

## Recruitment and Retention Study Series



Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

April 2003

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## Executive Summary

The Governor's Crime Commission, in conjunction with the North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission and the North Carolina Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission, held a joint planning retreat in the early summer of 2000 to identify and address the major emerging issues facing the state's criminal justice system and its public safety personnel.

Based on the planning group's recommended plan of action a research study team was assembled which consisted of staff members from the three criminal justice commissions. The study team held several meetings and decided that the most appropriate course of action would be to conduct several smaller studies with each targeting the unique attributes and distinct features associated with recruiting and retaining sworn police personnel, sworn sheriff's office personnel, detention officers and public safety telecommunications officials. Thus, this report is one of four, in a series, which examine the issue of recruitment and retention among North Carolina's public safety agencies.

A three part, 22 item survey was developed by the study team and administered to 80 sheriffs' offices which were randomly selected based upon a stratified sampling technique which divided the state's offices into four groups based on the number of full-time sworn deputy personnel. Forty-nine surveys were returned producing a response rate of 61.3 percent.

Twenty-seven respondents (56.3 percent of the sample) described their respective sheriffs' offices' recruitment strategies as neutral. Eleven agencies' strategies were rated as being either passive or somewhat passive (22.9%) with the remaining 10 agencies possessing aggressive recruitment strategies (20.8%). None of the respondents suggested that their offices had strongly aggressive recruitment tactics.

The most frequently used recruitment techniques were word of mouth (93.9%), the community college system (83.7%) and employing officers from an existing auxiliary or reserve force (75.5%). Local personnel listings (67.3%), newspapers (61.2%), job fairs (61.2%) and the Internet (61.2%) were also frequently employed recruitment techniques with more than one-half of the study respondents noting that their offices relied on these methods. The Police Corp program (51.0%) and radio/television (44.9%) were the least used methods, however a large percentage of the sheriffs' offices still used these two techniques to recruit sworn personnel.

Respondents were asked to rate each recruitment technique on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective. The top three most effective techniques were word of mouth ( $X=6.8$ ), community colleges ( $X=6.2$ ) and auxiliary/reserve forces ( $X=6.2$ ). The least effective recruitment techniques were perceived to be the Internet ( $X=2.4$ ), the Police Corp program ( $X=1.2$ ) and radio/television ( $X=1.2$ ). Thus, the data suggest that the most effective techniques are also the most frequently used. In other words, while sheriffs' offices use all types of recruitment techniques they rely most heavily on what has proven to be the most effective, in the past, for finding potential applicants.

Over one-half of the participating sheriffs' offices (57.1%) currently have a waiting list, or backlog, of qualified deputy sheriff applicants. The number of applicants on these lists ranged from two to 50 with a sample wide average of 12.2 individuals per waiting list.

Survey participants were also asked to delineate the number of applicants per vacant sworn deputy position within their agencies. The number of applicants for each vacant position ranged from zero to 25 with a sample wide average of 6.2 applicants per posted position.

Discussions surrounding the three most common barriers to effectively recruiting more qualified applicants revealed that agency budget restrictions (85.7%), competition with other criminal justice agencies (75.5%) and competition with the private sector (42.9%) posed the most challenges for the sheriffs' offices. The remaining seven obstacles which were listed in the survey posed less of a problem for the Sheriffs' Offices with less than one-third of the offices experiencing significant problems due to these barriers.

The percentage of applicants who are hired prior to BLET completion ranged from zero to 95 percent with 21 (42.9 %) agencies requiring all applicants to complete BLET before they are employed. Across the entire study sample the average sheriffs' office hires 80 percent of its applicants from an applicant pool that has already completed a BLET program.

Turnover rates for sworn deputy positions, using July 2001 as a base, ranged from zero to 60 percent with an average turnover rate of 12.7 percent being reported for those agencies returning completed surveys. Vacancy rates for sworn positions, using June 2002 as a base, ranged from zero to 45 percent with over half (53.1%) of the agencies reporting a full sworn force with no vacant sworn positions on June 30, 2002. The average vacancy rate for sworn positions was a modest 5.5 percent.

Respondents were offered a list of six different techniques for personnel retention and were asked to specify each technique used by their agencies and to rank each in terms of their effectiveness on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective. The most popular retention strategy was holding and using a vigorous and fair promotion strategy with 38, (77.6%), of the respondents noting that their respective agencies use this approach. Offering educational incentives, such as tuition reimbursement and allowing officers to attend classes during work hours, was the second most frequently employed technique (75.5%) followed by an annual pay increase, irrespective of job performance (73.5%). All of the six retention techniques were frequently used with more than half the sample noting that their offices employed all six in some form or fashion.

As a general rule the most frequently used retention techniques were also perceived to be the most effective with the exception of promotions and education and training at office expense. These two were reversed with the participants rating education and training as more effective than formal promotions, despite the fact that promotions were used by a slightly larger number of offices.

Agency budget restrictions (91.8%) were reported as the most frequently discussed factor when explaining why sworn personnel leave the sheriff's office. A high percentage of the respondents (83.7%) also noted that lateral transfers to other law enforcement agencies, retirement (63.3%) and individuals resigning to accept employment in the private sector (57.1%) were substantial factors which impact upon their respective agency attrition rates.

