



# SYSTEMSTATS

North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center

Governor's Crime Commission

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## Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Police Personnel

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### Introduction

The Governor's Crime Commission, in conjunction with the North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission and the North Carolina Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission, held a joint planning retreat in the early summer of 2000 to identify and address the major emerging issues facing the state's criminal justice system and its public safety personnel. The issue of recruitment and retention was identified as a significant area of concern with the joint commissions requesting that an in-depth and statewide study be conducted in this area. Specifically, four such studies were requested with each study focusing on one segment of the public safety community. Research studies on recruiting and retaining sworn police officers, sworn deputy sheriffs, detention facility personnel and telecommunicators were completed by members of the North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center and staff from the two training and standards commissions. This issue of SystemStats presents a condensed version of the final report on recruiting and retaining sworn police officers.

### Methods

A 27-item survey was created by the research team with the first section of the questionnaire presenting questions which addressed the issue of recruiting sworn police personnel. The survey items dealt with recruitment strategies and techniques, the number of applicants and the extent to which the responding agency had a backlog or waiting list of potential candidates. Part two addressed the issue of attrition and retention and included questions which were designed to detail the responding agency's turnover and vacancy rates and how these have varied over the past three years.

A total of 205 surveys were distributed with 53 (25.8%) going to agencies with more than 18 sworn officers, 45 (22%) to agencies with nine to 18 sworn officers and 43 (21%) being mailed to agencies with five to eight sworn officers. The remaining 64 surveys (31.2%) were mailed to the state's smallest law enforcement agencies as defined as having fewer than five full-time sworn officers. A total of 124 questionnaires were completed by agency personnel producing an aggregate return rate of 60 percent.

### Results

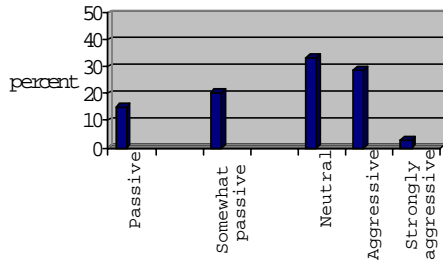
#### *Recruitment Issues*

Survey participants were asked to describe their respective agencies' recruitment strategies on a continuum which ranged from passive to neutral to strongly aggressive. As Figure 1 (page 2) reveals the respondents were fairly evenly distributed across the five available response categories with one-third reporting that their agency's recruitment strategy could best be described as neutral. Only 2.5 percent suggested a strongly aggressive recruitment strategy. Combining the five response categories into three produces an almost identical and equal distribution with 35.2 percent of the agencies having a passive recruitment strategy, 33.6 percent describing their strategy as neutral and the remaining 31.2 percent reporting an aggressive strategy.

The most frequently employed recruitment technique was word of mouth (N=118) with 95 percent of the respondents indicating that this was the preferred method which their respective agencies used to recruit potential officers. The second most common recruitment technique was newspaper advertising (N=103, 83.1%), followed by recruiting through the local community colleges (N=89, 71.8%) and use of the Internet (N=78, 62.9%). Recruitment through the

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**Figure 1 Perceived Strength of Agency Recruitment Strategy**



Police Corp program and through radio and television advertising were less frequently used (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1 also depicts the average effectiveness rating for the nine recruitment techniques which were listed in the survey. The top three most effective techniques were word of mouth ( $X=6.83$ ), local community colleges ( $X=5.62$ ) and newspaper advertising ( $X=5.38$ ). Job fairs, the Police Corp program and radio/television advertising were perceived to be the least effective techniques suggesting that the most effective techniques are also the most frequently used. In other words, police agencies use what works the best for finding potential applicants.

