Addressing Police Turnover: Challenges, Strategies, and Future Research Directions

Katherine Hoogesteyn, Meret S. Hofer, Travis A. Taniguchi, and Jennifer R. Rineer

RTI INTERNATIONAL

Suggested Citation

Contents

About the Authors

Katherine Hoogesteyn, PhD, is a legal psychologist in the Policing Research Program at RTI International. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3535 -8101

Meret S. Hofer, PhD, is a research psychologist in the Workforce Wellbeing and Effectiveness Program at RTI International. https://orcid.org/ 0000-0003-1834-3581

Travis A. Taniguchi, PhD, is a research criminologist and independent consultant. https://orcid.org/0000 -0003-2040-1330.

Jennifer R. Rineer, PhD, is a research psychologist and director of the Workforce Wellbeing and Effectiveness Program at RTI International. https://orcid.org/0000 -0001-8542-7772

RTI Press Associate Editor

Beth Glennie

Abstract

Maintaining adequate staffing levels to ensure public safety is a critical challenge for law enforcement agencies, especially with rising officer turnover driven by sociopolitical factors and changing workforce demographics. This narrative review examines strategies to enhance officer retention by synthesizing findings from both policing and related fields. These strategies are organized into five categories: (1) compensation and financial incentives, (2) career development and professional growth, (3) workplace environment and support, (4) wellness and resilience, and (5) feedback and organizational learning. The review underscores the importance of context-specific, tailored approaches and calls for rigorous studies to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of these strategies. Recommendations include adapting organizational structures to foster innovative retention strategies, optimizing resource management, and implementing continuous evaluation processes to promote sustained officer retention.

Introduction

Officer turnover has significant implications for law enforcement agencies, affecting officer morale, organizational effectiveness, and community safety (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Hur, 2014; IACP, n.d.; Lewis, 2022; Orrick, 2008; PERF, 2019; Wilson et al., 2023). Frequent departures lead to significant expenses related to recruiting, hiring, and training new personnel (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Orrick, 2008). Moreover, the loss of experienced officers erodes institutional knowledge, diminishes organizational effectiveness, and can reduce the quality of service provided to communities (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Hur, 2014). Studies also suggest that reduced staffing levels may be associated with higher crime rates (Hur, 2014; Mello, 2019). High turnover disrupts team cohesion and can lower morale among remaining officers, further exacerbating retention challenges (Lewis, 2022).

A recent surge in resignations and early retirements, described as a staffing "crisis" (BJA, 2023; IACP, n.d.; PERF, 2019), has brought officer turnover back into focus. Increased turnover has been attributed to several factors, including the sociopolitical events of 2020 (i.e., the murder of George Floyd and ensuing protests; Adams et al., 2023; Mourtgos et al., 2022; Reny & Newman, 2021); the COVID-19 pandemic (Nickeas & Krishnakumar, 2021); retirements among the Baby Boomer generation; and broader economic trends in the job market before, during, and after the pandemic (Grunwald, 2024). While recent data suggest that staffing levels are rebounding to pre-2020 levels (PERF, 2023, 2024), retaining officers has long been, and continues to be, a significant challenge for law enforcement agencies (e.g., Reynolds, 2024; Wilson & Weiss, 2012; Wilson et al., 2010).

As agencies are grappling with the lingering effects of the events of 2020, retention challenges have been further complicated by generational shifts in workplace expectations. Millennials and Gen Z workers tend to be more critical of policing and prioritize job flexibility, competitive compensation, and collaborative decision-making, making law enforcement careers less appealing (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Duret & Li, 2023; IACP, n.d). To remain competitive in the job market and maintain a diverse,

qualified workforce, law enforcement agencies must adapt their operations, benefits, and retention strategies to meet these expectations.

Although extensive research has explored factors contributing to officer turnover (see Davies et al., 2024, and Wilson et al., 2023, for recent reviews), empirical studies on effective retention strategies remain limited. Most of the recent work has focused on identifying and assessing strategies for recruitment (e.g., Holmes & Ryan, 2024; Taniguchi et al., 2023; Wojslawowicz et al., 2024), leaving police administrators with limited guidance for crafting effective retention plans (Buccellato, 2021; Wilson et al., 2023). To advance this area of research, it is essential to first map the current evidence base on retention strategies within the policing field and assess the extent to which these strategies have been studied.

