

TELEMASP BULLETIN

TEXAS LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE STATISTICS PROGRAM

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Use of Volunteers in Policing

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Introduction

Although the use of volunteers in policing is considered to be a relatively new program, the origin of uncompensated work in law enforcement can be traced back to the early Anglo-Saxon times in England (Greenberg, 2005). However, according to Ren, Zhao, Lovrich, and Gaffney (2006), despite the popularity of volunteers over the past two decades, there is still limited research on the use of volunteers in policing. Friedman (1998) suggested that through direct involvement in crime prevention, ordinary citizens have contributed considerably to the decline in crime rates that were witnessed during the middle to late 1990s.

Citizen participation in volunteer activities can enhance police functions that include: (a) the ability to help clear crimes, (b) prevent crimes from occurring, (c) maintain public order in difficult situations, and (d) provide services to potential and current crime victims. In addition, given that agency resources are often limited, citizens voluntary participation can serve, to some extent, as an effective means of compensating for the lack of financial and workforce resources (Zhao, Gibson, Lovrich, & Gaffney, 2002).

Similar to commercial private security, acceptance of volunteer policing has been transformed in less than a generation. Nevertheless, Bayley and Shearing (1996) identified trends that pose significant problems, particularly in regard to community mobilization and volunteerism. They found that there exists a great amount of selectivity concerning individual and community participation in government programs in general and criminal justice programs in particular.

According to Wilson and Kelling (1982), police volunteers are typically made up of citizens who are concerned about social disorder and fear of neighborhood crime. Thus, these citizens are often motivated to improve the quality of life in their communities by actively supporting the local police

through volunteer services. Correspondingly, Skogan (1987) maintained that from the early days of community policing, reduction in the fear of crime has been the main goal in building partnerships between the police and community residents. In a more recent study that compared civilian volunteers to non-volunteers, Zhao et al. (2002) concluded that through perceptions of collective efficacy, a willingness to help neighbors as well as build trust tend to be greater among volunteers.

An analysis of the neighborhood's background helps to broaden the scope of citizens who become policing volunteers by incorporating crime conditions, neighborhood social disorder, and participation in community organizations. Through an evaluation conducted by the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) program, citizens cited crime as "the number one problem" facing the city as well as their own neighborhoods. This concern motivated a significant number of citizens to attend community policing beat meetings in an attempt to solve neighborhood public safety problems (Skogan, 1998).

Further, Zhao et al. (2002) found that "police volunteers fear violent crime victimization substantially more than general citizens" (p. 41). Those volunteers focus more on the collective well-being of their respective neighborhoods than the other residents. Thus, Zhao and associates concluded that a neighborhood's social disorder and a desire to take action against it are likely to motivate citizens in becoming volunteers.

The final predictive factor associated with volunteerism is the relationship between an individual's perception concerning government agencies and citizen participation in coproduction efforts. In other words, citizens' perceptions regarding the local police as well as other public community organizations may have a considerable influence on their desire to become volunteers. In Brown's study (1976)

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that addressed the formation of early Western frontier day vigilante groups, the primary reason was found to be attributed to a strong distrust of the government. These groups were typically organized by citizens who believed that government agencies did not provide adequate law enforcement protection. Thus, their strength was derived from banding together with common interests in an effort to defend themselves from real and/or perceived threats.

According to Lin (1990), the number of law enforcement agencies that employ senior volunteers has increased in recent years, and, in addition, these citizens have gradually been assigned greater responsibilities. Further, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) (1983) maintained that law enforcement agencies often prefer older volunteers because they are usually more readily available, are highly dependable, and uniformly support the goals of police departments.

On the other hand, other scholars (Cao, Frank, & Cullen, 1996; Clear & Karp, 1998; Zhao et al., 2002) have challenged this traditional view by arguing that all citizens who participate in local crime prevention programs are likely to demonstrate a favorable outlook toward local police agencies. For example, volunteers may tend to support the idea of police-community partnerships and consider that citizen participation can assist local police agencies in controlling social disorder and improving the quality of life in their respective neighborhoods. Clear and Karp (1998) and Zhao et al. (2002) suggested that volunteers are often supportive of the community policing philosophy in particular. Volunteers are also more likely than average citizens to observe crime prevention as a collective effort that involves neighborhood mobilization (Smith, Steadman, Minton, & Townsend, 1999).