Over 80 percent of the responding agencies lost officers to larger law enforcement departments, suggesting that higher salaries and more competitive benefits may explain these losses. Lateral transfers to state law enforcement agencies was the second highest reported type of lateral transfer (69.4%) followed by employment with similar size departments (61.2%). Forty-nine percent of the sheriffs' offices reported that they are losing sworn personnel to smaller law enforcement agencies.

The data suggest that lateral transfers to larger law enforcement agencies and state law enforcement agencies are most prevalent in the participating sheriffs' offices with these two types of transfers explaining the bulk of the total number of transfers. In other words, the majority of the sheriffs' offices are losing the majority of their sworn personnel to larger and state criminal justice agencies. While personnel are also leaving to work in same size and smaller criminal justice agencies these losses are not significant and sizeable enough to exert a major impact on the Sheriffs' Offices' sworn workforce.

Overall, irrespective of the reasons why officers leave, the average length of an officer's employment is 28 months before he/she decides to leave the sheriffs' office. Sixty-one percent of the participating sheriffs' offices reported an average length of stay at 28 months or less with 83 percent reporting that their respective average length of stay was three years or less. Thus, it appears that a critical period of two years, four months, to three years, exists in which sheriffs' offices can implement policies and/or programs to improve retention rates and conversely minimize its attrition rate by retaining officers beyond this critical period.

A series of policy relevant research questions were examined, using the survey data, in an effort to further delineate recruitment and retention issues among the state's sheriffs' offices. Answers to these questions, actual quantitative survey data and the respondents' qualitative suggestions for improving recruitment and retention were compiled and analyzed to produce a series of five policy implications and recommendations. These included launching a more aggressive recruitment campaign, exploring both financial and non-financial options for retaining officers, examining current BLET screening procedures and conducting more research in the area of lateral transfers.

## **Introduction/Study Rationale**

The Governor's Crime Commission, in conjunction with the North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission and the North Carolina Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission, held a joint planning retreat in the early summer of 2000 to identify and address the major emerging issues facing the state's criminal justice system and its public safety personnel. As part of this planning endeavor members of the three commissions were divided into four focus group teams – professional development, public policy, funding, and recruitment and retention. Each team reviewed the major issues and obstacles in their respective areas, outlined a series of goals and objectives and concluded by formulating a specific plan of action to attain their stated goals. A summary of the work conducted by the recruitment and retention team is provided below with this report being a direct product of the focus team's recommendations.

## **Topics of Discussion**

The recruitment and retention working group identified six major areas of discussion during the joint planning session:

1. Recruitment and retention of law enforcement and correctional personnel.
2. Law enforcement retirement.
3. Establish minimum screening standards for entrance into BLET.
4. Certification versus licensing.
5. State subsidized salary increases linked to professional certificate program.
6. Minimum salary for law enforcement officers.

## **Recruitment and Retention Objectives**

Following the group's discussion of these topic areas, ten concrete objectives were delineated:

1. Develop partnerships with colleges and high schools (early recruitment).
2. Enhance the ability to identify and attract quality applicants.

3. Establish stronger minimum screening standards for BLET.
4. Become more competitive with the private sector.
5. Public recognition through marketing of the criminal justice profession.
6. Conduct a study which examines the recruitment and retention of criminal justice personnel.
7. Become more competitive with the private sector relative to compensation packages, i.e. salary, take-home vehicles, retirement plans and benefits.
8. Adequate resources relative to staffing, equipment and training.
9. Develop work environment competitively relative to overall employee wellness.
10. Review and further develop career opportunities.

### **Plan of Action**

*The focus team outlined a specific plan of action in order to achieve its objectives and better improve the recruitment and retention of criminal justice personnel in North Carolina. This plan consisted of the following key components:*

1. Encourage criminal justice administrators to identify key decision-makers in schools for the purpose of developing early recruitment strategies and partnerships.
2. Assemble a recruitment and retention study team consisting of staff from the three commissions.
3. Develop a marketing strategy and disseminate recruitment packets.
4. Provide fiscal resources to support legislatively mandated initiatives.
5. Develop and implement a wellness program for criminal justice employees.
6. Develop and implement a program for upward and lateral mobility at all levels.

Based on the planning group's recommended plan of action, a research study team was assembled which consisted of staff members from the three criminal justice commissions. The study team held several meetings and decided that the most appropriate course of action would be to conduct several smaller studies with each targeting the unique attributes and distinct features associated with recruiting and retaining sworn police personnel, sworn sheriff's office personnel, detention officers and public safety telecommunications officials. Thus, this report is one of four, in a series, which examines the issue of recruitment and retention among North Carolina's public safety agencies.

## Methods

### Survey Instrument

A three part, 22 item survey was developed by the study team with the first section of the questionnaire presenting questions which addressed the issue of recruiting sworn law enforcement personnel within the sheriff's office. The survey items dealt with recruitment strategies and techniques, the number of applicants, and the extent to which the responding agency had a backlog or waiting list of potential candidates. Respondents were also given the opportunity to comment on what course(s) of action should be undertaken to improve the recruitment of sworn deputy sheriffs and to build a more qualified applicant pool.