In this paper, we explore evidence-based officer retention strategies, summarizing those tested in law enforcement while identifying areas needing further research. Initially, we aimed to provide a comprehensive review of the evidence but found the research base to be limited. As a result, we emphasize gaps that warrant further study. Where relevant, we also extrapolate insights from other professional fields with potential applications to policing.

Methods

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to identify potentially promising officer retention strategies, and (2) to highlight gaps in the literature to derive recommendations for developing evidence-based strategies. We developed these aims, and our specific review strategy and parameters, with information from, and consultation with, police practitioners and research experts, including partners from the New York University Policing Project, scientific staff at the US Department of Justice, and members of the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing. Given the limited availability of studies on officer retention strategies, we opted for conducting a narrative review (see Cook, 2019; Sukhera, 2022). Although less structured and comprehensive than systematic reviews, narrative reviews enable researchers to understand the research landscape in a given area

while maintaining flexibility in selecting, interpreting, and discussing the literature (e.g., Bennell et al., 2022). This flexibility allows us to draw from both policing-specific literature and the broader workforce research (i.e., literature in the industrial psychology field) to identify retention strategies and discuss those we deemed most suitable for a policing context. For example, through searching workforce management studies more broadly, we were able to identify evidence on strategies employed in the nursing and education fields that were applicable to policing.

To identify potential retention strategies, we conducted a series of keyword searches (Table 1) on APA PsycINFO and Google Scholar. We used Google Scholar because of its strength in identifying practitioner-focused and other gray literature (e.g., dissertations and preprints; Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020; Haddaway et al., 2015). Sources were saved and deduplicated in Zotero, a reference management software. We reviewed a total of 141 sources to identify empirical studies that provided evidence for either the effectiveness of a strategy or derived informed conclusions for why a strategy may be useful in improving employee retention. We also included studies that were theoretical or descriptive (e.g., employee opinion surveys) as needed to better contextualize why a strategy might be effective in bringing about positive changes to retention.

Because of the broad topical area, we did not restrict sources by study type, country of origin, or year of publication, although we limited the search to publications available in English. We considered all sources returned by the search for inclusion but decided to place greater emphasis on studies specific to law enforcement. We also highlight sources in similar career fields (e.g., the correctional officer field). Unfortunately, research on adjacent professions tends to be even more limited than that in policing research. Because of the limited body of research, we have broadened the description of results to also

include research in more traditional professional settings (e.g., nursing). A preliminary review of search results indicated that not all potentially useful studies were of strong design. However, because this is a narrative review, we include exploratory research that might not otherwise meet quality criteria for inclusion in a more formalized systematic review. Where appropriate, we describe the gaps in knowledge and highlight how future research might address limitations found in existing research.

Retention Strategies

Compensation and Financial Incentives

Increasing officer compensation through pay increases, promotion, retention bonuses, opportunities for overtime, and off-duty employment is often used as a strategy to enhance employee retention (Wilson et al., 2010). The rationale behind compensation strategies for retention lies in the strong correlation between salary and job performance, morale, and satisfaction (Crow et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2007). Noncompetitive wages and inadequate benefits are strongly linked to higher turnover, while better pay and financial stability are associated with greater retention (Wilson et al., 2010; Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2018).

Although the effectiveness of compensation incentives in reducing officer turnover has been sparsely examined, some studies have provided valuable insights. One study using data from the national Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics survey ($N = 2,239$) found that higher adjusted salaries were significantly associated with decreased turnover and that agencies offering lower-than-average salaries experienced much higher rates of both voluntary separations and dismissals (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2018). In addition to base pay, economic incentives and defined benefit plans also played a role in reducing voluntary

Table 1. Search Terms

Search Parameters		
Retention; retention strategies; turnover; turnover intentions; job satisfaction; job perceptions; job commitment.	and	Police officers; policing; law enforcement; federal employees, workforce; workforce management; industrial psychology; organizational psychology.

turnover, though they did not significantly impact dismissals (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2018). Similar results were observed in smaller law enforcement agencies. Among small agencies (1–49 officers), those offering more pay incentives experienced lower voluntary turnover rates (Smith et al., 2014). While research on the influence of retirement benefits on law enforcement turnover is limited, studies conducted with military personnel have shown that a reduction in retirement benefits significantly decreased the likelihood of personnel remaining in service (Smith & West, 2012).

