A survey of issues in the recruitment, hiring and retention of law enforcement officers : Investigating the rural-urban divide

Morgan Steele

Tamara Lynn

Abigail Hayes

A Survey of Issues in the Recruitment, Hiring and Retention of Law Enforcement Officers: Investigating the Rural-Urban Divide

Morgan Steele (ORCID: 0000-0001-8033-9407)
Assistant Professor
Department of Criminal Justice
Fort Hays State University

Tamara Lynn (ORCID: 0000-0002-7987-9227)
Chair/Associate Professor
Department of Criminal Justice
Fort Hays State University

Abigail Hayes (ORCID: 0000-0002-6514-1790)
Graduate Assistant
Department of Criminal Justice
Fort Hays State University

Correspondence: Morgan Steele, mjsteele2@fhsu.edu

Abstract

The continuing crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and issues surrounding disparate policing practices have illuminated an underlying issue facing law enforcement agencies: how to recruit, hire, and retain qualified officers. Using survey data from over 200 rural and urban agencies across three states, this article explores the various issues agencies have with recruitment and retention, paying particular attention to the apparent differences between agency type and size, as well as the extent of urbanization in the jurisdiction. The implications of and potential policy solutions to these issues are then discussed.

Police departments, sheriff's offices, and other law enforcement agencies across the United States are reportedly understaffed. Retaining quality officers is a struggle, as several states report "at least 25% of officers leave their department within the first 18 – 36 months on the job" (Orrick, 2008, p. 8). More than a decade later, 100 officers left the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) during the six months following the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, which is twice as many than leave during a typical year (Bailey, 2020). Mourtgos et al. (2021) found police resignations in Minneapolis increased by 279% from January 2016 through December 2020. Nationwide, retirements were up 45% and resignations 18% during the 12 months ending April 2021, compared to the previous 12 months (MacFarquhar, 2021). During the 2020-21 fiscal year, 631 officers from all ranks left the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), almost 100 more than the previous fiscal year. Similarly, approximately 2,600 officers retired from the New York City Police Department (NYPD), almost 1,000 more retirements than the previous fiscal year (Cain, 2021). While these numbers seem like significant losses, the percentage represented by resignations or retirements is more telling. Specifically, the MPD employs about 600 officers (Mourtgos et al., 2021), representing a loss of slightly more than 16%. LAPD employs about 10,000 sworn personnel (Vernon & Lynn, 2021), representing a loss of just over 6% of their officers. The NYPD, which employs approximately 36,000 officers (About NYPD, nd.), experienced a loss of slightly more than 7% of sworn personnel.

Retirements and resignations clearly create open positions, requiring agencies to recruit, hire, and retain qualified applicants; however, filling these positions is becoming increasingly difficult. Many states have established minimum qualifications for becoming a sworn officer, such as minimum age and education standards, and disqualifying those with drug or felony convictions; standards that may be challenging to reach for some. A 2018 survey by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) identified three issues with recruitment and retention experienced by law enforcement agencies, including: 1) fewer applicants; 2) increased resignations; and 3) increased retirements (PERF, 2019). These issues are supported by a 2019 survey by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), which found:

> 78% of agencies reported having difficulty in recruiting qualified candidates; 65% reported having too few candidates applying to be law enforcement officers; 75% reported that recruiting is more difficult today than five years ago; 50% reported having to change agency policies to increase the chances of gaining qualified applicants; and 25% reported having to reduce or eliminate certain agency services, units, or positions because of staffing difficulties (IACP, 2018, p. 3).

While these statistics are troublesome, this research finds that retirements and resignations of sworn personnel experienced by rural agencies – albeit significantly lower based on the actual number of officers, compared to urban agencies – leaves a higher percentage of open positions. For instance, a rural police department funds five full-time

and two part-time sworn positions (equivalent to six full-time officers); however, at the end of 2021, the agency employs only two full-time sworn personnel (personal communications with the interim chief), meaning 67% of funded positions are open. A consequence of missing two-thirds of a community's police force can only mean a lack of services, as argued by IACP (2018).

A Changing Landscape for Policing

Globally, 55% of the population lives in urban areas, and that number is expected to increase to 68% by 2050 (UN, 2018). The past 100 years has experienced a shift in where Americans call home. As reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2016, cited by IACP, 2018), in 1910, 54.4% of Americans lived in rural areas. Fast-forward a century and the number of Americans living in rural areas (19.3%) has decreased approximately 35%. Despite the shift to urban areas, almost half (48%) of law enforcement agencies across the U.S. employ fewer than 10 officers (IACP, 2018, p. 1). Moreover, 71% of police departments and 21% of sheriff's offices serve populations of less than 10,000 (IACP, 2018). With the population shift to urban areas, cities seem to capture the most attention of policymakers and scholars. But what works for large law enforcement agencies cannot be assumed to work for their rural counterparts. Despite similar functions, rural agencies experience issues uncommon in more populated areas. The following discussion captures issues experienced by law enforcement agencies in both areas as well as issues unique to rural agencies.

