



# Issue Brief: California Law Enforcement Survey

November 2021

## Executive Summary

In the fall of 2020, the Little Hoover Commission launched a study to examine the role of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) in shaping law enforcement training standards for California's peace officers. As part of this work, the Commission anonymously surveyed active-duty peace officers in May 2021 to learn more about the training they receive through POST. Over 300 officers responded to the survey, and their answers, detailed in this Issue Brief, provide critical insight into the strengths and shortcomings of police training in California.

Officers' survey responses affirmed the value of the training they receive, but also pointed to problems.

- Overall, training in California is perceived to be superior to training in other states. Over 80 percent of officers said the training they receive is better than the training provided to their peers in different parts of the country.
- Officers overwhelmingly agreed that all forms of training – basic, field, in-service – are relevant to the work they do, yet officers are split on whether this formal training is more important than the informal on-the-job advice they receive from colleagues.
- Over 80 percent said stress-based academies provide essential training for law enforcement, and 76 percent agreed that California should continue using them. Sixty-four percent of officers said non-stress academies are not as effective as stress-based ones for preparing officers for the reality of policing.

Still, throughout the survey officers also identified pressing challenges that could be addressed to improve the training they receive.

- Over half of officers said certain subjects are not adequately covered by existing training curriculum. Mental health, de-escalation, legal processes and procedures, use of force, and officer wellness were identified as topics for which training is lacking.
- Various barriers prevent officers from pursuing additional training. Finding staff to backfill positions while officers receive training is frequently a barrier for 52 percent of respondents, while financing is a roadblock for almost half.
- Nearly 70 percent of officers said there needs to be greater consistency in training across California's 692 law enforcement departments and 41 basic training academies.
- Oversight of training outcomes and their effectiveness is missing. More than 80 percent of officers agreed that POST should monitor training outcomes and adjust its standards and curricula accordingly, while almost 70 percent said POST should incorporate research on training effectiveness into its training standards.

We hope this Brief will serve as a resource for state policymakers as they evaluate ways to improve police training to benefit peace officers and all Californians.

## Introduction

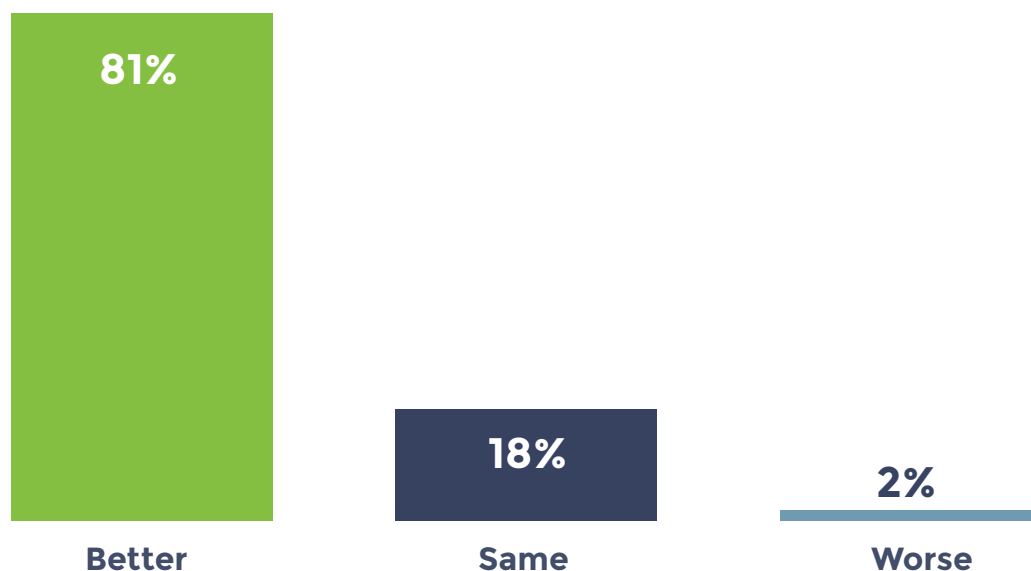
In the fall of 2020, the Little Hoover Commission launched a study to examine the role of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) in shaping law enforcement training standards for California's peace officers. As part of its review of law enforcement training in California, the Commission anonymously surveyed active-duty peace officers in May 2021 to learn more about the training they receive through POST. Over 300 officers responded to the survey, and their answers, detailed in this Issue Brief, provide critical insight into the strengths and shortcomings of police training in California. We hope this Brief will serve as a resource for state policymakers as they evaluate ways to improve police training to benefit peace officers and all Californians.

## Survey Findings

### CALIFORNIA'S TRAINING IS PERCEIVED TO BE BETTER THAN OTHER STATES

According to officers, overall law enforcement training in California is better than other states' training. Based on conversations with law enforcement colleagues in different parts of the country, 81 percent of respondents said the training they receive in California is better than the training provided to their peers in other states. "California public safety training is the gold standard throughout the United States," said one officer. "POST provides excellent training and continues to challenge themselves to improve throughout the years," said another. "I'm happy to be sworn in California with high standards of training." Eighteen percent said the training is about the same, while two percent said California's training is worse.

