

Are Changes in Utah Retirement System (URS) Pension Plans Contributing to a Shortage of Police Officers?

Karson Cook

Steve O'Camb


Riley Strickland

Tiffany Torrance

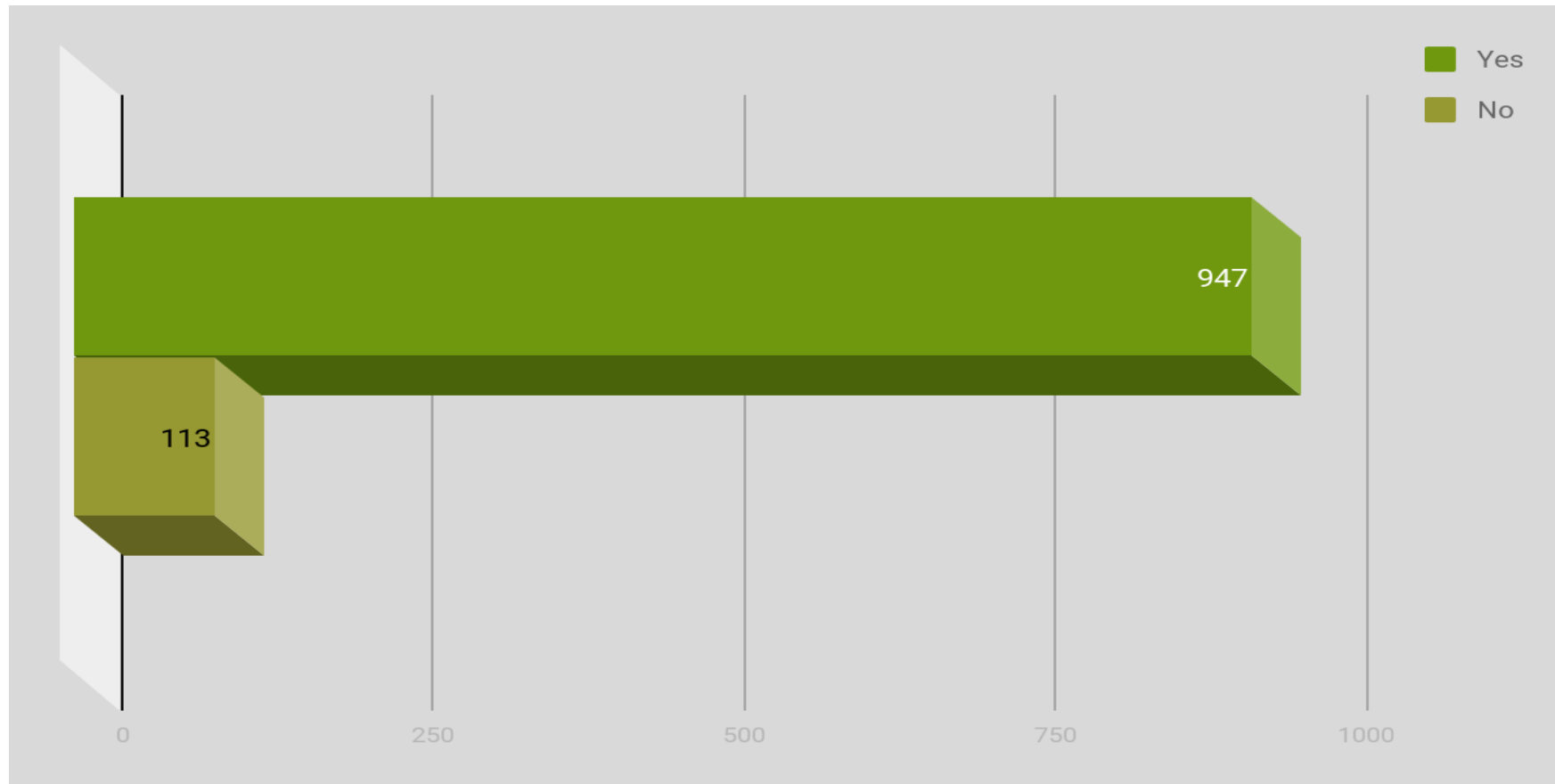
Research Questions:

- Are the changes in Utah Retirement Systems (URS) pension plans contributing to the shortage of public safety/police officers in Utah?
- Do these 2011 changes discourage qualified applicants, and/or contribute to the shortage by failing to retain or re-employ veteran officers?
- What is important to the prospective officers, and what can be done to mitigate the impacts of these reforms?