Issues with Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Officers

While rural areas arguably experience higher percentages of retirements and/or resignations by law enforcement officers, they also experience more difficulty filling open positions. Qualified officers, meaning those who meet the minimum qualifications for joining a law enforcement agency as a sworn officer within that state (or joining an agency with more stringent hiring criteria), are in short supply in rural areas. More agencies are preferring officers with educations beyond a high school diploma or GED or weeding out those who have problematic backgrounds (e.g., history of drug use). Additionally, potential candidates who meet these higher criteria may find more lucrative career options than law enforcement as a result. The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) hosted a forum in 2019 to address challenges that small and rural agencies experience with recruiting and retaining officers (Bradley, 2020). Issues with recruiting and retaining qualified officers are certainly not new to the literature, but research indicates downward trends continue (Copple, 2017; PERF, 2019).

Historically, recruiting and retaining officers occurred from a political-systems perspective, with individuals hired based on knowing someone with political clout (Hilal et al., 2017). However, this system of hiring was flawed and created issues of liability and discrimination (Hilal et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2010), leading to a merit-based approach to recruiting officers. A merit-based system emphasizes the skills that will aid a candidate in successfully doing the job, such as his or her level of education, ability to problem-solve, communication skills, socialization, and other factors (Hilal et al, 2017). Two separate reports from the COPS Office (Bradley, 2020; Copple, 2017) identified several characteristics necessary for recruiting well-qualified officers. Copple (2017) listed desirable personality characteristics such as advocate, analytical, adaptable, change-maker, common sense, communicator, compassionate, culturally competent, problem-solver, visionary, and well-educated (p. 5) that would ensure a competent officer. In contrast, Bradley (2020) categorized a significant list of characteristics into four key skill sets, including "cognitive, emotional, social/interpersonal, and moral skills" (p. 4), focusing more on what the recruit can do rather than their personality.

While much attention has focused on identifying successful law enforcement recruits, agencies – and specifically rural agencies – continue to struggle to recruit qualified individuals to apply for open positions and/or to remain with agencies once employed. Sid Smith (2016), a former Police Chief, identified societal changes as an important factor leading to a smaller pool of law enforcement recruits. For instance, the up-and-coming workforce is not like their parents in that they have little to no interest in living to work. Simply, they are not interested in overtime and working around the clock. Instead, this generation is more interested in working to gain an income to enjoy life. Smith argues the importance of changing recruiting techniques to focus on "salary, benefits, and time off" (para. 2), which is much more appealing to young people.

In addition to a changing applicant pool, common barriers to recruiting officers include low wages (Giblin & Galli, 2017); cultures that do not support minorities or women officers (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018; Kingshott, 2013; Wilson et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2013); anti-drug policies that prevent hiring individuals who previously used marijuana (Bottema & Telep, 2021); and others. In addition, college graduates may lack adequate preparation for the arduous hiring process to enter a law enforcement career.

Work-related barriers interfere with retaining qualified officers once they are trained. Research conducted by McCarty and Skogan (2012) found job-related burnout affected officers' health, job performance, and increased turnover. Similarly, McIntyre (1990) found job-related stress was arguably a common reason that younger, less experienced officers chose to resign. In contrast, research by Gächter, et al. (2013) did not find a correlation between high levels of job-related stress and resignations, but rather

it seemed officers understood the nature of the position to be stressful. Instead, issues related to social capital, interactional justice, and work-life-balance seem to lead to increased resignations (Gächter, et al., 2013).

Following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, by Officer Darren Wilson (Cadet, 2014), actions by law enforcement officers across the United States were heavily scrutinized in ways not seen since the LAPD's assault against Rodney King. Hosko (2018) argues the aftermath of Ferguson, arguably a "Ferguson Effect," along with similar incidents in communities across the nation, saw increased rates of violent crime, ambushes and fatal attacks on law enforcement, and decreases in officers responding to or engaging in criminal situations. While a popular belief, there is little evidence that this "Ferguson Effect" led to any broad impact on crime rates in larger cities (Pyrooz et al., 2016), affected the number of civilians killed by law enforcement (Campbell et al., 2018), or led to a war on cops (Maguire et al., 2017).

However, the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic and the civil protests and unrests surrounding the highly publicized murder of George Floyd at the hand of law enforcement may have changed things. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reports that 2021 marked a 20-year high in the number of officers intentionally killed while on duty (Tucker & Krishnakumar, 2022). Preliminary data indicates 73 officers were victims of felonious killings (59% increase from 2020), while 55 of those officers were killed by gunfire, also an increase from the previous year. Increased violence toward officers is detrimental to the field and negatively impacts the number of qualified individuals interested in pursuing law enforcement careers. Moreover, hostility towards law enforcement, even if it does not escalate towards outright defiance or violence against them, is likely to affect those who are willing to enter the field and stay long-term.

Maguire, Nix, and Campbell (2017) argue law enforcement agencies are facing a "legitimacy crisis" (p. 39). Law enforcement officers are viewed as legitimate when they use their authority fairly and professionally (Tyler, 2003). Voluntary cooperation and peaceful compliance by the public are dependent upon their perception of the legitimacy of law enforcement. The results of a 2020 Gallup Survey indicate decreased confidence in law enforcement, with 58% of Americans responding that major changes are needed, 36% responding minor changes, and 6% no changes (Council on Criminal Justice, 2020). A similar survey in 2021 yielded slightly improved results although differences were still noted according to race and political affiliation of respondents. This means law enforcement generally is not viewed as legitimate, supporting Maguire et al.'s (2017) argument of a legitimacy crisis, which likely has led to a decrease in qualified individuals pursuing law enforcement careers.