Part two addressed the issue of attrition and retention and included questions which were designed to detail the responding agency's turnover and vacancy rates and how these have varied over the past three years. Other questions focused on obstacles which hinder successful recruitment, techniques for retaining sworn deputy sheriffs, and reasons why officers leave the agency. Respondents were also given the chance to offer suggestions for improving personnel retention.

The final section of the questionnaire allowed the agencies to note any concerns, comments or suggestions regarding all recruitment and retention issues which they felt should be brought to the attention of the three commissions. Respondents were also queried to determine if the responding agency conducted closeout interviews upon an applicant's exit from the agency.

### Survey Sample

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A list of North Carolina's sheriffs' offices was provided by staff of the Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission and was used as the basis for selecting those sheriffs' offices which would be included in the survey sample. The list was divided into four groups, or quartiles, based upon the median number of sworn personnel.

A proportionate number of agencies, relative to the percent of agencies in each of the four groups, were sampled and selected to receive a copy of the survey in the mail. A total of 80 surveys were distributed with 20 (25 %) going to agencies with more than 73 sworn officers, 18 (22.5%) to agencies with 43 to 73 sworn officers, and 22 (27.5%) being mailed to agencies with 23 to 42 sworn officers. The remaining 20 surveys (25%) were mailed to the state's smallest law enforcement agencies, defined as having fewer than 23 full-time sworn officers.

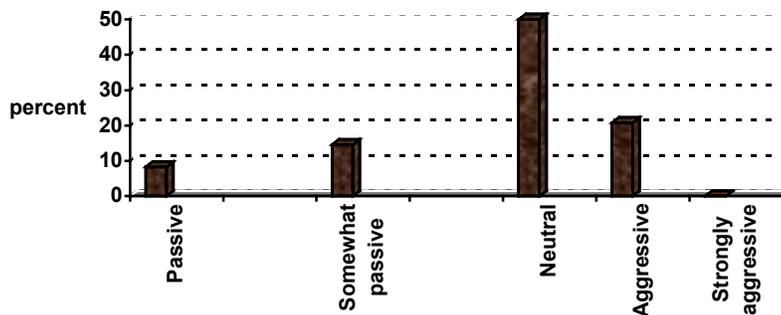
## Results

A total of 49 surveys were returned producing a study response rate of 61.3 percent.

### Recruitment Issues

As Figure 1 depicts, 27 respondents (56.3 percent of the sample) described their respective sheriffs' offices' recruitment strategies as neutral. Eleven agencies' strategies were rated as being either passive or somewhat passive (22.9%) with the remaining ten agencies possessing aggressive recruitment strategies (20.8%). None of the respondents suggested that their offices had strongly aggressive recruitment tactics.

Figure 1 Perceived Strength of Agency Recruitment Strategy



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The most frequently used recruitment techniques were word of mouth (93.9%), the community college system (83.7%) and employing officers from an existing auxiliary or reserve force (75.5%). Local personnel listings (67.3%), newspapers (61.2%), job fairs (61.2%) and the Internet (61.2%) were also frequently employed recruitment techniques with more than half of the study respondents noting that their offices relied on these methods. The Police Corps program (51.0%) and radio/television (44.9%) were the least used methods, however a large percentage of the sheriffs' offices still used these two techniques to recruit sworn personnel. As the data suggest, while the majority of the responding offices are not implementing aggressive recruitment strategies, they are nonetheless using a wide variety of recruitment strategies and are not limiting their recruitment initiatives to only one or two of the traditional strategies. It appears that the responding sheriffs' offices are being innovative and forward thinking as they are taking advantage of new programs and the latest technological developments to assist in their respective recruitment efforts (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1 also depicts the average effectiveness rating for the nine recruitment techniques which were listed in the survey. Respondents were asked to rate each recruitment technique on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective. The top three most effective techniques were word of mouth ( $X=6.8$ ), community colleges ( $X=6.2$ ) and auxiliary/reserve forces ( $X=6.2$ ). The least effective recruitment techniques were perceived to be the Internet ( $X=2.4$ ), the Police Corps program ( $X=1.2$ ) and radio/television ( $X=1.2$ ). Thus, the data suggest that the most effective techniques are also the most frequently used. In other words, while sheriffs' offices use all types of recruitment techniques they rely most heavily on what has proven to be the most effective, in the past, for finding potential applicants.

## Recruitment and Retention Study Series: Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

Table 1 Recruitment Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

| Technique                | Number Using | % Using | Average Effectiveness Rating<br>(0 to 9) |
|--------------------------|--------------|---------|--|
| Word of mouth            | 46           | 93.9%   | 6.8                                      |
| Community college        | 41           | 83.7%   | 6.2                                      |
| Auxiliary/Reserves       | 37           | 75.5%   | 6.2                                      |
| Local personnel listings | 33           | 67.3%   | 3.9                                      |
| Internet                 | 30           | 61.2%   | 2.4                                      |
| Newspapers               | 30           | 61.2%   | 4.6                                      |
| Job Fairs                | 30           | 61.2%   | 3.4                                      |
| Police Corps             | 25           | 51.0%   | 1.2                                      |
| Radio/TV                 | 22           | 44.9%   | .8                                       |

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

Over one-half of the participating sheriffs' offices (57.1%) currently have a waiting list, or backlog, of qualified deputy sheriff applicants. The number of applicants on these lists ranged from two to 50 with a sample wide average of 12.2 individuals per waiting list.

