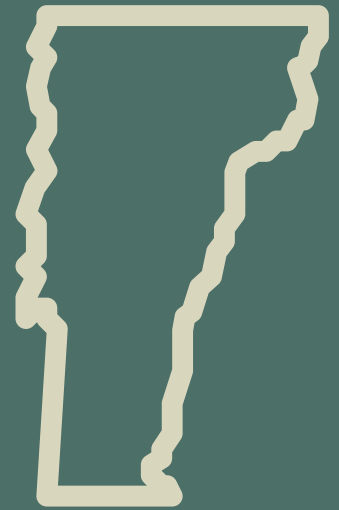


A SNAPSHOT OF
**MUNICIPAL
POLICING IN
VERMONT**



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SUBMITTED TO

**VERMONT LEAGUE OF
CITIES AND TOWNS**



Background

In recent years, a number of reports concerning rising crime in Vermont and police responses have garnered attention from stakeholders, community members, and the legislature. Given this attention, VLCT initiated a project focused on identifying the issues facing Vermont's municipal police departments, the strategies implemented to address these issues, and challenges and barriers to doing so.

Methods

Crime Research Group conducted interviews and surveys to explore these topics. In total, CRG interviewed 21 chiefs and town officials and received 88 responses to the survey. Survey responses were received from individuals not interviewed and included perspectives from chiefs, patrol officers, other law enforcement personnel, selectboard members, town/city managers, and more. The perspectives captured represent 45 of Vermont's 53 municipal police departments.

Key Takeaways

Major issues facing municipal police departments include:

Low or inadequate levels of staffing

Limited resources (e.g., funding, equipment, and facility capacity)

Reliance on police to respond to mental health, substance use disorder, and unhoused populations

Drug related crimes and theft/larceny

The issues facing municipal law enforcement are often interconnected meaning that operational issues impact law enforcement's ability to address non-criminal and criminal issues and vice versa.

Some interesting strategies for addressing the issues discussed included cross-training law enforcement in other first responder fields (i.e., EMT), collaboration with external and embedded social service providers, and data driven patrols.

Limitations

The results of this report reflect the perceptions of the law enforcement officers and town officials who participated in interviews and surveys. Not all departments' experiences are captured in the report. This means that there may be issues/challenges and strategies for addressing those issues that are not reflected in the report. Furthermore, this project did not compare the perspectives provided by respondents (i.e., large departments v. small departments, urban v. rural). As such, this report cannot fully speak to the impact of the issues/challenges on the departments.

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Introduction

In the last couple of years, the Vermont League of Cities and Towns has been following a number of reports on rising crime in the state and issues related to police response. These reports have piqued VLCT's interest in better understanding the state of policing for Vermont's municipal police departments. In this regard, VLCT contracted with Crime Research Group to explore issues facing municipal police departments in the state and strategies implemented by departments to address the issues. This project set out to answer the following questions:

1. Between 2022 and 2023, what operational, non-criminal, and criminal issues affected Vermont's municipal police departments?
 - a. What are some strategies municipal departments have implemented to address these issues?
2. What are challenges/barriers to addressing the issues for municipal departments?

Methods

Given the complexity of the topics at hand, CRG researchers engaged in two forms of data collection to answer the questions. First, interviews were conducted with randomly selected law enforcement chiefs and town leadership (e.g., selectboard members, town managers). Second, a statewide survey was administered to law enforcement personnel and town government officials in municipalities with police departments. See Appendix A for a detailed discussion on how the data were collected and analyzed by project leaders. Through the interviews and surveys combined, perspectives were captured from at least one person representing the operations of 45 of Vermont's 53 municipal police departments. In some cases, more than one person provided perspective on issues facing their town's department. Below, Table 1 depicts the departments with representatives who participated in an interview or the survey and illustrates whether participants include law enforcement, town officials, or both. Of the 45 departments reflected in the data, 20 departments had both town official and law enforcement participants. It is possible that perspectives on other departments were captured as there were six respondents who completed the survey anonymously.

Table 1. Participating Departments and Types of Respondents

Department Name	Law Enforcement Respondent	Town Official Respondent
Barre Town PD	X	
Bellows Falls PD		X
Bennington PD	X	X
Berlin PD		X
Bradford PD		X
Brandon PD	X	X
Brattleboro PD	X	X
Bristol PD	X	
Burlington PD	X	X
Chester PD	X	X
Colchester PD	X	X
Dover PD	X	X
Essex PD	X	X
Fair Haven PD	X	
Fairlee PD	X	X
Hartford PD		X
Hinesburg PD		X
Killington PD	X	X
Lyndonville PD	X	
Manchester PD	X	
Middlebury PD	X	X
Milton PD	X	
Montpelier PD	X	
Moristown PD	X	X
Newport PD	X	X
Northfield PD		X
Norwich PD	X	X
Richmond PD		X
Rutland City PD	X	
Rutland Town PD	X	
South Burlington PD	X	X
Springfield PD	X	X
St. Albans PD		X
St. Johnsbury PD	X	X
Stowe PD		X
Swanton Village PD		X
Thetford PD	X	
Town of Rockingham PD		X
Williston PD	X	
Wilmington PD	X	X
Windsor PD	X	X
Winhall PD	X	
Winooski PD	X	X
Vergennes PD		X
Woodstock PD		X

