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Fewer Performance Failures, More Voluntary Resignations: Changing Outcomes in Police Academy Training, 2015–2026

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ABSTRACT: *Police academy graduation rates provide limited information about why recruits fail to complete training. This retrospective quantitative study examined outcomes for 878 recruits across 23 consecutive basic law enforcement academy classes between 2015 and 2026. Overall, 697 recruits graduated (79.4%), while 181 (20.6%) did not complete training. Comparing 2015–2020 with 2021–2026, performance-related failures declined from 10.5% to 2.8% (OR = 0.24, 95% CI [0.13, 0.46], p < .001), while voluntary resignations increased from 6.1% to 10.6% (OR = 1.82, 95% CI [1.11, 3.01], p = .021). Further analysis showed that the increase in resignations was concentrated in the final three classes, reaching 20.6%, compared with 6.4% in the preceding 20 classes. Despite these changes, overall graduation rates remained relatively stable. The findings demonstrate that graduation rates can conceal substantial changes in why recruits leave training. Distinguishing academic and performance-related failures from voluntary resignations and other separations provides a clearer understanding of academy outcomes and identifies different challenges requiring further investigation.*

KEYWORDS: *academy attrition, law enforcement training, police academy, recruit performance, recruit readiness, voluntary resignation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Police academy graduation rates provide an important measure of recruit outcomes, but they do not explain why recruits fail to complete training. Some recruits are unable to meet academic or practical performance requirements, while others leave because of medical conditions, injuries, administrative actions, or voluntary resignation. Although these outcomes all affect graduation rates, they represent different challenges for academy administrators.

Understanding these differences is important when evaluating recruit training. Academic failures may raise questions about preparation, comprehension, or testing. Practical failures involve the inability to demonstrate required skills, while scenario evaluations assess the application of knowledge and skills in realistic situations. Voluntary resignation presents a different concern because a recruit's decision to leave does not necessarily indicate an inability to meet training standards. Examining these outcomes separately provides a clearer picture of academy performance and recruit retention.

National data illustrate the importance of distinguishing among reasons for noncompletion. Buehler [1] reported that more than 14% of recruits entering state and local law enforcement academies in 2022 did not complete training. Approximately 8% left involuntarily, 5% voluntarily, and 1% for other or unknown reasons.

These findings demonstrate that academy attrition includes different forms of separation that should not be treated as equivalent.

The academy examined in this study reopened in 2015 following a year-long reorganization of its instructional program. Developed with the involvement of the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST), the program integrates classroom instruction, problem-based learning, practical exercises, recruit presentations, and scenario-based training. The academy has continued to refine its instructional activities and evaluate recruit outcomes throughout the study period.

During its earlier classes, academic examinations and firearms proficiency were prominent reasons for noncompletion. In more recent classes, these failures became less common, while voluntary resignations emerged as a growing concern. This change raised questions about whether the challenges facing the academy were shifting from recruits' ability to meet training requirements toward other factors affecting their completion of training.

The present study examines 878 recruits enrolled in 23 consecutive basic law enforcement academy classes between 2015 and 2026. Using administrative records, it distinguishes academic and performance-related failures from voluntary resignations, medical or injury-related separations, and administrative dismissals. The purpose is to determine how the reasons for academy noncompletion changed over time and to identify areas where further examination of recruit preparation, performance, and retention may be warranted.

II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Reasons for Police Academy Turnover

Police academy recruits leave training for different reasons, including voluntary resignation, inability to meet physical training requirements, injuries, and academic and performance failures. Several studies have examined these outcomes and the factors associated with academy completion.

Lockie et al. [2] studied 401 police academy recruits, of whom 330 graduated, and 71 did not. Of those who left, 28 departed for personal reasons, 18 because of physical fitness requirements or injuries, and 25 because of academic or scenario failures. These findings demonstrate the importance of distinguishing among different reasons for academy noncompletion.

Ryan et al. [3] examined recruit withdrawals from the Michigan State Police Academy between 1934 and 2022. For the years 2016–2022, when reasons for departure were available, the researchers found that 74% of recruits who left training did so voluntarily. They also found that academy attrition tended to increase when economic conditions improved and unemployment declined. Their findings suggest that voluntary resignations, rather than failures to meet training standards, may account for much of the variation in academy attrition.

