

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

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**The Effect Police Salaries Have on Officer Retention**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In today's hard economic times, city and county police agencies, especially those adjoining outside, bigger cities and of smaller populations, are currently facing the challenges of recruiting and retaining police officers. With competitors offering higher salaries and more attractive benefits, there is a struggle to retain and recruit officers for smaller cities and counties. Adding to the struggle is the burden of training officers on a small budget. Training and equipping an entry level police officer out of a police academy could run as much as \$28,000.00. These monetary issues could create budgetary cuts and repercussions, which could be potentially devastating for smaller agencies found at the outskirts and beyond major metropolitan city areas. Officers may be leaving positions because of budgetary issues or other limitations like salaries, low retirement benefits (pensions), the work environment, job disapproval (dislike), location of work, or because they cannot get along with the boss.

The primary purpose of this study is to attempt to determine the cause of the officer retention crisis and how pay disparity is affecting smaller communities. A survey will be conducted and will focus mainly on the Houston, San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, and El Paso metropolitan area police departments. The goal is to try to identify reasons of officer separation. A comparative analysis of these five major cities will explore retention rates and the possible factors affecting retention. The conclusion drawn in this study shows that although a multitude of factors affect the retention rate of officers, competitive salaries between larger and smaller cities is the ultimate deciding factor for staying or leaving an agency.

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## INTRODUCTION

The police in America today face major challenges in all areas of police work. These challenges are numerous, and they could be debated for years to come. One significant and relevant problem facing police departments across this country, now and in the future, is keeping police officers (officer retention). Factoring in pre-existing limitations of police resources and with today's hard economic times has created greater challenges for small to medium sized police departments in keeping good officers than what it was years ago. In the past, and continuing in today's police forces, there is a continual struggle to retain officers. This is primarily caused when there is a significant difference in the salaries and fringe benefits offered by larger police departments than that of smaller police departments. The competition is fierce, and major area police departments often have more to offer in overall benefit packages and salaries. These benefits include promotional opportunities, affordable health care, and higher salaries, which attracts most officers. Therefore, the trend found is that smaller police departments are mostly being utilized as training and recruitment grounds for bigger agencies.

Presently, the city of Uvalde, for instance, is one of many agencies that provides all of the equipment necessary for its sponsored officers to attend the police academy. Ideally, when the police cadet graduates from the police academy, he or she is evaluated and will be hired by the local agency, depending on the number of vacancies. In addition, those recruits fresh out of the academy confront a lack of vacancies. It is likely that the department will offer opportunities in the area of communication

dispatchers while the new officer waits and hopes to receive the next police officer vacancy.

Losing the officer after being trained is a huge loss for any police agency. Replacing that empty slot creates a hidden, additional expense. For example, the capture cost for the Uvalde Police Department during the police officer training period, which includes six months probation with field training officer (FTO) programs as the hidden cost, is in excess of \$28,000.00 per officer. Multiply that by two or three officers leaving during the same fiscal year, and it is devastating for smaller agencies. Therefore, smaller police agencies cannot afford to continue this ongoing pattern or trend of losing officers as quickly as they are trained to bigger agencies that offer better or higher salaries.

Therefore, the relevance of this study is to identify those factors necessary for law enforcement agencies to know what is required to keep these potential officers interested in being employed by their respective police departments. This will, in turn, provide quality police services to their cities and respective counties. The purpose of this research is to determine officer retention rates from smaller area cities like the Uvalde Police Department and other smaller city police agencies similar in size. A comparison of these results will be focused mostly on five major cities in Texas: Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Austin, and El Paso. The final objective is to determine if police officers' salaries have a direct correlation to officer retention in smaller cities and in contrast to the five major cities mentioned above. Finally, this writer will attempt to explore the reason(s) why officers choose to leave smaller agencies for the major cities listed in this research. Ultimately, this author will demonstrate that if this trend

continues, there will be an everlasting effect on smaller police departments throughout this state and possibly throughout the country. This research will measure what impact this trend will have on smaller police agencies.

With the current cost of training an entry level officer, it is clear that local city, county, and state officials must do something to stop the wave of police officers leaving for the bigger agencies with better pay and benefits. In the end, officer retention rests on a multitude of factors that good employers should make every effort to control.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Research by departments throughout and outside this country on the subject of police salaries and its effects on retention are somewhat contradictory. Research consistently focused on the motivating factors of why officers seek employment elsewhere (Cooper & Ingram, 2004). Cooper and Ingram's (2004) findings revealed that officers left one agency for another for reasons contrary to the research in this particular study.