Literature Review:

- Our survey is unique as no other studies of URS have been conducted since the change in retirement policy for police and other first responders.
 - This study is important as data shows that the life expectancy is going up in the United States. Due to the longer life span of former employees, employers and state governments are increasing the number of years needed for new and current employees to serve and lowering the amount of pension they will receive when they retire. This poses problems in careers that have harsh mental/physical requirements as well as financial concerns for the employees.
- 
- A study in New Mexico has shown that nearly 50 percent of officers are unable to complete the years required of them for a full retirement. The years required for these officers were quite similar to those now required in Utah.
 - Due to these concerns we created a survey to observe Utah's first responders reactions to the changes in the requirements to retire.

Question: Do You Think You Will Work Long Enough to Reach a Monthly Retirement Pension Plan?



This means approximately 10.66% of current URS employees do not see themselves working long enough to collect benefits.

Research Design:

- We developed an electronic survey about issues affecting public safety; specifically the recruiting and retention of public servants employed by city, county, or state municipalities. Our survey took 5 to 10 minutes to complete and was administered via the Qualtrics program after approval from the Utah Valley University (UVU) Institutional Review Board (IRB).
- Data was collected from a random sample of UVU students (prospective public safety employees), as well as from Utah law enforcement agencies and government organizations. It was disseminated in two ways: 1) Emailed directly to randomized student addresses provided to us by UVU or 2) an anonymous link disseminated by our participating agencies. Since the survey was completed electronically it could be done from anywhere the participant felt comfortable, helping insure their anonymity.
- The findings of this research will be available to anyone that can benefit from it; in planning, budgeting, lobbying, or legislative initiatives aimed at improving public safety. It will also be available to educational institutions for further study.

Sample Size & Participating Entities:

- Our research goal was to obtain data from prospective, current, retired and re-employed public safety officers and government employees involved in the hiring of peace officers and public safety officials.
- Prospective Employees - UVU provided 501 randomized email addresses for students currently enrolled in Criminal Justice or Forensics Sciences majors at UVU.
- Current & Former Employees – An anonymous Link was distributed through the Utah Association of Counties and the Utah State Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP).

About our Survey Partners:

- Utah Association of Counties (UAC)

Includes all 299 elected county officials from Utah's 29 counties. UAC has a seat on the Membership Council for URS and disseminated our survey to the working group dealing with public safety issues statewide. That working group includes the UAC and League of Cities and Towns who represent the employers, the police officers and firefighters they employ, as well as lobbyists for the sheriffs association and police association, and the FOP representing the employees.

- Utah State Lodge, Fraternal Order of Police (FOP)

Represents over 2,850 police officers with 36 lodges spread across Utah from border to border. The FOP works to improve conditions for law enforcement officers and improve the safety of the public through education, legislation, information, community involvement, and employee representation. They are a 501(c)(8) non-profit corporation. (FOP Utah, 2017)

Survey Details:

Survey Start Date: July 15th, 2017


Survey End Date: July 31st, 2017

- 1,217 people responded to the survey, with 973 (80%) completing every question asked. Of 41 total questions, filters routed respondents to those specific to their classification, i.e. prospective employee, current employee, or re-employed or retired status.
- 1,169 of the surveys were completed via the anonymous link. Response rates vary for every question as participants could choose to not answer some questions.
- 501 UVU students were surveyed through direct emailing to random addresses provided by the University. Surveys were sent to them through the Qualtrics program to insure confidentiality. 48 students (4.12%) responded to the survey.

