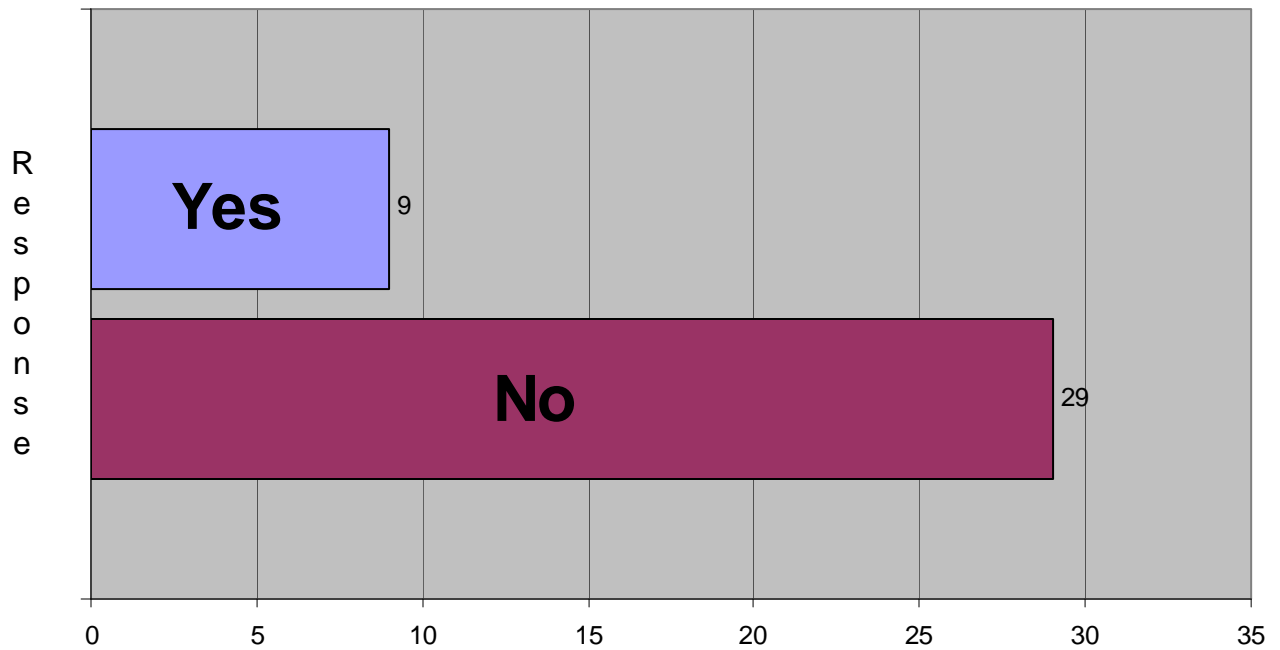


Note: Several agencies indicated using some combination of selection methods.

