

Life After a Police Career

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For the police officer, retirement is far from the end. Eligible for retirement at mid-life, police officers are faced with the difficult decision of staying in police work or returning to civilian life.

*- John M. Violanti, 1992, retired NY state trooper,
professor University of Buffalo*

Unless officers die during their police career, they will again become civilians. Like entering policing, leaving policing involves a psychological transition. The psychological transition from police officer to civilian involves leaving police authority, the police family, and any status associated with being a police officer, behind.

Police officers make the transition to civilian life either voluntarily or involuntarily.

Voluntary Departure

Voluntary departure from policing, unless an officer is leaving to avoid termination, involves leaving on one's own terms. There are many reasons that officers choose to leave policing, including the pursuit of other interests and planned retirement. Whatever the circumstance, officers must consider the future. Nearly everyone has heard the adage, "You should retire *to* something, not *from* something." This is good advice.

Many officers successfully move beyond policing careers. Yes, there is life after policing. Whether after just a few years or decades of service, these officers accept and anticipate their retirement from policing. They often start preparing long before their planned departure. They attend professional training classes, complete university studies, and otherwise take steps necessary to achieve their retirement goals. Following retirement, they transition into their new life, often becoming educators, politicians, lawyers, real estate agents, business owners, and even psychologists. It is career life-by-design at its best.

Some officers retire from their agency and accept civilian positions within their department. These officers-turned-civilian ease their transition out of policing by remaining employees of their agency. They often become lab techs, evidence custodians, background investigators, and so on. While this supports officers in their transition, the agency benefits as well. It retains the officer's years of training and experience. A pretty good deal for all involved.

Other officers continue their policing career by retiring from one agency and joining another. This is most often seen in agencies that have a fixed-period retirement system (see *Timing of retirement* below). Still others take advantage of their police training and become civilian security consultants, bodyguards, and private operators.

Some officers transition into full retirement. These officers are not interested in launching new or second careers. Instead, they find fulfillment in family, friends, travel, community service, and other endeavors. The important thing in full retirement is to do something. Ideally, it is something that is personally fulfilling and meaningful. For many former officers, volunteering for favorite charities, organizations, or worthy causes fills the bill.

Of course, whether an officer continues to work or enters full retirement after a policing career depends upon many factors, not the least of which is the officer. And even fully retired officers often pick up various "retirement gigs" to keep themselves busy and to earn some pocket money. Such gigs are normally, but not necessarily, far removed from policing. In the end, it seems that life after policing is limited only by one's goals and imagination.

Involuntary Departure

Involuntary departure includes leaving to avoid being fired, being terminated, and separating due to disability. When officers leave to avoid being fired it frequently involves an internal investigation that would likely result in the officer being terminated.

When officers are terminated, it is usually for cause and involves *due process*. Due process allows officers to challenge the reason(s) for termination and the imposed discipline. It also allows an appeal in the event the challenge is unsuccessful. Some police agencies are not subject to the rules of due process. In these agencies, officers serve at the discretion of the chief, sheriff, or other authority. As at-will employees, they can be terminated without cause.

Some police careers end through disability. Disability can result from illness or injury, including psychological injury caused by traumatic exposure. If the disability is job-related, there may be benefits that are not available otherwise. These benefits may make a significant difference in how the disability affects disabled officers. Regardless of the circumstances, in many cases of disability, officers struggle with the premature ending of their police career.

Grief and sometimes depression are observed when disability ends an officer's career. The grief experienced in such cases is twofold: grief for the loss of career and all that goes with it (status, income, benefits, comradeship, and so on), and grief for the loss of the "healthy self."

The experience of grief in response to a lost career can be significant and include practical and existential concerns. Former officers that find themselves coping with career loss due to disability often express these latter issues by asking "who am I without this job?" "how do I support my family" and "what do I do now?" The grief for the loss of health or the loss of an ability is somewhat unique. Much depends upon the actual loss and the officer's ability compensate for it or cope with it.

Separately, the loss of a career or the loss of health/ability can cause significant psychological distress. The loss of both simultaneously can be devastating.

Role Transition

Regardless of the type of departure from policing, successfully managing the transition means dealing with the loss of the police role. For some officers, leaving policing is a welcomed change. For most, it is a challenge. Even officers that have planned for and welcome the transition to civilian life will acknowledge missing at least some parts of the job - the most often cited is "the camaraderie."

Many officers have lived the "cop life" for so long that they do not know how to live any other way. This is reflected in their continued practice of carrying a firearm, meeting with the "boys" and "sisters," and hanging around the police station. However, it is not long before they notice that something has changed. As one officer explained it, "It's like I belonged to a big club. I made my mark, I was one of the guys, I did my job. Everyone in the station respects you. Suddenly, all of that is gone and you are on the outside looking in. I felt so different. I called the guys almost every day to see if they still related to me the same way. I visited the station, wondering what was going on and wanting to be part of the action. Somehow, it wasn't the same. I wasn't one of them anymore. It's hard to explain. I left, but I couldn't let go of this strong attachment" (Violanti, 1992, 41). Not much has changed since 1992.

