

# UK police officer resignations have risen by 72% in the last year—we asked former officers why

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Policing has long been known as a "job for life." With low rates of leaving and high rates of loyalty, a career of 30 years or more was very much the norm. However, times have changed.

[Government figures](#) show that the number of voluntary resignations from the police service in England and Wales has increased by 72%, from 1,996 in 2021 to 3,433 in 2022. Voluntary resignations now account for 42% of all police leavers, compared to 33% in the previous year.

A decade ago in 2012, there were 1,158 voluntary resignations, accounting for just 18% of all leavers. In just ten years, voluntary resignations have increased by 196%.

In 2016, the National Police Chiefs' Council referred to "[healthy churn as positive](#)". But after several years of increasing resignations, retention is now one of the biggest challenges in policing. This problem can't be tackled without a better understanding of why officers are leaving—whether it is due to dissatisfaction with the job or the organization, or part of a planned move towards a second or "portfolio career."

For the last few years, we have interviewed nearly 100 former police officers across England and Wales who have voluntarily left the service. We wanted to know more about their reasons for leaving—negative public perceptions of policing, the nature of the job itself or other reasons entirely.

[Our findings show](#) that officers are not resigning due to the often challenging and stressful occupational role of being a police officer but rather because of internal, organizational issues. Much like the issues facing any other workplace, retired officers complained of poor leadership, lack of promotion or progression opportunities and a lack of voice.

Officers felt that they weren't valued or even known by their line manager, and described relationships with their managers as poor and

distant. It is not surprising that some viewed yearly appraisals as "a waste of time." This creates a cycle where officers don't feel comfortable raising issues or challenges they have with their line manager.

Some also described a lack of appropriate role models in the senior ranks. This was particularly true for female officers with children who returned from [maternity leave](#), often part time. As one officer said:

"The really senior females that are married with children ... they seem to be always far and few between."

Not being able to learn from or seek support from a leader who has navigated a similar journey left officers feeling that the job was not for people like them.

## **Organizational injustice**

Officers described a sense of unfairness around promotion opportunities, and lack of guidance on how to achieve career goals. As one said:

"Everyone's so busy sorting themselves out that development ... it's all driven by you."

Officers were exasperated by the use of temporary promotions as a way to deal with resource issues, predominantly at sergeant rank. Some described the promotion process as cutthroat, and being about ambition, not ability.

Others said that the process rewarded nepotism, and said that higher-ups promoted people with similar qualities to themselves, creating a barrier to diversity in senior ranks. Officers described having to choose between seeking promotion and specializing in particular roles, as there were no

opportunities to do both.

Those we interviewed felt they were viewed as "just a number" by their police force, and that their voices were not heard. Participants did not feel they could share their opinions or be involved in decision making on issues that impacted their day-to-day role.

They also felt major decisions like where they were posted after a successful promotion, returning from absence or due to restructuring within the force, were out of their hands.

This lack of voice was also evident in "group thinking" within the organization. Officers said that attempts to challenge dominant thinking and practices were met with defensiveness, exclusion or being told to "shut up and get on with it." The policing organization is rightly facing calls to root out the damaging aspects of its culture and to encourage officers to speak out about poor behavior.

The head of the College of Policing Andy Marsh has warned of the dangers of a ["culture of defensiveness"](#)—police forces being unwilling to change their practices. Our evidence however suggests that even if officers are willing to do so, their voices may not be heard.

## **Exit interviews**

Most of our interviewees believed their decision to resign was the right one but that didn't hide their disappointment, regret and sadness in leaving:

"I was gutted, absolutely gutted, because I was really proud to be a [police officer](#)."

These feelings of an absence of organizational support are made worse

by the lack of meaningful exit interviews. A number of officers described their participation in our research interviews as being "cathartic" and providing "a bit of closure," as exit interviews are not routinely offered by [police](#) forces.

Only 35% of officers we spoke to were offered an exit interview, with only 26% of officers completing one. None felt they were offered a meaningful opportunity to discuss their reasons for leaving. They viewed the process as a "tick-box exercise" and perceived management as uninterested, with little information being actually recorded.

Understanding why there has been a 196% increase in voluntary resignations from the [police service](#) in England and Wales in the last decade may be a painful undertaking for many forces, but without that information, retention may only get worse. Starting those difficult conversations and providing leavers with the voice they lack within the force is the first step to solving the problem.

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