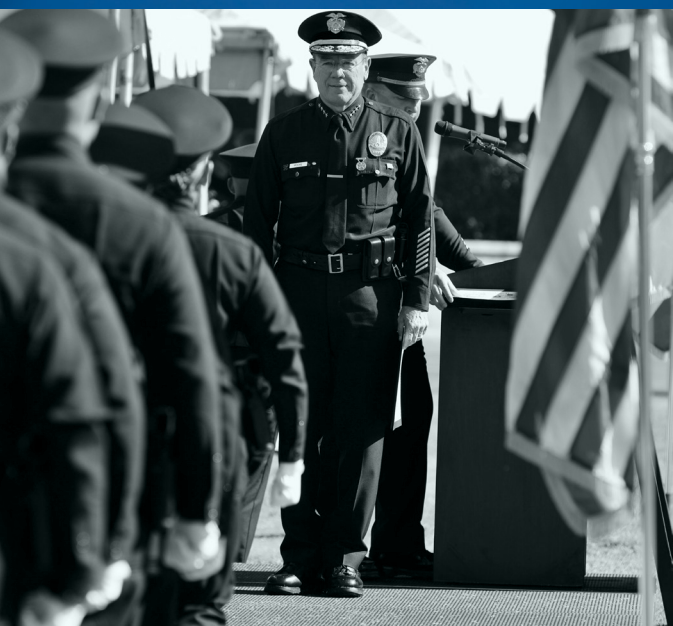




# The State of Recruitment & Retention: A Continuing Crisis for Policing

## 2024 SURVEY RESULTS





# Executive Summary

In the summer of 2024, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) conducted a survey of its member agencies to better understand the challenges police agencies are facing regarding recruitment and retention. The IACP received responses from 1,158 U.S. agencies. More than 80% of these respondents were from local municipal police agencies. Highlights from the survey results include:

**RECRUITMENT** – More than 70% of respondents reported that recruitment is more difficult now than five years ago. On average, agencies are operating at approximately 91% of their authorized staffing levels, indicating a nearly 10% deficit.

**HIRING PROCESSES** – In response to recruitment challenges, about 75% of respondents reported making policy and procedural changes to enhance recruitment and retention. Such changes include loosened restrictions on tattoos, facial hair, and appearance; increased investment in recruitment efforts; and increases in salary. Many agencies also tried to simplify the hiring process. Most agencies are now able to extend a job offer within three months of a candidate's application.

**RETENTION** – Respondents indicated that resignation is most likely within the first five years of hire, and that retaining officers during the recruit/training phase may be more challenging than retaining officers long-term. Moving to another agency for higher salary

was the reason most commonly cited for voluntary resignation. Retirements also seem to be increasing due to both the large number of officers hired in the 1990s now reaching retirement eligibility and officers' unwillingness to work beyond immediate retirement eligibility.

**OPERATIONS** – About 65% of respondents reported that they had reduced services or specialized units because of staffing challenges, prioritizing essential patrol functions over specialized assignments.

**SUCCESS STORIES** – Agencies also reported some success in improving recruitment and retention through intentional strategies. These included creating new pathways for young people to become police officers, emphasizing a healthy organizational culture, prioritizing employee health and wellness, and investing in the professional growth and development of employees.

**CUSTOMIZED SOLUTIONS** – What some agencies saw as a detriment or challenge, other agencies leveraged as an asset. Responses made clear that what works for one agency may not work for another, and a variety of factors must be considered in creating an effective police recruitment and retention strategy.

These conclusions are detailed along with supporting evidence from the survey responses in the report that follows.



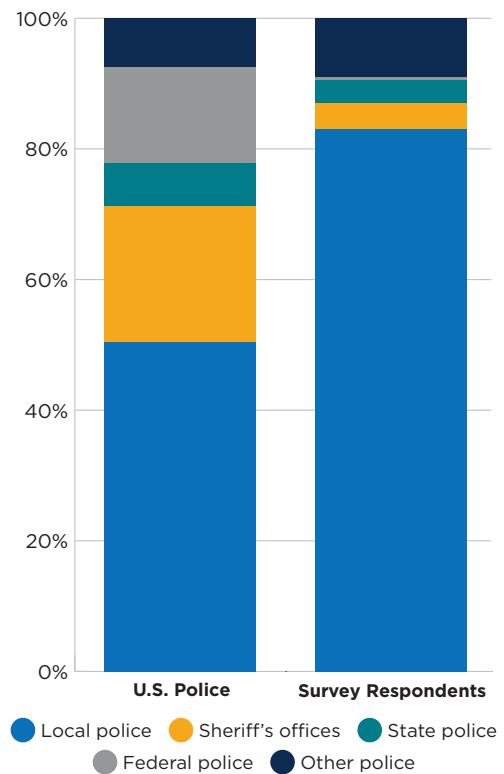
# Recruitment & Retention Survey Results

Anecdotes, industry reports, news outlets, and academic research agree that the state of recruitment and retention in police agencies is in trouble. A 2019 survey from the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) found that 78% of agencies surveyed were struggling to recruit enough officers. The report also noted that the challenge of recruitment is widespread and affects police agencies of all types, sizes, and locations across the United States.<sup>1</sup> The situation grew even worse in 2020, with a global pandemic, widely publicized incidents of police misconduct, community backlash, and a reform movement to “defund the police.” Staffing declined by 80% in a sample of police departments serving large cities from 2019 to 2023.<sup>2</sup> The Police Executive Research Forum also demonstrated a consistently declining number of police officers across 2020–2023, with only a modest increase in 2024.<sup>3</sup> This is despite increased hiring during the same period, indicating a greater number of police officers are leaving the profession than those entering it. As another example, in New York City, nearly 4,000 officers quit the force in 2022, representing the highest number of resignations since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center.<sup>4</sup> Exacerbating the issue, the struggle to recruit new officers means that existing officers are over-burdened and more vulnerable to burnout and, potentially, resignation.

In the summer of 2024, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) conducted a membership survey to better understand the extent of recruitment challenges, the factors that underlie current difficulties, and the impact of these challenges on agencies and the communities they serve.

The IACP received responses from 1,158 U.S. agencies<sup>5</sup> (out of 6,752 member agencies; a 17% response rate) across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. More than 80% of these respondents were from local

A Comparison of U.S. Police to Survey Respondents



municipal police agencies. Compared proportionally to U.S. police agencies, this is an over-representation of local police agencies and an under-representation of both federal police and sheriffs' offices. The results presented here should be interpreted with this in mind. Comparing the results of the 2024 survey to the results of the 2019 survey, it seems little has changed in the state of recruitment and retention.