A growing number of police agencies have begun to view volunteers as an integral part of community policing programs. Although departments utilize volunteers for different reasons and assign them to various roles, policing officials tend to agree that volunteers benefit their organizations financially and represent an ideal asset for carrying out tasks that might otherwise occupy sworn officers' valuable time (Sharp, 1999).

In an article pertaining to guidelines for using police volunteers, Aryani (2005) pointed out that volunteers hail from a variety of backgrounds and age groups. Typically, agencies that support volunteers provide training combined with periodic refresher courses that are paramount in decreasing costs and liabilities and increasing the effectiveness of volunteer resources.

TELEMASP Survey

An 18-item survey questionnaire pertaining to the use of volunteers was distributed to Texas municipal police departments, county sheriffs' offices, and the Texas Department of Public Safety in order to gain an estimate of the volunteerism initiative.

Results. Out of 74 agencies that participated in the survey, 58 use volunteers, 15 have never used volunteers, and only one has ceased using them. Notably, 26% of the departments began using volunteers in 2002, and a large number started their program within the last three years, with

La Porte representing the most recent police department that initiated its volunteer program in 2008.

Tendency to use volunteers. As shown in Figure 1, the number of volunteers has increased within the last three years in 55% of the agencies, while in 33% of the agencies the numbers have remained approximately the same. In only 12% of responding Texas police agencies has the number of volunteers decreased.

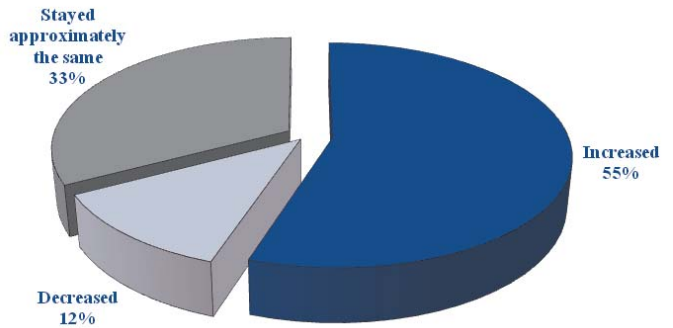


Figure 1. Percentage of increase or decrease in the use of volunteers, 2005-2009

Respondents were asked to indicate whether their agencies “do not use,” “occasionally use,” “frequently use,” or “extensively use” volunteers in the following roles: communication, front desk personnel, supporting Neighborhood Watch programs, public education related to criminal justice issues, assisting victims, motorist assistance, clerical assistance, translating or interpreting, data processing/management, Scout Explorer Posts, issuing parking/regulatory citations, and other. As shown in Table 1, “issuing parking/regulatory citations” ranked first among the use of volunteers, whereas “translating or interpreting” was the least employed role.

Table 1. Use of Citizen Volunteers

	Average Rate
Issue parking/regulatory citations	2.40
Other	2.30
Clerical assistance	2.17
Supporting Neighborhood Watch	2.13
Data processing/management	2.07
Scout Explorer Posts	2.00
Assisting with victims	1.90
Motorist assistance	1.76
Public education related to issues in	
Criminal justice	1.75
Front desk personnel	1.71
Communication	1.43
Translating/Interpreting	1.33

- 0 = Do not use
- 1 = Occasional use
- 2 = Frequent use
- 3 = Extensive use

Tendency to use retired police officers. Seventy-nine percent of the departments do not use retired police officers as volunteers, while 21% use them frequently in supporting Neighborhood Watch programs, Scout Explorer Posts, and

other functions, including chaplains, firearms, investigative training, and even Santa Claus in the case of the Highland Village police department.

