

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

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Officer Retention in Law Enforcement

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

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March 2005**

ABSTRACT

Unacceptably high employee turnover is costly for any organization. In private companies it can cause a decrease in profits that coincides with the increase in the turnover rate (Branham, 2001). While law enforcement agencies are not profit based organizations, officer retention problems cause strains on the budget, which is passed on to the citizens of the community in the form of greater expenditure of tax dollars. The purpose of this research project is to identify the reasons officers leave one law enforcement agency in order to work for another. Officer surveys are used to identify the factors that determine why officers leave one agency for another, reasons given by officers for liking or disliking the agencies they are with, as well as reasons officers give for wishing to remain with their current departments. The information gathered showed that there are two main categories given by officers for the questions on the survey. The first category considers that agencies have no ability to change. The second category includes factors that agency administrators can have an affect on. An analysis of the information indicates that job satisfaction and administrative staff were the two leading factors that are controllable. Although some agencies will have unique problems leading to unacceptable officer turnover rates, the information gathered during this research indicates that the departments that are the most successful in retaining their officers are those that provide a good work environment along with quality administrative practices. This information can be used by agency administrators to formulate a plan to reduce or avoid unacceptable officer turnover rates.

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INTRODUCTION

Retention of officers has been a long standing problem for law enforcement agencies. Departments of all sizes suffer from this problem. Officer retention is not only a monetary issue and a failure to maintain quality officers can have multiple, negative long-term effects on a department. These problems include the cost of training, unnecessary allocation of personnel to train new employees, and a lack of qualified personnel available to promote into positions of leadership within the department when the opportunity for advancement arises.

There has been much debate regarding the varied reasons why officers leave their career in law enforcement entirely or simply leave their departments to work for other departments. It is the latter group of officers that this research will concentrate on. The primary goal of this research is to find why officers leave their departments to work for other departments.

In order to determine reasons why officers leave their departments, two methods of inquiry will be used. The first of these methods will be the use of a survey. A survey will be given to officers of various departments and will inquire as to whether or not the officer has ever left an agency to work for another, or considered such action. The officer's reasons for taking or contemplating such action will be questioned. The information contained in all of the surveys completed will be tabulated in order to present the various reasons officers give for contemplating or actually leaving their present employment. Literature on the subject of employee retention will also be reviewed in order to gather statistics and compare the published material through surveys and interviews.

There are many reasons why an officer might leave one law enforcement agency to work for another. The most common belief is that most officers leave one department for

another in order to earn higher wages. It is anticipated that this research will prove that officers do not necessarily leave their present jobs for monetary reasons. Other important factors prove to be the greater cause of self-termination from one department to join another.

The intended outcome of this research is to determine which factors are the most common concerning employee turnovers. Factors will then be separated into two main groups, which include factors that can be influenced by department practices and factors outside department control. The results of this research can then be used to implement personnel management policies that may increase officer retention. If agencies can adopt practices that reduce the rate of employee turnover, both the agencies and communities will benefit in numerous ways. These benefits include reduced training costs, a consistent, higher number of officers working in the community and the reduced stress on officers who must frequently recruit, test, hire, and train new officers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While researching the topic of officer retention in law enforcement, the author was surprised to find that there is not a great quantity of literature dealing exclusively with the subject of employee turnover. The literature mainly focused on “for-profit” organizations or the challenges of managing generation X. Although some of the factors that affect employee retention in the private sector may translate into the field of law enforcement, it is important to remember that law enforcement officers function within a unique culture.

It should be noted that some turnover is desirable and this is true for a couple of reasons. First, if all officers stay and advance in pay grades, most officers will be at or near the top of their pay grades, causing budget issues. Secondly, new officers bring new ideas, attitudes and abilities that prevent an agency from becoming stagnant (Branham, 2001).

If an administrator of a law enforcement agency believes that they have an unacceptable officer turnover rate, they will first need to measure their turnover rate in order to compare it with that of other agencies of similar size in their region. There are seven general methods for measuring employee turnover.

1. Average length of service – sum of length of service for each member of the department divided by the number of employees.
2. Accession rate – number of new members added during the period divided by the average number of members during that period.
3. Separation rate – number of members who left during the period divided by the average number of members during the period.
4. Stability rate – number of beginning members who remain during the period divided by the number of members at the beginning of the period.
5. Instability rate – number of beginning members who leave during the period divided by the number of members at the beginning of the period.
6. Survival rate – number of new members who remain during the period divided by the number of new members.
7. Wastage rate – number of new members who leave during the period divided by the number of new members.

