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General Government Division

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May 22, 1990

The Honorable Don Edwards
Chairman, Subcommittee on Civil
    and Constitutional Rights
Committee on the Judiciary
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In response to your request, this report supplements the National Advisory Commission on Law Enforcement's (NACLE) study of federal law enforcement personnel issues. The Omnibus Anti-drug Abuse Act of 1988 created NACLE to study recruitment, compensation, and retention issues affecting federal law enforcement officers. You expressed particular interest in the difficulties federal law enforcement agencies experience in attracting and retaining qualified support staff.

Background

Law enforcement support staff perform a wide array of professional, administrative, technical, and clerical functions essential to accomplishing their agencies' missions. For the purposes of this report, the term "law enforcement support staff" refers to non-agent white collar employees in law enforcement agencies—the Department of Justice's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Bureau of Prisons, Drug Enforcement Administration, Immigration and Naturalization Service, and U.S. Marshals Service, and the Department of the Treasury's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, U.S. Customs Service, Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, and U.S. Secret Service.[1] "Non-law enforcement agencies" include all other federal agencies.

Few empirical data are available to quantify the magnitude of support staff problems facing federal law enforcement agencies today. Consequently, much of the information contained in this report reflects law enforcement officials' perceptions and opinions.

It should also be noted that the support staff problems discussed in this report are not exclusive to federal law enforcement agencies. Studies show that non-law enforcement federal agencies face similar problems in recruiting, retaining, and compensating their support staff. However, the problems can be exacerbated for agencies that require Top Secret

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[1] U.S. Secret Service Uniformed Division members were included in the NACLE study and, therefore, excluded from this study.

security clearances and drug tests for all of their staff, such as the FBI and Secret Service. Although recruitment, retention, and compensation issues are interrelated, we discuss them separately for ease of presentation in this letter and in appendixes I, II, and III.

Results in Brief

Although available data on support staff problems are limited, federal law enforcement managers and personnel specialists believe that attracting and retaining qualified support staff have become increasingly difficult as the pay disparity between federal and private sector employment has grown. They consider support staff recruitment and retention significant problems, and they point to noncompetitive federal compensation as the underlying cause of both problems.

Noncompetitive salaries cause recruitment and retention problems in all federal agencies. However, when low starting salaries are combined with law enforcement agencies' security clearance requirements, law enforcement managers report they have greater recruitment problems in terms of time, expense, and number of qualified applicants than their counterparts in most other federal agencies.

Our analysis of available governmentwide statistics for fiscal year 1988 indicates that quit rates[2] for law enforcement agencies—excluding the FBI—are about comparable to non-law enforcement agencies. When statistics include the FBI, the turnover is much higher. Our analysis also shows that within the law enforcement community, support staff turnover varies by occupation and location, with the greatest turnover occurring in clerical occupations in high-cost cities. Due to time constraints, we did not determine the reasons for variations in turnover.

The consequences of recruitment and retention problems, according to law enforcement managers, include increased recruiting and training expenses and lost productivity.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Our objective was to obtain data and information on the recruitment, compensation, and retention of support staff in federal law enforcement agencies. To accomplish our objective and to provide overall perspective, we attempted to identify and compare problems of support staff in federal law enforcement agencies with support staff in other federal

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[2]"Quit rate" refers to the total number of employees who resigned from the federal government during the fiscal year divided by the average yearly population.

agencies, in state and local law enforcement agencies, and in the private sector.

Information required to make direct comparisons with the private sector, state and local law enforcement agencies, and with non-law enforcement federal agencies was limited or unavailable. For example, information on salaries paid to state and local law enforcement support staff was readily available for only a few locations; data on recruitment activities other than the number of new hires were not readily available at the federal, state, local, or private sector levels; and turnover data were available only on the federal level. In addition, no standard definition of "vacancy" exists within the federal government. Thus, where vacancy statistics are available, interagency comparisons to discern the difficulty in filling jobs could be misleading. Because of the problems with availability and definition, we used available aggregate data and information obtained during interviews with law enforcement officials.

To compare compensation paid to support staff by the federal government with the private sector, we used the August 1989 annual report of the President's pay advisors, Comparability of the Federal Statutory Pay Systems With Private Enterprise Pay Rates, and a July 1989 report sponsored by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) entitled Study of Federal Employee Locality Pay. In addition, two FBI field offices provided information from local law enforcement agencies for comparative purposes on salaries paid to support staff in New York City and Seattle.

To determine the extent of support staff turnover in federal law enforcement and non-law enforcement agencies during fiscal years 1986, 1987, and 1988, we obtained and analyzed governmentwide turnover data for a judgmental sample of 14 occupational series. The selected occupations are common to federal law enforcement and non-law enforcement agencies. From OPM's Central Personnel Data File (CPDF), we obtained turnover data on all federal agencies for the 14 support staff occupational series except those agencies exempt from certain personnel reporting requirements (e.g., the FBI, Central Intelligence Agency, and other intelligence agencies). To derive aggregate and local "law enforcement" data, we supplemented the CPDF metropolitan statistical area data with similar data collected directly from the FBI. We also analyzed turnover data for five of eight metropolitan areas identified by NACLE as high-cost areas (New York City; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; Los Angeles; and San Francisco) and three of six identified as low-cost (Brownsville, Texas; Kansas City, Missouri; and Spokane, Washington). We did not independently verify the accuracy of the CPDF or FBI data.

To supplement the limited empirical data, we interviewed a judgmental sample of Secret Service and FBI managers, recruiters, and personnel specialists in FBI and Secret Service headquarters in Washington, D.C.; FBI field offices in Baltimore; New York City; Washington, D.C.; and the Secret Service's New York field office. We also reviewed (1) information on support staff recruitment and retention problems obtained during NACLE interviews with 102 federal law enforcement managers in 14 cities and (2) studies by GAO and other organizations. The Secret Service and FBI assigned a personnel specialist to facilitate data collection at their respective agencies and to assist in our overall review efforts.