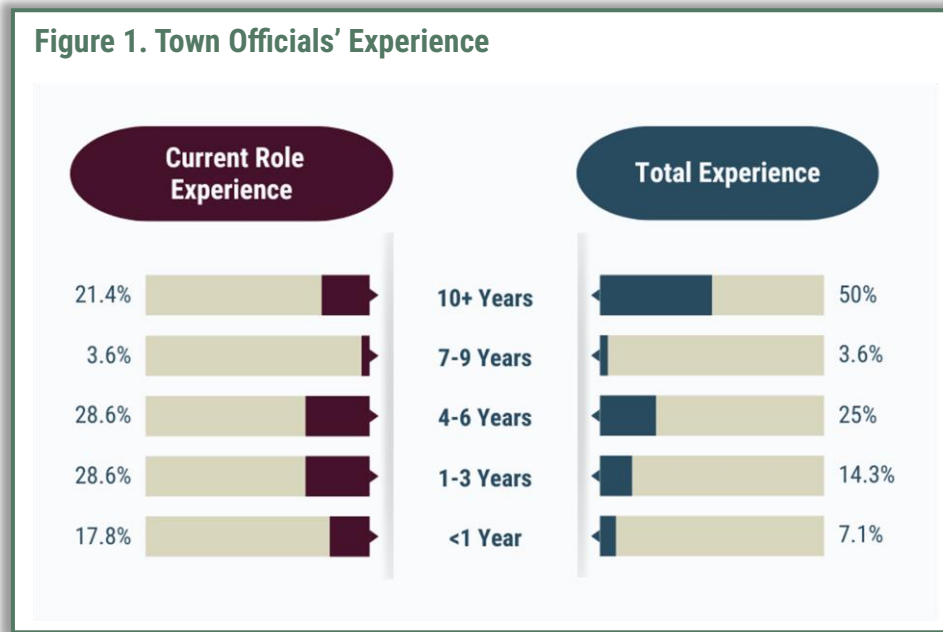
Interview Participants

In total, 10 police chiefs and 11 town leaders participated in the interview. Initially, CRG aimed to interview 11 police chiefs, but only 10 opted to participate in an interview. Those who did not participate did not respond to invitations to be interviewed. Those interviewed represented 11 counties in Vermont. However, it is important to note that two of Vermont's 14 counties— Grand Isle and Essex— do not have municipal police departments. Representatives from Orleans County were not included in the interviews. Chiefs interviewed had an average of seven years' experience in their current role and 25 years of experience as a police officer. Town leaders interviewed included both executive and legislative officials (e.g., selectboard members, town managers). The 11 officials interviewed had an average of 3.5 years of experience in their current role and 8 years of experience in town government.

Survey Respondents

A total of 172 people responded to the survey. However, some responses were discarded because they were incomplete. Additionally, some completed responses were discarded. While the respondent answered all questions, the responses indicated that their town either did not have a police department or contracted with a county/state agency for coverage.

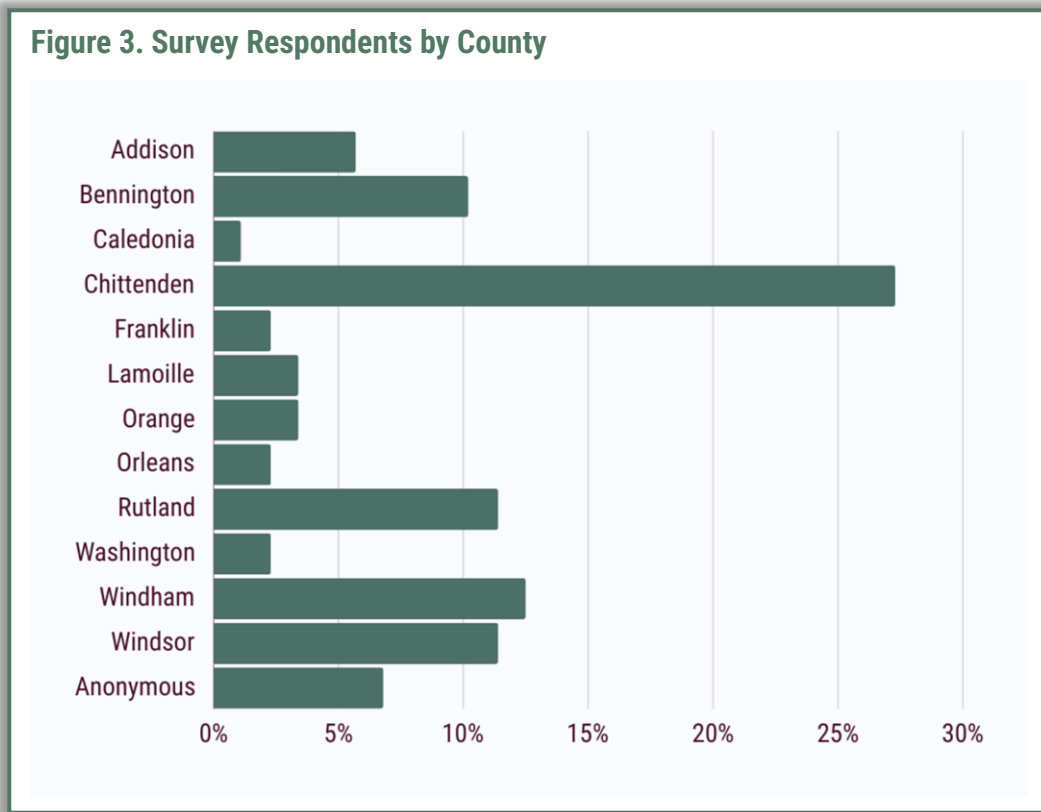
After completing the review process, a total of 88 survey responses were included in the analysis— 28 from town officials and 60 from law enforcement officers. A majority of town officials indicated that they serve their town's government as selectboard members (35.7%, 10) or managers (32.1%, 9). Other respondents included council members and trustees. Respondents' levels of experience in their current roles varied (see Figure 1 on the next page). However, half of the town officials (50%, 14) who responded to the survey had a total of 10+ years' experience in town government (other towns included).



A majority of the law enforcement surveyed indicated that they were patrol officers (55%, 33). Other respondents included chiefs, supervisors, detectives, community resource specialists, and administrative staff. Some indicated that they had more than one role within their agency. A majority (65%, 39) of law enforcement officers participating in the survey had 10+ years' experience as a police officer and many (48%, 29) had 10+ years' experience working for their department (see Figure 2).



The 88 survey responses received came from representatives of all 12 of Vermont's counties with municipal police departments (see Figure 3 on the next page). Most respondents represented departments in Chittenden County (27.27%, 24).



Limitations

While this report involved thorough exploration into the issues facing municipal police departments in Vermont, not all departments' experiences were captured in this report. A variety of perspectives are contained within the report; however, it is important to note that most responses came from law enforcement leaders and staff. Furthermore, this report details only the major themes identified by respondents. This means that there are other, less prevalent, issues facing police departments in the state that are not outlined in this report.

Findings

The findings presented below represent the perspectives of law enforcement and town officials who participated in the interviews and survey. The subheadings outline the major themes. Prominent subthemes from the data are bolded within the paragraphs; however, not all major themes contain subthemes.

Operational Issues

- Respondents overwhelmingly noted insufficient staffing levels as the most pressing operational issue.
- Other operational issues commonly highlighted include limited resources (e.g., funding, equipment, facilities) and professional culture/attitudes (i.e., leadership and officer morale).
- A few strategies for addressing the major operational issues identified by respondents include increased wages/new benefits, efficient/creative utilization of staff, grant funding, increased community engagement, and leadership changes.

