Walking away from the beat—why police officers are voluntarily leaving in large numbers

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Home Office data shows the number of police officers voluntarily resigning from the force in England and Wales has more than doubled in

the last eight years.

Scant attention has been paid to the reason for this mass exodus. Until now. Researchers from the University of Portsmouth studied government statistics, and discovered the numbers of officers voluntarily resigning from the police service is rising—from 1,158 in the year ending March 2012 to 2,363 in the year ending March 2020. The figure amounts to 1.83 per cent of the total police officer population in England and Wales up from 0.86 per cent eight years ago.

Dr. Sarah Charman, from the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Portsmouth, led the study. She says: "By any measure this rise is steep and troubling, especially when coupled with a more complex policing landscape requiring knowledge and experience. It seems more important than ever therefore to provide an insight into a relatively under-researched aspect of policing—why police officers resign prematurely from the police service through what could be argued to be avoidable turnover."

The researchers then carried out a small-scale study of officers who had resigned voluntarily from one medium-sized police force in England between November 2014 and June 2019. The study was published today in the journal *Policing and Society*. The data from this survey of 46 police leavers plus 27 interviews suggests a number of contributory factors, the majority relating to three areas:

1. Poor leadership and management was cited as the most regular theme in answers as to why officers left the police service voluntarily. Perceptions of poor management were often enhanced by concerns about powerful policing occupational cultures. Comments referred to management at all levels, whether immediate line management, middle management or senior management within the organization. This related to both

levels of supervision and levels of support. For example:

2. The research showed that police officers who had left the organization felt an overriding sense of organizational 'injustice', to such an extent that that the delicate balance between employer and employee had been breached. Participants felt that they had little or no control or autonomy over their job, their role or their future—they felt that they lacked a 'voice' within the organization. A lack of access to promotions and unsustainable workloads, with an inability to maintain a work/life balance had a negative impact. The comments related to these factors, the most frequently mentioned of these were related to a perceived lack of promotion and progression opportunities.

3. Personal factors were cited by 25 per cent of participants as being in their top three reasons for leaving. Almost half of these former officers referred to difficulties in managing caring responsibilities while doing the job. After poor leadership and management, this was the second most cited reason for leaving the police service.

Dr. Charman says, "With policing in England and Wales undergoing one of the biggest recruitment drives in modern history and the focus for the Home Office firmly back in favor of retention, an understanding of what contributes to a decline in organizational commitment and ultimately to avoidable turnover within policing is crucial. This research has endeavored to understand this relationship and its findings have important implications for the police service in England and Wales."

Researchers conclude that internal organizational issues are far more relevant to an individual officer's intention to leave policing than occupational factors. While there are also relevant external factors, particularly in relation to 'excessive' workloads, which do clearly impact on levels of dissatisfaction, the focus for change would appear to be in a consideration of how the social exchange factors, which are so crucial to

an enhanced sense of organizational commitment can be rebalanced equitably to take account of both the individual needs of staff in addition to organizational demand.

Provided by University of Portsmouth