Table 1 Recruitment Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using	Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)
Word of mouth	118	95.0 %	6.83
Newspaper	103	83.1 %	5.38
Community College	89	71.8 %	5.62
Internet	78	62.9 %	4.64
Personnel listings	76	61.3 %	4.13
Auxiliary/Reserve Force	71	57.3 %	5.32
Job Fairs	61	49.2 %	2.89
Police Corp	44	35.5 %	2.73
Radio/TV	34	25.4 %	.85

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all recruitment techniques which were used by their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

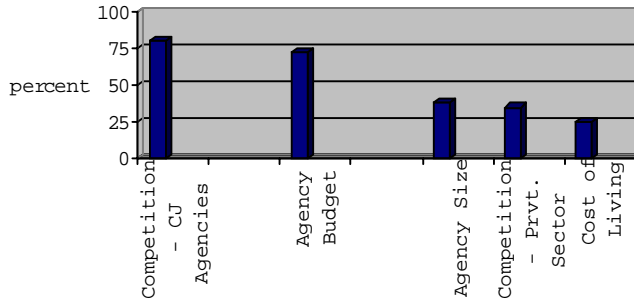
The majority of the police agencies, which were represented in the sample of returned questionnaires, did not have a current waiting list or backlog of qualified applicants (67.5%) while the remaining 32.5 percent did note that they currently maintain a waiting list. Of those agencies which do possess a waiting list the number of qualified applicants, on those agency lists, ranged from two to 36 applicants with the average waiting list containing seven applicants.

The number of applicants, per sworn position, demonstrated a greater degree of variance and ranged from one applicant for each vacant sworn position to 150 applicants per sworn position. The average number of applicants per sworn position, within those police departments represented in the survey, was 9.9.

As part of the survey police personnel were asked to comment, or offer specific recommendations, on what policies, standards and programs should be implemented in order to improve the quality of future applicant pools. Advice on how to recruit more highly qualified police officers was clustered in three primary areas – salaries, improving screening criteria and raising, or establishing new, minimum standards for applicants.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the suggestions dealt with the low and inequitable salary and compensation packages which deter and discourage many excellent candidates from applying for entry-level positions. Frustration at the inability to compete with not only the private sector but also other local and state law enforcement agencies was a common theme among the respondents.

**Figure 2 Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates**



**Figure 3 Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates**

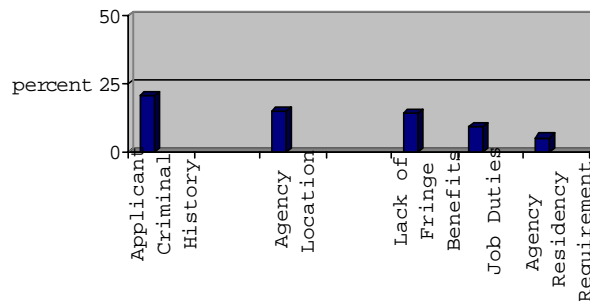
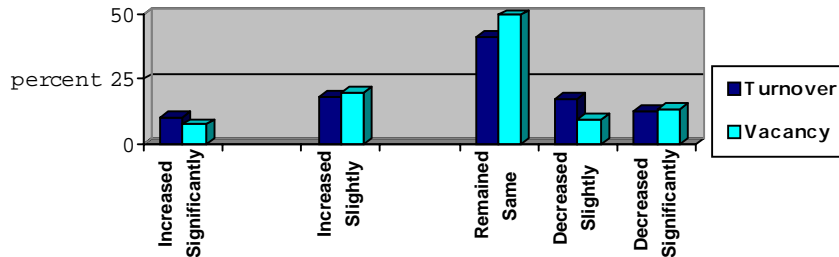


Figure 4 Turnover and Vacancy Rates Over the Past Three Years



The research team identified ten possible obstacles, or barriers, to recruiting more qualified applicants with the survey respondents being asked to list all which have negatively impacted upon local recruitment in their respective agencies. As Figures 2 and 3 (page3) suggest the most common barriers were competition with other criminal justice agencies (80.6%), agency budget restrictions (72.6%), agency size (37.9%) and competing with the private sector (34.7%). A lesser number of agency respondents reported that the current cost of living (25%), applicant criminal histories (21%) and agency location (15.3%) were problematic.