Insufficient Staffing Levels

Respondents noted that, in general, insufficient staffing levels posed an operational issue in departments that were both short-staffed and those that were fully staffed (See Appendix B for a list of municipal departments and their 2022 staffing numbers). In both cases, respondents indicated that staffing issues made it difficult to schedule shifts while maintaining adequate coverage of their jurisdictions. Those whose departments were short staffed— meaning that they had the funding to hire additional officers, but positions were vacant— sometimes pointed to specific issues like trouble **recruiting and retaining officers**. Several respondents who mentioned recruitment issues elaborated by noting that they felt there were few applicants for vacant positions. Additionally, some mentioned that those who did apply were not qualified for the position. Others discussed issues related to officer retention. In some cases, respondents indicated that officers left for typical reasons like retirement. However, several respondents mentioned that officers left their current employment for positions in other departments. In response to staffing issues, many departments have implemented wage increases and new

benefits (see more on this below). Some respondents suggested that this has caused a “wage war,” leading to many experienced officers leaving for positions in other agencies. Other respondents suggested that some officers have entirely left the policing profession. Beyond these general staffing issues, several respondents noted that their departments had specific staffing needs that they were unable to fill. Specific positions mentioned by respondents included dispatch, police social workers, analysts, evidence, and investigators. The impact of these vacancies is that officers spend less time in the field while they address some of the responsibilities of the unfilled positions.

Interestingly, respondents noted that staffing levels posed an operational issue in departments that were fully staffed— meaning that departments were staffed to the fullest extent allowed by their budgets— indicating that some departments have been dealing with a larger **demand for services** than they can provide. Several respondents noted that their departments have operated with five or fewer officers on patrol and, in some cases, this included the Chief. Certain aspects of policing can make it difficult to operate with few officers. For example, one respondent discussed how their jurisdiction is geographically widespread, which is challenging when there is one officer on shift having to respond to multiple calls on opposites ends of town. Another respondent noted that completing incident paperwork can sometimes take an officer out of the field for half of the day. Likewise, others mentioned that an officer may sometimes be off the job for longer periods of time due to injury, involvement in a shooting, required training, or time off requests. In these cases, the department must continue to function while being “down an officer.”

It should be noted that some respondents reported no issues with staffing levels, nor the recruitment and retention of officers. One respondent credited this to previous departmental leadership’s research on benefits/incentives offered by neighboring agencies as well as on what would encourage current staff to stay. As a result, the department was able to offer competitive wages compared to surrounding agencies and support training in specialized areas that interested their officers (e.g., firearms instructor, K9 handler).

Addressing Insufficient Staffing Levels

Respondents mentioned a variety of strategies implemented to address insufficient staffing levels. The strategy most often mentioned was **wage increases and additional benefits**. In addition

to increasing officers' pay, many respondents said their departments offer hiring and retention bonuses. Still, some respondents indicated that these incentives have not yet been effective in filling vacant positions. Other benefits added to encourage recruitment and retention include the addition of more time off, facility/equipment perks, enhanced medical benefits, and access to specialized training. One respondent explained that their department's new policy increased holiday time off and decreased the amount of time it takes an officer to accrue vacation time. Another respondent elaborated on their department's enhanced medical benefits, noting that their plan included the officer's family to the extent that the out-of-pocket costs were minimal, if not zero.

• • •
When asked about strategies for addressing staffing level issues, a few respondents pointed to specific facility/equipment incentives, like access to a gym within their facility and the availability of "take home" cars.
• • •

Several respondents noted their department's efforts to **support training opportunities** for officers. Some indicated that their departments supported these opportunities because they believed unique training opportunities encourage recruitment and retention of officers. Other respondents highlighted how their department's support of training opportunities served to enhance officers' capabilities. Respondents highlighted a variety of training opportunities, either offered or supported by their departments, which were believed to be of interest to officers like a K9 program, forensic cell-phone analysis, drone program, tactical response, and crash reconstruction. Trainings were either offered internally (e.g., by certified officers within the department, by external trainers brought into the department) or through external training opportunities supported by the department (e.g., identifying online trainings, paying for time off and the cost of training). Another respondent said their department provided officers with opportunities to earn certification in other first responder fields, such as EMT and fire. It is important to note that their departments were able to provide these cross-training opportunities because they had certified trainers working in their towns.

Another strategy for addressing insufficient staffing levels focused on **efficient/creative utilization of staff**. Several respondents mentioned that their department scheduled officers for

longer, 12- hour shifts. While this served to provide the coverage needed with limited staff, respondents did note that this solution was not sustainable and led to officers feeling overworked and clocking overtime hours, which had implications for the budget. Other scheduling strategies discussed involved using “on call” shifts and/or having one officer on shift. However, some found it difficult to work out the logistics of “on call” shifts, especially for those departments whose officers did not have “take home” cruisers: an on-call officer would first have to drive to the station to retrieve a police vehicle before responding to the call. Others highlighted that having one officer on shift at a time can pose challenges if multiple calls come in at once, potentially putting the officer in dangerous situations (e.g., responding to a domestic violence call). Some respondents discussed targeted patrol efforts to focus staff attention on certain areas of the department’s jurisdiction.

Finally, respondents highlighted their department’s **continued recruiting efforts**. This included utilizing advertising methods that they had not typically used in years past (e.g., word of mouth, personal contacts, social media) and the creation of internal positions focused exclusively on hiring. In some departments, this is just a single officer focused on developing recruitment strategies/materials and reviewing applications. Other departments have created a team of officers to complete these tasks.

Resource Limitations

The next most common operational issue discussed was resource limitations. Some respondents discussed **funding/budget** as a general issue. Many respondents discussed funding as a general issue, and some pointed out that their respective department budget had remained static for several years, despite increasing costs of operations due to inflation and a perceived higher demand for services from citizens. More often, respondents identified specific resources limited by the funding/budget— equipment and the facility.

Many highlighted specific **equipment** needs (i.e., maintenance and upgrades) that could be addressed with more adequate funding. For example, one respondent discussed a state mandate requiring departments to use digital radios. The respondent noted that their department put forth significant effort to find funding to meet the mandate by first working with town officials to determine whether the town could fund the mandate, and eventually applying for a grant. In

addition to radios, other types of equipment maintenance or upgrade needs mentioned include computers, police vehicles, uniforms, and tasers. A few also highlighted useful equipment that their department would purchase if they had the money to do so, like drones and motorized bicycles.

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One respondent highlighted that their department does not have adequate locker room space to support the hire of a female officer.
• • •

The department's **facility** is another resource limitation mentioned by several respondents who typically noted that there was inadequate space. One person described their department to be the size of a closet. Another respondent explained that officers in their department did not have adequate space to complete their report writing or hold arrestees. Someone else explained that their facility was not initially intended to be used as a police department. Other respondents noted

the old age and poor condition of their department's facility. One person expounded that their facility's flooring was peeling and there were areas contaminated with asbestos. The respondent's asbestos concerns were further exacerbated by the facility's poor ventilation.

