



**PUBLIC SAFETY FIRST:  
AN ATTRITION STUDY OF THE  
ATLANTA POLICE DEPARTMENT**

***Recommendations for the City of Atlanta***

November 2009

**This report is a product of the Atlanta Police Foundation. A comprehensive list of data sources and citations can be obtained by contacting the Atlanta Police Foundation.**



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## **ABSTRACT**

Officers with the Atlanta Police Department (APD) are some of the most sought-after in the country. They are highly skilled, well-trained individuals with urban law enforcement experience that rivals that of officers in cities like Chicago and New York. APD officers are eager to protect and serve the city of Atlanta, allowing businesses to thrive and people to live comfortably in the greatest city in the South.

### *Problem*

However, APD has difficulty retaining the talent that it selects and cultivates. While police officer retention is a challenge for law enforcement agencies across the country, Atlanta faces more losses than most. A 1999 study reports that the national attrition rate of police departments ranges between 5% and 7% (larger departments closer to 5% and smaller closer to 7%)<sup>1</sup>. In another study, from 1998-2008 the average attrition rate of a group of surveyed departments was 5.7%<sup>2</sup>. Comparatively, APD experienced a rate of more than 8% during the same time period. Worse, from 2005-2008 the average attrition rate at APD increased to 9.1%.

### *Impact*

Police presence is a critical component of community safety and crime prevention in Atlanta. However, when compared to cities of similar size, APD remains understaffed and unable to reach citizen expectations of police visibility. Lack of sufficient police strength hinders the ability of APD to prevent and respond to crime, thus putting the safety of the citizens of Atlanta at risk. Continued attrition within the department greatly contributes to insufficient police visibility in the city. Losing trained skilled police officers not only reduces the overall proficiency of the department, it also costs the city millions of dollars. The average cost of replacing a single police officer can range from \$14,000 to \$29,000 depending on how long the officer has been with the department<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Koper, Christopher S., et al., *Hiring and Retention Issues in Police Agencies: Readings on Determinants of Police Strength, Hiring and Retention of Officers, and the Federal COPS Program*. 2001. [www. Urban.org](http://www.Urban.org)

<sup>2</sup> Based on numbers reported to the Atlanta Police Department by 6 agencies similar in size.

<sup>3</sup> Harr, Robin N., *Factors Affecting The Decision of Police Recruits to “Drop Out” of Police Work.*” *Police Quarterly.*, 2005, December 4., <http://pqx.sagepub.com>

Lack of a properly staffed police department also places the city at a disadvantage when competing for conventions, tourism, businesses, and residents. The level of police attrition directly affects the safety of Atlanta.

### *Causes*

APD officers have repeatedly cited being “disappointed by the unfulfilled promises of higher pay, improved equipment and increases in manpower<sup>4</sup>” as reasons for leaving the department. In a survey conducted by Linder & Associates for the 2004 *Fragile Momentum Report*, more than 50% of the officers responding agreed that officer distrust of APD management is a serious problem. Officers often felt that the Command Staff was more focused on politics than reducing crime in Atlanta. When the Atlanta Police Foundation revisited *Fragile Momentum’s* recommendations four years later, the majority of those listed for boosting retention and morale had not been implemented; consequently, police officer attrition remains high.

### *Solutions*

Today, implementing some of those recommendations could serve to curb increasing attrition at APD. Reinstating and funding APD’s in-step program and career ladder would give officers a reason to stay with the department for their entire career. Providing additional required training to managers would help improve internal morale and distrust. Incentive programs, such as a take home car program and incentives for living in the City of Atlanta would help tie officers to the city they serve. Finally, ending the 10 year retirement program would eliminate the reward for retiring early.