The study team also thought it was important to ascertain the extent to which police agencies hire applicants who have already completed BLET, versus hiring applicants and then sponsoring their BLET training during the state mandated time period after employment. Survey questions addressed both sides of the coin by soliciting participants to state the percent of both pre and post BLET hires. The percentage of applicants who are hired prior to BLET completion ranged from zero to 100 percent with 70 agencies (58.3%) requiring all applicants to complete BLET before they are employed. Responses from eight agencies (6.7%) indicate that 100 percent of their new hires are employed first with admittance into a BLET program occurring thereafter. Across the entire study sample the average police department hires 82 percent of its applicants from an applicant pool that has already completed a BLET program with the remaining 18 percent of the new hires being employed prior to BLET.

*Attrition and Retention Issues*

Turnover rates for sworn police positions, using July 2001 as a base, ranged from zero to 87 percent with an average turnover rate of 14.2 percent being reported for those agencies returning completed surveys. As Figure 4 documents, 41.2 percent of the respondents noted that their agency's turnover rate has remained stable for the past three years. Slightly more than a quarter of the agencies experienced either a significant, or slight, rise in their respective turnover rates while turnover rates dropped for 30.2 percent of the police departments.

Vacancy rates for sworn positions, using June 2002 as a base, ranged from zero to 100 percent with almost half (47.6%) of the agencies reporting a full sworn force with no vacant sworn positions on June 30, 2002. The average vacancy rate for sworn positions was 7.2 percent. As with turnover rates, nearly half of the participating agencies (49.6%) reported that their respective vacancy rates had not changed over the past three years. Slightly more than one-fourth (27.8%) reported an increase in their vacancy rates, over the last three years, with 22.6 percent noting a decline during this period.

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Respondents were offered a list of six different techniques for personnel retention and were asked to specify each technique which is used by their agencies and to rank each in terms of their effectiveness on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective. As Table 2 (page 5) reveals the most popular retention strategy was annual pay increases, irrespective of job performance, i.e. longevity and cost of living adjustments (81.5%). Offering educational incentives, such as tuition reimbursement and allowing officers to attend classes during work hours, was the second most frequently employed technique (76.6%) followed by personnel promotions (69.4%).

Survey participant ratings, on the effectiveness of the six retention techniques, are also provided in Table 2. As a general rule, the most frequently used retention techniques were also perceived to be the most effective with the exception of promotions and assigning favorable work shifts which were perceived to be less effective than performance based merit pay.

Table 2 Retention Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)	
Annual pay increase irrespective of performance	101	81.5%	5.9
Education/training agency expense	95	76.6%	5.6
Promotions	86	69.4%	4.5
Annual pay increase performance based	82	66.1%	5.6
Formal awards, recognition	80	64.5%	4.2
Assigned favorable work shift	75	60.5%	5.2

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all retention techniques which were used by their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

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Table 3 Causal Factors for Police Department Attrition Rates

Factor	Number Reporting	Percentage
Agency budget Restrictions	102	82.3%
Transfer to another law enforcement agency	101	81.5%
Left for private sector	87	70.2%
Retirement	71	57.3%
Agency location	62	50.0%
Agency size	59	47.6%
Cost of living	59	47.6%
Specific job duties	55	44.4%
Unrealistic officer expectations	55	44.4%
Prior criminal history/ Decertification	55	44.4%
Lack of fringe benefits	54	43.5%
Agency residency requirement	51	41.1%

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all attrition factors which affect their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

Table 3 depicts the top three reasons which explain attrition rates within the responding police agencies with agency budget restrictions being reported as the most frequently discussed factor when explaining why police officers leave the department. A high percentage of the respondents also noted that lateral transfers to other law enforcement agencies, and individuals resigning to accept employment in the private sector were

substantial factors which impact upon their respective agency attrition rates. It should be noted that all of the factors listed in Table 3 were still identified as reasons why officers leave, with even the bottom three occurring in slightly more than 40 percent of the responding police agencies.

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Respondents were asked to identify the extent to which each factor impacts their agency's attrition, i.e. to select the best response from a range of percentages. Nearly half of the respondents (44%) noted that agency budget restrictions accounted for 71-100 percent of their agency's total attrition rate. Nearly one-third noted that lateral transfers explained between 81-100 percent of their attrition. Surprisingly, all of the remaining factors were discounted as significant contributors with the majority of the respondents noting that these factors account for less than 10 percent of their agency's total attrition. In other words, agency budget restrictions and lateral transfers account for the bulk of police departments' attrition rates. While the remaining

factors do explain some attrition, or occur in a large number of the departments, they do not occur frequently enough to drive a sizeable decline in a police agency's workforce.

