

**RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF GENERATION Z IN SMALL FIRE
DEPARTMENTS**

Research Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Executive Fire Officer Program

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Abstract

This research examines the factors that influence the recruitment and retention of Generation Z in small Metro-Atlanta fire departments. There is a different set of values and expectations in this newer generation that doesn't necessarily align with current fire department practices. The purpose of this research is to identify what motivates Gen Z and the expectations they bring to the fire service. Quantitative data was collected from 29 respondents from a survey sent to nine qualifying fire departments in the Metro-Atlanta area. The qualitative data was collected through a subgroup of 11 participants who volunteered for a semi-structured interview. The study focused on research questions that addressed organizational and personal factors associated with the satisfaction of Gen Z and their careers in the fire service. Findings highlight multiple ways for the fire service to adapt to the values and expectations of Gen Z, which could expand the applicant pool and improve retention in today's fire service.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The United States fire service is facing recruitment and retention issues that reach beyond just staffing and effective emergency response. Fire service leadership is looking into alternative methods to recruit and retain the Gen Z workforce. This is not just an operational issue, but an issue that resonates on a deeper level into the ability to sustain an organization, and the fire service as a whole. Fire departments nationwide have a decreasing pool of applicants and rising turnover rates. The problem is evident in small fire departments across Georgia. Peachtree City Fire Rescue (PCFR) and surrounding fire departments are finding firefighter positions harder to fill. The problem now is adapting to the workplace cultures, values, and expectations of the next generation of workers.

Gen Z, the youngest generation to enter the workforce, introduces values and interests that are different from those of past generations. Research shows that Gen Z puts a greater emphasis on the meaning of their career and work-life balance. They tend to put these ahead of the more traditional motivating factors such as pay, benefits, and job security (Revuru & Bandaru, 2024). Fire departments that use traditional leadership styles and traditional shift schedules aren't attracting this newer generation of workers. There must be changes in the fire service in order to attract and retain new talent.

This research examines the driving forces of recruiting and retaining Gen Z firefighters and what fire service leaders must do to shift organizational practices to meet the needs of the newer generation. It is important to understand what drives and sustains Gen Z so that staffing levels are maintained, firefighter health is improved, operational readiness is not compromised, and public trust is sustained. With these factors in mind, the fire service can continue to maintain operational readiness and sustain a healthy pool of applicants.

Background

Fire departments across the nation are seeing recruitment and retention rates decrease every year. Metro-Atlanta fire departments are experiencing the same issues as the rest of the nation. PCFR serves the citizens of Peachtree City, Ga., which is approximately 20 miles south of Atlanta. PCFR and other surrounding Metro-Atlanta fire departments have been working to combat smaller applicant pools and vacant positions. These same departments once had more qualified applicants than positions available, and local fire departments are now often resorting to costly overtime to meet staffing requirements. These shortages are similar to what is being seen on the national level, where Gen Z candidates are bringing values and expectations that are different from previous generations. This study examines the perspectives of Gen Z firefighters and provides practical recommendations that can guide fire service leadership to make necessary changes.

The existing literature indicates that Gen Z prioritizes greater work-life balance, flexible working schedules, meaningful work, and authentic leadership more than traditional benefits that were attractive to applicants in the past, like pension and pay (Zahra et al., 2025). Research suggests that the new generation of workers are “highly group-oriented” and suggests that they would work well in a culture of teamwork within the fire service (Potts, 2022, p. 23). The literature also suggests that traditional leadership styles and scheduling may not be attractive to the newer generation (Maioli, 2017). The research indicates that pay and monetary benefits are not sufficient motivators to retain talent. They must be accompanied by professional development, health programs, and organizational values that are similar to their own (Cantrell & Carr, 2024).

PCFR and neighboring fire departments are dealing with these recruitment and retention issues on a daily basis. By revisiting the traditional policies and procedures that have been used, fire departments may be able to improve recruitment and retention. Understanding the factors that influence Gen Z to join and remain in the fire service is essential for developing strategies to improve recruitment and retention.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is seen in the challenges in organizational effectiveness and public safety staffing that small fire departments in Metro-Atlanta are currently facing. The fire service's mission is to protect life and property, but staffing shortages threaten the ability to complete this mission. PCFR and other small Metro-Atlanta fire departments have seen a decrease in applications and an increase in turnover among the younger generation of firefighters, resulting in vacancies that increase overtime costs and put more pressure on existing personnel. These issues directly influence emergency response times and firefighter safety, which impact the trust and confidence of the community (Rhodes, 2025).

On an organizational level, the issue is a huge challenge involving organizational culture and strategic leadership. Change in the workforce requires leaders to consider new models for recruitment and retention. Organizations should promote healthy work-life balance, employee wellness, and career purpose without negatively impacting operational readiness and response (Cantrell & Carr, 2024).

Fire Departments around the nation are exploring different work schedules that would be more appealing to the younger generation. Carey (2025) states that the Greenville, NC, city council approved a 24/72 shift schedule for their firefighters, which is expected to improve recruitment and retention. This schedule requires firefighters to work an average of 42 hours per

week, compared to the traditional 24/48 shift schedule, which requires an average of 56 hours per week. The firefighters will also maintain the same pay. These types of changes in the fire service would be more appealing to recruit candidates as well as incumbent firefighters.

The need for this study is emphasized by its political and economic impact. Staffing shortages create overtime costs, firefighter burnout, and can lead to budget strain on local governments. Fire departments nationwide are working to recruit from a smaller pool of candidates, with departments improving pay and benefits to attract good candidates (Carter, 2023). The decrease in firefighters nationwide has been evident in recent years. There was a 4% decrease in the number of firefighters in the United States between 2019 and 2020, which is the lowest number of firefighters the industry has seen since 1991 (Fahy, Evarts, & Stein, 2022).

There must be an effort to research changes that could be made to the fire service to attract a generation of firefighters who can provide decades of service if they are supported. By considering these problems, this research will offer fire service leaders evidence-based solutions to support the workforce with the capability to address both current and future community demands.

Problem Statement

According to the U.S. Fire Administration (2024), fire departments across the United States are facing ongoing issues in recruitment and retention of qualified individuals, which has become an increasing problem over the last several years. Generation Z is described by Dwidienawati et al. (2025) as the generation born between 1997 and 2012. This generation has different values from applicants of the past, including career expectations and career goals. What once appealed to recruits, like 24/48 work schedules, pay/benefits, overtime, and fire department structure, may discourage the newer generation, decreasing candidate numbers and increasing

turnover. These issues are also compounded in small departments. Smaller departments may have barriers to a healthy applicant pool due to competing with larger departments. “Oftentimes, firefighters seek employment with larger departments which commonly provide more opportunities, such as increased benefits and compensation, specialty team participation, and upward mobility” (Aviles et al., 2023, p. 2). Department size is subjective, so for the purpose of this research, a small department will be considered comparable to PCFR, which is an Insurance Services Office (ISO) Class 1 career department, approximately 90 uniformed personnel, five fire stations, and covers an area of approximately 26 square miles.

PCFR once had many more applicants than positions to fill. Now, PCFR, along with neighboring departments, is working to establish alternative ways to attract the Gen Z population. The applicant pool is not what it was in years past, leading to filling vacancies with applicants that, at one time, would not have been considered. Local small fire department officials from Fayetteville, Fairburn, and Union City report difficulty in attracting Gen Z applicants, as this generation is drawn to technology, social media, and less physically demanding work.

These fire departments also report that the commitment of Gen Z firefighters tends to be high when they are offered formal training, career development opportunities, and feel they have a voice in departmental matters. Having influence in decision-making also seems to be an important retention factor.

According to Portillo et al. (2024), small fire departments cannot compete with the benefits that larger city departments can offer. If departments can modify these practices to the values and needs of this newer generation, it may attract more youthful candidates while maintaining operational readiness. Tiscareno (2024) states that we must “develop action items

based on what we know about Gen Z's job satisfaction." Without a deliberate strategy, filling vacancies could increase the cost of staffing, impacting the quality of service and firefighter safety. Smith et al. (2020) state that burnout is caused by long-term exposure to difficult situations that have not been controlled. By controlling these factors, fire departments may be able to retain their workforce and create a healthier work environment. Understanding how organizational practices influence Gen Z can lead to evidence-based change that improves their quality of life, increases recruitment, and decreases turnover.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to research how small fire departments in Metro-Atlanta can attract and retain interest from newer generations, potentially leading to a restructuring of the current fire service model and promoting a healthier applicant pool. Fire departments across the nation have different experiences with people applying to become firefighters, but the one thing that remains the same is that the fire service is always looking for qualified applicants.

Research Question

What strategies can small fire departments in Metro-Atlanta adopt to effectively recruit and retain Generation Z firefighters?

Sub-Questions

1. What workplace values, career priorities, and expectations do Gen Z firefighters hold for a career in small fire departments, and how are these different from those of older generations of firefighters?
2. How well do current recruitment methods in small departments line up with the communication preferences of Gen Z applicants?

3. How do factors such as scheduling, wellness programs, and career development influence Gen Z recruitment and retention in small fire departments?
4. What factors contribute to early career turnover in the Gen Z population?
5. What changes in policies, culture, or practices could help retain Gen Z personnel?

These research questions are extremely important because they present the challenges that the current fire service faces. By changing the way fire departments practice recruitment and retention strategies, they can increase the number of Gen Z applicants. As older firefighters retire and the pool of applicants decreases nationally, small fire departments are competing for personnel. If leaders understand how to bridge department practices with Gen Z values, they can ensure operational readiness and long-term workforce stability.

Summary

This chapter introduced the study, setting the problem background, showing the need for resolving generational differences in recruitment and retention within fire departments, and identifying the problem, purpose, and research questions. Collectively, these create the foundation for research by outlining the problem and research objectives.