**More than 70% of respondents reported that recruitment is more difficult now than it was five years ago.<sup>6</sup>** Despite having similar staffing levels across regions, however, agencies located in the Midwestern (81%) and Northeastern (77%) United

1 “The State of Recruitment: A Crisis for Law Enforcement,” International Association of Chiefs of Police, accessed May 16, 2023, [https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/239416\\_IACP\\_RecruitmentBR\\_HR\\_0.pdf](https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/239416_IACP_RecruitmentBR_HR_0.pdf).

2 Jeff Asher, Police Departments Shrank Less in 2023, Jeff-alytics. [Police Departments Shrank Less In 2023 - by Jeff Asher \(substack.com\)](https://www.substack.com/p/police-departments-shrank-less-in-2023).

3 [New PERF survey shows police agencies have turned a corner with staffing challenges \(policeforum.org\)](https://www.policeforum.org/news/new-perf-survey-shows-police-agencies-have-turned-a-corner-with-staffing-challenges). See also [Police Departments Shrank Less In 2023 - by Jeff Asher \(substack.com\)](https://www.substack.com/p/police-departments-shrank-less-in-2023).

4 Hope Sloop, “Cops in Crisis? NYPD Officers are Resigning at a Record-Breaking Pace - As the Number of Law Enforcement Quitting Rises by 117% in 2020,” Daily Mail, March 13, 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11855917/NYPD-officers-resigning-record-pace-number-law-cops-quitting-rises-117-2023.html>.

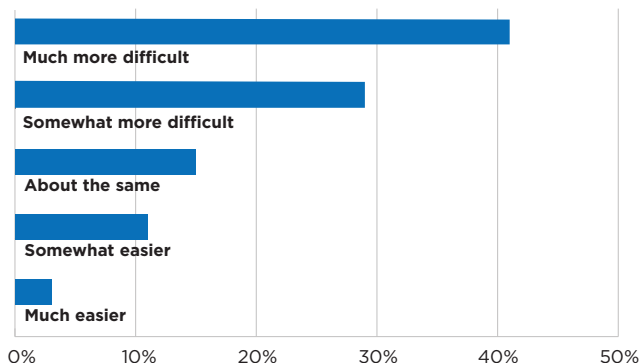
5 This included 956 local police departments, 69 campus police departments, 47 sheriffs' offices, 40 state police departments, 8 tribal police departments, 7 federal police departments, and 28 other specialized police departments. Local police departments are undoubtedly overrepresented in this sample, providing a unique aggregated view of localized issues.

6 In the IACP's 2019 survey, 75% of responding agencies reported that recruiting was more difficult than it had been five years earlier, indicating relative consistency in this trend.



States were more likely to report an increased difficulty in recruitment over the past five years, compared to agencies located in the Southern (64%) and Western (63%) United States. Smaller agencies (72%) were also slightly more likely to report difficulties with their recruitment efforts, compared to midsize (69%) and large (63%) agencies. On average, responding agencies were staffed at approximately 91% of their authorized staffing levels, thus operating with a deficit of nearly 10%.

**Compared to five years ago, which of the following best describes your current recruitment efforts?**



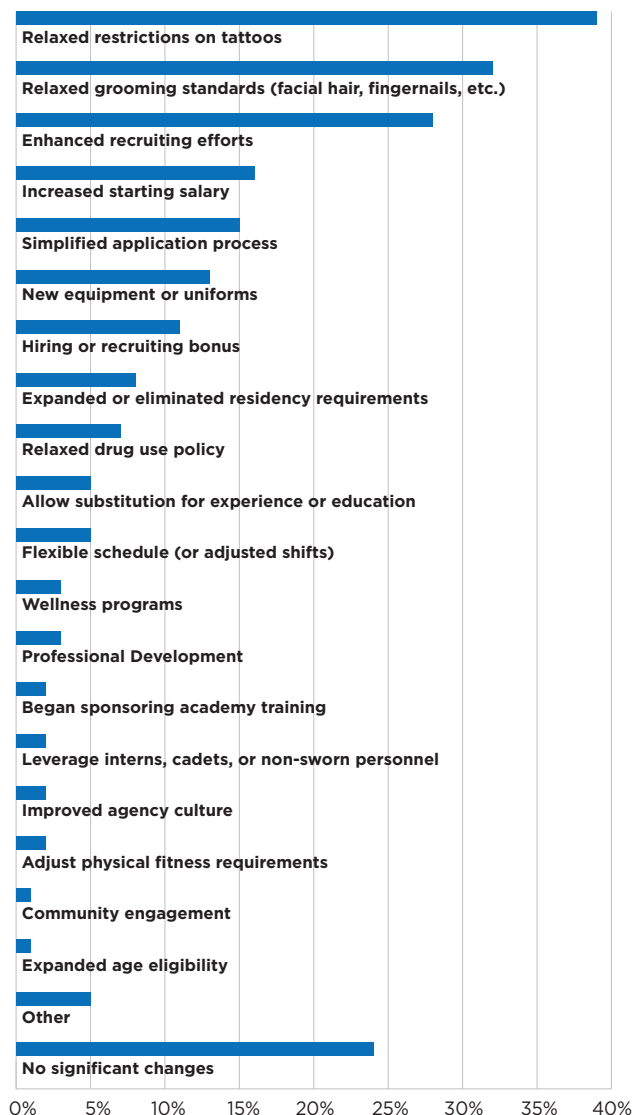
One respondent described how recruiting had changed starkly over the past decade:

- *“In this day and age, we have to go and find good candidates, whereas 10 years ago, candidates would be constantly calling and inquiring about job openings.”*

## Recruitment

In response to these challenges, about 75% of respondents reported changes made within their agency during the last five years to enhance recruitment and retention.<sup>7</sup> Loosening restrictions on tattoos was most common, followed by loosening restrictions on facial hair and other grooming practices (fingernails, jewelry, etc.). It should also be noted, however, that many agencies had already loosened their requirements related to tattoos or grooming standards more than five years ago, and some respondents acknowledged that these changes were made to align with societal norms and expectations more so than to enhance recruitment or retention. Additionally, many agencies also reported increasing the money and personnel time spent on recruiting.

## What changes has your agency made to enhance recruitment and/or retention?



Respondents varied in whether these changes were effective or not:

- *“Tattoos, beards--allowing these small changes has actually increased the candidate pool.”*
- *“We have made a plethora of policy changes - residency, facial hair, tattoos, load bearing vests - with the idea that these were barriers to recruitment. They clearly are not.”*
- *“[A] hiring bonus was implemented and worked in the beginning, but money only goes so far.”*

<sup>7</sup> This is an increase from 50% of respondents who reported having changed agency policies to enhance recruitment in 2019.

