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**Recruitment and Retention of Detention Facility Personnel**

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**Introduction**

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

**Methods***Survey Instrument*

A 22-item survey was developed by the study team with the first section of the questionnaire presenting questions which addressed the issue of recruiting detention officers. 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 detention personnel 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 detention officers and reasons why officers leave the agency. Respondents were also given the chance to offer suggestions for improving personnel retention.

*Survey Sample*

A list of North Carolina's detention facilities was provided by staff of the Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission and was used as the basis for selecting those facilities which would be included in the survey sample. The list was divided into four groups, or quartiles, based upon the median number of detention 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 78 surveys were distributed with 20 (25.6%) going to agencies with more than 45 officers, 22 (28.2%) to agencies with 23 to 45 sworn officers and 18 (23.1%) being mailed to agencies with 11 to 22 sworn officers. The remaining 18 surveys (23.1%) were mailed to the state's smallest detention facilities as defined as having fewer than 11 detention officers.

**Results**

A total of 43 surveys were completed and returned by detention facility personnel producing a study return rate of 55.1 percent.

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## Recruitment and Retention of Detention Facility Personnel

### *Recruitment Issues*

Over half of the respondents described their recruitment strategy as being neutral, i.e. non-aggressive nor overly passive. Nearly one-fourth of the survey participants did describe their detention officer recruitment efforts as aggressive with one agency (2.3%) noting that a strongly aggressive recruitment campaign was present, and ongoing, within their agency.

As part of the survey respondents were asked to indicate which recruitment techniques their respective departments use when searching for detention officer applicants. As Table 1 depicts the three most frequently employed techniques were word of mouth (97.7%), community colleges (69.8%) and newspapers (67.4%).

Based on the data detention facilities are using a wide range of recruitment techniques with all but three of the techniques being used by more than 50 percent of the agencies in the sample. The Police Corp, radio/television and the Internet were the three most infrequently employed techniques.

Respondents were also asked to rate the effectiveness of their agencies' recruitment techniques on a scale from zero to nine with nine indicating the greatest degree of effectiveness. Effectiveness ratings closely mirrored the extent to which agencies use the various techniques with the most frequently used methods also being rated as the most effective. Word of mouth received an average rating of 6.9, followed by the community college system (4.7) and newspapers (4.6).

Table 1 Recruitment Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using	Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)
Word of Mouth	42	97.7%	6.9
Community College	30	69.8%	4.7
Newspaper	29	67.4%	4.6
Local Personnel Listings	27	62.8%	4.8
Auxiliary/Reserves	27	62.8%	3.7
Job Fairs	24	55.8%	2.6
Internet	20	46.5%	2.8
Police Corps	17	39.5%	.9
Radio/TV	15	34.9%	.9

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

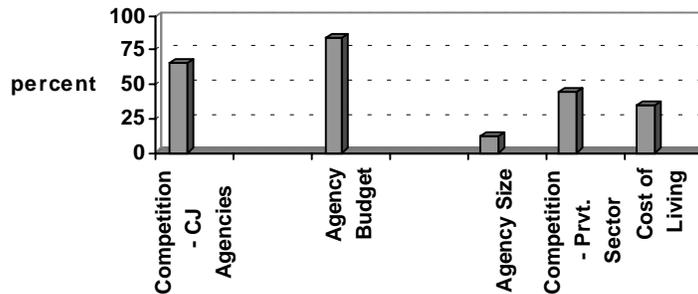
## Recruitment and Retention of Detention Facility Personnel

Over half of the respondents noted that their offices do not currently have a waiting list, or backlog, of qualified detention officers. Twenty-six agencies (63.4%) reported this fact with the remaining departments possessing a current waiting list of applicants. Of those agencies with waiting lists the number of applicants, on those lists, ranged from one to 49 with the average statewide waiting list, or backlog, containing 9.3 detention applicants.