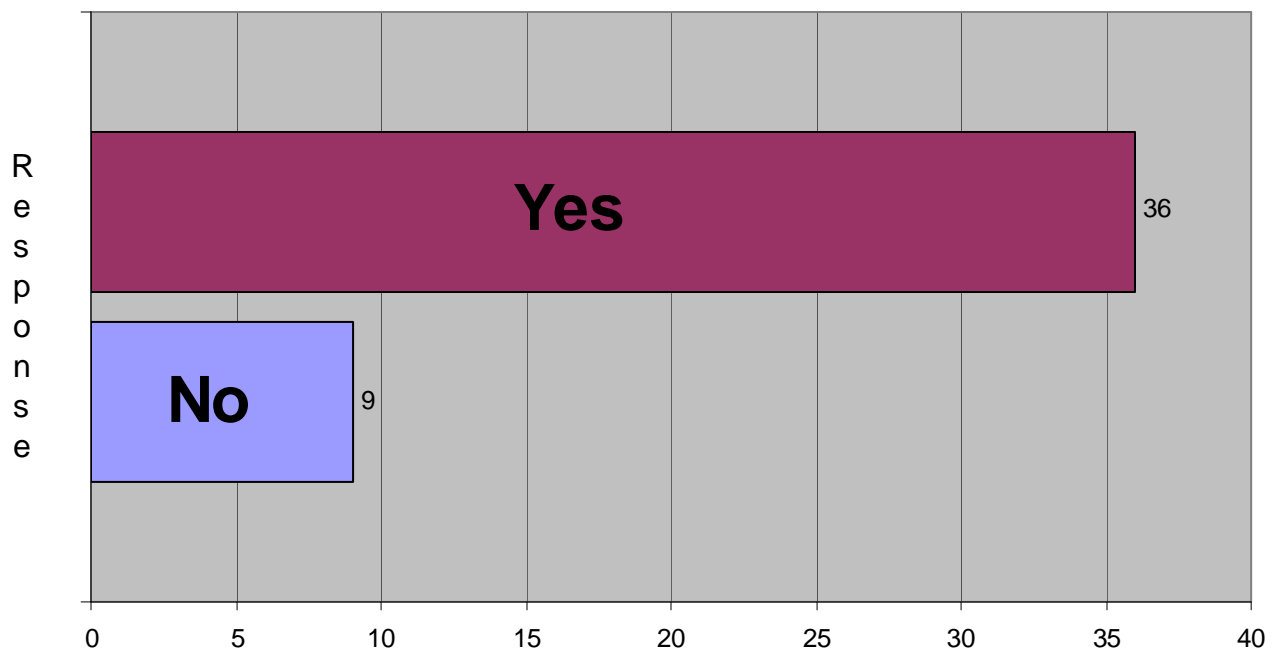




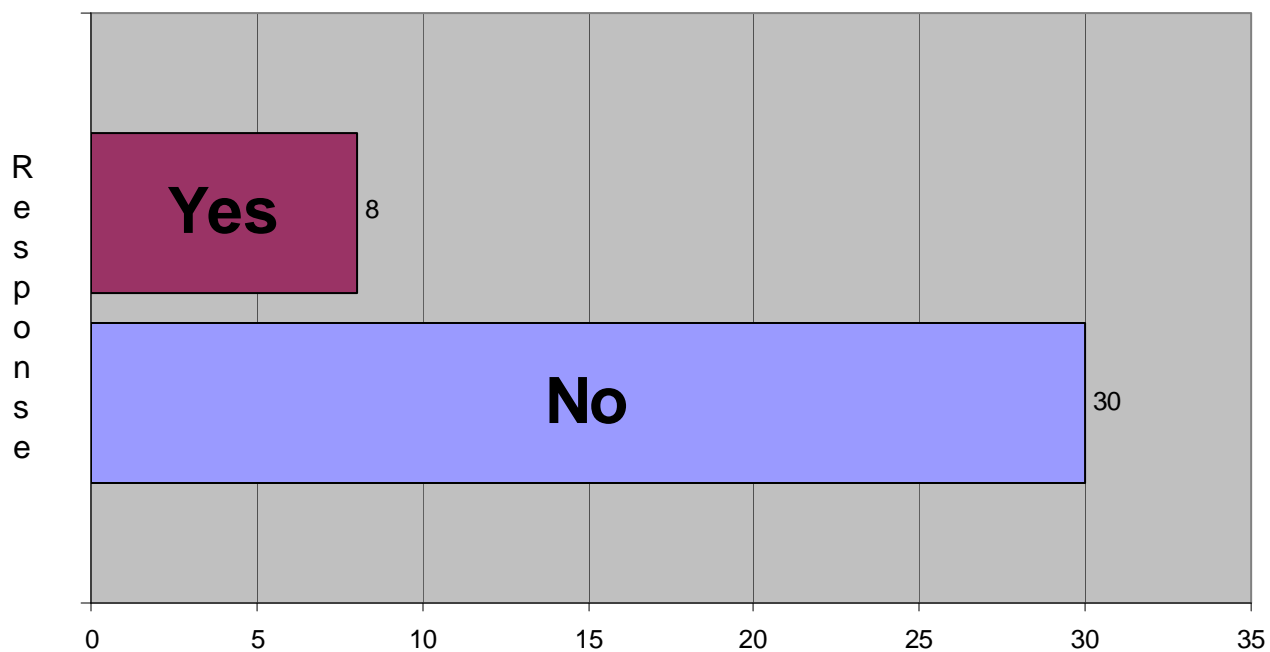
Are officers in your agency required to have other than patrol experience before promoting to supervisor?



