

Police Turnover in Isolated Communities: The Alaska Experience

by Darryl Wood

about the author

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In the rural areas of Alaska, where public safety services are provided to isolated areas spread across vast distances, officer employment turnover is a problem. This is especially true in isolated Alaska Native villages. From the days before statehood in 1959 to the present, administrators have had a difficult time keeping village police positions staffed. Employment turnover rates as high as 500 percent per year are not unheard of in some Alaska Native village police agencies.

To one degree or another, many small police agencies serving rural areas across the United States face similar problems. Rural police officers usually serve less time with their agencies than their suburban or metropolitan counterparts. The problem is especially troublesome for “micro” police departments — those with fewer than 10 sworn officers.¹ Generally speaking, the smaller a police department, the greater the officer turnover. In one early study, officer turnover was referred to as “the plague of small agencies.”²

Explanations often revolve around the issues of pay, benefits, and promotional opportunities. Because of limited tax bases, rural police

departments generally offer officers lower pay and relatively fewer benefits compared to agencies serving jurisdictions with larger populations. Departments with few employees often are treated as career “stepping stones” by officers who see them as a good place to begin a policing career. Because promotional advancement is difficult in smaller departments, officers often parlay the experience they receive in these small departments into a longer term position with a larger metropolitan or State police agency.

Alaska’s Situation

Alaska’s program that serves rural Alaska Native villages, the Alaska Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program, has not been immune from the employment turnover problem. Established as a way to locate a permanent public safety presence in isolated Alaska Native villages, the VPSO program has had an annual average turnover rate of 55 percent (see figure 1). This rate is roughly 10 times greater than

urban police departments across the country. With such high rates of attrition, the typical VPSO has remained employed in the program for slightly less than 1 year since the program began in 1979.

This article presents the findings from a study that examined factors related to officer turnover in the VPSO program. The findings from Alaska’s experience suggest ways police administrators in other rural jurisdictions can reduce the turnover rates in their departments.

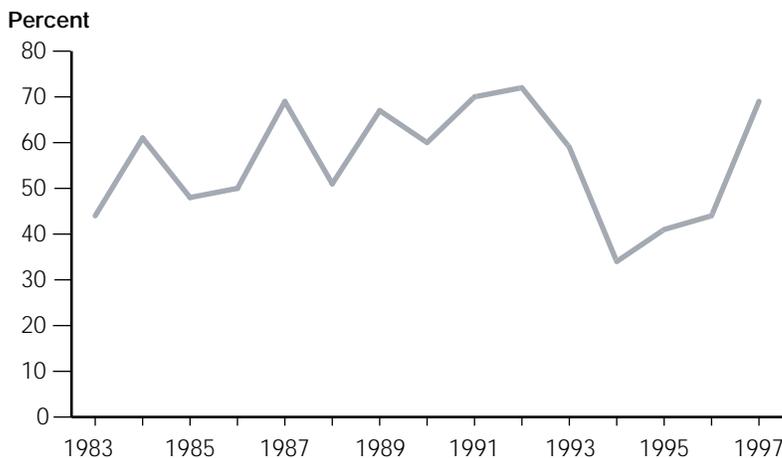
What Are Village Public Safety Officers?

Compared to non-Native jurisdictions, Alaska Native villages are dangerous places. The available measures of crime and accidental death in those villages are much higher on average than those found statewide or nationally.³

The high levels of crime and safety problems provide good reason for a local public safety presence in Alaska Native villages. However, difficult terrain, a harsh climate, and the lack of a road system connecting rural areas, along with relatively small village population sizes, make “traditional” methods of law enforcement and public safety unsuitable.

Rather than rely on a traditional police presence, many villages are served instead by Village Public Safety Officers. These officers are responsible for all public safety services, including law enforcement, fire fighting, water safety, emergency medical assistance, and search and rescue. VPSO’s can be thought of as public safety “jacks-of-all-trades.”

Figure 1: VPSO Turnover Rates, 1983-97*



*Computed as a percentage of the mean number of positions at mid-month.