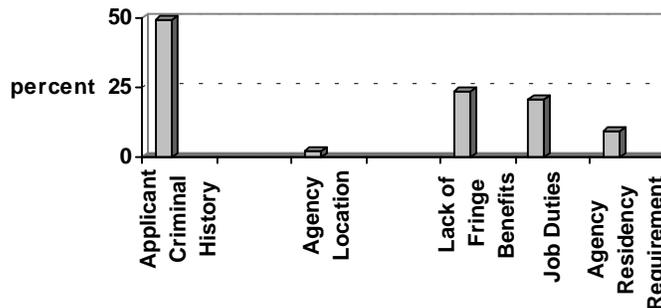
Respondents were also asked to provide information on the average number of applicants for each vacant detention officer position. The number of applicants, per position, ranged from one to 33 with a statewide average of 7.6 applicants per vacant detention officer position.

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 1 and 2 suggest the most common barriers were agency budget (83.7%), competition with other criminal justice agencies (65.1%) and the applicants' prior criminal histories (48.8%). Agency size (11.6%), residency requirements (9.3%) and the location of the detention facility (2.3%) were viewed as the least problematic barriers to effectively recruiting detention personnel. Other obstacles, listed by the respondents, included applicant use of cocaine and applicants who have bad credit ratings.

**Figure 1 Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates**



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



## Recruitment and Retention of Detention Facility Personnel

The study team also thought it was important to ascertain the extent to which detention offices hire applicants, who have already completed the Basic Detention Officer Certification Course, versus hiring applicants and then sponsoring their 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 training hires. The percentage of applicants who are hired prior to completing the certification course ranged from one to 100 percent with only three (7.0 %) agencies hiring all of their applicants after completion of the course.

Responses from fourteen agencies (32.6%) indicate that 100 percent of their new hires are employed first with admittance into a certification program occurring thereafter. Across the entire study sample the average detention facility hires between 14 and 21 percent of its applicants from an applicant pool that has already completed a certification program. The remaining 79 to 86 percent of the new hires are employed prior to attending a Basic Detention Officer Certification Course.

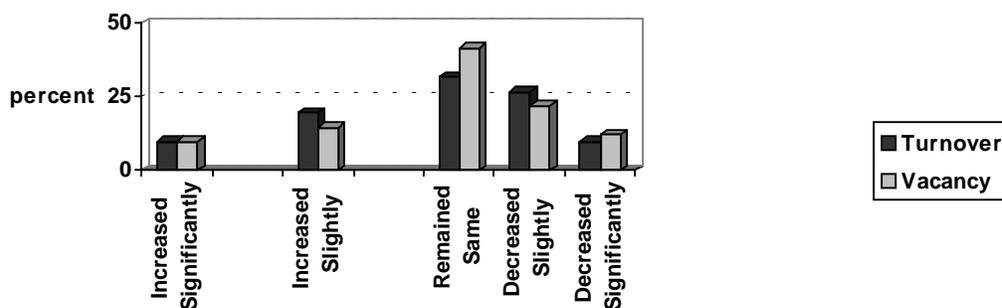
Survey respondents were asked, through an open-ended question, to comment on any ideas that they had for im-

proving the quality of future detention officer applicant pools. Responses tended to cluster in three areas – salaries, advanced training and better recruitment efforts. Of those respondents, who answered the question, 17 (60.7%) suggested either increasing the entry-level starting salary and/or increasing the salaries of those detention officers who are already working within the facility.

### *Attrition and Retention Issues*

Turnover rates for detention officer positions, using July, 2001 as a base, ranged from zero to 80 percent with an average turnover rate of 21.4 percent being reported for those agencies returning completed surveys. As Figure 3 documents 31.7 percent of the respondents noted that their agency’s turnover rate has remained stable for the past three years. Slightly more than a quarter of the agencies experienced either a significant, or slight, rise in their respective turnover rates while turnover rates dropped for 36.6 percent of the detention facilities.

**Figure 3 Turnover and Vacancy Rates Over the Past Three Years**



## Recruitment and Retention of Detention Facility Personnel

Vacancy rates, using June, 2002 as a base, ranged from zero to 100 percent with approximately one-third (31.7%) of the agencies reporting a full detention officer force with no vacant positions on June 30, 2002. The average vacancy rate, for detention positions, was 12.7 percent. As with turnover rates nearly half of the participating agencies (41.5%) reported that their respective vacancy rates had not changed over the past three years. Slightly less than a fourth (24.4%) reported an increase in their vacancy rates, over the last three years, with 34.4 percent noting a decline during this period.