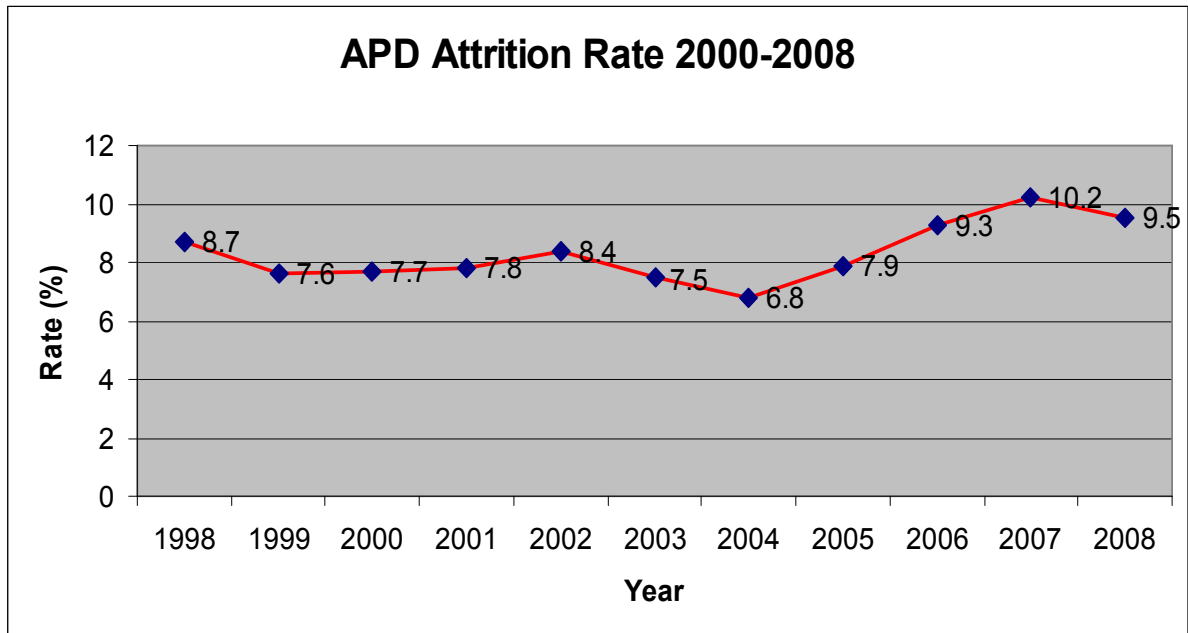
Retention of police officers is a critical issue for city leaders. Atlanta businesses, residents and visitors are concerned with Atlanta’s crime rate, as well as the well-being of those who fight crime in the city. If the city is to remain a desirable location to live, work and visit, and is to continue to grow, the issue of police officer retention must be addressed now.

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<sup>4</sup> Linder & Associates., 2004. *Fragile Momentum: Plan of Action for Rebuilding the Atlanta Police Department to Help Secure Atlanta’s Position as Capital of the New South.*

## APD Attrition<sup>5</sup> Snapshot

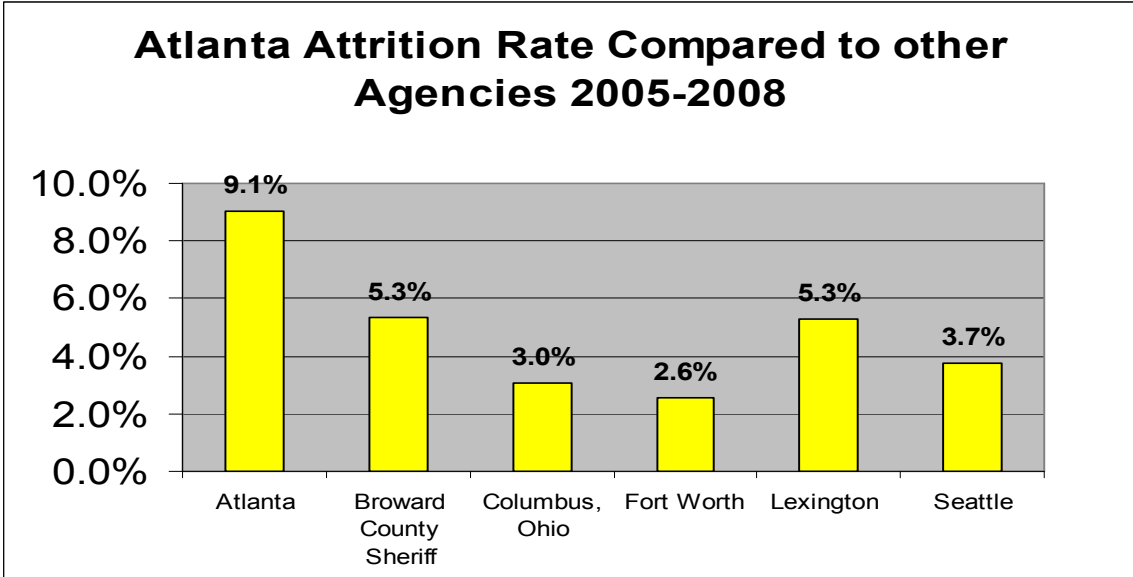
Historically, attrition at the APD has been higher than the national average for large law enforcement agencies (averages around 5%). From the ten year snap shot below, it is clear that attrition at the APD has been a long term issue within the department.



Atlanta averages higher, sometimes more than double, the average of other comparable departments across the county.

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<sup>5</sup> APD collects a considerable amount of data when an employee separates from the department. All sworn officers and officer recruits who leave the department are listed as **separated** from the department. Separated officers include those who have **resigned, retired, were terminated or died**. The level of attrition is determined based on separations. Included in officer resignations are those that have resigned or voluntarily washed out of the academy. Included in officer terminations are officers terminated from the department or recruits terminated due to failure to pass some part of the training program.

