



# Tennessee Municipal Police Recruitment and Retention

A Study by the MTAS Research and Information Center for  
the Tennessee City Management Association

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## Introduction

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The purpose of this study is to analyze Tennessee municipalities' ability to recruit and retain police officers. Many cities in Tennessee have hired and made significant investments in entry level police officers only to see them leave employment in the first three years. This short turnover impacts the cities financially and decreases their ability to maintain adequate staffing in their departments. By analyzing police officer recruitment practices and retention levels, this study can explore the factors affecting police recruitment and retention and offer insights into what works and what does not work when attracting and keeping talented police officers.

Conventional wisdom suggests that salary levels, benefits packages and retention strategies affect police officer recruitment and retention in municipal police departments. To test these assumptions, MTAS in partnership with the Tennessee City Management Association (TCMA), conducted a survey of police departments in Tennessee. The survey was designed to gather information relating to police recruitment strategies, employee benefits and police officer salary levels.

A total of 285 initial contacts were identified for this survey. The contact pool included all police chief contacts in the MTAS municipal directory. Where a city had no chief listed, or the position was vacant, a city manager or administrator or recorder was added for that city.

Out of the 285 contacts, 26 email addresses bounced for various reasons. This left a pool of 259 contacts. Four cities of the remaining 259 responded that they either do not have a police department or do not have any paid employees in the city. This left 255 possible participants. By the close of the survey, 81 responses were received resulting in a 31% overall response rate.

After all responses were gathered, an analysis was conducted that specifically looked at the relationship between police officer tenure and salary levels, benefits and retention strategies. The dependent variable, police tenure, was defined as the number of police officers leaving the department within three years of employment. Salary levels, employee benefits, retention strategies and recruitment strategies were all considered independent variables.

This study started with four basic assumptions regarding relationships within the data. The primary assumption was that if a municipality provides police officers with a higher salary the police officers will be less likely to leave employment. So as the level of salary increased, the number of police officers leaving within the first three years of employment should decrease. Another assumption posited that by offering benefits such as retirement, health insurance, take home police vehicles, pay incentives, uniform allowances and school tuition reimbursement, police officers will be less likely to leave employment. A third assumption stated that if municipalities employ effective recruitment strategies, it will reduce the time taken to fill a vacant position and the officers hired are less likely to leave in the first three years of employment. A fourth and final assumption was that the presence of active retention strategies will decrease the number of officers leaving within the first three years of employment.

### Summary Findings

The Tennessee Police Officer Recruitment and Retention Survey was sent to 255 municipalities in Tennessee. A total of 81 responses were received resulting in a response rate of 31 percent. 65 percent (53) of responding cities are private act charter cities. A high percentage of the respondents (75 percent (61)) are from cities with a

population under 10,000. Lastly, respondents are spread across the state's three grand divisions as follows; 35 percent east, 35 percent middle and 30 percent west grand division. See charts in [Section A](#) of the report for more details of the demographics of respondents.

**General survey finding highlights are:**

- The lowest reported minimum salary reported was \$15,080. Maximum starting salary reported was \$44,075.20.
- Uniform allowance and take home vehicles are the most often provided benefits in police departments. None of the responding cities were offering gym memberships or uniform cleaning services as part of the benefits packages.
- Forty-seven percent of responding departments offer “pension style” retirement plans vs 37 percent that offer “investment style” retirement plans.
- Seventy-six percent of respondents do not have an active retention strategy in their police departments.
- The “most effective” recruitment strategies most commonly used are word of mouth, social media and website advertising.

**Again, this study focused on four assumptions** relating to the factors affecting police officer recruitment and retention.

- As the police officer salary increased the number of officers leaving in the first three years will decrease.
- The presence of employee benefits will decrease the number of officers leaving in the first three years of employment.
- The presence of recruiting strategies will decrease the number of police officers leaving in the first three years of employment.
- The presence of retention strategies will decrease the number of police officers leaving in the first three years.

