Park Law Enforcement Officer Project Report for PLEA

Dr. Michael Suttmoeller

Missouri State University

Officer members of the Park Law Enforcement Association (PLEA) were administered an online survey covering a wide variety of park law enforcement officer topics during May of 2022. One hundred and sixteen out of a possible 1,669 park law enforcement officers responded in whole or in part to the survey which resulted in a 7% response rate. Seventy-nine of the responding officers were from twelve different state level agencies and the remaining 37 responding officers were located at the federal (2), county (12), or municipal (15) levels or were special districts (8). These officers represented 27 different agencies. The results presented in the following report should be interpreted with caution due to the low response rate. Due to rounding, results may not equal 100%.

***Overall Survey Results***

**Officer Demographics**

Officers were asked a series of questions to better understand the demographics of those that chose to complete the survey. Questions were asked related to race, gender, years of service, the type of agency through which they were employed, education levels and whether or not they were sworn or not.

Park Law Enforcement officers who are members of PLEA are employed by agencies at various levels of government. Of those that responded to the survey, approximately 68% (79) were employed at the state level. Fourteen percent (16) were city or municipal officers while approximately 10% (11) officers were from agencies located at the county level. Approximately 9% reported they were employed by agencies from other jurisdictions such as the federal level or a special district. Officers on average also had approximately 12 years of service with their current agency and 13 years of service as a park law enforcement officer in total. The years of service for both time periods ranged from less than one year to 40 years of service.

The responding officers were overwhelmingly White and male (95% and approximately 81% respectively), while approximately 19% identified as female, 3% Black or African American, 1% Hispanic or Latino and 1% as another race.

All responding PLEA officers reported some amount of education post high school. Approximately 65% reported having earned a Bachelor’s degree with approximately 19% having earned a Master’s degree. Approximately 12% reported an Associate’s degree and 4% reported having some college. There was quite a bit of variation in the field of study for those with a college degree. The largest category was a Bachelor’s degree in a biological field (wildlife/fisheries management, biology, environmental science etc.) with 35% of responding officers having this type of degree. The next highest category was a degree in parks, recreation or tourism with 24% of responding officers having this type of degree. The third highest category was criminology or criminal justice with approximately 17% of responding officers. The remaining officers had degrees in a variety of other subject areas including among others anthropology, business, education, history, fire protection, forestry and theology.

The final demographic questions examined whether park law enforcement officers were sworn, whether they carried firearms while on duty, their military background and employment prior to becoming a park law enforcement officer. The officers that participated in this study were overwhelmingly sworn (approximately 90%), while approximately 7% reported that they were non-sworn but participated in law enforcement functions and 2% reported they were non-sworn and did not participate in law enforcement functions.

When asked about their employment prior to becoming a park law enforcement officer, respondents were presented with five categories that were related to work within a parks environment and traditional law enforcement with a sixth category of “Other” that allowed officers to enter in a different type of prior occupation. This category was the most chosen more frequently than any of the other categories related to parks or law enforcement. Approximately 29% of respondents chose the “Other” category and reported some occupations that were natural resources related such as a fisheries biologist, but most of the reported occupations were not closely related to parks, natural resources or law enforcement work such as grocery store manager, electrician, or adjunct professor. The second highest category was as a part-time non-law enforcement park employee (approximately 27%), with a position with traditional law enforcement next at approximately 18% and a full-time non-law enforcement parks and recreation position next at approximately 17%.

**How Officers Spend Their Time**

Officers were asked a series of questions examining the types of activities and the frequency in which they participate in different activities.

Officers were asked to estimate the percentage of their work week that is spent on natural resource related law enforcement, non-resources related law enforcement, outreach and education, and wildlife assistance such as sick/injured wildlife or human and wildlife conflicts.

When asked to identify what percentage of their time is spent on natural resources law enforcement, approximately 65% of officers reported that 30% or less of their time was spent on law enforcement activities related to natural resources enforcement. Similarly, approximately 68% of responding officers reported that 30% or less of their time was spent on non-natural resources enforcement activities.