AlSabah et al. [4] examined data from 488 U.S. police academies. The researchers found that longer training hours and higher-stress environments were associated with higher rates of voluntary withdrawals. These findings suggest that academy training demands and organizational conditions may influence recruit retention.

III. RECRUIT READINESS

Physical fitness has been identified as an important factor in academy success. Korre et al. [5] examined 724 recruits from 15 Massachusetts police academies and found that lower entry-level performance on physical fitness assessments was associated with a reduced likelihood of graduation.

IV. INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Research has also examined the relationship between instructional practices and recruit learning. Donohue and Kruis [6] compared traditional and adult-learning instructional approaches among 97 Massachusetts police academy recruits. Recruits receiving adult-learning instruction reported greater improvements in investigative competence, while those receiving traditional instruction reported greater improvements in general subjects,

including constitutional law. Both groups reported similar improvements in patrol procedures. These findings indicate that instructional outcomes may differ depending on the subject being taught.

Beer-Maxwell et al. [7] examined the effects of integrating communication skills instruction across multiple training topics at five U.S. police academies. Sixty days after training, recruits receiving in-person integrated instruction achieved a median knowledge test score of 72.9%, compared with 51.5% for those receiving a stand-alone classroom lesson. These findings indicate that reinforcing course content across different training activities may improve recruits' retention of knowledge over time.

Previous research has identified factors associated with recruit readiness, instructional effectiveness, and academy attrition. However, fewer studies have examined how different reasons for noncompletion change over time within the same academy. Distinguishing voluntary resignations from academic and performance-related failures is important because these outcomes may reflect different challenges involving recruit retention and training.

V. CURRENT STUDY

This study examined graduation and noncompletion outcomes among 878 recruits enrolled in 23 consecutive basic law enforcement academy classes between 2015 and 2026. Particular attention was given to changes in academic and performance-related failures and voluntary resignations, including whether these changes occurred throughout the study period or were concentrated in particular classes.

Since reopening in 2015, the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office Basic Academy has combined classroom instruction with problem-based learning, practical exercises, recruit presentations, and scenario-based training. Recruits participate in more than 50 interactive learning activities tied to course objectives. These include practical scenarios, role-playing, mock investigative interviews, and exercises requiring recruits to identify and explain criminal offenses and their legal elements. Recruits also complete daily reading assignments and present course material to their classmates. The academy separately administers 14 structured, graded scenarios near the end of training.

During the past three to four years, the academy has continued to refine its instructional activities, with additional attention to scenario practice, practical application of course material, and individual recruit learning needs. These changes have included providing additional opportunities for scenario practice, demonstrating how classroom instruction applies to police work, and strengthening instructors' understanding of individual recruits' learning needs. The improvements were part of ongoing instructional evaluation rather than a separate intervention designed for this study.

The academy has also conducted surveys examining emotional intelligence, decision-making confidence, and instructional effectiveness. Although these evaluations have informed ongoing efforts to improve training, their findings were not included in the present statistical analysis.

The academy operates a month-long pre-academy program emphasizing physical conditioning, report writing, and general preparation for training. Because the present study examined recruits who entered the formal academy, individuals who left during pre-academy preparation were not included.

The study addressed three research questions:

1. How did graduation rates, academic and performance-related failures, and voluntary resignations change between 2015 and 2026?
2. Were these changes consistent throughout the study period or concentrated in particular academy classes?
3. What do these changes reveal about the different challenges associated with recruit performance and retention?

VI. METHOD

Research Design

This retrospective quantitative study examined administrative records from 23 consecutive classes at the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office Basic Academy between 2015 and 2026. Graduation and noncompletion outcomes were compared across two periods: 2015–2020 and 2021–2026. Additional analyses examined whether changes were consistent throughout the study period or concentrated in the most recent classes.

VII. SAMPLE

The study included 878 recruits who formally entered academy training. Of these, 408 attended during 2015–2020 and 470 during 2021–2026. Recruits who left during the month-long pre-academy program were excluded to maintain a consistent starting point for measuring academy outcomes.

VIII. OUTCOME CLASSIFICATION

Each recruit was assigned to one of four mutually exclusive categories based on academy records:

1. Graduation: Successful completion of all academy requirements.
2. Voluntary resignation: A recruit's decision to leave before graduation.
3. Academic and performance-related failure: Failure to meet required academic, firearms, physical, practical skills, or scenario standards.
4. Other noncompletion: Medical or injury-related separations, administrative dismissals, and other documented reasons.