Chapter 2 will present a literature review of workplace generational values, fire service recruitment and retention issues, and public administration thoughts on recruitment and retention. Chapter 3 will describe the research process, including research design, participants, and the data collection process. Chapter 4 describes the findings, and Chapter 5 will conclude with an overview of the findings, suggestions for fire service leadership, and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review examines how fire departments across the nation can address the challenges of recruiting and retaining Gen Z. This new generation has a different set of values and workplace expectations that motivate them to pursue their personal goals. The theory behind this research is that by finding ways to attract the Gen Z population to the fire service, there will be more demand in this career field, which is a pressing issue for the continuity of emergency response. The theory is that if there are changes made to create an environment that attracts the Gen Z lifestyle, fire departments will be more successful in recruitment and retention.

The disciplines studied in this research include organizational structure and behavior, human resource management, and generational theories in the Gen Z population. Each discipline intersects with the topic in interesting ways. The organizational structure and behavior are analyzed to determine how the current leadership structure, as well as the shift schedule, work with Gen Z and if they need to be changed, if at all. Human resource management is looking at ways to address fire department workforce shortages and how those shortages impact emergency response. The generational theories look at work-life balance, the digital culture of Gen Z, and how this generation communicates and interacts with others. Determining what motivates Gen Z with these disciplines in mind will help to solve some of the significant issues the fire service is currently facing.

Existing Literature

The existing literature emphasizes the critical factors that are important when it comes to what motivates Gen Z to work in a particular career. They include their work schedule, compensation and benefits, organizational culture, and work-life balance. This literature focuses

on issues that, if addressed, have the potential to increase recruitment and retention in the fire service. There are several variables that the literature discusses that explain why some members of the Gen Z population apply themselves to specific work environments. Although most of these have historically been issues in many different career fields, the literature shows that Gen Z prioritizes different aspects of their personal and professional lives as opposed to older generations. This would mean that fire departments, which have been founded on more traditional scheduling and leadership practices, may need to evolve to better reflect the values of this generation.

In addition to the reasonable considerations for decision-making, research has shown that cultural expectations and generational identity are strong forces behind the shaping of the Gen Z attitude towards work. Contrary to previous generations that would likely adapt more easily within an organization, Gen Z has shown more openness to finding a relationship between their own values and the mission of the organization. It is this shift that resonates with the need to look beyond the motivations of work, such as compensation and other benefits, to other motivations, like belonging to a group, and displaying care for the well-being of the employee. Each of these items separately points to an overarching narrative. It requires more than a job to recruit and retain Gen Z, but a whole career experience that is encouraging and sustainable.

Fire Department Organizational Structure

The historical organizational structure of many fire department organizations provides individual role clarity. Sujanto et al. (2025) determined that role clarity reduces confusion and the associated stress. Potts (2022) found that Gen Z “value relationships” and view themselves as “highly group-oriented” (p. 23). This suggests that this generation would likely thrive with a fire department culture, driving them to a successful career. Gen Z also has different views and

values that differentiate them from past generations (Maioli, 2017). This generation needs something different from their organization. This may possibly be a change in organizational leadership practices, but it may also be a reorganization of the traditional method of fire department shift work. This generation values their days off, and the shift work schedule might be an important identifying factor that determines whether they will work for a particular organization or not.

Cantrell and Carr (2024) discuss that Gen Z employees are value-driven and expect the organization to deliver what is stated in their policies and procedures. This generation will protest policies and procedures that they do not understand or agree with. Cubukcu and Balcioglu (2024) state that Gen Z likes organizational cultures that are innovative and sustainable. Gen Z wants to work for a department where they feel valued. Ramadorai and Haris (2023) discuss that workplace engagement is improved once the leaders adopt inclusive behaviors that empower the young employees. Visser and Terblanche (2025) suggest that cultivating Gen Z's work skills requires training and leadership practices that focus on communication and flexibility. The research shows that fire service leaders must introduce new models of leadership and organizational practices into the old system in an effort to retain Gen Z employees.

Organizational Behavior

Research on organizational behavior shows that Gen Z desires a career that has meaning and provides mentoring as well as feedback. They need to believe that they are contributing to something great and that their leadership cares for them. Revuru and Bandaru (2024) state that compared to older generations, who may have cared more about job security or respect for rank, Gen Z desires authentic relationships with their leaders and peers. They want to believe that their

daily work leads them directly to meaningful outcomes, both for the department and the community they serve. Zahra et al. (2025) also speak of flexibility and adaptive developmental opportunities. Gen Z employees not only want to contribute, but they also want to feel that the organization is investing in them for career development. They want to see a more flexible work schedule. They also want to have a more structured mentorship program, which might allow these employees the environment in which to succeed. Surigiu et al. (2025) suggest that Gen Z are motivated by meaningful work that aligns with values. This is a generation that will not accept transactional models of the workplace and instead choose those that provide recognition, growth, and purpose.

Fire Service Staffing and Shift Schedules

Shift schedules remain one of the defining characteristics of fire departments. The 24/48 schedule has been the standard for years in the fire service, but studies have found that this model is not necessarily the expectation of Gen Z workers. Zahra (2025) found that flexibility and work-life balance are even higher on the list than job security as a priority, evidence that priorities are changing. The traditional fire department schedule, while familiar to previous generations, may not work well with the lifestyle of Gen Z. Moving to a work schedule that gives employees increased time to recover and increased time with family might make the profession more attractive to younger candidates. Sanchez-Hernandez et al. (2019) state that younger employees consider time off as a primary priority, often removing themselves from organizations that have overtime-based staffing configurations. Abdelmoaty et al. (2025) conducted a study on firefighter shift work and compared different models. The article compared three different shift models: the 24/48, 1/3/2/3, and 48/96 shifts. The firefighter will work the same number of days per month with each model. However, the 1/3/2/3 and 48/96 models offer

increased recovery time from work, as well as more consecutive days off, which they can spend with their family. The problem that the article mentioned with the shifts that extend past 24 hours was the family issues that come with being gone for those extended periods of time.

This generation also has general health concerns, with the majority of Gen Z workers associating rest and work-life balance with overall wellness. Cecconi et al. (2025) state that Gen Z values prevention when it comes to health, and an organization that fails to provide this requirement may be unable to retain its Gen Z workforce. Fire departments face the issues of being operationally prepared and accepting measures to prevent burnout and a healthy way of life. It's not easy to change a department's shift schedule, but flexible departments that can be creative will find it easier to recruit and retain personnel.

In the State of Florida, for example, the Executive Officer of the Governor (2025) announced on June 5, 2025, that Governor Ron DeSantis signed House Bill 929, which states that the standard for firefighter shifts will be limited to 42 hours per week (24/72 shift schedule). The goal is to prevent burnout within the fire service, making this field more attractive, increasing recruitment and retention across the state.

Human Resource Management

Shortages in the workforce are not solely an internal issue for the fire department. These shortages also reflect the quality of emergency response. Peterson (2025) states that data from human resource officials indicate that there is a struggle to integrate Gen Z into the workplace and that human resource departments are prepared to deal with these new challenges so that integration will be easier. By accommodating Gen Z to bring their values and ideas into the workplace, they will blend more comfortably into the fire department. Dobrowolski et al. (2022)

discuss that Gen Z will embrace the environment and culture of their workplace, but they do have new generational values that they need to see implemented. By implementing these values and bringing a lifestyle that attracts Gen Z, it may encourage more applicants to join the fire service.

Compensation: Pay and Benefits

Although compensation remains an integral aspect of the hiring process, Gen Z considers compensation in the broader context. Pay is important, but it is increasingly weighed against the possibility of personal growth, career progression, and organizational culture. Gen Z would be more likely to stay in a profession if they feel that there is a chance for advancement and if they are guided by education and mentoring (Cantrell & Carr, 2024). Surugiu et al. (2025) state that job satisfaction and personal development are valued as much as pay, making it challenging, if not impossible, for managers to use financial rewards as the only benefit. Good pay alone will no longer retain talented people. Peterson (2025) indicates that organizations must invest in wellness initiatives and professional development in order to remain competitive in the job market. For fire departments, this can translate to integrating compensation with non-traditional rewards such as mental health therapy, wellness initiatives, tuition reimbursement, and fitness club membership. These types of benefits can increase the appeal of a position, particularly when younger employees see them as an investment for their long-term career.

Generational Theories

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance plays a significant role in recruitment and retention. Sanchez-Hernandez et al. (2019) state that the younger generations prioritize work-life balance, and it is

not a peripheral benefit but a core aspect of department culture that they focus on. The idea is that there must be a cultural shift within the fire departments. The older generations would have their life revolve around their work schedule, whereas Gen Z would be more inclined to have their work revolve around their life. An unmanageable work-life balance can easily make an employee disengage in the workplace, leading to sickouts and employee turnover. Gochangco (2024) states that Gen Z expresses the need for flexibility in the work schedule to get the balance that they desire. Kim et al. (2024) found that dissatisfaction was usually associated with excessive overtime, which disrupts their personal life and the time they need to recover from their previous shift. This obviously has implications for fire service organizations. Managers need to ensure that not only are schedules operationally effective, but they are also designed in such a way that they will increase work-life balance and prevent burnout.

Digital Culture and Communication

Gen Z has known digital technology their entire life, and this reality has vast implications for workplace communication. They are inspired by new technology and prefer to work for organizations that embrace digital solutions and move toward progressive technological advancements. Dobrowolski et al. (2022) state that Gen Z is talented with digital technology, including the internet and social media. They use this technology not only for entertainment purposes, but also for professional networking and information sharing. Fire departments willing to adopt digital approaches, such as social media-based recruitment campaigns, can make it more efficient to find younger candidates. Benitez-Marquez et al. (2022) state that Gen Z grew up during the technological age and actively seek out organizations with cultures that naturally integrate technology into operations. For the fire department, this might involve moving away from the use of face-to-face or paper systems to more technological platforms in training,

scheduling, and communications. Even if previous generations in the workforce may resist such change, embracing digital solutions is really a way to bring all generations together and create a culture of acceptance and accessibility. Advertising careers online, where Gen Z spends their time, can increase recruitment efficiency.