Although our work focused on recruitment and retention issues within the law enforcement community, we made limited contacts with the following non-law enforcement agencies to obtain their views on these same issues—the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C., and New York City; the Environmental Protection Agency in New York City; and OPM and the Departments of Defense and Energy in Washington, D.C.

We did our work between October 1989 and March 1990, using generally accepted government auditing standards.

Law Enforcement Officials Perceive Significant Support Staff Recruiting Problem

Aggregate data identifying trends in law enforcement support staff recruitment are not available. Although supporting data are not routinely maintained, many federal law enforcement managers and recruiters perceive a significant support staff recruiting problem. For example, 44 percent of the 102 law enforcement managers interviewed by NACLE reported experiencing recent problems recruiting sufficient qualified support staff. Of the problems affecting law enforcement support staff reported by these managers, recruitment was the third most often cited.

According to federal law enforcement officials, their offices frequently have several support staff vacancies at one time, some of which have taken months—or years—to fill. Such long-standing vacancies disrupt office operations and diminish overall efficiency. These officials added that noncompetitive entry level salaries and stringent hiring standards such as requiring Top Secret security clearances for a higher proportion of support staff combine to make recruiting more difficult and expensive for law enforcement agencies than for many other federal agencies.

Support Staff Turnover Statistics Vary Between Law Enforcement and Non-Law Enforcement Agencies Primarily Because of FBI Quit Rates

Governmentwide statistics indicate that support staff turnover varies by occupational series and location and is higher in law enforcement agencies than in non-law enforcement federal agencies for 13 of 14 support series that we reviewed. However, the FBI's high quit rate is the principal reason that the statistics show law enforcement agencies' quit rates as being greater than those of non-law enforcement agencies. In fiscal year 1988, the FBI's average quit rate for the 14 support staff occupational series was 16.52 percent—almost 2 1/2 times greater than all of the other law enforcement agencies combined.

When FBI data are excluded, the average quit rate for law enforcement agencies decreases from about 11 percent to 6.7 percent, which is about comparable to the 6.2 percent quit rate for non-law enforcement agencies. Since federal law enforcement and non-law enforcement support staff of the same grade are paid the same salaries, compensation alone does not account for the differences between the FBI and other agencies' quit rates. Due to time constraints, we were not able to obtain the data needed to determine why turnover varies between the FBI and other agencies.

According to law enforcement managers, it is not uncommon for a single position to turn over several times within a year. New support employees acquire training and experience at government expense and then leave for higher paying jobs in the private sector. As a result, federal law enforcement agencies have become support staff "training grounds" for law firms, banks, and other private employers. Law enforcement managers attributed their support staff turnover in federal law enforcement agencies primarily to noncompetitive compensation. They said the consequences of the high turnover include increased recruiting and training expenses and lost productivity.

Law Enforcement Support Staff Compensation Is Not Considered Competitive With Nonfederal Sector

According to the 1989 report of the President's pay advisors, there was a pay gap averaging 29 percent between federal salaries and private salaries for all types of comparable positions. Other studies have also shown that federal sector pay is less than private sector pay for comparable support positions. For example, a 1989 OPM-sponsored study showed that the federal mean salary for computer specialist (grade 5) was about $16,275 compared with the salary range of about $22,000 to $26,000 in the private sector. Although special salary rates, where available, narrow the gap between federal and private support salaries, OPM and law enforcement officials do not believe that these rates adequately address the overall pay problem.

Law enforcement managers cited two related consequences of the disparity between federal and private sector compensation. The most frequently cited consequence was that federal law enforcement agencies find attracting and retaining qualified support staff increasingly difficult. Another consequence, managers believed, is a conspicuous decline in the quality of candidates who do apply for law enforcement support positions.
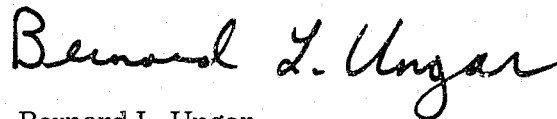
Agency Comments

As requested by the Subcommittee, we did not obtain written comments from agencies. We did, however, discuss the contents of the report with law enforcement officials at the FBI and Secret Service and non-law enforcement officials at OPM and the Departments of Defense, Energy, and Health and Human Services and incorporated their comments where appropriate. The officials generally agreed with the facts presented, and the FBI said it plans to do further analysis on its quit rates. The non-law enforcement officials generally said that the problems cited in the report are not exclusive to law enforcement agencies, and they experience similar recruitment and retention problems because of noncompetitive federal pay.

As agreed with the Subcommittee, we have also included as appendix IV governmentwide data on transfers of employees among federal agencies.

Also as arranged with the Subcommittee, we are providing copies of this report to the Directors of the FBI, U.S. Secret Service, and OPM. We plan no further distribution of this report until 10 days from the date of its issuance unless you publicly announce its contents earlier. At that time, we will send copies to interested parties and make copies available to others upon request.

The major contributors to this report are listed in appendix V. If you or your staff have any questions concerning the contents of this report, please call me on 275-5074.

Sincerely yours,

Bernard L. Ungar
Director, Federal Human Resource
   Management Issues

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Abbreviations

CPDF	Central Personnel Data File
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
NACLE	National Advisory Commission on Law Enforcement
OPM	Office of Personnel Management

Law Enforcement Officials Perceive Significant Support Staff Recruiting Problem

Aggregate data identifying trends in law enforcement support staff recruitment are not available. Nevertheless, many federal law enforcement managers and recruiters we interviewed perceive a significant support staff recruiting problem. The managers and recruiters cited several factors that contribute to their support staff recruiting problems. Principal among these factors were noncompetitive compensation, stringent hiring standards, and the cost and length of time required to bring new employees on board. (See app. III for a more detailed discussion of noncompetitive federal compensation.)

