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ISSUE BRIEF | American Justice

BACK THE BLUE: A POLICY ROADMAP FOR BETTER-STAFFED, BETTER- SUPPORTED LAW ENFORCEMENT

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ America's law enforcement agencies are in crisis, with officer staffing still below pre-2020 levels, dozens of departments dissolving entirely, and cities like Chicago and Philadelphia carrying more than 1,000 officer vacancies.
- ★ This is a public safety emergency with direct consequences for the communities depending on police the most.
- ★ Studies consistently show that increasing officer staffing reduces violent crime through deterrence, improves emergency response times, and can dramatically increase clearance rates for violent crimes.
- ★ States and cities that have made sustained investments in law enforcement recruitment, retention, officer wellness, and competitive compensation are already seeing the results. Federal, state, and local policymakers have the tools to scale these successes nationwide.

Executive Summary

“Many of the best parts of America’s history would have been impossible without police. All the freedoms we enjoy — freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from fear — sit on a foundation of public safety” ([Bratton, 2015](#)). These words were spoken by William Bratton, the current Co-Chair of the Homeland Security Advisory Council and the former commissioner of six police departments, including Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. Commissioner Bratton couldn’t be more spot on: prosperity is impossible without public safety, and public safety is impossible without police.



In recent years, however, law enforcement has faced a wave of intense and misguided public criticism, most visibly from the “defund the police” movement that surged following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 ([Mourtgos et al., 2022](#)). That movement, and the broader erosion of public confidence in law enforcement that accompanied it, has accelerated a staffing crisis already years in the making. Officers are leaving the force earlier and in greater numbers than a decade ago. Between January 2020 and January 2025, sworn officer ranks nationwide shrank by 5.2%, and resignations in 2024 remained 18.4% above their 2019 level ([PERF, 2025](#)).

Officers today carry heavier workloads, absorb more mandatory overtime, and work under sharper scrutiny, with fewer colleagues beside them and less public support behind them. Officers are also spending fewer years on the force, with the profession increasingly serving as a stepping stone rather than a lifelong calling ([Wilson et al., 2023](#)). Chronic understaffing forces officers into longer, more irregular hours, accelerating burnout and shortening careers even further. The result is that many communities are now policed by a less experienced workforce than in prior generations in a profession where experience is critical to sound judgment, effective policing, and constitutional compliance. Research shows that younger, less experienced officers are more likely to engage in problematic behaviors, with negative consequences for both the agency and the communities they serve ([Boehme et al., 2026](#)).

The evidence is clear: increased police presence reduces crime ([Mello, 2019](#)). However, the communities most affected by violence and disorder are increasingly lacking sufficient law enforcement. Most low-income Americans express a desire for more police in their neighborhoods, not fewer, and this desire is even more pronounced in high-crime areas ([Gallup & Center for Advancing Opportunity, 2019](#)). The “defund the police” movement may have gained attention, but it did not reflect the concerns of those most impacted by violent crime. In a 2020 Gallup survey of more than 36,000 adults, 81% of Black Americans said they wanted police to spend the same amount of time or more time in their neighborhoods, and only 19% wanted less ([Saad, 2020](#)). These residents deserve safety, which requires enough officers with the necessary experience to serve their communities effectively. Achieving this depends on policymakers at all levels prioritizing law enforcement recruitment and retention as a key aspect of public safety. Signs suggest this focus is gaining ground. In April 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14288, ordering federal agencies to boost support for officer recruitment, retention, pay, and training ([The White House, 2025](#)). This momentum is reflected in federal hiring. From January to April 2025, U.S. Customs and Border Protection received 34,650 applications for Border Patrol positions, a 44% increase from 2024 and the agency's strongest four-month recruiting period, credited to increased national attention, targeted incentives, and outreach to veterans and law enforcement ([U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2025](#)).

This brief first examines the causes and consequences of the current nationwide staffing crisis. Next, it will examine the evidence for why adequate police staffing is essential to public safety. The brief then explores measures policymakers have already taken to address issues with officer recruitment and retention that are producing results. Finally, it offers concrete recommendations for stakeholders at every level of government on how to successfully recruit and retain law enforcement officers.