Generational Identity

Generational identity defines the characteristic in how Gen Z understands and measures work. Cantrell and Carr (2024) document that face-to-face interaction is still essential to this generation, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Although they have a reputation as digital natives, most Gen Z employees enjoy in-person interaction and like to work in groups where close friendships are made. Jayanthi and Mathews (2023) argue that Gen Z possesses strong community values, and they want to use both formal and informal types of communication to discuss issues. Social media is a great tool to reach Gen Z, and it's a platform where ideas are exchanged. Dobrowolski et al. (2022) state that Gen Z identifies as a generation of good character, and they know they should be treated with fairness and respect in the workplace. Such a belief puts pressure on organizations to show evidence of integrity in policy and in everyday life. By creating policy and taking action that promote these generational identities shows that the organization cares about its people, and those efforts can aid in recruitment and retention efforts.

Synthesis of the Existing Literature

Across the literature, there are several areas of similarity. Gen Z values flexibility, and the fire service's traditional scheduling, leadership, and compensation model often creates friction with Gen Z's need for work-life balance and career development. Pay remains important, but there are other factors, such as engagement, mentoring, and workplace culture, which carry

more weight. Organizational behavior studies suggest that Gen Z works best in environments that provide meaning, flexibility, and with organizations that are proactive with digital resources. Public administration and human resources literature validate that workforce planning needs to adapt to sustaining proper staffing levels for the delivery of essential community services.

Summary

This literature review demonstrates how pay, scheduling, organizational structure, public administration, human resources, and generational theory create recruitment and retention challenges in the fire service. Gen Z's values, digital knowledge, diversity, and need for work-life balance are reshaping workforce expectations. It requires fire departments and municipal government officials to coordinate policies, leadership methods, and organizational tactics to counteract these trends. This literature review forms the foundation for studying strategies to hire and retain Gen Z firefighters in modern fire departments.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter addresses the methodology used when researching strategies for small Metro-Atlanta fire departments in the recruitment and retention of Gen Z firefighters. Population and sample, instrumentation, research process, research design, and ethical concerns are explained in a reproducible format. A convergent mixed-methods design was used in the research through the use of quantitative and qualitative methods to collect measurable data patterns and lived experiences of the target generation firefighters.

Research Design

The convergent mixed-methods design was applied in the research project to collect, analyze, and produce quantitative and qualitative data. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), researchers are most familiar with the convergent mixed method design. The design was applied to understand the recruitment and retention issues of small fire departments in the Metro-Atlanta area. The quantitative portion used an online survey with closed-ended questions to provide a way to tabulate responses. The qualitative aspect involved in-person semi-structured interviews to explore a deeper discussion on the reasoning behind personal decisions, shared experiences, and insights among Gen Z firefighters.

This method was used to find answers to recruitment and retention issues that small fire departments are facing in the Metro-Atlanta area. The mixed-methods approach is a practical research methodology used to find answers to real-world issues. (Kaur, 2016). Quantitative data provided a snapshot of generational trends while qualitative data offered context and explanation for the trends. The combination of both types of data produced findings through triangulation

that prove or disprove each other (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This information can be used by fire service leaders to potentially make changes that are attractive to this generation of workers.

Population and Sample

Target Population

The population targeted in the study included career firefighters from small Metro-Atlanta fire departments similar in size to PCFR. PCFR has approximately 90 uniform personnel divided across three shifts and five stations. Departments were to be chosen to participate if the department was within a quartile of PCFR's uniform personnel and station number, so that they would compare in size and provide an adequate sample of Gen Z subjects.

Department Selection Process

A list of questions was sent via e-mail to nineteen Metro-Atlanta fire departments for demographic and operational information on the size and capabilities of the departments (population served, square miles, stations, total uniformed personnel, annual call volume, ISO Class, and transport model) to determine which departments best fit the inclusion criteria. Nine fire departments responded with full information, and eight of those were included in the criteria needed for participation. Even though the additional questions asked would not exclude departments from participating, the additional questions provided more data about the departments. The smallest department included had 60 uniformed personnel, and the largest had 133. Both were marginally higher or lower than the quartile range, but were included deliberately to try to maximize the number of potential Gen Z participants.

Sampling Strategy

The quantitative sample from the survey consisted of twenty-nine participants from PCFR and the eight other Metro-Atlanta fire departments. The survey link was disseminated

through respective fire chiefs, and they were asked to distribute the survey to their Gen Z members. The participation was anonymous and voluntary, apart from the fact that volunteers were asked whether they would want to provide contact details for a voluntary follow-up interview.

Among those who participated in the survey, a qualitative subsample of eleven firefighters was obtained for an interview. Sampling was meant to be represented by a variety of ranks, levels of fire service experience, and department types. The only firefighters who volunteered to be interviewed were from PCFR. The number of participants that were interviewed was acceptable, and there were common themes of information in this subsample. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) state that limiting interviews to 9-17 delivers adequate information to make out patterns and assess thematic saturation.

Instruments

Quantitative Instrument - Survey

Quantitative data was collected using a 30-question web-based survey (Appendix A) with seven categories:

1. Personal Information (optional)
2. Demographics
3. Recruitment
4. Workplace Values and Expectations
5. Work Schedule
6. Career Development and Compensation
7. Recruitment and Retention

Twenty-six of the survey questions were designed as closed-ended, single-response, true/false, or yes/no to allow for sufficient statistical analysis. Four of the questions allowed participants to select multiple responses, allowing the survey to capture a broad range of factors that influence recruitment and retention. The survey was developed to take no more than 15 minutes, which is an approach found to maximize response quality and response rates. Kunz and Gummer (2024) state that 15 minutes is the longest a general population survey should be.

A beta test was conducted for instrument validation by a pilot group to test for clarity, timing, and relevance. The pilot group was not included in the final study. Feedback also ensured that the survey was no longer than 15 minutes and that everything was readable and relevant. Minor editing for reading and flow was done prior to passing the instrument to the participating departments. The average time for the beta test was 7 min 34 s. Besides slightly altering the survey by recommendations from the pilot group, there was one additional question in the beta test that was not in the final instrument, which was the question that asked for feedback from the pilot group. This question caused a skew in the final average time for the final instrument, which was 5 min 23 s.

Qualitative Instrument - Semi-Structured Interview

The qualitative component employed a 20-question semi-structured interview guide (Appendix C). Interviews addressed six general topics: background, recruitment process, work-life balance, organizational culture and leadership, career development, retention and turnover, and technology and communications. Interviews were conducted in person and lasted 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded with permission from the participants and were later transcribed to be analyzed for themes. All the participants signed a confidentiality and consent

form (Appendix B), and participant identifiers were removed at transcription to ensure anonymity.

Research Process

The research process was structured in five consecutive steps to facilitate consistency, transparency, and replicability.

Preparation (Weeks 1–2)

- Implemented the convergent mixed-methods design and created the research instruments.
- Completed the confidentiality and consent statements.
- Receive administrative clearance to conduct the study.

Department Outreach (Weeks 3-4)

- Emailed baseline demographic questions to nineteen Metro-Atlanta fire departments to find those comparable to PCFR.
- Eight fire departments were found to be eligible for the study (not including PCFR).
- Emailed Metro-Atlanta fire chiefs the completed survey for review and approval to distribute to staff.

Data Collection (Weeks 5-7)

- Administered the EFO Gen Z Survey online through Microsoft Forms. Participation was voluntary, confidential, and anonymous except for those willing to leave contact information for a follow-up interview.
- Of those willing to do so, an organized semi-structured interview was conducted with volunteer participants.
- Carried out each interview (30 - 60 minutes), audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis and Integration (Weeks 8-9)

- Quantitative analysis: Survey responses were placed in graphs and tables to determine meaningful variables (e.g., schedule type, intent to stay at current department, mentorship opportunities, job satisfaction).
- Qualitative analysis: Transcripts were used to identify repeating patterns between participant responses. Themes were discovered, such as (1) pathway into the fire service and recruitment, (2) shift schedules and work-life balance, (3) organizational culture, and (4) career development.
- Integration: Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated through the use of a joint display of data (see Table 6 in Chapter 4), which presents areas of overlap and divergence between the two datasets, enabling a mixed-methods triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Interpretation (Weeks 10-12)

- Findings of the quantitative and qualitative data are presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

Validity

When using the convergent mixed-method approach, validity should be based on both quantitative and qualitative portions of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey instrument was distributed to nine fire departments (one being PCFR, the other eight were other Metro-Atlanta fire departments) and was successful overall. The interview instrument's data was limited because all the participants worked for the researcher's fire department. The researcher was unsuccessful at getting members from other departments to participate in the interview process. This most likely caused an imbalance in the qualitative research. However, PCFR is a

melting pot of many different departments, and all the interviewees have previously worked for one or more other fire departments, which adds more depth to the data provided.

Consent for voluntary participation in the interviews and survey was achieved. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and they understood that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and that their responses would remain confidential. All interview participants signed a Confidentiality and Consent form (Appendix B). No personally identifiable information (PII) was collected or retained on file or in the final paper. Participants were assigned coded identifiers (e.g., Participant 1) to ensure their privacy. All electronic data was retained on a password-protected drive. Signed informed consent forms are kept in a locked file cabinet and will be disposed of within 365 days following study completion.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were taken and maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the approximate time commitment required, and their right to withdraw at any time. Other considerations included obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, informing participants that their involvement was voluntary, showing respect to all participants, ensuring equity throughout the process, maintaining honesty and transparency, and advising that documents would be disposed of within 365 days of receipt of the information.

