Commonwealth of Virginia Law Enforcement Survey

Results

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Overview of the Study

The Commonwealth of Virginia Law Enforcement Survey was a joint effort between Dr. Allison Chappell in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Old Dominion University and Captain Ray Greenwood at the Virginia Beach Police Department. The primary purpose of the data collection effort was to gather information about performance evaluation in Virginia police agencies. The survey also included a number of questions about chief demographics, department characteristics, community policing implementation, training practices, and attitudes toward various aspects of crime and policing.

Surveys were administered to 213 police chiefs in municipal, county, and college/university police agencies in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The first wave of the survey was mailed in April 2007, and stamped, self-addressed envelopes were included so that survey responses would be anonymous. Approximately one month after the initial mailing, another letter was mailed to each department thanking them for their participation and reminding them to participate if they had not done so already. The letter provided an internet link to the survey as well. Finally, a third mailing was sent in August 2007 which included a letter outlining the importance of obtaining a high response rate, a copy of the survey, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The authors received 125 completed surveys, which is a respectable response rate of approximately 58.7%. Below, we provide an overview of the findings from the survey, and when appropriate, we include data from a national survey of law enforcement agencies for comparison purposes (Hickman & Reaves, 2006). These comparisons should be considered with caution, however, because smaller departments tend to be underrepresented in national surveys.

Chief Characteristics

The survey was completed by the chief of each department, so general demographic questions were included in the survey. An overwhelming majority of the responding chiefs were white (87.2%) and male (90.4%), and their ages ranged from 33 to 69, with a mean age of approximately 51 years. On average, the respondent had served as chief of their current department for seven years. The educational level of responding chiefs was high, with approximately 60% having at least a two year college degree, 46% having a four year college degree, and 26% having a master's degree or higher. Approximately 57% of those who held a degree had majored in criminal justice or police science.

Department Characteristics

The characteristics of the study departments differed substantially. The number of sworn officers ranged from 1 to 1388 with a mean of 79 officers and a median of 18 officers. Variation was also seen in the number of non-sworn officers with a range of 0 to 343, a mean of 22, and a median of 1. There was, not surprisingly, considerable variation in the population served with a range of 300 to over one million, a mean of 39,841, and a median of 6,050. The percentage of officers assigned to patrol ranged from 50% to 100% with a mean of 81%. The make up of the department, in terms of race and gender, was also examined. Overall, the average percentage of minority and female sworn officers within Virginia police agencies was low, comprising 10.8% and 9.7%, respectively. Nationally, the average percentage of minorities is approximately 24% (Hickman & Reaves, 2006), while women comprise approximately 11% of full time sworn personnel nationally. However, the percentage of female officers averages only

approximately 6% in agencies serving less than 10,000 residents on the national level. Females were far more likely to serve as non-sworn officers in Virginia police departments with an average of 26% of non-sworn officers being female.

Questions were also included about the educational level of officers. An overwhelming majority of Virginia police departments (96%) required a high school diploma (or equivalent) for new officers, and only approximately 3% of departments required more than a high school diploma (e.g., some college or two year degree). Nationally, 9% of departments require a 2 year degree (Hickman & Reaves, 2006). The educational *attainment* of patrol and supervisory officers in Virginia police agencies, however, indicates that many officers attain more education than is required. In fact, on average, 33% of patrol officers had a 2 year college degree or higher, and 46% of supervisory officers had at least a 2 year degree.

Officer Evaluation

In addition to requesting a copy of the evaluation instruments used by the departments (results presented elsewhere), questions regarding evaluation procedures were included in the survey. The results indicate that 79% departments evaluate officers annually, and 48% of departments evaluate officers during field training. The responsibility for evaluating patrol officers most often fell to the direct supervisor (45%), but 30% of respondents indicated that the chief or assistant chief was responsible for evaluating officers. When asked what the evaluations were used for, 76% of chiefs indicated that they are used for raises and promotions, 22% used them for budget justifications, 30% used them for rewards, 39% used them for disciplinary action, and 27% indicated that they used them for "other" reasons.

Adoption and Implementation of Community Policing

The survey consisted largely of questions relating to the implementation of community policing. A large majority (91.2%) of chiefs indicated that community policing and problem solving was part of their department's "strategic plan." In comparison, nearly half of all U.S. police departments (employing 73% of all local police officers) reported that they had a mission statement that included "some aspect" of community policing. In Virginia, community policing was implemented as a *departmental philosophy* in 88% of responding departments and as a separate unit in 12% of departments. While the majority of Virginia police departments have adopted community policing as a departmental philosophy, only 47.2% indicated that police officers were involved in problem solving *formally*, while 49.6% indicated that officers were involved in problem solving *informally*. At the national level, about 25% of departments (employing 45% of all officers) report that they "actively encourage patrol officers to become involved in problem solving projects" (Hickman & Reaves, 2006).

