

Improving Recruitment and Retention in the New Orleans Police Department

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Abstract

Following Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) has suffered from serious recruiting and retention problems. Drawing on decades of experience and on interviews with members of the NOPD, RAND researchers identified some initiatives in five areas that, when tailored to NOPD circumstances, could help the NOPD address these problems and would carry modest or no additional costs to the city.

Hurricane Katrina and the flooding that followed largely disabled the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) and other city first responders. These organizations ended up becoming as much victims of the storm as the people of New Orleans they were supposed to help. Subsequently, the NOPD has suffered from unusually high rates of departure from the force and an inability to recruit new officers.

RAND Corporation researchers conducted a “quick-look study” to help address the NOPD’s recruiting and retention problems, drawing on insights gained from decades of working with a number of large governmental organizations on ways to improve the management of their personnel systems, most extensively with the Department of Defense but more recently with several municipal police departments.

Recruiting and Retention Problems Facing the NOPD After Katrina

The NOPD is shrinking, in terms of both the budget for police officers and the actual number of officers on the street. In the first 14 months after Katrina (from August 2005 to October 2006), the budgeted commissioned police force was cut about

15 percent, from 1,885 to 1,600. During the same period, the actual on-board strength declined by an even larger amount: 321 officers—from 1,742 to 1,421—or about 18 percent.

Since the storm, the NOPD has lost officers at an annualized rate of about 17 percent, compared with a pre-storm loss rate of 5 percent. Even more problematic, losses were concentrated disproportionately among the junior ranks—the officers who patrol the streets today and who were being counted on to provide the leadership for tomorrow.

Lessons That Might Help Address the NOPD’s Recruiting and Retention Problems

RAND researchers identified some initiatives in five areas that, when tailored to the NOPD’s circumstances, could help address recruiting and retention problems. Researchers visited New Orleans to talk with officers and civilians throughout the NOPD. Recognizing the city’s current budgetary constraints, they focused on, but did not limit themselves to, initiatives that carry modest or no additional costs to the city.

Compensation. Providing a competitive level of compensation is essential for the NOPD’s long-term viability, but unfortunately, NOPD salaries are noncompetitive relative to those in other, comparable cities. Most notable is the failure in the past few years to pay increases to grades of Police Officer 2, 3, and 4 (PO2–PO4) after officers pass the examinations that qualify them for promotion. Not only does this hinder retention, it also hinders the department’s ability to attract new recruits and motivate current officers. Directly correcting the pay problem is critical to improving retention.

The study stressed the need for the city to follow through on promises for pay increases as patrolmen advance through the junior ranks.

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Finally, given that the city is likely to acquire a stock of relatively good housing, officials might want to consider using housing as non-cash payment in-kind for signing a contract committing a police officer to some number of years of service.

Career Progression and Promotion. Promotion examinations are supposed to be held every three years, but as many as five years pass between examinations. Officers are promoted on the basis of their examination scores, with the department moving down the list of qualified candidates over time as need arises. Unfortunately, many of those not promoted to fill immediate needs leave rather than wait for a distant future examination that may move them up the list, often leaving the department with those at the bottom of the list. Having more-frequent examinations and convening promotion boards every 12 to 18 months to qualify (pass) only enough officers each cycle to fill vacancies between the more-frequent examinations can help improve the quality of those promoted, raise morale, and assist in retention.

Recruiting. Current NOPD efforts to recruit new officers seem insufficient, with uniformed officers devoted more to processing candidates who have already volunteered than to actively recruiting them. RAND suggests a more proactive approach that would field officers with specific recruiting goals. Over the longer term, this program could be augmented with a Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps–type or school-based program.

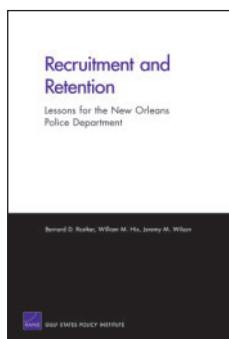
Such a program could include after-school employment during the school year, summer employment between grades, and post–high school graduation employment as civilian employees until the recruits are eligible to become uniformed officers.

Civilian/Officer Mix. During visits, RAND researchers found officers doing jobs civilians could do. Given the current shortage of officers, the NOPD should be aggressive in ensuring that all uniformed personnel are assigned to duties they are uniquely qualified to perform.

Morale. The whole infrastructure of the criminal justice system was a casualty of the flooding and its aftermath; much of the NOPD is still working out of trailers. Priority should be given to rebuilding police facilities, including headquarters and the district stations, as quickly as possible, especially since much of this can be done with funds from the federal government.

The Way Forward

Mayor Ray Nagin and RAND released the study to the public jointly at a press conference at City Hall in New Orleans in March 2007. At that time, the Mayor noted that the city had already acted upon several of the RAND recommendations, most notably, increasing the pay of junior patrolmen and (with the New Orleans Civil Service Commission) moving to increase the frequency of the promotion examinations. ■



This research brief describes work done for the Safety and Justice Program as part of the Center on Quality Policing within RAND Infrastructure, Safety, and Environment documented in *Recruitment and Retention: Lessons for the New Orleans Police Department*, by Bernard D. Rostker, William M. Hix, and Jeremy M. Wilson, MG-585-RC (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG585/>), 2007, 48 pp., \$21.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4142-5. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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