- *“Paid recruiting agency, social media targeted campaigns with tracking of views, responses, etc., and with new videos with changed focus, and netted us zero candidates.”*
- *“Targeted advertising through social media platforms has been very successful, much more successful than more traditional recruiting outreach.”*

Similarly, respondents described varying levels of control or influence over the hiring process. While some policies or procedures could be changed easily, other proposed changes required approval from additional governing bodies:

- *“Approximately three years ago, the town voted the police department out of civil service. Having our own hiring standards and requesting applicants to be academy trained has assisted us with hiring.”*
- *“Previously, our agency did not accept entry-level applicants. We are currently in the process of changing our civil service rule to allow this.”*
- *“I have attempted to launch a cadet program modeled on the successful Boston PD Program. It has been tied up in the legislative process for more than two years.”*
- *“We can’t find applicants that can pass the mandated Illinois POWER Test (Physical Agility). We would like to lower the standard; however, this is a state mandate.”*

Some respondents described success at using increased emphasis on community engagement to enhance recruiting:

- *“Advertising our community engagement philosophies versus focusing on the tactical image of most agencies. [We have] seen a significant increase in Latin and female candidates wanting to serve the community.”*
- *“We are selling the concept of service over self, and it has paid off. We have been able to hire qualified applicants who desire to serve the community and get involved.”*
- *“[We] updated [the] department website and post more on community interactions and programs. [We] moved away from posting crimes and missing/found animals. [We have] received numerous comments [about] how that made applicants want to work for [the agency].”*

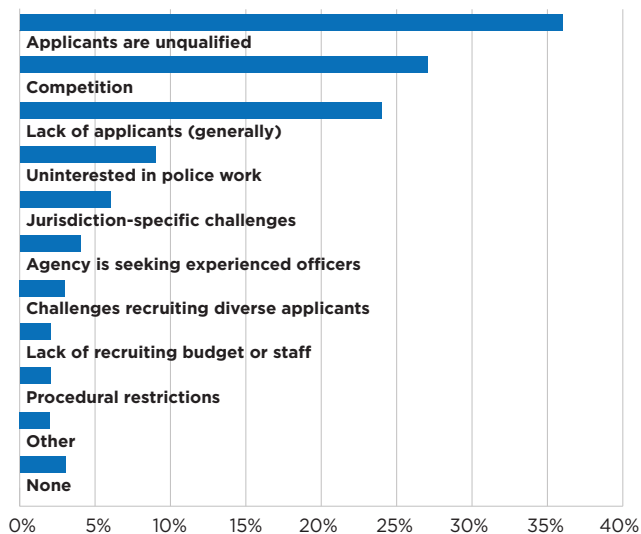
Other examples of enhanced recruitment efforts included more intentional selection of recruitment personnel, financial sponsorship during academy training, and creating new recruiting pipelines for youth interested in policing:

- *“We have made it an organizational priority and devoted significant resources to recruiting, including staffing, paying for recruitment venues, and purchasing lots of recruitment supplies. The most important factor in all our recruitment efforts is selecting the right people to do formal recruiting.”*
- *“We paid for and sent officers to the police academy for the first time in the department’s history.”*
- *“For us, developing our own officers for the academy. Pre-academy orientation and training. This growing-our-own strategy has helped us [in] recruiting new officers as they feel valued. It has also reduced resignations within the past two years and improved retention efforts with this group size.”*
- *“We implemented a Community Service Officer (CSO) program. The intent was to target high school graduates that don’t meet the age requirements for [a police officer’s] job but have an interest in law enforcement. In the CSO role, they handle low-level calls for service (property crime, some civil) where no suspect is present. They get to work alongside officers. Once they are of age and if approved by their supervisors, the CSO [is] then transitioned into a recruit role, and they are sent to the academy.”*

Other, less-common changes made to enhance recruitment and retention included a stipend for childcare expenses or discounted childcare services, tuition assistance or student loan reimbursement, and adjustments to the weight or scoring of individual components of an application (for example, “eased written test minimum scores--we now average all scores of different areas to get an overall minimum passing score so that one weak area does not disqualify the applicant”).

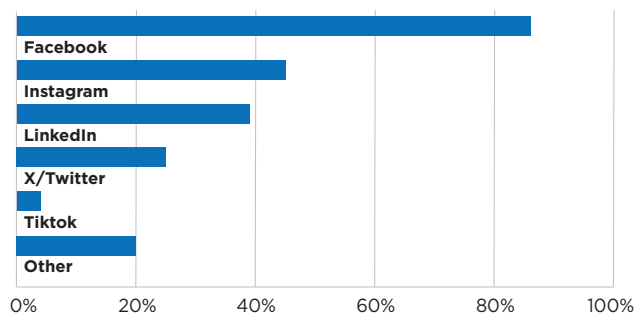
Beyond simply recruiting applicants, respondents expressed that the biggest challenges in recruitment are recruiting *qualified* applicants and competition from agencies that can pay more or offer better benefits.<sup>8</sup> However, one respondent described “partnering with other agencies to create a larger pool of candidates,” rather than viewing one another as competition.

**What are the biggest challenges your agency has experienced with recruitment?**



Police departments typically use social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn to advertise job openings.

**Which of the following social media outlets do you post your job openings to?**



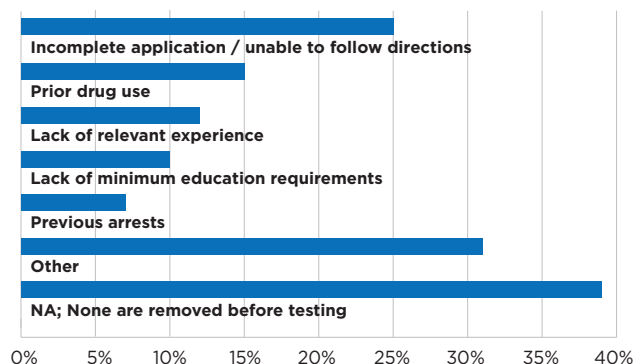
As with other recruiting efforts, results varied. For social media advertising, specifically, a targeted and data-informed approach might work better than general posts or advertisements.

- “We’ve tried in-person recruiting events and social media, but personal interactions seem to work best.”
- “Approximately two years ago, to fill vacancies at a faster rate, we strategically utilized geofencing to target potential hires via social media suggested advertisements. The goal was to entice current officers seeking a move to the sunshine state. We continued for approximately six months and stopped due to our needs being met.”

## Hiring Processes

Many agencies reported that applicants are often not eliminated until official testing begins. For those that are eliminated prior to formal testing, the reasons vary. ‘Other’ reasons, as indicated in the graph below, included failure to meet minimum requirements, lack of interest (candidate did not respond or follow up), concerns with prior work experience (including disciplinary concerns and negative reviews), and integrity concerns.