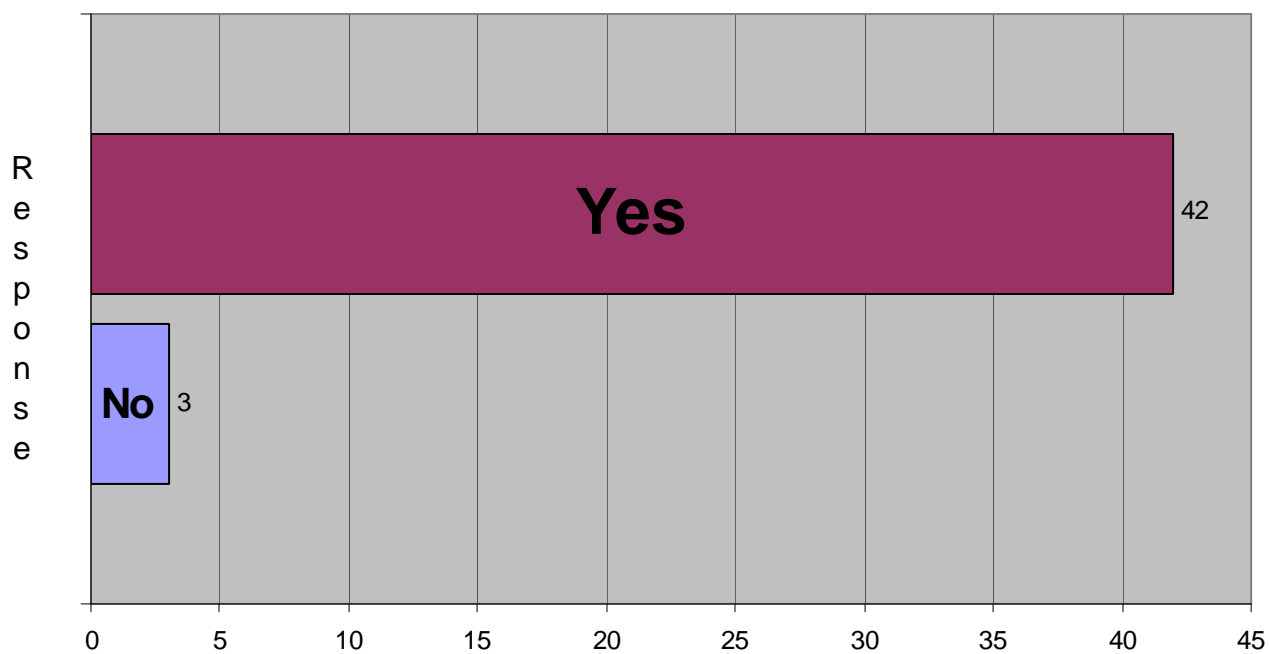
In your opinion, should officers have other than patrol experience before promoting to supervisor?