Further questions were asked in an effort to refine, and explore at a much more detailed level, the extent to which lateral transfers impact police agency attrition. Specifically, to ascertain which types of agencies police officers are leaving for when they are granted a lateral transfer. (Refer to Table 4).

Table 4 Police Department Attrition Rates – Lateral Transfers

Factor	Number Reporting	Percentage
Employment with larger law enforcement agency	99	79.9%
Employment with state law enforcement agency	76	61.3%
Employment with same size agency	66	52.4%
Employment with smaller law enforcement agency	51	41.1%

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all possible lateral transfer types which affect their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

Nearly 80 percent of the responding agencies lost officers to larger law enforcement departments, suggesting that higher salaries and more competitive benefits may explain these losses. Lateral transfers to state law enforcement agencies was the second highest reported type of lateral transfer (61.3%) followed by employment with similar size departments (52.4%). Over 40 percent

of the agencies lost personnel to smaller law enforcement agencies suggesting that many officers possibly eschew higher salaries, or receive the same salary, yet obtain a mid to senior level police executive position, i.e. sacrifice pay increases for the prestige of being a high ranking command officer in a smaller jurisdiction.

Thus the data suggest that no one single type of lateral transfer can account for the majority of all lateral transfers occurring within a police agency. In other words, while more agencies report losing officers to state and larger law enforcement agencies they are not losing the majority of their lateral transfers to these types of agencies with transfers to same size and smaller agencies occurring at about the same rate.

Overall, irrespective of the reasons why officers leave, the average length of an officer's employment is 34 months before he/she decides to leave the police agency. Eighty-four percent of the agencies reported an average length of stay less than three years. Thus, it appears that a critical period of two years and ten months, to three years, exists in which police agencies can implement policies and/or programs to improve retention rates and conversely minimize its attrition rate by retaining officers beyond a three-year period. Once an officer is retained beyond this critical period attrition drops precipitously. Only 16 percent of the police agencies reported an average length of stay, for those officers that eventually leave the agency, which was greater than three years.

### **Discussion and Policy Implications/ Recommendations**

It is extremely important to consider external events and the current economic situation, which both local and state police agencies are experiencing, as a contextual framework when interpreting the results of the current study. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terrorism, the current fiscal crisis and recession as well as the war in Iraq have and will impact recruitment and retention issues among the state's police agencies. Economic concerns and limitations may limit attrition as individual officers have fewer options to pursue outside of their current position, i.e. fewer available jobs for which the officers can apply. Conversely, more positions may be created as a response to homeland security issues and more vacant positions may open up in order to fill the void left by officers who have been activated to serve in the military reserves.

As a result, survey responses indicate that as a general rule police departments are not initiating aggressive recruitment campaigns at this time with slightly less than 10 applicants per sworn position. Also, with the exception of four recruitment techniques, respondents do not rate the effectiveness of the current recruitment strategies extremely high as indicated by an average ranking below midpoint of the given scale.

### **Recommendation # 1**

Police departments may wish to consider launching a more aggressive recruitment strategy to fill vacancies which are fairly limited at this time as indicated by an average vacancy rate of 7.2 percent. New and innovative recruitment strategies should be explored as well as holding discussions that center on improving the effectiveness of existing strategies. Perhaps, more recruiting efforts should be conducted on a national level which would include recruiting ex-military personnel. This would expand the average number of applicants, which is currently 9.9 per position and possibly include more individuals which the departments view as better and more qualified applicants.

Respondents overwhelmingly mentioned salary issues as factors affecting both recruitment and retention within their agencies. Increasing the average starting salary may attract a better and larger applicant pool, however study findings suggest that the greater salary concern occurs after, and not before, the applicant is hired as a new officer. On the average officers are leaving the department after two years and 10 months of service possibly because of limited opportunities for promotion and/or the failure to receive an increase in their salaries. In other words they are still receiving the same compensation, or only a slight increase above, their original starting salaries. This holds true for all officers irrespective of whether or not they possess a two or four-year college degree.