Overall, despite the associations found between compensation and turnover, more research is needed to examine shifts in turnover as compensation changes are made and to tease apart the effects of modifications to compensation packages from other changes in the work environment. Research is important for measuring the relative effectiveness of compensation changes compared with other benefits or policy and working condition changes.

Career Development and Professional Growth

Mentorship Opportunities

Law enforcement practitioners have recommended the implementation of mentorship and networking programs to connect officers across different ranks and roles, promote inclusion, and enhance retention efforts (Farrell & Barao, 2022; Lavender & Todak, 2022; Suboch et al., 2017). For example, a recent survey of women officers across the United States revealed that although formal mentorship initiatives are uncommon, women officers often seek out informal mentorship opportunities and that those opportunities are highly valued (Lavender & Todak, 2022). A UK study found that women officers who were mentored by other women reported significant boosts in self-confidence and long-term learning (Jones, 2017). Despite the apparent value of mentorships, there is limited research on the effectiveness of mentorship programs in law enforcement. Given that formal mentorship opportunities are beneficial in other fields—one-to-one mentorship programs for new nursing graduates, which have shown positive impacts on nurse retention (Cottingham et al., 2011; Brook et al., 2019;

Halter et al., 2017)—future research should explore the relationship between mentorship opportunities, both formal and informal, and officer job satisfaction and turnover in the US policing context.

Training Development

Access to training opportunities has been shown to increase employee performance and reduce turnover across various professional settings, including finance (Darwish et al., 2013), child welfare (Clark et al., 2013), and education (Shibiti, 2019). Improved training quality may similarly reduce officer turnover, especially for recruits and new officers (Hilal & Litsey, 2020). For instance, dissatisfaction with field training programs contributed to turnover among new hires (Skaggs et al., 2022), but there is limited research on how the quality of academy and field training affects officer satisfaction, perceptions of preparedness, and turnover (Caro, 2011). Training that prepares new personnel for job realities has improved retention in other fields, such as child welfare, where field-based training reduced turnover compared with classroom-based methods (Osborne et al., 2020). Future research should rigorously examine law enforcement training programs and their impact on retention.

Career Conversations

Emerging research in other professions has explored the benefits of career conversations, or conversations between managers and employees focused on the career development goals of the employee (Kharsan et al., 2022). Career conversations are seen as mutually beneficial because employers can help shape employee goals to align with organization goals, and employees are provided with development opportunities that enhance engagement and retention (Borgen et al., 2013). A pilot study evaluating the use of career conversations in a business setting found that both managers and employees reported benefits (improved communication between managers and employees and work performance) from engaging in conversations within 6 months of their implementation (Borgen et al., 2013). While using career conversations has not been explored in a law enforcement setting, research shows that supervisor support and competence development opportunities are important for officer job satisfaction

and commitment (Kohlström, 2022). Career conversations and demonstrated commitment to professional growth by leadership may be particularly beneficial for retaining officers from younger generations (Holmberg-Wright et al., 2017). Thus, implementing mechanisms that involve both supervisors and officers in the discussions around officers' career growth opportunities may help foster commitment and, in turn, retention (Kirkland, 2019).

Workplace Environment and Support

Strengthening Police-Community Relations

Improving police-community relationships is a frequent recommendation when discussing police reform and organizational improvements. Although the relationship between the police and the community extends beyond retention strategies, adopting a community-oriented policing (COP) philosophy may help improve officer job satisfaction. COP involves community participation in crime prevention and has been shown to enhance perceptions of police legitimacy and satisfaction (Gill et al., 2014). Studies have found that community police officers often experience higher job satisfaction—a key predictor of turnover—than traditional patrol officers (Brody et al., 2002; Crowl, 2017; Pelfrey, 2007; Ramshaw, 2013). However, other research does not find that adopting COP practices (e.g., problem-solving projects, geographic assignments, citizen training) significantly predicts voluntary turnover (Smith et al., 2014).