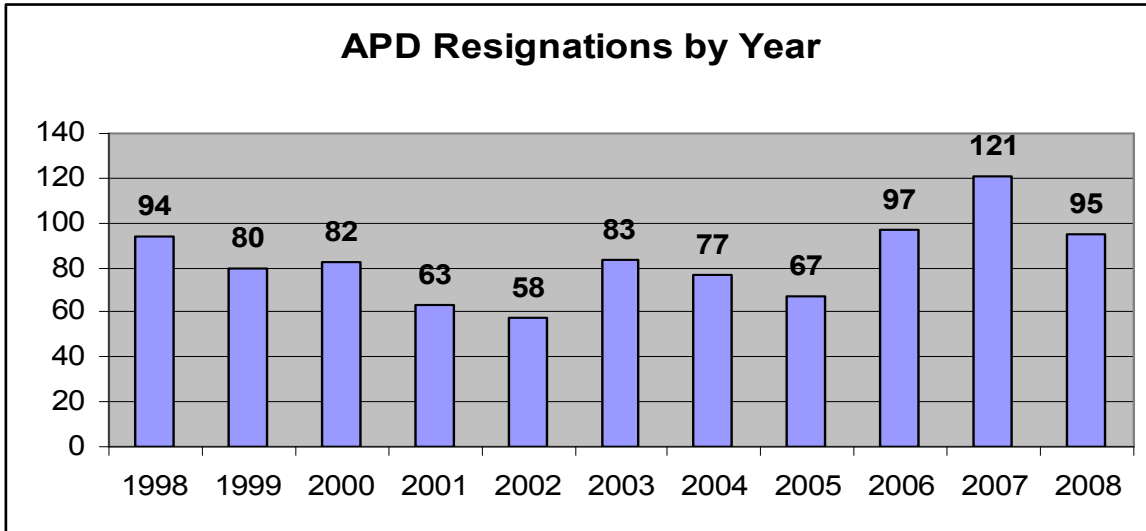


**Analysis of Officer Attrition**

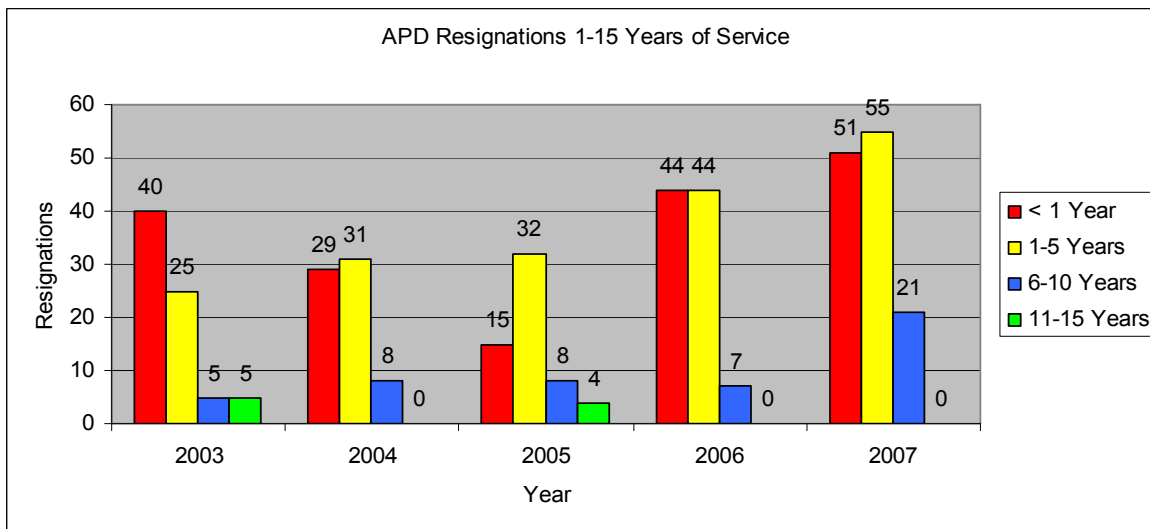
Any discussion about APD officer attrition must include an in-depth analysis of officer resignations, recruit “washouts” (or dropouts) and officer retirement. Each of these elements of officer “separation” from the APD contributes greatly to the rising attrition rate. Each of these categories of individuals separating from APD must be addressed.

*APD Resignations*

APD’s average number of officer resignations from 1998-2008 is 83 officers. However, in 2007 resignations at the APD totaled 121 officers - significantly higher than the average of 83.



Studies indicate that the first 16 months of a police officer’s career are the most crucial for retention. Furthermore, if officers stay longer than 34 months they will likely retire from that department<sup>6</sup>. In an effort to retain employees, the City of Atlanta offers a retention bonus of \$3,000 after 5 years of service if officers sign an agreement to stay an additional 3 years. The challenge remains to retain officers within the 1-3 year period.



