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Document Title: Turnover Among Alaska Village Public Safety Officers: An Examination of the Factors Associated with Attrition -- Summary

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Document No.: 182608

Date Received: May 24, 2000

Award Number: 98-IJ-CX-0035

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TURNOVER AMONG ALASKA VILLAGE PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH ATTRITION

SUMMARY

Providing police and public safety services to the isolated Alaska Native villages spread across the state is a daunting challenge. With rates of intentional and accidental violent death much higher than those found in urbanized areas of Alaska and the U.S., these villages certainly do require a police and public safety presence. However, the terrain, climate, and a lack of roads interconnecting these villages, along with relatively small population sizes, have precluded a "traditional" method of dealing with their law enforcement and public safety needs. Instead, the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program has been developed over the past 20 years as a localized response to the broad range of public safety needs in Alaska Native villages. VPSOs — whose five-part task bundle includes law enforcement, fire fighting, water safety, emergency medical assistance, and search and rescue — can be best thought of as public safety "jacks-of-all-trades." The program has been heralded for its trifurcated management structure allowing for local control over the day-to-day provision of services at the village level.

Despite these innovations, the problem of officer attrition has hindered the VPSO program in much the same way as it affected earlier efforts at providing police services to Alaska Native villages. Basically, those individuals who are responsible for policing Alaska Native villages do not have particularly long careers doing so. The attached report examines the turnover problem in the VPSO program and attempts to isolate some of the possible reasons for the extreme levels of turnover among VPSOs.

Two primary data sources were drawn upon to come to an understanding of VPSO turnover. Information about turnover rates and the amount of time officers spend in the program was obtained from lists of current and former VPSOs published by the Alaska Department of Public Safety. The measures of factors considered as possible reasons for turnover, as suggested by prior research on the VPSO program and by administrators closely associated with the program, were gathered by a self-administered survey of 113 (out of a possible 184) current and former VPSOs.

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FINAL REPORT

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Compared with what is found in police agencies across the state and in the remainder of the nation, turnover rates in the VPSO program have been, and remain, very high. Consider the following points regarding VPSO turnover rates:

- The problem of high rates of officer attrition in the VPSO program continues a trend seen in earlier policing efforts in Alaska Native villages. Annual turnover rates of more than 100 percent in pre-VPSO rural policing programs were typical.
- The typical VPSO lasts in a village and in the program for less than a year.
- When the turnover rate is computed as a percentage in which the number of terminations in a year is divided by the total number of VPSOs employed in a year, the VPSO turnover rate has averaged 35 percent per year for the years 1983 through 1997. Rates using this measure have been as high as 45 percent per year (in 1992).
- Calculating turnover rates as the proportion of the number of terminations in a period over the average number of employees in a period, VPSO rates of attrition averaged 55 percent per year over the period 1983-1997. This rate is at least 10 times greater than what is experienced by metropolitan police departments in Alaska and the U.S.

For a number of reasons, the high VPSO turnover rates are problematic:

- It costs an estimated \$6,200 to hire, train, and equip each new VPSO.
- The time between when one VPSO quits and another takes his or her place is more than four months (138 days). During this time the village is without local VPSO service.
- Even when a replacement is made, new VPSOs will, on average, serve in a village for an additional five months before completing the training academy.

The survey of current and former VPSOs focused upon four topic areas thought to be associated with officer turnover. First of all, the officers were questioned about their pay and cost of living expenses. Both subjective and objective measures appear to indicate that VPSOs are underpaid.

- Five out of six VPSOs felt that they are not paid very well while more than nine out of ten were of the opinion that VPSOs earn much less than the job is worth.
- The majority (60 %) of VPSOs reported doing something to supplement their incomes. More than 20 percent of the officers reported using food stamps while in the program, and 48 percent of the officers reported working an extra job while employed as a VPSO.

- VPSO housing is expensive; nearly two-thirds (63 %) of the VPSOs reported paying more than one-third of their salaries toward housing. Only a slim majority (51 %) of VPSOs were satisfied with the quality of their housing.