While the evidence of the effects of community policing on officers' job perceptions and turnover is mixed and underdeveloped, there is room to consider COP as a retention strategy in the post–George Floyd context. Decades of research exploring what motivates officers to pursue careers in law enforcement consistently finds that service to the community is a strong motivator regardless of the officer's gender, race, ethnicity, or generation (Foley et al., 2008; Raganella & White, 2004; Seklecki & Paynich, 2007; Schuck, 2021; Todak, 2017; Todak et al., 2018; White et al., 2010). It is likely that police officers' main motivator—to serve their community—is undermined by the public's increasing lack of respect and trust for them (e.g., Reynolds, 2024).

Prioritizing the strengthening of the public's trust and legitimacy through COP (Crowl, 2017) in the longer term may help bridge the growing gap between police officers and community members and, in turn, improve job satisfaction and reduce turnover. Nonetheless, more research is needed before any conclusions and recommendations can be made regarding the effects of COP, and the various practices that fall under it, on officer retention (Smith et al., 2014).

Organizational Justice

Organizational justice refers to perceptions of fairness in the workplace, including fair distribution of resources (distributive justice), decision-making processes (procedural justice), and social interactions, especially with supervisors (interactional justice; Herr et al., 2018). A study conducted in England, where police retention is also an ongoing issue, found that a lack of perceived organizational justice—measured by lack of voice, lack of recognition of skills and experience, and barriers to career development and progression—was driving voluntary turnover in one medium-sized police agency (Tyson & Charman, 2023; see also Charman & Bennett, 2022). Perceived organizational justice also indirectly influences other factors relevant to turnover. For instance, correctional officers who perceive fair treatment experience lower job-related stress and less work-family strain (May et al., 2020). Officers who believe management is fair in actions such as discipline and promotions are more likely to trust their agencies and feel satisfied in their roles (Donner et al., 2015; Wolfe & Nix, 2016).

Organizational justice is especially relevant following incidents of police misconduct, where the stakes are high and the public scrutiny is intense. How leadership navigates these situations not only affects the agency's public image but also impacts the internal dynamics and the willingness of officers to remain in their roles. One study found that when law enforcement officers perceived greater organizational justice, they were less affected by heightened public scrutiny (Mourtgos et al., 2022; Nix & Wolfe, 2016). Identified strategies that can enhance perceptions of organizational justice include allowing officers space to express their feelings about events, minimizing ambiguity in policies, ensuring due process for

officers under investigation, maintaining consistency and fairness in disciplinary actions, showing transparency and involving staff in decision-making, explaining processes to staff, avoiding favoritism, and maintaining professionalism (Lambert, 2003; Lambert et al., 2007; 2023; Wolfe & Lawson, 2020). These strategies suggest that it may be beneficial to consider policy changes to prioritize organizational justice, provide supervisor training on organizational justice, and implement a reward system for supervisors who uphold its values (May et al., 2020). Given these generally positive findings, more research is warranted that can better link strategies designed to improve procedural justice to enhanced officer retention.

Supervisory Support

The quality of management and supervisor support is critical to job satisfaction and retention (Sun et al., 2022). Poor management practices, such as unsupportive or abusive supervision, contribute to higher turnover intentions, while supportive leadership environments enhance job satisfaction and reduce turnover (McCarty & Skogan, 2013; Andreescu & Vito, 2021; Saleem et al., 2021). Immediate supervisors, in particular, play a pivotal role in influencing officer well-being. Law enforcement agencies could adopt strategies like the positive leadership model (Cameron, 2008), which includes fostering a positive workplace climate, developing strong relationships, engaging in supportive communication, and reinforcing meaningful work. These strategies have been shown to improve organizational climate and reduce turnover (Martin & Wright, 2017). Similarly, authentic leadership strategies—focused on emotional intelligence, transparency, and ethical decision-making—have positive effects on officer well-being and turnover intentions (Farr-Wharton et al., 2023). Regardless of the specific strategy used, there is a clear need for evidence-based supportive supervisory strategies that can help people adapt to and cope with challenges inherent to policing.