**"Based on your conversations with law enforcement colleagues in other states, do you feel that the training provided to California officers is better, the same, or worse?"**



## ALL FORMS OF TRAINING ARE RELEVANT

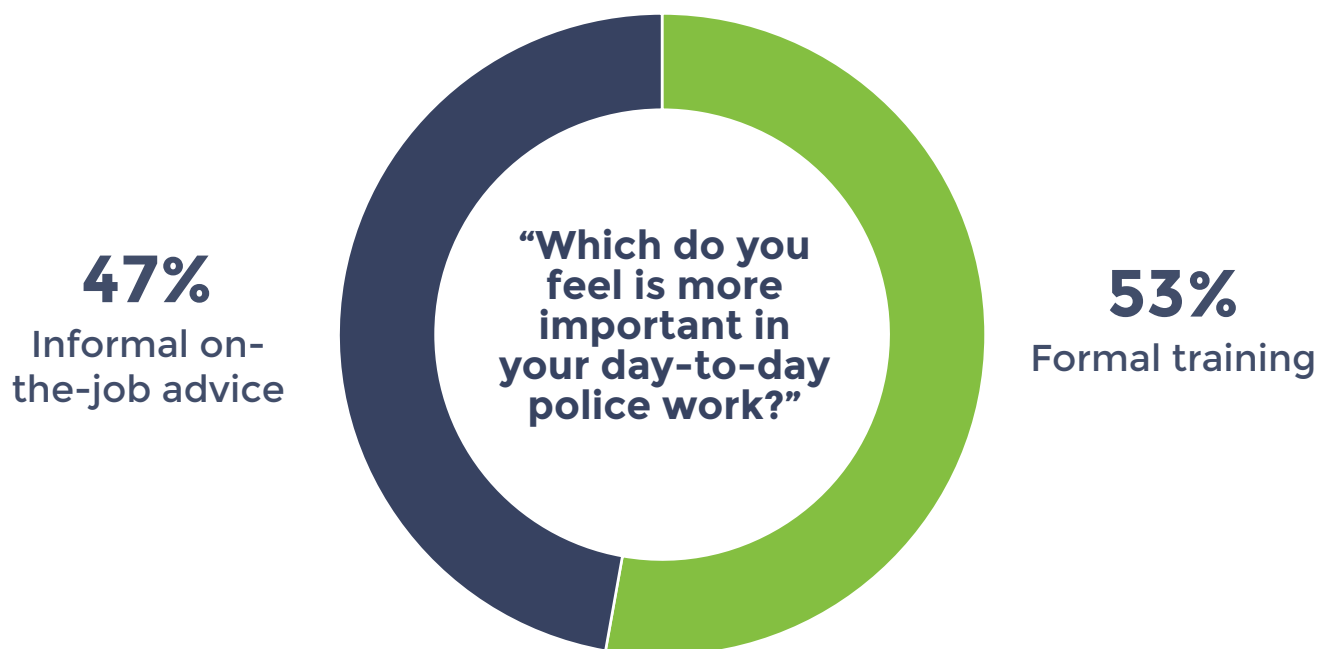
There are three main forms of training officers receive at different stages of their law enforcement career.

- Basic training occurs at 41 basic academies located throughout California. Academies must teach a minimum of 664 hours of POST-developed training in 42 different topics, known as Learning Domains, that include subjects such as leadership, professionalism, and ethics; juvenile law and procedures; search and seizure; use of force and de-escalation; domestic violence; first aid; and cultural diversity/discrimination. Recruits in basic academy “are subject to various written, skill, exercise, and scenario-based tests” and must also complete “a rigorous physical conditioning program which culminates in a physical ability test at the end of the academy.”<sup>1</sup>
- Field training is hands-on experience designed to “facilitate [officers’] transition from the basic academy to performing general uniformed patrol duties.”<sup>2</sup> Officers are trained on actual calls for service under the guidance and direction of the Field Training Officer, a seasoned officer with

“practical patrol experience.” Field training must be provided for a minimum of 10 weeks, although most programs in the state are 12 to 16 weeks long.<sup>3</sup>

- In-service training consists of professional development courses focused “on furthering the skills, knowledge, and training of peace officers.”<sup>4</sup> Officers must receive 24 hours of Continuing Professional Training every two years, and 14 of those 24 hours must provide training in arrest and control, firearms, driving, and strategic communications.<sup>5</sup>

Basic, field, and in-service training each play different yet important roles in officers’ education. According to respondents, each form of training builds upon fundamentals learned in previous trainings, and each provides its own unique perspective on policing. “It’s like a three-legged stool,” one officer said. “Each one is a vital support.” Basic training is the foundation upon which all other peace officer training builds, while field training teaches officers how to implement what they learn in the academy. In-service training is lifelong learning and is the primary way officers stay up-to-date on training.