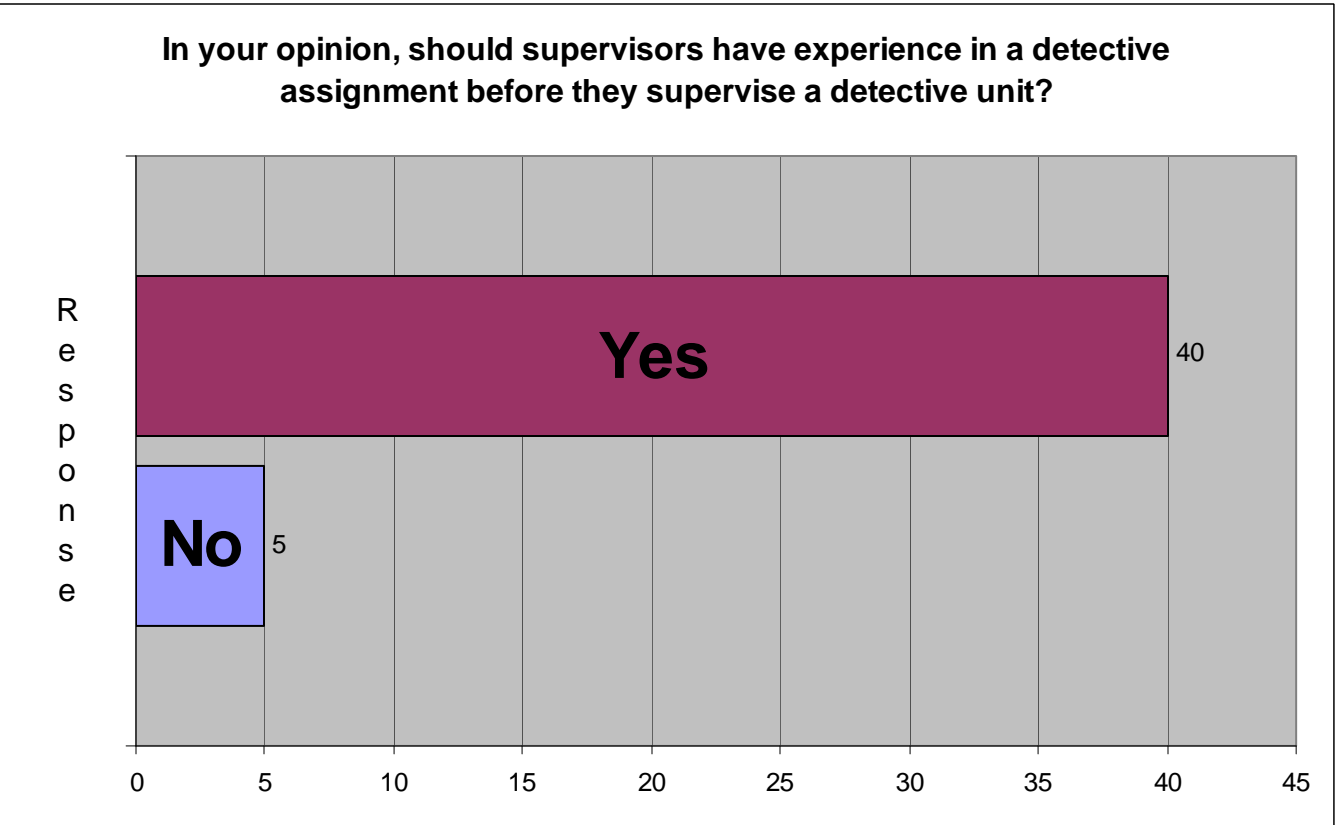
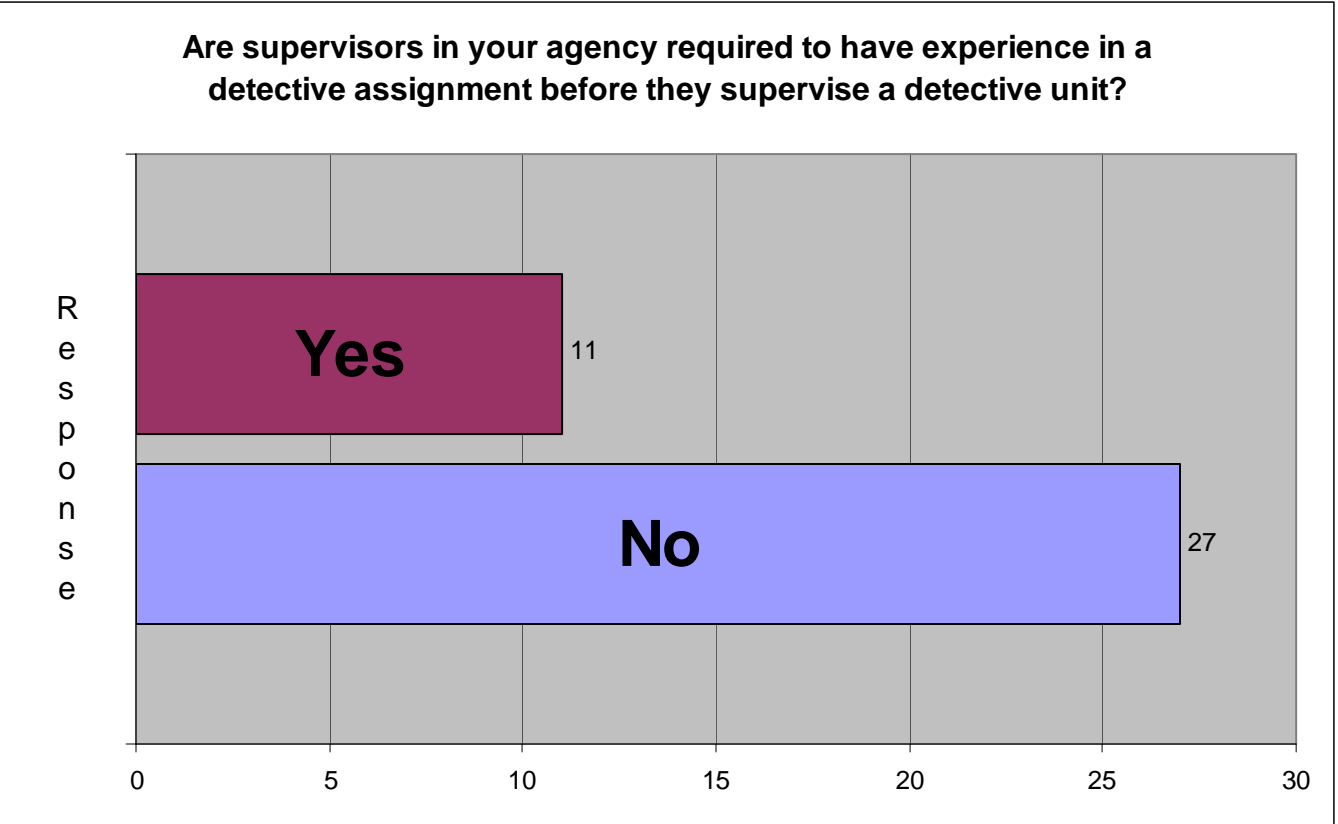