Employee Recognition

Employee recognition that does not rely on financial incentives has been found to predict employee motivation and reduced turnover intentions (Apostel et al., 2018; Chênevert et al., 2021; Paré & Tremblay, 2007). In a statewide law enforcement retention study conducted in Vermont, officers recommended that as well as standardizing pay and retirement plans, leadership should provide more recognition to reduce turnover (Litcher et al., 2006). Nevertheless, there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of recognition initiatives on employee turnover, though there are some promising results from the studies conducted on organizations in the financial sector (e.g., Scherbaum et al., 2022). Although employee recognition is likely to work best in conjunction with other retention strategies (Litcher et al., 2006), future research should explore the effectiveness of improved supervisor recognition on officers' job perceptions and turnover.

Participative Management and Leadership

Participative management emphasizes bottom-up decision-making, allowing input from people at all levels of an organization. In policing, officers and researchers have suggested moving away from the traditional hierarchical structure in favor of involving line-level officers—who have the most direct knowledge of on-the-ground issues—in strategic decisions (Davis, 2023; Smith, 2015; Toch, 2008). While participative management has been adopted in other fields to enhance employee commitment and job satisfaction (e.g., Kim, 2002), which are crucial to reducing turnover, its application in policing has shown limited but promising results.

A participative management initiative in a medium-sized police agency in Oklahoma resulted in the creation of a 12-member Leadership Team representing various ranks, divisions, and functions, with the goal of fostering collaboration between management and staff (Steinheider & Wuestewald, 2008). This team had policymaking authority and could make binding decisions on issues, with the chief ensuring that decisions aligned with legal, budgetary, and operational constraints. Operating democratically, the Leadership Team focused on overarching policy rather than day-to-day operations. Steinheider and Wuestewald (2008) found that this approach significantly improved organizational commitment, pride, and retention rates, highlighting the potential benefits of participative management

in law enforcement and the need for replication and incremental studies examining participative management as a retention strategy.

Wellness and Resilience

Training for Well-Being and Resilience

Police work is inherently stressful, with officers often facing dangerous situations, family challenges, and negative public perceptions. This high-stress environment can lead to burnout and increased turnover intentions, particularly for officers of color and those working in high-crime areas (Saunders et al., 2019; Adams et al., 2023). Addressing stress and promoting mental health are crucial for reducing attrition (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Julseth et al., 2011).

To bolster resilience, police training should incorporate the development of skills to help officers manage the emotional challenges of the job and avoid burnout (Blumberg et al., 2019). Emotional regulation and stress tolerance are teachable skills (Schutte et al., 2013; Spilberg & Corey, 2014); emotional intelligence training can help officers better recognize and manage their emotions (Creighton & Blumberg, 2016). Mindfulness-based resilience training (MBRT) can improve officers' mental and physical health, reducing stress, aggression, burnout, and even alcohol use (Christopher et al., 2016, 2018; Kaplan et al., 2020; Rehder et al., 2021). For example, a study involving an 8-week-long MBRT program, found that increased mindfulness significantly predicted reduced alcohol use, while enhanced self-compassion was linked to decreased burnout (Kaplan et al., 2020). Another study, a randomized controlled trial conducted with a police agency in the Midwest, assigned officers either to an 8-week mindfulness intervention or a waitlist control group. Results showed that compared to the waitlist control group, the mindfulness group reported significant improvements in psychological distress, mental health symptoms, and sleep quality. Additionally, they exhibited a reduced cortisol awakening response both immediately post-training and during a 3-month follow-up period (Grupe et al., 2021). These findings suggest that strategies such as MBRT may mitigate some psychological challenges faced by officers. However, further research is needed

to assess the generalizability of these results to more diverse law enforcement populations.

It is important for this type of training to begin at the earliest career stage. Law enforcement academies can instill a culture of wellness by encouraging open discussions about stress and providing healthy management tools like mindfulness (Blumberg et al., 2019; Crowe et al., 2022; Jeter et al., 2013). Some academies have been able to cultivate a culture that supports mental health, with some states enacting supportive legislation, such as Arizona's "Craig Tiger Act" (2018) and the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (Fix et al., 2024). Additionally, research highlights a potential shift in officers' attitudes, moving away from a "tough it out" mindset toward a more supportive approach that normalizes seeking help (Cohen et al., 2019; Padilla, 2023). Additional research is needed to understand the wellness needs of officers throughout their career course. Information provided by exit and stay interviews, discussed later in this paper, can contribute to knowledge about agency-specific health and wellness needs of officers.