Job dissatisfaction ranked among the highest of factors in retention, but Litcher, Reister, & Mason (2006) discussed other factors and stated, "the most satisfying elements are relationship with peers, amount of responsibility, while the least satisfying job elements are salaries" (p. 27). The talk among today's high-level police administrators and one of the most prevalent concerns in law enforcement today is staffing and job satisfaction. Banks (2007) described agencies struggling to obtain qualified personnel, even after offering many incentives like health benefits, sign-on bonuses, mortgage assistance, and moving allowances. There is a perception about police work that is based on what television and movies portray. Despite the dangers of

the job, people grow up wanting to become police officers, but long working hours, advancement opportunities, and even a sense of belonging can affect an officer's decision to stay or go. It is generally accepted that the term "24/7" could have easily been coined for police officers. Even in off-hours, they are expected to continue to do their job. A police officer's job is one of several of the most important in every community.

Larger cities, which may offer better pay and benefits, still face the challenge of retaining officers (Eiserer, Farwell, Ramshaw, & Shaw, 2005). The threat of officers leaving to move closer to their hometown still exists; therefore, rural communities with smaller police agencies benefit when it deals with location. According to Eiserer et al. (2005), location is shown to be of importance and a considering factor when leaving an agency.

A final issue to consider is the difference in age generations. For many of generation X and Y, the number one goal is to get hired somewhere. Hacker (2009) stated that once generation X and Y have been hired and have their foot in the door, some of them will begin searching for better options. When looking for a job, generation X and Y want and, for the most part, prefer a friendly and fun workplace, career and professional development, and a diverse work force. In addition, generation X and Y prefer jobs advertised online, where the job applications process is easy and electronic. They want and demand flexible benefits, flexible scheduling, high tech equipment, and employment skills that will help them build a good resume. For that reason, personnel losses may be unavoidable if police agencies do not meet the demands for recruiting generation X and Y. The losses could become detrimental to any police department.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance that police agencies take steps to ensure junior officers are working with senior officers to preserve institutional knowledge and, at the same time, meet the demands of generations to come (Hacker, 2009).

Ultimately, the challenges of retention are faced by both large and small police departments. The focus of this research is to show the importance of pay equality as it pertains to retention, and it is believed to be one of the largest factors as to why officers leave an agency for better opportunities or greener pastures. According to Sneider (2003), the state of California's other police agencies, in order to keep pace with Santa Monica's Police Department, which is labeled as premiere police department in the state, had to increase salaries in order to recruit and retain staff. It is important to note that retention is cheaper than retraining, and with every officer that is convinced to stay, money is saved and agency knowledge is preserved.

Retaining good officers saves the department valuable re-training costs and should not be ignored. According to Banks (2007), "Palo Alto California cops were leaving in droves, and the town lost 10 officers in two years and two more detectives are on the way out" (p.1). It was noted by Palo Alto Police Chief Ron Davis that having "the lowest pay and benefits exacerbates the challenge" (as cited by Banks, 2007, p.1). Police Chief Davis also stated, "We need to take these challenges and start working with the union to put the current industry situation into perspective" (as cited by Banks, 2007, p. 1). Frustration continues among police administrators as to the retention of officers. Recently, in San Angelo, Texas, Anthony (2008) reported that the department is allotted 159 officers and has 13 vacancies. According to the article, some 15 other officers are still in training and will not be on the streets until next year. At least 17



officers are seeking higher-paying employment elsewhere, leaving 45 open or potentially open positions, which equals almost 30% of the entire department. Chief Tim Vasquez stated, “we need to look at ways to retain our officers” (as cited in Anthony, 2008, p. 1). Chief Vasquez also said, “We have to find a way to keep them here” (as cited in Anthony, 2008, p. 1). Chief Vasquez is set to approach the San Angelo City leaders to attempt to correct a recruitment problem that has vexed him for years in office.