**Results**

The results of testing these four assumptions indicated that none of these suggested factors had a statistically significant impact on the number of police officers leaving employment in the first three years of employment. In other words, the factors of officer salary levels, employee benefits, retention strategies and recruitment strategies all had no statistically significant effect on police officer tenure. A possible explanation is that police tenure is affected by other factors not considered in this study such as department culture and/or department leadership.

Another explanation of these findings may be that there is a problem with the data sample itself. While a sample size of 81 responses out of a sample size of 255 is adequate to test correlations between variables, a sample size like this is sensitive to outliers and a high number of missing data. In this dataset, many responses were missing data, were zeros, or were outliers. In fact, on some of the questions, the responses provided were dissimilar to the point that the data are considered to have a non-normal distribution. For example, when the relationship between salary and tenure was tested, the results indicated that as the salary increased, the number of officers leaving employment also increased. So, not only were some of the data not statistically significant, but in some cases the observed relationships in the data were not logical.

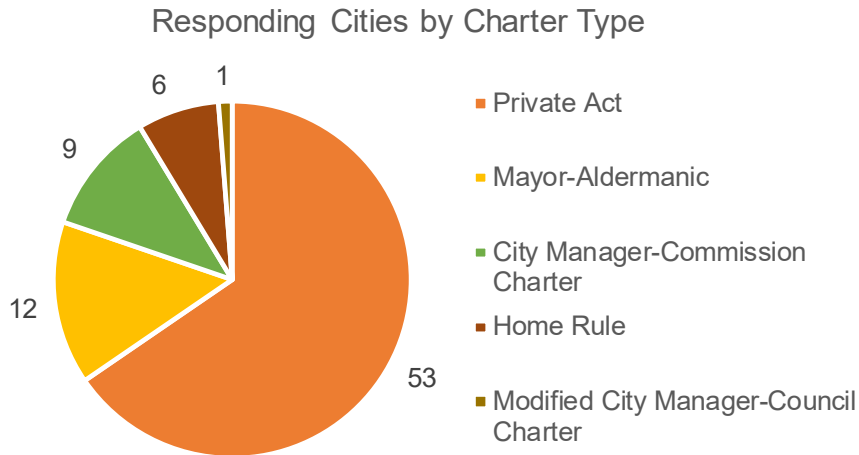
One way to address these issues with the dataset is to redesign and redistribute the survey to establish if these findings can be replicated to increase confidence in the findings or show that these findings are in error.

However, while these results do not provide statistically significant insights into the relationships between police officer tenure and salaries, benefits, retention strategies and recruitment strategies, the study does provide useful data regarding current employment practices in police departments across the state.