Recruitment Statistics Lacking

OPM does not track vacancies throughout the federal government and, although some agencies do track vacancies, interagency vacancy rates are not comparable because no standard definition of "vacancy" exists. Some individual federal law enforcement managers have documented their support staff recruiting problems by systematically tracking and analyzing support staff vacancy rates and other recruiting statistics. However, the data are specific to individual offices and cannot be projected to the entire federal law enforcement community.

Support Staff Recruiting Considered Increasingly Difficult

Despite the scarcity of recruitment data, many federal law enforcement managers believe that recruiting qualified support staff has become increasingly difficult as the pay disparity between federal and private sector employment has grown, the prestige of public service has declined, and the skills required for entry positions (e.g., computer skills) have increased.

Of the 102 law enforcement managers interviewed by NACLE in 14 cities across the nation in 1989, 44 percent reported experiencing recent problems recruiting enough qualified support staff. Of the problems affecting law enforcement support staff reported by these managers, recruitment was the third most often cited.

According to a Secret Service recruiter, 10 years ago the Secret Service had an abundance of qualified candidates to choose from and little or no specialized recruiting was required to fill support positions. However, in his opinion, recruiting is more difficult today due to the tight job market, the increasingly technical nature of support positions, and the low pay and benefits associated with federal government employment. For example, Secret Service document examiner positions were easily filled ·

in the past. However, a recent Secret Service recruiting trip to a conference where nearly 100 potential applicants were present did not produce a single application for vacant document examiner positions. The recruiter attributed the lack of interest in these positions to the low starting salaries. FBI recruiters related similar recruiting experiences.

Law enforcement agencies' difficulties attracting qualified support applicants have sometimes resulted in vacancies remaining open for long periods of time. For example, an analysis of support staff turnover in the Secret Service's Los Angeles office showed that support vacancies remained open an average of 251 days in fiscal year 1987, 306 days in fiscal year 1988, and 248 days in fiscal year 1989. The Secret Service's Phoenix field office, which has three support positions authorized, had one position vacant for the 2-year period ending May 1989. The FBI Washington, D.C., field office had a 20-percent vacancy rate among its secretarial staff from October 1989 through January 1990. According to law enforcement managers, long-standing vacancies disrupt office operations, increase other staff members' workloads, and diminish overall efficiency.

Stringent Hiring Standards May Increase Recruiting Difficulties

According to several law enforcement managers, recruiting is generally more expensive and difficult for law enforcement agencies than for most other federal agencies because of their more stringent and time-consuming hiring standards. Unlike most support staff in non-law enforcement agencies, certain support staff in some law enforcement agencies need Top Secret security clearances. In other agencies, such as the Secret Service and FBI, all support staff need Top Secret security clearances and drug tests.

Stringent Security Standards May Limit Pool of Potential Applicants

The background investigations required for Top Secret clearances include reviews of applicants' credit, employment, education, medical, military, tax, and any criminal records that may exist. They also include interviews with references and other acquaintances, criminal records checks on all close relatives and roommates, reviews of immigration records if the applicant or close relatives are registered aliens or naturalized U.S. citizens, and overseas checks if the applicant or close relatives resided or traveled outside the United States.

In addition to background investigations, applicants for law enforcement support positions may also be subject to drug tests, polygraph tests, medical examinations, and physical fitness requirements. Such

demanding hiring requirements may deter some job seekers from even applying at law enforcement agencies in the first place. As a Secret Service manager explained, up to 50 percent of potential applicants at the New York field office lose interest in working for the Secret Service when informed of the agency's strict rules against drug use, as well as agency drug-testing requirements.

Of those who do apply for law enforcement support positions, many are rejected due to adverse material facts (criminal records, drug use, bad credit) uncovered during the personal interview or background investigation. Although data are not routinely accumulated, in 1986 the Secret Service's New York field office interviewed 154 applicants listed on the OPM registry for support positions. Due to adverse material facts revealed during the interviews, only five candidates warranted a background investigation, and only one candidate's background could sustain the necessary security clearance. According to FBI managers, the FBI denies more than twice as many applicant security clearances as it grants because of derogatory information developed during background investigations.

Time-Consuming Clearance Process Further Limits Pool of Potential Applicants

Personnel specialists told us the length of time required to obtain security clearances further limits the pool of potential applicants for law enforcement support positions. Unlike most other federal agencies, FBI and Secret Service support staff need Top Secret security clearances. Therefore, they do not always have the flexibility to hire applicants to a nonclassified position and reassign them upon clearance approval. The security clearance process takes an average of 3 months and can take as long as 1 year. During that time, many applicants take other jobs with private employers or non-law enforcement federal agencies that may offer the same or better salary and benefits as law enforcement agencies, but can bring new employees on board quicker. According to HHS and EPA staffing specialists in the New York regional offices, new support employees can begin working at HHS and EPA within a few weeks of being offered positions. On the other hand, officials at the Departments of Defense and Energy said that they are not always able to bring support staff on board until they obtain security clearances.

Recruiting Is More Expensive for Law Enforcement Agencies

Law enforcement managers contend that support staff recruiting is far more expensive for them than for their counterparts in most other federal agencies. According to a U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board study, replacing a federal employee typically costs from $300 to $2,200,

depending on the position. However, due to the additional costs of conducting background investigations, drug tests, polygraph tests, and medical examinations, data provided by the Secret Service and FBI show that it costs an average of $9,700 to replace their professional and support staff.

According to FBI and Secret Service managers, exacting hiring standards and Top Secret security clearances are necessary for all support employees because of their constant use of classified information in the performance of their duties and the mission of the agency. Due to time constraints, we did not evaluate the reasonableness of requiring Top Secret clearances for all law enforcement support staff or compare the efficiency of law enforcement security clearance processing with that of other agencies.

Recruiting Activities Expanded

FBI and Secret Service officials told us they have responded to the recruitment challenge by expanding and upgrading their recruiting efforts, but with limited success. In the past, law enforcement agencies recruited support staff on an as-needed basis. Now, however, recruiting has become a full-time, year-round activity.