The most prevalent method of measuring the employee rate in private sector organizations is the separation rate. By using separation rate, organizations obtain the broadest indicator of their turnover problem. This is due to the fact that this measure reflects a general tendency to leave an organization regardless of employee tenure (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982).

Upon concluding that an agency has a turnover rate that is at a level that is unacceptable, the next logical response would be to attempt to find a reason or reasons for the problem of officer retention. In order to do this, agency administrators must be willing to give their officers the opportunity to provide their concerns without fear of retribution. Using a survey like the one found in this study will provide insight into the factors affecting each officer's decisions on whether they wish to remain with the department or seek employment elsewhere.

While the author was unable to locate any literature dealing directly with the reasons officers leave one agency for another, there were articles containing examples of what some law enforcement agencies have done to improve morale and lower attrition. Steven J. Sarver published an article in The Police Chief magazine in October of 2003. The article was titled “Twelve Steps to Getting the Most Out of Your Employees.” Although this article was not written to address the issue of officer retention directly it did provide insight on what makes an officer want to do his or her best work for an agency. The steps for getting the most out of employees were as follows:

1. Try to see things from the line officer’s point of view.
2. Include them in decision-making activities and listen to them.
3. Give them responsibility and hold them accountable.
4. Reward them for contributions and give credit where it is due.
5. Publicly commend their accomplishments.
6. Mentor and support them.
7. Challenge them to explore new ideas.
8. Treat them as they want to be treated.
9. Be firm when necessary.
10. Be honest with them.
11. Be a part of their activities.
12. Care about them.

Another article that dealt with officer turnover was written based only on small departments. Small law enforcement agencies with officer retention problems are affected more greatly than large departments. This is due to the fact that these departments tend to have minimal personnel when they are at full staff, making the loss of officers more of a problem for them than for larger agencies that have a greater number of officers to handle the additional work load.

An example of a department that has been successful at maintaining officers is Ferguson Township, in central Pennsylvania. Ed Conner became chief of the department in 1985. The department has eleven officers and has only had to replace four officers in the last

eight years. Upon being sworn in, Chief Conner called a departmental meeting and asked the officers what they wanted from the department. Conner discussed the practicality of the suggestions one at a time, showing his officers that their concerns mattered to him. In the article by Hoffman (1993), Conner stated “Innovation is why law enforcement will excel. You have to make the officers an important part of the job. If you don’t keep officers interested in the job, you will lose them” (p. 26).

In an article from the early nineties, Chief John Marriott with the Heritage Police Department in Pennsylvania stated that his department did not have a turnover problem. Until a few years prior to his interview for the article, the newest officer at the department had been employed there for thirteen years. Chief Marriott credited this to the fact that the department had a “complete participatory style of management” (p. 27). As chief, Marriott gave the first-line supervisors more control and allowed the officers to have more input regarding how the department was run. Although the Hermitage Police Department had some of the best pay and benefits in the area at the time, Marriott claimed that a high salary level did not keep officers from leaving (Hoffman, 1993).

Though this research is not intended as a study on the generation of officers who are part of generation X, there is a large amount of literature available on managing, recruiting and retaining officers who are a part of that generation. While most of the officers who entered the workforce in the last decade have come from generation X, there are still many from the “Baby Boom” generation in law enforcement, as well as a growing number of officers from the latest generation known as generation Y. Generation X officers began to develop their life and work ethics in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time there was a change from the previous generation in how Generation X deals with authority, views their

role in society and sees the status of work in their lives. According to Mineard (2003), officers from generation X “were raised with a sense of self and the role of authority” (p. 94). Members of generation X value their personal time off and are willing to relocate in order to work in an agency that compliments their lives (Mineard, 2003). This should indicate to agency administrators that they must look at the way their agencies are operated. If the agency is running under the same method of operation as it did in previous decades, this may be a factor in failing to retain the younger generation of officers.

A review of the indicators given by authors on employee turnover gave the impression that monetary gain is not the primary reason for employees leaving one agency for another. On the contrary, management practices appear to have more of an influence on employee turnover than salary. However, it is also obvious that the literature did not provide an in-depth analysis of all factors that contribute to officer retention problems.