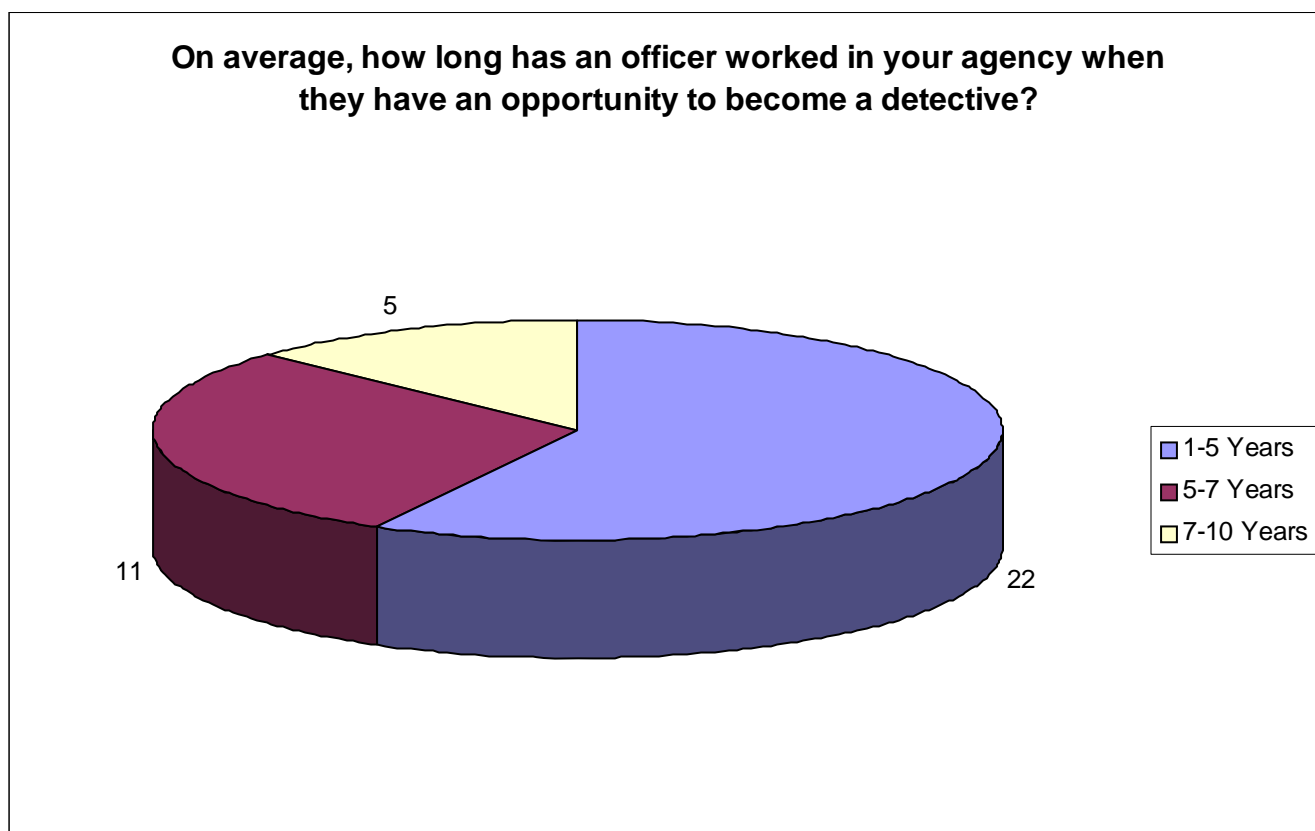
Are officers in your agency required to have other than patrol experience before they promote to command level ranks?