**Understanding Issues Unique to Rural Agencies for Recruiting and
Retaining Law Enforcement**

The policing literature focused on the United States has primarily focused on urban areas, neglecting rural agencies (Fenwick, 2015; Huey & Ricciardelli, 2015). However, we do know that the totality of policing varies across location, needs of the population, economic conditions, and availability of resources (Yarwood, 2015). These variances are important for conducting research of rural agencies to understand the unique factors facing law enforcement administrators' efforts to recruit, hire, and retain officers. Ricciardelli (2018) facilitated focus groups to understand the organizational versus operational risks associated with policing in rural locations. Ricciardelli (2018) found that officers believed operational risks were simply part of the job, like Gächter et al.'s findings (2013). In contrast, the organizational risks were extensive, including being understaffed, which when combined with the lack of cellular reception, means that officers often could not call for backup. This decrease in rural officers' perceptions of their safety in the field was compounded by their reporting being issued compromised equipment and feeling isolated in the field (Ricciardelli, 2018). Furthermore, rural agencies often lacked funding to increase staff or update equipment, meaning that the agencies cannot address those officers' concerns. Issues created by limited staff often prevent officers from taking much-needed time off, leading to fatigue, injuries, and other unnecessary risks (Ricciardelli, 2018).

Huey and Ricciardelli (2015) conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 police officers employed by rural police agencies in Eastern Canada. These researchers were interested in understanding the discrepancy between officers' expectations of what they "should be doing ('law enforcement')" and what they were required to do "('knowledge work')" and the role strain that resulted from these discrepancies (2015, p. 196). Findings indicate officers were eager to conduct work related to policing or social work; however, officers believed most tasks included "knowledge work or peacekeeping" (p. 202), which led to role strain. In contrast, officers employed in urban areas did not experience this role strain, which can make retaining officers in urban departments easier than in rural ones.

Building on Huey and Ricciardelli's (2015) work, Ruddell and Jones (2018) surveyed 827 Canadian officers employed in Indigenous communities. Of those surveyed, 260 worked in isolated locations. Findings indicate officers working in these isolated locations experienced higher crime rates and more serious crimes, with fewer resources than those working in non-isolated locations. Furthermore, younger and less experienced officers were usually assigned to the isolated areas, supporting general practice in law enforcement of assigning new officers to "less desirable locations"

(Ruddell & Jones, 2018, p. 422). The consequences of these working conditions make retaining officers far more difficult as those who are retained already receive attractive assignments, while those the agency should retain are pushed into isolated (i.e., rural) areas.

Extending this research beyond North America, Fenwick (2015) interviewed 34 police officers of various ranks and locations in rural Scotland, including from the islands, mountainous regions, towns, and villages. Findings indicate rural officers experience unique demands compared to urban agencies. Officers must 1) respond to a broad range of crimes, often in isolation without any backup; 2) continually engage in negotiations with individuals and groups that range from mundane to threatening situations; and 3) balance roles of being a citizen versus protecting the small communities in which they reside (Fenwick, 2015), which is consistent with the literature (Ricciardelli, 2018; Gatcher et al. 2013). Moreover, administrators had to understand the unique characteristics of policing in rural areas to support their staff to thrive rather than simply survive the job (Fenwick, 2015). These demands on rural officers were compounded due to limited resources, fewer than necessary staffing, and difficult geographic terrains, which interferes with retaining qualified officers.

These studies, along with an increasing focus on issues facing rural law enforcement agencies, are important for addressing the issues surrounding the recruitment and retention of officers. Rural communities lack funding to continually recruit and hire officers. Excessive turnover depletes already limited budgets, leaving agencies without the resources to send new recruits to training or to implement necessary services within their jurisdiction. Compounding this issue, rural communities often cannot pay officers a competitive wage, compounding issues related to retaining officers. For instance, a specialized police department in a rural area is regularly faced with turnover as trained officers leave for higher-paying agencies (personal communications with the chief). When the chief approached the administration to increase the starting wage to improve retention, he was informed the agency would lose a position to fund the higher starting pay. Unfortunately, this agency is already understaffed, and the loss of a sworn position will negatively impact the services available to constituents. This research seeks to determine whether rural agencies experience more significant issues related to recruiting, hiring, and retaining law enforcement than their urban counterparts.

Sample and Methods

Participant agencies within the Midwestern United States were recruited via two means. First, asked the Kansas Association of Chiefs of Police to distribute the survey through their

listservs to facilitate recruitment[1]. However, this was not productive, with only 44 online surveys completed. This may be due to rural administrators potentially experiencing limited or inconsistent internet access[2]. Instead, we identified all law enforcement agencies in Kansas and expanded our sampling frame to include neighboring areas in Southern Nebraska, and Eastern Colorado, collecting agencies physical address. Next, we mailed a survey to 475 agencies minus the 44 that had completed the online survey. As a result, we had 44 agencies with representatives who had completed the online survey and 204 that completed the hardcopy survey in our sample.

To support this project, we pursued a faculty research experience grant through Fort Hays State University, obtaining $1882 to fund a mail survey, and $4283 to support the dissemination of the findings across two years of funding. Using the list of mailing addresses and eliminating those agencies that had already disclosed electronic participation, we mailed the survey to 475 agencies with a self-addressed stamped envelope. Of these, 204 (42.95% of 475) agencies returned the survey. This led to an overall participation percentage of 52.21% (n= 248), including those that had completed the online survey[3]. Chi Square and Analysis of Variance tests were conducted, where appropriate, to highlight where agencies differed in their experiences and their responses. All percentages displayed below indicate the percent of agencies within that urbanization level experienced that issue. Because several questions within the survey were open-ended, agencies were free to raise multiple issues within the same question. These were then coded to the categories listed in Table 2-3. Consequently, the row totals and percentages will not equal the number of agencies that responded to that question, as many agencies indicated multiple themes in the open-ended questions.