Summary

The convergent mixed-method design used to collect data on Gen Z recruitment and retention in small Metro-Atlanta fire departments has been described in this chapter. The mixed-methods approach incorporated the results of a 30-question survey along with the findings of 20

semi-structured interview questions. Samples were taken from agencies of similar size to PCFR to maximize applicability. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study.

This chapter detailed the research process, including how participants were selected, the data collection procedures, and the methods used to analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. The information provided gives insight into the factors that influence career decisions made by the Gen Z population.

CHAPTER 4: STUDY RESULTS

Introduction - Demographics of the Participants

The data for this research was compiled from conducting a convergent mixed-method design consisting of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was received through the participation of 29 Gen Z career firefighters who are employed by nine Metro-Atlanta fire departments that are similar in size to PCFR. The qualitative data was received through a semi-structured interview process from eleven career firefighters who are employed by PCFR. The survey and interview participants' age range was from 21 to 28 years of age.

The survey data showed that the largest age range groups were split. 41% of the respondents were between 24 and 26 years old, and 41% of the respondents were between 27 and 28 years old. The survey also showed that 45% of the respondents had been in the fire service for 3-5 years, which was the largest group when discussing length of time in the fire service.

The survey was used to receive quantitative data that reflected demographic data, questions relating to why the firefighter chose this profession, job expectations, work-life balance, etc. The qualitative data was received to give insight into the answers produced from the survey. The qualitative data is the *why* behind the quantitative data. The data received helps to answer the research question: What strategies can small fire departments in Metro-Atlanta adopt to effectively recruit and retain Generation Z firefighters?

Research Results

Quantitative Data

Survey Respondent Sample

Figures 1 and 2 represent the number of uniformed personnel and fire stations the respondents' department had. This information provides insight into the department's size and

how it compares to PCFR. These departments have been isolated from larger ones to focus on how recruitment and retention can be better understood and how the processes can be improved for Gen Z in small departments.

Figure 1

Number of Uniformed Personnel

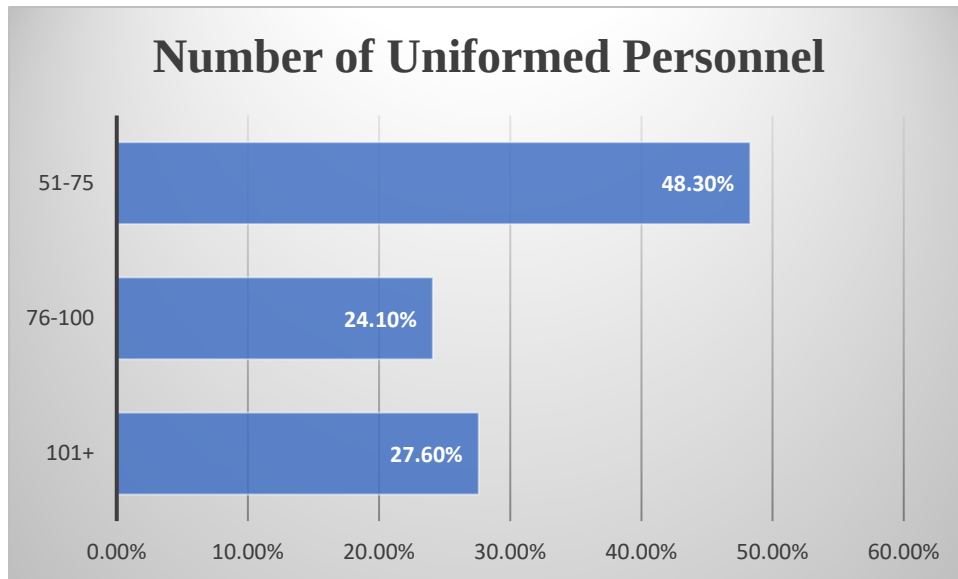
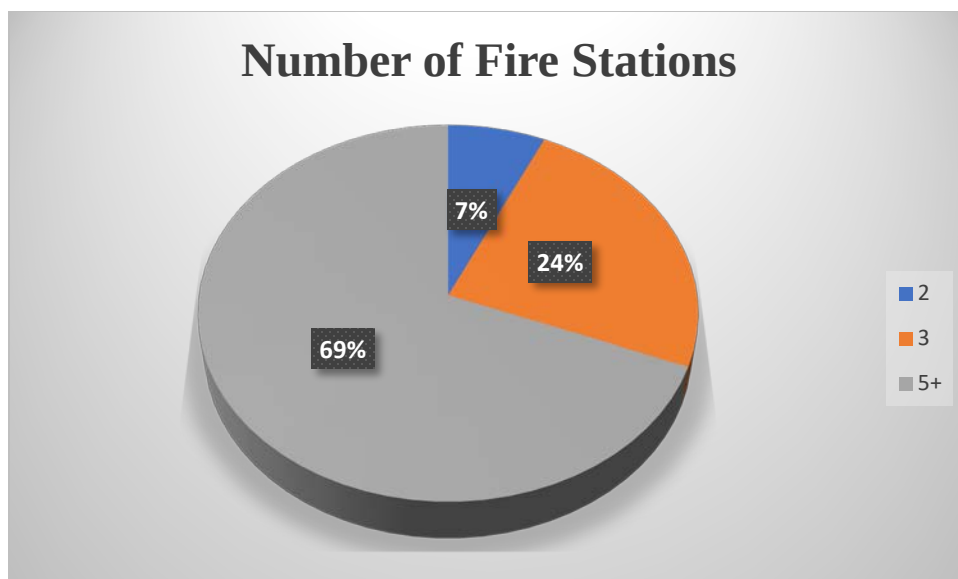


Figure 2

Number of Fire Stations



There were varying levels of job positions that completed the survey, including probationary firefighter, firefighter/EMT, firefighter paramedic, driver, and officer. The majority of respondents who completed the survey were firefighter/EMTs. Figure 3 outlines the percentage of each position that completed the survey.

Figure 3

Job Positions

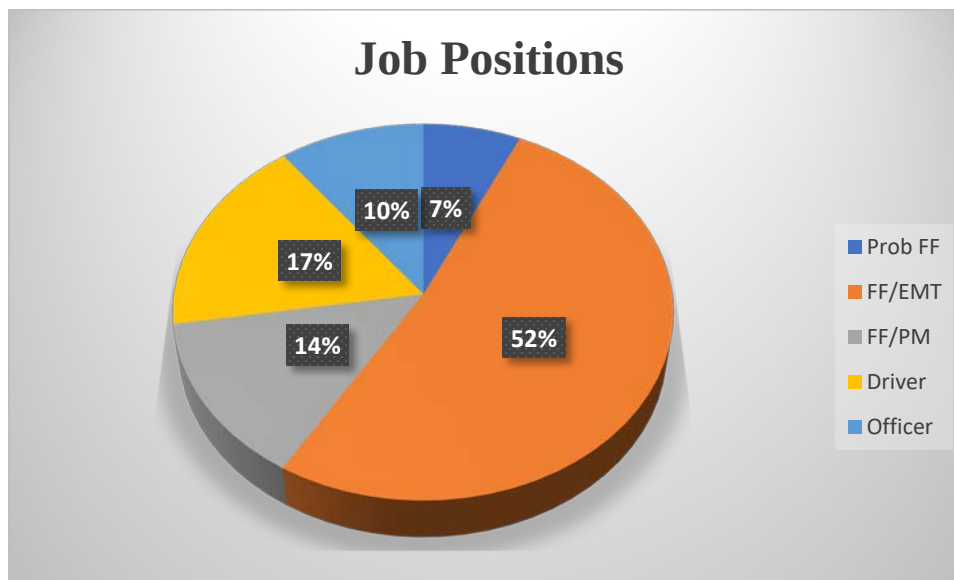


Figure 4 depicts the type of shift schedule the respondents are working at their current fire department. There were multiple shift schedule options for the participants to choose from to describe their department's schedule. The 24/48 (one day on/two days off), 48/96 (two days on/four days off), and the 1/3/2/3 (one day on/three days off/two days on/three days off) shift schedules were the only ones reported. The majority of the respondents work a 24/48 shift schedule (86%).