Participating agency respondents indicated that the importance of volunteers depends on whether their roles are considered to be “least valuable” or “very valuable.” As Table 2 reveals, the average rating given to volunteers was 2.58 on a scale ranging from zero to 4. For example, the Garland Police Department found volunteers to be “indispensable” in vehicle fleet maintenance, fingerprinting citizens, and pawn ticket retrieval, whereas volunteers employed by the Lewisville and McKinney police departments were rated as being either “very valuable” or “indispensable” to the Digital Child ID program. Similarly, volunteers in the Keller Police Department were reported to be “indispensable” on issues related to animal control.

However, this does not necessarily mean that there are no negative aspects associated with their employment. While 67% of the respondents indicated that their agencies “have no problems” with their volunteers, 33% reported having “some” problems. As depicted in Figure 2, 68% of volunteer-related problems are attributed to staff/volunteer conflicts, and 26% are based on dependability problems. The Bexar County Sheriff’s Office reported that there have occasionally been minor issues; however, the problems have been resolved by implementing training or orientation measures. Further, survey results indicated that high turnover rates among volunteers is no longer an issue. Still, legal liabilities, citizen/volunteer conflict, and problems

Table 2. Assessment of Volunteers According to their Roles

	Average Rate
Other	3.26
Clerical assistance	2.73
Supporting Neighborhood Watch	2.71
Public education in criminal justice	2.68
Data processing/management	2.67
Scout Explorer Posts	2.64
Issue parking/regulatory citations	2.60
Front desk personnel	2.59
Assisting with victims	2.50
Motorist assistance	2.29
Translating/interpreting	2.25
Communication	2.00
AVERAGE TOTAL	2.58

- 0 = Of some assistance
- 1 = Valuable
- 2 = Very valuable
- 3 = Indispensable

related to departmental confidentiality (21%) must be taken into account.

As shown in Figure 3, recognition ceremonies, awards, and social events (i.e., group outings and picnics) represent popular incentives that directly reinforce the importance of community-service volunteers. The Frisco Police Department