Approximately 60% of responding officers spend less than 20% of their time in outreach and education activities and approximately 88% of officers spend less than 20% of their time dealing with wildiife related issues such as nuisance wildiife or human and wildlife conflicts. Officers were also asked to report how many of certain types of programs in which they participate, how often they assist other agencies, how many nuisance, sick and injured wildlife complaints they receive and how many media contacts in which they participate.

When asked how many total programs in which they participate over the course of a year, officers reported an average of 31 programs with a low of 0 and a high of 250. When asked how many programs they create and administer that are specifically tailored to a specific school group, officers reported an average of approximately 10 school specific programs with a low of 0 and a high of 100. Officers were also asked how many programs they conduct for community groups such as an Elk’s club or rotary club. They reported an average of approximately 5 programs per year with a low of 0 and a high of 25. Finally, they were asked how many programs they conduct each year for Boy or Girl Scout organizations. They reported an average of 4 programs with a low of 0 and a high of 60. When asked about their involvement with dealing with sick/injured wildiife and human/wildlife conflicts, officers reported an average of 13 of these contacts per year with a low of 0 and a high of 60. Finally, officers were asked about their involvement with the media. Officers reported that on average, they have approximately 5 media contacts per year with a low of 0 and a high of 50.

Officers were also asked about their law enforcement activities. Approximately 70% of responding officers reported that the most common violation they encountered was some type of park rules violation with traffic violations the second highest reported at approximately 18%. Drug offenses was the third highest reported violation at approximately 7%. Officers were also asked to estimate the percentage of their citations they make during routine patrol, group patrols or from information provided by the public. Approximately 50% of officers reported they make 51% of more of their citations from routine patrol. Seventy-five percent of responding officers reported less than 10% of their citations are made from group patrols and 83% of responding officers reporting that less than 30% of their citations are made from information provided by the public, with approximately 49% reporting less than 10%.

**Preservice Academy**

Responding officers were asked a series of questions concerning their pre-service academy training. These questions examined not only the type of academy that responding officers attended prior to becoming park law enforcement officers, but also how well they believed that their pre-service training equipped them for the duties associated with park law enforcement. When asked about the type of pre-service academy training that was required of their agency, approximately 68% of responding officers reported that they had attended a traditional law enforcement or police academy that did not specialize in park law enforcement. Approximately 15% of officers reported they attended a traditional law enforcement academy and then a specialized park law enforcement academy. Approximately 8% of officers attended a park law enforcement officer specific academy only and for close to 8% of officers, academy training was not required by their agency.

When asked whether or not the academy prepared them for the overall duties of a park law enforcement officer, approximately 76% of officers agreed or strongly agreed that the academy prepared them for their overall duties. Similarly, approximately 56% of officers agreed that the academy prepared them to deal with armed suspects, while approximately 32% of officers strongly agreed that the academy prepared them well for these encounters. However, when asked how well the academy prepared officers for the public relations aspects of the park law enforcement job, approximately 55% of officers agreed or strongly agreed that the academy prepared them for these duties, while 45% of officers disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were adequately prepared to public relations duties after their academy training. Whether or not the pre-service academy training prepared officers for the interpretive duties associated with the park law enforcement job, only 24% agreed or strongly agreed that the academy prepared them for these duties, while 76% of officers disagreed or strongly disagreed.

**Park Law Enforcement Officer Role**

The next series of questions explored officer perceptions of the role and job responsibilities of park law enforcement officers.

*Geographic Isolation and Dangerousness*

The first set of questions pertained to officer perceptions as to the geographic isolation of park law enforcement officers and how dangerous they believed the park law enforcement officer occupation to be. When asked if their assigned area is too large to effectively patrol, approximately 54% of responding park law enforcement officers believed that their assigned district was too large to effectively patrol, while approximately 46% did not. When asked more specifically about their geographic isolation, approximately 87% of officers agreed or strongly agreed that they rely primarily on other agencies for backup. In this same vein, officers were asked if the limited access to backup influences whether or not they choose to intervene in some law enforcement situations and approximately 52% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes choose not to intervene in a law enforcement situation because of their lack of access to backup.