**What are the most common reasons applicants are deemed ineligible for hire before any testing is administered?**

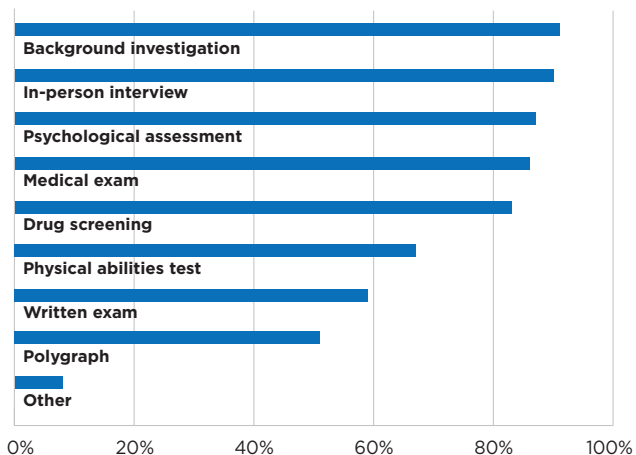


8 In the IACP’s 2019 survey, 65% of responding agencies reported too few candidates applying to be police officers, and 78% of respondents reported difficulty in recruiting qualified candidates. The current survey indicates these challenges may have declined since 2019 but still remain problematic.



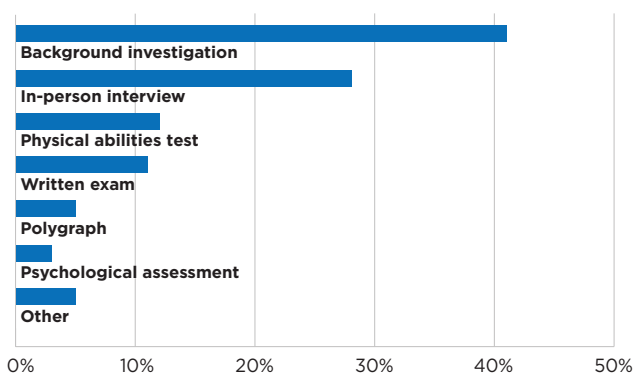
Steps in the hiring process most cited include a background investigation, in-person interview, psychological assessment, medical exam, and drug screening. Other evaluation tools such as a test of physical abilities, a written exam, and a polygraph are less common.

**Which of the following steps does your agency use in the hiring process?**



Once formal testing begins, agencies reported that candidates are most often eliminated during the background investigation and the in-person interview, as these stages are where information about an applicant not listed on the application are often revealed. 'Other' steps used in the hiring process include multi-stage interviews, voice stress analysis, personality testing, and scenario-based assessments.

**At which stage of the hiring process are most candidates eliminated?**

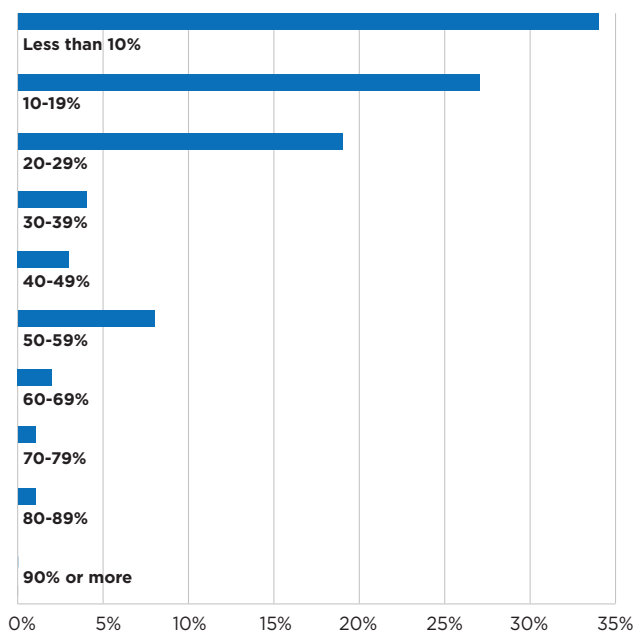


Often, the reasons applicants were deemed unqualified related to a variety of intertwined factors. The following responses offer illustrative examples of respondents' open-ended answers regarding the biggest challenges they face with recruitment. Of note, these particular challenges seem to be specific to lateral applicants:

- *"Attracting qualified applicants. Most applicants are running from one problem or more from a previous department."*
- *"History of failure at other departments due to poor decision-making."*
- *"Failure to stay at prior agencies for any length of time."*
- *"Asking the applicant when coming from previous departments if there is anything we should be aware of and them not disclosing the truth regarding their employment."*
- *"Finding out we got someone else's problems."*

Only a small number of candidates withdraw from the process voluntarily.<sup>9</sup>

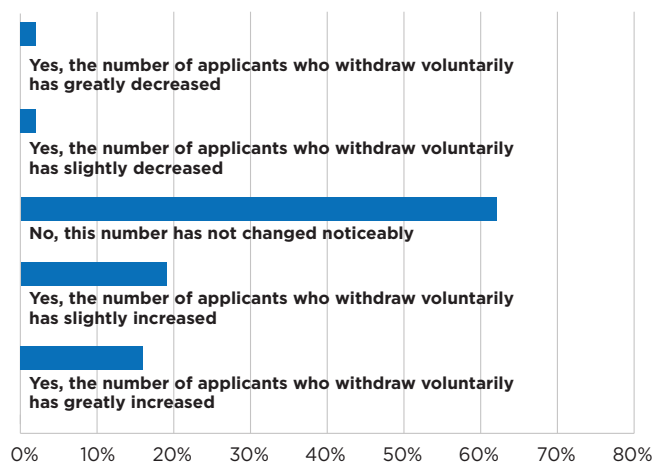
**Approximately what percentage of applicants withdraw from the hiring process voluntarily?**



<sup>9</sup> Respondents who reported vague responses such as "a very small number" or something similar were included within the interval of less than 10%.

This number seems to have remained relatively stable over the past five years, but it has increased in some agencies.

### Has the percentage of applicants who withdraw voluntarily changed over the last five years?

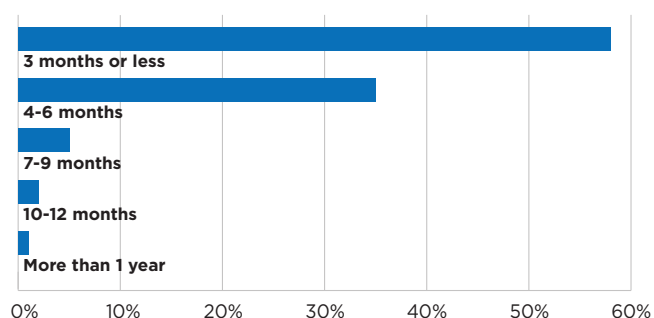


Voluntary withdrawals might vary depending on the specific characteristics of an individual community. For example, one respondent observed:

- *“We receive a lot of applications; however, once applicants realize the cost of housing in a mountain resort community, they voluntarily drop off.”*

Most agencies are able to extend a job offer within three months of a candidate’s application.