Results

Community Size and Agency Size

Within the survey, agencies were able to identify the type of communities they serve (Figure 1), with nearly half describing their community as rural (n = 113, 45.56%), 32% urban (n = 80), almost ten percent suburban (n = 23,) or a combination (n = 25), with less than two percent identifying as a specialized jurisdiction (n = 4) (e.g., university police, park police, etc.). Five agencies did not identify their urbanization level (2.02%). Of the responding agencies, 144 were local police departments (58.06%), 99 County Sheriff's Offices (39.92%), three county-wide policing departments (1.21%), and four were specialized in some way (1.61%) (school/university police, Marshal's Office, combined police and fire). With this information, we explored the following patterns: the extent of any staffing shortage (in isolation and as a function of agency size), the length of time those positions have been available, the issues the agencies

---

[1] The Kansas Association of Chiefs of Police website indicates that they have 500+ members. However, we do not know how many agencies are represented on their listserv, nor how often they solicited participation in the study.
[2] In identifying all law enforcement agencies, we encountered many that did not have an online presence, including listed email address, social media account, or individual website.
[3] While several agencies did not answer all questions on the survey, most did. This led to many of the results presented below having slightly varying totals.

have faced in filling open positions, and what steps the agencies have taken to ameliorate those issues.

Figure 1

Agency Size Across Levels of Urbanization
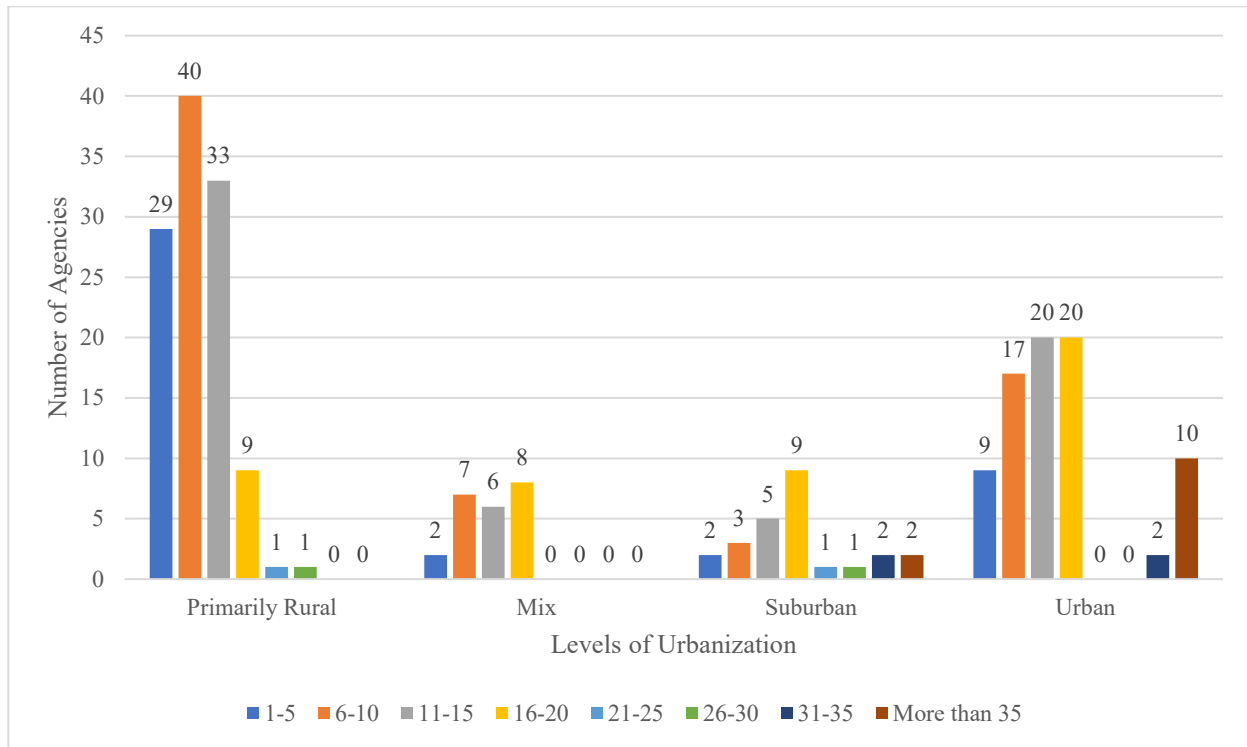
As Figure 1 indicates, agency size across levels of urbanization makes the differences in agency sizes within this sample clear. Rural agencies, along with those serving a mix of urban and rural areas, tend to be small (1-20 sworn officers), with very few having more than 20 officers. More urbanized agencies have a more diverse array of agency sizes, though they tend to be larger.