# I. Demographics of Respondents

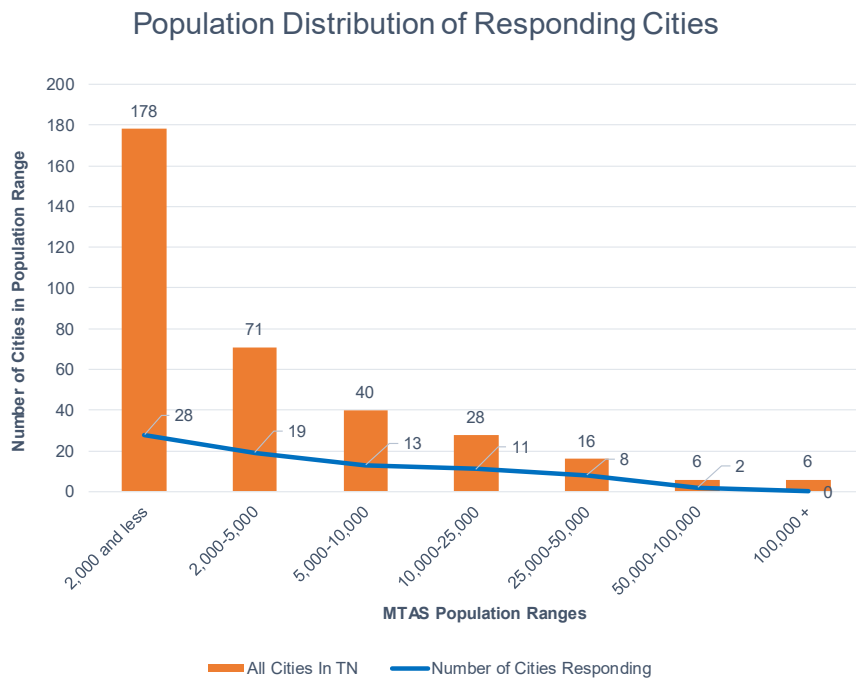
## 1. Responding Cities by Charter Type

66 percent of the 81 responding cities were from private act charter cities.

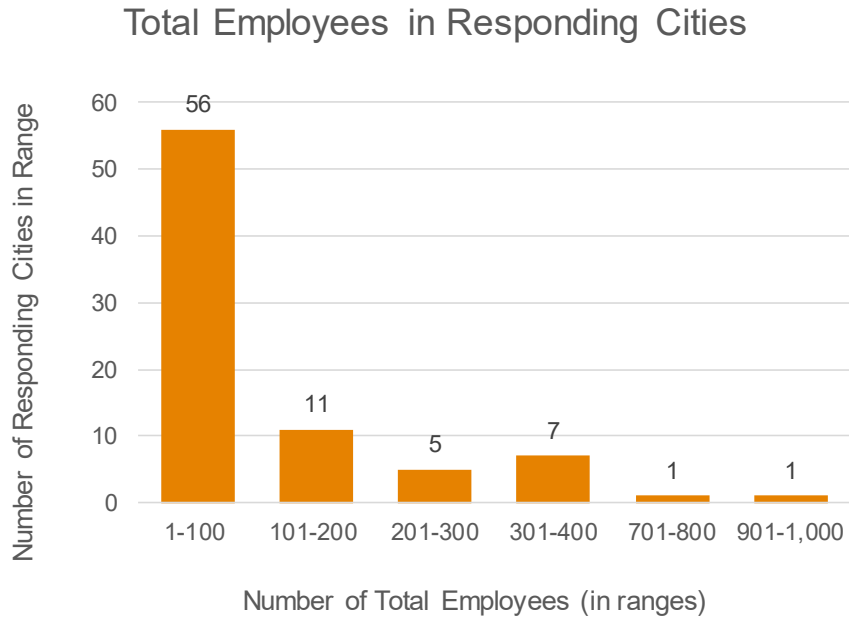


## 2. Population Distribution of Responding Cities

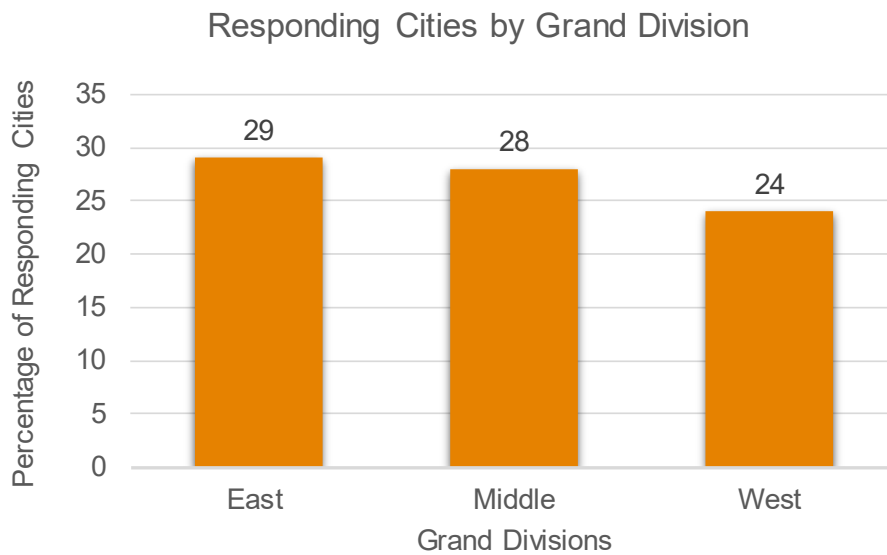
The distribution of the respondents by population generally corresponds to the distribution of all cities in the state by population. Additionally, 75 percent of the respondents are from cities with populations under 10,000.