### What is the average time between application and offer/hire for your agency?



To some extent, this may be a result of changes agencies intentionally made to speed up the hiring process. Agencies described several ways they have streamlined their hiring processes so as not to lose qualified candidates during a lengthy process:

- *“[We have]...adopted an alternate route hiring process that helps applicants who have not taken the entry-level civil service exam. The entry-level exam is still a requirement to accept a trained officer from another agency but does not require an untrained civilian to have tested for the position. As long as the potential employee passes all other training requirements, the initial exam can be waived.”*
- *“[The] Physical Readiness Test (PRT) has been changed to allow for a 10% lower overall score at time of application, as long as the applicant can pass the PRT assessment before graduating [from] the academy. Plans are in place to ensure physical fitness improves during [the] academy so applicants can be successful in passing by graduation. We were losing otherwise-qualified applicants who could not do the required number of push-ups/sit-ups, etc., but with consistent training/exercise, should be able to pass the test at some time during the academy, before graduation. If not, they do not graduate.”*
- *“[We] accept [a] college degree in place of a written exam. This shortens [the] hiring process. The applicant has already shown that they meet higher academic standards by holding a degree [other] than the required (high school).”*
- *“We increased the number of recruiters from 1.33 to 10. Once the applicant obtains a hire date, we host an orientation and assign them a mentor who stays with the applicant for one year. Our communications focus on realistic expectations, and recently received a pay increase on a pay scale that tops out at 20 years.”*
- *“We have started doing hiring events specifically for our agency in an effort to streamline the hiring process and complete as many steps in the hiring process as possible at one time.”*
- *“We have also hosted same-day hiring events in which applicants who are interested in becoming police officers come in, apply, take our PAT [physical abilities test], interview, and meet with a police psychologist.”*

- *“Moving quicker, with initial chief’s interview and a conditional job offer to speed up background process immediately after the PT [physical test] and written test.”*
- *“We now hire when we have vacancies and hold an academy once a year. The new employee will shadow other employees until the academy starts.”*

Many respondents discussed the importance of coaching and mentoring throughout the hiring process.

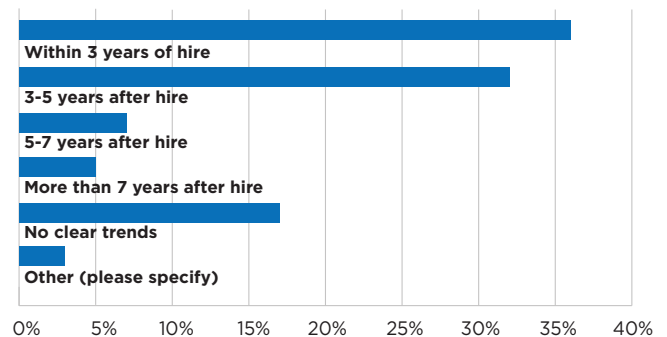
- *“We have a physical fitness workshop, where applicants can elect to participate in an exercise program to prepare them for the academy. We also hold a four week ‘pre-academy’ program to prepare them for the actual academy.”*
- *“The process for hiring needs to be more personalized. Applicants need weekly (at least) updates on their status, and want multiple sit-downs to talk about their concerns about the job, etc. My captain handles these like colleges scouting for athletes—sitting down at kitchen tables and talking to spouses and even parents about how we train and prepare officers, etc. This generation expects personal attention, or they will move on.”*
- *“We assign one officer/mentor to each candidate, so they are in constant contact during our process to answer questions or provide updates.”*
- *“Our recruiters visit our candidates in the academy on a weekly basis as a quasi-mentorship program to provide ongoing support. That contact catches the attention of non-sponsored recruits who seek out employment opportunities.”*
- *“We have created a professional-staff-to-sworn-police-officer pathway internally within the agency. This allows for additional support and education to prepare our nonsworn members who may be interested in becoming a sworn officer, but [who may be] fearful or hesitant to do so.”*

## Retention

Keeping employees engaged once they are hired is the next challenge. Respondents indicated that resignation is most likely within the first five years of hire. Retaining officers during the recruit/training phase may be more challenging than retaining officers long-term:

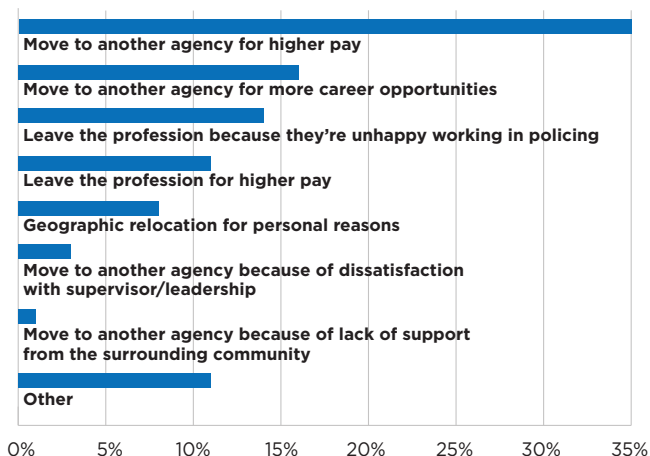
- *“Officer[s are] leaving before three years with two weeks’ notice, and it takes a year to have a new recruit on the road.”*
- *“Most retention issues faced occur within the first five years of employment. Sworn members either realize that this career isn’t for them, or they simply cannot effectively do the job.”*
- *“[The biggest challenge in retention is] mainly someone who thinks this is what they wanted and within a year deciding it’s not for them. There also seems to be more job burnout quicker than [there]used to be.”*
- *“New hires with no experience cannot reach department expectations [or] perform at an acceptable level.”*

### How long into an employee’s career is turnover most common?



Moving to another agency for higher pay is the most common reason for resignation before retirement reported. “Other” reasons for resignation include better benefits (aside from salary) at another agency, moving to another agency for a change of pace (both faster pace and slower pace were cited), and seeking traditional work hours.

### What are the most common reasons employees leave the agency before being eligible for retirement?

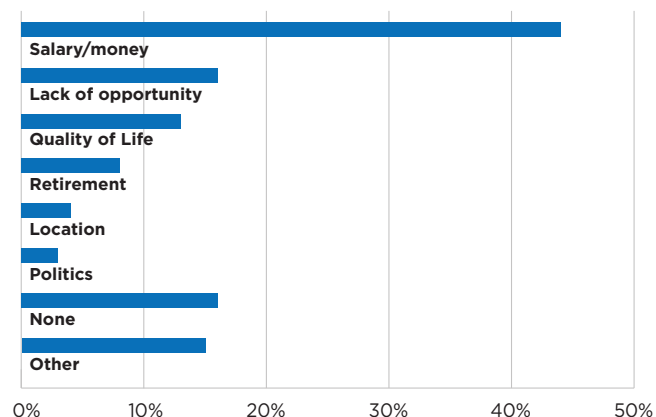


Some agencies offered retention bonuses as incentives for employees to stay with an agency:

- “We have added a retention bonus of sorts. We have increased the employees matching deferred compensation package for those employees between 7 and 15 years of service.”
- “We give more days off for those who have been with the agency 10, 15, and 20 years.”
- “Legislation [was] enacted [to] pay [an] incentive of \$16,000 to sworn personnel at the end of 26 years and each year beyond retirement tenure of 25 years.”
- “[We] created a master officer position with greatly increased pay levels to reward veteran officers for long-term, value-added service to the community.”