In your opinion, should officers have other than patrol experience before promoting to command level ranks?







The final question of the survey was this: “In your opinion, should officers be able to compete for detective assignments based on factors other than seniority such as work performance, disciplinary record, dependability, education, supervisory recommendations, experience from other agencies, interpersonal skills, job knowledge, etc.?” All respondents answered “YES” to this question.

In comparison with the results of this project's survey, the Lubbock Police Department is quite similar to other agency around the state, with the exception of how its detectives are selected. While officers assigned to the department's unit responsible for investigating crimes against persons are appointed, all other detectives are chosen purely by seniority. With such a system in place, the agency's practices do not align

with the literature reviewed for this project. As a supervisor in the department's narcotics unit from 2002 until 2004, the author supervised detectives assigned to the unit both through the previous interview process and through the current seniority based policy. With rare exceptions, officers who competed for their positions in front of interview boards not only made far more attempts at initiating cases, but also produced cases of much higher quality. The author finds that this translates easily to higher levels of motivation and higher conviction rates in correlation with research discussed earlier in this paper.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

This research topic was initially chosen because the author lacked confidence in the manner in which his agency selects detectives. The author sought answers to questions about the best method of selecting detectives and how selection processes affected the department as well as individual officers. The author supposed that an equitable system in which hard work and strong aptitude should lead to the coveted title of "Detective," and that such an assignment was vital in preparing officers to become well-rounded leaders in police organizations.

Although the review of literature for this project did not provide a simple "best-selection-method" answer, it gave useful information about what elements are necessary as part of an agency's preferred detective selection process. The difficulty in identifying the specific traits and characteristics that would predict officers' success as a detective only compounds the difficulty in creating a viable method of selecting them for assignment as a one. However, the literature seems to clearly indicate that systems most likely to produce effective and successful detectives must consider the candidates'

level of motivation along with their previous work history. On the issue of the value of education to the investigator, current selection and assignment methods are not aligned with what researchers and practitioners suggest and believe.

In considering the research pertaining to Herzberg's Hygiene/Motivation Theory, the author believes that most law enforcement jobs innately satisfy officers' hygiene needs. Few people enter police work for the salaries and working conditions. Instead, most applicants are interested in the excitement and challenge a career in law enforcement offers. Furthermore, the author believes that new officers maintain high motivation from the satisfaction of police work in and of itself. However, this "rookie" motivation will without doubt begin to fade if new opportunities and challenges are not available. In most agencies, especially civil service agencies, many rewards for patrol officers such as promotions, shift assignments, days off, etc. are governed by seniority or attrition. The author agrees with Cohen and Chaiken (1987) that being assigned as a detective is a promotion in the eyes of the public and most police officers, regardless of any increase in pay, and according to this project's survey findings, the average police manager believes it should be a promotion with increased pay. As such, the opportunity to compete for investigative and specialized assignments can be effectively used by administrators to reward patrol officers for exemplary performance, and such opportunity would meet their motivation needs under Herzberg's theory.

For the most part, the literature seemed to support the manner in which the majority of the Texas law enforcement agencies polled during this project select their detectives. Interestingly however, the most notable point revealed by the author's survey was that what police managers advocate is often quite different from the actual

practices in the law enforcement career field in relation to the status of detectives once they are assigned and the usefulness of that assignment in the officers' professional development. On each question of the project survey soliciting respondents' opinion, the results were overall opposite (drastically on several questions) from the actual practice mentioned on the previous question.

Regarding the author's own agency, the literature consulted and the independent research conducted support his assumption that using seniority to assign officers to detective roles is rare and less effectual than other methods. Clearly, seniority alone gives very little insight about an officer's level of motivation, and it speaks nothing about his or her past performance. Therefore, the literature obviously does not support seniority as an effective factor alone in choosing officers to become detectives. The author believes that this method often rewards mediocrity and fails to identify the best officer for the assignment. Perhaps a comparative evaluation of the department's detective case clearance and conviction rates along with Lubbock's crime rate since the inception of the seniority system would indicate its true effectiveness in relation to the previous interview process.

In conclusion, the author hopes his research, findings, and conclusions on this project will be helpful to law enforcement agencies considering creating a detective section or restructuring their existing detective selection process. This project has satisfied his assumption that how detectives are made impacts the morale and development of police officers, the effectiveness of their departments, and the future of law enforcement as a whole.

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