### 3. Number of Employees in Responding Cities



### 4. Grand Division of Responding Cities



## II. Survey Question Response Summaries

### A. Salary and Benefits

#### 1. Minimum and maximum salary reported for entry level sworn police officers

Participants were asked to provide the minimum and maximum salaries for “entry level sworn police officers in your city.”<sup>1</sup>

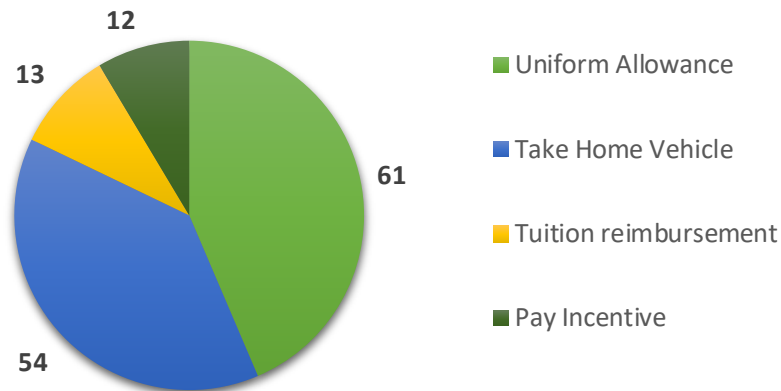
<b>Table 1</b>	Minimum Reported	Maximum Reported
<b>Salary</b>	\$15,080	\$44,075.20

<b>Table 2</b>	
<b>Minimum only information provided</b>	5
<b>Error response</b>	5
<b>No response</b>	6
<b>Total complete responses</b>	64

#### 2. Benefits provided to entry level police officers

None of the cities responding to this question provided uniform cleaning or access to a city-owned or local gym. (Total responding to question= 71)

Number of Cities Providing Selected Benefit



<sup>1</sup> Responses to this question contained several errors in reporting. The minimum and maximum information provided in Table 1 is based on a dataset where the error data has been removed. Table 2 provides information on the types of errors and the total responding to the question.



3. Participation in the Tennessee Consolidated Retirement System<sup>2</sup>

<b>Participation in the Tennessee Consolidated Retirement System</b>		
<b>Selected Answer</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Total Number</b>
Yes	27.20%	22
No	7.40%	6
*No responses	65.40%	53
Total	100%	81

4. Provision of the public safety “bridge” supplement

<b>Public Safety Bridge Supplement Provided</b>		
<b>Selected Answer</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Total Number</b>
Yes	6.20%	5
No	28.40%	23
*No responses	65.40%	53
Total	100%	81