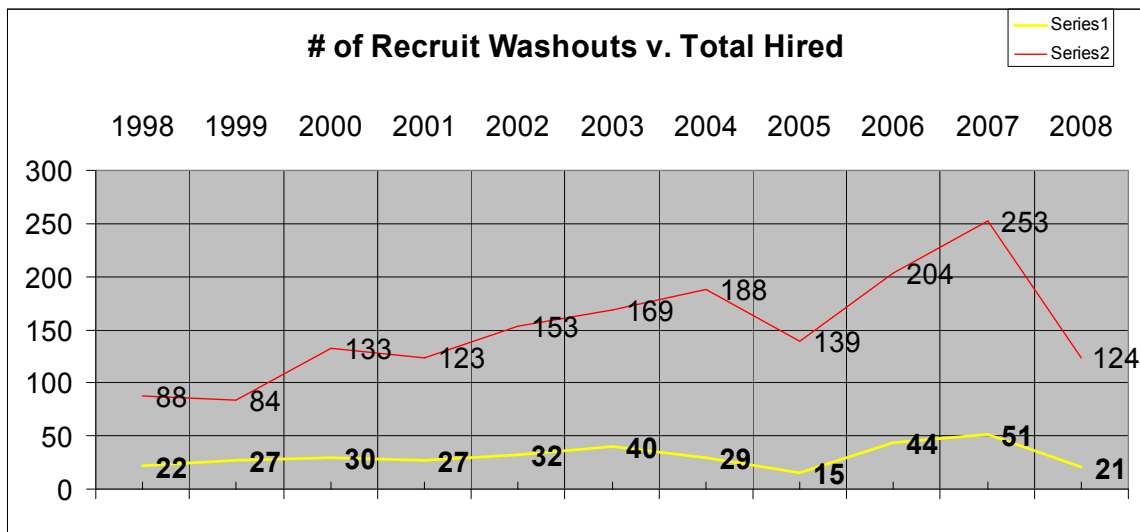
From 2003-2007, 82% of the 445 officers that resigned (not including retirements) from APD had less than 5 years of service and 40% had less than 1 year of service.

<sup>6</sup> Yearwood, Douglas L., Analyzing Concerns among Police Administrators: Recruitment and Retention of Police Officers in North Carolina., The Police Chief Magazine., 2009, March. [www.policechiefmagazine.org](http://www.policechiefmagazine.org)

## Recruit “Washouts”

Secondly, washouts, or recruits that are unable to finish basic training, are an important part of separation totals. Recruit training is an essential component to every police department. Most recruits excel in training, but there are some who are unable to successfully pass various training components, or simply realize police work is not for them. Recruit washouts (aka dropouts) is important to analyze because this class of resignations is included in almost every department’s attrition numbers. The classification of washout applies to self resignations after entering the academy; training failure; terminations during academy and self resignations before training. Studies indicate that the average percentage of recruit washouts is around 25% nationally<sup>7</sup>. In comparison, from 1998- 2008 the APD had a 20% washout rate. This finding indicates that APD sits below the average in recruit washouts<sup>8</sup>.

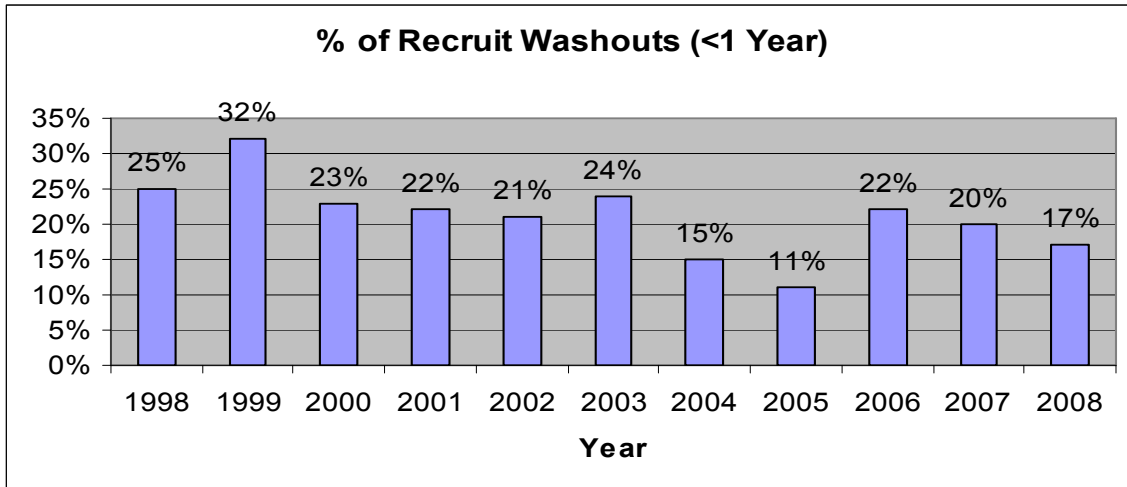
The chart below illustrates the hiring efforts v. the recruit washouts from 1998-2008. It is important to note that although hiring increased drastically in 2006 and 2007, the number of washouts remained close to the 20% mark.