Normally, as the length of time increases from the date of departure, these behaviors decrease. Slowly, for most officers, the "ownership" of the police agency is given over to the next generation of officers and the attachment to the police role diminishes.

The loss of the officer's role can also affect spouses. Some wives of retired police officers talk about their husbands as if they were still police officers. There seems to be a vicarious social status enjoyed by these women and many find the status difficult to relinquish. For example, one wife consistently referred to her retired officer husband as "the lieutenant." This was interesting because she would do so only in public. Another wife of a former police officer, upon his transition to new car salesman, complained, "I used to be somebody. I was the wife of a police officer." Evidently, she did not derive similar satisfaction from being the wife of a car salesman. Although the husband's job-change was not the only factor, this couple divorced about a year after he left the police department.

Clearly, wives, like officers, sometimes struggle with the idea that relinquishment of the police role is tantamount to not being a "big shot" (as one officer put it) any longer. Children of police officers can have similar experiences. Of course, this pattern may also be observed when wives are the former police officers, and within any other interpersonal relationship.

Timing of retirement

Many officers struggle with the timing of their retirement. Although there are no strict rules for when an officer should retire, the retirement system of an officer's agency often influences this decision. There are still some police departments with a fixed-benefit retirement system. In these agencies, if officers work for a specified number of years (usually twenty or twenty-five), they receive a percentage of their active-duty salary upon retirement. For most, this is collectable immediately upon retirement and is paid for life. Although it happens, it is unusual to see officers work much beyond their fixed retirement period. This is because after reaching the required years of service, officers are effectively working for a portion of their salary (the amount difference between their salary and what they would receive in retirement). As one officer put it, "I'm not working for half-pay. I'm outta here."

In agencies that provide an employer sponsored, defined contribution personal pension retirement, such as the 401K program, it is not unusual to see officers with more than thirty-five years of service. This system encourages longevity because the longer that officers work, the more money is accumulated. Unlike a fixed benefit retirement, when 401K money is exhausted, there is no further benefit. Add this to the fact that most police officers do not pay into social security, so that benefit may be lacking, and it is easy to see why some officers will work for many years in the same agency with 401K retirement plans. Some officers working under such a retirement benefit system have difficulty thinking they ever have enough money in their account to retire. The sad result of this is that some officers stay well beyond the time that they should have left. They become disinterested ROD (retired on duty) or ROAD (retired on active duty) officers. ROD/ROAD officers are just marking time, stacking money. They have "quietly quit" and do only what is necessary to get by. This becomes evident in their attitude and performance. They eventually end their police careers with a history of less-than-desirable performance and a poor work reputation.

Successful Retirement

For successful retirement from policing, officers need to prepare. Although having sufficient funds is important, this preparation should go beyond finance. Officers should think through the Retirement Checklist:

Retirement Checklist

1. Have you planned your retirement income to meet your needs? Is the income sufficient to support your anticipated retirement lifestyle?
2. Have you talked to your family about your retirement? How might it affect their lives? Discuss the fact that you may be around much more of the time.
3. Have you arranged for affordable medical and other insurance benefits?
4. Is it time for a change? Have you given all that you reasonably can to policing? Are you ready for a change?
5. Are you satisfied with your police career? Are there still things you wish to accomplish as a police officer?
6. Are you still connected to policing or have you mentally checked out? If you are still connected and it is not time for a change, continue your career. You are not ready to retire. If you have mentally checked out and it is not time for a change, reclaim your career. If it is time for a change, consider retirement. *Do not end your successful police career as a ROD or ROAD officer.*
7. How will you occupy the time formerly spent at work?
Hopefully, not with food, alcohol, or computer games. Some officers that have never had a serious problem with overeating, drinking too much, and spending unproductive days in front of a computer, develop these behaviors following retirement.
8. Are you ready for a change of pace? Have you thought about the possibility of not having enough to do or feeling overwhelmed with too much to do? When retired, there may be times that you feel a bit bored. This is not unusual, as occasionally feeling bored is a part of life for most everyone. The same goes with feeling overwhelmed. The important thing to avoid in retirement is a bored or overwhelmed lifestyle. For most officers, this means actively pursuing balance, a balance that may not have been available when working.
9. Are you prepared for a change in perceived stress? The stress reduction experienced by most officers upon retirement is often remarkable. This is often unanticipated and can lead to a collision of emotions - a simultaneous sense of relief from job stress and a feeling of sadness due to no longer being part of the police department.
10. What will you do? Do you have a plan? Will you begin another career, pursue a hobby, or take a retirement break before deciding? It can be beneficial to simply enjoy some time off after years of a police career. Whatever you are considering, write it down. You might surprise yourself with what you can discover when you write out what you are thinking.

Time structuring and time management are important in retirement. Even the pleasure of travel, sports, activities, and not having to work eventually wears off. This is especially true if many of the officer's friends are still working. Managing time and making it meaningful is a major challenge of retirement. Remember that retirement is a transition. Transitions take time. Once retired, be patient. It may take some time to find your retirement rhythm.