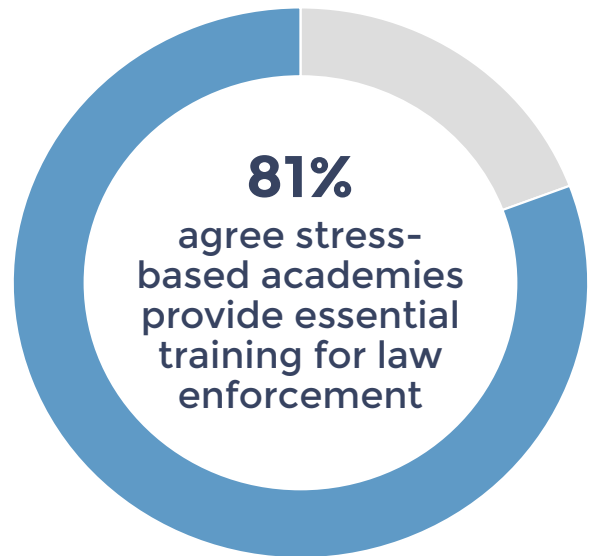
As one respondent noted, “All three categories [of training] serve a particular purpose in one’s career. To say one is more important than another is not taking into consideration the various stages of a law enforcement career.” Nearly 100 percent of respondents (97 percent) said field training is relevant or very relevant to their everyday police work, while strong majorities said the same about basic (83 percent) and in-service training (91 percent).

While officers overwhelmingly affirm the value of basic, field, and in-service training, they are split on whether this formal training or on-the-job advice from colleagues is more important in their day-to-day police work. More than half of respondents (53 percent) said formal training is more important on a daily basis, yet 47 percent said the opposite.

#### **STRESS-BASED ACADEMIES HAVE VALUE**

Majorities of officers affirmed the importance of stress-based academies – interpreted by officers as reality-based scenario training that simulates everyday stressful situations – as a crucial strategy to prepare recruits for the stressors they will face on the job. Eighty-one percent of respondents said stress-based academies provide essential training for law enforcement, while 76 percent agreed that California should continue using these academies. Sixty-four percent said non-stress academies are not as effective as stress-based ones for preparing officers for the reality of policing.

When asked later on in the survey how they would design a training and educational program for California law enforcement, respondents said stress-based training should be included. “I would absolutely maintain a stress academy to ensure law enforcement officers do NOT overreact to stressors,” one respondent said. “Too many times we see law enforcement officers overreact because they were overcome by stress. Stress inoculation allows a person to make better, calculated decisions over the person who can’t handle the stress.” Others noted



the importance of stress-based training at the beginning of an officer's law enforcement education but wanted to see a pivot to less stressful training afterward. "The academy still needs to remain stressful, at least at first," one officer replied. "As academies have become more relaxed I have seen an increase in field officers who lack confidence or don't handle field confrontations well.

**"Too many times we see law enforcement officers overreact because they were overcome by stress. Stress inoculation allows a person to make better, calculated decisions over the person who can't handle the stress." - Survey Respondent**

After the initial washout of recruits who don't work well under stress, the environment should change to less stress to allow recruits to take in the maximum amount of information." As another said, "Include some amount of high stress early in the academy (first several weeks), but don't run the whole academy like a boot camp."

### **SOME TRAINING TOPICS ARE LACKING**

While officers affirmed the importance of all types of police training, over half (53 percent) said there are subjects not adequately covered by existing training curriculum. Mental health was one of the most common topics officers identified that is not addressed well by current training. "With the changes in the climate and the call for more attention to this field, we need more training in crisis intervention and de-escalation techniques when dealing with those suffering from behavioral health issues," one respondent said. Respondents also emphasized the need for officer mental health training on how to "effectively deal with family and mental health issues," and "cope with stress from the job."

Other topics that officers said are not currently covered well in training are use of force; legal processes and procedures such as courtroom preparation and testifying, submitting evidence in court, and updates on legal changes; and de-escalation. "Most of [de-escalation training] is theory and adequate simulator training. Let's get hands on training taught by mental health specialists