Addressing Resource Limitations

Respondents outlined two strategies for addressing resource limitations— applying for grants and engaging town government. Most commonly, respondents mentioned several **grants** that their departments have utilized for funding, including the US Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grant, BJA's Justice Assistance Grant (JAG), and Governor's Highway Safety Program grants. Another strategy highlighted by several respondents was their department leadership's **engaging town government** at meetings. A few people discussed how their police department's representative attended meetings to better explain the reasoning behind budget requests. Oftentimes, leadership would bring reports and other materials (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, pictures, strategy plans) to support their resource requests.

Professional Culture and Attitudes

The third most common operational issue mentioned related to professional culture and attitudes. More specifically, respondents mentioned issues with **leadership** and **officer morale**.

Respondents noted both changes in leadership and lack of leadership (perceived and actual) as operational issues. Those discussing changes in leadership pointed to the onboarding process. In other words, the time it takes for new leadership to learn about the department and settle in creates a temporary operational challenge. Still, most noted that changes in leadership were ultimately positive for the department. Others mentioning lack of leadership did not often elaborate. Context provided by those who did elaborate indicates that respondents mentioning lack of leadership could mean that leadership positions were vacant, or it could mean that they felt their department's leaders were not performing adequately. One respondent did note challenges in recruiting and retaining officers for leadership positions. Other respondents discussed key leaders who had been with the department for a long time and, as a result, felt that things in the department had become stagnant.

Respondents discussing officer morale attributed low morale to several factors, some of which were external and outside of the department's control. External factors include the perception of inadequate criminal justice system responses, community perceptions of law enforcement, and legislative policies. Still, there were some internal factors that respondents pointed out as contributing to low officer morale, like poor facility conditions, long hours, and leadership. In general, respondents felt that officers' morale impacted their motivation to perform their duties.

Addressing Professional Attitudes and Culture Issues

Respondents recognize that there are limited actions their department could take towards addressing external factors influencing officer morale (see Challenges and Barriers section below for more on external issues). Still, a few respondents noted specific efforts related to **community policing**, which they believe has had a positive impact on officer morale through increasing officers' engagement with community members (e.g., meet and greets, officers

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One respondent felt that uniform changes had increased officers' morale. Instead of 8-point hats the officers are now able to wear department baseball caps. The respondent suggested that feeling more comfortable on long shifts can have a positive impact on an officer's attitude.

...

attending school lunch, community members invited into the department for coffee). There were a couple of examples provided for strategies implemented to address internal factors contributing to low officer morale. For example, one respondent mentioned that new/upgraded equipment motivated officers in their department. Another discussed changes to the uniform that made officers more comfortable throughout long shifts.

Non-Criminal Issues

- Mental health, substance use, and unhoused populations were commonly mentioned as non-criminal issues facing municipal police.
- Other issues mentioned include traffic enforcement and citizen concerns/disputes.
- A few strategies implemented to address these issues were the addition of a police social worker, collaborations with social service agencies, the purchase of radar equipment, and proactive interactions with citizens.

Public Health Issues

Many respondents listed several public health matters when discussing non-criminal issues facing the police department— mental health crises, substance use, and unhoused people. Several respondents noted that these issues can be interconnected in some cases; however, in other

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One respondent summed up their town's issue by saying the motel had been turned into a homeless shelter without adequate management and felt the responsibility had defaulted to the police department.
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instances they are unique issues. Of the three matters identified by respondents, **mental health crises** were mentioned most often. Some respondents indicated that they were receiving a lot of mental health related calls. A few indicated that mental health calls were a leading non-criminal issue handled by their departments but overall, the number of calls was low. Several respondents also mentioned **substance use** calls as being a common non-criminal issue facing their department. These included people using substances in public and medical emergencies related to drug use (i.e., overdoses). The final

public health issue mentioned as a non-criminal issue facing police departments was matters related to **unhoused populations** in town. Some noted that there was a large, unhoused population in their town. Some respondents noted that their police departments are often called to address issues related to camping on private and public property. A few mentioned that other calls made to their police departments about these populations were related to low-level crimes, such as public intoxication, loitering, and trespassing. Other respondents discussing issues related to unhoused populations indicated that they believed the issue to be, in part, connected to the motel housing voucher program.

Addressing Public Health Issues

When discussing how departments were addressing public health matters, respondents commonly noted **collaboration with community organizations and other social services providers**. Other general strategies for addressing public health matters mentioned by respondents include increased community interaction, training officers, and relying more on non-sworn personnel.

On the issue of mental health crises specifically, respondents highlighted **embedded social service providers** like their department's police social worker and community resource/support specialists. Another noted that their department has established a crisis intervention team (CIT). Other respondents indicated that their departments were in the process of seeking grants to fund the hire of embedded social service providers and/or community resource specialists. Some explained that their department utilized countywide mental health worker services (i.e., Vermont State Police embedded workers).

Two examples were given of how departments were specifically addressing matters concerning unhoused populations and substance use. One respondent said their department has created a task force of collaborative partners to focus specifically on issues concerning unhoused populations. Another person described how their officers memorize or consult dispatch for the contact information of addiction providers to share the information with those who need it. Their department is in the process of creating cards with this information for officers to carry and hand-out when responding to substance related incidents.

Traffic Related Issues

The next commonly mentioned non-criminal issue facing police departments was traffic related matters, including **speeding, parking violations, and crashes**. Those who elaborated on their town's traffic issues focused on speeding. Some respondents noted that citizens often called to report speeding. Several people attributed speeding issues to their town being a "pass through" community for people driving between major cities or between states.

Addressing Traffic Related Issues

To address traffic issues, respondents identified several strategies implemented by their departments. Most commonly, respondents mentioned the use of **portable radar equipment** (which collects data on traffic flow and speeds) and signs that display the speed of passing vehicles. Some respondents mentioned that their departments had the staffing resources available to schedule some shifts during which police officers were stationed in areas to monitor traffic. In some departments, a sworn officer manages these shifts, while others indicated they relied on non-sworn officers or local constables. All the respondents who discussed strategies for addressing traffic issues noted that their departments **engage in data informed traffic patrols**, meaning that they use traffic data and citizen reports to target specific areas of concern. A few also mentioned that their departments have made a larger effort to communicate regularly with citizens about traffic issues via newsletters and/or social media. One respondent said their department sometimes uses temporary speed bumps in problem areas.

Citizen Concerns/Disputes

Another non-criminal issue commonly mentioned was citizen concerns/disputes which encompasses a wide variety of calls from citizens requesting **pre-emptive action and/or mediation** from the police department. This includes matters

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One person detailed how their town's police department, in collaboration with EMTs, have begun to make preemptive visits to senior housing in town to complete basic blood pressure checks. The purpose of this initiative is to prevent future calls requesting welfare checks. Officers or EMTs connect with a family member if further consultation with a doctor is needed.

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like suspicious persons, animal issues, welfare checks, alarms, property disputes, and domestic disputes (e.g., family arguments, tenant/landlord disagreements).