Survey participants were also asked to delineate the number of applicants, per vacant sworn deputy position, within their agencies. The number of applicants for each vacant position ranged from zero to 25 with a sample wide average of 6.2 applicants per posted position.

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The research team identified ten possible obstacles, or barriers, to recruiting more qualified applicants with the survey respondents being asked to list all which have negatively impacted upon local recruitment in their respective agencies. As Figures 2 and 3 suggest the three most common barriers were agency budget restrictions (85.7%),

competition with other criminal justice agencies (75.5%), and competition with the private sector (42.9%). The remaining seven identified obstacles posed less of a problem for the sheriffs' offices with less than one-third of the offices experiencing significant problems due to these barriers. The research did not support commonly held assumptions, or stereotypes, which are often associated with working in rural and small jurisdictions. It is often erroneously assumed that residency requirements and the size and location of rural law enforcement agencies act as negative barriers, or exert a deterring effect, for recruiting sworn personnel. These three factors were heavily discounted by the participating sheriffs' offices and did not appear to act as barriers to successful recruiting efforts.

Figure 2 Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates

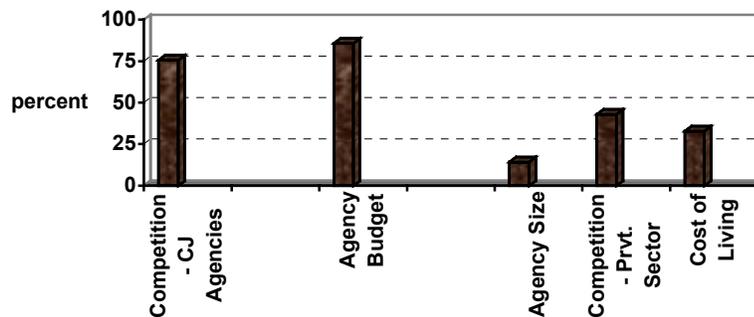
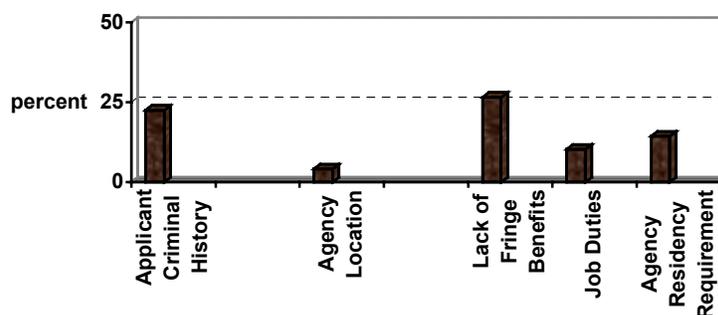


Figure 3 Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates



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Respondents were also given the opportunity to write-in any other barriers which affected their offices' recruitment efforts with two participants noting the salary issue and one respondent suggesting that entry-level duty assignments, such as working in the detention facility or communications branch, were negative obstacles which impact recruitment.

The study team also thought it was important to ascertain the extent to which sheriffs' offices hire applicants who have already completed BLET, versus hiring applicants and then sponsoring their BLET training during the state mandated time period after employment. Survey questions addressed both sides of the coin by soliciting participants to state the percent of both pre and post BLET hires. The percentage of applicants who are hired prior to BLET completion ranged from zero to 95 percent with 21 (42.9 %) agencies requiring all applicants to complete BLET before they are employed. Across the entire study sample the average sheriffs' office hires 80 percent of its applicants from an applicant pool that has already completed a BLET program.

Survey respondents were asked through an open-ended question to comment on any ideas that they had for improving the quality of future sworn deputy sheriff applicant pools. Responses tended to cluster in two areas with the salary and benefits issue ranking as the number one area where improvements are needed. Of those officers who answered the question, exactly 50 percent mentioned improving salaries as a means of improving the quality of future applicant pools. Nearly one in five survey participants suggested making improvements by conducting better background checks and implementing stricter standards for screening applicants *prior to* enrollment in BLET. Illustrative examples are provided below:

- ✦ Better Pay
- ✦ Higher pay
- ✦ Place higher standards on BLET acceptance criteria courses in community colleges-Polygraph mandatory
- ✦ Better screening prior to an applicant's entry into a BLET program in the community college system
- ✦ Keep standards moving with the times. Improve on policies and programs to keep new officers as well as old up to date on new advances in law enforcement
- ✦ Better benefits which come from the County Commissioners-Better retirement benefits-Lower the years of retirement