**"Are there any training subjects that are not adequately covered by existing curriculum?"**

**Yes**

**53%**

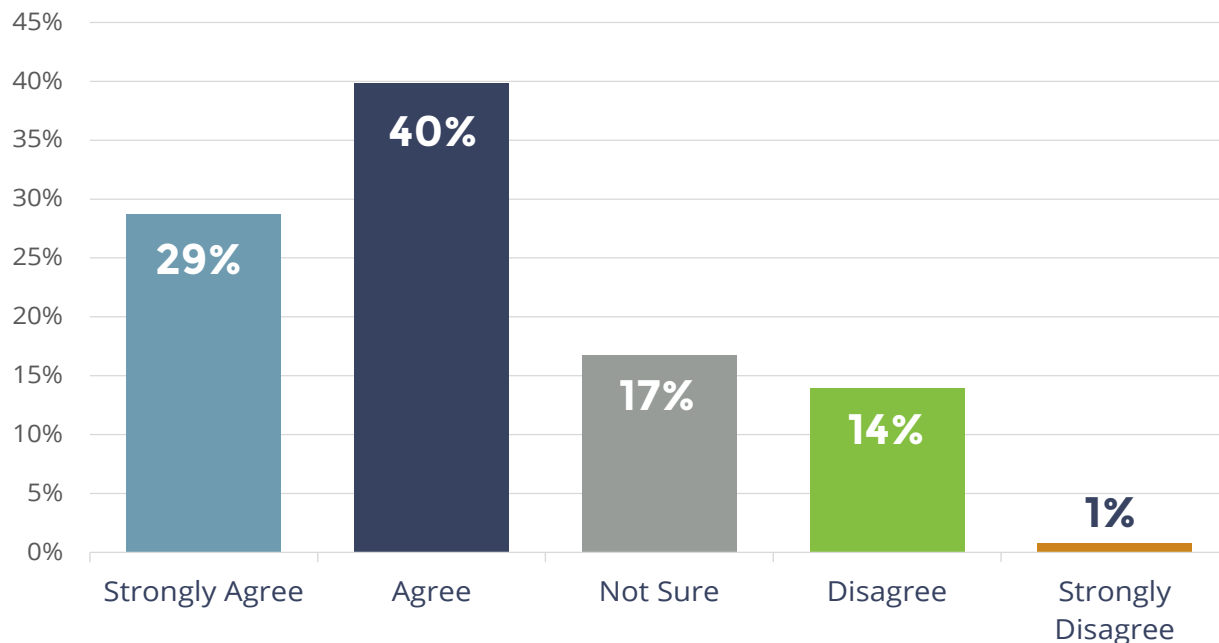
**No**

**47%**

or therapists,” an officer suggested. Numerous officers also cited the need for more communication training, including community and media relations, report writing, and interpersonal skills. “I don’t think we teach people the realities of dealing with people on the streets,” one respondent said. “It’s developed over time but I think it could be taught from the beginning.” Another echoed the need for “realistic verbal communication skills on how to deflect, de-escalate, and mediate angry/hostile people.” Additionally, officers said more training is needed on various tactics such as firearms, driving, and defensive techniques, including search and seizure and arrest and control tactics.

Some officers suggested increasing the availability of training to cover more topics. “Lawmakers pass laws constantly and it seems like we are not always taught. Perhaps agencies or POST need to add courses when new laws or court rulings occur,” an officer said. “The course catalog is comprehensive,” another respondent noted, “but many of the courses have limited availability.”

**“How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: There needs to be greater consistency in training across California’s law enforcement departments and academies.”**