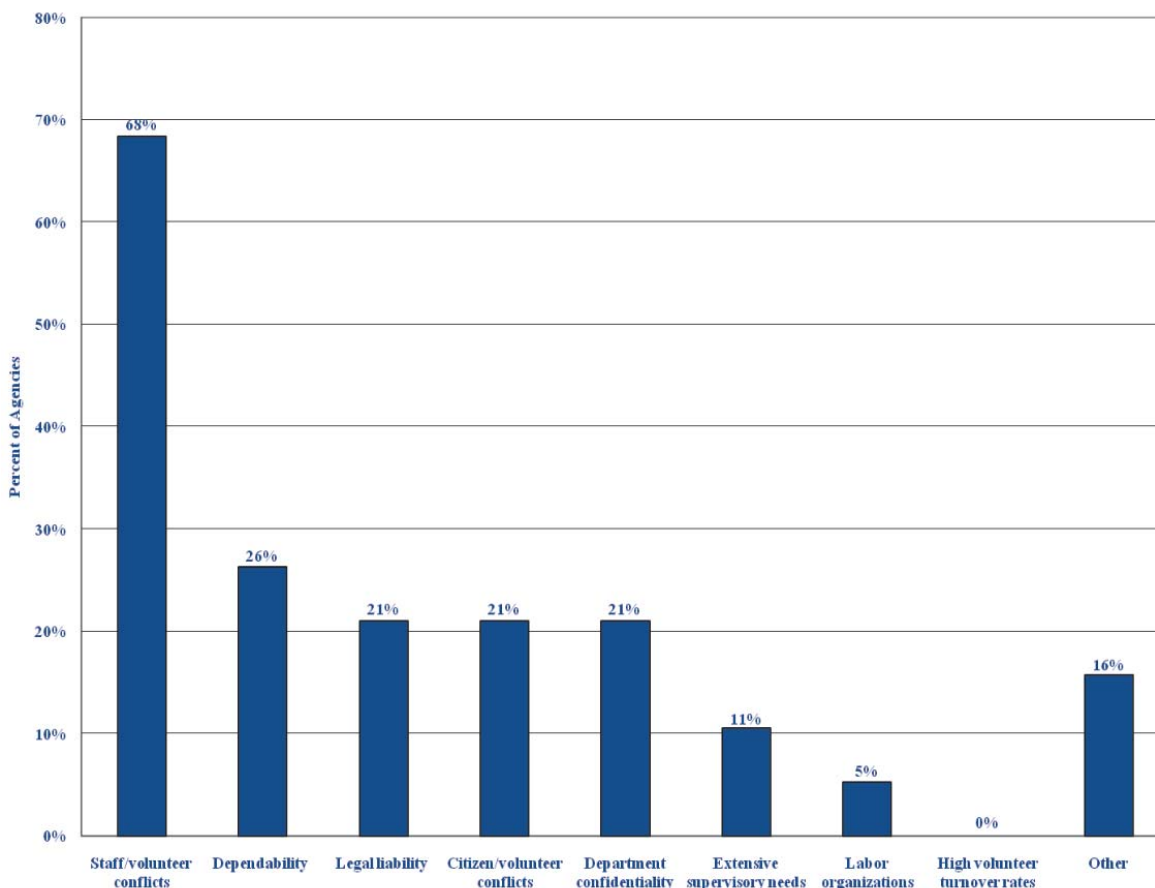


Figure 2. Problems related to use of volunteers

goes one step further by providing citizens-on-patrol with vehicles, radios, and meeting facilities. On the other hand, 12% of the agencies do not offer any motivational rewards for enthusiastic volunteers.

As depicted in Figure 4, 40% of the survey respondents require 1 to 10 hours of training, while 28% require 21 to 40 hours of standard volunteer training followed by 9% that require 41 to 80 hours and 7% that call for 11 to 20 hours. At the extreme level, the Allen and Seagoville police departments require their volunteers to participate in an 80+ hour program. Conversely, 14% of the agencies do not require any training.

Survey results indicated no significant difference between required drug testing used to screen potential volunteers vs. actual appointed volunteers. Eighty-eight percent of the agencies do not use drug testing for potential volunteers, and 86% do not require testing for their appointed volunteers. Conversely, appointed volunteers are subject to drug testing by the Carrollton Police Department and the Travis County Sheriff's Office in the event that a motor vehicle accident is involved. The McKinney and Sulphur Springs police departments have initial drug screening, whereas the Rosenberg and Bedford police departments have random testing for their appointed volunteers.