<sup>7</sup> Harr, Robin N., Factors Affecting The Decision of Police Recruits to “Drop Out” of Police Work.” Police Quarterly., 2005, December 4., <http://pqx.sagepub.com>

<sup>8</sup> Harr, Robin N., Factors Affecting The Decision of Police Recruits to “Drop Out” of Police Work.” Police Quarterly., 2005, December 4., <http://pqx.sagepub.com>

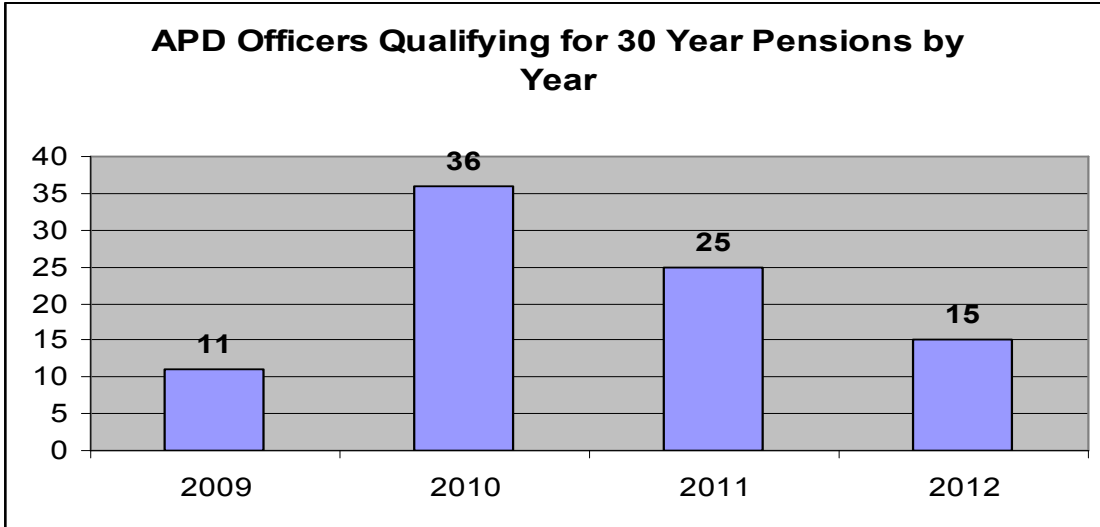
With an 80% graduation rate, it is clear that the Atlanta Police Academy and the APD Recruitment Unit have routinely done an outstanding job at selecting and training qualified candidates.



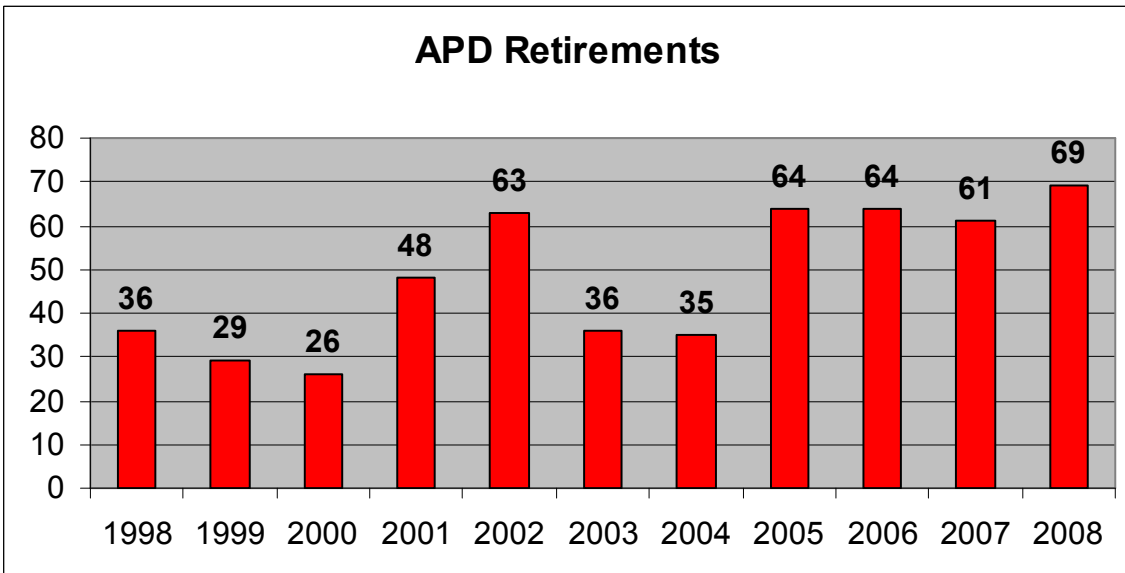
### **APD Retirements**

Finally, as officers retire from the department, they take with them valuable training and skills that have been developed over several years. APD has seen an increase in retirements in recent years (and will likely see more in coming years). Although some of this is due to 30 year retirements, much of it is may be due to a program that allows officers to retire at the 10 year mark and still retain benefits from the pension fund. The program, implemented for all city employees by the City of Atlanta in 2006, encourages relatively young, well trained, skilled officers to leave the department.