FBI and Secret Service field offices each have at least one Special Agent and/or one support employee assigned to recruiting. In addition, both Secret Service and FBI headquarters have units dedicated to directing and coordinating recruiting activities.

Law enforcement agencies expend considerable resources conducting nationwide recruiting activities and developing innovative recruiting techniques. In addition to customary recruiting methods, such as attending job fairs and advertising in local newspapers, law enforcement agencies have begun consulting with advertising professionals, producing recruiting videotapes, and establishing or expanding high school co-op, college intern, summer, part-time, and handicapped employee programs.

Support Staff Turnover Statistics Vary Between Law Enforcement and Non-Law Enforcement Agencies Primarily Because of the FBI's Quit Rate

Federal governmentwide statistics for fiscal year 1988 indicate that law enforcement agencies, primarily because of the FBI's quit rates, experience higher turnover in certain support occupations than non-law enforcement agencies. Excluding data on the FBI, the turnover statistics for law enforcement agencies are about comparable to non-law enforcement agencies. Further, turnover varies by occupation and geographic location, with the greatest turnover occurring in clerical occupations in high-cost cities. According to many law enforcement managers, high turnover among support staff is a critical problem that is primarily due to noncompetitive federal compensation, and results in lost productivity and increased recruiting and training expenses. (See app. III for a more detailed discussion of noncompetitive federal compensation.)

Support Staff Turnover Varies by Series, Type of Agency, and Location

Governmentwide turnover statistics indicate that support staff turnover varies by occupational series and location, and turnover in some support series is higher in law enforcement agencies than in non-law enforcement federal agencies. The FBI's high quit rate is the principal reason why governmentwide statistics indicate that law enforcement agencies' quit rates are generally greater than those of non-law enforcement agencies. Since federal law enforcement and non-law enforcement support staff of the same grade are paid the same salaries, compensation alone does not account for the differences between the FBI and other agencies' quit rates. Due to time constraints, we were not able to obtain the data needed to determine why turnover varies between the FBI and the other agencies.

Turnover Varies by Occupational Series

Among the 14 support series we analyzed, the highest turnover generally occurred in clerical positions, such as mail and file, clerk-typist, and data transcriber. Table II.1 lists in descending order for fiscal year 1988 the nationwide quit rates for the 14 law enforcement support series.

Table II.1: Quit Rates for Selected Law Enforcement Support Staff Series

Series	Title	Fiscal year 1988		Fiscal year 1987		Fiscal year 1986	
		Quit rate	Average population	Quit rate	Average population	Quit rate	Average population
0305	Mail and file	19.51%	2,983	12.39%	2,978	12.95%	3,058
0356	Data transcriber	18.14	226	17.11	228	14.35	230
0322	Clerk-typist	17.78	2,098	13.86	1,833	16.48	1,802
0332	Computer operation	14.88	168	8.62	174	6.98	172
0540	Voucher examining	12.84	148	17.16	134	6.82	132
0303	Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	9.71	2,708	8.93	2,912	8.67	2,907
0525	Accounting technician	9.01	566	7.37	529	9.06	508
0318	Secretary	7.98	3,133	8.07	2,900	8.24	2,791
0334	Computer specialist	6.14	651	4.15	579	4.68	534
1802	Compliance inspection and support	5.06	1,739	3.66	1,176	4.06	837
0393	Communications specialist	4.42	113	0.94	106	1.01	99
0132	Intelligence	3.54	650	3.36	535	1.87	428
0301	Miscellaneous administration and program	3.51	941	3.63	855	3.72	779
0080	Security administration	2.71	221	1.51	199	5.29	170
	Average (weighted)	11.01%		8.94%		9.56%	

Source: Developed by GAO from OPM and FBI data.

Table II.1 also illustrates that quit rates have generally increased during the last 3 years for which data are available. Between the most recent 2 fiscal years—1987 and 1988—the computer operation series has experienced the largest increase (73 percent) among the occupations for which quit rates were higher than 10 percent. In 9 of the 14 occupations, quit rates were, to varying degrees, higher in fiscal year 1988 than in the preceding 2 years. In four occupations—mail and file, computer operation, security administration, and communications specialist—quit rates in fiscal year 1988 were at least 57 percent higher than in the preceding year.

Turnover Varies Between Law Enforcement and Non-Law Enforcement Agencies Because of the FBI's Quit Rate

During fiscal year 1988, law enforcement agencies' turnover statistics were higher for virtually every support staff series than in non-law enforcement agencies. Table II.2 compares nationwide law enforcement and non-law enforcement quit rates for the 14 support series. As shown in this and subsequent tables, the clerk-typist series is usually among the highest in quit rates irrespective of the agency or location involved.

Table II.2: Comparison of Law Enforcement and Non-Law Enforcement Agencies' Quit Rates for Selected Support Staff Series for Fiscal Year 1988

Series	Title	Law enforcement		Non-law enforcement		Ratio
		Quit rate	Average population	Quit rate	Average population	
0080	Security administration	2.71%	221	2.35%	4,852	1.15
0132	Intelligence	3.54	650	2.83	2,795	1.25
0301	Miscellaneous administration and program	3.51	941	2.69	27,420	1.30
03C3	Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	9.71	2,708	6.41	48,064	1.51
0305	Mail and file	19.51	2,983	7.46	15,979	2.62
0318	Secretary	7.98	3,133	6.75	91,594	1.18
0322	Clerk-typist	17.78	2,098	13.47	37,416	1.32
0332	Computer operation	14.88	168	3.47	9,062	4.29
0334	Computer specialist	6.14	651	2.37	42,436	2.59
0356	Data transcriber	18.14	226	7.27	5,766	2.50
0393	Communications specialist	4.42	113	2.41	3,117	1.83
0525	Accounting technician	9.01	566	4.64	19,978	1.94
0540	Voucher examining	12.84	148	6.61	5,202	1.94
1802	Compliance inspection and support	5.06	1,739	5.78	952	0.88
	Average (weighted)	11.01%		6.22%		1.77

Source: Developed by GAO from OPM and FBI data.