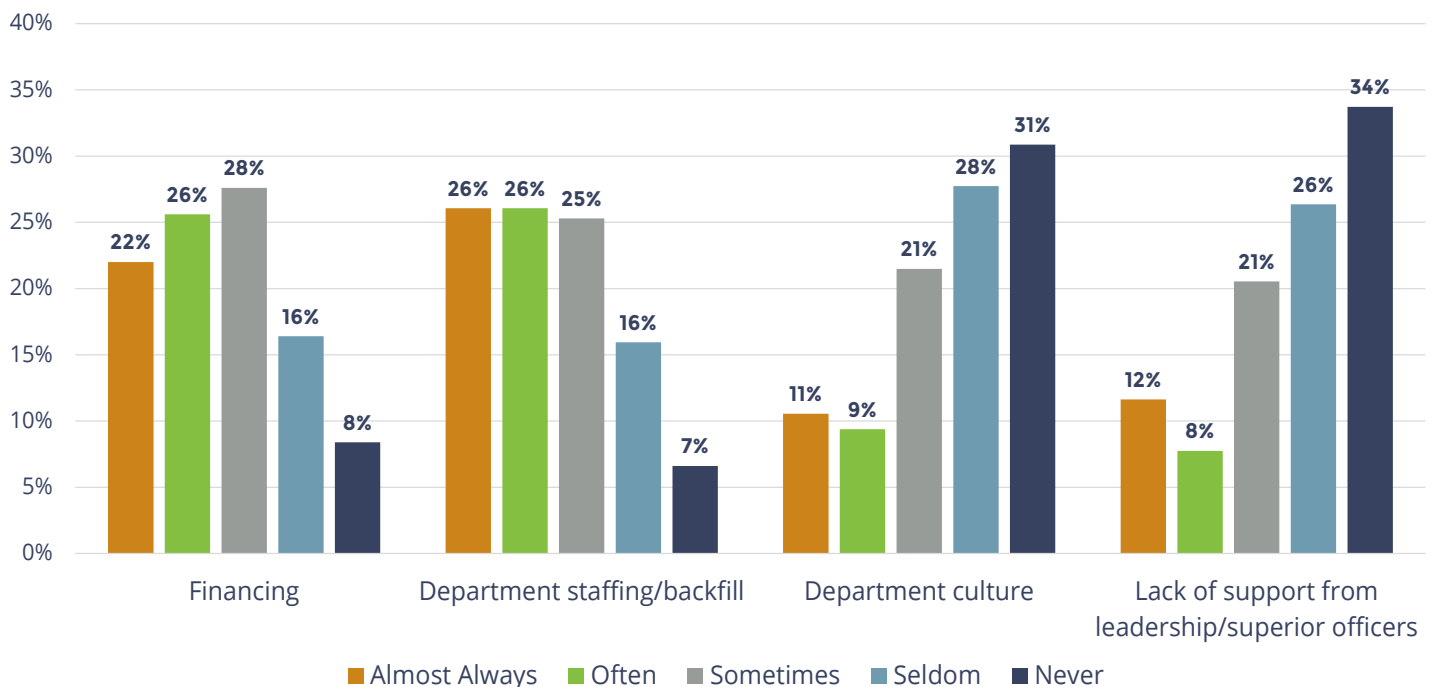
### CONSISTENT TRAINING IS NEEDED

Approximately 70 percent of officers agree there needs to be greater consistency in training across California’s law enforcement departments and academies. There are currently 692 law enforcement departments and 41 basic academies across California that provide state-mandated training to officers, yet the variation in resources among these departments and academies is staggering. Large departments such as the Los Angeles Police Department or California Highway Patrol have more resources and funding available to offer supplemental training to their sworn personnel. Many small departments, however, are frequently unable to provide similar training opportunities to their officers. “To improve access to training and consistency, POST could offer more courses versus leaving it up to the agencies to provide the training,” one respondent said. “As a member of a smaller agency, we don’t have the resources and skill level to instruct ourselves.”

### BARRIERS PREVENT OFFICERS FROM ACCESSING TRAINING

Many officers are prevented from continuing their policing education due to department-level barriers. For more than half of respondents (52 percent), finding staff to backfill their position while they attend training courses is frequently a barrier, while securing funding to attend training is almost always or often a roadblock for almost half of respondents (48 percent). One-fifth of officers said department culture (20 percent) and lack of support from superior officers (20 percent) are almost always or often barriers to continuing training.

#### “How frequently are the following a barrier to your continuing education?”



### OVERSIGHT OF TRAINING OUTCOMES AND EFFECTIVENESS IS MISSING

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that POST should take steps to study training outcomes and increase training effectiveness. More than 80 percent (82 percent) of officers agreed that POST should monitor training outcomes and adjust its standards and curricula accordingly, and almost 70 percent (69 percent) said POST should incorporate research on training effectiveness and apply those lessons to training curricula.

### KEY PRIORITIES FOR OFFICERS

Respondents were also asked an open-ended question about which elements of training they would redesign if they could build a training and educational program for California law enforcement from the ground up. This question generated 163 responses, which were grouped by Commission staff into general areas of response.



- **Stress- and reality-based.** Thirty-three officers said they would keep stress- and reality-based training. “There is no better way to train than practical application,” an officer noted. Respondents said they would include more hands-on training rather than video and classroom-based education. “The most growth in [the field training program] comes from actually dealing with calls for service rather than going through the training manual,” said another. Others agreed. “We need to teach to the realities of what we’re going to face,” one responded. “We need to focus on scenarios more than trying to [learn by the book].”
- **Better access to and frequency of training.** Seventeen officers said they would increase access to and frequency of training. Some officers noted that more online options for courses would be helpful, while one respondent said POST could offer more courses instead of requiring agencies – especially smaller ones without the resources or skill level for instruction – to provide necessary training themselves. Others expressed a desire to make field training longer in order “to spread the items that need to be covered over a longer period of time.” As one respondent said, “I am still learning things that a ‘competent’ officer should know because there are just hundreds of situations that we need to know.” Several officers shared that there is not enough time to teach all of the topics required by legislative mandates. To help officers complete all required training as well as training in any additional areas in which they need help, some respondents said they would mandate certain hours of training on a regular basis. One recommended eight hours of in-service training each month while another suggested four eight-hour sessions per year to cover all necessary material.
- **High-quality instructors.** The need for more experienced instructors to train officers was cited by 13 officers. “The foundation of any training

program are the staff and the instructors. Quality, dedicated professionals are a necessity,” one respondent said. “Just because someone has rank does not make them qualified, and rotating people every 2-3 years in/out of training does not facilitate consistency or quality.” One officer suggested banning instructors who have been retired from law enforcement for more than five years, while another said only instructors with bachelor’s degrees should be allowed to teach. Others said they would like to include more instructors from outside law enforcement to broaden the experience of trainees. One respondent suggested bringing in experts to teach on subjects such as criminology, juvenile justice, and re-entry programs, as well as on how to reduce violence and recidivism and incorporate community outreach and involvement into policing.