Officers were also asked about their perceptions related to how dangerous they believed the park law enforcement occupation to be. Approximately 85% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that the job of a park law enforcement officer was a dangerous job. Similarly, approximately 81% of officers agreed or strongly agreed that the job of a park law enforcement officer was more dangerous than other jobs and approximately 82% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they had a good chance of being hurt while working as a park law enforcement officer.

*Officer Role*

The next series of questions asked officers their perceptions of their role as a park law enforcement officer. When asked if they believe they are being asked to do too much traditional law enforcement, approximately 60% believed that they are not being tasked with doing too much traditional law enforcement work. When asked whether or not educational programming duties take away too much time from law enforcement work, approximately 77% of responding officers did not believe that the time spent on educational programing took away too much time from law enforcement duties. Further, officers were asked if spending time enforcing laws pertaining to drugs and alcohol take away too much time from more traditional park law enforcement duties, approximately 66% of responding officers did not believe that engaging in this type of enforcement took away too much time from their traditional park law enforcement duties.

The next series of questions asked officers about their perceptions of how much of the job was learned “on the street” and what their role should be in teaching new officers how to do the job of a park law enforcement officer. When asked whether or not they learned most of how to the park law enforcement job while working as a park law enforcement officer, officers overwhelmingly reported that most of what they learned about being a park law enforcement officer was learned once on the job, with 91% of officers agreeing or strongly agreeing (approximately 44%) strongly agreed. Similarly, 96% of officers agreed or strongly agreed that they try to teach new officers about how to the job of a park law enforcement officer and 89% agreed or strongly agreed that experienced officers are a valuable resource for new officers.

**Officer Discretion**

The next series of questions pertained to the officer’s use of discretion and whether or not different factors such as their organization, local court system, the local community, the view point of other officers, the suspect’s demeanor or the suspect’s prior offending history influenced their decision making in law enforcement situations.

The first three questions for this section pertained to officer perceptions on their use of warnings as an enforcement tool as well as their perception of their organizations emphasis on law enforcement activities. When asked if officers believed it was important to educate through the use of warnings, approximately 75% of offices agreed or strongly agreed that it was important to use warnings to educate the public of possible law violations. Officers were also asked whether they had an expected number of tickets they were supposed to write each year and if they believed their organization placed too much emphasis on the number of tickets they wrote each year. Approximately 95% of officers did not believe that they had certain number of tickets they were expected to write each year and similarly, approximately 87% of officers did not agree that their agency placed too much emphasis on the number of tickets they wrote.

The next series of questions dealt with how the officer’s external environment influenced their discretionary decision making. When asked about the influence of the local court system on their decision making, approximately 53% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that the local court system influences their decision making in law enforcement situations. Approximately 61% of responding officers disagreed or strongly disagreed that local community customs influenced their decision making and approximately 60% of responding officers disagreed or strongly disagreed that the view point of other officers would influence their decision making.

When asked about whether or not characteristics of the offender influenced their decision making, approximately 63% agreed or strongly agreed that the suspect’s prior offending history or reputation for offending influenced their decision making in law enforcement decisions and approximately 89% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that a suspect’s demeanor influenced their law enforcement decision making.

**Officer Recruitment and Retention**

A substantial portion of the survey administered to park law enforcement officers examined issues related to officer recruitment and retention such as job satisfaction, satisfaction with benefits, role ambiguity and whether or not officers are considering employment somewhere else. Two questions examined how much park law enforcement officers enjoyed their job. When asked if the found real enjoyment in their job, approximately 93% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they did find real enjoyment in their job. Officers were also asked if they believed that they enjoyed their job more than the average park law enforcement officer. Approximately 75% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they did enjoy their job more than the average park law enforcement officer. Four questions examined levels of motivation and job stress. When asked if they found it hard to get motivated to go to work, approximately 83% of responding officers disagreed or strongly disagreed that they found it hard to get motivated to go to work. When officers were asked whether the park law enforcement job sometimes made them frustrated or angry, approximately 75% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they felt frustrated or angry sometimes doing park law enforcement. Officer stress levels were also examined. When asked if being a park law enforcement officer involved high levels of stress and if they often felt tense or uptight while at work, approximately 74% agreed or strongly agreed that the park law enforcement job involved high levels of stress, but only about 36% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they often felt tense or uptight while at work.