As table II.2 illustrates, consolidated quit rate statistics for federal law enforcement agencies were higher than quit rates for non-law enforcement federal agencies during fiscal year 1988 for 13 of the 14 support series. Overall, quit rate statistics for law enforcement agencies were about 77 percent greater than for non-law enforcement agencies. The quit rate statistics for computer operation in law enforcement agencies were about 4 times greater than for non-law enforcement agencies. The quit rate statistics for mail and file, computer specialist, and data transcriber were about 2 1/2 times greater in law enforcement agencies than in non-law enforcement agencies.

Our further analyses of the fiscal year 1988 quit rates within the law enforcement agencies show that the FBI's quit rates account primarily for the overall difference between law enforcement and non-law enforcement quit rates. Table II.3 shows that the FBI's average quit rate for all of the occupational series was 16.52 percent—almost 2 1/2 times greater than all of the other law enforcement agencies. By excluding the FBI data, the average quit rate for other law enforcement agencies (6.69 percent) is about comparable to the 6.22 percent shown in table II.2 for non-law enforcement agencies.

Table II.3: Comparison of FBI With Other Law Enforcement Agencies' Quit Rates for Fiscal Year 1988

| Series | Title | FBI | | Other law enforcement agencies | | Ratio |
		Quit rate	Average population	Quit rate	Average population	
0080	Security administration	5.26%	76	1.38%	145	3.01
0132	Intelligence	4.17	96	3.43	554	1.21
0301	Miscellaneous administration and program	15.24	164	1.03	777	14.80
0303	Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	15.85	1,123	5.36	1,585	2.96
0305	Mail and file	21.15	2,572	9.25	411	2.29
0318	Secretary	8.87	924	7.61	2,209	1.17
0322	Clerk-typist	19.74	1,059	15.78	1,039	1.25
0332	Computer operation	15.38	130	13.16	38	1.17
0334	Computer specialist	11.40	228	3.31	423	3.44
0356	Data transcriber	29.23	130	3.13	96	9.34
0393	Communications specialist	21.43	14	2.02	99	10.61
0525	Accounting technician	14.47	152	7.00	414	2.07
0540	Voucher examining	17.14	105	2.33	43	7.39
1802	Compliance inspection and support	3.21	405	5.62	1,334	0.57
	Average (weighted)	16.52%		6.69%		2.47

Source: Developed by GAO from OPM and FBI data.

As shown in table II.3, the FBI's quit rates were higher than all of the other law enforcement agencies in all of the occupational series except compliance inspection and support. The largest differences in quit rates between the FBI and the other law enforcement agencies are in the miscellaneous administration and program, communications specialist, and data transcriber series.

Turnover Varies by Location

Turnover statistics also show that law enforcement and non-law enforcement support staff turnover rates vary by location. Table II.4 lists the fiscal year 1988 quit rates for the 14 support series by type of agency in five high-cost and three low-cost metropolitan areas.[1]

[1] High-cost cities include Chicago; New York City; San Francisco; Los Angeles; and Washington, D.C. Low-cost cities include Brownsville, Texas; Kansas City, Missouri; and Spokane, Washington. NACLE identified the cities on the basis of cost-of-living data developed by Runzheimer International, management consultants for travel and living costs. (Report of the National Advisory Commission on Law Enforcement OCG-90-2, Apr. 25, 1990.)

Table II.4: Comparison of Fiscal Year 1988 Law Enforcement and Non-Law Enforcement Support Staff Quit Rates in High- and Low-Cost Cities

| | | Law enforcement agencies | | | | Non-law enforcement agencies | | | |
| | | High-cost cities | | Low-cost cities | | High-cost cities | | Low-cost cities | |
Series	Title	Quit rate	Average population	Quit rate	Average population	Quit rate	Average population	Quit rate	Average population
0080	Security administration	2.50%	200	0.00%	1	2.16%	1,624	5.71%	35
0132	Intelligence	4.51	377	0.00	1	2.43	1,068	0.00	24
0301	Miscellaneous administration and program	5.18	599	0.00	7	4.20	10,940	1.01	396
0303	Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	14.30	1,336	5.56	36	7.32	11,824	4.35	1,011
0305	Mail and file	25.99	1,785	0.00	27	7.77	3,359	5.57	521
0318	Secretary	11.01	1,208	0.00	40	7.87	28,318	5.37	1,025
0322	Clerk-typist	22.36	1,060	12.50	24	17.74	10,844	11.63	361
0332	Computer operation	13.28	128	a	a	3.56	1,403	2.11	237
0334	Computer specialist	6.75	578	a	a	2.78	14,203	2.79	789
0356	Data transcriber	19.07	194	a	a	8.07	657	5.08	177
0393	Communications specialist	5.21	96	0.00	2	2.84	881	7.50	40
0525	Accounting technician	12.88	132	0.00	9	5.38	3,399	4.07	540
0540	Voucher examining	13.71	124	a	a	6.32	870	3.57	84
1802	Compliance inspection and support	7.61	565	1.23	81	7.69	169	0.00	13
	Average (weighted)	14.95%		2.63%		7.34%		4.57%	

[a]No support positions existed in these occupational series in fiscal year 1988.

Source: Developed by GAO from OPM and FBI data.

As table II.4 indicates, both law enforcement and non-law enforcement agencies' support staff turnover, on an overall basis, was greater in high-cost metropolitan areas than in low-cost metropolitan areas. For each support staff series at the law enforcement agencies, the staff turnover was greater in high-cost cities compared with the low-cost cities. In non-law enforcement agencies, it was greater in high-cost cities in 11 of the 14 series.

The table also indicates that, with the exception of the compliance inspection and support series, law enforcement quit rates exceeded all non-law enforcement quit rates in high-cost cities. The law enforcement agencies' average quit rate for all of the series was twice that of non-law enforcement agencies in high-cost cities. On the other hand, in low-cost cities, the average quit rate for non-law enforcement agencies was about 1 3/4 times greater than that of the law enforcement agencies combined.