The Current Staffing Crisis

The Numbers and Impact

The United States is currently facing a significant police-staffing shortage. A July 2025 survey conducted by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) revealed that, from January 2020 to January 2025, officer numbers declined by 5.2%, amounting to thousands fewer officers ([PERF, 2025](#)). Cities such as San Francisco, Phoenix, and Washington, D.C., each have 400 to 500 vacancies. In 2024, the Miami Police Department received 809 applications, matching the number it had in a single day a decade ago ([Katz, 2025](#)). A 2024 survey by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) found that, among 1,158 responding agencies, 70% reported greater difficulty recruiting qualified candidates than five years prior. Furthermore, agencies are, on average, operating at 90% of their authorized staffing levels, with 65% having reduced services or specialized units due to staffing shortages. Only 25% of responding agencies in 2019 had to reduce services or units due to staffing issues ([IACP, 2024](#)).

The shortages are forcing departments to incur significant overtime costs, a costly short-term fix. As of October 2025, the Chicago Police Department reported 1,358 sworn vacancies, with total staffing nearly 1,900 below its 2019 peak, and police overtime expenses reaching \$278 million in 2024, which was almost three times the budgeted amount ([Illinois Policy Institute, 2025](#)). Philadelphia is managing about 1,200 vacant officer positions out of a total authorized force of 6,380, reflecting a 19% vacancy rate, and had expected a record \$150 million in overtime ([Orso, 2025](#)). Cleveland's officer numbers decreased from 1,550 in 2019 to 1,240 in 2025, resulting in \$27 million in overtime costs for that year ([Police1, 2026b](#)).

Although there have been recent modest improvements in hiring, resignations remain well above pre-2020 levels. Resignations in 2024 were still 18.4% higher than in 2019 ([PERF, 2025](#)). Small departments have been hit hardest, with agencies of fewer than 50 officers reporting 60.4% more resignations than in 2019 and 66.7% more retirements over the same period ([PERF, 2025](#)).

For some small towns, the losses have been fatal to the department itself and are now dissolving at a pace of roughly one per month nationwide ([Shults, 2025](#)), with two Colorado towns disbanding their forces within a single week in December 2024 and the entire police department of Weber City, Virginia, resigning overnight in March 2025, leaving 1,200 residents with no officers on duty ([Denver Gazette, 2024](#); [Shults, 2025](#)). As Goodhue County, Minnesota Sheriff Marty Kelly summarized the situation after absorbing policing for a town whose entire force quit, “It's scary. We are robbing Peter to pay Paul. And we're not alone” ([Associated Press, 2023](#)).

The Causes of the Current Police Staffing Crisis

The role of policing has always been challenging, but over the past five years, these challenges have intensified to an unprecedented level. Officers are reporting to duty daily, carrying heavier individual workloads as vacancies go unfulfilled, absorbing more mandatory overtime and administrative burden, working under increased scrutiny, with fewer colleagues, and often lacking the public support that earlier generations of officers could rely on. Identifying the exact impact of a single factor on current



staffing shortages is difficult because these issues are interconnected and tend to build on one another. However, the evidence shows several prominent factors have led to the current staffing crisis.

The first is a demographic time bomb decades in the making. The Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Hiring Program, created under the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, funded roughly 100,000 new officers nationwide. Those officers are now hitting their retirement marks at roughly the same time, producing a wave of departures that no department could easily replace. In fact, roughly one-third of federal law enforcement officers will be eligible to retire within the next five years ([GAO, 2026](#)). At the state and local levels, the IACP reports that nearly a quarter of commissioned staff were eligible for retirement by January 2025. One respondent noted, “We are currently experiencing a ‘wave’ of those reaching their retirement eligibility” ([IACP, 2024](#)).

The second factor is the political and reputational climate that emerged after George Floyd's death in May 2020. The “defund the police” movement led to direct budget reductions in some cities, caused officers to resign in others, and significantly impacted recruitment efforts nationwide. Resignations increased by 47% between 2019 and 2022 ([Police Executive Research Forum, 2023](#)). In its 2026 report, GAO found that most law enforcement associations and federal agencies it surveyed cited negative public perception as a primary reason officers are leaving the force. Additionally, more than three-quarters of officers polled stated that negative media coverage had affected their motivation ([GAO, 2026](#)). The policy challenge, then, is to create a “fund the police” environment that pairs renewed public and political backing for law enforcement with concrete federal, state, and local investment in hiring and retention.

The third is the toll the work itself takes, particularly when departments are running short. Officers face roughly twice the rate of PTSD and depression as the general public and a 54% higher suicide risk ([Hughes, 2024](#)). Understaffing makes it worse. When fewer officers are available, the ones who remain absorb the workload through forced overtime, accelerating burnout and pushing more out the door.

Last but certainly not least is compensation. The national mean officer salary is \$79,320, but in states like Mississippi, it sits at \$45,450, more than 38% below the national average. In a tight labor market with private sector competition for skilled workers, departments are increasingly losing candidates and current officers to better-paying alternatives that ask less of them ([R Street Institute, 2025](#)).