## SYSTEMSTATS

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Recommendation # 2

Further work is needed to explore options for retaining officers beyond the three-year service mark including proposals to address increasing officer salaries during this critical period. In addition to cost of living adjustments, merit pay, increased pay for education and specialized training and in-grade step increases should be considered. Graduated pay scales based on length of service, with or without supplemental state and federal funding were mentioned as possible alternatives. Increasing salaries, during this critical period, would probably be more problematic for the small police departments yet would be more beneficial since these agencies reported significantly higher attrition rates.

It is also postulated that these measures would further reduce statewide turnover rates which remained stable, or dropped slightly for the majority of the surveyed agencies, during the past three years. Nonetheless nearly a quarter of the agencies reported increasing turnover rates during this period and these measures would exert more influence on those agencies which experienced a greater degree of turnover above the average statewide rate of 14 percent.

A relatively large percentage of the respondents noted concerns about the current applicant screening process including the role of the community colleges in screening and BLET instruction. Given the fact that across the state 82 percent of the newly employed sworn officers have already completed BLET, the importance of pre-BLET screening should be apparent.

Recommendation # 3

Serious consideration should be directed at examining current BLET screening procedures and further consideration should be given to exploring options for strengthening and improving the screening process. Numerous recommendations were offered in this area including requiring a mandatory passing score on standardized entrance exams, minimum reading and writing test requirements as well as having all interested parties pass the minimum Training and Standards employment requirements prior to enrolling in a BLET course of instruction.

The three largest reasons which explain officer attrition were identified as agency budget restrictions, accepting employment in the private sector and lateral transfers to other law enforcement agencies. While the first two may be more difficult to address, especially in light of the current economic situation, the issue of lateral transfers is within the domain of training and standards.

Recommendation # 4

A more detailed and in-depth study should be conducted to further assess the issue of lateral transfers within the law enforcement community. Issues such as why officers switch agencies, including questions regarding salaries/ benefits and promotions at a higher rank, should be studied. Officers who leave for employment with state agencies and larger municipal law enforcement agencies should be contrasted with those transferring to agencies of the same size and smaller. Recommendations should be directed at reducing the number of lateral transfers across law enforcement agencies which may include consideration of salary issues, extending an officer's employment contract to three years and a combination of employment restrictions and incentives to remain with an agency once employed.

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<p>The Governor's Crime Commission was established in 1977 by the North Carolina General Assembly under G.S. 143B-479. Its primary duty is "to be the chief advisory body to the Governor and the Secretary of the Department of Crime Control and Public Safety for the development and implementation of criminal justice policy." The Crime Commission is always open to comments and suggestions from the general public as well as criminal justice officials. Please contact us and let us know your thoughts and feelings on the information contained in this publication or on any other criminal justice issue of concern to you.</p>			
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## Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Police Personnel

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Prior SystemStats and reports include:

Juvenile Structured Day Programs for Suspended and Expelled Youth: A Statewide Assessment

Effective Strategies for Domestic Violence Shelters: Strengthening Services for Children

Geographic Information Systems for Small and Medium Law Enforcement Jurisdictions (SystemStats)

Dispositional Outcomes of Domestic Violence Ex-Parte and Domestic Violence Protective Orders (SystemStats)

Domestic Violence Shelters and Minorities

Domestic Violence: Dispositional Outcomes of Protective Orders in the Courts

A Process and Impact Evaluation of the North Carolina Communities that Care Initiative

Geographic Information Systems for Small and Medium Law Enforcement Jurisdictions: Strategies and Effective Practices

Perceptions of Crimes Affecting North Carolina's Latino Residents: Results from a Qualitative Crime Prevention Needs Assessment (SystemStats)

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Juvenile Day Treatment Centers - Strategies and Effective Practices

Law Enforcement Domestic Violence Units: Handbooks

Some of these reports can also be found on the Governor's Crime Commission website below:

<http://www.gcc.state.nc.us>

Analysis Center's areas of current study:

Cybercrime

Recruitment and Retention of Public Safety Personnel

SAVAN Evaluation

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