Factors beyond pay account for the apparent difference in quit rates experienced by law enforcement agencies in the high-cost cities. The FBI's quit rates were again higher than those of the other law enforcement agencies in almost all series in the high-cost cities. When FBI data were excluded, the non-law enforcement agencies' average quit rate was within 1 1/2 percent of that for law enforcement agencies combined. No single city was responsible for making the FBI's overall quit rates higher than those of the other law enforcement agencies in the high-cost cities.

Law Enforcement Managers Perceive Support Staff Turnover as a Critical Problem

Turnover of law enforcement support staff is a critical problem, according to many law enforcement managers. The majority (57 percent) of law enforcement field office managers interviewed by NACLE in 1989 reported having difficulties retaining qualified support staff. In addition, law enforcement managers and personnel specialists told us that retaining qualified support staff is even more difficult than recruiting them. According to law enforcement managers, high turnover creates support staff shortages in many offices and results in increased recruiting and training costs and lost productivity.

Rapid Turnover Leaves Many Law Enforcement Offices Understaffed

Turnover and recruiting problems have resulted in support staff shortages in many federal law enforcement offices. An analysis of support positions in the Secret Service's Los Angeles office showed that one-third of them were unfilled during fiscal years 1988 and 1989. Similarly, the Secret Service's Boston office reported having 60 percent of its support staff positions unfilled between 1986 and 1989.

Federal law enforcement recruiters said they expend considerable time and effort recruiting new support staff, only to see a large number leave within a relatively short period of time. According to law enforcement managers, it is not uncommon for a single position to turn over several times during the course of a year. FBI and Secret Service managers refer to this situation as the support personnel "revolving door." That is, new support employees acquire training and experience at government expense and then leave for higher paying jobs in the private sector. According to Secret Service and FBI officials, federal law enforcement agencies have become support staff "training grounds" for law firms, banks, and other private employers. In this regard, Secret Service officials told us that their support staff, having met the agency's high hiring standards, become very attractive to other employers.

An analysis of support staff turnover in the Secret Service's New York field office between July 1986 and December 1989 showed that of 25 support staff resignations,

- 4 resigned with less than 1 year on the job,
- 13 resigned with less than 3 years on the job, and
- 18 resigned with less than 5 years on the job.

Similarly, according to the Chief of the Personnel Resources Unit, between fiscal years 1980 and 1988, over one-half of the support staff resignations from FBI headquarters were employees with 2 years or less of service. Overall, only 12 percent of FBI support staff stay with the Bureau until retirement.

High Turnover Is Expensive

As discussed in appendix I, replacing law enforcement staff is expensive and time consuming. The Secret Service and FBI estimate that it costs an average of $9,700 to replace professional and support staff. The cumulative costs of replacing employees can be particularly high when the same position must be filled on a recurring basis.

These estimates of the cost of turnover are limited to the more direct costs of recruiting new employees. Total turnover costs are likely to be much higher, since they also include such indirect costs as lost productivity while the position is vacant, the disruptive effect of the vacancy on related jobs, loss of experience, reduction of work quality while the replacement learns the job, and increased requirements for training and supervision. Law enforcement personnel specialists were not able to provide training cost estimates for new support employees because most law enforcement support training is conducted on the job and because training costs vary by job series. They did note, however, that clerk-typists can learn word processing within a few weeks of on-the-job training, whereas new intelligence research specialists spend a year training on the job.

High Turnover Inhibits Productivity

Costs associated with lost productivity are difficult to quantify. However, according to law enforcement managers, they include the costs of (1) relying on inexperienced support staff and (2) having agents perform clerical duties.

Inexperienced Support Staffs Are Less Productive

Frequent turnover results in support staffs composed of generally inexperienced employees with little knowledge and skill, according to law

enforcement managers and recruiters. As a Secret Service personnel specialist explained, 2 or 3 years of experience are required to achieve the full performance level for many law enforcement support positions. However, since many support employees leave before reaching full performance, some or all of an office's support staff may lack the skills and experience required to adequately perform their duties.

An analysis of support staff experience levels by the FBI's New York office showed that, of the 743 support employees on board as of January 1988,

- 185, or 25 percent, had been on the job 1 year or less;
- 348, or 47 percent, had been on the job 3 years or less; and
- 419, or 56 percent, had less than 5 years' experience.

Turnover Results in Agents Performing Support Staff Functions

In many federal law enforcement offices, support staff turnover has forced investigative personnel to perform various support functions in order to maintain efficient operations, thus creating morale and productivity problems. Informal surveys conducted by the FBI's Chicago and New York field offices in March 1989 and July 1989, respectively, indicated that a substantial number of agents were spending a significant portion of their time on duties that they perceived could or should be done by support employees. One agent commented:

"I presently find myself in the position of working as an untrained and highly inefficient GS-13 . . . clerical employee [because] the office is attempting to compensate for its underpaid, overwhelmed, and increasingly inexperienced support staff by using its agents to perform support duties."

This situation was also related at the Secret Service, where one manager commented that due to the shortage of support staff, agents must spend their time on clerical duties, such as filing and photocopying, as well as on technical duties, such as data entry on fraud and forgery operations and checking counterfeit notes.

Law Enforcement Support Staff Compensation Is Not Considered Competitive With Nonfederal Sector

Substantial evidence exists that federal sector pay is not competitive with private sector pay for comparable support positions. Although special salary rates, where available, narrow the gap between federal and private support salaries, indications are that they have not been sufficient to make federal salaries competitive. Federal law enforcement support salaries also apparently cannot compete with support salaries in some local law enforcement agencies. Federal law enforcement managers said two related consequences of the pay disparity between their agencies and both the private sector and local agencies are that

- federal law enforcement agencies find attracting and retaining qualified support personnel increasingly difficult, and
- the overall quality of candidates who do apply for law enforcement support positions has declined markedly.