Why Law Enforcement Staffing and Retention are So Critical to Public Safety

The case that adequate police staffing is critical to crime prevention and crime solving is overwhelming. Regardless of methodology, point in time, and location, it is among the most routinely documented and replicated findings in public safety policy: communities that hire more police see significant public safety benefits.

More Police Means Safer Communities



In “More COPS, Less Crime,” Steven Mello ([2019](#)) reviews how increased funding to the federal Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grant program in 2009 allowed certain cities to increase their police force. Mello looked at cities with similar risk profiles that did and did not receive the grants and found that a 3.2% police rate increase from the grant recipient cities reduced the victimization cost-weighted crime by 3.5%.¹ The study also found that one life can be saved for every 9.5 officers hired, and every additional officer prevents four violent crimes and 15 property crimes each year. Also of note is that arrests did not increase alongside these declines, suggesting that police presence caused criminals to change their behavior, preventing crime before it even started.

Using data from nearly 7,000 municipalities, Emily Weisburst ([2019](#)) found that a 10% increase in police employment reduced violent crime by 13%. Aaron Chalfin and Justin McCrary ([2018](#)) in “Are U.S. Cities Underpoliced,” looked at 242 cities over five decades, and calculated that every dollar spent on policing generates \$1.63 in social benefits. The study also found that a 10% increase in police staffing results in roughly a 3%-4% reduction in violent crime. Crudu & Moharir ([2024](#)) replicated the Chalfin & McCrary study using more recent data and different methodologies and confirmed the findings.

Well-Staffed Police Agencies Solve More Crimes

Adequate staffing is the single most important factor in whether police can respond quickly when called. Mourtgos et al. ([2024](#)) found that staffing levels had the strongest influence on response times and that delayed responses can undermine both public trust in law enforcement and the likelihood of a successful outcome for victims ([Boehme et al., 2026](#)). In San Antonio, emergency response times improved from 6 minutes and 20 seconds in 2023 to 5 minutes and 29 seconds in 2025 after the department added 165 officers. Chief William McManus attributed the improvement directly to the staffing increase ([KSAT, 2025](#)).

When officers arrive at a crime scene faster, they are more likely to find witnesses on scene, preserve evidence, and apprehend suspects before they flee. When departments are understaffed and response times increase, those investigative advantages erode. Research has shown that a 10% increase in response time is associated with a 4.7 percentage-point decrease in the likelihood of clearing the crime ([Blanes i Vidal & Kirchmaier, 2018](#)).²

The national homicide clearance rate hit an all-time low of 52.3% in 2022 before recovering to 61.4% in 2024, likely driven largely by declining homicide counts that reduced caseloads per detective rather than by expanded investigative capacity ([Murder Accountability Project, 2025](#)). Research has consistently found that the number of detectives assigned to a case, the speed of their arrival, and their ability to stay on the case without being pulled to other duties are the most critical factors in solving homicides ([Wellford & Cronin, 1999](#); [Carter & Carter, 2016](#)).

¹ Victimization cost-weighted crime is a commonly used method to measure crime that counts serious offenses more heavily than minor ones, based on the actual harm to victims.

² Clearing a crime means that law enforcement has identified a suspect and either made an arrest or resolved the case through other means, such as when the suspect dies.



Officer Retention and Public Safety

Recruitment alone does not resolve staffing issues if departments are unable to retain their officers. Evidence indicates that staffing stability is independently important for community safety, regardless of overall force size. Kim et al. (2024) found that agencies with lower resignation rates tend to have lower crime rates. Experienced officers bring valuable institutional knowledge, community ties, and investigative skills that new hires typically take years to acquire, resulting in improved public safety outcomes with less governmental intervention. A recent study of the Chicago Police Department found that more experienced officers deterred violent crime more effectively while making fewer low-level arrests and using force less often, suggesting that public safety can improve with fewer coercive police interventions (Ba et al., 2021). The study estimates that equalizing officer seniority across Chicago's districts would reduce violent crime by 4.6% and officer use of force by 10%. The cost to replace a departing officer is estimated to be up to five times their annual salary when accounting for recruitment, training, and lost productivity (Orrick, 2008a, 2008b; Mourtgos et al., 2022).

What's Working: Proven Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Officers

Agencies and policymakers across the country have identified approaches that produce measurable improvements in hiring, retention, and public safety. While compensation matters, the most successful efforts treat recruitment and retention as long-term commitments and recognize that money alone does not solve the problem. The work environment, the hiring process, the support officers receive on and off duty, and the public confidence that the profession is valued matter tremendously.