METHODOLOGY

There are two main questions in regards to officer retention in law enforcement. The first question asks, what are the reasons officers have for leaving or staying at the department they work for? The second question asks, what steps can be taken by department administrators to maintain good officers? A review of this topic will be conducted by examining existing articles, books and research material. Additionally, a survey will be given to officers from different law enforcement agencies in the State of Texas.

The survey consists of a series of questions that are fill-in-the-blank format and multiple choice. The survey was provided to officers who attended multi-agency training events in Victoria, Texas. For this reason, the return rate for the survey was 100 percent. The results of the survey show the reasons an officer sought employment with their current

agency, what makes an officer consider leaving one agency to seek employment with another agency, and what factors officers have for liking or disliking the agency they work for. The results will be analyzed, placed into number and graph form and presented in summary format. The author anticipates that most officers consider leaving one agency for another for purposes other than monetary compensation.

FINDINGS

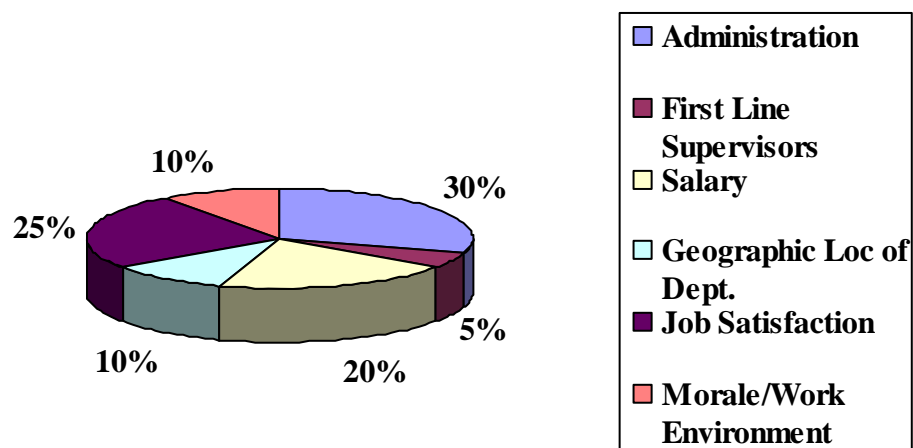
The topic of officer retention is one that is of high priority for many police administrators especially since the cost of training new officers is high. A study conducted in the fall of 2004, by the Victoria Police Department, in Victoria, Texas concluded that the cost of hiring and training a new officer who is already commissioned was approximately sixty thousand dollars. This cost included salaries for the new officer and training officers for the period of a four week orientation and sixteen week field training program. If the department hires non-commissioned personnel the cost is considerably higher, as the new employee has to attend a sixteen week formal academy prior to beginning work at the department. If the new officer fails to complete the program or decides to leave the department, this money is unrecoverable.

In addition to the aforementioned cost is the fact that a high turnover rate places additional stress on personnel who must recruit, test applicants, hire new officers, and conduct training of the new officers. Many of the officers tasked with training new officers have additional duties that must be completed while training each new officer. For a department to function at the level required to provide its citizens with quality service employee turnover must be kept at an acceptable level.

The survey that was provided to officers from various agencies in the State of Texas asked a series of questions in order to gather information about their work history in law enforcement and provide a better idea of what makes an officer want to work at or leave an agency. A total of 66 surveys were administered and the return rate was 100%. The average respondent had 6.8 years as a law enforcement officer. Experience of the respondents ranged from one year to twenty years of service. Fifty-five percent of the respondents have worked at more than one agency during their law enforcement careers. Of those who have worked in multiple agencies, the average time spent at their previous agencies was five. Most officers worked from one to three years in previous agencies prior to moving to their current employer, while the longest time spent at a previous agency was 6.5.

The officers were asked to prioritize a list of sixteen given factors that make them like or dislike the agency they work for. These factors were predetermined from a list of known factors the author gathered during experience as a police supervisor. As reflected in figure 1, there were six of the sixteen factors that were indicated by the officers as being their top reason for liking or disliking the agency they work for.