When asked about the biggest challenges in retention (open-ended), the results largely aligned with the above. Salary or other monetary bonuses was the most frequently mentioned challenge, followed by lack of opportunity (for promotions or for specialized assignments), and dissatisfaction with the quality of life a policing career offers (working weekends, long shifts, stress and burnout, etc.). In most cases, this dissatisfaction drove officers to leave the profession, but not always. In some cases, officers moved to other police agencies that offered more flexible policies or different operational structures.

### What are the biggest challenges your agency has experienced with retention?



Examples included:

- “[The biggest challenge with retention is] keeping officers wanting to do this job when it seems like legislators only want to make our jobs harder due to passing laws where you cannot arrest people for low-level crimes, and officers having to do so much more than before to ensure they are doing their job properly in the eyes of the legislators. It used to be an officer’s word was good enough in a court of law, but now if the officer fails to turn their body camera on, then it creates doubt that the officer is...being truthful.”
- “[The biggest challenges with retention are] burn out, unsupportive state legislation, threat of loss of qualified immunity, trials and prosecution of police officers, limited funding to support proper staffing levels, focus on pre-trial release of offenders despite threat and repeat offense risks, [and] lack of resources to prosecute offenders leading to a lack of accountability.”

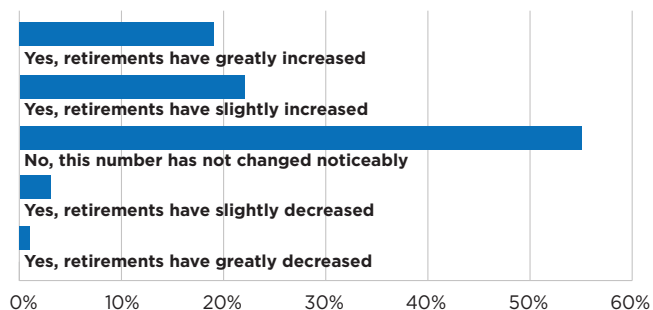
Most agencies reported that the rate of retirement remains relatively stable to that of five years ago, while some agencies reporting a perceived increase in retirements. It may be that officers are now more likely to retire as soon as they are eligible, whereas they may previously have stayed on the job past retirement eligibility. Additionally, some agencies experienced a hiring boom in the 1990s, and most of those officers are at or approaching retirement eligibility, leading naturally to higher retirement than agencies previously experienced. Examples included:

- *“We are currently experiencing a ‘wave’ of those reaching their retirement eligibility. As of today, nearly 18% of our commissioned personnel are retirement eligible, with that increasing to 24% by January 2025. While many are or will utilize the DROP [Deferred Retirement Option Plan] program once they hit 20 years, we have seen a recent trend of people either not completing their DROP (5-7 years) or not entering the DROP at all and leaving right at 20 years. Thus, one of our biggest challenges is retaining the more senior staff.”*
- *“[The biggest challenge in retention is] retirees not willing to work beyond 20 years.”*
- *“The biggest challenge is officers reaching retirement eligibility and being able to retire and start another law enforcement career with a local agency in a different pension system (school SRO program). They get significant[ly] more time off, additional income source, and less stress from normal police responsibilities.”*
- *“We have faced several significant challenges with retention in recent years. One of the primary factors has been a wave of retirements within a relatively short period. This sudden loss of experienced officers has been difficult to manage, as these individuals took with them a wealth of knowledge and expertise that is not easily replaced.”*

Some respondents explained that although retirements weren't necessarily problematic in and of themselves, their agencies did not have enough qualified applicants to backfill those officers retiring, worsening their staffing deficit:

- *“Officers are retiring as soon as they are eligible, and newly hired officers...are not able to complete the Field Training Program. A lot of applicants seem to not have a good idea of what the job of a law enforcement officer requires and are unable or unwilling to continue through the Field Training Program.”*
- *“Over the last five years, the bulk of those who have separated have been due to retirement. The second most prevalent separation is not meeting expectations during probation.”*
- *“The biggest challenge has been replacing people after retirements. We have a huge experience level gap in our police department.”*

**Has the rate of retirement changed in the last five years?**





## Operations

About 65% of respondents reported that they had reduced services or specialized units because of staffing challenges, significantly higher than the 25% of agencies that reported staffing-related reductions in services, units, or positions in IACP's 2019 survey. However, the extent to which services and units were reduced varied drastically. Often, staffing patrol functions was prioritized over specialized units. Some specialized units were disbanded entirely. In other cases, respondents described a reduction in the number of officers authorized to specialized units. In still other cases, specialized units were not officially reduced but maintained authorized vacancies for years at a time, intentionally focusing the agency's resources on patrol functions. Several respondents noted that their agencies no longer participated in the joint task forces they used to be a part of, and respondents also described withdrawal from community engagement events. Some found that their adaptive efforts created further obstacles:

- *"This has been a revolving issue. We... disbanded our Traffic Unit until traffic-related major injury/deaths became a major issue for our community."*

Respondents also noted that recruitment, retention, and operations are all intertwined. In understaffed agencies, officers often experienced burnout to the extent they would leave the agency or the profession, further exacerbating staffing challenges and resulting in an increased workload for the other officers still employed—thereby making those officers even more vulnerable to burnout as well.