Figure 4

Shift Schedule

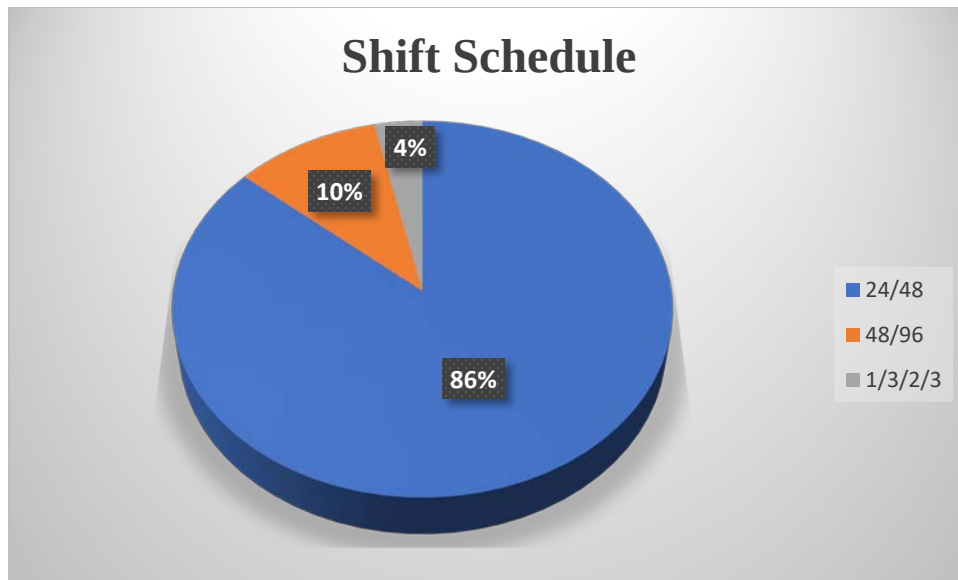
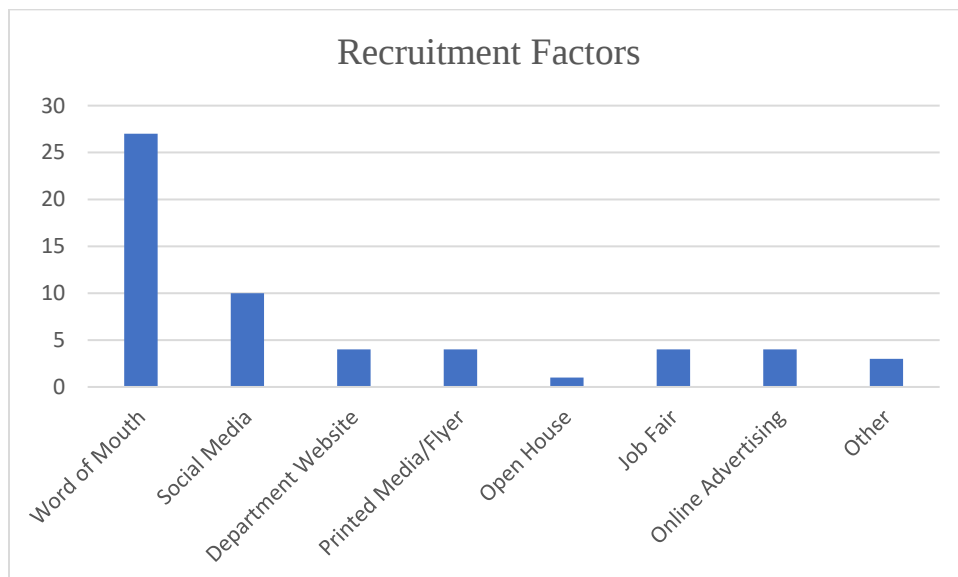


Figure 5 shows the different recruitment factors that were used to attract the respondents to their fire department. The respondents could choose multiple answers depending on their individual experience. Word of mouth was the number one factor (47%) in the recruitment process, with social media being the number two factor (18%).

Figure 5

Recruitment Factors



Note. Participants could select more than one option.

Table 1 shows the results of how well the respondents believe their department did in explaining pay, benefits, and work schedule during the hiring process, and whether the length of the hiring process was reasonable. 86% of respondents said the explanation of benefits and shift schedule was explained well, and 93% said the length of the hiring process was reasonable.

Table 1

Perception of Compensation, Schedule, and Hiring Process

Variable	Yes	No	Percent Yes	Percent No
Good Explanation of Pay, Benefits, and Work Schedule	25	4	86%	14%
Length of Hiring Process was Reasonable	27	2	93%	7%

Figures 6-8 discuss career motivation, job expectations, and the realities of the job. Most respondents (75%) stated they were looking for an exciting and challenging career. This was followed by job stability, the need to serve their community, teamwork, internal fulfillment, opportunities for growth, work-life balance, and civic engagement.

They were also asked about their expectations when joining the fire service, and the two highest job expectations were purpose/service and teamwork. This was followed by excitement/action, opportunities to strengthen physical and mental fitness, respect and professionalism, training and professional development, an attractive schedule and work-life balance, good leadership and culture, and the lowest item on the priority list is pay. The respondents were asked if the job matched their expectations, and 86% of them said yes, with an overwhelming majority.

Figure 6

Career Motivation



Note. Participants could select more than one option.

Figure 7

Job Expectations



Note. Participants could select more than one option.

Figure 8

Reality Match

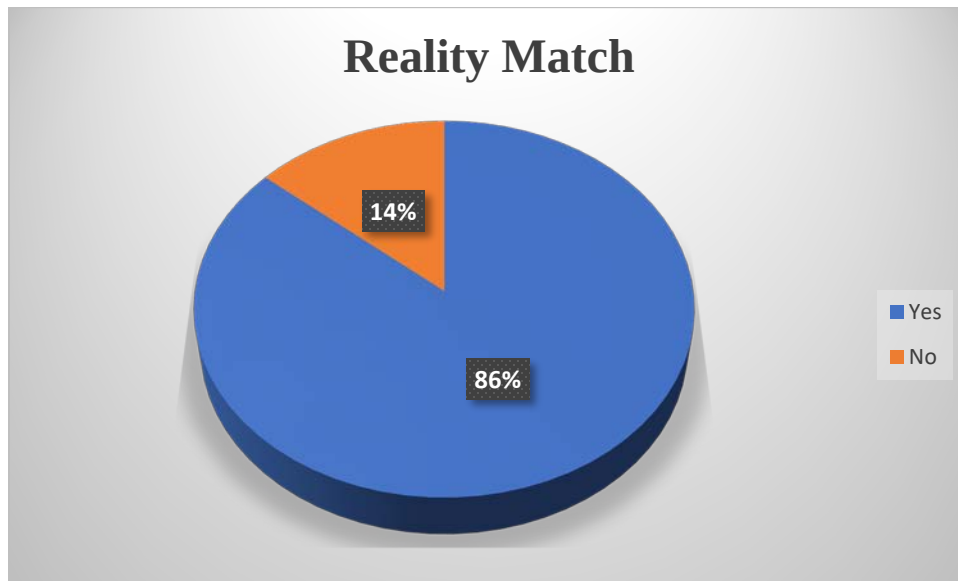


Table 2 shows the results of whether they felt like having a voice within their department was important, if work-life balance was more important than overtime opportunities, whether their department had a supportive culture, and if recognition was important to them. 100% of respondents stated they wanted a voice within the department, 90% said work-life balance was more important than overtime opportunities, 83% said their department's culture is supportive, and 65% want to be recognized for their contributions.

Table 2

Voice, Work-Life Balance, Culture, Recognition

Variable	Yes	No	Percent Yes	Percent No
Voice in the Department is Important	29	0	100%	0%
Work-Life Balance vs Overtime	26	3	90%	10%

Supportive Culture	24	5	83%	17%
Importance of Recognition	19	10	65%	35%

The survey participants were asked if their current schedule allows for adequate rest and family time. They were also asked if they had personally experienced burnout due to a demanding work schedule and overtime. The majority state they do receive enough rest and family time, but it is not an overwhelming majority. The data collected for their personal experience with burnout was similar. It is almost split between the 29 respondents. Nearly half of the respondents have experienced burnout, and it is important to note that the majority of them have only been in the fire service for 3-5 years (see Table 3 and Figure 9).

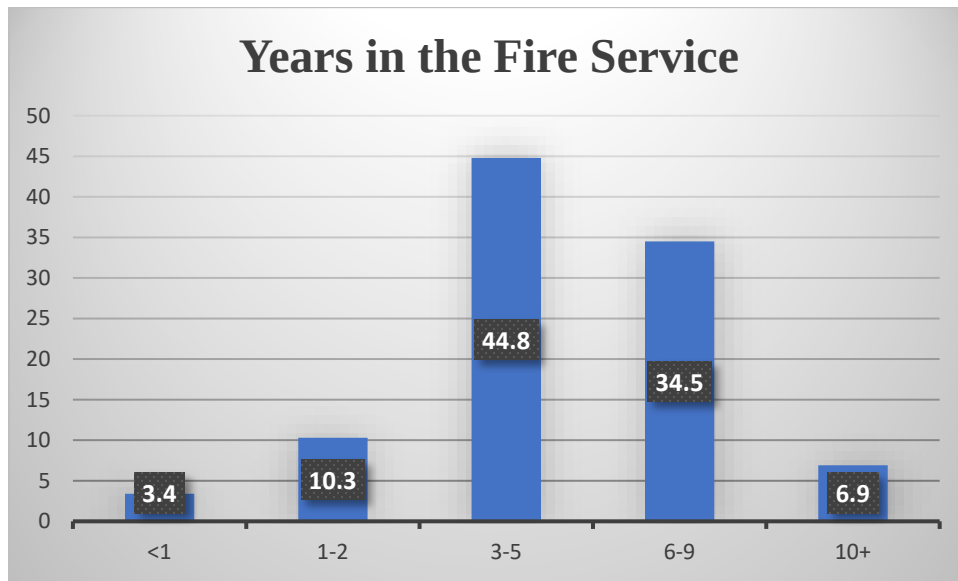
Table 3

Rest, Family Time, and Burnout

Variable	Yes	No	Percent Yes	Percent No
Adequate rest and family time	17	12	58.6%	41.4%
Experienced burnout due to schedule/overtime	14	15	48.3%	51.7%

Figure 9

Years in the Fire Service



The survey asked whether their department supports physical fitness and wellness during duty hours and whether they believe mental health is important to their department. The majority stated that their department supports physical fitness, wellness, and mental health (see Table 4).