Vacancy Levels

Vacancy levels across the rural and urban divide displays how vacancies are distributed across the sample, breaking the results down based on the level of urbanization. As shown in Figure 1, more rural agencies tended to have fewer officers, while urban agencies tended to employ more officers. When examining the number of agencies with vacancies, a Chi Square test showed that more urbanized agencies were more likely to have open positions ($X^2 = 8.612$, $p = 0.035$). When examining the number of positions vacant within the agency, the mean response across the sample was approximately one opening (mean = 1.11, standard deviation (SD) = 1.31), with this ranging from 0.83 (SD = 1.13) in rural agencies to 1.56 (SD = 1.42) for

suburban. An analysis of variance test comparing the mean number of vacancies across levels of urbanization showed that there was a significant difference in the number of vacancies (F = 3.169, p = 0.025). Tukey's Honest Significant Difference Test indicated that this was likely because rural agencies tended to have fewer open positions than urban ones (Tukey's = -0.521, p = 0.045).

Table 1

Vacancies Across the Rural and Urban Divide

	Agencies with Vacancies (%)	Mean Vacancies within Agencies (SD)	Modal vacancy length (%)	Agencies struggling to fill positions (%)
Primarily Rural	52 (46.0)	0.83 (1.129)	Less than 3 months (28.1%)	59 (52.2%)
Mix of rural and urban	16 (69.6)	1.21 (1.182)	3-6 months (52.9%)	11 (47.8%)
Primarily suburban	17 (68.0)	1.56 (1.423)	3-6 months (23.5%)	13 (52.0%)
Primarily urban	49 (61.3)	1.35 (1.484	3-6 months (32.1%)	47 (58.8%)
Overall	134 (55.6)	1.11 (1.314)	3-6 months (26.4%)	130 (53.9%)
	X^2 p		X^2 p	X^2 p
Chi Square	8.612 0.035		16.191 0.369	1.186 0.756
ANOVA		3.169 0.025		

Of those agencies that reported having a vacancy (n = 144), slightly less than half of those positions were open for six months or less (47.9%), with 15 agencies reporting that those vacancies have existed for more than 18 months. When disaggregated by the type of community, vacancies in rural agencies tended to have been open for less than three months (n = 16, 28.1% of all rural agencies with a vacancy), while more urbanized agencies tended to have vacancies that had been open for between three and six months. This ranged from between 23.5% for suburban (n = 4) to 32.1% for urban (n = 17) agencies to nearly 53% of agencies serving a mix of rural and urban communities (n = 9). However, these differences were not statistically significant. Lastly, about half of all agencies across the sample struggled with filling their open positions. This was also consistent across levels of urbanization (X^2 = 1.186, p = 0.756).

Issues with Recruitment and Retention Across the Rural-Urban Divide

Table 2: Issues with Recruitment and Retention summarizes the agencies' responses to questions concerning why they have had issues filling their open positions, as well as the reason why trained personnel left the agency. The single largest issue for agencies filling their open positions is finding qualified candidates, with over 64% of all agencies sharing this issue, and 21.7% (n = 44) having issues finding any candidates. Less serious issues include ensuring the candidates complete academy and field training (7.9 and 7.5%, respectively). Across levels of urbanization, this pattern held, with the most serious recruitment issue being finding qualified candidates. While still present, issues of recruiting any candidates or their completing training were not more or less prevalent across urbanization levels.

Table 2

Issues with Recruitment and Retention Across Rural-Urban Divides

	Recruitment				Training	
	Any Candidate (%)	Qualified Candidate (%)	Accept Offer (%)	Complete Academy (%)	Complete field training (%)	Other (%)
Primarily Rural	22 (22.7)	70 (66.0)	8 (7.2)	7 (6.3)	3 (2.7)	20 (18.0)
Mix	5 (21.7)	14 (63.6)	1 (4.3)	3 (13.0)	2 (8.7)	6 (26.1)
Suburban	3 (20.0)	14 (60.9)	1 (4.0)	2 (8.0)	3 (12.0)	3 (12.0)
Urban	14 (20.6)	50 (63.3)	7 (8.8)	7 (8.8)	10 (12.5)	18 (22.5)
Overall	44 (21.7)	148 (64.3)	17 (7.1%)	19 (7.9)	18 (7.5)	47 (19.7)
Chi Square	X^2 9.848	p 0.829				
Retention						
	Leaves law enforcement field (%)		Hired by different agency (%)		Other (%)	
Primarily Rural	30 (26.8)		53 (47.3)		17 (15.2)	
Mix	8 (34.8)		11 (47.8)		6 (26.1)	
Suburban	12 (48.0)		13 (52.0)		10 (40.0)	
Urban	25 (31.3)		36 (45.0)		20 (25.0)	
Overall	75 (31.3)		113 (47.1)		53 (22.1)	
Chi Square	X^2 3.950		p 0.683			

A Chi Square test to identify issues concerning filling of vacancies did not identify any consistent pattern across levels of urbanization (X^2 = 9.848, p = 0.829). Thirty-five agencies reported that a confounding issue was compensation, either because other agencies offered better pay or better benefits, with two identifying the budget issues in their rural areas. Two agencies stated that the COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted their hiring candidates, either through a budget-related hiring freeze or restrictions on academy class size. Seven agencies noted their recruits had issues abiding by policy, with several agencies describing issues with misconduct, insubordination, or a history of marijuana use, or being unable to follow residency requirements. Finally, two agencies mentioned the perceived hostility towards law enforcement impacted their ability to recruit candidates.