**“We need to teach the realities of what we’re going to face,” one officer responded. “We need to focus on scenarios more than trying to [learn by the book].”**

- **Formal career pathways.** The desire for better recruitment strategies and career pathways into law enforcement was cited by six officers. Respondents said they would include greater opportunities for officer recruitment and provide career pathways out of high school. One officer noted that many other countries handle law enforcement training as if it were university-level training. The officer said trainees should ideally be selected from high school-based programs to complete a multi-year training program equivalent to an undergraduate education at a university, complete with internships with law enforcement



departments and field work. “It would take time, but it should take time,” the officer responded. “It would also wash a lot of cadets out, but we should at the end of the day only end up with those most suited for the career.” Another suggested tying law enforcement training to the California state university and community college degree programs so interested students can take classes in law enforcement and receive “full academic honors” in the form of a bachelor or associate degree in the field.

- **Greater diversity.** Five officers said there needs to be greater diversity in policing. One officer noted that “new police officers often have very little life experience or exposure to other cultures. It needs to be addressed so they understand how law enforcement is perceived by different cultures they will be working with.” Respondents called for more diverse cadets, particularly more women and more people from minority communities. One officer said POST should change background requirements and processes for recruitment and reduce “restrictions that were originally put in place as a racist measure to keep marginalized people and people of color out of law enforcement.”

**“New police officers often have very little life experience or exposure to other cultures. It needs to be addressed so they understand how law enforcement is perceived by different cultures they will be working with.” - Survey Respondent**

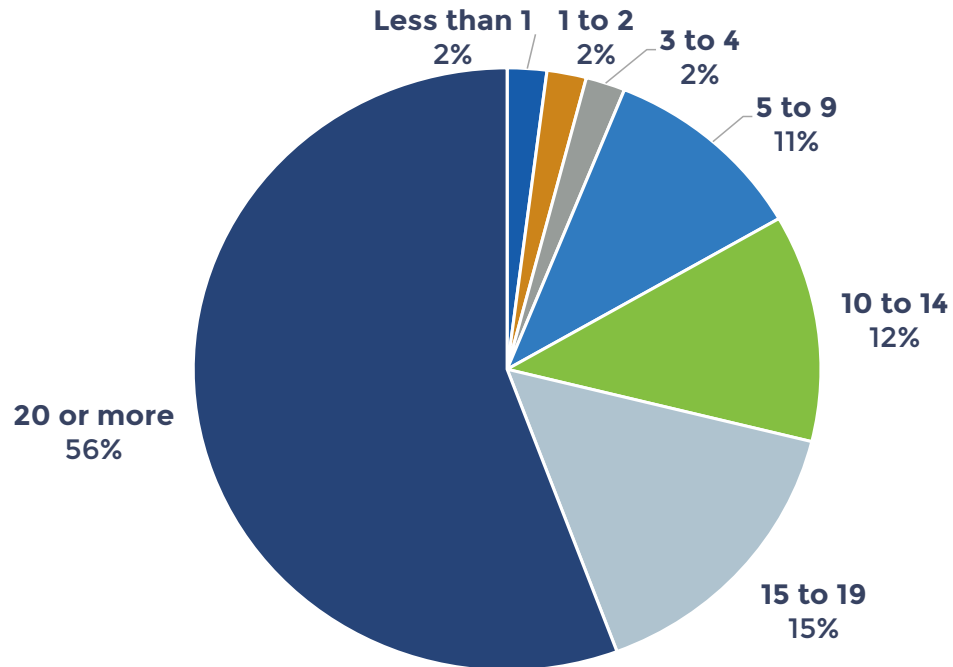
- **Expanded topics for training.** Respondents identified numerous topics they would include in training requirements. Sixteen officers said training should emphasize verbal skills and community relations, including providing more opportunities for trainees to interact with the public they will be serving. “This is a people job more than a law job,” one respondent said. Training on mental health was cited by eight officers, one of whom said “more empathetic training on behavioral health issues” is needed. Similarly, seven respondents said they would include more training on officer wellness to help officers cope with the stress of the job, incorporate a work-life balance, and practice mental resiliency. Five officers said they would include more training on legal processes and procedures, including courtroom testimony, report writing, and search and seizure laws. Numerous officers identified various tactical training as elements they would redesign in training, including de-escalation (eight officers), use of force (six officers), firearms (four officers), defensive tactics (four officers), driving (two officers), and emergency response (two officers).