Table 4

Physical Fitness/Wellness Support

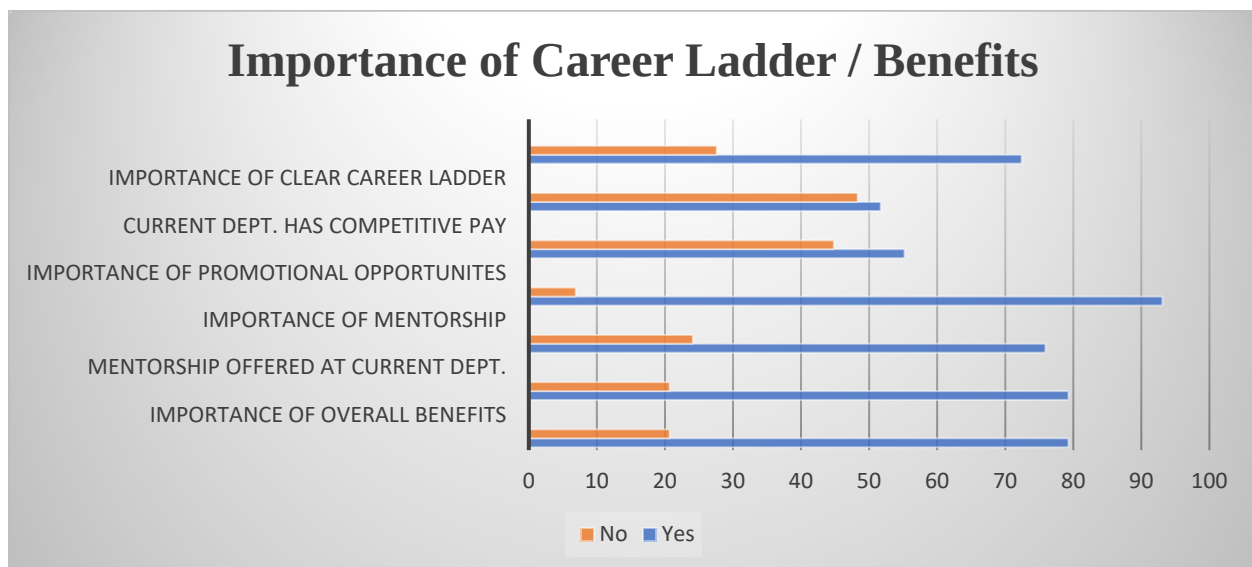
Variable	Yes	No	Percent Yes	Percent No
Department supports physical fitness/wellness	26	3	89.7%	10.3%
Department supports mental health	25	4	86.2%	13.8%

Data was gathered to determine the importance of a clear career ladder and department benefits to the Gen Z population. The survey asked whether a clear career ladder, competitive pay, promotional opportunities, mentorship, and additional benefits (e.g., tuition reimbursement, wellness programs, and mental health support) were important. The majority (72%) said a clear

career ladder is important, but approximately half said promotional opportunities would influence them to stay in their current department. Nearly half of the respondents said their department offered competitive pay compared to surrounding departments. Most respondents stated that mentorship is important to them and their career, and the majority have mentorship offered at their current department. 79% of the respondents said that the additional benefits were important to them (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Importance of Career Ladder / Benefits



The majority of the survey participants said that they plan to stay with their current department for more than 5 years. The participants were asked to select reasons that would make them leave their department, and multiple answers were accepted. The number one reason respondents said they would leave is inconsistent standards and accountability, followed by poor leadership/management. The area of least concern was lack of purpose or impact, followed by health and safety concerns (see Figure 11 and Table 5).

Figure 11

Plan to Stay with Current Department

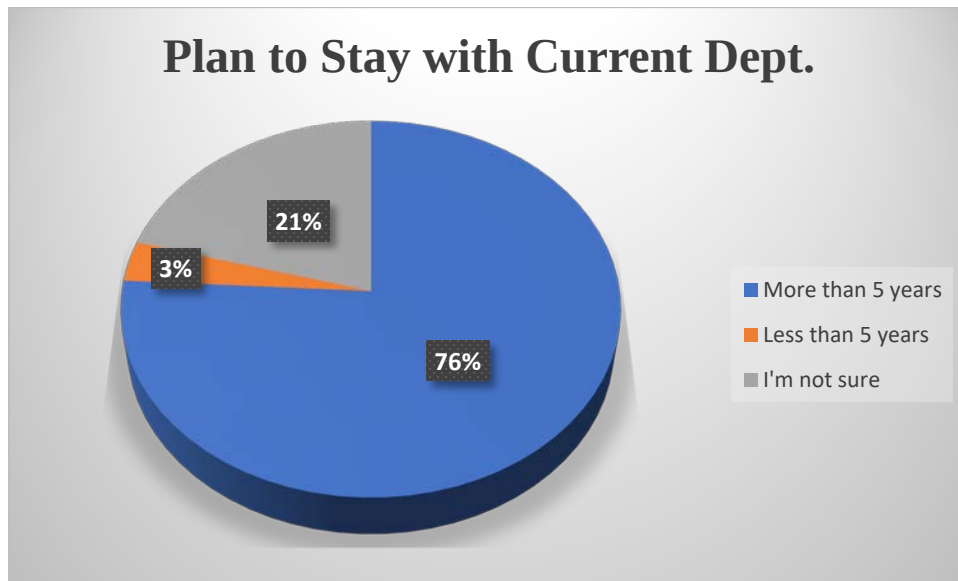


Table 5

Reasons to Leave Current Department

Variable	Count	Percent
Not Applicable	2	6.9%
Poor Leadership or Management	17	58.6%
Limited Career Advancement Opportunities	6	20.7%
Low Pay and Benefits	16	55.2%
Scheduling and Staffing Challenges	8	27.6%
Toxic or Exclusionary Culture	16	55.2%
Lack of Belonging or Recognition	5	17.2%
Inconsistent Standards or Accountability	21	72.4%
Family Strain and Burnout	9	31.0%
Health and Safety Concerns	4	13.8%
	35	

Lack of Purpose or Impact	3	10.3%
Better Opportunities Elsewhere	9	31.0%
Other	4	13.8%

Note. Participants could select more than one option.

Qualitative Data

The qualitative phase of this research explored the pathways of Gen Z participants into the fire service, the recruitment process, organizational culture, shift schedules, career development, and retention within the fire service. There were 11 semi-structured interviews conducted, and four themes were identified:

- Pathway into the Fire Service and Recruitment
- Shift Schedules and Work-Life Balance
- Organizational Culture
- Career Development

Theme 1: Pathway into the Fire Service and Recruitment

During the interviews, there were multiple pathways into the fire service. There were several interviewees who identified family members who were in the fire service, which influenced their career decisions. Some other reasons for their decision to work in the fire service were their desire to be involved in service-oriented work, and others who said they weren't satisfied with their previous career, regardless of the pay.

Participant 11 said, "My dad has been in it, and several of my family members." Participant 10 stated that coming into the fire service was "a no-brainer" after serving in the U.S. Army as a combat medic. Some of the others described their former careers as unfulfilling. Participant 1 was in healthcare information technology and described the work environment,

saying “I didn't even have a window,” and having to travel for work on occasion, and “hating every second.” Participant 1 also said, “I was a person who needed something fulfilling more than I needed cash.” He also likes the fact that the work in the fire service is unpredictable, which is appealing, and he said, “I show up, I never know what call I am going to have.”

Word of mouth was the reason most participants heard about their current fire department's positions, by an overwhelming majority. Most of the firefighters heard about the positions from coworkers, former coworkers, friends, family, and acquaintances who either worked for their current department or were thinking about working for their current department. Participant 2 said they heard about their current position through “word of mouth.”

Some of the other ways they heard about their current position were social media and online job postings. Several participants saw their current department's advertising on Facebook, Instagram, and Indeed. They said it was extremely important to clearly state the pay, benefits, shift schedule, and other important benefit information, like pensions, in the advertisements. Participant 1 mentioned that their current department had all the information they wanted to see on the social media flyer, and that they didn't have to go to the interview to get the information. They like that they can apply for the position with all the information that is valuable to a job seeker.

Theme 2: Shift Schedules and Work-Life Balance

There is a correlation between shift schedules, work-life balance, and the retention of the Gen Z population. Most participants have gone from much busier departments to smaller, lower call-volume departments. Most participants discussed that at their prior department, there was chronic fatigue and limited recovery time at home under the traditional 24/48 shift schedule, specifically at a busier department.

Participant 8 discussed the high call volume at his former department, saying he would usually spend the first day off sleeping, essentially reducing his time off and limiting his time with family. He talked about having to be on the ambulance constantly and being up all night transporting patients, which made him feel burned out.

Many participants describe their current department as giving them the opportunity for better recovery. Participant 2 said, “Here is almost like I can breathe, even if we go out once or twice at night, I’m still getting four or five hours of sleep.” Participants with young families discussed the importance of being able to come home after a 24-hour shift and being rested.

Almost all participants discussed the interest in the 24/72 shift schedule, giving the firefighters another day off between shifts. Participant 1 said that he would like to go to a 24/72 shift schedule, which would make the hours more comparable to other career fields that work 40 hours a week, compared to 56 hours per week. Participant 9 said the 24/72 schedule is a “phenomenal schedule,” saying, “you literally get that many more days off every year, and it adds up to a lot of time.” Participant 7 said, “If we’re not willing to move to 24/72s, make it where we can accrue more time,” also mentioning that he would prefer the “Kelly days to be given back”, so he can have more time off.

Participants discussed their experience with burnout from the job, and the fact that most are in the early stages of their careers. They said that mandatory overtime, high call volume, and having multiple jobs to make ends meet contribute to this feeling. Participant 11 described working “48s and 72s all the time” at their previous department due to low pay, saying, “It’s easy to get burned out.”

Theme 3: Organizational Culture

Participants described organizational culture as one of the strongest influences on job satisfaction. Many said that their current job is family-oriented and supportive. Participants said that, due to the department's size, most people know everyone, that leadership is approachable, and that firefighters feel valued. Participant 8 said, "Here, it is definitely more family-oriented. I actually enjoy coming to work here."

Participants discussed that Gen Z wants to know why decisions are made. Participant 1 said transparency is directly related to trust in their leadership. He said, "If I can't trust you to make decisions that affect me as an employee, why should I trust you when I'm going into a fire?" He said that the leadership at his current department is "approachable."

Participant 2 discussed that it is important for the battalion chiefs to allow the lieutenants to lead, without being micromanaged. He said that seeing the lieutenants being empowered by their leadership shows the younger firefighters what it will be like when they advance in their careers.