Leadership and supervisors play a critical role in encouraging the use of wellness programs within law enforcement agencies (Fix et al., 2024). Initiatives aimed at equipping supervisors and administrators with tools to promote mental health can significantly enhance the effectiveness of these programs. For example, modeling person-first language that reflects accurate knowledge and a commitment to mental health promotion is a foundational strategy for leadership to adopt (Wu et al., 2021). Another promising approach is the Workplace Mental Health Support Training, which having already been tested in military settings, shows potential for law enforcement agencies. This training helps supervisors support employee mental health by raising awareness, promoting proactive behaviors, and providing tools for responding to emotional distress (Mohr et al., 2023).

Work-Life Balance Programs

Work-life balance programs are increasingly recognized as essential for retaining officers. When organizations offer benefits that support work-life balance, employees feel valued and reciprocate with

greater productivity and loyalty, thereby reducing turnover (Caillier, 2016; Lee & Hong, 2011).

For example, in a survey of 32 senior female law enforcement officers working in 16 federal law enforcement agencies, officers indicated that family-friendly policies, such as paid maternity leave and flexible work arrangements, could significantly reduce turnover intentions (Yu, 2019). Another study examined the impact of various family-friendly programs—including telework, alternative work schedules, childcare subsidies, elder care, employee assistance programs, and health and wellness programs—on employee turnover in 36 federal agencies (Caillier, 2016). The author found a one unit increase in the satisfaction of family-friendly programs reduced turnover by more than a half a percentage point. The author argued that, in line with the social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), organizations ought to experience lower turnover when they offer services, resources, or subsidies to help employees maintain work-life balance because organizations are perceived as caring about their employees' well-being and family obligations (Caillier, 2016).

Despite promising results, research on the effectiveness of family-friendly programs in policing is lacking. Implementing programs such as flexible work schedules is particularly challenging in law enforcement due to the need for 24/7 coverage. Staffing shortages and operational inefficiencies further exacerbate these challenges by increasing call-backs, extending shifts, and limiting the ability of officers to take time off. These factors not only hinder work-life balance but also contribute to stress, burnout, dissatisfaction, and ultimately turnover. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes improving recruitment efforts to alleviate staffing shortages and enhancing operational efficiency to optimize resource allocation and scheduling.

Future research should explore how additional work-life flexibility can be accomplished within the structured environment of law enforcement while considering the constraints posed by these operational challenges. At a fundamental level, cultural support for work-life balance is essential, as is addressing staffing shortages that may limit the ability

to take time off (Cordner & Cordner, 2011). Moreover, more research is needed to understand the impact of work-life balance programs on turnover in municipal and state law enforcement agencies (Yu, 2019).

Feedback and Organizational Learning

Exit and Stay Interviews

Although not a direct retention strategy, exit and stay interviews help identify turnover causes and inform retention plans (Buccellato, 2021).

Exit interviews, conducted with departing employees, provide insights into the work environment and areas for improvement, enhancing future recruitment and retention (Koziel, 2008). However, employees may hesitate to share their reasons for leaving due to concerns about confidentiality and potential repercussions (Johns & Gorrick, 2016; Johns & Johnson, 2005). Thus, fairness, transparency, and respect are essential to elicit honest feedback, even from involuntarily terminated employees (Wood & Karau, 2009; Jeong & Han, 2021). Using neutral third parties and conducting interviews after employees leave can improve the process (Layman et al., 2007). Effective exit interviews have proven useful in developing improvement plans in correctional facilities (Layman et al., 2007) and are valued by law enforcement leaders (Eades, 2022), though their impact remains largely unevaluated.

Stay interviews involve discussions with current employees to address concerns before they lead to turnover (Robeano, 2017). Few studies have examined the implementation of stay interviews thus far, and law enforcement agencies lack guidelines regarding the administration and development of stay interview materials.

