

The Alternative Responder Project

Preliminary Results from a Survey of North Carolina Police Departments

September 2022



Background

Social issues like substance use disorders, mental health crises, and homelessness frequently land at the doorstep of the criminal justice system. Law enforcement officers are tasked with responding to these issues, often without appropriate training or support. Using the criminal justice system to address these issues can be more expensive and less effective than connecting people with needed services, and it can put officers and community members at risk. As a result, interest is growing in alternative response and community responder programs to promote public safety, connect people with services, and reduce reliance on the justice system to address these issues. While individual police departments have begun implementing such programs, there is no common understanding of how many departments are doing this work and what the programs look like.

Executed by the North Carolina Association of Chiefs of Police (NCACP) and the UNC School of Government Criminal Justice Innovation Lab, the [Alternative Responder Project](#) seeks to address that knowledge gap and support North Carolina leaders as they explore more effective solutions. In June 2022, the project team conducted a survey of NCACP member police departments to learn about the types of programs currently in place and under consideration across the state. This paper summarizes preliminary survey findings and takeaways.



Survey Design & Participation

The survey was adapted from a national survey of police departments conducted by the University of Cincinnati Center for Police Research and Policy.¹ Questions focused on current and planned-for programs, trainings, and partnerships to respond to issues like mental health crises, substance use, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and homelessness. Specifically, it asked about:

- **Alternative response programs**, including both police-based and co-responder models like crisis intervention teams (CIT), mental-health co-response, and homeless outreach teams;

¹ Preliminary findings from the national survey of the largest police departments can be found [here](#). The only North Carolina police departments included in that survey were the Raleigh and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Departments.

- **Community responder programs**, like mobile teams of behavioral health, disability, or social service staff that respond alone or in partnership with medical professionals to calls, with law enforcement serving in a back-up role as necessary;
- **Training** for police department personnel to prepare them to respond to calls involving people in crisis; and
- **Community partnerships** between police departments and community organizations to respond to service calls.

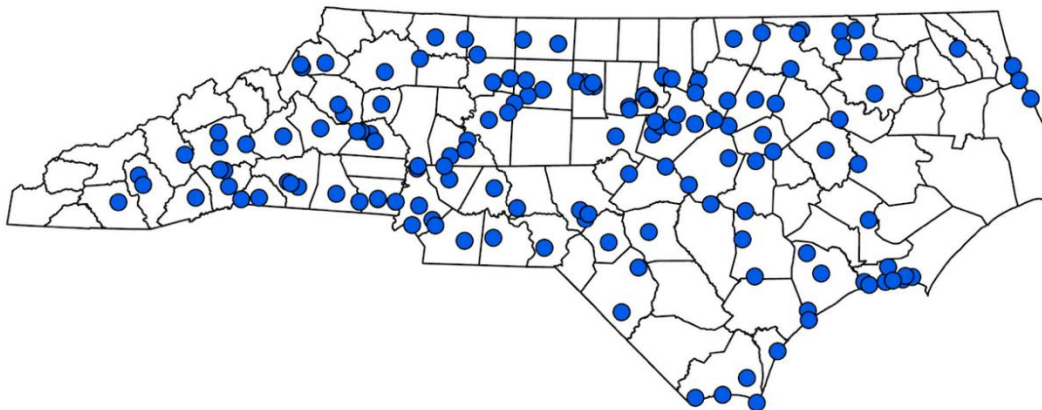
The survey was distributed to NCACP members from 208 police departments.² One hundred forty-four departments responded to the survey—a 69% response rate.

69%

Of recipients completed the survey, representing 144 of 208 NCACP member departments.

Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of departments that responded to the survey. In terms of population, demographics, and economic metrics of communities served, the responding departments are a representative sample of NCACP membership.

Figure 1. Police Departments that Responded to the Survey



The survey asked respondents if they would be interested in sharing more about their department’s efforts by serving as a case study site. Thirty-five departments volunteered, indicating a high level of interest.

² The survey was sent to only one NCACP member from each police department. These members were largely from municipal police departments, although some were from special agencies (e.g., college or university police departments).