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 annual pay increases, irrespective of job performance, such as cost of living adjustments and longevity (88.4%). The

second most frequently employed retention technique was formal promotions (72.1%) followed by education and training incentives such as tuition reimbursement and allowing detention officers to attend classes on departmental time (62.8%).

Survey participant ratings, on the effectiveness of the six retention techniques, are also provided in Table 2. While formal promotions were more frequently used their effectiveness ratings were reported as extremely lower than the other retention techniques. In other words, while detention management officials frequently promote detention officers they do not view these promotions as being the most effective and beneficial means for retaining their employees. Other infrequently used techniques were perceived to be more effective such as assigning favorable work shifts, providing formal awards, offering other types of recognition programs and performance based pay increases.

Table 2 Retention Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using	Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)
Annual pay increase irrespective of performance	38	88.4%	5.7
Promotions	31	72.1%	4.3
Education/Training	27	62.8%	5.2
Formal recognition/ award ceremonies	23	53.5%	4.7
Performance based pay increase	23	53.5%	5.2
Assigning favorable work shift	21	48.8%	4.7

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

## Recruitment and Retention of Detention Facility Personnel

Agency budget restrictions were reported as the most frequently discussed factor, when explaining why detention officers leave the department. A high percentage of the respondents also noted that transfers, to other law enforcement agencies, and individuals resigning to accept employment in the private sector were substantial factors which impact upon their respective agency attrition rates. Job related duties and retirement were also significant factors with more than half of the responding agencies commenting that their departments lose officers for these reasons. Agency location, size and residency requirements were the least frequently reported attrition factors yet still occurred in one-third of the participating detention facilities.

Further questions were asked in an effort to refine, and explore at a much more detailed level, the extent to which transfers, to other criminal justice agencies, impact detention facility attrition. Specifically, to ascertain which types of agencies detention officers are transferring to, or accepting employment with, once they terminate their employment with the detention facility. (Refer to Table 3 below).

Seventy-two percent of the responding agencies lost officers to larger criminal justice agencies. Transfers to state criminal justice agencies was the second highest reported type of transfer (58.1%) followed by employment with similar size departments (48.8%). Over thirty

Table 3 Detention Facility Attrition Rates – Other Criminal Justice Agencies

Factor	Number Reporting	Percentage
Employment with larger criminal justice agency	31	72.1%
Employment with state criminal justice agency	25	58.1%
Employment with same size agency	21	48.8%
Employment with smaller criminal justice agency	15	34.9%

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

percent of the detention facilities lost personnel to smaller agencies.

Over half of the respondents revealed that transfers to larger agencies accounted for 21 to 50 percent of their agencies' total attrition rates, while one in five respondents commented that this type of transfer explained between 61 to 70 percent of their agencies' total turnover. While accepting employment with state criminal justice agencies was the second most frequently reported type of criminal justice transfer, nearly

three-fourths of the respondents noted that this type of transfer was not exerting a sizeable impact on their overall staff turnover. In other words, most detention facilities are losing officers to state agencies but these transfers only account for 30 percent or less of their total transfers. This fact holds true for transfers to same size agencies and transfers to smaller agencies as well. Despite the fact that almost half of the facilities lost officers to same size criminal justice agencies, and more than a third lost personnel to smaller departments, these transfers are not significant enough to

drive a sizeable decline in detention facility turnover. Thus, the data suggest that transfers to larger criminal justice agencies account for the greatest percentage of all transfers on a statewide basis.

Other survey data validate the assumption that detention officers are leaving the employing agency all together versus transferring to another division such as road patrol. On the average only 21.6 percent of the detention officers, who leave the facility, are being re-assigned to full time law enforcement status through intradepartmental transfers. This means that 78.4 percent of the statewide turnover is attributable to detention personnel completely exiting the agency to pursue employment elsewhere.