5. Employee contributes to the “bridge” supplement

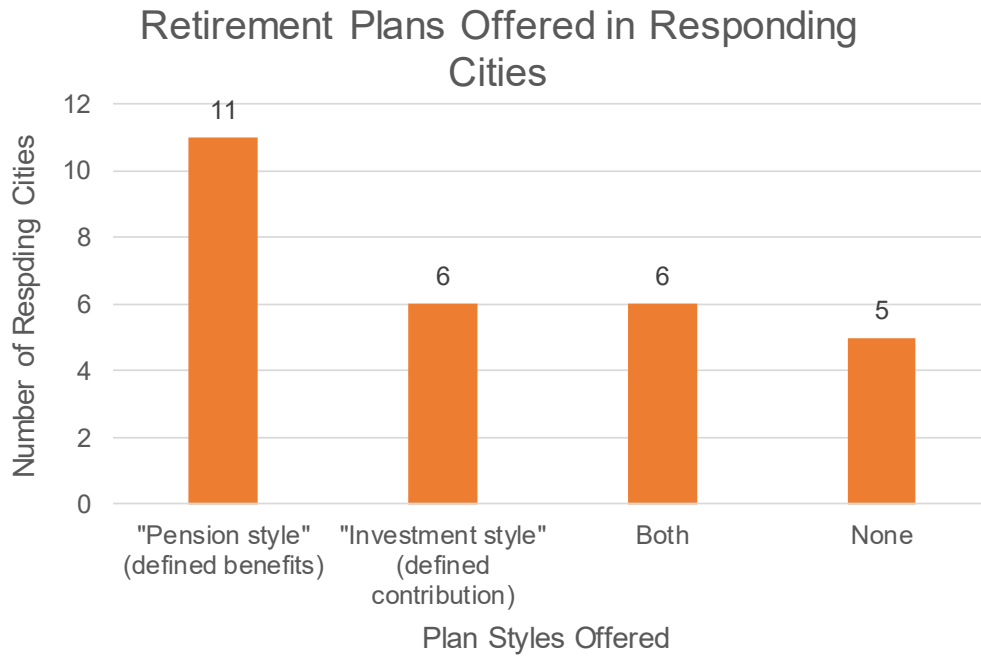
<b>Employees Contribute to Bridge Supplement</b>		
<b>Selected Answer</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Total Number</b>
Yes	3.70%	3
No	30.90%	25
*No responses	65.40%	53
Total	100%	81

Comments on the “bridge supplement”

Public Safety employees forewent a 3.5 percent onetime raise to fund the Bridge
The employee contributes 4 percent of the total contribution. That contribution level does not change based on whether the bridge is present.

<sup>2</sup> We received a low response rate on questions 3-6. This is attributed to survey questions not displaying to participants. Data was obtained through direct follow up via email with survey participants.

6. Style of retirement program being offered -- "pension style" or "investment style" program<sup>3</sup>  
 (Total responding to the question = 28)



6.1. Additional comments on style of benefits program offered

Employees hired before June 30, 2010, participate in the Defined Benefit plan. Employees hired after July 1, 2010, participate in the Defined Contribution plan.
City of Brentwood offers Pension style and Investment style programs depending on DOH [date of hire].
Pension prior to 7/1/2012. Defined contribution for those hired after 7/1/2012.
We offer both. Our defined benefit is mandatory (whether TCRS or our own City defined benefit plan). We also offer a 401(k) to employees, which is voluntary.
Both. We participate in TCRS and also have a 457 Plan, a Roth 401K, and a Non-Roth 401K. The city contributes to the TCRS plan but not the 457/401K's.
Voluntary option
Investment style (We have a 401/457 style plan. We contribute 5% of our salary and the city matches 5%)
Investment style (with match from town)
Voluntary 457 plan
Only TCRS

<sup>3</sup> We received a low response rate on questions 3-6. This is attributed to survey questions not displaying to participants. Data was obtained through direct follow up via email with survey participants.

7. Responding cities with employees contributing to retirement

<b>Employees Contributing to Retirement</b>		
<b>Selected Answer</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Total Number</b>
Yes	65.40%	53
No	23.50%	19
No response	11.10%	9
Total	100%	81

8. Responding cities with employees contributing to employee health insurance premium

<b>Employees Contributing to Health Insurance Premium</b>		
<b>Selected Answer</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Total Number</b>
Yes	38.30%	31
No	55.60%	45
No response	6.20%	5
Total	100%	81

9. Amount of employee contribution to individual employee health insurance premium

<b>Employee Percent Contributed to Health Insurance</b>	
<b>Percentage Reported</b>	<b>Total Number</b>
100%	6
70%	1
50%	1
33%	1
30%	1
22%	1
20%	6
15%	1
10%	3
5%	4
No response	56
Total	81