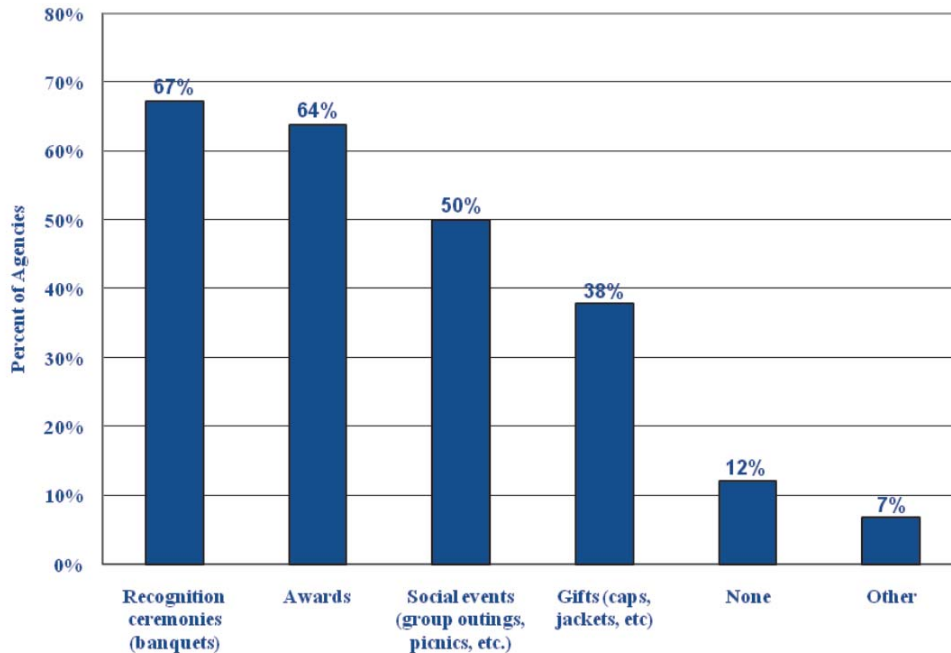


Figure 3. Incentives used to motivate volunteers

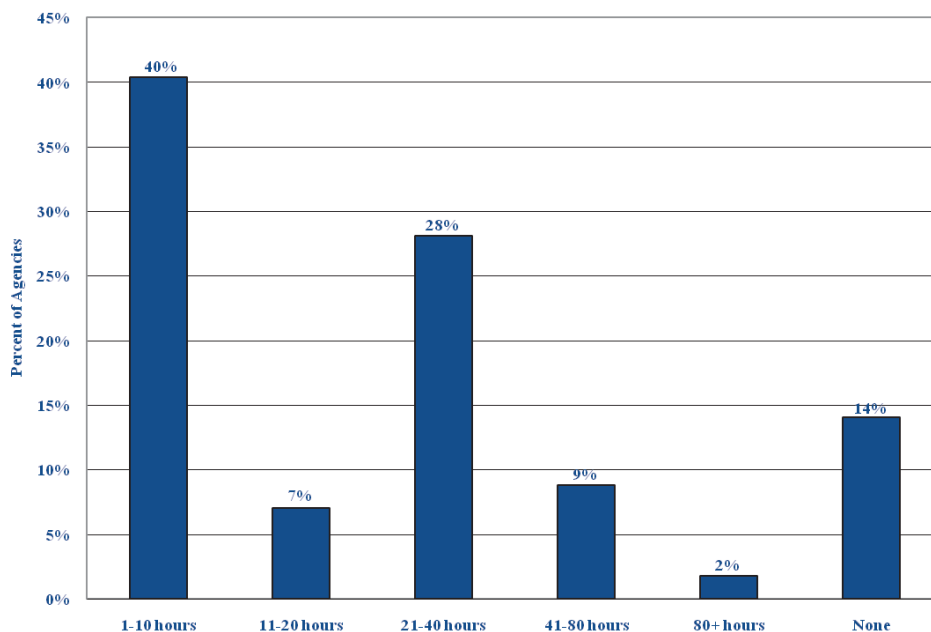


Figure 4. Required hours of volunteer training

Responses to the survey indicated a considerable difference between volunteers who are either subject to specific dress codes or required to wear uniforms furnished by the department. Ninety-five percent of the departments require a dress code, 61% provide uniforms, and 5% do not designate a dress code. Similar to the Duncanville Police Department, however, most of the respondents stated that volunteers must wear casual but professional attire. For example, volunteers of the Denton Police Department must avoid wearing torn jeans, sandals, flip flops, or T-shirts with alcohol logos or use of profanity.

Referring to Figure 5, agencies report in aggregate that 68% of volunteers are 51 years of age or older, and 90% are 31 years of age or older. Although there are no policies that specify maximum age restrictions, the minimum age is subject to change within different volunteer programs. Specifically, volunteers of the Tyler Police Department's Citizens for Traffic Safety Volunteer (CTS) or Vehicle/Property Crimes Volunteer programs must be at least 21 years of age. On the other hand, 18 is the minimum age level requirement for Citizens On Park Patrol (COPP). The minimum age limit does not constitute a special situation given that only 3% of the volunteers are 21 years of age or younger.