In today’s police departments, almost all face problems with recruitments, and most administrators know that recruitment is synonymous with salaries. According to Sneider (2003), “In order to keep the pace with the high cost in police salaries, other municipalities have increased their safety personnel wages in order to recruit and staff” (p. 5). The article also elaborated that, in fact, “most top city officials see no problem with paying high public safety wages” (Sneider, 2003, p. 2). As for attracting good, quality applicants, most police administrators today believe that to get the best, the agency must pay the most. Mayor Richard Bloom for the city of San Angelo, Texas stated, “We want the most of our professional force and in order to reach that goal we need to pay the money” (as cited in Sneider, 2003, p. 2). Perhaps salaries are only one of many other factors that sum up officer retention, but it surely surfaces as the most used factor in this research.

Following Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) suffered serious recruiting and retention problems. In the study conducted by Rostker (2007), he noted that the NOPD began shrinking in terms of both the budget for the police officers and the actual number of officers on the street. This was shortly

discovered and noted in a research brief conducted by Rand Corporation researchers. They conducted a “quick-look study” to help with the NOPD’s retention problem. One factor that was highlighted the most was compensation. Providing a competitive level of compensation (salaries) is essential for the NOPD long-term viability. Notable was that NOPD’s salaries were noncompetitive relative to those in other, comparable cities. Most notably in the past few years, and contrary to indicated factors affecting officer retention, salaries have failed to increase, and, in some instances, they have actually diminished. The lack of city priorities for NOPD salaries created a crisis in retention among their ranks, and, in addition, it also hindered the department’s ability to attract new recruits and motivated current officers (as cited by Rostker, 2007).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methods utilized in obtaining research for this particular study will consist of surveys involving police officers in the Houston, San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, and El Paso area police departments. In addition, surveys will be conducted of the surrounding area communities. Approximately 100 surveys will be sent to a multitude of agencies in an effort to conclude the ranking factors of retention. The participants will not be asked to specifically state statistical numbers on exactly how many resignations or separations their department faced, and this factor will not be considered for the findings.

The survey will consist of six reasons or considering factors for leaving their last or previous law enforcement agency. The survey will ask the participants to rank the reasons for leaving their last police employment. They will be asked to select from various categories ranging from better salary, pension/retirement package, and work environment, to job dissatisfaction, location, and how they feel about the boss. These

reasons will be ranked by importance according to each officer surveyed. The survey, once completed, will be broken down and examined according to the factors of importance.

Obtaining pay disparity information among officers of different agencies will be a difficult task when most agencies are somewhat reluctant to give out salary information. The methods used will attempt to examine the most recent collective bargaining agreements and additional information found regarding the five major cities listed above, including their suburbs. The survey will only be sent to full-time police officers to give a better overview of all areas discussed that involve fulltime commissioned officers. Twenty of these surveys will be sent to the different agencies surrounding major cities in Texas. A total of 122 surveys were returned, which is more than what was originally sent. Extra copies of the survey were created by other police participants. The extras were also included in the findings of this report. The graphs in the findings reflect the outcome of the surveys.

## **FINDINGS**

Although the findings of this study varied somewhat, pay disparity within police departments was the major cause for concern; this is, of course, coupled with factors like pension programs and other incentives that are used to retain officers. In these findings, surveyed officers of various counties, and even that of larger cities, cited their work environment as a factor of importance. Perhaps, when faced with significantly higher crime rates or better technological equipment, which are not specifically mentioned in the survey, officers may consider leaving their employed agency.

The research indicated that in San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, El Paso, and Houston areas, salaries are the number one factor for officers leaving other agencies (See Figures 1 through 6 for different areas). Overall, the research showed that out of the all major city areas surveyed, from North, South, East, and West Texas, salaries are the main contributing factor for the officers leaving the agency. The factor of salary is followed by work environment and location. The fourth factor is job dissatisfaction. In these findings, it would seem that other factors, such as work environment and location, are considered indicators that have some effect on officer retention. However, it certainly seemed that retention remains a key concern; no matter what the motive is, salaries continue to be the key issue for retaining officers. The cost of training an officer, only to lose him/her to a larger, better paying agency, consistently threatens chances for smaller agencies to advance in offering more pay.