**B. Vacancies and Separation from Employment with City**

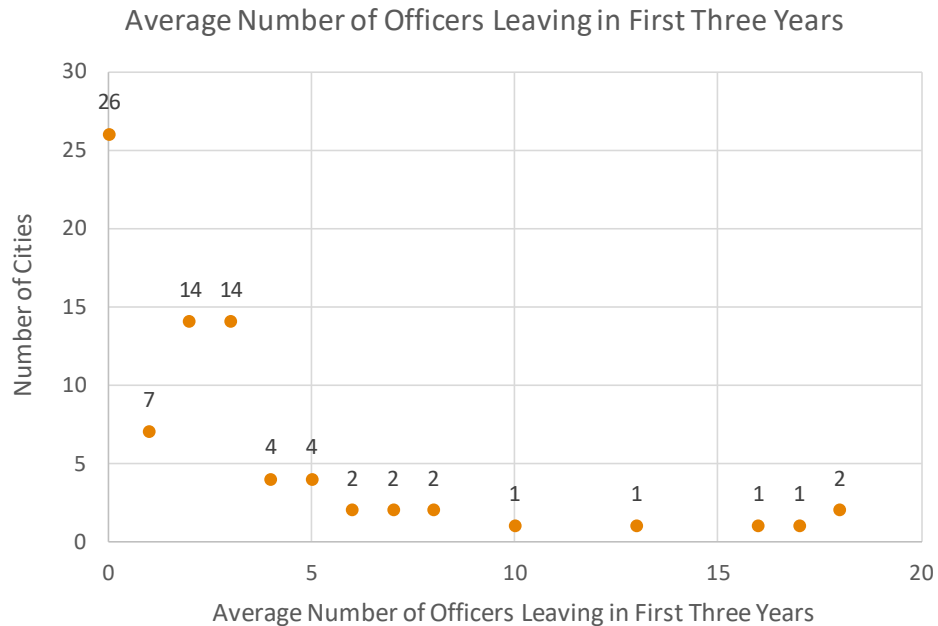
10. Average number of days to fill a vacancy for entry level police officers (from date of advertising to hire)

	Minimum Days	Maximum Days	Average Days	Total Responding to Question
<b>Average # of Days to Fill Vacancies</b>	0	350 days	59.53 days	71

11. Officers voluntarily leaving before 3 years of employment (in last 3 years)

This chart shows the frequency at which entry level officers are leaving within their first three years of employment with the responding cities and towns. It is interesting to note that the most reported frequency was “zero” which we interpret as no officers left these responding municipalities within the first three years of employment. In other words, 38% (26 of 68) of the cities responding to this question do not experience officers leaving within the first years of employment.

(Total responding to the question = 68)



12. Average percent of vacant patrol positions in last 3 years in department  
(8 error responses removed from total responding)

	Minimum	Median	Maximum	Total Responding to Question
Average % of vacant patrol positions in last 3 years	0	2%	50%	70

### C. Retention Strategies

13. Police departments with an active employee retention strategy

Departments with Retention Strategy		
Selected Answer	Percent	Total
Yes	7.40%	6
No	76.50%	62
No response	16.00%	13
Total	100%	81

14. Comments describing the employee retention strategy

Longevity, Family oriented work as team to make sure officers are covered with time off as needed or requested. Take home car program
Self-actualization strategies, salaries, incentives as feasible.
Longevity Pay
Morale building and benefits
We continue to include families in our department. Regular get-togethers. We incorporate the family from day 1 into the department.

15. Cities offering a wellness program for police officers

[No responses]

## D. Recruitment

### 16. Most effective recruitment strategies for entry level police officer positions

Respondents were asked to select from a list of predefined possibilities, the recruitment method that they found most effective for their municipality. Word of mouth, social media and website advertising were most often selected as the most effective recruitment strategy. Other methods listed in the comments area for the question were newspaper advertising, citizen police academy and college internships.