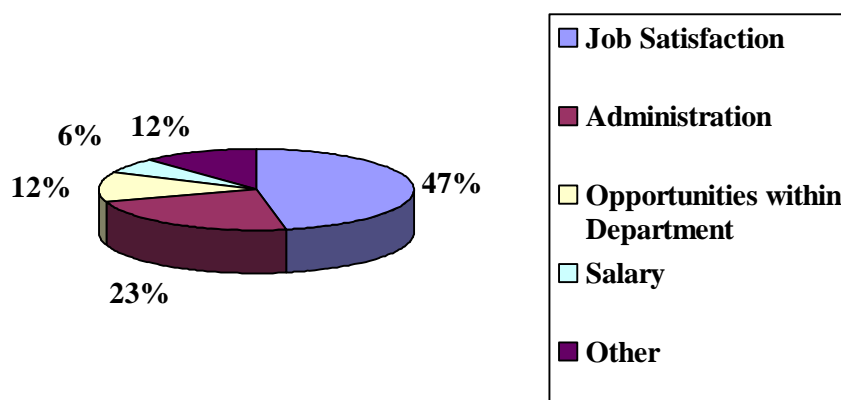
Figure 1



In addition to the data gathered through the prioritizing question, officers who left one agency for employment with another agency were asked what their reasons were for leaving. Unlike the previous data, this information was in the fill in the blank format. Although the two questions are not the same, the respondents gave answers that were close in reason to those shown as top indicators in the data above. The exception being that some percentages were not as close as the author would have expected. Of the responses for this question 10% put administration or supervisor problems, 10% wrote lack of job satisfaction, 10% put workload or overworked, 30% put geographic location of agency, 20% indicated salary, 10% put size of the department, and 10 % wrote lack of advancement or growth opportunities.

While knowing the reasons an officer may look to leave a department for employment with another agency is important, it is also important to know what factors make an officer want to remain employed with his or her current agency. In order to determine this, officers were asked what factors make them want to remain with their current department if they are not seeking to resign. Eighty percent of those given the survey responded to the question. The results are indicated in Figure 2.

Figure 2



Looking at the differences in responses provided for the questions examining why an officer chooses to remain at his or her current department, reasons officers chose to leave a previous department, and what officers indicated as reasons they like or dislike the agency that they work for, may cause some confusion. Although none of the respondents indicated that the geographical location of their current agency as a reason for remaining employed there, location was the number one factor given for why some of the same officers left their previous agencies to seek employment with the agencies they currently work for. While forty-seven percent of those surveyed put job satisfaction down as a reason for remaining where they currently work, only ten percent wrote that job satisfaction was the reason they left their previous employer. It should be noted that ten percent of those who have worked at more than one agency left their previous agency for “work load” issues, which may be placed in the same category as job satisfaction. However, this was not clarified in the survey and was therefore left as a separate indicator.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The topic of officer retention is one that most law enforcement agency administrators are concerned with. The fact that fewer qualified persons are applying for the position of police officer than in previous years only compounds the problems caused by unacceptable turnover rates. All law enforcement agencies are expected to serve and protect the citizens whom they are responsible for. If an agency is unable to retain quality officers, this task becomes more difficult. While some turnover is desired in order to prevent stagnation of the work environment (Branham, 2001), too many officers resigning from a department can be an indicator that problems exist within the agency. It is up to the

department, local government administrators and citizens of the community to determine what rate of officer turnover is acceptable.

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons officers remain with an agency or decide to self-terminate employment with one agency in order to seek employment with another. It was the intention of the author to gather information that can be used by law enforcement agency administrators to increase officer retention within their departments. The author hypothesized that most officers who decide to leave one agency for employment with another, do so for reasons other than monetary gain, which is often viewed as the primary reason officers leave one agency for another.

This research identified numerous reasons officers gave for leaving one agency for another. The seven reasons given by respondents were geographic location of agency, salary, administrative staff, job satisfaction, work load, size of agency, and lack of opportunity for advancement in their previous agencies. Of these factors, location was the reason given by most (30%) of the officers. This may seem an unfortunate finding for many agency administrators, as this is the one factor that remains unchangeable. The second most indicated factor officers gave for leaving their previous agencies was salary. However, this was not an overwhelming factor, as it was only given as the reason for leaving by twenty percent of the respondents. The other five factors, which include administrative staff, job satisfaction, work load, size of agency, and lack of advancement opportunity accounted for ten percent each.

This information is not what many agency administrators would like to see. Not only is the leading factor given for leaving one employer for another one that nobody has any control over, there was no other single factor that had an overwhelming response. There is

no true single “fix” to the problem of officer retention and the answer to the problem of officer retention is one that, for many agencies, will take a multi-pronged approach.