A majority of the surveyed agencies (86%) do not expect volunteers to perform their duties based on age. However, exceptions were reported. For example, in the Bexar County Sheriff's Office, younger volunteers assist with family-based programs, and older volunteers handle more service-oriented or counseling type programs. Further, in the Houston Police Department, young interns are appointed to plain clothing assignments and private investigators, whereas middle-aged and other volunteers are assigned to in-house administrative duties. Accordingly, in the Texarkana Police Department, younger volunteers typically work outdoors whereas older volunteers prefer inside duties.

The gender of volunteers is almost equally distributed. Although volunteers are generally comprised of 51% females and 49% males, there were extremes reported by agency respondents. For example, volunteers are made up of all females (100%) in the Jersey Village Police Department, and the Baytown and Lufkin police departments consist of 90% male volunteers.

Respondents pointed out that one of the most important reasons for recruiting volunteers is related to the substantial cost savings. However, funding for volunteers ranged from an extreme high of \$5,000 to an extreme low of \$5.00. On average, the annual volunteer expenditures totaled \$424 in direct costs in the surveyed agencies. In addition to lower costs, respondents stated that they had never been involved in a lawsuit stemming from the actions of volunteers.

As shown in Figure 6, agencies were reported to refrain from the use of volunteers for reasons related to legal liabilities, staff/volunteer conflicts, citizen/volunteer conflicts, extensive supervisory needs, dependability problems, violations of departmental confidentiality, and "other." Of these problems, those perceived and reported as "very important" include legal liabilities and dependability. Although these issues may be common to volunteers, a majority of the respondents indicated that the department could overcome such problems. For example, the Garland Police Department does not permit volunteers to write citations due to potential citizen conflicts, and "other" problems were based on safety measures. Thus, in the Waco Police Department Explorers are not permitted to drive patrol vehicles or participate at the firing range due to safety regulations.

Conclusion

Historically, volunteers have been a long-time tradition of American policing. In Texas, the number of law enforcement