Most participants discussed the use of technology in communication. The majority prefer methods that are simple, like email and text messaging. They did discuss recruitment using social media, and some cautioned against the overuse of sites like TikTok, as they may sometimes appear unprofessional. Participants discuss recruitment advertisements as needing to be professional, focusing on community service, training, and the department's strengths.

Theme 4: Career Development

Career development was a significant factor in the long-term retention of the participants. Many said they want to see a clear and structured career ladder. Participant 10 described liking

the department's clear career ladder because it shows “exactly what you have to do to get to the next level.”

Participants noted that training was an essential part of the job. Participants want realistic, scenario-based training that aligns with department operations. Participant 10 mentioned that while going outside for certifications is valuable, certain skills need to be taught “in-house.” He believed that getting training in your own department is more valuable than going to outside academic institutions.

Participants discussed having informal mentors who helped them with their early development. Participant 9 said, “My former captain taught me all about SCBAs, small engine repair, and all the things I would have no idea about.” Participant 1 said that during his first couple of weeks working at his current department, “multiple firefighters and officers said to come to them if I needed anything.” This made the participant feel welcomed into the department.

While participants viewed training as essential, their views on a formal higher education varied. Some saw college degrees and certifications as beneficial for promotion, while others felt that experience and real-world training were more relevant. Several participants said that obtaining a paramedic license was key to advancement in many departments.

Integration and Interpretation of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

The convergent mixed-method design uses both quantitative and qualitative data in a joint display of data to interpret results. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that a joint display of data is a tool used at the end of the data collection process that merges both forms of data. The following joint display of data integrates and interprets the quantitative and qualitative results gathered in this research (see Table 6).

Table 6*Joint Display of Data*

Quantitative Results (Survey)	Qualitative Results (Interviews)	Integration Interpretation
Recruitment Factors • Primary recruitment method: 47% were recruited by word of mouth. • The secondary method was social media at 18%.	Theme 1: Pathways and Recruitment • Most participants learned about the fire service or their current department through friends, coworkers, family, and acquaintances. • Social media is useful, but only when the benefits are fully transparent in the advertisement.	• Word of mouth is the best form of recruitment for Gen Z. • Social media must present clear information for this generation to be interested in the position.
Work-Life Balance & Burnout • 90% of respondents prefer work-life balance over overtime opportunities. • 59% report adequate rest and family time. • 48% reported having experienced burnout, even though they only have 3-5 years of experience in the fire service.	Theme 2: Shift Schedules and Work-Life Balance • Participants report burnout and fatigue from previous departments due to high call volume and inadequate recovery time. • Participants would prefer a 24/72 shift schedule. • They prefer smaller departments due to lower call volume and better recovery.	• Gen Z prioritizes their days off over any financial incentives. • Higher call volumes and inadequate rest and recovery are directly related to low retention.
Job Expectations • 86% said the job met expectations. • Most important expectations: purpose, teamwork, and belonging.	Theme 3: Organizational Culture • Participants described their department as family-oriented and supportive in nature.	• Gen Z believes expectations are met when the culture of the organization is supportive and they feel a sense of belonging.

• 72% want consistent leadership standards • 58% say that poor leadership would make them leave their department • 55% say low pay would make them leave their department	• Being able to talk to the leadership was important, and they need transparency from that leadership. • Participants say they have experienced micromanagement and poor leadership behaviors.	• When expectations are met, higher retention rates are achieved. • Leadership needs to be consistent and have clear expectations. • Pay is important to most, but the department's leadership behaviors matter more.
Importance of Career Development • 72% say they want to see a clear career ladder. • 93% say mentorship is highly valued. • 79% of respondents want additional benefits like tuition reimbursement and overall wellness support.	Theme 4: Career Development • Participants want to see structured advancement opportunities. • They prefer realistic training to develop skills. • Mentorship is highly valued.	• They want to see a clear path for advancement, training opportunities, and mentorship. • Gen Z is more likely to stay at a department with this type of culture.

Summary

This research used a convergent mixed-methods design to examine how small Metro-Atlanta fire departments can better recruit and retain Gen Z firefighters. Quantitative data was gathered from 29 survey respondents, and qualitative data was gathered from 11 interview participants.

The quantitative data showed that word of mouth is the primary recruitment method, and having an attractive organizational model, where staff members tell others how much they enjoy working at their own department, aids in the recruitment process. Most participants said that their department clearly explained their pay, benefits, and schedules, and the majority said the job

matched their expectations. Respondents value work-life balance, a supportive work culture, and the opportunity to have a voice within the department. The survey showed that burnout is common, even among members who have only been on the job for a few years. Having a clear career ladder is important, as well as mentorship and good benefits.

The qualitative data identified four themes: (1) Pathways into the fire service were influenced by family and having backgrounds in military and/or EMS. (2) Shift schedules and work-life balance significantly affect recovery, and most participants would go to a 24/72 shift schedule if given the option. (3) Organizational culture is one of the strongest influences on job satisfaction. (4) Career development, training, and mentorship are also significant when discussing retention.

Gen Z firefighters want to be involved in meaningful work and have a leadership team that is supportive. This generation wants to work for a fire department that has a clear career ladder and also supports work-life balance, which are all essential for the welfare of the firefighters and support recruitment and retention efforts.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Results

The quantitative data from the survey instrument indicate that recruitment of Gen Z firefighters was primarily driven by word of mouth, with social media as the second driving factor. This newer generation prioritizes having an exciting and challenging career over pay and monetary benefits. Work-life balance is a significant contributing factor to overall job satisfaction, and they prefer time off to overtime opportunities. All the respondents value having a voice in the department, indicating that they feel the need to be heard by their crew and department. Nearly half of the respondents have experienced burnout, although the majority of them have only been in the fire service for 3 to 5 years. Some retention drivers include having a clear career ladder, competitive pay, and promotional opportunities. Many would consider leaving their current department if they saw inconsistent standards, poor leadership, and a lack of accountability within the department. The majority of participants plan to stay with their current department.

The qualitative data received from the interview participants indicate that the pathways for recruitment into the fire service rely heavily on family members, having meaningful work, and the department being transparent about pay and benefits. Gen Z needs work-life balance and a schedule that promotes rest and recovery, and many are interested in the 24/72 shift schedule. There was an emphasis on having a supportive organizational culture, and they value leadership transparency, trust, and leaders who do not micromanage. Career development is very important, and they feel the need for a structured career ladder and realistic scenario-based training.

The integration of both sets of data reflects that Gen Z needs and expects work-life balance, a supportive organizational culture, and a clear career development model. Many state

that inconsistent standards and poor leadership standards are major retention issues within the fire service. The integration of data also reflects that there is a direct link between shift schedule/call volume and experiencing burnout early in one's career.

Conclusions Based on the Results

The data collected in the survey and interviews provide an understanding that departments must use employee networks and social media for recruitment. The data collected illustrates that if a department has a healthy organizational culture and the employees are satisfied with their jobs, they will do most of the recruitment. Social media came in second as a major driving recruitment tool. Gen Z wants to see transparency on social media flyers that reflect what the pay and benefits are. They do not want to wait until the interview to see what benefits the department offers. If the pay and benefits are posted on the flyer and are comparable to those of other departments, there is a much better chance they will apply if all the information is clearly stated.

This generation expects adequate time off that allows for rest, recovery, and time with family. The department's shift schedule and call volume directly affect burnout, retention, and overall job satisfaction. They want to see their department have a system in place for rest and recovery.

This generation looks for departments with a healthy organizational culture that promotes high leadership standards. They want the leadership to be consistent and maintain accountability for everyone in the department. There must be transparency within the leadership ranks for them to trust their leaders. Having this trust significantly influences department retention. They want effective communication from leadership. This includes simple communication methods such as text and email.

A clear and structured career ladder is essential. Having this system in place motivates this generation to work toward promotions, which leads to higher retention rates. There is value in realistic, scenario-based training, which is what they value more than traditional classroom teaching.

This research contributes more data to the field of recruitment and retention in small fire departments in Metro-Atlanta. It provides a data-driven understanding of Gen Z's expectations and how fire departments can improve, not only to create a larger applicant pool but also to retain the members they invest in. Portillo et al. (2024) argue that small fire departments cannot compete with larger fire departments because of the benefits they offer. Smaller departments may be able to compete if the current model is strategically modified to reflect what is important to this generation. The data provides information that will help improve recruitment and retention of this newer generation of the workforce. This research supports a broader discussion of how the leadership in today's fire service can make changes to the work culture to meet Gen Z's expectations.

Limitations

The sample size of the survey and interviews created limitations on the data received. There were 29 respondents for the survey and 11 participants in the interviews. This data was also limited by the geographical area it represented. The data was collected from nine fire departments in the Metro-Atlanta area. All fire departments were comparable in size to PCFR and included PCFR. The size and geographical restriction were intentional. Data was meant to be collected by members who represent small fire departments in Metro-Atlanta. Another limiting factor is that the data does not represent fire departments nationwide. If the survey and interviews were conducted similarly in other parts of the United States, the information gathered

may differ. The data collected also doesn't represent firefighters from larger departments. If the participants were from larger departments, that information may change significantly.

The survey was completely anonymous, except that respondents could provide optional personal information for a follow-up interview. In these instances, socially desirable responses may not be prevalent, but in the interviews, there may be instances of the participants giving socially acceptable responses. Socially desirable responses can compromise the validity of self-reported information (Stelling, 2023).

This data may not reflect long-term trends. The data collected is cross-sectional, that is, it was collected at one point in time in their life/career and may not reflect the same data later in their life as their circumstances change, they make career advancements, and as the fire service evolves in policies and shift schedules (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The findings are influenced by the culture, size, and call volume of their fire department. The data was collected from a subgroup of firefighters from small fire departments in Metro-Atlanta and does not necessarily reflect the views of the majority of firefighters in Georgia or nationwide.