VPSO's are assigned to a specific village and are responsible for meeting all public safety services in and closely around the village. They patrol on foot or in all-terrain vehicles and serve as the first response to any criminal offense or other emergency that may arise. As they presently operate, VPSO's serve a "trip-wire" function.⁴ Although they are trained and equipped to handle the smaller problems that arise, they must broker larger emergencies to their specially equipped partner agencies (such as the Alaska State Troopers).

Because of the VPSO's unique organizational structure and officers' multiple task bundle, Captain John Stearns, former VPSO program coordinator for the Alaska State Troopers, has referred to the program as "community policing at its rawest."⁵

Four aspects of the program make it a prime example of a community policing program:

- Policing authority is decentralized at the community level.
- Responsibilities both to State law and to traditional tribal and village social controls require officers to go beyond meeting minimal legal requirements and encourage VPSO's to employ problem-solving techniques to perform with effectiveness.

- The generalist policing role stresses the complexities of public safety and social order to address all causes of disorder and threats to welfare.
- Participation of the community is built into the organizational structure of the program, with the involvement of local village councils and regional nonprofit corporations in personnel and operational decisions.⁶

In short, the VPSO program is organized to provide a community-based response to the distinct needs of modern-day Alaska Native villages. (Read more about the organizational structure of the

program in "How the VPSO Program Works.")

In its development over the years, the VPSO program has received and continues to receive a good deal of support from within the Alaska Native community.⁷ Although it went unheeded, the Alaska Federation of Natives in 1998 passed a resolution calling for the State to increase funding for the program and expand it to cover Alaska Native villages located on the State's highway system. The State of Alaska, however, did not agree with the Federation's resolution, and funding was not increased.

Today the relationship between the Alaska Native community and the State government is, to put it mildly, strained. Limits on local self-government, disputes over subsistence hunting and fishing rights, and a general perception held by Alaska Natives that they are treated as second-class citizens underlie the strain. Given that the VPSO program is one of the few efforts of State government in the villages that has the support of the Alaska Native population, it is unfortunate that since its inception, the program has had a problem with retaining officers.

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How the VPSO Program Works

From its outset, the VPSO program was designed to deal with the broad range of public safety issues facing Alaska Native villages and to instill within the program local support for and control over the provision of law enforcement and public safety services to these communities. The program has been heralded for a management structure that allows Alaska Native leaders in each village to make day-to-day decisions about the delivery of public safety services to their communities.

Administration of the VPSO program is divided into three levels: (1) the Alaska State Troopers, (2) regional nonprofit Native corporations, and (3) at the local level, Alaska Native villages. Each level has specific responsibilities associated with selecting, training, equipping, supervising, and paying VPSO's.

The Alaska State Troopers, whose policing jurisdiction encompasses all areas in the State that lack municipal police services, play a major role in the administration of the program. Apart from the agency's role in training and issuing some equipment, the troopers' main function in the program is field supervision of the VPSO's.

Each VPSO is assigned an "oversight trooper" (a commissioned Alaska State Trooper working from a central location that is, in some cases, 300 miles away from the VPSO posting) who acts as a mentor and provides technical assistance and on-the-job training. In high-risk or complex situations, including all felony cases, the VPSO stays in communication with the oversight trooper and takes immediate action as prescribed by the trooper to keep the situation under control until the trooper arrives, generally by air or snow machine.

Regional nonprofit Native corporations, which handle the day-to-day managerial functions of the VPSO program, are the agencies considered to be the actual employers of the individual officers.

Because these entities are unique to Alaska, a bit of explanation is in order. When the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was enacted in 1971, 12 regional for-profit Native corporations were created across Alaska to invest funds received from land claims. Coinciding geographically with these for-profit corporations are an equal number of regional nonprofit Native corporations, which play a significant role in the lives of Alaska Native village residents.¹ The nonprofit corporations provide many of the services, such as education, health, housing, and employment counseling, normally provided by local governments. The corporations actively compete for Federal and State grant funds to provide such services to their areas. Given their experience in the administration of government-funded programs and their awareness of the specific needs of the local areas to be served, these regional nonprofit corporations are viewed as being particularly well situated to provide administrative support to the VPSO program.²

Each nonprofit has a VPSO coordinator who administers the program for the corporation. The coordinator has numerous duties, including management of payroll, insurance, and retirement plans; record-keeping of personnel files; and expenditure of grant funds. The VPSO coordinators also assist the villages and the troopers in recruiting, hiring, and terminating VPSO's.