## Success Stories

The IACP asked police agencies to share the programs, methods, and strategies that were working well for them. One theme that emerged was the creation of new pathways to becoming an officer, often starting young or uncertain candidates in a civilian role before transitioning them to being in a sworn position:

- *"We have doubled the size of our Community Service Officer (non-licensed staff who wear a uniform and perform animal control, parking enforcement, and general departmental support) [program] staffing and have begun recruiting ... recent high school graduates. We provide them with a paid position while they are attending a post-secondary law enforcement program with the goal of onboarding them upon completion of their schooling and after they have obtained eligibility for licensure."*

- *"We have a robust SLEO [Special Law Enforcement Officer] program that we pull a lot of candidates from. We employ between 20 to 30 SLEOs and this allows them to get their feet wet to determine if this job is for them. Some realize law enforcement isn't for them and end up not taking [the] civil service test or applying for full time. This helps because we don't go through the process of hiring someone who resigns in six months. The SLEO program also acts as a good word of mouth recruitment tool as many SLEOs recommend their friends to apply and work."*
- *"We split the cadet program into two classes, Cadet I starting at age 18 and Cadet II starting at age 20 ½. Cadet I allows us to hire the candidate, have them start working at the department in various capacities, and train for the academy...Cadet I's can then promote to Cadet II for an academy class. Cadet II [cadets] are hired specifically for an academy class, without prior department experience."*
- *"We have not had significant challenges with recruitment. We have created multiple streams of potential full-time hires through reserve officers and community service officers. We spend time filling these roles and it has allowed us to fill vacancies quickly."*
- *"We have implemented the Pathway to Trooper program, which allows 18-20 year-olds a chance to apply for a civilian position, and in this position, they will also be exposed to law enforcement activities, training, etc. We have also implemented the Trooper Apprenticeship program that allows us to hire applicants who have passed the background as civilian employees, and this provides them with a job until our next academy starts, which then keeps them from going to other police departments that may have an academy starting before ours."*

Many respondents cited the importance of a healthy organizational culture being crucial to their retention success:

- *"I know this sounds cliché, but **we focus on our culture as priority #1**. Every employee is an ambassador to our hiring efforts. We ensure that every candidate who is being considered will go to lunch with our hiring supervisor and talk about why they want to work for our department. If they are not a fit, we tell them right away and help them find a home with a better department. We also use social media to tell a true story of who we are and what we do each day. People*

who apply to our department comment that we have fun, and they want to be a part of that. In our hiring process, we send every applicant an email from the chief of police and city manager thanking them for applying. When they take the written test, the chief, command staff, supervisors, and recently hired officers welcome all candidates and speak to them about the benefits of working for [the agency]. If candidates make it to the oral panel, we give them all the questions in advance. We find that candidates who have time to prepare give better answers, and we can see who they really are as opposed to someone who is reacting in the moment and may not consider the best answer to give. **All of these personalized touches have greatly increased the quality of candidates we are hiring.**"

- "[We] Introduced a new holistic safety vision through a tiered safety response system. [We] introduced full-time unarmed civilian safety professionals to handle/support sworn personnel on nonviolent calls for service not requiring a sworn response. [We] also added a Mobile Crisis Response team consisting of both the unarmed civilian safety professional paired with a counselor/social worker to respond to nonviolent calls for service involving a person in crisis. Pursuing a holistic safety vision allows our sworn personnel to refocus their attention and time to crime prevention, intervention, and response. **We have heard from applicants that one reason they are applying at our agency is due to our holistic safety vision** because it includes additional resources within the department to support sworn personnel and better spread out the workload among the whole department."
- "Respect for everyone. Accountability for all. Support from the top. High performing and respected department."
- "POSITIVE CULTURE - [I] cannot speak enough about it ... **Officers want to be a part of something good, and when they feel they are trusted overall and have support, they willingly accept accountability and even discipline when necessary.** But that takes time. When other agencies in our state, area, and nation are lowering standards, we raised ours. I came here as a change agent in 2017, and my captain and I have been on an overt culture building and changing mission for the past 5 years. Our officers now understand what is expected, why it is expected, and are

proud to be a part of an agency that does things right. They are proud to be a part of the community, and [they] understand the mission. Culture creates true buy-in."

- "[I] can't really explain it via a 'program,' but we have invested heavily in the culture of our organization across all kinds of programs, leadership, and more. **Our culture is often the #1 reason people come to our agency.**"
- "We work hard to ensure we provide a positive organizational culture that supports family life, opportunity for engagement, and frequent communication between command staff and the chain of command. **Our reputation in law enforcement circles is well known for being professional and innovative, and setting the benchmark for excellence.**"
- "As a new chief under four years, I believe we've changed the culture completely by **addressing issues immediately, allowing all to have a voice or opinion, and ensuring the person comes first.**"
- "We raised the bar of expectations, and accountability for actions are enforced. Our department used to 'settle' for whatever officer they could get, where[as] today, we turn away good applicants because others want to work for our department as our pay is now competitive and command is fair—but [we] maintain high standards. We believe if you lower your standards, you lose your best people. **We believe great officers want to be held to high standards as long as they are treated fairly.** Officers have confidence they will be supported when they are right and fairly held accountable when necessary. This is our management philosophy, and it has paid dividends in changing the culture of our department."
- "We have restructured the department and **changed to a team mentality.** This inclusion effort has increased morale, work performance, and retention."
- "**Happy employees are the best recruiters.**"

Closely related to culture, employee health and wellness was another recurring theme in agency efforts to retain employees:

- *“We have embarked on a wholesale culture change, centered on employee development, wellness, and support. Wellness includes restorative rest policies, a wellness canine, on-duty workouts, nutritional training, heart screening, [and] physical therapy support. This mindset has led to a more supportive internal culture. This has been a major factor in keeping employees at the agency.”*
- *“We’ve provided our team with two gyms, a healthy food delivery service (employees pay for the meals; we’ve negotiated a discount, free delivery, and a large refrigerator for storage of several meals per person), wellness incentives ([wellness] app, gym membership), and a birthday holiday.”*
- *“We have been focusing largely on overall health and wellness. We have implemented workout on-duty policies to allow physical fitness conditioning to occur during an officer’s shift (as call load and supervisor approval allows), we have partnered with a local hotel to offer healthier meal options that are subsidized and no cost to the officers, brought in a blue-light therapy program to assist with sleep and stress management, engage officers through [resiliency programs], we also have anonymous counseling services available to officers. The idea is to treat the officer as a whole person.”*
- *“We have a robust wellness program to include health clinics, in-house counselors, free fitness classes, free yoga.”*
- *“[We] put more resources into the mental health, physical health, and money management for officers and their families. [We] implemented a fitness test as well as a mandatory mental health check up every year. [We put] more stock in the person and not the number they are assigned.”*
- *“Our agency has partnered with [a law enforcement resiliency program] to provide assistance to our officers and families deal[ing] with traumatic events during the course of their job duties. [The program] trains active serving military units and first responder agencies so participants are able to transform struggle into strength and growth, and be of better service to themselves, their family, community, and country.”*

- *“Officers are now allowed to utilize on-campus workout facilities 24/7. Officers are paid time and a half for any extra detail regardless of whether they have worked 40 hours within the pay period. Better training opportunities are being sought/paid for by the department.”*
- *“My executive staff have committed to giving our officers the best training, best equipment, and a robust wellness program in order for us to put the officers in the best position mentally and physically to be successful in carrying out their policing duties.”*

Sometimes, wellness programs extended beyond the officers to their families as well:

- *“We are blessed with having a very supportive community and city government. We have up-to-date equipment and continually strive to improve. We also have a family atmosphere and work to make sure our members of service are doing well along with their families. My wife and I have started a family support academy here where we work on improving our marriages, helping families understand the issues [they] face which may cause them to behave in certain ways, give them access to what the police department and city offer for them, and give them opportunities to network with each other. This has been successful so far in not only retention but recruitment as well. Officers want to work in this environment.”*

Agencies also recognized the continued desire for professional growth and development in retaining their employees:

- *“We research equipment and test and evaluate equipment at the officer level and ask their input on the products they need. We also have a robust career development program that the employee can receive money at the end of the year based on three categories (physical fitness, career achievements, and education).”*
- *“[We offer] greater training and other opportunities such as a drone unit, and we are attempting to bring back a K9 to the agency.”*
- *“The command staff promoted a clear path for leadership training provided by outside entities ... We restarted our recognition program for recently promoted troopers. We encouraged troopers to seek secondary opportunities to help the department achieve*

its mission (as adjunct instructors, drone operator, mobile field force, special weapons and tactics, child protective services, crisis negotiations, etc.). And more recently, we began job shadowing for critical positions when someone is retiring. We routinely conduct train-the-trainer classes for those who want to share their knowledge in a specific area, and we encourage participation on boards, committees, and task forces. We have embraced the mantra of coaching, mentoring, and training troopers at all echelons.”

- “Retention is a leadership problem. We are sending all supervisors through true academic leadership training. An eight-hour training or a three-day training is not adequate leadership training. Agencies must invest in their employees, if they expect to see a greater retention rate.”
- “We have tried to focus our retention efforts on intrinsic vs. extrinsic rewards. We have focused on developing our staff. We have added several special assignments and programs to build upon the niche/passions of our staff members. This includes being a part of several countywide multijurisdictional [task forces] including our Evidence Tech Team, Major Crime Team, Drone Team, Sex Trafficking Team, Accident Reconstruction Team, etc. We have increased our recognition and awards program.”

## Customized Solutions

Despite the commonalities agencies experienced in recruitment and retention, there was some variation, and what works well for one agency may not work as well in another. For example, several small agencies cited the fact that they were unable to provide diverse specialized assignments as a reason for losing officers to larger agencies. One respondent remarked:

- “We are a smaller agency that does not have the specialty assignments of larger agencies. We have lost several officers to larger agencies who have these specialties and the potential to promote earlier as well.”

Yet, at the same time, large departments often discussed the challenges they experienced with officers leaving to work for smaller departments:

- “[The biggest challenge in retention is] applicants wanting to go to a slower department with less calls for services.”
- “We...have an extremely high calls for service and violent crime issue that is making our officers seek employment at departments that pay more and have half or 1/4 of the call load.”
- “We [have] seen some officers leave to go work for smaller towns and villages that aren’t as busy, nor do they have to deal with the social issues or criticism involved in city policing. They can do less work, feel better supported by their community, and risk less complaints made against them.”

In this way, what might be seen as a challenge can also be leveraged as an opportunity if framed differently.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, several small departments found success in attracting candidates who had previously worked for larger departments who were now seeking a change of pace:

- “We must appeal to the burned out, overworked certified candidates who do want a slower pace after gaining experience in [a] larger city. We work to publicize our downhome feel and community policing efforts.”
- “We look toward local department retirees who are still looking to work a low-impact community policing job, and we realigned the department to boost morale and the ability for us to retain hires.”
- “Many of our employees are on second careers, having retired from other law enforcement agencies.... Many of the officers we hire are not doing the job for the money alone; they are looking to stay active and relevant.”

Further, recent research suggests that police staffing levels are just one piece of a larger police ecosystem, and that referring to the current staffing shortage many agencies are experiencing as a “crisis” overshadows both the complexities within that ecosystem and the potential solutions within it. Rather, in addition to simple projections of numbers to forecast staffing needs, police agencies should consider a variety of factors and their

10 Jeremy M. Wilson and Clifford A. Grammich, “Reframing the Police Staffing Challenge: A Systems Approach to Workforce Planning and Managing Workload Demand,” *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 18 (2024). See also Jeremy M. Wilson, Clifford A. Grammich, and Terry Cherry, “‘Crisis’ Versus ‘Challenge’: Field Lessons for Building Police Workforces,” *PSO Perspective*, Michigan State University, Police Staffing Observatory, September 2024.



interconnections to operate more effectively and efficiently. These factors might include consideration of officer workload, community call volume, agency goals, employee performance objectives, and resource allocation—among others.<sup>11</sup>

For example, some agencies effectively adapted to challenges in recruitment, seeking operational efficiencies as a way to cope with reduced staffing. For example, one respondent explained:

- *“We looked at real world [numbers to identify]...what is the number of officers we need to be able to cover [our service area], and we used historical data to identify what the best hours are for coverage. By doing this, we built a law enforcement assessment [planning tool] that will be run yearly for justification. We are using it to reduce [staffing] numbers but build on those things we believe are slowing us.”*

Another highlighted both its successes and shortcomings, explaining:

- *“We are successful because of our unique circumstances. We have a small town (3,500) but very large tourist population (15K plus daily). Revenue is tourism-driven, and our workload is as well. We are able to provide an excellent facility, equipment, and pay and benefits comparable to other agencies. The flip side is we don’t offer a lot in terms of variety or special assignments due to the small size.”*

## Conclusion

While police agencies of varying sizes, locations, and demographics have experienced struggles with recruiting and retaining officers over the past decade, there likely is no one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, police agencies must consider what makes them unique (relative to other police agencies) and use those attributes to their advantage. Honestly assessing and acknowledging an agency’s own strengths and weaknesses—and being candid about those with police officer applicants—could attract more candidates with a better cultural fit. Understanding candidates’ aspirations and the extent to which those aspirations align with the department’s mission (for example, whether they prefer a community with a slower pace or an agency with significant opportunity for advancement and specialized assignments) may help agencies attract candidates that are more likely to commit to the agency for a longer period of time.

A focus on recruitment is important and necessary in the short term, but an investment in employee retention could be even more beneficial in the long term *and* reduce the need for increased recruitment. This may take the form of intentional cultural shifts to increase officer satisfaction and agency cohesion, as well as wellness efforts aimed at ensuring officers and their families are provided with the support needed to combat burnout, vicarious trauma, PTSD, and other mental injuries as a result of their work.

In comparing the results of the 2019 survey to the 2024 survey, the core challenges of recruitment and retention have remained consistent, but the 2024 survey shows a more pronounced impact of these issues and a broader range of strategies being employed to address them. Across the United States, while agencies are still experiencing significant difficulties in both their recruitment and retention efforts, police departments are making a conscious effort to improve their overall staffing and seek candidates who will be a good fit for their agencies. With continued research, police leaders will be able to strengthen recruitment and retention efforts to improve the quality of response they provide to the communities they serve.

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11 Wilson and Grammich, “Reframing the Police Staffing Challenge.”







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