Implications and Recommendations to the Field

Recruitment Recommendations

The influence of word-of-mouth was the driving factor for recruitment. Fire departments should create and support outreach programs for academic institutions, job fairs, and community events. The second-highest driving factor for recruitment is social media. There should be adequate social media advertisements for all fire department job opportunities. Given both of these driving factors, job postings/flyers should include transparent information about pay, benefits, schedules, and advancement opportunities.

Work-Life Balance Recommendations

Fire departments should work to evaluate the feasibility of a 24/72 shift schedule to improve work-life balance. Many participants mentioned the 24/72 shift schedule at some point in the interview process, and it is apparent that Gen Z values their time off and looks for opportunities to improve their quality of life. The barriers to adopting this schedule are creating a fourth shift, where the fire department must hire more firefighters, which is costly for municipalities. There are many factors involved in moving to the 24/72 shift schedule, and this research does not incorporate every aspect of that process.

Burnout is a major contributor to low retention, and implementing a wellness initiative for firefighters can improve physical and mental health, thereby increasing retention. The wellness initiatives can focus on fatigue management that increases rest and recovery both on and off shift.

Organizational Culture Recommendations

There should be measures taken to implement consistent leadership and accountability standards. The leadership within the fire department needs to be transparent in decision-making and ensure that the reasons why decisions are made are clear to the firefighters. Fire departments need to provide leadership training for their company officers and ensure they have the tools necessary to be successful in their roles.

Career Development Recommendations

A clear career path should be implemented, and it should be easily accessible to personnel. They need to be able to see what is expected of them to move through the ranks. The training division must provide realistic, scenario-based training for firefighters to help develop

their skills and knowledge. There should also be an initiative to encourage and support obtaining a paramedic license, as this is often a big part of career advancement in many fire departments.

Recommendations for Future Research

A longitudinal study is one that collects data over a period of time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This type of study should be conducted to examine Gen Z firefighters throughout their careers. Research should be conducted to compare shift schedules to determine impacts on burnout, rest, recovery, and retention. Data should be collected from a larger geographic area and from departments of varying sizes to obtain more diverse information.

Gen Z has a different set of values than those of older generations, and more research is needed to explore those generational differences across the ranks and among firefighters in various stages of their careers. Data also needs to be collected to determine whether improvements in organizational culture and leadership training are correlated with higher retention rates.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to identify what influences recruitment and retention in small Metro-Atlanta fire departments in the Gen Z population. The data collected shows that Gen Z firefighters want work-life balance, a supportive work culture, transparent leadership, and a structured career path. These driving forces are different than those of older generations, who wanted overtime opportunities and higher call volumes. This study provides insight into what practices fire departments need to adopt to recruit and retain this newer generation of workers. By understanding and addressing these generational differences, fire departments can make changes to increase recruitment and retention, continuing the long tradition of service.

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Appendix A

Gen Z Survey

This survey is being conducted as part of the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) Program through the National Fire Academy. Your responses are completely confidential, and your name will not be shared with anyone. If you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview, please fill out the personal information in section 1, or contact Sam Anglin at sanglin@peachtree-city.org or text/call (678) 621-3765. This research seeks to better understand the challenges surrounding firefighter recruitment and retention in today's fire service, with a specific focus on the newest generation entering the workforce, Generation Z.

SECTION 1

Personal Information (Optional)

1. **Name:** _____
 2. **Email Address:** _____
-

SECTION 2

Demographics

3. **What is your age range?**
 - ☐ 18–20
 - ☐ 21–23
 - ☐ 24–26
 - ☐ 27–28
4. **How many years have you been a career firefighter in the fire service?**
 - ☐ <1
 - ☐ 1–2
 - ☐ 3–5
 - ☐ 6–9
 - ☐ 10+
5. **How many uniformed staff does your department have?**
 - ☐ <50
 - ☐ 51–75
 - ☐ 76–100
 - ☐ 101+
6. **How many fire stations does your department have?**
 - ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2

- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5+

7. **What is your current position?**

- ☐ Probationary Firefighter
- ☐ Firefighter/EMT
- ☐ Firefighter/Paramedic
- ☐ Driver/FAO/Engineer
- ☐ Fire Officer

8. **What is your department's shift schedule?**

- ☐ 24/48
- ☐ 24/72
- ☐ 48/96
- ☐ 1/3/2/3
- ☐ Other: _____

SECTION 3

Recruitment

9. **What type of recruitment was used that attracted you to your department?**

- ☐ Social Media
- ☐ Department Website
- ☐ Printed Media/Flyer
- ☐ Fire Department Open House
- ☐ Word of Mouth
- ☐ Job Fair
- ☐ Online Advertising
- ☐ Explorer Program
- ☐ Internship or Apprenticeship
- ☐ Other: _____

10. **Did the hiring process clearly explain pay, benefits, and work schedule?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

11. **Was the length of the hiring process reasonable?**

- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
-

SECTION 4

Workplace Values and Expectations

12. I chose a career in the fire service because:

- ☐ Desire to Serve Your Community
- ☐ Exciting and Challenging
- ☐ Teamwork and Brotherhood/Sisterhood
- ☐ Opportunities for Growth and Specialization
- ☐ Job Stability
- ☐ Work-Life Balance and Schedule Appeal
- ☐ Personal Fulfillment and Meaning
- ☐ Civic Engagement and Leadership
- ☐ Other: _____

13. What were your expectations when joining the fire service?

- ☐ Purpose and Service
- ☐ Teamwork and Belonging
- ☐ Excitement and Action
- ☐ Training and Professional Development
- ☐ Attractive Schedule and Work-Life Balance
- ☐ Good Pay and Benefits
- ☐ Good Leadership and Culture
- ☐ Paths to Strengthen and Maintain Mental and Physical Fitness
- ☐ Respect and Professionalism
- ☐ Other: _____

14. Does the reality of the job match your expectations?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

15. Having a voice within my department is important to me.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

16. Work-life balance is more important than overtime opportunities.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

17. My department's culture is of a supportive nature.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

18. Recognition for my contributions is important to me.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

SECTION 5

Work Schedule

19. **My current schedule allows for adequate rest and family time.**
☐ True
☐ False
20. **I have experienced burnout due to a demanding work schedule and overtime.**
☐ True
☐ False
21. **My fire department supports physical fitness and wellness during duty hours.**
☐ True
☐ False
22. **Mental health is important to my fire department.**
☐ True
☐ False
-

SECTION 6

Career Development and Compensation

23. **There is a clear career path in my department.**
☐ True
☐ False
24. **The pay in my department is competitive compared with other departments in my area.**
☐ True
☐ False
25. **Opportunities for promotion influence my decision to stay at my department.**
☐ True
☐ False
26. **Mentorship is important to my career development.**
☐ True
☐ False
27. **Mentorship is offered at my department.**
☐ True
☐ False
-

SECTION 7

Recruitment and Retention

28. Additional benefits, such as tuition reimbursement, wellness programs, and mental health support, are important to me.

☐ True

☐ False

29. I plan to stay in my department:

☐ Less than 5 years

☐ More than 5 years

☐ I'm not sure

30. What are some reasons why you would consider leaving your department?

☐ Not Applicable

☐ Poor Leadership or Management

☐ Limited Career Advancement Opportunities

☐ Low Pay and Benefits

☐ Scheduling and Staffing Challenges

☐ Toxic or Exclusionary Culture

☐ Lack of Belonging or Recognition

☐ Inconsistent Standards or Accountability

☐ Family Strain and Burnout

☐ Health and Safety Concerns

☐ Lack of Purpose or Impact

☐ Better Opportunities Elsewhere

☐ Other: _____

Appendix B

Confidentiality and Consent Form

The results of this research will be presented to the NFA program faculty and students. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the **respondent's identity WILL NOT** be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented, representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. All information that links individual respondents to their answers (including audio recordings) will be destroyed within 365 days of the interview. Final aggregate results will be made available to participants upon request.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion, or if you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Sam Anglin

Student

National Fire Academy

sanglin@peachtree-city.org

Ed Kensler

Instructor

National Fire Academy

edward.kenslerjr@fema.dhs.gov

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form, and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have received satisfactory answers to my questions. The interviewer provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

☐ I give consent to be audio recorded during my interview. ____ (interviewee initials)

Interviewee Name: _____

Interviewee Signature: _____ Date: _____

Interviewer Name: _____

Interviewer Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C

Gen Z Interview Questions

Background

1. How did you become interested in the fire service?

Recruitment

2. How did you hear that your fire department was hiring?
3. Was the recruitment process designed for your generation, or do you believe it was outdated?
4. Did social media, digital communication, or technology play a role in the recruitment process?
5. What part of the recruitment process should change to make it more attractive to Gen Z?

Work-life Balance

6. How does your current schedule affect recovery and your personal life?
7. If you could choose your work schedule, what would it look like and why?
8. Have you personally experienced burnout? If so, what was the major contributor?

Organization Culture and Leadership

9. Describe your department's culture. Do you feel included and valued?
10. Do you have a voice in decision-making?
11. What leadership traits make you want to stay or leave?

Career Development

12. Do you believe there is a clear path for advancement in your department?
13. Have you been mentored in your department? If so, how has that impacted your career?
14. Are training and a formal education important to you and your career goals?

Retention & Turnover

15. What factors would make you stay or leave your department in the next five years?
16. If applicable, is there anything that could change in your department that would make you more likely to stay long-term?

Technology and Communication

17. In what ways would you say that fire departments should use technology for communication and as a recruitment tool?
18. If you could choose a communication method for your department, what method would that be?

Closing

19. How do you think fire departments could better adapt to meet the expectations and values of your generation?
20. Is there any information you would like to add to the interview?