International Comparisons

Jurisdictions abroad that confronted similar shortages show that sustained public investment in recruitment produces favorable results. In 2019, England and Wales launched the Police Uplift Programme, a centrally funded, national effort that set recruitment targets for each of the country's 43 local forces, allocated dedicated funding to meet them, and helped forces expand their hiring and training capacity (National Audit Office, 2022). The program committed roughly £3.6 billion and met its goal, adding 20,951 officers between 2019 and 2023 and bringing the force to a record high of nearly 149,600 (Home Office, 2023). The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts estimates that these additional officers will help prevent around 505,000 crimes annually from 2024-25 onward (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2022).

Beginning in 2016, the government of the Australian state of Victoria dedicated roughly \$2.5 billion to recruit 3,135 additional officers over five years, which comprised one of the largest recruitment campaigns in the state's history (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2022). The campaign ran statewide across television, radio, print, outdoor, and digital and social media, and emphasized the benefits of a career in law enforcement (AdNews, 2019). By mid-2019, sworn officer numbers had grown about 16 percent to roughly 15,300, an increase of more than 2,100 officers since 2014 and the highest level in the state's history (Premier of Victoria, 2019).



Federal Action

Since its enactment in 1994 under the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office has provided more than \$21 billion towards advancing community policing, including the “hiring and redeployment” of over 140,000 officers ([DOJ COPS Office, 2025](#)). Several studies show that COPS-funded hiring leads to tangible reductions in crime. Weisburst ([2019](#)) found that a 10% increase in police employment cut violent crime by 13%, and Mello ([2019](#)) estimated that each additional officer prevents four violent crimes and 15 property crimes every year (see also [Cook et al., 2017](#)).

The Recruit and Retain Act, passed with bipartisan support in May 2024, expanded efforts by allowing agencies to use grant funds for background checks, psychological assessments, and testing fees that were previously paid by departments or shifted onto applicants, which often discouraged applications ([S. 546, 2024](#)). The law also created the Pipeline Partnership Program, offering grants to partnerships between police agencies and educational institutions to introduce students to law enforcement careers through internships, mentorships, and apprenticeships. The Act also required the GAO to conduct a study on police recruitment ([GAO, 2026](#)).

President Trump has prioritized law enforcement staffing across both of his terms. In his first term, in 2018, President Trump signed the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act, allowing COPS grant funding to be used for programs addressing officer mental health, suicide prevention, peer support, and officer wellness, as discussed later in this brief ([COPS Office, 2025](#)). In April 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order 14288, urging the Attorney General and other agency leaders to enhance federal efforts in officer recruitment, retention, training, pay, benefits, and legal protections, and to develop model practices for adoption by state and local agencies ([The White House, 2025](#)). Additionally, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025 allocated approximately \$4.1 billion to U.S. Customs and Border Protection for hiring 5,000 customs officers, 3,000 Border Patrol agents, and 200 air and marine operations personnel over four years, along with \$2 billion allocated for recruitment and retention bonuses ([Federal News Network, 2025](#)).

The Trump Administration has also taken steps to focus on merit-based hiring opportunities and remove diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) criteria from federal hiring practices, including federal law enforcement agencies. In January 2025, President Trump signed Executive Orders 14151 and 14173, which abolished DEI programs and offices throughout the federal government and replaced diversity-based hiring and affirmative action with merit-based selection. The second order explicitly listed law enforcement agencies among the entities required to cease using race- and sex-based preferences ([Executive Order 14173, 2025](#)). Additionally, a directive instructed the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Secret Service, to eliminate race and sex-based preferences and terminate any additional DEI initiatives. The Office of Personnel Management issued a merit-based hiring plan applying the same standard to the entire federal workforce, mandating that employees be recruited, hired, and



promoted without regard to race, sex, color, religion, or national origin ([The White House, 2026](#)).

Lowering hiring standards to meet demographic targets reduced the quality of all new officers, minority and nonminority alike, and was associated with higher crime rates, with the largest harms concentrated in the heavily Black neighborhoods the policies were intended to serve ([Lott, 2000](#)). Research on officer quality reaches the same conclusion today, finding that less qualified officers are more likely to engage in problematic behaviors that harm both the agency and the communities they serve ([Boehme et al., 2026](#)).

State Action

Many states have taken meaningful steps to tackle the staffing crisis by improving pay, expanding training opportunities, facilitating easier transfers, and offering education benefits that go beyond what many local agencies can often provide, such as direct pay and bonuses (Florida, Arkansas, and Tennessee), education benefits for officers and their families (Missouri, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Alabama), and faster certification for experienced transfers (Florida).