In addition to these findings, various police departments in the areas of San Antonio, Dallas, and Houston were asked how long it takes to hire, train, and deploy police officers. The most expeditious process was an average of 30 days for the application process, 14 days for the background check, 10 days for the testing and oral board, and 14 weeks for the psychological results. When added together, there is a minimum time period of 60 days or two (2) months for hiring an individual. For the most part, the problems and costs encountered in recruiting, hiring, and training officers varied by agency, but there was an average cost that varied between \$28,000 for smaller agencies and \$37,000 for larger agencies to fully train and equip an officer. The amount of time for how long agencies maintain officers in periods of police departments' growth and non-growth within the agency varies between agencies, and the figures

obtained are inconclusive. One can say that economics plays a major factor for growth and non-growth for the agencies. These are areas that were examined, but salaries are the overall indicator regarding the findings.

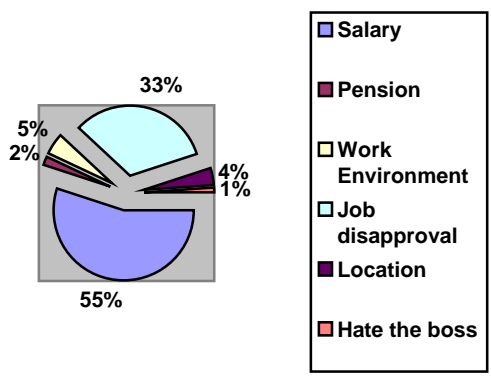


Figure: 1 (San Antonio area)

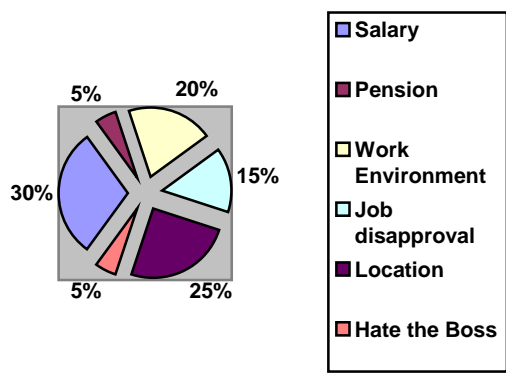


Figure: 2 (Austin Area)

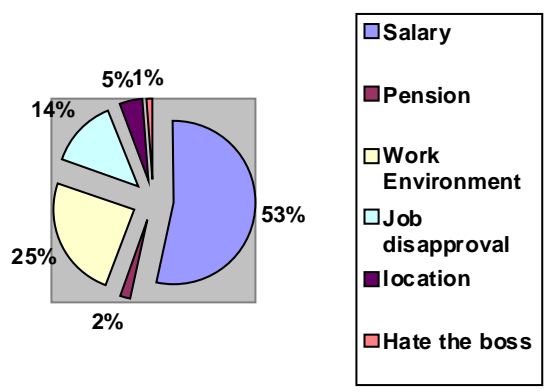


Figure: 3 (Houston Area Survey)

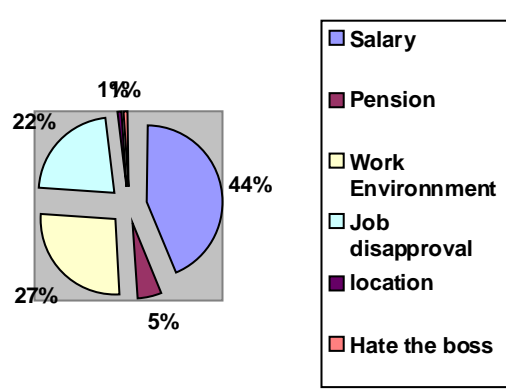
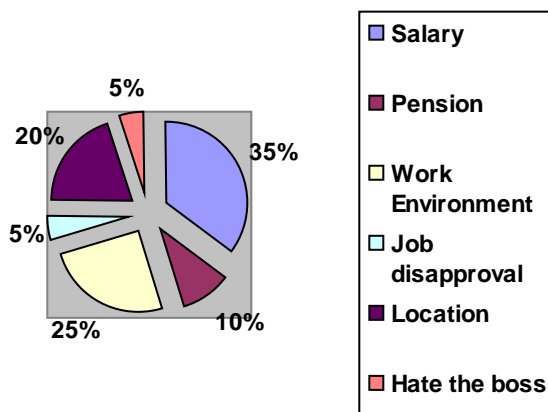
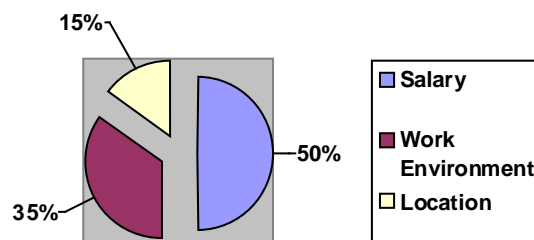