Role ambiguity can also be a source of dissatisfaction for officers and three questions addressed role ambiguity in park law enforcement. When asked if their role as a park law enforcement officer was often unclear, approximately 69% of responding officers disagreed or strongly disagreed that their role was often unclear. Similarly, approximately 60% of responding officers disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was unclear what their organization expected of them in their work and approximately 60% of officers disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was often unclear what park visitors expected of them.

Workplace benefits can also be a source of dissatisfaction for employees and four questions assessed the levels of satisfaction among park law enforcement officers with their workplace benefits. When asked if they were satisfied with their current pay compensation, approximately 67% of responding officers reported that they were not satisfied with their current pay compensation. Similarly, approximately 63% of officers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their job paid well. When asked about their satisfaction with their overall workplace benefits, approximately 70% of officers agreed or strongly agreed that they were happy with their workplace benefits. When asked if their benefits would be better if they had a different job, approximately 47% agreed or strongly agreed that their benefits would be better somewhere else.

The amount of autonomy that employees experience has been found to influence job satisfaction and retention. Three questions examined perceptions of autonomy. Officers were asked if they have the freedom to plan their own work and approximately 85% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they did have the freedom to plan their own work. When asked if they get to make decisions with little supervision, approximately 88% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they do get to make decisions without much supervision. Finally, officers were asked if they often get to tryout their own ideas and approximately 77% of officers agreed or strongly agreed that they do often get to tryout their own ideas.

The next series of questions examined interpersonal relationships between officers and between officers and supervisors. The first three questions examined relationships between officers by asking whether officers of the same rank were condescending to the responding officer, made derogatory remarks about them or excluded them from a professional camaraderie. Approximately 31% agreed or strongly agreed they had been in a situation where an officer of the same rank was condescending to them, approximately 16% agreed or strongly agreed that an officer of similar rank made derogatory remarks about them and only approximately 17% reported they had been excluded from professional camaraderie. The next three questions examined the relationship between the responding officer and their supervisor. Approximately 27% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that a supervisor had spoken to them in a condescending manner, approximately 14% agreed or strongly agreed that a supervisor had made derogatory remarks about them and approximately 20% agreed or strongly agreed that a supervisor had addressed them in unprofessional terms.

The next series of questions examined officer perceptions of how well officers are recognized for their accomplishments and their perceptions of advancement opportunities. When asked if top management only recognizes work by their favorite officers, approximately 70% of responding officers disagreed or strongly disagreed that that was occurring. Similarly, approximately 66% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that officers receive recognition from top management for work that they do, while approximately 57% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that top management recognizes line-level employees for the work that they do.

When asked about advancement opportunities, approximately 60% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that the process for career advancement is fair. Similarly, only approximately 20% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they did not have the same chance of advancement as other similarly credentialed officers, while approximately 36% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that promotional opportunities within their organization are not evenly distributed.

The final series of questions in this section examined whether or not park law enforcement officers are seeking other employment opportunities. Officers were asked whether they often think of applying for a job in a career outside of park law enforcement and approximately 42% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they often think about applying for a job outside of park law enforcement. However, only approximately 12% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they were planning to leave park law enforcement in the near future. When asked if they were actively seeking work in a position other than a park law enforcement officer, only approximately 21% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they were actively seeking work in a different position. When asked if they were actively seeking work as a park law enforcement officer in a different organization, only approximately 11% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they were. Similarly, approximately 22% of responding officers agreed or strongly agreed that they often think about applying for a park law enforcement job with a different organization.