Florida

Launched in 2022, Florida's Law Enforcement Recruitment Bonus Payment Program provides a one-time \$5,000 after-tax bonus to newly hired law enforcement officers in Florida. As of March 2026, the program had distributed over 10,000 bonuses totaling approximately \$67.9 million, with more than 1,900 of those bonuses going to officers relocating from 49 other states and two territories. Additionally, the 2025-26 budget included an additional \$49 million in pay increases for more than 16,200 officers, raising the minimum base pay and providing raises to all officers. Florida has also enacted the Florida Law Enforcement Academy Scholarship Program, which covers training costs for new recruits, as well as student loan forgiveness programs ([Florida Executive Office of the Governor, 2026](#)).

Arkansas

In 2025, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed Senate Bill 392, which included double-digit raises to certain law enforcement positions, including state troopers ([Office of Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, 2025](#)). In 2022, Governor Asa Hutchinson signed House Bill 1026, which increased the starting salary for Arkansas State Police troopers from \$42,357 to \$54,000, elevating the state's ranking from seventh to second among ten Southern states for entry-level trooper pay ([Arkansas Online, 2022](#)). The Arkansas Law Enforcement Officers' Dependents Scholarship Program (now called the Arkansas Heroes Scholarship) waives tuition, fees, and on-campus room charges at any state-supported college, university, or technical institute for dependents and spouses of Arkansas law enforcement officers, firefighters, foresters, correctional officers, and certain other public employees who were killed or permanently disabled in the line of duty ([Arkansas Division of Higher Education, 2024](#)).

Tennessee

Governor Bill Lee announced in October 2022 a \$30 million recruitment and retention bonus program providing bonuses to more than 3,000 newly hired officers. The state also began funding the local share of training costs at the Tennessee Law Enforcement Training Academy, saving local agencies more than \$3,000 per new officer trained ([Tennessee Office of the Governor, 2022](#)).



In October 2025, Governor Lee announced an additional \$175 million in grant funds for public safety, including dollars to hire and train specialized crime units ([Tennessee Office of the Governor, 2025](#)).

Missouri

Senate Bill 71, the Public Safety Recruitment and Retention Act, was signed into law by Governor Mike Kehoe in 2025. The bill establishes a tuition award covering up to 100% of resident tuition and fees at Missouri public and independent colleges and universities for public safety personnel, including law enforcement officers, firefighters, paramedics, and emergency medical technicians, with at least six years of service. It also covers dependent children for those with at least ten years of service. Recipients must agree to live in Missouri until they complete their degree or for five years from the date they first receive the award ([Office of Governor Mike Kehoe, 2025](#)).

Nebraska

Nebraska's First Responder Recruitment and Retention Act, originally enacted in 2016 and substantially expanded in 2023 and then again in 2025 by Legislative Bill 608, provides a tuition waiver of up to 100% at any state university, state college, or community college for sworn law enforcement officers, firefighters, firefighter-paramedics, eligible disabled first responders, and their dependent children. The waiver applies to associate or baccalaureate degree programs related to the recipient's career and is available for up to five years ([LB 608, 2025](#)). LB 608 expanded the program to include disabled first responders and their dependents, with correctional officers and youth detention officers added beginning July 1, 2027 ([Nebraska Department of Revenue, 2025](#)).

Pennsylvania

In December 2025, the Pennsylvania Department of Education announced an agreement between the Institute for Law Enforcement Education and Commonwealth University that awards up to 16 free college credits to eligible Pennsylvania law enforcement officers. The program is designed to help current officers advance their education and careers without requiring officers to start their college coursework from scratch ([Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2025](#)).

Alabama

In 2026, Governor Kay Ivey signed House Bill 98, the Alabama Law Enforcement Officers' Family Scholarship Act. Sponsored by Representative Allen Treadaway, a retired police officer with more than 30 years of experience, the law provides up to \$2,500 in tuition assistance per academic period to spouses and dependent children of long-serving Alabama law enforcement officers and may be used at any public technical school, college, or university in Alabama ([Alabama Reflector, 2026](#)).

Local Action

Local governments and law enforcement agencies across the country have also implemented effective recruit and retention strategies, such as direct incentives (Birmingham and Lexington), long-term staffing strategies (San Antonio), recruitment messaging (Chattanooga), pay raises adopted by county



leadership (Berkeley County), and investments in culture and family support (Rapid City, El Paso County, San Diego, and St. Louis County).