IX. MEASURES AND DATA ANALYSIS

Counts and percentages were calculated for each outcome using the number of recruits who entered training during each study period. Voluntary resignations were also calculated as a percentage of all recruits who did not complete training.

Fisher's exact tests were used to compare graduation rates, voluntary resignations, and academic and performance-related failures between the two periods. Odds ratios (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for resignations and failures. Statistical significance was established at $p < .05$.

Two additional analyses examined the final three academy classes. First, resignation rates in these classes were compared with those in the preceding 20 classes. Second, the original period comparisons were repeated after excluding the final three classes. These analyses helped determine whether the observed changes were distributed throughout the study period or concentrated in the most recent classes.

Each recruit was treated as an independent observation. The analyses did not adjust for individual recruit characteristics or possible similarities among recruits within the same class. Consequently, the findings identify statistical associations but do not establish causation.

X. RESULTS

Overall Academy Outcomes

Of the 878 recruits who entered academy training between 2015 and 2026, 697 (79.4%) graduated and 181 (20.6%) did not complete training. Among those who did not graduate, 75 voluntarily resigned, 56 failed to meet academic or performance requirements, and 50 left for medical, administrative, or other reasons. Table 1 presents these outcomes for the two study periods.

Table 1
Academy Outcomes by Study Period, 2015–2026

Outcome	2015–2020 (n = 408)	2021–2026 (n = 470)	Total (n = 878)
Graduated	316 (77.5%)	381 (81.1%)	697 (79.4%)
Voluntary resignation	25 (6.1%)	50 (10.6%)	75 (8.5%)
Academic and performance-related failure	43 (10.5%)	13 (2.8%)	56 (6.4%)
Other noncompletion	24 (5.9%)	26 (5.5%)	50 (5.7%)
Total noncompletion	92 (22.5%)	89 (18.9%)	181 (20.6%)
Voluntary resignation share of noncompletion	25 (27.2%)	50 (56.2%)	75 (41.4%)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of recruits entering the academy during each period, except for the final row, which shows voluntary resignations as a percentage of all noncompletions. Percentages may not total exactly 100% because of rounding.

Changes in Academic and Performance-Related Failures

Academic and performance-related failures declined from 10.5% (43 of 408 recruits) during 2015–2020 to 2.8% (13 of 470) during 2021–2026. This reduction was statistically significant (OR = 0.24, 95% CI [0.13, 0.46], $p < .001$).

The decline was not limited to the final three academy classes. After excluding those classes, the failure rate remained significantly lower in the later period (10.5% versus 2.9%, $p < .001$).

Voluntary Resignations

Voluntary resignations increased from 6.1% (25 of 408 recruits) during 2015–2020 to 10.6% (50 of 470) during 2021–2026 (OR = 1.82, 95% CI [1.11, 3.01], $p = .021$). However, the increase was concentrated in the final three academy classes. In those classes, 27 of 131 recruits (20.6%) resigned, compared with 48 of 747 (6.4%) in the preceding 20 classes ($p < .001$). When the final three classes were excluded, resignation rates were nearly identical in the two study periods (6.1% versus 6.8%, $p = .765$).

Voluntary resignations also accounted for a larger share of all noncompletions, increasing from 27.2% during 2015–2020 to 56.2% during 2021–2026.

Graduation Rates

Graduation rates increased from 77.5% (316 of 408 recruits) during 2015–2020 to 81.1% (381 of 470) during 2021–2026. This difference was not statistically significant ($p = .210$).

XI. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal two distinct changes in academy outcomes. Academic and performance-related failures declined substantially between 2015–2020 and 2021–2026, while voluntary resignations increased sharply during the final three classes. Despite these differences, overall graduation rates remained relatively stable. These results demonstrate why graduation rates alone provide an incomplete picture of academy outcomes.

Declining Academic and Performance-Related Failures

One of the study's most important findings was the decline in recruits who failed to meet academic or practical performance requirements. The failure rate decreased from 10.5% to 2.8%, and this reduction remained statistically significant after excluding the final three classes.