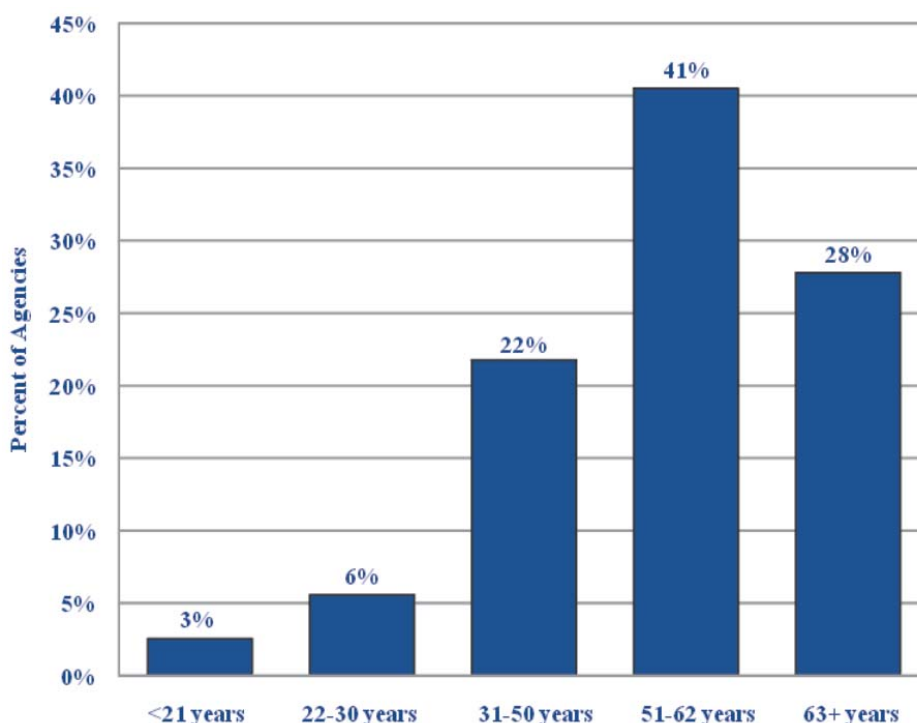


Figure 5. Typical age of volunteers

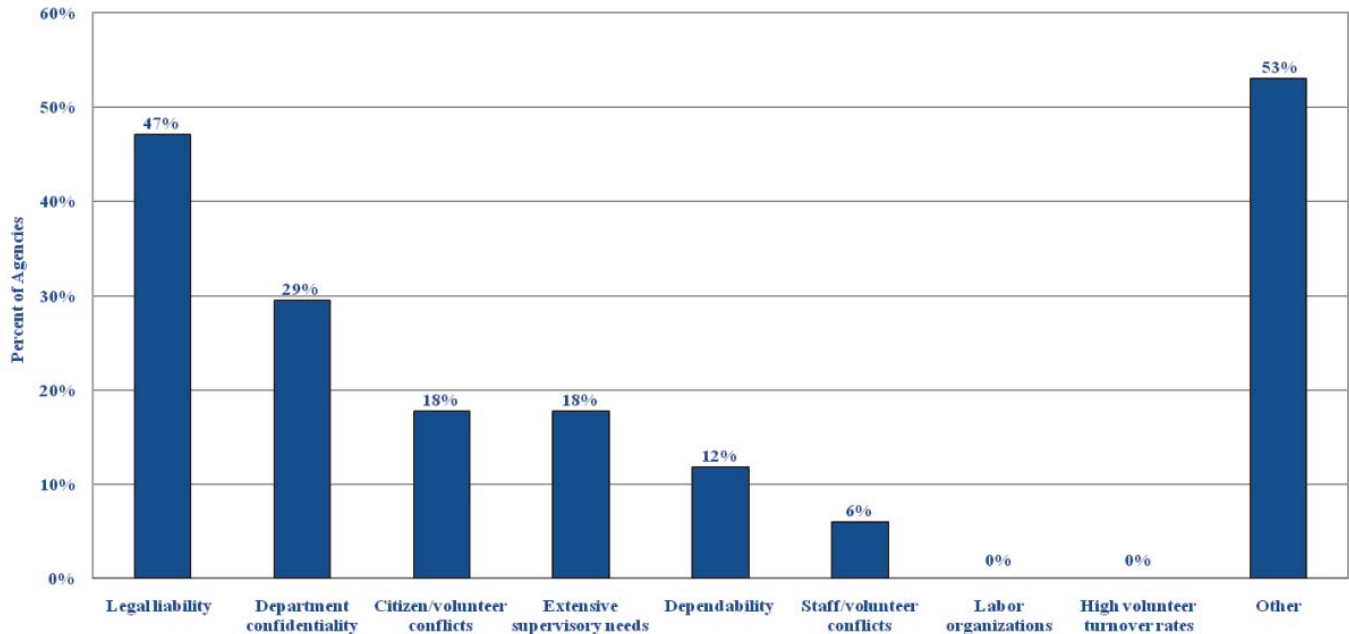


Figure 6. Reasons that agencies may refrain from the use of volunteers

agencies that use volunteers has sharply increased, particularly since 2002. In addition to the cost-effective benefits, volunteers are indispensable in providing relief to sworn officers by assisting in a variety of necessary tasks. In this *TELEMASP Bulletin*, respondents representing 74 Texas police agencies reported that any problems associated with volunteers can be overcome. In addition, respondents indicated that their agencies have never been involved in lawsuits related to the actions of volunteers. Accordingly, when the pros and cons are weighed, the use of volunteers is regarded as a viable source for policing agencies throughout Texas.

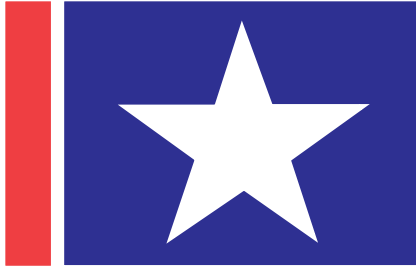
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Austin Police Department	McKinney Police Department
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Beaumont Police Department	Midland Police Department
Bedford Police Department	Montgomery County Sheriff's Office
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