Local village control over the VPSO program comes in two ways. First,

the villages choose to participate in the program; they cannot have a VPSO imposed on them. Villages request a VPSO from their nonprofit, which, in turn, requests funding from the State for the position. When funding becomes available, the village receives its VPSO. With recent cutbacks in the program, however, more villages want VPSO's than can receive them.

The second source of village control over the program involves the selection and termination of officers. Although hiring and firing is generally conducted in consultation with the nonprofits and the troopers, the villages have the ultimate discretion over who becomes their VPSO and whether that officer is retained or dismissed.³

Given their inadequate resources, the local villages' other responsibilities to the VPSO program are limited. They provide office space, telephone service, and a holding cell for use by the VPSO. They also are responsible for obtaining any equipment above and beyond that provided by the Alaska State Troopers.

1. Case, David, *Alaska Natives and American Laws*, Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 1984: 389.
2. Marenin, Otwin, "Innovations in Policing: Bureaucratic Entrepreneurship in the Development of the Village Public Safety Officer Program in Alaska," unpublished paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Reno, Nevada (1989): 13.
3. Marenin, Otwin, and Gary Copus, "Policing Rural Alaska: The Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program," *American Journal of Police* 10 (Winter 1991): 11-12.

Methods and Data Analysis

The research drew upon two primary data sources:

- Alaska Department of Public Safety records for the period 1978 through 1999, showing the amount of time officers spend in the VPSO program.
- Self-administered surveys from 113 (out of a possible 184) current and former VPSO's who had served in the program between July 1, 1994, and June 30, 1998.

The first data source was used to calculate program turnover rates and length of the officers' employment tenure. Information

for possible explanations of officer turnover was taken from the completed surveys.

Principal components analysis was used to reduce the large number of survey variables into a smaller number of theoretically compelling factors and scales that could then be reasonably analyzed while holding other factors constant. The goal was to determine the likelihood that a VPSO would leave the program in any one month.

These factors and scales were used in three different proportional hazards regression models.

Proportional hazards regression analysis examines the relationships between each of the individual causal variables (e.g., dissatisfaction with training) and the effect variable (VPSO turnover) while holding constant the values of the other causal variables (e.g., marital status, age, dissatisfaction with pay, and so forth). In other words, the proportional hazards regression analysis helped determine the impact of each individual causal variable upon turnover when the values of the other individual causal variables were held equal.

Why Do Officers Leave and Stay?

Researchers conducted a survey of current and former VPSO's to better understand the reasons for the high turnover rates the program has experienced. (See "Methods and Data Analysis.")

Survey questions were developed based on four possible explanations for officer turnover:

- Job stress, especially the stress associated with rural policing.
- Dissatisfaction with salary and benefits.
- Difficulties associated with applying non-Native policing arrangements in Alaska Native communities using Alaska Native employees.
- Sociodemographic characteristics, such as age and marital status.

Based upon a multivariate analysis of the data gathered in the survey, a number of factors were found to be closely associated with VPSO turnover while other factors once

thought to be important were ruled out as having an influence upon attrition.

The Effects of Job Stress. Stress, in general, did not appear to be the reason why VPSO's left the program. None of the traditional measures of police officer stress were associated with the likelihood of a VPSO leaving. For instance, VPSO's who reported having felt the physiological effects of stress (e.g., loss of sleep, headaches, difficulty relaxing) were no more or less likely to leave the program than officers not reporting such effects.

The degree to which officers reported experiencing role ambiguity or role conflict (that is, being a Native Alaskan *and* a law enforcement officer) likewise had no effect on their likelihood of turnover. Being injured on the job or facing numerous dangerous situations, including having to deal with armed conflict, also appeared to have little effect on the probability of an officer leaving the program.⁸

The only measure of general stress among police in general that did seem to influence turnover was counter to what was predicted: Those who reported feeling endangered on the job were actually less likely to leave the program.