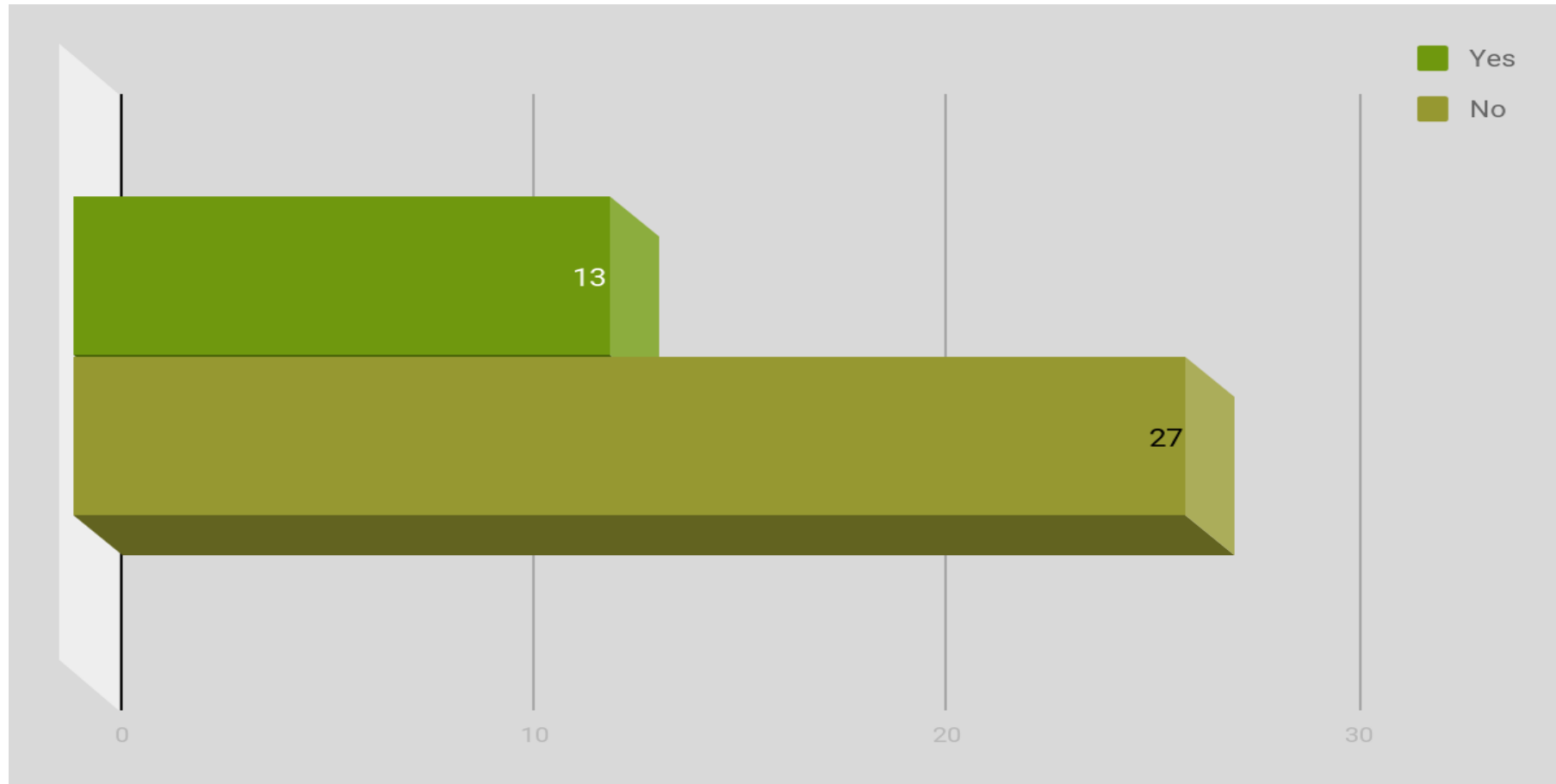
Demographics:

- Age Range 18 - 78 Years, Average Age 41.9 Years
- Gender = 90.5% Male, 9.4% Female, .10% Other
- Utah Residents = 99.49%, Seasonal residents = .31%, Non-Utah Resident = .20%
- Sworn Employees = 93.2%, Non-Sworn = 6.8%
- Currently Employed = 84.1%, Retired = 7.7%, Re-employed = 4.1%, Prospective = 4.1%
- Employer = City 57.08%, County 19.87%, State 17.65%, Non-Governmental 5.4%
- Years of Service = 0 - 47 Years, Average 14.79 Years, Average Start Date 2001

Data – Prospective Employees:

- Out of 40 Utah Valley University Criminal Justice/Forensic Science students, 13 or 32.5% reported that the change in the URS pension plan has had an adverse affect on their desire to pursue a career in Criminal Justice or Forensic Science. 
- This further illustrates the current trend of pension reforms creating a disincentive for young, qualified individuals to enter this field.