## Demographics

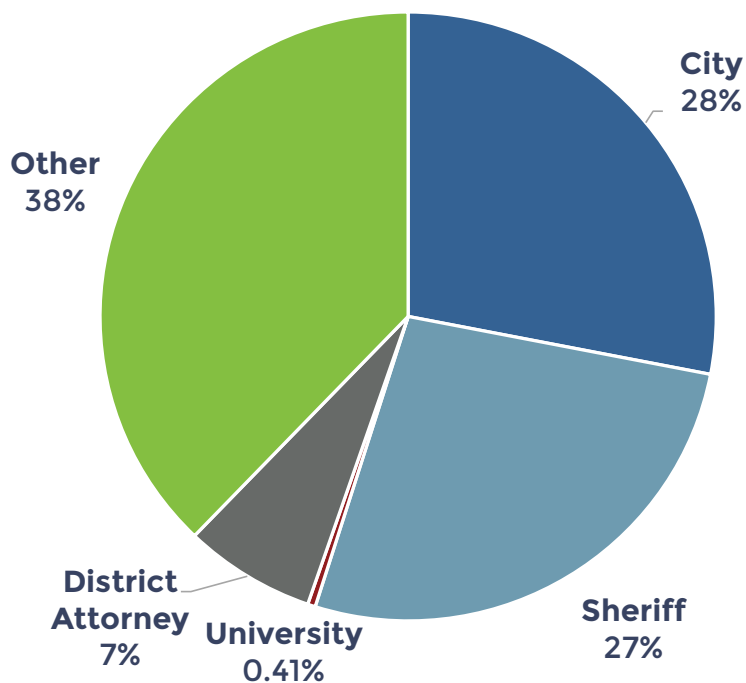
The majority of officers who responded to the survey (56 percent) had more than 20 years of experience as a police officer. More than half work in either city police (28 percent) or sheriff departments (27 percent), while 65 percent of officers work in law enforcement agencies with more than 100 officers.

**Most survey respondents have served as a peace officer for more than 20 years**

Share of survey respondents by years of experience as a peace officer

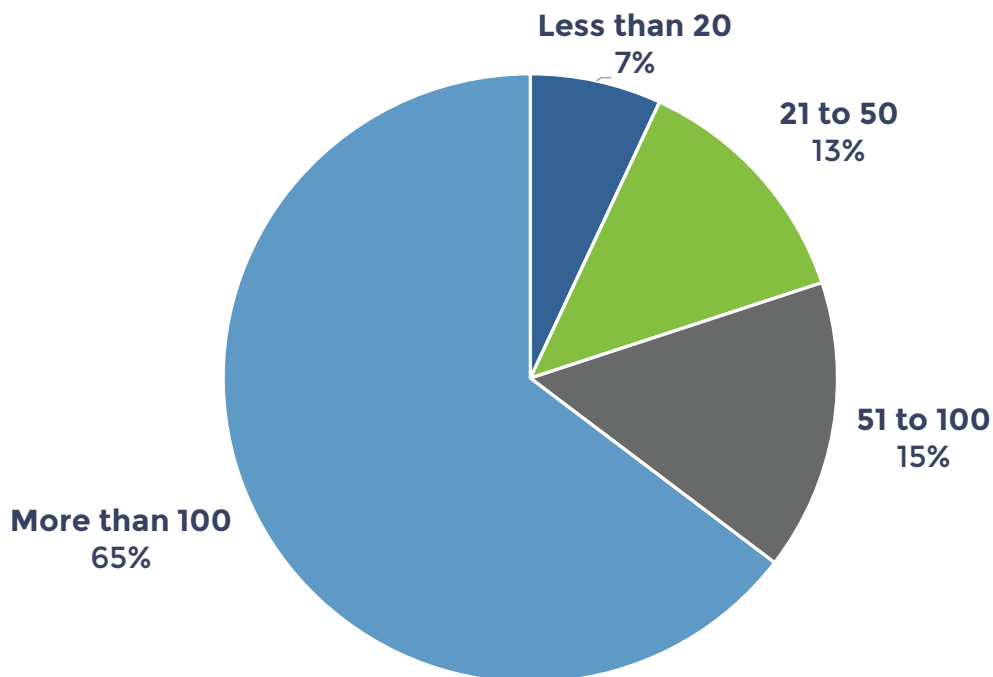
**More than half of respondents work with either city police or sheriff's departments**

Share of survey respondents by agency type



## Most respondents work in departments with more than 100 officers

Share of survey respondents by agency size



## Methodology

The survey was conducted between Tuesday, April 27 and Tuesday, June 1, 2021. To ensure the anonymity of respondents, the Commission designed the survey using Survey Monkey, a web-based tool that did not track any personally identifying information or how officers accessed the survey. Additionally, the Commission partnered with statewide law enforcement associations to help facilitate distribution and ensure that only current California peace officers received the survey link. Associations that sent their members a link to the survey include the California Police Chiefs Association, the Peace Officers Research Association of California, the California State Sheriffs' Association, the California Peace Officers Association, the California Statewide Law Enforcement Association, and the California District Attorneys Association.