Documented Disparity Between Federal and Private Sector Salaries

Numerous studies document the pay disparities between the federal and private sectors. According to the August 1989 report of the President's pay advisors, there was a gap averaging 29 percent between federal salaries and private salaries for comparable positions. To achieve comparability with the private sector, the pay advisors recommended that federal salaries be increased at a graduated rate, from about 20 percent at GS-1 to almost 37 percent at GS-15.

Similarly, a 1989 study commissioned by OPM found a significant pay gap between federal and private salaries.[1] Of the 51 positions studied, private sector salary levels exceeded federal levels by at least 20 percent for 30 of the positions and by 30 percent or more for 16 of the positions. Table III.1 shows mean federal salaries and private sector salary ranges reported in the study for selected support positions.

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[1] Study of Federal Employee Locality Pay, Wyatt Company (Philadelphia, 1989).

Table III.1: Comparison of Federal and Private Sector Salaries for Selected Support Staff Positions

Series/grade	Title	Federal mean	Private sector range	
303/3	Miscellaneous clerk	$13,578	$14,771	• $19,406
305/3	Mail and file	13,647	13,306	• 19,732
322/4	Clerk-typist	14,835	14,652	• 22,517
525/4	Accounting technician	14,812	17,332	• 22,781
318/5	Secretary	17,237	17,374	• 22,255
334/5	Computer specialist	16,275	22,183	• 26,030
332/6	Computer operation	18,905	20,314	• 26,211

Source: Study of Federal Employee Locality Pay, Wyatt Company.

As the table illustrates, mean federal salaries (which include special salary rates discussed below) are less than private sector salaries for many support positions.

Indications That Special Rates Are Not Sufficient to Compete With Private Sector Salaries

Attracting and retaining qualified support staff is difficult even for positions covered by special salary rates,[2] according to law enforcement managers and personnel specialists. For example, in one Secret Service field office, all of the clerical positions covered by special rates have turned over at least once during the last 3 years, and some have turned over several times. In the opinion of FBI and Secret Service managers, special salary rates are "too little too late." OPM has recently testified that the special rate program is unable to adequately address the need for variances from the General Schedule. Moreover, law enforcement managers and personnel specialists said special salary rates create morale problems. For example, because special rates apply to only certain occupations at certain grades, situations exist in which supervisors are not eligible to receive the special rates their subordinates receive.

[2]OPM has the authority to approve salary levels above the regular General Schedule rates when there is evidence that nonfederal pay rates are seriously hampering recruitment and retention of qualified workers. Special salary rate increases vary by series and location, but they cannot exceed the step 10 salary for each grade covered.

Pay Gap Exists Between Federal and Some Local Law Enforcement Support Salaries

Information available on salaries paid to local law enforcement support staff indicates that federal law enforcement support salaries are not competitive with some local law enforcement support salaries. For example, support staff in the New York City Police Department generally start as office aides or secretaries, depending upon their training and experience. Starting salaries in 1989 ranged from $16,908 to $20,480 for office aides and from $17,479 to $21,526 for secretaries. Similarly, the Seattle Police Department started support staff at $15,953 and increased their salaries to $17,606 after 6 months. On the other hand, at that time most FBI support employees were hired at GS-3 or GS-4, with starting salaries ranging from $12,531 to $14,067.

Pay Disparity Considered Cause of Recruitment and Retention Problems

Law enforcement managers and personnel specialists consider noncompetitive compensation the leading cause of their recruitment and retention problems. This view is generally supported by OPM, GAO, and other studies that indicate that noncompetitive federal salaries contribute to recruitment and retention problems throughout the federal government.

Managers Believe Noncompetitive Compensation Is Responsible for Recruitment and Retention Problems

In the opinion of many federal law enforcement managers, noncompetitive compensation is the primary cause of their support staff recruitment and retention problems. Of the 102 federal law enforcement managers NACLE interviewed, 70 considered inadequate pay for support staff to be a problem. Of the problems affecting law enforcement support staff reported by these managers, pay was cited most often.

Similarly, the law enforcement managers, recruiters, and staffing specialists we spoke with consider inadequate compensation to be the major contributor to their recruitment and retention difficulties. In their experience, below-market starting salaries prevent federal law enforcement agencies from competing with the private sector for qualified, experienced support staff. A law enforcement manager explained that his office gets what it pays for and attracts young and inexperienced workers who lack the skills to compete in the private sector.

As with recruitment, law enforcement managers consider noncompetitive compensation the leading cause of high support staff turnover. A December 1989 Secret Service memorandum stated that the support staff "quit for pay" rate could be characterized in one word—"EXODUS." The Secret Service tracked all support staff resignations from the

New York field office between 1986 and 1989. Of the 25 employees who left,

- 18 cited "better salary" as their reason for leaving;
- 14 accepted higher paying jobs in the private sector, 3 transferred to other federal agencies, and 1 went to a local law enforcement agency; and
- 14 reported salary increases that ranged from $4,000 to $12,000, with an average increase of $5,892.

Similarly, each of the 51 support employees who resigned from the FBI New Haven office between 1983 and 1989 cited the need to seek higher income as the principal reason for leaving.

Studies Support the View That Noncompetitive Pay Is a Problem

OPM, GAO, and other studies conclude that noncompetitive federal salaries contribute to federal recruitment and retention problems. According to the 1989 Wyatt study:

". . . government salaries have fallen so far behind the pay levels offered by other employers that it is difficult, if not impossible, to recruit and retain adequately qualified workers in some occupations and in some locations."

Similarly, in 1989 we reported that (1) to recruit and retain a quality workforce, the federal government must pay competitive salaries and benefits and (2) the competition from the private sector was hurting the federal government's ability to maintain the quality it needs to be effective.[3] In addition, the 1989 report by the President's pay advisors cautioned that the federal government's continued ability to recruit and retain qualified employees is dependent upon pay comparability adjustments.