Overall, irrespective of the reasons why officers leave, the average length of an officer's employment is 21 months before he/she decides to leave the facility. Seventy-five percent of the agencies reported an average length of stay of two years or less. Thus, it appears that a critical period of two years exists in which detention facilities can implement policies and/or programs to improve retention rates and conversely minimize its attrition rate by retaining officers beyond a two-year period. The longest average length of stay was five years with two survey participants reporting this number as being indicative of how long the average detention officer stays within their agency.

As part of the survey a question was included which asked participants to state what percentage, of their detention officers, are also required to hold full-time sworn deputy sheriff status. Responses ranged from zero to 80 percent with 32 (78%) detention facilities not requiring any of their detention officers to also be sworn deputies. Across the entire survey sample only 3.7 percent of the detention officers also held sworn deputy status. This suggests that many Sheriffs' Offices are developing dual career tracks in which detention work is viewed as a separate, and equally respected, profession comparable to the law enforcement field.

### Discussion and Policy Implications/ Recommendations

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

Despite the fact that most facilities are not experiencing significant long-term attrition problems and most have not noticed strong increases in their vacancy rates the average statewide attrition rate hovers at 21 percent while the statewide average vacancy rate is slightly higher than 12 percent. Nearly one-fourth of the facilities still noted that their respective turnover and vacancy rates have risen during the past three years. Also, over half of the respondents described their recruitment efforts as neutral, i.e. not aggressive nor passive.

#### Recommendation #1

Detention facility recruitment efforts should be intensified, especially in those agencies which are experiencing significant growth in their attrition and vacancy rates. Intensifying recruitment efforts should also include the exploration of non-traditional recruitment techniques such as use of the Internet.

## Recruitment and Retention of Detention Facility Personnel

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Respondents overwhelmingly mentioned salary issues as factors affecting both recruitment and retention within their agencies. Increasing the average starting salary may attract a better and larger applicant pool, however study findings suggest that the greater salary concern occurs after, and not before, the applicant is hired as a new officer. On the average officers are leaving the detention facility after 21 months of employment because of limited opportunities to receive an increase in their salaries. In other words they are still receiving the same compensation, or only a slight increase above, their original starting salaries. One in five officers leave the detention facility with the majority of these leaving for employment with larger criminal justice agencies.

### Recommendation #2

While agency budget restrictions are imposing significant hardships on detention facilities, and their ability to retain personnel, the research findings suggest that other retention techniques, beyond increasing salaries, may be promising and certainly less costly alternatives for retaining officers. County facilities, and state personnel who work in the detention certification, education and standards area, may wish to consider expanding the quantity and quality of in-service and advanced training which is currently offered to detention personnel. Formal award programs should also be expanded at both the local and state levels with the assignment of favorable work shifts being given serious consideration by detention facility directors as well.

The quality of applicants' prior criminal histories appears to be problematic with nearly 50 percent of the respondents noting this factor as a significant barrier to recruiting more qualified detention officers.

### Recommendation #3

More in-depth analysis should be conducted in this area in order to ascertain the nature and extent of applicants who have prior criminal histories. More research is needed to determine how many applicants have criminal records and the types of offenses for which they

have been arrested and/or convicted. This research should include officer decertification data as well. A possible solution could include requiring more intensive applicant screening prior to enrollment in certification courses although this would impact a limited number of agencies.

Prior SystemStats and reports include:

Technology on Patrol: An Evaluation of Mobile Data Computers in Law Enforcement Vehicles

Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Police Personnel

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

Effective Strategies for Domestic Violence Shelters: Strengthening Services for Children

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

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

Domestic Violence Shelters and Minorities

Domestic Violence: Dispositional Outcomes of Protective Orders in the Courts

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

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

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

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National and State School Crime Trends (SystemStats)

Disproportionate Minority Overrepresentation in the Juvenile Justice System

Law Enforcement Tools for Latino Communities

North Carolina Citizens' Perceptions of Crime and Victimization (SystemStats)

Juvenile Day Treatment Centers - Strategies and Effective Practices

Law Enforcement Domestic Violence Units: Handbooks

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

<http://www.ncgccd.org>

Analysis Center's areas of current study:

Cybercrime

Recruitment and Retention of Public Safety Personnel

SAVAN Evaluation

Mobile Data Computers

Grant Sustainability



### SYSTEMSTATS

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