Except for one officer, the special stresses often said to plague police serving in rural areas did not appear to be associated with VPSO turnover. The extent to which officers felt that they were expected to be on duty at all hours of the day or that their job made it difficult to hunt, fish, or spend time with their family had little influence on the likelihood of attrition.⁹

Serving in isolated circumstances also did not appear to increase the chances that a VPSO would leave the program. Those VPSO's reporting a lack of contact with the Alaska State Troopers or a long distance from Trooper support were not any more likely to leave the job.

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VPSO turnover was the presence or absence of other police in the village. In many villages, VPSO's are the lone public safety presence; in others they serve alongside village police officers or tribal police officers.¹⁰ Turnover was less likely for officers serving in a village where there were other police officers.

Effects of Salary and Benefits. Officer dissatisfaction with salary and benefits, another issue facing most rural police administrators, was not shown to be associated with VPSO employment turnover.

Almost all of the VPSO's surveyed were strongly dissatisfied with the pay and benefits they received. Because the level of dissatisfaction was nearly equal for those who quit as for those who remained with the program over the long term, it failed to predict the likelihood of officer attrition.

Other measures associated with salary, however, were related to VPSO turnover. For instance, VPSO's who relied on food stamps to make ends meet while employed were about five times more likely to leave the program as those who did not use food stamps. Contrary to expectations, the officers who

reported additional employment (such as commercial fishing) while serving as a VPSO were about 70 percent less likely to leave the program than those who did not moonlight.

Effects of Non-Native Policing Arrangements. The survey also examined the issues associated with using Alaska Native employees to apply non-Native policing arrangements. The researchers hypothesized that factors associated with VPSO attrition would include (1) feelings of rejection and isolation, which Native police officers sometimes develop in their encounters with the community, (2) difficulties associated with policing one's relatives, and (3) the conflicting feelings officers might have when required by official duties to go against fundamental cultural precepts.

Contrary to the hypotheses, however, analyses indicated that those most likely to stay on the job were Alaska Natives from the villages they were serving. The stronger a VPSO's Alaska Native heritage (in terms of being Alaska Native, being fluent in the native language, and being raised in an Alaska Native home and village), the less likely he or she was to leave the job. VPSO's serving in

their home villages were less likely to leave the program as were the Alaska Native VPSO's who were psychologically suited to conduct their business in a culturally appropriate fashion.

Feelings of rejection and isolation and the need sometimes to deal with relatives in a law enforcement capacity were not factors associated with increased turnover. Although many officers felt that they received little village support or that they were treated like outcasts in the village, neither of these factors were associated with turnover. Similarly, the pressures and difficulties of policing relatives did not appear to increase the probability of an officer leaving the program.

Although the VPSO program was originally designed so that Alaska Native officers would provide public safety services to their home villages, over time a sizable minority of officers have been hired who are non-Natives and are outsiders to the villages they serve. This is an unfortunate development, given that locally hired Alaska Natives are the ones who last the longest on the job.

Effects of Social and Demographic Characteristics. Of the VPSO's sociodemographic characteristics examined in the survey, only two appeared to be associated with turnover.

The most prominent was marital status: VPSO's, both Alaska Natives and non-Alaska Natives, who were married were much less likely to leave the program. The age of an officer also appeared to affect the chances of remaining a VPSO: Among the non-Native VPSO's, the younger the officer was, the more likely he or she was to leave the program. Age did not make a significant difference for Alaska Native VPSO's.

Implications for Policy and Practice

VPSO turnover does not appear to be associated with the relatively low pay, the job-related stresses, the difficulty in policing one's relatives, or the difficulties of enforcing non-Native policing policies and procedures.

Rather, officers are more likely to stay in the VPSO program if they are:

- Embedded in the Alaska Native culture.
- Married.
- Serving in their home villages.
- Serving in villages where other police, such as village police officers or tribal police, are stationed (even though it can increase the levels of stress reported by VPSO's).

Despite all the reasons for leaving, many VPSO's do remain with the program for a considerable amount of time. Some of these factors, such as officer marital status, cannot be considered in the recruiting and hiring process. Other factors, such as higher salaries, are usually beyond the control of many rural police administrators. Nonetheless, the central finding —that officers with personal and cultural connections to their local environment and to other local police are the ones most likely to remain in service —suggests a number of steps that rural police administrators can take to minimize officer attrition.