Key Survey Findings

Existing Training, Programs & Partnerships

Training is the most common initiative, followed by community responder programs and alternative response programs.

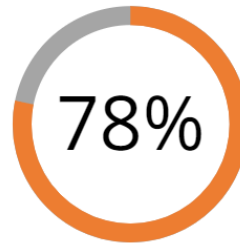
Training



Community Responder Programs



Alternative Response Programs



of departments **have at least one community partnership** to respond to issues like mental health, substance use, and homelessness.

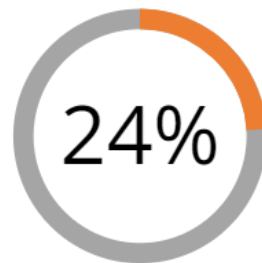


Mobile Crisis Teams & Crisis Intervention Teams are the most common programs

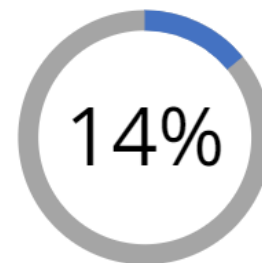
Programs under Consideration

One-Third

of departments are considering implementing a new program.



of departments are considering implementing a new **alternative response program.**



of departments are considering implementing a new **community responder program.**

Among departments considering a new program, greatest interest is in **police/mental health co-response and Crisis Intervention Teams.**

Homelessness is a Common Concern



45%

of departments have implemented or are considering implementing a training or program to respond to homelessness.



Preliminary Survey Findings

Alternative Response Programs

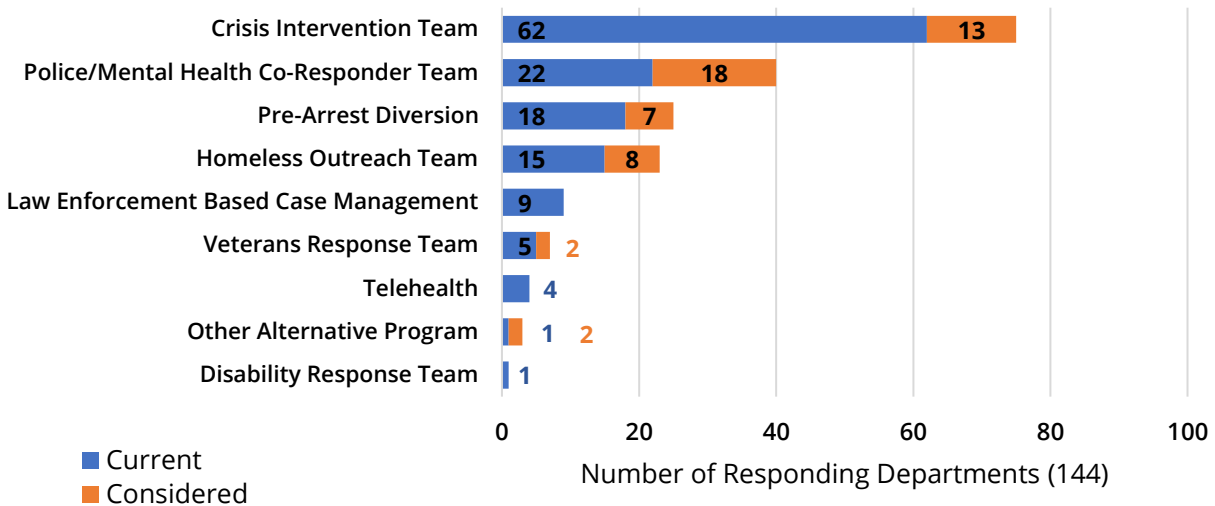
Fifty-three percent of responding police departments reported having at least one type of alternative response program. Figure 2 shows the frequency of different program types. As shown there, crisis intervention teams (CIT) are by far the most common (43% of responding departments).

53%

of departments have at least one alternative response program.