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- ★ We are going to have to establish pay parameters for deputies that are equitable to other professional positions
- ★ Better pay-More screening of BLET applicants
- ★ I think that we have to consider license to practice law enforcement after BLET
- ★ More work on report writing. Cleaner backgrounds.
- ★ I would like to see a license program.
- ★ Set a statewide pay standard for all agencies
- ★ Complete background investigation prior to starting BLET
- ★ Require minimum Associate's degree
- ★ Better pay rates-Better equipment upgrades
- ★ Better training-more salary-stop training felons at the community college level for BLET

### Attrition and Retention Issues

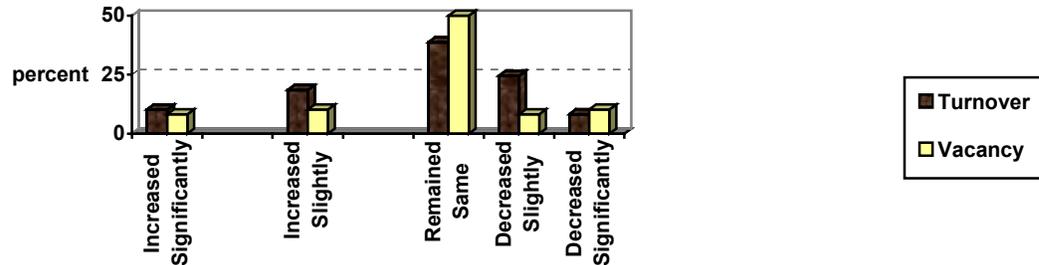
Turnover rates for sworn deputy positions, using July 2001 as a base, ranged from zero to 60 percent with an average turnover rate of 12.7 percent being reported for those agencies returning completed surveys. As Figure 4 documents 38.8 percent of the respondents noted that their agency's turnover rate has remained stable for the past three years. Slightly more than a quarter of the agencies (28.6%) experienced either a significant, or slight, rise in their respective turnover rates while turnover rates dropped for 32.6 percent of the sheriffs' offices.

Vacancy rates for sworn positions, using June 2002 as a base, ranged from zero to 45 percent with over half (53.1%) of the agencies reporting a full sworn force with no vacant sworn positions on June 30, 2002. The average vacancy rate for sworn positions was a modest 5.5 percent. Statewide trends in the vacancy rates indicate that 63.3 percent of the offices' report no discernible changes; i.e. vacancy rates have remained stable during the last three years for these sheriffs' offices. Eighteen percent of the participants reported an increase in their vacancy rates over the last three years, with an identical percentage noting a decline during this period.

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Figure 4 Turnover and Vacancy Rates Over the Past Three Years



Respondents were offered a list of six different techniques for personnel retention and were asked to specify each technique which is used by their agencies and to rank each in terms of their effectiveness on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective.

As Table 2 reveals the most popular retention strategy was holding and using a vigorous and fair promotion strategy with 38, (77.6%), of the respondents noting that their respective agencies use this approach. Offering educational incentives, such as tuition reimbursement and allowing officers to attend classes during work hours, was the second most frequently employed technique (75.5%) followed by an annual pay increase, irrespective of job performance (73.5%). All of the six retention techniques were frequently used with more than half the sample noting that their offices employed all six in some form or fashion.

Survey participant ratings on the effectiveness of the six retention techniques are also provided in Table 2. As a general rule the most frequently used retention techniques were also perceived to be the most effective with the exception of promotions and education and training at office expense. These two were reversed with the participants rating education and training as more effective than formal promotions, despite the fact that promotions were used by a slightly larger number of offices.

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Table 2      Retention Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

| Technique   | Number Using | % Using | Average Effectiveness Rating<br>(0 to 9) |
|---|--------------|---------|--|
| Promotions  | 38           | 77.6%   | 5.0                                      |
| Education/training<br>agency expense                  | 37           | 75.5%   | 6.0                                      |
| Annual pay increase<br>irrespective of<br>performance | 36           | 73.5%   | 5.8                                      |
| Annual pay increase<br>performance based              | 31           | 63.3%   | 5.3                                      |
| Formal awards,<br>recognition                         | 30           | 61.2%   | 4.3                                      |
| Assigned favorable<br>work shift                      | 30           | 61.2%   | 4.5                                      |

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

Table 3 depicts the reasons which explain attrition rates within the responding sheriffs' offices; with agency budget restrictions (91.8%) being reported as the most frequently discussed factor when explaining why sworn personnel leave the sheriff's office. A high percentage of the respondents (83.7%) also noted that lateral transfers to other law enforcement agencies, retirement (63.3%) and individuals resigning to accept employment in the private sector (57.1%) were substantial factors which impact upon their respective agency attrition rates. The data suggest that all of the listed attrition factors are exerting some impact upon the state's sheriffs' offices with the least frequently occurring factors still being reported in over 40 percent of the responding sheriffs' offices.

Respondents were asked to identify the extent to which each factor impacts their agency's attrition, i.e. to select the best response from a range of percentages. Over half of the respondents (53.4%) noted that agency budget restrictions accounted for 71-100 percent of their agency's total attrition rate. Over one-half noted that lateral transfers to other law enforcement agencies explained between 51-60 percent of their attrition.