Birmingham, AL

In late 2024, the Birmingham Police Department (BPD) had more than 223 officer vacancies ([Chatman, 2025](#)). That same year, the city broke its nearly 100-year homicide record with 152 murders ([Birmingham Times, 2026](#)). This prompted the City Council to approve a \$15.8 million recruitment and retention plan to fill these vacancies. The plan included sign-on, retention, referral, and transfer bonuses, as well as covering relocation costs, take-home vehicles, and paid mental health days. In 2024, BPD was operating at 73% staffing levels ([Chatman, 2025](#)). Today, they are 96-100% staffed. The 2025 recruiting class had 90 recruits, the largest in nearly three decades ([Chatman, 2026](#)). With the department at or near full staffing, Birmingham saw 2025 end with 88 homicides, a 44% drop from 2024 and the first time the city ended the year with less than 100 homicides since 2015 ([Birmingham Times, 2026](#)). So far in 2026, homicides are down 48%, compared to the same time last year. Also of note, the clearance rate in 2024 was 57%. That climbed to 87% in 2025 and currently sits at 100% for 2026 ([Pollock, 2026](#)).

San Antonio, TX

In 2024, the City of San Antonio launched a five-year plan to add 360 new proactive patrol officers. In 2024, the city hired 100 new officers, and in 2025, 65 new officers ([KSAT, 2026](#)). Chief William McManus reported that overall crime fell 13% and violent crime by 9% in 2025 from the prior year. Average emergency response times improved from 6 minutes 20 seconds in 2023 to 5 minutes 29 seconds in 2025. McManus directly attributed the improvement in response time to the staffing increase ([KSAT, 2025](#)).

Berkeley County, SC

In 2025, the Berkeley County Council adopted a budget that directed \$1.2 million into deputy pay raises across every rank, part of what county leadership described as the largest share of new county revenue devoted to public safety in years. Within weeks, Sheriff Duane Lewis announced that the office was fully staffed at both the sheriff's office and the detention center for the first time since 2021, allowing the agency to return deputies to proactive patrol and shorten response times in the county's fastest-growing communities ([WCBD News 2, 2025](#)).

Lexington, VA

Facing five vacancies in 2021, the Lexington Police Department, serving a town of roughly 7,000 in the rural Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, raised pay 12% and then another 5%, added signing bonuses of \$1,500 to \$5,000, paid referral bonuses of \$750 to \$1,250 to serving officers, offered a \$2,500 retention bonus tied to a two-year commitment, and allowed officers to take patrol cars home. By early 2024, the department was fully staffed for the first time in years and had not lost an officer in two years ([Beimdick, 2024](#)).

Chattanooga, TN



How a department frames the job can shape who applies and how much attention that job receives. In a field experiment with the Chattanooga Police Department, recruitment messages that emphasized the challenge and career of the job, rather than service alone, roughly tripled applications with no drop in applicant quality ([Linos, 2018](#)). The postcards cost \$4,000 to send to roughly 10,000 households and produced eight eventual hires, roughly \$500 per recruit, and non-white applicants who received the challenge/career-framed message were four times as likely to apply ([Linos, 2018](#)).

Rapid City, SD

At the start of 2023, the Rapid City Police Department (RCPD) had 35 vacancies in a force of fewer than 150 officers. The department implemented an "Everyone is a Recruiter" referral program, offering officers \$3,000 for each successful new hire. The department also built a co-responder model in partnership with local mental health agencies, allowing mental health professionals to handle approximately 1,000 non-criminal calls per month and freeing officers to focus on resources on law enforcement. With federal grant assistance, the department implemented a wellness program that included gym reimbursements, zero-cost therapy, quarterly wellness days, and a sabbatical program that provides officers with two weeks of leave every four years without using accrued PTO. The department realized \$750,000 in savings in a single year by reducing overtime and emergency response costs. By the end of 2023, only eight vacancies remained ([Police1, 2024](#)).

El Paso County, CO

In 2024, Sheriff Joe Roybal reported that the El Paso County Sheriff's Office in Colorado had reached full staffing for the first time in eight years, even as he told county commissioners that his deputies remained underpaid relative to neighboring agencies. Sheriff Roybal attributed the turnaround to a deliberate rebuilding of the agency's culture, telling the county board that deputies stay because "they feel heard, appreciated, and they have a new sense of pride" ([Colorado Politics, 2024](#)).