Since reopening in 2015, the academy has combined classroom instruction with problem-based learning, practical exercises, and scenario-based training. These activities provide opportunities for recruits to apply course material, practice required skills, and receive feedback before formal evaluations.

During the past three to four years, instructors have continued to refine these activities, including providing additional scenario practice, demonstrating the practical application of course material, and addressing individual learning needs. O'Neill et al. [8] studied defensive and control tactics training among 115 police recruits at three academies. They found that additional practice and corrective feedback improved recruits' performance, although some skills declined after training.

Importantly, the decline in failures extended over a longer period than the recent instructional refinements. The present study did not independently evaluate the effects of these changes. Recruit selection, preparation, remediation, and other factors may also have influenced the results. Nevertheless, the sustained decline in failures raises questions about the factors associated with recruits' ability to meet academy requirements.

Why Are More Recruits Leaving?

Voluntary resignations followed a different pattern. Although the resignation rate increased between the two study periods, the increase was concentrated in the final three classes. When those classes were excluded, resignation rates were nearly identical.

This raises an important question: Why did more recruits choose to leave during the most recent classes? Previous research offers possible explanations. Haarr [9] examined how recruits' expectations and experiences influenced their decisions to leave police training. Ryan et al. [3] found associations between voluntary withdrawals and economic conditions, while AlSabah et al. [4] identified relationships between academy conditions and recruit resignations.

The academy provides a month-long pre-academy program emphasizing physical conditioning, report writing, and general preparation. However, preparing recruits for academic and physical requirements does not necessarily address every factor influencing their decision to continue training.

The present study cannot determine why resignations increased in the final three classes. Although the academy conducts exit interviews, those responses were not systematically analyzed. Further examination of recruit expectations, personal circumstances, and the timing of departures may help explain the recent increase.

XII. IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMY TRAINING

The findings have several practical implications for evaluating academy outcomes. First, graduation rates should be examined alongside the reasons recruits leave. A decline in academic or performance-related failures represents a different outcome from an increase in voluntary resignations. Examining these categories separately allows administrators to identify changes that may otherwise be overlooked.

Second, the reduction in failures supports continued examination of recruit preparation, instruction, practice opportunities, and assessment. Evaluating these activities alongside academy outcomes may help identify factors associated with recruits' ability to meet established requirements. The present findings do not establish that any particular instructional method produced the observed decline.

Third, the recent increase in voluntary resignations warrants closer attention. The academy already records the timing of departures and conducts exit interviews. Systematically examining this information may help identify

recurring concerns involving recruit expectations, personal circumstances, or difficulties encountered during training.

Finally, academy graduation should not be treated as the sole measure of recruit readiness. Academic performance, practical skills, scenario evaluations, and subsequent field training outcomes provide additional information about recruits' preparation for police work. Examining these measures together may offer a more complete assessment of training outcomes.

XIII. LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to a single academy, and the findings may not apply to academies with different recruit populations, instructional methods, or training requirements. Although the academy conducts exit interviews, the responses were not systematically analyzed. Instructional improvements were also not evaluated independently, and changes in recruit selection, preparation, or other factors may have influenced the results.

The statistical analysis did not account for possible similarities among recruits attending the same academy class, which may affect the interpretation of the findings. The study also excluded individuals who left during the pre-academy program. Consequently, the findings describe outcomes among recruits who formally entered academy training rather than all individuals who began the academy's preparation process.

Finally, the increase in voluntary resignations was concentrated in the final three classes. Additional data are needed to determine whether this represents a continuing trend or a temporary increase.

XIV. CONCLUSION

This study examined graduation and noncompletion outcomes among 878 recruits attending 23 consecutive police academy classes between 2015 and 2026. Academic and performance-related failures declined substantially, while voluntary resignations increased sharply during the final three classes. Despite these changes, overall graduation rates remained relatively stable.

The sustained decline in failures indicates that fewer recruits were separated for failing to meet established training requirements. Although the academy continued to refine its instructional activities, the study could not determine whether those changes contributed to the decline. The recent increase in resignations presents a separate concern requiring further examination of why recruits choose to leave.

The central finding is that fewer training failures do not necessarily produce higher graduation rates. Distinguishing recruits who fail to meet academy requirements from those who voluntarily resign provides a clearer understanding of academy outcomes and a stronger basis for examining recruit preparation, performance, and retention.

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