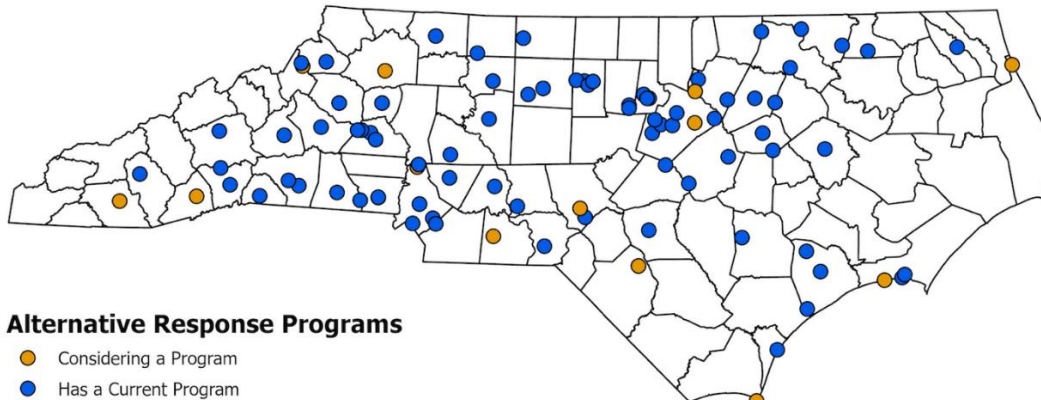
Twenty-four percent of responding departments are considering implementing at least one alternative response program. As shown in Figure 2, the most common program under consideration is a police and mental health co-responder team.

Figure 2. Current & Considered Alternative Response Programs



Alternative response programs are distributed throughout the state and exist in both rural and urban communities (Figure 3).

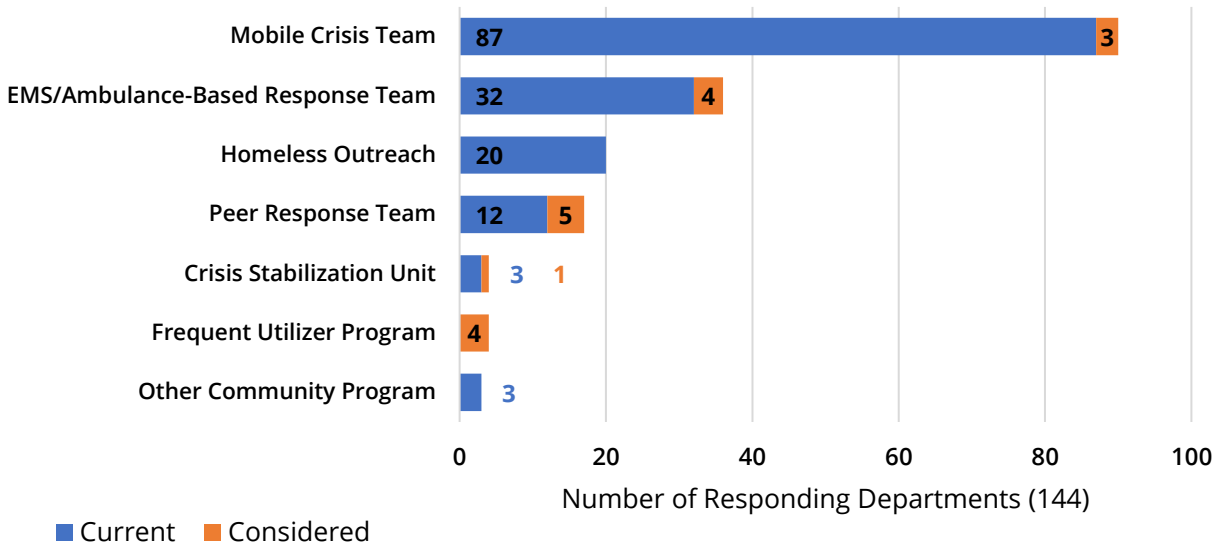
Figure 3. Map of Alternative Response Programs