Retirement and Emotional Abandonment

Upon retirement, some officers report feeling emotionally abandoned by the department and former coworkers. They express these feelings in statements such as "My department has forgotten me" and "I guess when you're gone, you're gone!" For these retired officers, it seems that once the retirement ceremony ended, so did the years of work-group camaraderie. This can be especially distressing for officers who feel that they have given decades of honorable service to the agency, only to be swiftly forgotten.

To address this issue, some police agencies have developed programs which actively involve retired officers. These programs include volunteer services and assignments, periodic retired-officer social events or meetings, invitations to attend regular department events, and alumni associations. Additionally, many agencies support retired officers by offering periodic firearms qualification courses for those that wish to carry a concealed weapon as authorized under the *Law Enforcement Officers Safety Act* (LEOSA)(2004). However, as desirable as these programs have proven to be, many departments lack them.

Retired officers that feel emotionally abandoned and have a desire to reconnect with former coworkers have at least two options: (1) wait for someone to reach out or (2) initiate behavior to maintain or reestablish former relationships. As you might guess, pursuing option two significantly increases the probability of success.

The behaviors initiated under option (2) would depend upon the desired outcome. Therefore, a desire to stay in contact with specific former coworkers might involve arranging a breakfast together. Maybe this breakfast meeting evolves into a periodic coffee gathering - an excellent way to stay connected to friends. Planning and inviting others to common interest activities is another great way to keep in touch. The point is, as a retired officer, if you feel emotionally abandoned, you do not have to wait for others to remedy the situation. Instead, take the initiative. Your efforts may not result in exactly the outcome you want, but it is likely that it will be good. Remember, the outcome does not have to be perfect to be ok. Try again if things do not first turn out as you hoped.

If you are a working officer and have had close ties with a now retired officer, consider reaching out. The reach out does not have to be anything elaborate, an occasional telephone conversation or invitation for coffee will do. Even if the retired officer does not feel emotionally abandoned, your efforts will almost certainly be appreciated. Keep in mind that when you reach out, you honor the service and contributions of a retired officer who made some difference in your life and police career. Reaching out to a retired officer that meant something special to you is a very good thing to do, for both of you. Of course, retired officers can also reach out to other retired officers.

Retirement and Marriage

If married, retirement will often bring the couple back to the beginning. The kids, if any, are usually out of the house. The couple, as when first married, is back to living as a couple. The difference this time is that there is no job to go to. This means a lot of unprecedented time together. In 1984, psychologist John Stratton said that for police marriages, retirement can be a “time of friction or a time of rediscovery” (284). This is as true today as it was then. As Stratton reported, one police wife put it this way when asked how it felt to have her husband home. She answered, “Great, I went out and got a job.” Another said, “I took him for better or for worse, but not for lunch” (284).

Following retirement, couples can expect an adjustment period. During adjustment, couples can re-discover one another in a way not previously possible. They can also drift apart. Find what works to strengthen your bond. Do not allow the golden years of retirement to distance the intimacy in your relationship. Keep in mind that with a little planning and some patience, retirement can bring everything that you hoped it would. With a little planning and some patience, most officers go on to live rewarding, fulfilling, and enjoyable lives with their spouse after a career in policing.

Retirement and the Police Officer Bond

While nearly every retired officer would agree that their place in the police family has changed, few would deny that there remains a lifetime emotional bond among police officers that have served honorably. This bond goes beyond that developed with other officers while on the job. It is forged by the common experiences, risks, and dangers confronted by police officers, no matter what country or time period within which they served. This bond is felt and expressed by officers throughout the world.

Once a police officer, always a police officer

The police officer bond is expressed in sociable conversations with previously unknown officers, exchange of small gifts and uniform arm patches when in other jurisdictions and foreign countries, tours of police facilities, and so on. It is the enduring emotional connection that active and retired police officers share with every other police officer. In this sense, for most officers, *once a police officer, always a police officer*.



Graffiti on a wall in Vittoria, Sicily (Italy) expressing an attitude toward the police.



Graffiti in Regensburg, Germany. Common stressors and experiences bond police officers worldwide.

The Poetry of Retirement

Police Retirement: The Uniform

The uniform is put away,
In the closet, there to stay,
Never more to take a seat,
Never more to walk a beat.

It has worked, day and night,
In full sight, through calm and fight,
Through the sun and through the snow,
Through each shift, busy or slow.

It has faced danger, served and protected,
Taken the best and the worst, as expected.

No longer a witness to a report,
No longer needed to stand up in court,
Now it has taken its last dispatched call,
It has served honorably once and for all.

- Jack A. Digliani, 2022

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Perhaps renown American poet Robert Frost (1874-1963) best expressed one way to view life after retirement. In his celebrated poem published in 1923, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, he closed with these words:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Like the person in Frost's poem, retired police officers have promises to keep and miles to go before they sleep.

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