San Diego, CA, and St. Louis County, MO

Childcare has emerged as a major barrier to law enforcement recruitment and retention, particularly for women officers and parents of young children. A San Diego Police Officers Association survey found that 21% of officers were considering leaving the department over childcare issues, and another 59% reported missing work or leaving a shift due to childcare conflicts ([KPBS, 2022](#)). In response, the San Diego Police Department opened the nation's first agency-affiliated childcare center in January 2024. The center is open from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m., offers emergency callout services to officers' homes, and charges 50% of the market rate ([American Police Beat, 2024](#)). St. Louis County Police became the second department in the nation to open a similar center in October 2025, partnering with the National Law Enforcement Foundation, the St. Louis Police Foundation, KinderCare, and the St. Louis County Fraternal Order of Police ([Police1, 2026a](#)).

Federal Recommendations

Reauthorize and Modernize the COPS Hiring Program



Research has consistently linked COPS-funded hiring to measurable reductions in violent crime ([Mello, 2019](#); [Weisburst, 2019](#); [Cook et al., 2017](#)). The program has operated without formal reauthorization since 2009, funded through annual appropriations. Yet the program's statutory per-officer cap of \$75,000, which has been raised to \$125,000 only through annual appropriations riders since 2012, has not kept pace with actual officer salaries since the program was created in 1994. While the amount may seem high, this is over a three-year period. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median total salary for a law enforcement officer over three years is \$228,870, meaning the grant-receiving agency would still have to cover \$103,870 over that time period ([Congressional Research Service, 2026](#)). Congress should formally raise and index the cap to reflect current compensation levels.

Congress should also expand allowable uses beyond entry-level salaries to include retention bonuses and recruiting activities, as proposed in the Enhancing COPS Hiring Program Grants for Local Law Enforcement Act (H.R. 5403, [2025](#)), which would expand COPS grant eligibility to cover recruitment and retention bonuses and extend grant application validity from one year to five years to reduce administrative burdens that are particularly difficult on small agencies.

The Invest to Protect Act would allocate \$250 million over five years specifically for law enforcement agencies with 175 or fewer officers, covering training, mental health support, and recruitment and retention efforts for the small and rural departments that have been hit hardest by the staffing crisis ([Gov1, 2025](#)).

The More Funding for COPS Act ([H.R. 3500, 2025](#)), introduced by Representative Zach Nunn, would formally reauthorize the COPS program for the first time since 2009 and nearly double its funding, increasing the annual authorization from \$685 million in FY2025 to approximately \$1.16 billion per year through FY2030. The bill has a particular focus on ensuring that small and rural departments are not left behind, as funding currently disproportionately flows to larger agencies. First, the bill replaces year-to-year appropriations with multi-year budget certainty, which is much more critical for smaller agencies with slimmer budgets. Second, the bill includes rural and small-agency set-asides, steering dollars towards departments experiencing the steepest increases in resignations and retirements ([Nunn, 2025](#); [PERF, 2025](#)).

Expand the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act

Officers face roughly twice the rate of PTSD and depression as the general public and a 54% higher suicide risk ([Hughes, 2024](#)), yet 62% of law enforcement agencies currently have no formal wellness program at all ([Benchmark Analytics, 2025](#)). The Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act of 2017 (LEMHWA) (Pub. L. 115-113), signed by President Trump in January 2018, created a grant program within the COPS Office that funds peer support networks, suicide prevention programs, stress reduction training, clinical support, and family wellness resources for law enforcement agencies ([COPS Office, 2025](#)).

The current LEMHWA funding ceiling of \$8.8 million annually is insufficient at the documented scale of the problem. Congress should substantially increase LEMHWA funding and expand eligible uses to include mental wellness services such as embedded clinician programs, on-duty fitness time, and sabbatical structures of the type that produced measurable retention gains in Rapid City, South



Dakota. Many federal law enforcement agencies already allow three hours per week of on-duty time for fitness activities. Congress should extend this model to a broader range of federal law enforcement personnel and encourage state and local agencies to adopt similar policies through grant incentives, treating physical fitness as a job readiness requirement.

Leverage Existing Student Loan Forgiveness Pathways

Law enforcement officers working for government agencies are already eligible for the federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program, which forgives remaining federal student debt after ten years of public service and 120 qualifying payments. However, the program is underused, partly because awareness is low and the certification process is confusing ([GAO, 2018](#)). To address these issues, federal policymakers and law enforcement officials should actively promote PSLF in recruiting and onboarding materials, making it a more attractive benefit. Additionally, the Department of Education had committed to automatically credit federal employees for PSLF by matching loan data with employment records ([U.S. Department of Education, 2021](#)). That effort stalled, but bipartisan legislation has since been introduced to require its completion so military service is credited automatically without a separate application ([Moran & Cortez Mastro, 2023](#)). Applying the same automatic data-matching approach to federal law enforcement officers and assisting state and local agencies in certifying officers' qualifying service would allow officers to earn credits effortlessly. Importantly, this does not require creating new programs or extra funding.