Strategies used to implement community policing were also examined, yielding interesting findings in light of the fact that such a large majority of departments reported that community policing was a part of their department's strategic plan. Of the strategies examined (foot patrol, bike patrol, civic leagues/neighborhood watch, SARA-type problem solving, substations, community surveys, victim assistance, code enforcement, citizen's academy, permanent geographic assignments, and repeat offender tracking), victim assistance and code enforcement were used most often. Sixty nine percent of departments used victim assistance all or most of the time, and 64% of departments used code enforcement all or most of the time. Other strategies included substations (16% of

departments used all or most of the time), community surveys (19% of departments used

all or most of the time), bike patrol (22% of departments used all or most of the time),

citizen's academies (24% of departments used all or most of the time), foot patrol (46%

of departments used all or most of the time), civic leagues or neighborhood crime watch

(48.4% of departments used all or most of the time), SARA-type problem solving (29.8%

of departments used all or most of the time), permanent geographic assignments (37% of

departments used all or most of the time), and repeat offender tracking (30% of

departments used all or most of the time). On a national level, approximately 59% of

departments use foot patrol routinely, 38% use bicycle patrol regularly, 12% operate

substations, and 31% of departments assign patrol officers to specific geographic areas.

Nationally, 17% of police agencies operate a citizen's academy and 22% use citizen

surveys (Hickman & Reaves, 2006). Larger departments are more likely to utilize such

methods compared to small and medium sized departments. Additionally, only 14.4% of

Virginia departments used a version of Compstat.

Departmental Training and Community Policing

The survey also examined training practices in Virginia police agencies. We

found that 11.2% of departments included in the study operated their own academy. This

is high compared to only 3% at the national level. The average amount of academy

training required for new recruits in Virginia was 762 hours with a median of 800 hours

(the national average is 628 hours). New recruits were required to have an average of

285 hours of field training (the national average is 326 hours). For field training, most

departments (48%) used the San Jose FTO model, 8.8% used the Department of Criminal

Justice Services (DCJS) model, and 4.8% used the Reno (PTO) model. Seventeen percent of responding departments did not specify their field training model.

Most departments did not require officers take community policing training courses. In fact, only 20.8% of departments *required all officers* to take community policing courses. In addition, 10.4% of departments *required some officers* to take community policing courses, 37.6% *encouraged officers* to take community policing courses, and 30.4% of departments had no policy on community policing training. New officers were most likely to have community policing training with 52% of departments reporting that all new officers had at least 8 hours of community policing training over the last two years. Twenty-four percent of departments reported that all in-service sworn personnel had at least 8 hours of community policing training over the last two years. Nationally, 39% of local police departments trained at least some new recruits in community policing, and 31% of departments trained all new officer recruits in community policing. Forty-eight percent of departments trained at least some in-service officers in community policing and 17% trained all in-service officers in community policing (Hickman & Reaves, 2006).

There are a number of barriers to obtaining adequate training in community policing. Barriers include distance to training facility, time, funding, and an absence of other officers to cover duties. Of these, having no other officers to cover duties and lack of time were reported as barriers to community policing training by over half of the departments (56% and 53.6%, respectively). Funding was identified as a barrier to training in community policing by 43.2% of departments, and distance to training facility was a barrier in 23.2% of departments.

Attitude toward Community Policing

It is important to study not only the implementation of community policing strategies, but also the attitude that those in positions of authority hold regarding community policing. To gauge attitude toward community policing, the survey asked the chief of the department to respond to a number of statements. The results indicate that chiefs hold quite positive attitudes toward community policing, however, there were a number of surprising findings. For example, 88.8% of chiefs agreed or strongly agreed that community policing is the best way to fight crime, however, a substantial proportion (19.2%) of chiefs also agreed or strongly agreed that community policing is 'nothing more than hype promoted by academics and activists.' Additionally, 95.4% of chiefs agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'police officers can be trained how to be a good community policing officer,' but less than half (44.8%) felt that their officers receive enough training in community policing. This is interesting in light of the previous finding that less than a quarter of departments required officers to take community policing training courses. Additionally, 60.8% of chiefs agreed or strongly agreed that officers learn more about community policing on the job than in training, and less than half (42.4%) felt that their officers had a thorough understanding of the SARA (or similar) problem solving model. Results also showed that the effect of the terrorist attacks of September 11th on community policing may still be unclear. Almost half of the chiefs (44.8%) felt that the emphasis on community policing is waning due to homeland/domestic security concerns, but a large majority (85.6%) felt that community policing/problem solving complements homeland/domestic security strategies.

Overall, most chiefs (88%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that community policing was not necessary in their department due to the population they served. Also, 91.2% of chiefs disagreed or strongly disagreed that the job of a police officer is to enforce the law and fight crime rather than worry about making the community happy. This is an encouraging finding regarding the acceptance of community policing among police chiefs and demonstrates the shift away from traditional policing. In support of this view, 92.8% of chiefs agreed or strongly agreed that community involvement is essential to good policing.

In conclusion, the survey of Virginia law enforcement agencies has added to our knowledge about community policing, training, evaluation practices and chief and departmental characteristics. The results are interesting in light of the national numbers provided by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and offer a better idea of how the Commonwealth of Virginia compares on a national level.

References

Hickman, Matthew J., and Brian A. Reaves. (2006). Local Police Departments, 2003. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. NCJ 210118.