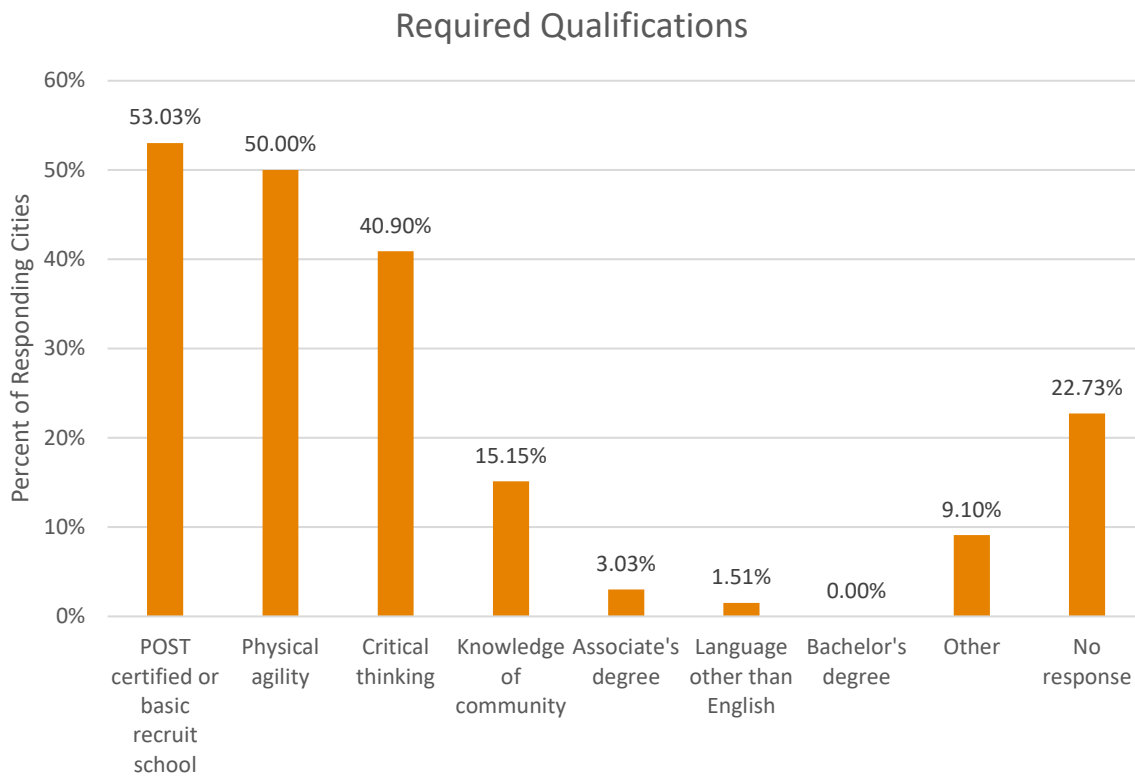
The following percentages are of the total number of the 71 cities who responding to this question. 10 cities did not respond at all to this question. Following the chart is a table which gives the count of times each option was selected.



Recruitment Strategy	Percent of Cities	Count
Word of mouth	79.00%	64
Social media	46.00%	46
Website advertising	34.60%	28
Police reserve program	17.30%	14
Community events	14.80%	12
Campus job fairs	7.40%	6
Military veterans outreach	3.70%	3
"Explorer" program	1.63%	3
No response	12.00%	10

### 17. Required qualifications for entry level police officer positions beyond minimum POST requirements

A total of 66 cities responded to this question and the percentages below are based on that number. Respondents could select more than one option. 15 cities did not respond at all to this question.