Question: Will/Did the Change in Pension Plans Affect Your Desire to Pursue a Career in Criminal Justice/Law Enforcement



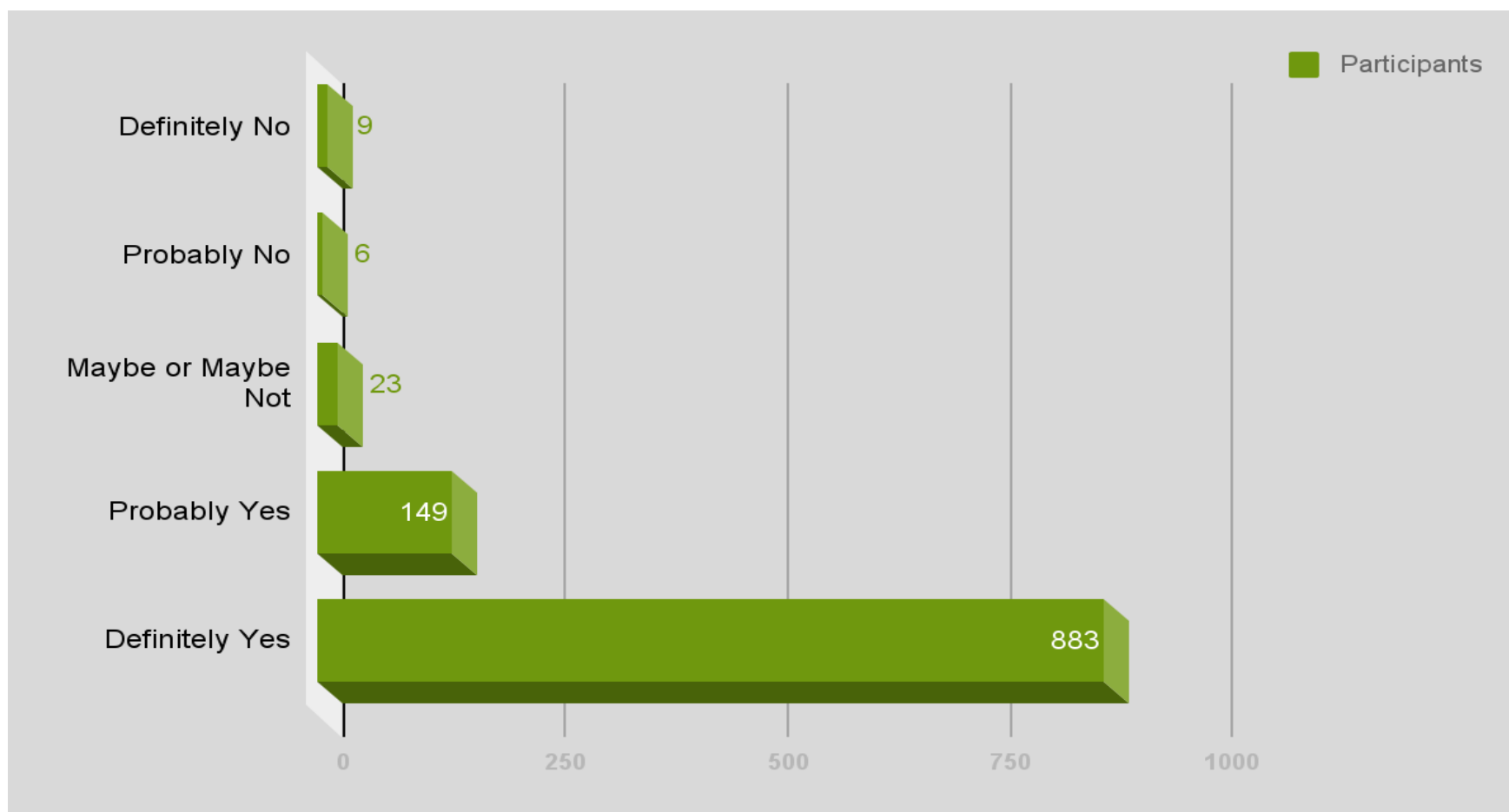
Data Continued:

- Question: Do You Think Changing the URS Public Safety Retirement Eligibility Back to 20 Year Retirement Would Improve Recruitment?



- The data provided a clear indication that individuals both directly and indirectly involved with law enforcement attribute changes in the pension plan to an issue with police recruitment. Recruitment levels have not only diminished, but the qualifications of the candidates have diminished as well.