A 1989 employee exit survey conducted by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board to determine reasons why employees resign from the federal government also tends to confirm these views. The responses of a limited sample of professional and support staff leaving the Departments of Justice and Treasury suggested that compensation was one of the more important reasons for their resignations. Other important reasons included employees' (1) desires to pursue nonwork interests and

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[3]The Public Service: Issues Affecting Its Quality, Effectiveness, Integrity, and Stewardship (GAO/GGD-89-73, June 6, 1989).

improve career opportunities and (2) dissatisfaction with various aspects of the job, such as poor use of their skills and unfair treatment.

Noncompetitive Compensation Also Considered Cause of Staff Quality Decline

A related consequence of noncompetitive compensation is a conspicuous decline in applicant quality, according to law enforcement managers and personnel specialists. Declining applicant quality, in turn, results in poor quality support staffs, managers believe. For example, according to an FBI manager, in January 1989, the FBI's New York field office tested 303 support applicants in basic skills and abilities, and only 44 passed, a lower passing rate than was experienced in prior years. Overall, this office recruits and tests over 33 applicants for every 1 successful applicant it brings on board.

Because federal salaries are not competitive with the private sector, law enforcement managers and personnel specialists said they are frequently forced to fill positions with minimally qualified candidates. The cumulative result, they believe, is a marked decline in the quality of law enforcement support staffs. Managers expressed concern over the potential impact this workforce may have on agency operations. Moreover, since law enforcement agencies frequently promote their support supervisors and office managers from within, law enforcement officials are also concerned about the potential effect the quality of this workforce will have on their future ability to staff such positions. However, none of the law enforcement managers or personnel specialists we interviewed could provide any objective measure of the decline in support staff quality because they do not systematically track applicant test scores or support staff performance over the years.

Fiscal Year 1988 Transfer Rates for Selected Support Staff Series

Table IV.1: Comparison of FBI, Other Law Enforcement, and Non-Law Enforcement Agencies' Transfer Rates for Selected Support Staff Series for Fiscal Year 1988

Series	Title	FBI		Other law enforcement agencies		Non-law enforcement agencies	
		Transfer rate	Average population	Transfer rate	Average population	Transfer rate	Average population
0080	Security administration	2.63%	76	2.07%	145	2.64%	4,852
0132	Intelligence	3.13	96	2.71	554	1.90	2,795
0301	Miscellaneous administration and program	1.22	164	1.54	777	1.32	27,420
0303	Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	2.76	1,123	2.90	1,585	2.50	48,064
0305	Mail and file	1.94	2,572	5.60	411	2.23	15,979
0318	Secretary	1.08	924	4.57	2,209	4.15	91,594
0322	Clerk-typist	2.74	1,059	6.45	1,039	6.60	37,416
0332	Computer operation	0.77	130	7.89	38	1.06	9,062
0334	Computer specialist	1.75	228	4.26	423	2.13	42,436
0356	Data transcriber	4.62	130	3.13	96	3.09	5,766
0393	Communications specialist	7.14	14	2.02	99	2.09	3,117
0525	Accounting technician	5.26	152	3.86	414	2.70	19,978
0540	Voucher examining	3.81	105	9.30	43	4.08	5,202
1802	Compliance inspection and support	0.49	405	2.17	1,334	3.36	952
	Average (weighted)	2.13%		3 73%		3.30%	

Note: Transfers measured as losses, not gains.

Source: Developed by GAO from OPM and FBI data.

Table IV.2: Comparison of FBI, Other Law Enforcement, and Non-Law Enforcement Agencies' Support Staff Transfer Rates in High- and Low-Cost Cities for Fiscal Year 1988

| | | FBI | |
		Transfer rate	Average population
Series	Title		
0080	Security administration	2.78%	72
0132	Intelligence	4.35	92
0301	Miscellaneous administration and program	3.29	152
0303	Miscellaneous clerk and assistant	4.15	772
0305	Mail and file	4.01	1,570
0318	Secretary	1.15	436
0322	Clerk-typist	4.92	447
0332	Computer operation	1.06	94
0334	Computer specialist	2.71	221
0356	Data transcriber	5.69	123
0393	Communications specialist	7.14	14
0525	Accounting technician	2.44	41
0540	Voucher examining	5.38	93
1802	Compliance inspection and support	4.52	155
	Average (weighted)	3.76%	

| High-cost cities | | | | | | Low-cost cities | | | |
| Other law enforcement agencies | | Non-law enforcement agencies | | FBI | | Other law enforcement agencies | | Non-law enforcement agencies | |
Transfer rate	Average population	Transfer rate	Average population	Transfer rate	Average population	Transfer rate	Average population	Transfer rate	Average population
2.34%	128	4.68%	1,624	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	2.86%	35
3.16	285	2.53	1,068	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.00	24
2.24	447	2.36	10,940	0.00	1	0.00	6	1.52	396
3.01	564	3.59	11,824	0.00	9	0.00	27	3.46	1,011
3.26	215	3.13	3,359	0.00	21	0.00	6	3.45	521
7.12	772	5.76	28,318	0.00	10	3.33	30	4.98	1,025
7.34	613	9.17	10,844	0.00	13	0.00	11	9.42	361
5.88	34	1.85	1,403	a	a	a	a	1.27	237
4.48	357	3.75	14,203	a	a	a	a	1.14	789
1.41	71	4.72	657	a	a	a	a	1.13	177
2.44	82	3.97	881	0.00	0	0.00	2	5.00	40
7.69	91	4.65	3,399	0.00	2	0.00	7	3.89	540
9.68	31	6.78	870	a	a	a	a	1.19	84
2.44	410	4.14	169	0.00	5	0.00	76	0.00	13
4.56%		4.87%		0.00%		0.60%		3.48%	

[a]No support positions existed in these occupational series in fiscal year 1988.

Source: Developed by GAO from OPM and FBI data.

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