Questions were also included in the survey to consider the stresses and dangerous situations VPSOs face in their job.

- In terms of the organizational sources of stress, most of the officers surveyed were clear about VPSO their role and the limits of their authority, but most also reported receiving conflicting direction from the multiple sources of authority they report to.
- A slim majority of VPSOs reported experiencing at least some physiological effects of stress because of their job.
- Many VPSOs feel as though they have been placed in danger on the job. Most (80 %) reported that they were lucky to not have been injured in some of the calls for service they responded to; a similar proportion (72 %) said that they feared for their own life and safety while dealing with dangerous situations.
- More than one-third (37 %) of the VPSOs surveyed reported being injured while making an arrest. Nearly two-thirds (63 %) of those hurt while making an arrest required medical attention for their injuries.
- Roughly two-out-of-five (39 %) VPSOs said that at least once in their career they had responded to a call for service in which gunshots were fired.
- Almost all (89 %) VPSOs surveyed believed that the villages they served expected 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week service and most (68 %) said that the job made it difficult to take part in subsistence activities or to spend time alone with their family.

An additional set of questions were included in the survey to gauge to VPSOs' perceptions of their training and the organizational support they received throughout their tenure.

- Although a third of the VPSOs reported dissatisfaction with their training, a majority (59 %) of officers felt that they were well trained while slightly more (69 %) believed that VPSO academy prepared them for the job at hand.

- While nearly all (93 %) VPSOs reported talking to their Oversight Troopers on the telephone at least once a month, a slim majority (55 %) reported seeing the Oversight Troopers in their village only in the case of emergency or investigation.
- Although a majority (63 %) of VPSOs were satisfied with their office space, a similar proportion (62 %) felt that they lacked the equipment necessary for them to do their jobs properly.
- Most VPSOs felt as though they were supported by the village they served (59 %) and that people in the village expressed their appreciation for the job the officer was doing (60 %).

The final set of questions included in the survey examined the experiences of the nearly two-thirds (63 %) of VPSOs who are of Alaska Native heritage.

- Most Alaska Native VPSOs served in their home village (75 %) or a village where they were related to other residents (93 %).
- Serving in these locations often forced the Alaska Native VPSOs to enforce the law against relatives. Nearly four out of five (79 %) said that they had arrested a relative. Half as many (39 %) reported making an arrest of an immediate family member.
- Somewhat surprisingly, a majority (57 %) of the Alaska Native VPSOs surveyed felt as though they had not been pressured to be lenient toward their relatives.
- Only a slim majority (52 %) of Alaska Native VPSOs felt that it was difficult to enforce the law against relatives.
- Slightly less than half (46 %) of all VPSOs felt as though they were treated like outcasts.
- Two-out-of-five (42 %) Alaska Native VPSOs reported being treated as if they were somehow less Native because they were VPSOs.

Principal components analysis was used to reduce the large number of variables made available by the survey into a smaller number of theoretically compelling factors and scales that could then be reasonably compared using multivariate analytical techniques. Treated as though they were factors that put officers at risk of leaving the VPSO program, these factors and scales were used in three different proportional hazards regression models to investigate their effects when other factors and scales were held constant. As an analytical tool used when considering the effects of risk factors upon the likelihood of mortality in demographic and actuarial research, proportional hazards

regression analysis provided an appropriate tool for estimating the likelihood of VPSOs quitting and/or being fired from the program in any given month given the officers' scores on the factors and scales isolated in the principal components analysis.

Three different proportional hazards regression models of VPSO turnover were estimated to determine the probabilities of officers leaving the program. One model considered the likelihood of attrition among all VPSOs while the other two looked at the likelihood of turnover among Alaska Native and non-Native VPSOs, respectively.