Addressing Citizen Concerns/Dispute Issues

Some mentioned working with specific citizens who generate many of the calls to either connect them with needed resources or preemptively address them. Another strategy implemented to address some of these issues included strengthening communication with the community about crimes to encourage feelings of safety or sharing educational information about town animal policies. Respondents mentioned using social media, newsletters, and events to facilitate this communication.

Additionally, many respondents indicated that their departments had implemented a triaging system for all incoming calls. Instead of responding to incoming calls in order, some calls determined to be less serious are answered only after the more serious calls have been handled. Some mentioned that this can result in a delay of a day or more in responding to some calls.

Criminal Issues

- Most respondents pointed to drug related crimes and theft/larceny as criminal issues facing their departments.
- Strategies for addressing these issues included participation in a multi-agency task force, officers specializing in specific crimes or the creation of specialized units, increased patrols in targeted areas, and communicating prevention information with community members and businesses.
- Domestic violence was also commonly mentioned; however, respondents did not often provide additional context about circumstances surrounding the crimes or strategies for addressing the issue.

Drug Related Crimes

Respondents often mentioned drug related crimes in general as a top criminal issue facing their municipality's police department. Specific drugs mentioned included prescription opioids and heroin. Some specified the **sale of drugs** as a pressing issue, while others highlighted the

possession of illegal drugs. Several respondents specified both issues. Oftentimes, respondents noted that they believed drug related crimes to be connected to other criminal and non-criminal issues. For example, several respondents indicated that they believed people committed thefts/larceny to support their purchase of drugs. Some others did not give a reason as to why they felt drug related crimes were associated with other crimes, instead, they just suggested that drug crimes led to other criminal activities like trespassing and burglary.

Other respondents talked about **drug related crimes and their connection to non-criminal issues** facing their municipality's police department. More specifically, they felt that addiction issues may be contributing to mental health crises or a person's housing situation. Conversely, some suggested that a person's housing situation may be contributing to their substance abuse. Furthermore, a few respondents indicated that they believed some of their town's criminal activity to be related to public health issues.

Addressing Drug Related Crimes

Most often, respondents provided general strategies used by their department for addressing criminal issues. Several people indicated that their department had engaged more in **proactive patrols**, sometimes targeting specific areas. Others noted that they were patrolling more often either in a cruiser (marked and unmarked) or on foot. A couple of respondents suggested that their department's level of enforcement had increased in recent years. Recognizing the interconnectedness of criminal activity and social needs, respondents also noted that **collaboration with social services** had been a strategy implemented to address criminal issues. Some noted their department's internal resources, like police social workers, while others explained that officers try to connect people with services available in their communities. Another strategy frequently identified by respondents is an increased use of restorative justice services. One respondent explained that their department has 14 misdemeanor crimes that they directly refer to their community justice center.

Respondents discussing strategies for addressing drug related crimes often highlighted their department's **drug units or officers who specialize/focus in drug crime**. Participation in a **multiple agency collaboration** was also commonly mentioned. Specific collaborative partners identified include other county law enforcement, Homeland Security, Vermont National Guard, and the State Drug Task Force. One respondent elaborated on their collaborative efforts noting that

they meet monthly with all county law enforcement agencies to share information about problem areas and key players. Several respondents noted that their department has increased patrols in areas where drug crimes commonly occur. A few noted that their departments have begun to execute more search warrants related to drug crimes. Other strategies mentioned include drug-sniffing dogs, consistently engaging community members for information, additional training on drug related issues, and proactive engagement with people at risk (e.g., youth).

Thefts/Larceny

Like drug related crimes, most respondents indicated that thefts/larceny were a top crime facing their departments without indicating a specific type of theft/larceny. Many respondents specified **retail theft** as being a top criminal issue. Some others specified that thefts/larceny in their communities were the result of people **stealing the contents of motor vehicles or parts off the vehicles**. Several respondents also highlighted theft of motor vehicles as being a top criminal issue in their municipality.

Addressing Thefts/Larceny Crimes

Respondents outlined a variety of strategies implemented by their departments for addressing theft/larceny crimes. For addressing thefts/larceny generally, one respondent

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In addressing retail theft, one person highlighted their department's focus on building stronger partnerships with local businesses to better understand each other's needs and facilitate more effective cooperation in combating crime.
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highlighted their department's use of "special details," which assign an officer(s) to specifically focus on theft. Another respondent said their department increased patrols in specific areas. On the issue of thefts involving motor vehicles, several respondents mentioned communication with citizens via social media and physical posters reminding people to lock their cars. One respondent detailed a civilian patrol that monitors the parks in summer to dissuade car thefts and felt this made a noticeable difference. However, the respondent noted that it did not appear to make a difference in neighborhood car thefts occurring overnight. Another respondent mentioned that their department was

working closely with law enforcement partners in neighboring towns on cases of theft that seem to be tied together. For retail thefts, respondents detailed their department's efforts to **strengthen relationships with businesses** and communicate information about theft prevention. A couple of respondents said their departments also stationed officers (both in uniform and plain clothes) in retail "hot spots" or during the holiday season. One respondent said that stores in their municipality hire officers to stand in their stores and deter theft.

Challenges/Barriers to Addressing the Issues

- In general, many of the operational issues are in and of themselves a challenge/barrier to addressing the issues discussed above.
- Several respondents stated that their departments were just trying to complete their basic duties with the limited staff and resources available and felt their departments did not have the ability to be proactive.
- Many challenges/barriers detailed by respondents affected the department's ability to address more than one of the issues they discussed.

Operational Issues as a Challenge/Barrier

Many respondents discussed the difficulty of proactively addressing criminal and non-criminal issues given the staffing and resource limitations discussed above. For some, insufficient staffing levels have made it challenging to respond to incoming calls in a timely manner, especially given that many respondents noted a perceived increase in demand for services over the last couple of years. Some felt that it would take the development of a multi-disciplinary taskforce or specialized unit (e.g., street crime unit, drug crime task force) to adequately address some of the issues facing their department. However, these initiatives would require more staff as well as more funding to pay and train the staff. Furthermore, it can be difficult for some departments to respond to crimes that may put their officers in danger (e.g., domestic violence calls) when there is only one officer on duty. Respondents indicated that, in the past, state police were available to assist in

these situations; however, their capacity has been diminished in the last couple of years as they, too, are facing staffing issues.