With no clear single indicator given for officers leaving one agency for another the next logical response is to view the data gathered in reference to the questions examining why officers choose to remain with their current agencies and what makes them like or dislike their current agencies. When reviewing this information, two factors stand out as highly important to the respondents of the survey. These factors are job satisfaction and agency administration and fortunately these are two factors that agency administrators can have an influence on.

The factors of job satisfaction and administrative staff may appear vague. However, they are areas that in most cases can be improved without the agency having to spend money from their budgets. This will hold true unless there are equipment issues that cause problems with the job satisfaction rating of the officers.

The results of the study provide a basic overall view of the causes of employee turnover in law enforcement in the State of Texas. The results of the study should be considered by those concerned with officer retention within their department and it is advised that any department that is having problems with an unacceptable turnover rate conduct a survey of its officers in order to get a better picture of what is causing their officers to leave. While some problems may be common from one agency to another, and easily recognized by agency administrators, some law enforcement agencies will have unique situations that are not addressed in the study. Furthermore, the problems members of one department may have with job satisfaction or administrative staff may be entirely different from those same

categories in another department. For this reason, it is impossible to provide one easy-to-follow formula for all departments to use in the effort to retain quality police officers.

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OFFICER SURVEY

I am working on a research paper about employee retention. My goal is to determine what steps an agency must take in order to achieve the goal of long term retention. In order to achieve that goal, any agency must first know what makes an employee want to remain employed with an agency. Equally important is for the agency to know what makes a person wish to terminate the employer/employee relationship. Please take the time to answer the questions below. Your assistance is appreciated.

What type of department do you work for? Federal State Sheriff Municipality Other _____

What factor(s) brought you to your current career?

How many years in law enforcement? _____

How many years with current department? _____

What made you apply for a job with the department you are currently working at?

If you have worked for another law enforcement agency, what was your reason for leaving?

Rank currently held? _____

What are your current duties? _____

Do you enjoy your current work assignment? _____

If you enjoy your current work assignment, why do you?

If you do not know enjoy your current work assignment, why do you not?

What are the main causes of stress in your professional life?

What are the aspects of your profession you enjoy the most?

Have you ever applied with another law enforcement agency while working for your current department? _____

If so, were you offered a job with the department you applied at? _____

If you were offered a job, why did you decide to remain where you are?

Are you currently seeking to resign from your current employment? _____

If so, do you intend on remaining in the law enforcement profession? _____

If you are not looking to resign from your current employer, what factors make you want to remain with your department?

Do you have goals for our professional future? _____

If so, what are they?

If you have goals, do you have a plan on how to achieve these goals? Explain.

Is there an educational aspect to your professional plan? If so, explain.

If you have goals, who helped you develop them? _____

What was your starting salary with your current department? (Circle One)

\$10,000 - \$20,000 \$20,001- \$30,000 \$30,001 - \$40,000 \$40,001 - \$50,000 Over \$50,000

What is your current salary? (Circle One)

\$10,000 - \$20,000 \$20,001- \$30,000 \$30,001 - \$40,000 \$40,001 - \$50,000 Over \$50,000

Do you believe your current salary is fair compensation for the work you are assigned?

If not, why? _____

The below list represents many of the factors people give for liking or disliking the agency they work for. Please prioritize the below list from 1 (most important) to 16 (least important) as far as they rank in importance to you.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Administrative Staff | <input type="checkbox"/> Equipment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> First Line Supervisors | <input type="checkbox"/> Advancement Opportunities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Salary | <input type="checkbox"/> Differential/Incentive Pay |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Location | <input type="checkbox"/> Job Satisfaction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Size of Department | <input type="checkbox"/> Lateral Transfer Opportunities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Schedule | <input type="checkbox"/> Moral/Work Environment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Training Opportunities | <input type="checkbox"/> Work Load |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Retirement Benefits | <input type="checkbox"/> Health Insurance Benefits |

If there are other factors that you feel are important to why a person would like to dislike a place of employment please note them here.

If you have any comments on employee retention please write them below.

This survey is being conducted by Roy Boyd of the Victoria Police Department. It is part of my research paper on employee retention for Leadership Command College, through Sam Houston State University. If you have any questions you can contact me by mail, e-mail, or phone, as listed below.

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