In addition, in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the APD embarked on aggressive recruiting campaigns. As 2010 approaches, many of those officers will become eligible for 30-year retirement. The chart below indicates the total number of APD officers who will be eligible for 30-year retirement between 2009 and 2012. This does not account for officers who take 10-year retirements, or those officers who will retire with less than 30-years of service.



The below chart provides the total number of APD retirements from 1998 to 2008. In 2002 when Chief Richard Pennington was hired, the number of retirements totaled 63 for the year. On the heels of the new APD leadership taking office, the numbers declined for 2003 and 2004 to 36 and 35. However, in 2005-2008 the average number of retirements increased to 65, much higher than the 1998-2004 average of 39.



## **Causes for Attrition**

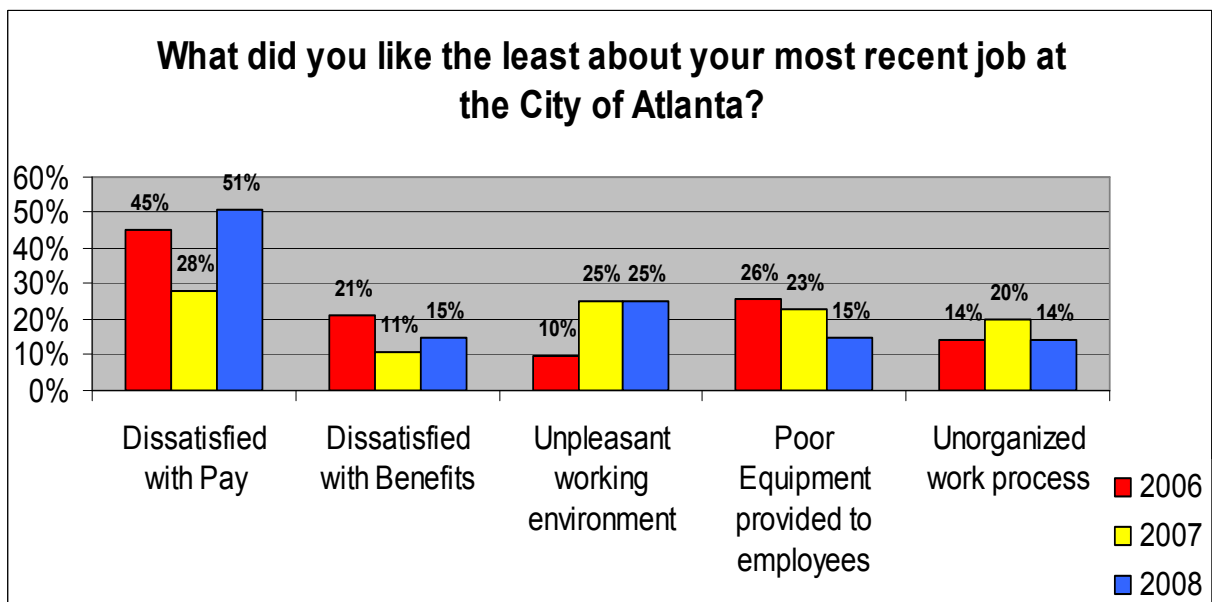
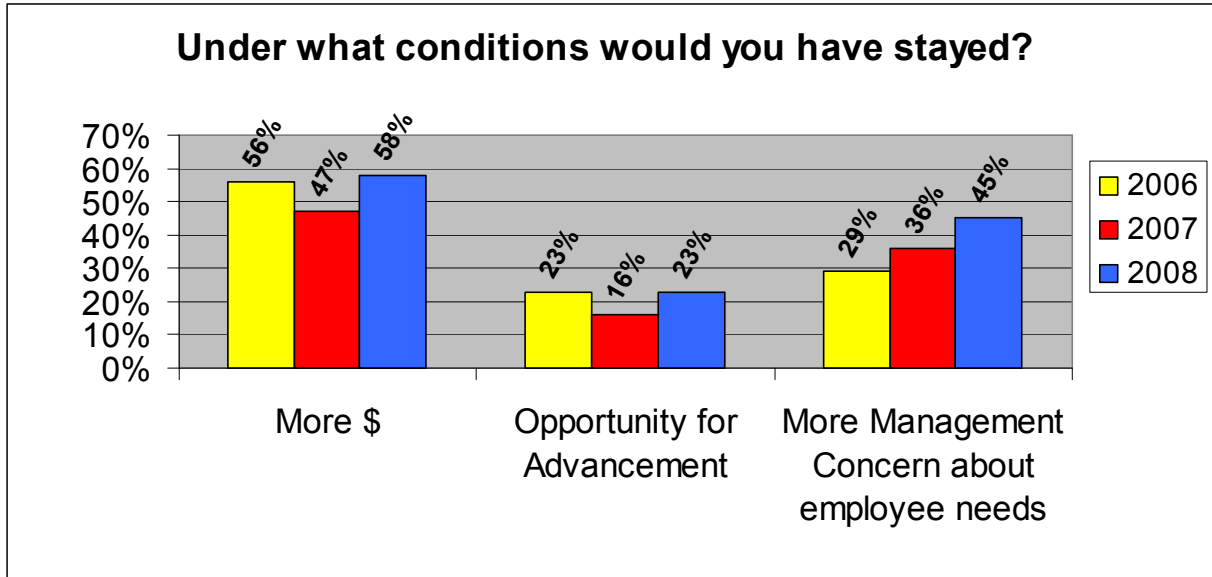
Exit interview data from more than 73%<sup>9</sup> of the officers who left the APD between 2006-2008 shows pay as the most compelling reason for leaving the department. As the chart indicates, officers leaving the department consistently noted that more money would be a reason they would have stayed. Following closely as the second reason, officers leaving the department felt that APD had an unpleasant work environment and that there was a lack of concern from management. Officers noted that they felt that leaders within the department were more concerned with politics than with solving crime. This is also echoed in exit interview data that shows that officers who felt there was a lack of concern from management increased 16% between 2006 and 2008.