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Three-fourths of the respondents noted that for every three to five resignations the officers were leaving to accept employment in the private sector. While retirement affected a majority of the sheriffs' offices only a few noted that it accounted for a significant portion of their overall attrition. Three-fourths of the offices stated that retirement explained 20 percent or less of their total attrition. Surprisingly, all of the remaining factors were discounted as significant contributors with the majority of the respondents noting that these factors account for less than 10 percent of their agency's total attrition. In other words, agency budget restrictions, lateral transfers and losing officers to the private sector account for the bulk of the sheriffs' offices' attrition rates. While the remaining factors do explain some attrition, or occur in a large number of the departments, they do not occur frequently enough to drive a sizeable decline in the sworn personnel workforce.

Table 3          Causal Factors for Sheriffs' Personnel Attrition Rates

| Factor   | Number Reporting | Percentage |
|--|------------------|------------|
| Agency budget restrictions                     | 45               | 91.8%      |
| Transfer to another law enforcement agency     | 41               | 83.7%      |
| Retirement                                     | 31               | 63.3%      |
| Left for private sector                        | 28               | 57.1%      |
| Cost of living                                 | 27               | 55.1%      |
| Prior/current criminal history decertification | 23               | 46.9%      |
| Job duties                                     | 23               | 46.9%      |
| Agency size                                    | 23               | 46.9%      |
| Lack of fringe benefits                        | 23               | 46.9%      |
| Agency location                                | 22               | 44.9%      |
| Unrealistic officer expectations               | 21               | 42.9%      |
| Residency requirement                          | 20               | 40.8%      |

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

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

Over 80 percent of the responding agencies lost officers to larger law enforcement departments, suggesting that higher salaries and more competitive benefits may explain these losses. Lateral transfers to state law enforcement agencies was the second highest reported type of lateral transfer (69.4%) followed by employment with similar size departments (61.2%). Forty-nine percent of the sheriffs' offices reported that they are losing sworn personnel to smaller law enforcement agencies. This suggests that many officers possibly eschew higher salaries, or receive the same salary, yet obtain a mid to senior level executive management position, i.e. sacrifice pay increases for the prestige of being a high ranking command officer in a smaller jurisdiction.

Slightly more than 60 percent of the responding survey participants stated that lateral transfers to larger agencies accounted for up to one-half of their total transfers while slightly less than a quarter (24.4%) noted that these personnel actions explained 71-100 percent of all lateral transfers. Nearly three-fourths (70%) of the agencies reported that lateral transfers to state agencies accounted for up to 40 percent of their total transfers. The majority of the respondents noted that transfers to same size, or smaller agencies, only accounted for less than 20 percent of all lateral transfers.

The data suggest that lateral transfers to larger law enforcement agencies and state law enforcement agencies are most prevalent in the participating sheriffs' offices with these two types of transfers explaining the bulk of the total number of transfers. In other words, the majority of the sheriffs' offices are losing the majority of their sworn personnel to larger and state criminal justice agencies. While personnel are also leaving to work in same size and smaller criminal justice agencies these losses are not significant and sizeable enough to exert a major impact on the sheriffs' offices' sworn workforce.

## Recruitment and Retention Study Series: Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

Table 4 Sheriffs' Offices' Attrition Rates – Lateral Transfers

| Factor   | Number Reporting | Percentage |
|--|------------------|------------|
| Employment with larger law enforcement agency  | 41               | 83.7%      |
| Employment with state law enforcement agency   | 34               | 69.4%      |
| Employment with same size agency               | 30               | 61.2%      |
| Employment with smaller law enforcement agency | 24               | 49.0%      |

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

Overall, irrespective of the reasons why officers leave, the average length of an officer's employment is 28 months before he/she decides to leave the sheriffs' office. Sixty-one percent of the participating sheriffs' offices reported an average length of stay at 28 months or less with 83 percent reporting that their respective average length of stay was three years or less. Thus, it appears that a critical period of two years, four months, to three years, exists in which sheriffs' offices can implement policies and/or programs to improve retention rates and conversely minimize its attrition rate by retaining officers beyond this critical period. Once an officer is retained beyond this critical period, attrition drops precipitously. Only 17 percent of the offices reported an average length of stay, for those officers that eventually leave the agency, which was greater than three years.

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to freely express ideas for improving retention rates. Not surprisingly, the number one recommended method for improving retention revolved around the salary and benefits issue with over 90 percent of the survey participants suggesting that improvements need to be made in this area. Selected comments are included below:

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- ◆ Salary Increase
- ◆ Pay structures have to be adjusted and that can only be done at the local level. We cannot continue to train people with quality training and specialized training and not have the ability to provide incentives.
- ◆ Higher pay-period
- ◆ Deputy Sheriffs' pay needs to be raised at least 20%
- ◆ Competitive salaries and career development plans that are similar to other local and state agencies.
- ◆ The state should set standards on years and education/training to the pay scale that officers work across the state. The state should step in.
- ◆ Higher wages/lower retirement-steady hours
- ◆ Some sort of state guidelines that would put pressure on local governments to increase LE pay and benefits.
- ◆ Pay a decent wage-Increase training-Reduce retirement years of service to 25 years. State and local government issues.
- ◆ Increase starting salary
- ◆ A new pay study and plan implemented
- ◆ I feel we should ask legislators to pass a bill setting minimum pay for deputy sheriff's.
- ◆ Standardized salary scale-cost of living increases and longevity pay plans for each sheriff's office statewide.
- ◆ Increase pay-Have step increases for achieving educational training goals.
- ◆ Professional standard of pay compatible with federal and state salary. Opportunity for advancement in salary promotion longevity and merit.