Figure: 4 (Dallas Area Survey)



**Figure: 5** (EL Paso Survey Area)



**Figure: 6** (Overall)

## DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

In today's law enforcement arena, there are many things to consider regarding what is used to measure success in law enforcement. In many cases, the law enforcement community can evaluate why police departments throughout the country are having many problems in combating crime in their assigned jurisdictions and ask the question of what is contributing to this existing problem.

Strengthening methods for recruiting and retaining qualified officers could be emerging as one of the major challenges facing today's law enforcement agencies and administrators. It is crucial to identify existing problems and implement those strengthening methods and positive solutions, which could very well determine the success of law enforcement in the future. The primary purpose of this study was to attempt to determine the cause of the officer retention crisis and how pay disparity is affecting smaller communities. A survey was conducted, and it targeted the geographics in metropolitan areas such as Houston, San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, and El Paso police departments. The outcome of the surveys identified reasons for officer separation. The

results are a comparative analysis of these five major cities and surrounding areas that identified the retention rates and the factors involved affecting officer retention.

The conclusion drawn in this study shows that although a multitude of factors affect the retention rate of officers, competitive salaries between larger and smaller cities is one of the ultimate deciding factors for an officer's decision to stay or leave an agency. Therefore, something must be done to stop the trend of making smaller agencies training grounds for bigger agencies. Officer retention for smaller agencies is imperative. Having said this, a possible solution to the problem of officer retention as it relates to pay disparity is for state or federal governments to step in and assist Texas law enforcement by providing a standard across-the-board base salary for all police recruits at the entrance level. This could be justified by saying that all commissioned police officers in Texas and throughout the country are required to complete the same criteria for police licensing. In general, the idea could be followed by other incentives like bonuses, continuing education, and opportunities for advancements within agencies at higher salaries. Participants in this study revealed that the attraction of leaving a smaller agency for that of a larger agency is because larger agencies offer better pay and nicer fringe benefits.

In addition, it is imperative that each city, large or small, have a full support system mechanism from its citizens, such as yearly recognition of its police officers, salary increases, equipment, and manpower resources. This support system should not only be from citizens, but should include city council members, the city manager, the mayor, and other governmental officials. Undoubtedly, with such a support system for officers' retention, police agencies will be able to improve on retaining officers, which

will create money savings by not having to retrain new officers to augment the departing officers.

Police agencies need to become better at focusing on and creating ideas for officer retention. As indicated in this research, pay is the number one factor affecting officer retention in the great state of Texas, and most likely, the trend will continue since there are no plans to correct the problem. Something must be done to cross over into 21<sup>st</sup> century law enforcement, or small city police departments will vanish due to larger departments having more salary competitiveness for recruiting and retaining personnel.



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## APPENDIX

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The following survey is being conducted to identify and rank significant factors why officers leave Police agencies in pursue to work for others (Police Agencies).

Number the Following:

Please rank the following in the order of greatest importance. One (1) being the highest reason or most important in your decision to terminate your last police employment and six (6) being the least.

If you have made a career of your agency and have never terminated employment, please participate in this survey with your best reasons why officers terminate but check the following \_\_\_\_\_ to indicate so.

### Poll your Agency:

Better Salary \_\_\_\_\_

Pension/ Retirement Package \_\_\_\_\_

Work Environment \_\_\_\_\_

Job Dissatisfaction \_\_\_\_\_

Location (closer to home) \_\_\_\_\_

Hate the boss \_\_\_\_\_

Personal information:

Gender:            Male \_\_\_\_\_            Female \_\_\_\_\_

Age:    19- 25 \_\_\_\_\_            26- 40 \_\_\_\_\_            40- 55 \_\_\_\_\_            Over 55 \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Service 0-2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3-5 \_\_\_\_\_ 5-10 \_\_\_\_\_ 10-15 \_\_\_\_\_ 15-20 \_\_\_\_\_ 20  
+ \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you,  
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