Across all three models (i.e., for all VPSOs, for Alaska Native VPSOs, and for non-Native VPSOs) a number of factors were found to be closely associated with VPSO turnover. In any given month:

- Officers who were dissatisfied with their training, were, when all else is held equal, more likely to leave the program.
- VPSOs who were unmarried while in the program were more likely to leave the program.
- Officers who did not work an extra job while serving as VPSOs were actually at a greater risk of leaving the program.

Other factors were associated with VPSO turnover in only some of the models. In any given month:

- Among all VPSOs and among Alaska Native VPSOs, those who reported using food stamps as a means of financial assistance had a much greater chance of leaving the program.
- Among all VPSOs, being of Alaska Native heritage decreased the chance that an officer would turnover.
- Among all VPSOs, serving in a village where other police such as Village Police Officers or Tribal Police are stationed reduced the probability that an officer would leave the program.

The proportional hazards regression model for the Alaska Native subgroup generated a few results that differed from those found for the model of all VPSOs as a whole. During any given month:

- Alaska Native VPSOs who served somewhere other than their home village were more likely to turnover.

- Alaska Native VPSOs who scored highly on a psychological scale measuring directiveness (included in the survey to gauge the extent to which officers were able to do their job without being ‘bossy’) had an increased chance of quitting, or being fired from, the VPSO program.
- Alaska Native VPSOs who did not report feeling endangered on the job were at a higher risk of leaving the program.

Aside from the effects of dissatisfaction with training, being unmarried, and not working an extra job while in the program, the only other significant effect found by the proportional hazards regression model for the non-Native subgroup was that the younger a VPSO was when hired, the greater the chance of him or her leaving the program during any given month.

With the factors considered above held constant, a number of other measures appeared to have negligible effect upon VPSO turnover.

- Lack of contact with, or being too far away from, an Oversight Trooper did not appear to make VPSOs any more or less likely to leave the program.
- Dissatisfaction with their equipment did not appear to have an effect upon the chances that a VPSO would turnover.
- Most of the factors associated with officer stress — role ambiguity, role conflict, adverse health effects, difficulties with the demands of VPSO duty, receiving injuries in the line of duty — appeared to have little effect upon the likelihood of an officer leaving the program.
- The perceived mistreatment of VPSOs by the villages they served, either through a lack of village support or through village treatment of the officer as an outcast, also appeared to have no discernable effect upon officer attrition.
- Because of overwhelming agreement among the officers that VPSOs are not paid very well and that they deserve much more salary than they currently receive, the subjective indicators regarding VPSO pay and expenses did not help to predict which officers would stay with the program and which would terminate their employment.
- Among all VPSOs in general, and specifically among Alaska Native VPSOs, the pressures and difficulties of policing relatives did not appear to be associated with the likelihood of an officer leaving the program.

As explanations, no single perspective on VPSO turnover was any more convincing than any other. VPSO turnover does not appear to be associated only with their relative lack of pay, with the stresses the job brings, or with the issues surrounding the officers' Alaska Native heritage. Instead, variables from each of these perspectives helps to discern between the VPSOs that stay with the program versus those more likely to leave the program. Given that no single viewpoint was any more compelling than another, a different theoretical perspective on VPSO turnover which focuses upon the reasons officers have for remaining with the program and the connections they have to others in the villages they serve should be put forth. This perspective would take into account some of the more compelling findings from this study including those showing that:

- Entrenchment within the Alaska Native culture makes officers more likely to remain a VPSO.
- The stabilizing force of marriage has a positive influence upon the probabilities of VPSO's staying in the program.
- Service to the officer's home village increases the likelihood that he or she will continue to serve the program.
- And, although it actually increases the levels of reported stress felt by VPSOs, service in villages where other police (such as VPOs or Tribal Police) are stationed gives a VPSO someone else to work and reduces the chance that he or she will leave the program.

Ultimately, it is perhaps more beneficial to search for those things that keep VPSOs attached to the occupation instead of looking at the things that drive them away. Despite all the reasons for leaving, many VPSOs for good reasons do remain with the program for a considerable amount of time.

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