Question: Do You Think Changing the URS Public Safety Retirement Eligibility Back to 20 Year Retirement Would Improve Recruitment?



The 1,032 Individuals Mentioned on the Previous Page are a Combination of the Probably and Definitely Yes Responses

Cross Tabulation: Non-POST Certified & Involved in Recruitment

		Do you work as a police officer, corrections officer, or any role that requires maintaining a pol...										Total
		Yes					No					
Are you, or were you ever, involved in any capacity with the recruiting, hiring, training, or onb...		Do you believe the URS changes enacted in 2011 affected recruiting for the following jobs? - Police										
		Definitely Not	Probably Not	Might or might Not	Probably Yes	Definitely Yes	Definitely Not	Probably Not	Might or might Not	Probably Yes	Definitely Yes	
Yes		1	0	1	23	640	0	1	1	11	40	718
No		1	1	1	16	275	0	1	3	3	10	311
Total		2	1	2	39	915	0	2	4	14	50	1029

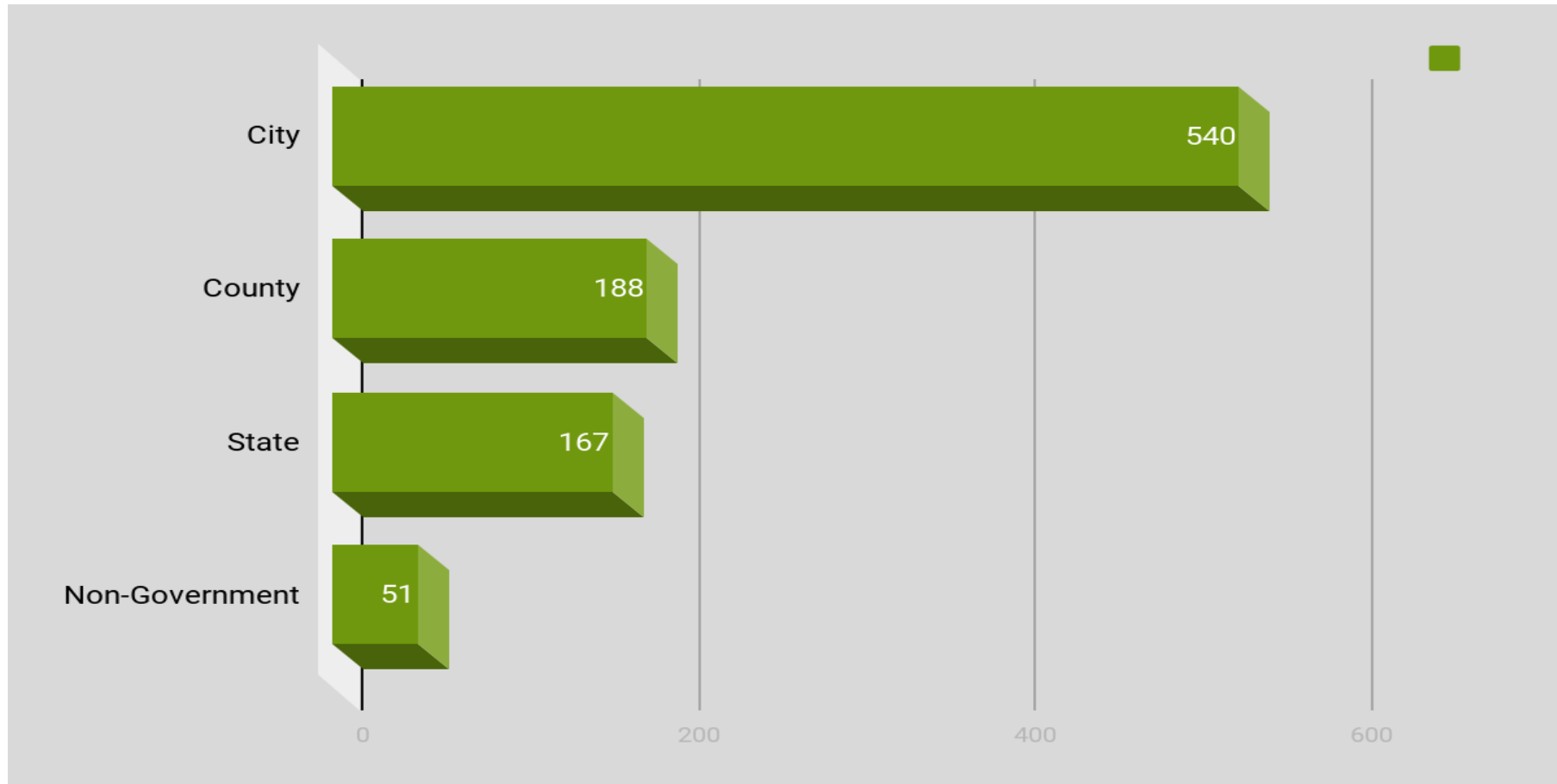


70 Non-POST Certified individuals who are/were involved in the hiring process responded to this portion of the survey. Of those individuals, only one person stated that they believed that the changes in the pension plan had not affected recruitment efforts. This means that 69 individuals, or 98.6% of Non-POST Certified employees, believe that the changes in the 2011 pension plan affected and is affecting law enforcement recruitment efforts.

Data Continued:

- This sentiment was echoed across city, state, county, and non-government entities. Almost 1,000 total responses came back to the survey team from individuals who stated they worked for an organization that would fall under one of these categories. Across the board the answers were consistent. Recruitment has been negatively affected and changing the pension back would make an enormous difference to agencies and officers alike.
- Of the 944 individuals who answered the question “do you believe the URS changes enacted in 2011 affected recruiting for the following jobs – Police”, 931 out of 944 (98.6%) respondents selected Probably or Definitely Yes.
- Of the 940 individuals who answered “do you think changing the URS public safety retirement eligibility back to the 20-year retirement would improve recruitment”, 901 out of 940 (95.8%) respondents selected Probably or Definitely Yes.

Question: What Entity Are You Employed With?



Officers Comments: Job Related Fears – 453 Responses

Financial Stability Bankruptcy Not Being Able to Provide for My Family Inability to Support Family as I Start Having Kids

Not Being Able to Financially Support My Family, Or Being Able to Retire Loss of Retirement Altogether Being Able to Work Long Enough to Earn Retirement or Being Able to Survive Off of the URS Retirement if I Make it to That Point

The URS Retirement System Not Improving by the Time I Retire Lacking Retirement Retirement System Benefits Being Changed Before I Retire

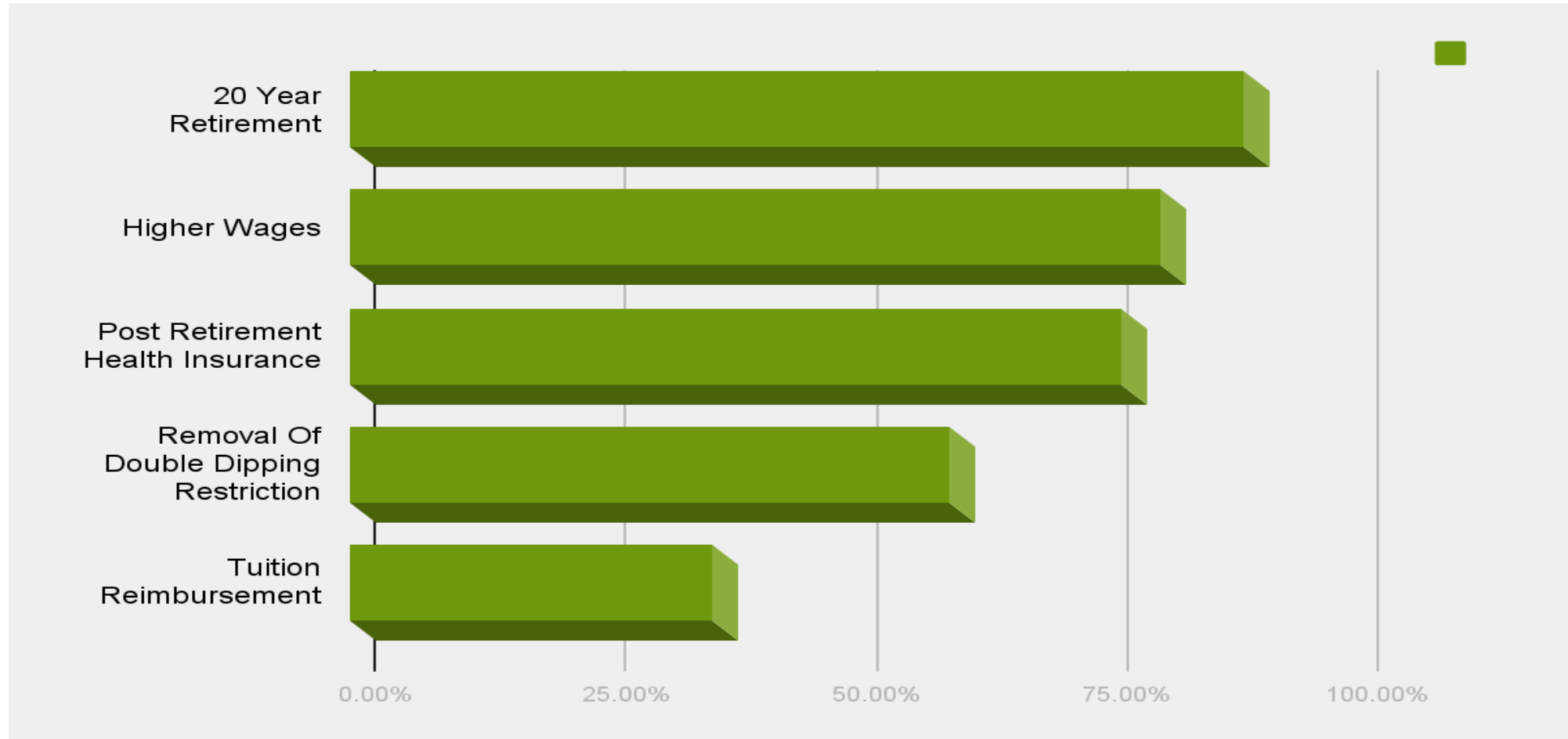
Retirement Fund Going Bankrupt so That My Defined Benefits Go Away Not Enough Money for Retirement