Survey participants were also encouraged to provide comments on any aspect of the recruitment and retention process that they thought would be of noteworthy importance to the training and standards commissions and the Governor's Crime Commission. The

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following comments were suggested or offered as issues that should be brought to the attention of the commissions.

- \* Nothing additional except a note that every deputy who has left over the past 5-7 years has left only because of the need for better pay.
- \* Put pressure on county commissioners and county government
- \* Again the state needs to step in and set statewide pay scales for officers across the state and help match pay at least 1/2 of an officer's salary.
- \* We need to look at POPAT requirements for older officers or applicants because we do not always attract young recruits.
- \* For agencies that can't pay higher wages reducing the retirement time may help in attracting and keeping personnel.
- \* Criminal justice insurance for retirees
- \* Mandated salaries for each sheriff's office statewide
- \* Why not explore a standardized state subsidy for local officers based on professional certificate achievements and/or longevity through county?

### *Research Questions*

1. Do agencies with high attrition rates differ from agencies with low attrition rates in terms of how each group rates the effectiveness of their recruitment strategies?

**Yes,** Of the nine recruitment techniques listed in Table 1, high and low attrition agencies differed in their perceived effectiveness of job fairs. Sheriffs' offices with higher attrition rates tended to view job fairs as being much more effective for recruiting deputy sheriffs. This finding calls the use of job fairs into question and suggests that applicants who are recruited through these fairs may be more inclined to leave the sheriffs' office versus those who are recruited through other means. No other significant differences existed between the two attrition groups with their average effectiveness ratings being close for each of the remaining recruitment techniques.

2. Do agencies with high attrition rates differ from agencies with low attrition rates in terms of how each group rates the effectiveness of their retention strategies?

**No,** The effectiveness ratings of the various retention strategies did not vary by agency attrition group. Agencies with low attrition rates are no more likely to report more effective retention strategies than agencies with high attrition rates. Thus it appears that the perceived effectiveness of retention techniques is not related to agency turnover.

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3. Do small and large agencies differ in terms of their perceived effectiveness ratings for recruitment techniques?

*Yes*, Small sheriffs' offices, with fewer than the sample average of 85 sworn deputies, rate word of mouth as a much more effective recruitment technique than their larger agency counterparts.

4. Do small and large agencies differ in terms of how each group rates the effectiveness of their retention strategies?

*No*, The effectiveness of the retention strategies did not vary significantly by the size of the sheriffs' offices. Both small and large agencies tended to rate the effectiveness of the retention strategies very closely.

5. Do small and large sheriffs' offices differ in their attrition rates?

*No*, While the small sheriffs' offices do have a slightly higher average turnover rate ( $X=13.0$ ) compared to the larger offices ( $X=11.9$ ), this difference is not significant from a statistical standpoint.

6. Are larger agencies more likely to hire applicants who have already completed BLET?

*No*, In fact, smaller agencies hire a greater percentage of their new deputy applicants from a pool which has already completed BLET. Eighty-five percent of the applicants who are hired by the small sheriffs' offices have already completed BLET versus 69 percent of the applicants who are hired by the larger sheriffs' offices.

7. Do agency turnover and vacancy rates vary by geographic region of the state?

*Yes*, Turnover rates and vacancy rates were substantially higher in the Western part of North Carolina versus the Coastal and Piedmont regions. The average turnover rate in the mountains, as defined as those counties west of the Surry, Iredell, Mecklenburg line, was 15 percent versus 12 percent in the Coastal region and 9.5 percent in the Piedmont. Vacancy rates were also more pronounced in the west with an average of 8.7 percent versus 3.4 percent in the Piedmont and 2.9 percent in the Coastal region.

8. Do agencies with aggressive recruitment strategies differ from agencies with passive and neutral strategies in terms of their applicant pools, turnover rates and vacancy rates?

*Yes*, but statistically significant differences only exist for applicant pools. Agencies with aggressive recruitment strategies have significantly higher applicant pools with an average of 25 applicants on their lists. The average number of applicants on waiting lists for those agencies with passive and neutral recruitment strategies was 10. Turnover and vacancy rates were higher for those agencies with aggressive strategies suggesting that the greater the attrition the more aggressive an agency will become in its recruitment efforts.