In response to questions concerning why trained officers left the agency, respondents most often stated their employees moved to a different agency (n = 113, 47.1%), with the next most often reason being the officer leaving the field entirely (n = 75, 31.3%). As with issues in recruitment, this pattern was consistent across levels of urbanization. These issues were more keenly seen in suburban agencies and those that covered a mix of urban and rural areas. However, this may be due to the few number of agencies in those types of communities who participated.

Of the 54 agencies that conducted an exit interview or had some inkling about their former employees' motivations for leaving, the most frequently shared complaint was pay and compensation (n = 21, 38.89%). This issue included the base salary or hourly wage, to issues with overtime, benefits, or not being able to find housing, and was roughly proportionally expressed across levels of urbanization. Relatedly, one agency noted that some of their officers have transitioned to part-time, while another mentioned a private entity in the area paid more. Ten agencies (18.52%) noted their officers left for family reasons, such as a spouse being in the military and being stationed elsewhere or their partner obtaining a job in a different area. Three of these noted the stress of shift work played a role, as well. Eight agencies (14.81%) noted their officers had retired or left for a medical reason, with this more frequently occurring in agencies in a mix of rural and urban areas (4). Finally, two agencies (3.70%) mentioned they had terminated employees for misconduct or personnel issues.

Agencies' Efforts Towards Recruitment and Retention of Law Enforcement Officers

Table 3 describes how the 80 agencies (32.650% of the total responding agencies) have implemented different recruitment and retention programs to address vacancy issues. Eighty agencies provided additional information about their expanded recruitment and retention practices. These were then reduced to two broad categories: bonuses and benefits. Examples of bonuses included lump sum payments for being hired or for remaining with the agency for a set amount of time (n = 8, 10%), being certified as a law enforcement officer at the time of hiring (n = 3, 3.8%), or for referring a new hire to the agency (n = 1, 1.3%). Agencies also noted that they had increased their compensation to compete with other agencies, including raising their starting

salary or improving their retirement benefits (n = 28, 35.0%), providing additional training or reimbursement for academy attendance (n = 11, 13.8%), and changing their hiring practices (n = 35, 43.8%). These changes included dedicating personnel to recruitment, creating and distributing advertisements, changes in the hiring process, and forming relationships with academic institutions in the area for recruitment purposes.

Table 3

Agencies' Efforts Toward Recruitment and Retention of Law Enforcement Officers

	Any (% of total)	Bonuses (% of responding agencies)		Benefits (% of responding agencies)			
		Education or Certification	Recruitment or Retention	Referral	Salary or Benefits	Tuition or Training	Changes to Hiring Practices
Rural	47	1	4	1	18	3	21
(n=112)	(42.0)	(2.1)	(8.5)	(2.1)	(38.3)	(6.4)	(44.7)
Mix	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
(n=23)	(4.3)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)
Suburban	6	1	1	0	1	1	1
(n=25)	(24.0)	(16.7)	(16.7)	(0.0)	(16.7)	(16.7)	(16.7)
Urban	28	1	3	0	9	7	12
(n=79)	(34.5)	(3.6)	(10.7)	(0.0)	(32.1)	(25.0)	(42.9)
Overall	80 (32.7)	3	8	0	28	11	35
(n=245)		(3.8)	(10.0)	(0.0)	(35.0)	(13.8)	(43.8)
Chi	X^2	(p)					
Square	13.30	p=.004					

Across the rural-urban divide, there were some differences to note. In primarily rural agencies, they tended to update their hiring practices (n = 21) through advertising via social media, updating their human resource systems, and raise salary (n = 18), compared to other efforts. In contrast, urban agencies did not have a clear preferred tactic to improve recruitment and retention. Of the seven agencies that serve a suburban or mix of urban and rural populations, no practice was favored. However, these differences should be interpreted cautiously as only 33.5% of the sample enacted these policies, and consequently, the differences between groups were very slight.

To summarize, approximately half of the agencies surveyed have open vacancies, with this resulting in a considerable staffing shortage that is not easily addressed in most instances. The driver of this issue seems to be related to finding qualified candidates and retaining those who complete training. Most often, these officers are moving to agencies with better pay and benefits, while a considerable number of officers are leaving the field entirely. To address this, a small percentage of agencies are focusing on providing educational assistance or bonuses to recruit and retain officers, while other agencies are attempting more novel approaches with other

types of bonuses or benefits. However, given the cross-sectional nature of this data, we cannot speculate as to whether this will address the issue.

Discussion

As discussed above, understanding the patterns of recruitment and retention of quality personnel within law enforcement agencies is a significant challenge for practitioners and researchers. Our survey of agencies across Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado shows that staffing shortages are prevalent across the rural-urban divide. This issue is rooted in agencies having difficulty recruiting quality applicants and retaining them over the long term. However, this finding is likely to generalize towards agencies in similar areas in that shortages of trained officers are more likely to affect agency operations and lead to stress among remaining employees. Moreover, none of the responding departments served the metropolises, meaning that they more accurately reflect the state of recruitment and retention than studies of New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago.

Additionally, the reasons given for the issues surrounding the recruitment and retention of officers are likely consistent for all agencies facing staffing shortages - a lack of qualified candidates applying for the job and remaining in the agency long enough to cover training costs. This suggests that agencies are unwilling to take "just anyone" interested in the job, as shown by the number of agencies that terminated employees during background checks or because of misconduct, nor sacrifice employee numbers to provide small raises. However, it also indicates that qualified candidates may be looking elsewhere for employment, possibly outside of the surveyed population or outside the field. While we do not suggest that agencies lower their standards to address staffing and retention issues, examining how agencies are recruiting would be a useful endeavor.