Hire locally. Compared to those who are recruited from outside, VPSO recruits from in and around the immediate police jurisdiction are more likely to remain with the department. It appears to be a sign of an intent to stay when someone from the local area chooses to join a local department.

Given the solitary nature of rural policing—
in which officers spend much of their
day working alone —administrators should
expand the opportunities for working with others
in the law enforcement field, both inside and
outside their departments. Doing so will help
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bigger than their little corner of the world and
will give them someone with whom they
can share the ups and downs of the
police occupation.

Conversely, those from outside the local area have already demonstrated their willingness to move geographically to a new job. Chances are, they will be willing to move again.

Hire culturally. Of all the VPSO's surveyed, those who were most integrated in the local culture remained with the program the longest. Having strong connections to the local culture appears to give police officers —VPSO's and, perhaps, their rural counterparts in the lower 48 States —a greater reason to stay.

Strengthen ties to the community. Once an officer has been hired, steps should be taken to strengthen connections to the local community. Some rural police chiefs, for example, have found it

useful to encourage their officers to purchase homes locally, thereby giving them a reason to remain employed in the area.¹¹ Administrators might persuade their officers to take advantage of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Officer Next Door Program, which allows full-time police officers to purchase HUD homes at 50 percent of market value.¹² By purchasing their own homes, officers both gain a stake in employment stability and become owners of a piece of the community.

Strengthen ties to the police culture. Rural police managers also can reduce turnover once officers are hired by getting officers involved in the larger police culture. VPSO's

who had a connection to other officers in their village were about twice as likely to stay on the job as VPSO's who served without such connections.

Given the solitary nature of rural policing —in which officers spend much of their day working alone — administrators should expand the opportunities for working with others in the law enforcement field, both inside and outside their departments. Doing so will help officers feel that they are part of something bigger than their little corner of the world and will give them someone with whom they can share the ups and downs of the police occupation.

Employment turnover among rural police officers is prevalent but by no means inevitable. Even in the Alaska VPSO program, with its many conditions that might encourage officers to leave, many stay and provide police services that meet the specific needs of Alaska Native villages. Knowing why suggests actions decision makers can follow to reduce officer attrition in similar situations.

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Notes

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2. Hoffman, John, "Turnover: The Plague of Small Agencies," *Law & Order* 41 (June 1993): 25.
3. Angell, John E., *Alaska Village Justice: An Exploratory Study*, Anchorage, AK: Criminal Justice Center, University of Alaska Anchorage, 1979: 49. Berman, Matthew, and Linda Leask, "Violent Death in Alaska: Who Is Most Likely to Die?" *Alaska Review of Social and Economic Conditions* 29(1) (Spring 1994): 5. Lee, Nella, "Rural Crime Rates High," *Alaska Justice Forum* 5(2) (Summer 1998): 1-3.
4. Hippler, Arthur, *Final Report to the Commissioner of the Department of Public Safety on the Village Public Safety Officers Program (VPSO)*. Anchorage, AK: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage, 1982: 4.
5. Associated Press, "Funding Sought for Village Cops," *Juneau Empire* (September 14, 1992): 8.
6. See, for example, Marenin, Otwin, "Community Policing in Alaska's Rural Areas: The Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program," unpublished paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Denver, Colorado, 1990: 21-22.
7. Marenin, Otwin, "Conflicting Perspectives on the Role of the Village Public Safety Officer in Native Villages in Alaska," *American Indian Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1994): 313.
8. It should be noted that VPSO's do not carry firearms in the performance of their duties.
9. As one VPSO put it, "The only time I am off duty is when I am out of the village."
10. Some villages, using local and Federal funding, employ their own village police officers. Other villages, through local tribal governments, employ "tribal police officers." Unlike the VPSO program, neither of these policing arrangements has typically received the support and funding of the State of Alaska; recently, though, the Alaska State Troopers have begun to provide rudimentary police training to the village police officers and tribal officers.
11. Hoffman, "Turnover: The Plague of Small Agencies," 27.
12. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Officer Next Door Program*. February 14, 2001, <http://www.hud.gov:80/ond/ond.html>.