9. Do agencies with larger applicant pools differ from agencies with low and non-existent applicant pools?

*Yes*, Numerous differences exist between these two groups. Agencies with larger applicant pools, as defined by those with 12 or more candidates on a waiting list, also have twice the number of applicants per vacant position. Significant differences were found to exist for pre/post hire BLET training with agencies that have larger waiting lists being far more likely to hire officers first and then sponsor their BLET after employment. Respondents from those agencies reported that their office sent 24 percent of new hires to BLET versus agencies with small or no waiting lists that only sent 14 percent of new hires to BLET after employment. No significant differences were found to exist between agencies with large applicant pools and those with small or non-existent pools, in terms of how effective their recruitment and retention strategies were perceived.

10. Do sheriffs' offices and police departments differ in their recruitment strategies?

*Yes*, Respondents from police departments perceived the Internet and Police Corps program as more effective recruitment techniques when compared to respondents from the sheriffs' offices. Of those agencies which maintain applicant waiting lists, the average number on those lists was significantly higher for the sheriffs' offices. The sheriffs' offices had an average of 12.2 applicants on their lists compared to 7.2 on the police waiting lists.

*No*, Sheriffs' offices and police departments did not differ significantly in terms of the number of applicants per sworn position. Sheriffs' offices and police departments were similar in terms of the percentage of new hires who had already completed BLET before employment. Sheriffs' offices reported that 80.4 percent of their new hires had previously completed BLET compared to a slightly higher percent for the police departments (83.4%).

11. Do sheriffs' offices and police departments differ on attrition and retention issues?

*No*, Both agency types had comparable turnover and vacancy rates with the average turnover rate being only slightly lower for the sheriffs' offices (12.6 percent for sheriffs' offices versus 14.2 percent for police departments). Vacancy rates for sheriffs' offices were also lower with an average of 5.5 percent versus 7.2 percent in the police departments. The agencies did not differ in terms of the perceived effectiveness ratings of their preferred retention strategies. With the one exception listed below, no significant differences existed between sheriffs' offices and police departments as to why these agencies lose personnel and where the lost personnel go for future employment.

*Yes*, Police departments tended to report losing a greater percentage of their workforce to the private sector versus sheriffs' offices. The average length of stay for employees who eventually leave the organization is slightly higher for police departments with police officers remaining an additional six months longer than officers who voluntarily terminate their employment with sheriffs' offices.

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

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

Respondents from over half of the participating sheriffs' offices described their current recruitment efforts as neutral with another 23 percent describing their efforts as either passive or somewhat passive. Currently, the sheriffs' offices are using those recruitment strategies which are perceived to be the most effective and utilizing a wide variety of recruitment techniques beyond those considered to be the traditional methods of recruiting.

### Recommendation # 1

It is suggested that the state's sheriffs' offices consider increasing their current recruitment programs to make them more proactive and aggressive in nature. Survey findings indicate that the sheriffs' offices are using a host of innovative strategies, in addition to the standardized traditional recruitment techniques; however these strategies are not being used to their fullest extent. Intensifying recruitment efforts while continuing to use the same effective techniques which the offices are currently using, should increase both the quality and quantity of future applicant pools. It is anticipated that more aggressive recruitment efforts will expand the current average of six applicants, per vacant position, considerably.

A relatively large percentage of the respondents noted concerns about the current applicant screening process with serious concerns being expressed about the lack of scrutiny directed toward individuals entering BLET. Given the fact that across the state, 80 percent of the newly employed sworn deputies have already completed BLET, the importance of pre-BLET screening should be apparent.

### Recommendation # 2

Serious consideration should be directed at examining current BLET screening procedures and further consideration should be given to exploring options for strengthening and improving the screening process. This issue was also identified as a serious concern among those police departments that participated in the police research study. Since both sheriffs' offices and police departments use the same core BLET curriculum and training facilities this issue will overlap, and impact, both law enforcement agency types. Numerous recommendations were offered in this area including requiring a mandatory passing score on standardized entrance exams, minimum reading and writing test requirements as well as having all interested parties pass the minimum training and standards employment requirements prior to enrolling in a BLET course of instruction.

Despite the fact that over 70 percent of the surveyed offices have experienced either stable or declining turnover rates during the past three years, statewide turnover in the sheriffs' offices was almost 13 percent. The average length of stay for sworn deputies who terminate employment with the sheriffs' office, is 28 months and typically these officers leave to pursue other law enforcement careers with larger agencies and state criminal justice agencies.

### Recommendation # 3

In an effort to lower turnover even further, and improve retention, work is needed to explore options for retaining officers beyond the 28 month critical mark including proposals to address increasing officer salaries during this critical period. In addition to cost of living adjustments, merit pay, standardized pay scales, increased pay for education, specialized training and in-grade step increases should be considered. Graduated pay scales based on length of service, with or without supplemental state funding, were mentioned as possible alternatives.

### Recommendation # 4

Other non-financial means for retaining deputies should also be examined and given equal weight, especially in light of the current economic crises that many county governments are experiencing. Sheriffs' offices should capitalize, and take advantage of the opportunity to provide more educational and training assistance, as surprisingly this benefit was rated as a more effective retention tool than formal promotions. Sponsoring officer training and allowing officers to attend classes to further their education is less expensive compared to other retention techniques, and would be more cost-effective for the agency in the long run.

### Recommendation # 5

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