Importantly, the combined crises of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and the social pressures facing law enforcement may be having indirect effects on recruitment and retention, with a minority of departments mentioning issues related to either, by name. As discussed above, officers often moved to other agencies for better pay or benefits. Given the impact that COVID-19 has had on local economies and government budgets, this is unlikely to improve in the near-term. Relatedly, the real and perceived hostility towards law enforcement may be deterring otherwise qualified applicants from seeking out careers in law enforcement, either due to misconceptions about the role of law enforcement in the community or their desire to avoid controversy. To understand the impact of these issues on law enforcement staffing, a more focused study is necessary.

With this information, what can agencies do to address these issues? The popular approaches to recruiting and retaining officers seemed to fall within either cash bonuses or non-monetary benefits. These steps may be easier for cash-strapped municipalities to take advantage of lower-cost options, especially considering COVID-era budget constraints. More broadly, they

may take steps to emphasize the role of police within communities: as guardians of the community and not soldiers in the war on crime (Martinelli, 2021; McLean et al., 2019). This may include making proactive community service a cornerstone of the police so that community members, and potential applicants, see officers 'doing good' in the neighborhood, in addition to their traditional crime-focused duties.

In effect, this would shift officers from the Watchman or Legalistic style towards one of Service (Wilson, 1968). These more community-oriented duties will necessitate more discretion for the officers in how to intercede in situations and resolve minor incidents, which may impact more serious investigations as a consequence. Wilson also argued that Service-style agencies often serve middle-class, suburban communities that are fairly homogeneous across socioeconomic measures. Given that rural communities tend to be poorer, even if still homogeneous, switching rural agencies from their traditional order maintenance role to community service may present a logistical challenge.

As with all research, our study has several limitations that may attenuate the findings. First, agencies that decided to participate may be fundamentally different from those that did not. This likely means that agencies currently experiencing recruitment and/or retention problems are more likely to complete the survey. Consequently, our results may overemphasize the issue when generalized to all agencies. Given the relatively high number of agencies that chose to participate, this study may instead reflect what a significant portion of agencies are experiencing, especially rural ones, rather than all police agencies. Second, our survey reflects the opinions and perceptions of a relatively small area within the United States and thus, our results may have reduced external validity to non-U.S. or non-Midwestern agencies. Additionally, this study's cross-sectional nature means that we cannot identify what works to increase recruitment and retention or if the problems are getting worse. This area is of critical importance as police are encouraged to do more with less. We hope to continue exploring how this affects law enforcement practice and its impact on rural communities.

References

About NYPD. (n.d.). *NYC, New York City Police Department*. Retrieved from
https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/about/about-nypd/about-nypd-landing.page

Bailey, H. (2020, November 13). Minneapolis violence surges as police officers leave
department in droves. *The Washington Post*, retrieved from
https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/minneapolis-police-shortage-violence-
floyd/2020/11/12/642f741a-1a1d-11eb-befb-8864259bd2d8_story.html

Bottema, A.J., & Telep, C.W. (2021). Examining views of police chiefs and college students
regarding drug disqualifiers for the hiring of police officers in Arizona. *Journal of Drug
Issues, 51*(1), 109-127. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022042620959331

Bradley, K. D. (2020). *Recruiting and retaining offices in small and rural agencies*. Washington,
DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Cadet, D. (2014, August 15). Darren Wilson identified as officer who fatally shot Michael
Brown. *Huffington Post: Black Voices*. Retrieved from
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/darren-wilson-michael-brown_n_5681340

Cain, J. (2021, August 6). 'They're worn out': LAPD contends with hundreds of officer
resignations, retirements after protests, pandemic break out. *Los Angeles Daily News*.
Retrieved from https://www.dailynews.com/2021/08/06/theyre-worn-out-lapd-contends-
with-hundreds-of-officer-resignations-retirements-after-protests-pandemic-break-out/

Cambareri, J.F., & Kuhns, J.B. (2018). Perceptions and perceived challenges associated with a
hypothetical career in law enforcement: Differences among male and female college
students. *Police Quarterly*, 21(3), 335-357.

Campbell, B.A., Nix, J. & Maguire, E.R. (2018). Is the number of citizens fatally shot by police
increasing in the post-Ferguson era? *Crime and Delinquency,* 64(3):398–420.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611118760862

Copple, J. E. (2017). Law enforcement recruitment in the 21st Century: Forum proceedings.
Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Retrieved from
https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/evidence-based-policing-45-small-bytes

Council on Criminal Justice (2020, October 7). *Public perceptions of the police*. Retrieved from
https://counciloncj.org/public-perceptions-of-the-police/

Fenwick, T. (2015). Learning policing in rural spaces: 'Covering 12 foot rooms with 8 foot
carpets'. *Policing, 9*(3), 234-241. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pav015

Giblin, M.J, & Galli, P.M. (2017). Compensation as a police candidate attraction tool: An
organizational-level analysis. *Police Quarterly, 20*(4), 397-419.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611117713679

Gächter, M., Savage, D.A, & Torgler, B. (2013). Retaining the thin blue line: What shapes
workers' intentions not to quit the current work environment. *International Journal of
Social Economics, 40*(5), 479-503. https://doi.org/10.1108/03068291311315359

Hilal, S., Densley, J.A., & Jones, D.S. (2017). A signaling theory of law enforcement hiring. *Policing & Society, 27*(5), 508-524. https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2015.1081388

Hosko, R. T. (2018). Through police eyes – the Ferguson Effect Scare. *Berkeley Journal of Criminal Law, 23*(1), 9 – 31.