Financial Problems Not Enough Pay Further Degradation to Compensation to Public Safety and the Impact that will have on Society When I Will Be Able to Afford to Retire

Reduction in Benefits/Pay Changes in Pension That Take Away my Pension or Have Additional Adverse Affects on My Family Life as it Pertains to Retirement

Not Making Enough Money Towards Retirement Not Enough Money to Retire Working With Less Qualified Officers...Due to Sub-Par Hiring Pool

Survey Statement: Rank What Will Have the Biggest Impact on Attracting Future Public Safety Employees.



Scary Facts:

- 91% of officers have feared losing their life on the job and 26% have been seriously injured in the line of duty.
- 59% of officers did not know agencies can choose not to count time off from being injured (getting shot, stabbed, etc.) in the line of duty toward retirement accrual. 64% of non-sworn employees said they were also unaware of this policy.
- 45% of officers would absolutely not recommend a career in public safety to their children, friends or family. In-fact only 3.5% said they definitely would.
- 41% of officers say if they had it to do over again they would not choose a career in public safety.


Research Challenges:

- The only delay we experienced during the research phase was that it took almost two weeks to get the student sample emails from the IRI. We didn't feel like this portion of the process was explained in the expectations of the class and was completely unforeseen to us. I would expect the other teams experienced something similar. Luckily, we still had ample time to still receive the email addresses, get them entered, and sent out to the 500 students in time. Our timeline allowed the students ten days to complete the survey once sent.
- The IRI was also extremely hesitant to send surveys to students who had already been surveyed this semester. We thought this was odd as we (this research team) frequently receive multiple surveys in a semester.

Added Measures: Survey Collection

- We implemented a some safety nets during our survey to ensure we received the highest number of responses possible. One example of this was:
 - We sent out reminder emails to both the students and the URS employees/pensioners reminding them when the survey would expire. We noticed a jump in survey responses upon sending the reminder.

Conclusions:

- Law enforcement officials in Utah agree there is a shortage of qualified police applicants creating a legitimate public safety concern statewide.
- Overwhelming numbers of survey respondents representing a cross-section of city, county and state employees from all over Utah agree; the URS reforms implemented in 2011 have negatively impacted recruiting and retention. 
- Returning to a 20 year retirement, higher wages, post-retirement health insurance, and removing the one year waiting period were all recommended – in that order.
- These problems need to be addressed as soon as possible to avoid a manpower crisis similar to that occurring in other states around the country.

Questions and Answers

Thank You for Your Time