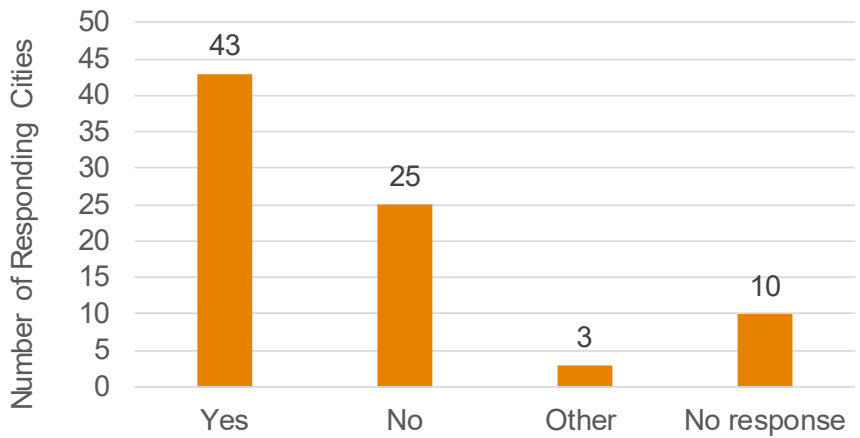


Other required qualifications mentioned in comments area:

Mostly POST certified and experience. Have made some exceptions
Knowledge, Skills and Abilities related to the position applied for
30 Hrs. College w/Military or Prior Police Experience
Will send to Academy if not POST certified

18. Cities that offer additional pay for previous experience for patrol officers

Cities that Offer Additional Pay for Previous Experience

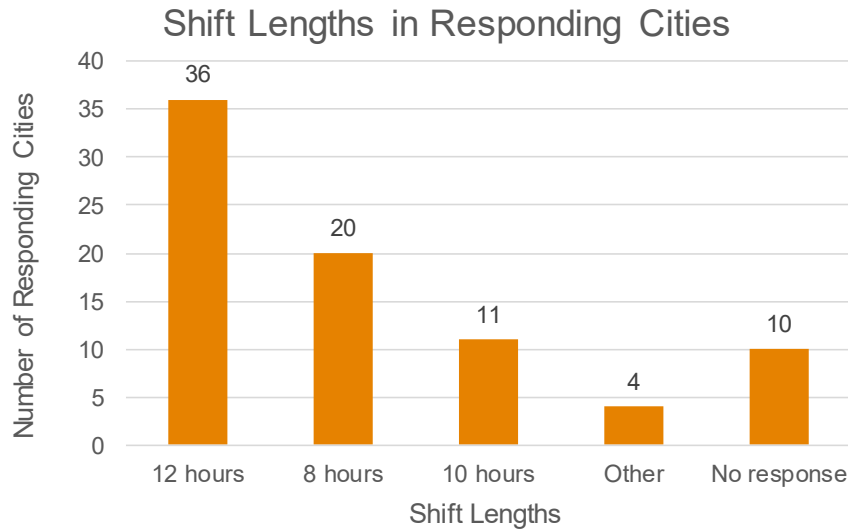


Other Comments:

We have a set pay for certified officers hired.
We are working on that pay incentive currently.



## 19. Shift lengths for patrol officers



### III. Final Summary

In summary, the goal of the “Tennessee Municipal Police Recruitment and Retention” study was to explore the selected factors affecting police recruitment and retention and to offer insights into what works and what does not work when attracting and keeping talented entry level police officers.

The primary factors analyzed were entry level police officer tenure, salary levels, benefits offered, and recruitment and retention strategies.

This study could suggest that the factors identified above are not the primary drivers effecting police officer tenure in the responding cities. Perhaps police officer tenure is affected by other workplace factors such as geographic location, department culture, and leadership—factors not included in this study.

While this study does not provide statistically significant insights into the relationships between police officer tenure and salaries, benefits, retention strategies and recruitment strategies, it does provide useful descriptive information regarding the current recruiting and retention practices in police departments across the state. Further research into the factors influencing officer recruitment and retention may be merited if Tennessee municipalities wish to better identify the best practices to attract and retain talented men and women to “protect and serve” in their communities.