Community Responder Programs

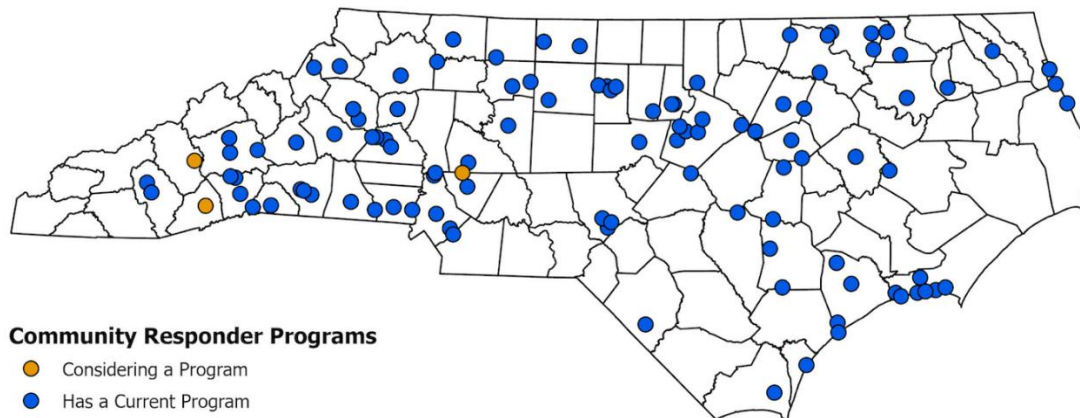
Seventy-two percent of responding departments reported that their communities have at least one type of community responder program. Figure 4 shows the frequency of program types. Mobile crisis teams are the most common, existing in 60% of communities. According to responding departments, few communities are considering a new community responder program, with only 17 such programs under consideration.

Figure 4. Current & Considered Community Responder Programs



Community responder programs are distributed throughout the state and exist in both rural and urban communities (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Map of Community Responder Programs