Despite the potential of exit and stay interviews, organizations often fail to collect and use meaningful data due to inconsistent administration of and poor data quality from these interviews (Spain & Groysberg, 2016). For interviews to drive organizational change, the data must be effectively analyzed and acted upon (Johns & Gorrick, 2016). Given the potential benefits of conducting exit and stay interviews to enhance retention, there is a need to create a more robust evidence base to inform

the development of interview materials, their administration, and the analysis of interview data. By aligning these interview initiatives with evidence-based practices, law enforcement agencies can foster organizational learning and improve retention (Klotz et al., 2021).

Discussion and Implications

Despite the numerous retention strategies reviewed here from both policing literature and other fields, research on officer retention strategies remains fragmented and inconclusive. This fragmentation stems from the lack of programmatic, progressively scaled, applied, and generalizable studies and their corresponding replications. Still, the current preliminary and developing body of work provides several future research directions and implications for practice.

Opportunities for Enhancing Retention Research

Given the multifaceted nature of turnover, influenced by a combination of organizational, individual, and sociopolitical factors, research on long-term retention strategies must adopt a methodologically rigorous, holistic approach that is able to produce authoritative guidance on promising retention strategies.

First, studies should examine the relative effectiveness of retention strategies. Budgetary and resource restraints may restrict the number and scope of retention strategies that can be implemented. Agencies may need to select among strategies or may need to implement several strategies concurrently. A critical need in retention research is the controlled study of different retention strategies or retention packages. By conducting these studies, researchers and police administrators can optimize strategies that maximize cost-efficiency and efficacy. Researchers should also establish robust cost-benefit frameworks that would allow practitioners to choose strategies that are both evidence-based and cost-effective.

Second, retention research involves distal outcomes that require longer-term studies on different forms of turnover (e.g., early retirements, voluntary resignations) over time. Research should further disaggregate lateral transitions between law enforcement agencies from transitions to non–law enforcement careers. This work should involve the long-term tracking of retention-related factors (e.g., perceptions of job satisfaction over time) and incorporate analytical designs that can adequately model person- and assignment-related contextual factors.

Third, research should better explore the organization- and person-level contextual factors that might impact the effectiveness of retention strategies. Agencies vary considerably in structure, purpose, and type of operations. These differences may impact the effectiveness of retention strategies, which would require exploratory research in a diverse set of agencies with a diverse set of officers. A person's position or assignment within the agency may be critical to understanding why some strategies work or why strategies may work better for some than for others.

Fourth, retention research should be expanded to include all agency staff. Unfortunately, agencies are also struggling to recruit and retain professional staff, such as crime scene investigators and crime analysts. These staff are essential to agency functioning but have been subject to much less retention research than have officers. The factors that influence the success of retention strategies for nonsworn professional staff may be different than sworn officers. Additional research on retention strategies for these types of positions is needed.

Fifth, implementation studies on how agencies enact specific retention strategies, and their local historical context, have critical implications for generalizability (see La Vigne, 2024 for a recent discussion on implementation studies). That is, the outcome studies that build evidence on effectiveness need to be accompanied by process evaluations that document the real-world implementation and administration of retention strategies, including the resource management, administrator, and officer buy-in to, rollout of, and adherence to policies and programs. These factors can directly or indirectly reduce the expected effectiveness of an otherwise evidence-based retention strategy.

Implications for Practice

While building a robust evidence base for retention strategies is essential to prioritizing those with the greatest impact, we offer the following recommendations based on our review of the emerging literature on promising approaches:

Tailoring Officer Retention Strategies to Agency Context and Individual Needs

Patterns in officer turnover vary by agency and should be considered within the unique context of each agency (Adams et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2014). It is essential to recognize that there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to improving officer retention. Instead, retention strategies should be developed and implemented with careful consideration of each agency's context, including its size and the specific patterns of resignations and retirements it is experiencing (Adams et al., 2023). Implementing general retention strategies may not effectively address the unique needs and circumstances of an agency and the sentiments of its officers. Agencies should explore their overall patterns of retention and attrition and the issues that are often precursors to turnover. For example, programs to identify agency-specific health and wellness challenges have been found to be effective in addressing stressors (Rineer & Taniguchi, 2023). Without a comprehensive understanding of retention challenges, agencies risk investing limited resources in initiatives that may not align with their organizational context or that fail to address underlying causes of turnover.