Causing even further distress within the department is that the City has repeatedly stopped the progression of “in steps” allowing officers to earn promotional grades within their position. This means that an officer who has been at APD for 15 years, for example, holds the same rank and grade of an officer who has only been on the job for 5 years at another comparable department. Therefore, an officer hired into APD as a lateral transfer with only 5 years of experience may outrank the officer who has remained at APD for 15 years. This causes morale issues within the department and encourages quality, experienced, tenured officers to leave the department.

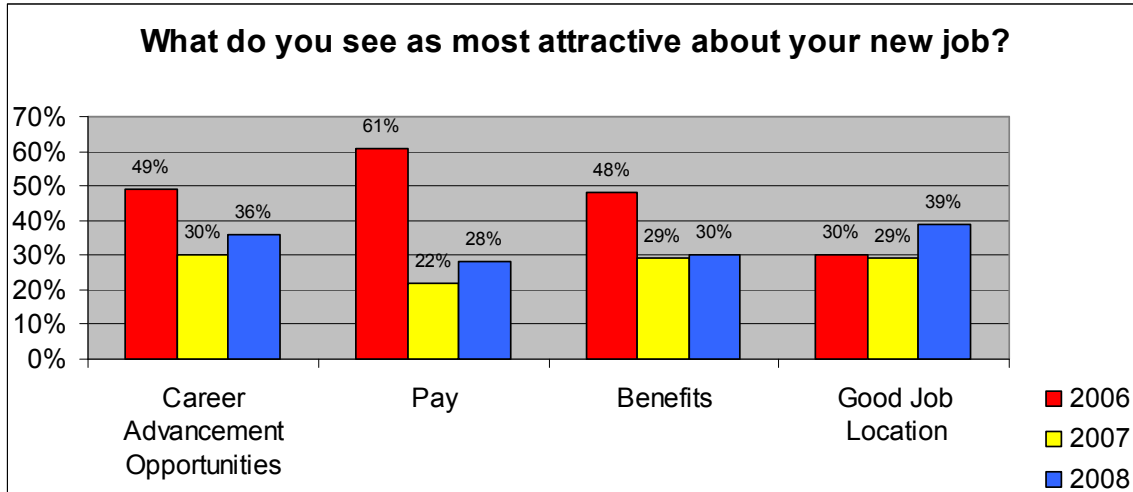
In addition, because of their exemplary training, skill and urban experience, APD officers are in high demand. New and existing local law enforcement agencies are eager to hire them away from APD, luring them in with promises of higher pay, more opportunity for promotion and better work environments.

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<sup>9</sup> 27% of those leaving chose not to participate in the exit interview survey



Although dissatisfaction with pay was a primary theme among officers leaving the department, it must be noted that it was not the most attractive part of their new job.



During the interview process for the *Fragile Momentum* report, poor equipment available to officers was also noted. However, this seems to be a declining sentiment in exit interview data, showing an 11% decrease from 2006-2008.