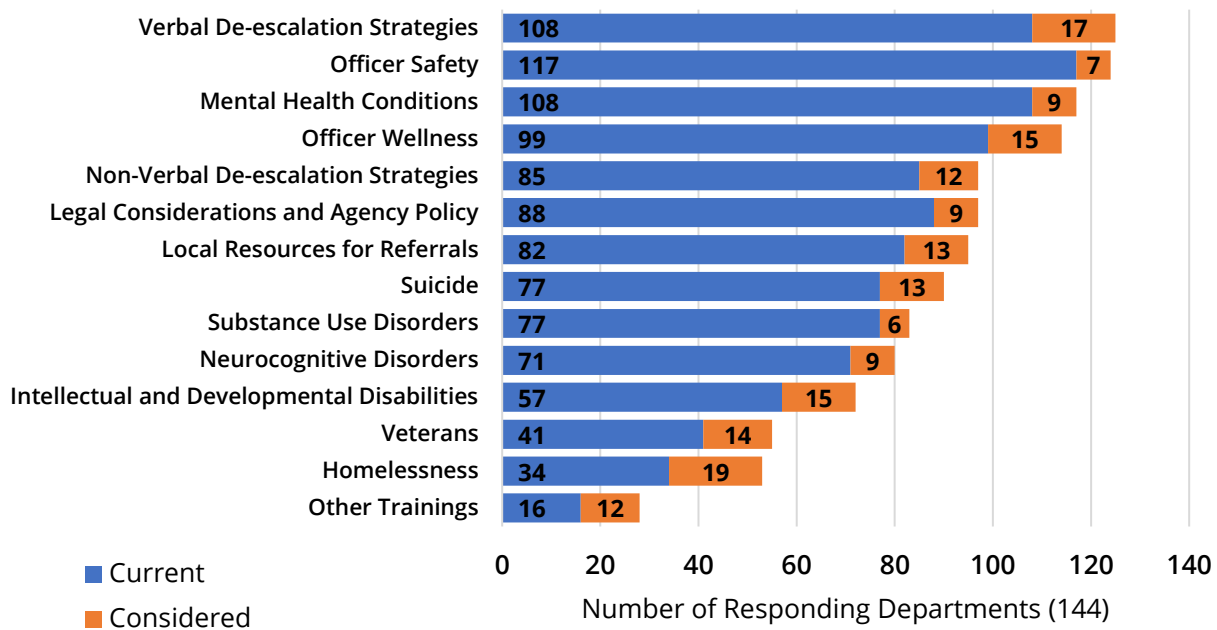
Training

The survey asked whether departments trained on topics such as homelessness, mental health, and substance use. Ninety-four percent of responding departments train on at least one of these topics. Figure 6 shows the frequency of current and considered trainings by type. Trainings on verbal de-escalation strategies, officer safety, and mental health conditions are the most common. Fifty-six percent of departments are considering adding training on at least one additional topic. While a relatively small number of departments currently have trainings on homelessness, that is the topic of greatest interest for new trainings.

94%

of departments train on at least one topic to prepare officers to respond to people in crisis.

Figure 6. Current & Considered Trainings



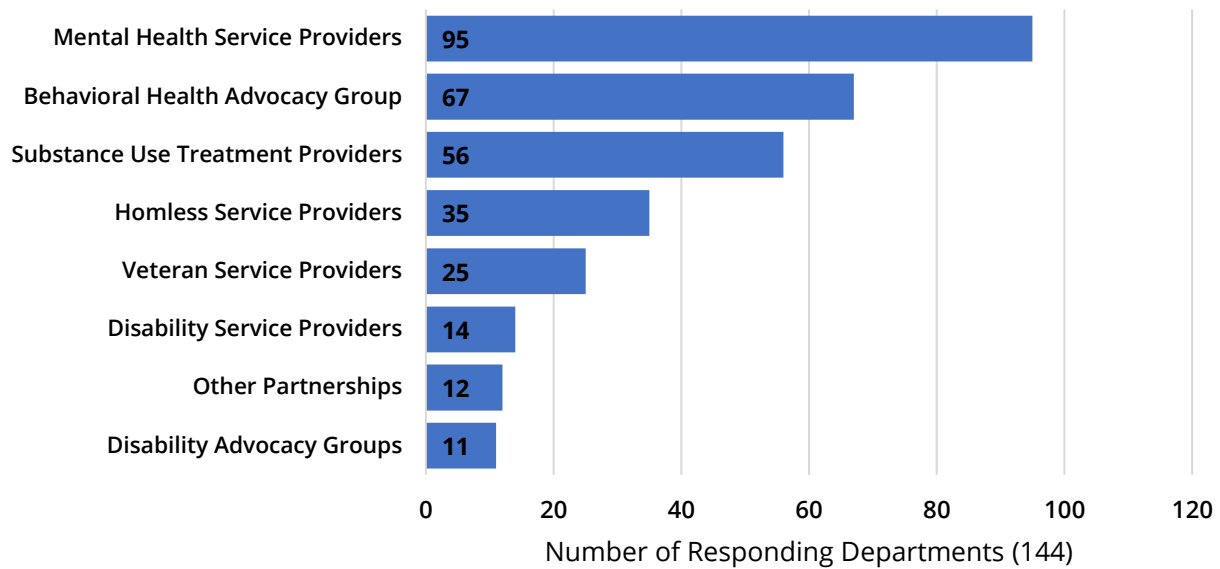
Community Partnerships

The vast majority of departments have existing community partnerships to respond to issues such as mental health, behavioral health, and homelessness in their jurisdictions. Seventy-eight percent of responding departments reported partnering with at least one outside agency. As shown in Figure 7, mental health service providers were the most common community partners, followed by behavioral health advocacy groups and substance use treatment providers.

78%

of departments have at least one community partnership to respond to issues such as mental health, substance use & homelessness.

Figure 7. Current Community Partnerships



Next Steps

The team will supplement survey findings with interviews and case studies to gather even more information about existing and planned programs. It will present all this information in a report and a stakeholder webinar, highlighting the work of local innovators and sharing information to promote best practices and scaling of effective programs. In the project's second phase, we plan to execute an empirical evaluation of North Carolina alternative response and community responder programs to help leaders better understand their impact across a variety of criminal justice, economic, and related metrics.

For more information about the Alternative Responder Project, contact Lab Project Manager Maggie Bailey at m Bailey@sog.unc.edu.

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