Moreover, even within agencies, it is important to recognize that officers have distinct needs and motivations for staying. To the extent possible, agencies should tailor retention strategies to accommodate these differences. For example, younger officers may prioritize work-life balance, whereas more experienced officers might value retirement benefits. Understanding these individual differences can inform the development of targeted retention initiatives. Law enforcement agencies should therefore conduct thorough internal assessments to establish their specific patterns, needs, and possibilities regarding officer retention. This assessment process may involve analyzing turnover data, conducting exit interviews, and engaging in open dialog with current staff (e.g., conducting stay interviews) to identify concerns and corresponding retention strategies for implementation. If previous employee satisfaction or engagement surveys have been conducted, agencies are encouraged to revisit the results.

Navigating Resource Constraints in Implementing Retention Strategies

Although agencies can influence their budget requests, final decisions are often made by higher authorities, such as city councils or legislative bodies, with public perception, media scrutiny, and community pressures also playing a role. Agencies can proactively engage in evidence-based advocacy and collaboration to shape these decisions. For example, they can present data demonstrating the importance of officer retention for public safety, community trust, and agency effectiveness. Partnering with external stakeholders, such as research institutions and community organizations, can also help evaluate staffing and retention needs, strengthening the case for increased funding.

One significant difficulty in implementing retention strategies arises from the need for additional funding or personnel (e.g., for trainings, parental leave, personal-time-off, job shadowing, and mentoring programs) and the scarcity of personnel available to dedicate to such efforts. Identification and implementation of retention strategies often require a substantial investment of time, resources, and personnel to assess current practices, identify areas of improvement, and implement targeted interventions. However, agencies frequently and increasingly face limited staffing and bandwidth, particularly in the face of growing demands and responsibilities (Wilson, 2012). Given the level of investment required to implement retention strategies, once such strategies are implemented, agencies should ensure that they can continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies. Agencies should employ regular assessments and feedback mechanisms to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments and to ensure more informed and evidence-based planning in the future. Assessment results can also demonstrate transparency to agency personnel and keep people motivated to continue making changes.

Adapting Organizational Structures to Foster Innovative Retention Strategies

The hierarchical and traditional organizational structures as well as the regulatory environment prevalent in law enforcement may stifle the development of innovative retention initiatives or the ability to adapt to changing workforce dynamics. For example, despite knowledge that work-life balance is a priority for women and younger workers (Gomes et al., 2023; National Institute of Justice, 2019; Williams & Sondhi, 2022), many retention strategies that enhance work-life balance and have been successful in other sectors, such as flexible shift schedules, part-time work, and telecommuting (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Jabeen et al., 2020), are incompatible with some aspects of police work. Nevertheless, despite the requirements of patrol services to provide continual services, other career paths within law enforcement have the ability to provide greater flexibility. Given the shrinking pool of candidates, law enforcement may need to reexamine existing leadership and organizational structures to enable greater autonomy and flexibility for officers without compromising public safety outcomes.

To adapt organizational structures to promote retention, law enforcement agencies can benefit from sharing lessons learned and collaborating with other local agencies. They can exchange information through webinars, podcasts, and practitioner-oriented conferences on police staffing innovations. Numerous initiatives and resources exist to support agencies in their efforts to enhance retention and reduce turnover. For example, professional organizations, police associations, and university-led research groups can provide valuable opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and innovation. Agencies can also engage with research institutions and consultants to seek external state and federal funding to support the development, implementation, and evaluation of tailored strategies for addressing staffing challenges.

One resource available to agencies is the 30x30 Initiative (https://30x30initiative.org), which focuses on increasing the representation of women in policing and fostering more inclusive workplace environments. Although its primary focus is on advancing gender equity, it also provides a model for how agencies can evaluate internal disparities, implement targeted strategies, and monitor progress over time. Initial evidence suggests that emphasizing a commitment to diversity and inclusivity can improve perceptions of the organizational climate and may contribute to retention by creating workplaces where all employees feel valued (Rineer et al., 2023). By participating in initiatives like 30x30, agencies can take actionable steps to improve their organizational structures while also contributing to broader conversations about workforce sustainability.

Data Availability Statement

In this publication, we do not report on, analyze, or generate any data.

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