Many respondents highlighted that more funding/budget is required to implement some of the strategies discussed above (e.g., wage increases, portable radars, replacing outdated radios). Some respondents noted issues related to working with their town's government to get department funding/budget items on the agenda, or before the town for a vote. While a few respondents pointed to a lack of support from their town's citizens for increasing the department's budget, several others noted the town was overwhelmingly supportive but there was just not enough revenue being produced to increase the budget. Others mentioned that their town's government was operating with vacant positions, which impacted the rate at which steps were taken towards adjusting the department's budget. Furthermore, funding/budget constraints limited departments' ability to hire supportive staff, like embedded social/clinical workers. Some noted additional challenges related to accessing funding for these hires. For example, one respondent recounted finding an external funding source to hire an embedded worker but explained that their application was ultimately denied due to the department already having access to a social work liaison. The respondent felt the liaison did not provide as much support to the department as an embedded worker but did not want to sacrifice the resource they had available just for the chance to access a better resource. Interestingly, several respondents noted that the use of wage increases and added benefits as a recruitment and retention strategy had produced unintended consequences. They suggested a "compensation race" had been created and some agencies could not compete with what others were offering.

Respondents discussed some challenges/barriers related to implementing strategies to address budget issues. More specifically, some departments were able to apply for additional funding via grants. While some departments have found success with this approach, the respondents often noted the challenges of applying for, and managing, the grants. Several stated that the administrative requirements of some grants were barriers for their departments. After weighing the cost/benefits, they decided not to apply. While a grant was helpful for acquiring needed equipment, it often required considerable time commitment from the department's staff to manage its administration. This further diminished staffing availability, especially in smaller departments lacking grant assistance resources (e.g., a grant writer/manager). One respondent

expressed hesitancy about applying for grants, noting that a lot of time and effort goes into applying for a grant, without a guarantee of an award.

Some noted that there are not grants available for everything departments may need. For example, highway safety grants can pay for officers working overtime to monitor traffic control issues, but those funds can't be used to pay officers working on criminal issues. In general, grant funding is often directed towards very specific purposes. Respondents noted that it has been difficult to find grant funding for things like facility improvements, innovative equipment (e.g., drones), training, and officer pay.

Some noted that their town's population fluctuations exacerbated staffing and budget challenges. In essence, the tax base in the town does not support the increasing needs of the police departments. Respondents outlined a multitude of reasons that a town's population might fluctuate. Some towns' populations fluctuate seasonally (i.e., people visiting to ski, people coming to their second homes). Others indicated that their town's year-round residential population had increased in the last couple of years. Furthermore, some respondents noted that transient and unhoused populations contribute to these fluctuations. It can be difficult to predict these fluctuations. For example, one respondent discussed a new pass offered by a nearby resort that allows pass holders to access multiple mountains, noting that this made it difficult to predict traffic patterns and plan for adequate police coverage.

Training Processes

Several respondents mentioned the training process as a barrier to hiring new officers. In particular, the Police Training Academy process requires officers to attend weeks-long onsite training at the academy. This can be a challenge/barrier for some interested in pursuing a career in law enforcement, such as single parents and those with other family/job obligations that require them to remain in a specific area of the state. Some suggested that commuting to the training location or online options could reduce the barrier. Also, departments use resources to send candidates through the academy; however, training completion is not guaranteed. In some cases, candidates have been injured

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One respondent pointed out how onsite training limits the pool of potential officers noting that some people, like single parents, cannot be away from home for weeks.
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during the training process. As a result, a few respondents noted that their departments have begun to focus more on recruiting certified officers to save the time/money their department would typically invest to assist officers in the training process. One respondent noted that it would be helpful if there was certification reciprocity, meaning that out of state certifications would be recognized in Vermont. Additionally, a few respondents noted that completion of annual training was a challenge for their understaffed departments. Other respondents mentioned issues of certification waiver approvals. One respondent said their department was not able to retain an officer as a result of such issues.

Partner Agency Availability/Capacity

Several respondents pointed out that police officers are not adequately trained to handle the public health issues that are called into the department. While a few departments do have internal social workers/services that they can rely on for assistance, many departments rely on external agencies to assist in addressing these issues. Respondents noted that many external agencies are facing their own issues related to staffing and resource limitations. In some cases, respondents said that officers are turned away when they reach out to providers for assistance with public health calls. Moreover, a couple of respondents said that while their departments were utilizing services provided by social service organizations, the partner agencies were not local. In order to access these resources, officers have to drive people to organizations in other towns, sometimes over an hour away. Others noted that social service agencies do not operate 24/7, so this resource may not be available to them at times when it is needed.

Other times, external agencies are available to respond but their distance from the incident may lead to delays in response time. Delays can occur for other reasons as well. One respondent said that service persons have gotten lost on the way to their remote town. Additionally, a few noted that some people are dealing with overlapping public health issues, making it difficult for partner agencies to provide services. One respondent highlighted how overlapping public health issues (i.e., an unhoused person with a substance use disorder) can be a barrier to provision of services because people sometimes refuse to go to a “dry” shelter. A few respondents noted that, in general, there were not enough resources available for unhoused persons, including shelter and health care (local or otherwise). Several others noted that their department did not have access to

holding cells for intoxicated individuals. These respondents also noted that officers often take the time to drive individuals to the closest jail or social service provider.

In addition to social service providers, several respondents discussed how they typically relied on state police to serve as back-up for mental health calls that are potentially dangerous (e.g., armed/suicidal individuals in crisis) or provide additional coverage when their department is not operating (i.e., departments that do not operate 24/7). However, they indicated that the Vermont State Police has not been able to assist lately because it is also experiencing staffing challenges.

Legislative Policies and Criminal Justice System Responses

In general, several respondents felt that the legislature enacts statewide policies having a differential impact on police departments. They noted that what works for one city/town may not work for another. Sometimes these policies are mandated which can cause a budgetary strain for some departments. Others elaborated on specific policies that have created challenges/barriers.

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One person expressed frustration with the criminal justice system, citing the repetitive cycle of arresting individuals 10-15 times a month. They described the process of arrest, release with a court date, failure to appear, and subsequent warrant issuance, emphasizing the strain it places on both officers and the community.

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The hotel/motel voucher program was mentioned by many respondents as a contributing factor to issues related to unhoused populations in their towns. They felt that the growth in unhoused populations in town due to the voucher program caused an increase in calls from citizens. One respondent discussed a recent use of force policy. They explained that as a result of the policy, officers are now worried about liability issues when responding to incidents in which someone has threatened death. In the past, the officers would have felt comfortable walking into the room/situation and interacting with the person in crisis.

When it comes to challenges/barriers related to addressing criminal issues facing municipal police departments, respondents often mentioned the “revolving door” of the criminal justice system. Their perception is that officers feel as though they are consistently arresting the same people. Respondents noted that this contributed

to low officer morale -- they believe there is no point to doing their job as the person will just be cited and released. A few indicated this also had a negative impact on community perceptions of law enforcement. One respondent said they believed this issue has created a sense within the community that there is a lack of accountability, which they believe makes the community members less likely to call the police. Furthermore, one respondent felt that individuals being arrested multiple times no longer have respect for law enforcement because they know they will be released. Several suggested that this was related to changes in bail reform laws, however, specific laws were not identified. Some respondents stated that it would be helpful for those working in the field to provide feedback on potential law changes before they are enacted.