## Appendix A: Survey Questions

The Commission received survey responses from 302 officers. Respondents were asked a maximum of 14 questions. Below are the questions asked in the survey:

### 1. Which do you feel is more important in your day-to-day police work?

	Responses	Percent
Formal training you have received	159	52.82%
Informal on-the-job advice from colleagues	142	47.18%

### 2. How relevant are the following to your day-to-day police work?

	Very Relevant	Relevant	Slightly Relevant	Not Relevant	Not Sure	Total
Basic training	40.36% 113	42.14% 118	15.36% 43	2.14% 6	0% 0	280
Field training	76.70% 214	20.07% 56	2.15% 6	1.08% 3	0% 0	279
In-service training	64.29% 180	26.79% 75	6.79% 19	1.79% 5	0.36% 1	280

### 3. Are there any training subjects that are not adequately covered by existing curriculum?

	Responses	Percent
Yes	143	52.57%
No	129	47.43%

### 4. What subjects are not adequately covered in existing curriculum?

112 open-ended responses

### 5. How frequently are the following a barrier to your continuing education?

	Almost Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Total
Financing	22.00% 55	25.60% 64	27.60% 69	16.40% 41	8.40% 21	250
Department staffing/backfill	26.07% 67	26.07% 67	25.29% 65	15.95% 41	6.61% 17	257
Department culture	10.55% 27	9.38% 24	21.48% 55	27.73% 71	30.86% 79	256
Lack of support from your leadership/superior officers	11.63% 30	7.75% 20	20.54% 53	26.36% 68	33.72% 87	258

6. Based on your conversations with law enforcement colleagues in other states, do you feel that the training provided to California officers is better, the same, or worse?

	Responses	Percent
Better	205	80.71%
About the same	45	17.72%
Worse	4	1.57%

7. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
POST should incorporate academic research on training effectiveness and apply those lessons to its standards and curricula.	23.41% 59	45.24% 114	18.65% 47	9.52% 24	3.17% 8	252
POST should monitor training outcomes and adjust its standards and curricula accordingly.	32.14% 81	49.60% 125	11.90% 30	5.56% 14	0.79% 2	252

8. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Stress-based academies provide essential training for law enforcement.	46.18% 115	34.54% 86	8.43% 21	8.43% 21	2.41% 6	249
Non-stress academies are just as effective as, or more effective than, stress-based academies for preparing officers for the reality of the job.	6.40% 16	12.80% 32	16.80% 42	35.60% 89	28.40% 71	250
California should move away from stress-based academies.	5.60% 14	7.60% 19	10.80% 27	27.60% 69	48.40% 121	250

9. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
There needs to be greater consistency in training across California's law enforcement departments and academies.	28.69% 72	39.84% 100	16.73% 42	13.94% 35	0.80% 2	251

**10. If you could build a training and educational program for California law enforcement from the ground up, what elements would you redesign?**  
163 open-ended responses

**11. Please share any additional comments below.**  
58 open-ended responses

**12. How many years have you served as a peace officer?**

	Responses	Percent
Less than 1 year	5	2.03%
1-2 years	5	2.03%
3-4 years	5	2.03%
5-9 years	26	10.57%
10-14 years	30	12.20%
15-19 years	38	15.45%
20 or more years	137	55.69%

**13. What is your agency type?**

	Responses	Percent
City	69	28.05%
Sheriff	66	26.83%
University	1	0.41%
Community College	0	0%
Marshal	0	0%
District Attorney	17	6.91%
Other	93	37.80%

**14. How many officers are in your agency?**

	Responses	Percent
Less than 20	17	6.91%
21-50	32	13.01%
51-100	38	15.45%
More than 100	159	64.63%

## Notes

1. Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training. "Basic Training Academies." <https://post.ca.gov/basic-training-academies> ----. "Peace Officer Basic Training." <https://post.ca.gov/peace-officer-basic-training>
2. Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training. "POST-Approved Patrol Training Programs." <https://post.ca.gov/field-training-police-training>
3. Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training. "Field Training Program Guide Volume 1: Overview and Appendices." [https://post.ca.gov/portals/0/post\\_docs/publications/field-training-program/FTP/FTP-Vol1.pdf](https://post.ca.gov/portals/0/post_docs/publications/field-training-program/FTP/FTP-Vol1.pdf)
4. Contra Costa County Office of the Sheriff. "In-Service Training." <https://www.cocosherriff.org/join-our-team/law-enforcement-training-center/in-service-training>
5. Manny Alvarez, Executive Director of the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training. Testimony to the Commission. February 11, 2021.



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