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44 PERCENT CITE INCREASES IN CRIME DUE TO ECONOMIC CRISIS

63 PERCENT OF LOCAL POLICE DEPARTMENTS ARE FACING CUTS IN THEIR TOTAL FUNDING, SURVEY SHOWS

(January 27, 2009, Washington, D.C.)—Nearly two out of three police agencies responding to a new survey said they are currently making plans for cutting their budgets, according to the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), a Washington, D.C.-based independent research organization made up of local and state police officials. And 44 percent of the police departments report increases in certain types of crime which they believe can be attributed to the economic crisis.

Of the 233 responding police agencies, which generally consisted of the larger police departments across the country, 63 percent said they are preparing plans for an overall cut in their total funding for the next fiscal year. In a large majority of cases, the police officials indicated that they are not merely making contingency plans or thinking about cuts as an academic exercise; of those who said they are planning cuts, 88 percent said they have already been told to expect cuts by their mayor, city council, or other governing authority.

On average, the responding agencies said they are planning a cut of 6.24 percent in their overall funding level.

PERF conducted the study in late December and early January in order to measure the extent to which the faltering national economy is impacting local police departments' budgets and operations, and to explore police executives' views about whether the economy is affecting crime levels.

“Police departments usually are among the last agencies to be cut when the economy turns bad, because elected officials see public safety as a top priority and try to find other places to cut,” said Miami Police Chief John Timoney, president of PERF. “The fact that most police departments currently are being asked to make cuts is an indication of how badly this recession is affecting local tax bases.”

Even as police officials are planning how they will implement cuts in their total funding for the next fiscal year, the survey showed that many already have trimmed funding in various areas. Specifically:

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- 53 percent of responding agencies said they already have implemented a **hiring freeze** for non-sworn personnel, and 27 percent said they have implemented a freeze for sworn positions.
- 62 percent said they have already cut **overtime** spending. This may be more significant than it appears, because police departments often use overtime to meet their minimum staffing levels. (In fact, 52 percent of the agencies responding to PERF’s survey said they “regularly rely on overtime to meet minimum safe staffing.”) Overtime also is often used as a method of temporarily increasing the number of officers on patrol, so police can respond to a crime spike in a certain neighborhood or handle a major public event without incurring the more permanent expense of hiring additional officers.
- 49 percent said they have already cut back or eliminated plans to acquire **technology**.
- 47 percent said they have already reduced or discontinued various types of **officer training**.
- 34 percent said they have discontinued, reduced in size, or delayed classes for **new police recruits**.
- 24 percent are already reducing police employment levels through **attrition**.
- 12 percent said they are considering **laying off** police employees or forcing retirements, and 10 percent said they have already used unpaid furloughs of employees to reduce spending.

PERF Executive Director Chuck Wexler noted that those cuts are especially significant in light of the fact that 52 percent of the responding agencies reported that they operate on a fiscal year that begins on July 1. That suggests that most of the responding departments are currently operating on funding that their elected officials approved back in the spring or early summer of 2008, months *before* the economic crisis hit.

“It wasn’t until September and October that we started reading all the headlines about Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, AIG, Washington Mutual, and Wachovia,” Wexler said. “If police departments are already tightening their belts everywhere we look and we are seeing an initial impact on crime, it’s quite sobering to think about how things will look six months from now, when police departments enter their first real year of being hit with the crisis.”

The survey revealed further signs of trouble in questions about how chiefs are planning to apportion their upcoming budget cuts among various operations or functions. The survey showed the strongest level of agreement (4.39 on a scale of 1 to 5) with the statement, “Sworn officer positions should be the *last* thing cut in the budget.” Respondents generally said they would *not* cut sworn positions even to maintain critical elements of their training, equipment, or technology budgets.

And yet, when survey respondents were asked how they would apportion cuts in their overall budgets, they indicated on average that 28 percent of the dollar cuts would come out of

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funding for sworn personnel. Another 14 percent would come out of funding for civilian personnel, and 11 percent would come out of overtime funding. **In other words, for every dollar that police departments are planning to cut from their total budgets, 53 cents will come out of personnel—sworn, civilian, or overtime funding.**

“Personnel costs account for the large majority of a police department budget, typically 80 percent or more of your total funding,” said Prince William County, Va. Police Chief Charlie T. Deane, vice-president of PERF. “So it is not surprising that we are already seeing many departments resorting to hiring freezes and reducing their size through attrition. And if the economic crisis continues, we will see more departments looking at layoffs.”

The survey asked police executives about any plans they are making for reorganizing their departments in order to save money:

- 43 percent said they are planning to rely to a greater extent on **less-costly civilian employees**, rather than sworn officers.
- 36 percent said they are planning ways of discontinuing or delaying the police response to certain types of **calls for service** (such as encouraging residents to file reports about minor crimes online, rather than in-person to an officer).
- 29 percent said they are planning to discontinue **special units**, such as street crimes units, narcotics task forces, community policing units, and so on.
- 16 percent said they are planning to reduce **public access hours** at district stations.

“The plans to discontinue special units are especially disconcerting,” Chief Timoney said, “because in many cities, it is these special units that have proved effective in reducing violent crime rates—for example, by focusing intensive police resources on crime ‘hot spots.’”

CHANGES IN CRIME PATTERNS

When police officials were asked whether their jurisdiction has experienced increases in crime levels in recent months that they believe can be attributed substantially to changes in the economy and/or their police budgets, 44 percent said they had experienced such increases in crime. (55 percent responded “no,” and 1 percent said they did not know.)

Of the 100 responding agencies who said they have experienced increases in crime attributable to the economy:

- 39 percent said they have seen an increase in **robberies**.
- 32 percent said they have seen increases in **burglaries**, such as incidents in which appliances and other equipment are taken from vacant homes.
- 40 percent said they have seen increases in **thefts**, such as thefts of GPS devices from cars and other “opportunistic” crimes.

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“We know that when police departments saw increases in violent crime in 2005 and 2006, they were able to respond quickly by using overtime to flood crime hot spots with additional patrol and sending specialized units in,” Wexler said. “This helped to bring crime back down again in 2007 and the first half of 2008. The threat posed by the economic crisis is that a lot of departments will no longer have these options available to keep crime and violence down.”

PERF will convene a Summit of police executives and other officials from across the nation on January 28 in Washington, D.C. to discuss the survey findings and the particular budget and crime situations in individual departments, as well as chiefs’ strategies for maintaining public safety despite cuts in their resources.

PERF is a membership organization of police executives from the largest city, county and state law enforcement agencies. For additional information, go to www.policeforum.org.

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