Public Perceptions

Several respondents felt that public perceptions of police are not favorable and felt that this contributes to officers' low morale. A few noted that they felt there was not much that could be done about this issue. Many expressed concern that negative public perceptions were contributing to recruitment and retention issues. Some respondents highlighted the impact of COVID on the way police departments functioned, noting that officers were not able to interact with citizens as frequently as they did prior to COVID. As a result, some respondents believe that this has led to communities feeling disconnected from their law enforcement officers and vice versa. Another challenge/barrier related to professional culture mentioned by respondents was that there is not a mechanism/process through which officers could submit complaints about leadership.

Discussion and Conclusion

This report outlined numerous issues facing Vermont municipal police departments. The interviews and surveys completed for this project indicated that insufficient staffing and public health matters were the most prevalent issues facing Vermont's municipal police departments. Other operational and non-criminal issues included resource limitations (e.g., funding, equipment, facility), professional culture and attitudes (e.g., leadership and morale), traffic enforcement (e.g., speeding, parking, crashes), and citizen concerns/disputes (i.e., pre-emptive responses and mediation). Respondents discussed a range of strategies used to address these issues. For example, a common strategy used to encourage recruitment and retention of officers included

wage increases and added benefits (e.g., enhanced health insurance, bonuses). Strategies employed to address public health issues commonly included collaboration with community providers. However, more often, respondents detailed challenges and barriers to addressing the issues facing their departments, including funding/budget, training processes, partner agency availability/capacity, legislative policies, and public perception.

Many of the issues outlined in this report overlap and, as such, present compound challenges for departmental operations. For example, respondents noting that departments facing recruitment and retention issues also discussed how additional training of existing officers can increase their capabilities. However, without adequate staffing, it can be difficult for departments to create flexible schedules that would allow their officers the time needed to complete additional training. Further, budgetary constraints may limit departments' ability to support this training.

Moreover, it is important to note that the issues discussed above can have a differential impact on departments. Some issues, insufficient staffing, for example, may have an intensified impact on smaller departments because one vacant position may be 25% of their total staff. Another example relates to mental health issues facing municipal law enforcement. Departments in rural areas of the state may face a greater challenge locating and accessing nearby social service providers capable of assisting in mental health crises. This differential impact on departments is also relevant when considering the effect of legislative mandates and policies; some departments may have discretionary funds to implement changes, while others may struggle to comply. As such, it is imperative that legislators and other stakeholders seek input from a variety of departments on policies and initiatives related to the work of law enforcement in Vermont.

Despite this project's focus on issues facing departments, and strategies for addressing those issues, we also provided respondents with the opportunity to highlight general information they would like people to know about their departments. Most people responding to this question emphasized the commitment of their department's officers to the safety of the community. Many others noted the high level of training and professionalism of their officers. Some noted that their department was fortunate to have the support of their town's citizens and officials. A consistent message from respondents answering this question was that officers are people, too. They do not

just patrol the community; they also live in the community. As citizens, they want what is best for the community. Also, they're hiring!

Future Studies

This project offered a broad perspective on complex topics for which respondents discussed a variety of overlapping issues. Future studies should seek to isolate specific issues of interest and explore them further. Given the prevalence of staffing and public health issues discussed by respondents in this report, future examinations should detail national strategies for addressing these issues. Furthermore, it is critical to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers impacting departments' ability to address these issues. Future studies might review the intentions of Vermont's legislative policies directly and tangentially related to law enforcement and outline unintended consequences that may impact police operations. Explorations of this nature would be capable of identifying actionable policies that could be employed to effect change. A recent RFP released by the Vermont Criminal Justice Council indicates that it is investigating changes to the training process. Any future studies related to making the training process more accessible would benefit from including an array of law enforcement voices the discussion given the variety of factors that impact the work of municipal departments (e.g., department size, geography, rural v. urban).

Appendix A: Methodology

Participant Recruitment

Prior to contact from CRG researchers, VLCT representatives contacted the 22 chiefs and town leaders via email to inform them of the project. Then, the lead CRG researcher followed up with potential interviewees via email with information about what would be discussed during the interview and asked whether they would be willing to participate in an interview about public safety issues facing their town's police department.

The survey link was distributed to as many law enforcement personnel and town leaders as possible using VLCT's contacts. Utilizing scripts prepared by CRG researchers to introduce the purpose of the survey, VLCT representatives facilitated the distribution of the survey link to town officials via email on November 16, 2023. To reach municipal law enforcement personnel, VLCT developed and distributed a postcard containing the link to the survey. Postcards were sent by mail on November 20, 2023, to be placed in law enforcement officers' personal mailboxes within their departments.

Interview Data and Procedures

To identify interviewees, CRG researchers first used R, a data analysis tool, to generate a representative sample of Vermont municipalities with police departments based on the population size of municipalities— 2 large populations (10,000+ residents), 6 medium populations (between 9,999 and 2,500 residents), and 2 small populations (less than 2,500 residents). Three samples were generated after which CRG researchers consulted with VLCT representatives to identify the 2 samples (1 for chief interviews and 1 for town leader interviews) to be used based on perceived likelihood of participation. The third sample generated served as a list of alternate municipalities.

Interviews were conducted between November 13, 2023 and December 20, 2023, and typically lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. In addition to questions about the respondents' law enforcement and governmental backgrounds, interviewees were asked questions about common operational issues affecting their department, issues that were not criminal behavior affecting their department, and crimes affecting the community. Additionally, interviewees were asked to detail whether the department and/or other town entities had done anything different or innovative to approach these issues and identify any challenges/barriers to doing so. See

Appendices A and B for the full interview guides. The interviewer took notes during the interview. Notes were reviewed, clarified, and additional context was added within 36 hours of the interview.

Coding and Analysis

Interview notes and valid survey responses were analyzed using NVivo 12, which is software useful for organizing large quantities of qualitative data into categories relevant to the questions of interest (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019).¹ Researchers note that the use of qualitative data analysis software like NVivo can help researchers identify themes that may have otherwise gone unnoticed (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019). R was also used to analyze descriptive information about the survey respondents. Given the rich contextual information of the data, analysis and development of the codebook began with the interview data. This process was guided by the questions of interest to first illuminate operational, non-criminal, and criminal issues facing police departments in Vermont. Operational issues consisted of things (within the control of police departments) which impacted the day-to-day functioning of the respondent's police department. Only those things that could be influenced by the department were included in this category. Non-criminal issues concern things the department responds to that may not be criminal by law or may be related to issues that may develop into crimes following the initial call. Criminal issues facing the departments were also discussed, but they are only mentioned in this report as they relate to operational and non-criminal issues. Once issues were identified, the data were then analyzed for information that identified strategies implemented by law enforcement and/or town entities to address the issues and challenges/barriers to doing so. Importantly, the project team member responsible for conducting and analyzing the data did not participate in initial conversations about why VLCT was contracting CRG to conduct this research. This was to avoid establishing preconceived notions about what the data might reveal.