Huey, L., & Ricciardelli, R. (2015). 'This isn't what I signed up for': When police officer role expectations conflict with the realities of general duty police work in remote communities. *International Journal of Police Science & Management, 17*(3), 194-203.

International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). (n.d.). *The state of recruitment: A crisis for law enforcement*. Retrieved from https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/ 239416_IACP_RecruitmentBR_HR_0.pdf

International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). (2018). *Practices in modern policing: Policing in small, rural, and tribal communities*. Retrieved from https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/IACP_PMP_SmallTribal.pdf

Kingshott, B.F. (2013). Revisiting gender issues: Continuing police reform. *Criminal Justice Studies, 26*(3), 366-392.

Maguire, E. R., Nix, J., & Campbell, B. A. (2017). A war on cops? The effects of Ferguson on the number of US police officers murdered in the line of duty. *Justice Quarterly, 34*(5), 739-758.

Martinelli, T. J. (2021). *Deterring unconstitutional policing: What all cops, civic leaders, and citizens should know for improving police community interactions and reducing civil liability.* Gatekeeper Press.

McCarty, W.P., & Skogan, W.G. (2013). Job-related burnout among civilian and sworn police personnel. *Police Quarterly, 16*(1), 66-84.

McLean, K., Wolfe, S. E., Rojek, J., Alpert, G. P., & Smith, M. R. (2019). Police officers as warriors or guardians: Empirical reality or intriguing rhetoric? *Justice Quarterly, 37*(6), 1096–1118.

MacFarquhar, N. (2021, June 12). Police forces struggle to fill ranks in time of upheaval. *The New York Times*, Section A, Page 13.

McIntyre, R. W. (1990, June). *Why police officers resign: A look at the turnover of police officers in Vermont*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. https://www.ojp.gov/library/abstracts/why-police-officers-resign-look-turnover-police-officers-vermont

Mourtgos, S. M., Adams, I. T., & Nix, J. (2021). Elevated police turnover following the summer of George Floyd protests: A synthetic control study. *Criminology & Public Policy,* 1-25. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12556

Orrick, W. D. (2008). *Best practices guide for recruitment, retention, and turnover of law enforcement personnel.* International Association of Chiefs of Police. https://www.nccpsafety.org/assets/files/library/Recruitment_Retention_and_Turnover_in_Law_Enforcement.pdf

Police Executive Research Forum (PERF). (2019). *The workforce crisis, and what police agencies are doing about it.* Washington, DC. Retrieved from https://www.policeforum.org/assets/WorkforceCrisis.pdf

Pyrooz, D. C., Decker, S.H., Wolfe, S.E., & Shjarback, J.A. (2016). Was there a Ferguson effect on crime rates in large U.S. cities? *Journal of Criminal Justice* 46:1–8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2016.01.001

Ricciardelli, R. (2018). Risk it out, risk it out": Occupational and organizational stresses in rural policing. *Police Quarterly, 21*(4), 415-439.

Ruddell, R., & Jones, N. A. (2018). Policing the 'middle of nowhere': Officer working strategies in isolated communities. *Policing, 14*(2), 414-427.

Smith, S. (2016, June). A crisis facing law enforcement: Recruiting in the 21st century. *The Police Chief, 83,* web only. Retrieved from https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/a-crisis-facing-law-enforcement-recruiting-in-the-21st-century/

Tucker, E., & Krishnakumar, P. (2022). Intentional killings of law enforcement officers reach 20-year high, FBI says. *CNN* (January 13). Retrieved from https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/13/us/police-officers-line-of-duty-deaths/index.html

Tyler, T. R. (2003). Procedural justice, legitimacy, and the effective rule of law. *Crime and Justice, 30*, 283-357.

United Nations (UN). (2018, May 16*). 68% of the world population projected to live in urban areas by 2050, says UN.* Retrieved from https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html

Vernon, P. B., & Lynn, T. J. (2021). Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) stops: Race and the perception of bias. *Journal of Law and Criminal Justice*, *9*(1), 180–194. https://doi.org/10.15640/jlcj.v9n1a11

Wilson, J. M., Dalton, E., Scheer, C., & Grammich, C. A. (2010). *Police recruitment and retention for the new millennium: The state of knowledge.* RAND Corporation.

Wilson, J. Q. (1968). *Varieties of Police Behavior: The Management of Law and Order in Eight Communities.* Harvard University Press.

Wilson, C.P., Wilson, S.A., & Gwann, M. (2016). Identifying barriers to diversity in law enforcement agencies. *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice, 14*(4), 231-253.

Wilson, C.P., Wilson, S.A., Luthar, H.K., & Bridges, M.R. (2013). Recruiting for diversity in law enforcement: An evaluation of practices used by state and local agencies. *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice, 11*(4), 238-255.

Yarwood, R. (2015). Lost and hound: The more-than-human networks of rural policing. *Journal of Rural Studies, 39*, 278 – 286.