A committee of experts commissioned by the Atlanta Police Foundation used statistics, exit interview surveys, and personal experience, to compile a list of primary catalysts to increased attrition at APD. The committee agreed upon the following as the primary catalysts driving officer attrition at APD:

1. *A 2006 City of Atlanta program that allows city employees to retire with 10 years of service.* This program hurts retention of officers because at the 10-year mark they are eligible to draw from the City’s pension plan, shortening their career with APD. For example, if an individual is hired as a police officer at the age of 21, at 31 he can retire from the police force and continue his career as an officer at another department, draw from his pension, and utilize the valuable training APD provided.
2. *Creation of new police departments within the Metro Atlanta area such as Dunwoody, Milton, John’s Creek and others.* These new departments, in some cases, offer higher starting salaries, free healthcare benefits, take-home cars and other incentives to attract senior officers to join their ranks. Most recently the creation of the Dunwoody Police Department resulted in a number of skilled, trained APD DUI Task Force officers leaving to join Dunwoody. It is no secret that the APD provides

outstanding training of its officers which makes them (and their in-city job experience) very attractive to other departments.

3. *Perceived shortfalls of APD, including lack of career ladder funding, expensive in-city housing, lack of a positive work environment and no annual cost of living raises.* All of these components have lead to the poor morale within the department.

### **APF is Poised to Help**

Since its inception, the Atlanta Police Foundation has made improving the safety of Atlanta, through increased police visibility in the city, a priority. The Foundation, along with its Board, supporters, and donors believes that a tangible image of a safer Atlanta begins with police visibility.

No one task can reduce the attrition rate within the APD on its own. There must be a systemic approach to reduce attrition that incorporates proven strategies, effective leadership, and support from the Mayoral administration. Some recommendations listed below will require City Council legislation and hard work on part of the APD leadership, however, the Atlanta Police Foundation feels confident that by implementing some or all of the recommendations below, Atlanta will begin to keep more of Atlanta's Finest.

## **Recommendations**

In order to retain and improve officer morale at APD, we make the following recommendations<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Leadership***

1. The functions, positions, and career tracks of the APD are vastly different than other departments within the City of Atlanta. The APD should be viewed without parody when decisions of pay increases, career ladders, and other incentives are considered by City Council.
2. The Chief's vision and goals should be communicated to the department through open lines of communication. Based on the Chief's vision, the APD commanders must set direction and operational goals for their units.
3. Mayoral administration should require the Atlanta Police leadership to take ownership of the attrition issues within the department by making it a top priority. Commanders within the department should be measured not only by their efforts to reduce crime, but also their leadership skills with their officers. By reviewing and adding accountability to increased attrition within each zone provide more affective leadership.
4. Identifying and training future leaders of the APD should be a top priority of the next Police Chief.

### ***Funding***

1. Review the current proposed career ladder and implement the proper funding to instate the program. Career ladders are more often used by employees who enjoy the position they have and are not looking to become a supervisor. To ensure these highly trained and qualified officers are rewarded for their dedication and training efforts, a career ladder within current ranks should be implemented.

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<sup>10</sup> Many of the recommendations will require further study and will need to be aligned with the current policies and procedures within the department.

2. Review and consider an annual cost of living increase for Atlanta Police Officers. The annual pay increase will help to retain trained officers ultimately reducing the temptation of marginal pay increases outside of the city.
3. Review and fund the take-home car program for officers who live within Atlanta city limits. This will not only boost morale and increase the number of officers living in the city, but will also increase police visibility in neighborhoods.

### ***Retirement***

1. Review and end the 10 year retirement program for APD officers. As officers are recruited to join the APD, they receive valuable training and experiences at the department. The 10-year retirement program undermines the retention efforts at APD allowing officers to draw from their pensions only after 10-years of service.
2. City Council should review other retirement options such as a drop program or retirement program options, but not allow any retirements before 15-years of service.

### **Conclusion**

Despite recommendations to increase police force strength and stem attrition at APD, the City has yet to accomplish the task. While the issue was important 10 years ago when it was first introduced, it is now approaching crisis levels. The safety, security and economic viability of the City of Atlanta depend on increasing police visibility in the city and decreasing officer attrition. Stemming attrition at APD is possible with the implementation of recommendations made herein.

## **About the Atlanta Police Foundation**

The Atlanta Police Foundation, established in 2003, brings together the public and private sectors in the shared goal of making the city a safer place to live, work and play. The Foundation, a 501(c) 3, provides a vehicle for individuals, communities, and businesses to engage, and contribute donations and resources to, the Atlanta Police Department – with the ultimate goal of preventing and reducing crime. The Foundation’s programs address the need for more police visibility and enhanced training and include Crime Stoppers Atlanta, recruitment, scholarships, training, housing, Operation Shield, and the mounted patrol.