The first cycle of coding employed "concept coding" methods commonly used by researchers to analyze multiple types of data and move towards ideas suggested by the study's questions (Mihas, 2015; Saldana, 2021).^{2 3} During the second cycle of coding, initial concepts were further condensed to extend beyond the observable into "concept codes" that captured the

¹ Bazeley, P., & Jackson, K. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo*. Sage Publishing.

² Mihas, P. (2015). *Qualitative analysis. Research Design and Methods: An Applied Guide for the Scholar-Practitioner*, 99.

³ Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

essence of ideas presented in the data (Saldana, 2021). The lead researcher consulted the larger CRG team when data could not be clearly coded into the concept codes (e.g., when acronyms were used). Data that did not fit into the concept codes were coded as “disconfirming data” or examples from the data that did not fit emergent themes (Patton, 1990).⁴ In some cases, data provided were too vague to be coded and thus, was not included in the analysis. For example, survey answers like “communication” may have meant that departments had difficulty communicating internally, externally, or practically (e.g., radio issues). Given this uncertainty, the information could not be included in the analysis.

⁴ Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. SAGE Publications, inc.

Appendix B: 2022 Full-Time Employment Information for Municipal Police Departments

Department Name	Sworn Male Officers	Sworn Female Officers	Non-Sworn Male Officers	Non-Sworn Female Officers	Total
Barre	15	3	0	1	19
Barre Town	7	0	0	1	8
Bellows Falls	6	0	0	1	7
Bennington	22	2	1	6	31
Berlin	7	0	1	0	8
Bradford	2	0	0	0	2
Brandon	7	0	0	1	8
Brattleboro	17	1	2	11	31
Bristol	3	0	0	0	3
Burlington	57	12	9	21	99
Castleton	5	0	0	0	5
Chester	5	0	0	1	6
Colchester	21	4	4	4	33
Dover	5	1	0	1	7
Essex	26	2	2	4	34
Fair Haven	3	1	0	0	4
Fairlee	0	0	0	0	0
Hardwick	6	1	0	0	7
Hartford	15	2	5	5	27
Hinesburg	6	0	0	0	6
Killington	2	0	0	0	2
Ludlow	4	1	4	0	9
Lyndonville	2	0	0	0	2
Manchester	5	1	2	2	10
Middlebury	13	0	0	2	15
Milton	15	1	0	1	17
Montpelier	14	1	1	8	24

Department Name	Sworn Male Officers	Sworn Female Officers	Non-Sworn Male Officers	Non-Sworn Female Officers	Total
Morristown	9	0	0	0	9
Newport	11	1	2	2	16
Northfield	3	2	0	1	6
Norwich	2	1	0	1	4
Pittsford	1	0	0	0	1
Randolph*	-	-	-	-	-
Richmond	3	1	0	0	4
Royalton	2	1	0	0	3
Rutland	26	2	6	5	39
Rutland Town	3	1	0	0	4
Shelburne	6	1	2	6	15
South Burlington	28	7	2	12	49
Springfield	12	0	2	4	18
St. Albans	19	2	3	8	32
St. Johnsbury	10	0	2	4	16
Stowe	9	1	0	0	10
Swanton	9	0	0	0	9
Thetford	3	0	0	0	3
Vergennes	6	1	0	0	7
Weathersfield	2	0	0	0	2
Williston	13	2	1	5	21
Wilmington	5	0	1	1	7
Windsor	9	1	0	1	11
Winhall	7	0	0	1	8
Winooski	11	0	1	3	15
Woodstock	5	0	0	1	6

*The data on this table reflect information reported by departments to the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) in 2022. Randolph's department was reinstated in 2023 and as such, did not submit data to NIBRS in 2022.

Appendix C: Police Chief Questions

1. How long have you been with this Department?
 - a. In this role?
 - b. A police officer?
 - c. In Vermont?
2. Thinking about the year 2022 and through 2023 thus far, what three crime types affected the community the most?
 - a. Did your department do anything different or innovative to approach these crimes?
3. What were some operational issues that affected your department in 2022/2023?
 - a. Did your department do anything different or innovative to approach these issues?
4. What were the top three issues that weren't criminal behavior that affected your department?
 - a. Did your department do anything different or innovative to approach these issues?
5. Did your department face any challenges/barriers when responding to the issues you discussed?
 - a. Are there any challenges/barriers that you feel are unique to your town?
6. What would you like people to know about your department?
7. Is there anything you expected me to ask that I didn't?

Appendix D: Town Leadership Questions

1. What is your role in NAME OF TOWN government?
 - a. How long have you been in this role?
 - b. How long have you been involved in NAME OF TOWN government?
2. Thinking about the year 2022 and through 2023 thus far, what three crime types affected your community the most?
 - a. Did the police department do anything different or innovative to address these crimes?
 - b. Did other town agencies or town government do anything different or innovative to address these crimes?
3. What were some operational issues that affected your police department in 2022/2023?
 - a. Did the police department do anything different or innovative to address these issues?
 - b. Did other town agencies or town government do anything different or innovative to address these issues?
4. What were the top three non-criminal issues facing your police department in 2022/2023?
 - a. Did the police department do anything different or innovative to address those issues?
 - b. Did other town agencies or town government do anything different or innovative?
5. Did your town's police department face any challenges/barriers when responding to the criminal and non-criminal issues you discussed?
 - a. Are there any challenges/barriers that you feel are unique to your town?
6. What would you like people to know about your police department?
7. Is there anything you expected me to ask that I didn't?

Appendix E: Survey Questions

1. What Department do you work for?
2. How long have you worked for the Department?
3. What is your current assignment (patrol, traffic, detective, etc.)?
4. How long have you been a police officer in Vermont?
5. Thinking about the year 2022 and through 2023 thus far, what three crime types affected your community the most?
 - a. Did the police department do anything different or innovative to address these crimes? If yes, please elaborate.
6. What were some operational issues that affected your department 2022/2023?
 - a. Did your department do anything different or innovative to approach these administrative issues? If yes, please elaborate.
7. What were the top three non-criminal issues that affected your police department in 2022/2023?
 - a. Did the police department do anything different or innovative to address those issues? If yes, please elaborate.
8. What would you like people to know about your department?