Reform Federal Consent Decrees to Protect Local Control and Staffing

When the Justice Department believes it has found a pattern of misconduct in a law enforcement agency, it can place that agency under a court-enforced consent decree overseen by an independent monitor. These agreements often become counterproductive, costly, open-ended, and damaging to staffing. For example, New Orleans spent twelve years and more than \$60 million under its decree, Chicago has paid over \$28 million for monitors and remains years from compliance after missing its 2024 deadline, and officials in Ferguson and Baltimore reported being left with fewer officers and harder-to-fill vacancies ([NOLA.com, 2025](#); [WTTW News, 2026](#); [Associated Press, 2022](#); [NBC News, 2023](#)). The Department itself noted in 2025 that the Minneapolis and Louisville decrees would have directly governed staffing, recruitment, and hiring while imposing potentially hundreds of millions in compliance costs if fully implemented. Instead, the Civil Rights Division under President Trump moved to dismiss the lawsuits against the police departments that had begun under the Biden Administration ([U.S. Department of Justice, 2025](#)).

The Justice Department should use consent decrees only for clear misconduct cases, such as proven patterns of excessive force or illegal arrests, rather than based solely on statistical differences. When pursuing such agreements, they should include specific timelines and criteria for exit, control monitoring costs, and consider the impact on department staffing before taking action. When issues can be addressed through technical assistance and collaborative reform, the Department should prioritize these options over indefinite court oversight, in line with its more cautious strategy introduced in 2025 ([U.S. Department of Justice, 2025](#)).



Address the Federal Retirement Wave Proactively

GAO has documented that approximately one-third of federal law enforcement officers will reach retirement eligibility within five years ([GAO, 2026](#)). Congress should direct federal agencies to develop workforce succession plans, expand incentives for lateral transfers, and create pathways for retired federal officers to support understaffed state and local agencies.

The Department of Justice can enhance officer recruitment and retention through its discretionary grant programs, such as COPS hiring grants and Byrne Justice Assistance Grants, by prioritizing applications that support officer hiring, wellness, and retention. Additionally, federal agencies can help streamline lateral transfer and certification recognition processes and develop succession plans to address the upcoming wave of federal retirements ([The White House, 2025](#); [GAO, 2026](#)). These administrative actions can be quickly implemented and will support the statutory measures recommended earlier.

State Recommendations

Reform Certification Reciprocity

One of the most cost-effective state interventions available is eliminating the bureaucratic barriers that prevent experienced out-of-state officers from quickly transferring. States should streamline certification for officers with verified prior law enforcement experience, reducing the time from application to active duty from months to weeks. Florida's model shows the potential benefits certification reciprocity can have ([Florida Executive Office of the Governor, 2026](#)).

Enact Tuition and Family Support Programs

Several states, including Missouri, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania, have demonstrated that education benefits are a cost-effective retention tool that rewards officers who stay. States that have not enacted similar programs should prioritize legislation that extends tuition benefits to currently serving officers and their families.

Invest in Officer Wellness Infrastructure

States should help law enforcement agencies build a robust wellness infrastructure, including peer support networks, embedded mental health clinicians, and physical fitness programs. States should enact statutory protections ensuring that mental health treatment records cannot be used against officers in disciplinary proceedings.

Maintain Merit-Based Hiring and Remove DEI from the Hiring Considerations

Public safety depends on fielding the most capable officers possible. This means hiring, promotion, and assignment should turn on individual merit and demonstrated performance, not on race, sex, or other group identity. Diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks replace that single standard with demographic categories, running counter to both the principle that individuals deserve to be judged on their own qualifications and the public's interest in having the best-prepared officers on duty. State and local agencies should follow the federal government's lead in returning to merit-based



selection, so that every officer earns the badge on the strength of qualifications alone ([The White House, 2025](#)). The research reviewed in the Federal Action section shows the cost of departing from that standard ([Lott, 2000](#); [Boehme et al., 2026](#)).

Local Recommendations

Adopt Multi-Year Staffing Plans with Defined Public Safety Benchmarks

Local elected officials should adopt multi-year staffing plans that set targets for authorized strength, detective caseloads, and response time benchmarks, and hold department leadership accountable to them. The collapse in national homicide clearance rates has been caused in part by the inability of understaffed homicide units to work cases properly. Local departments should ensure that staffing plans account for investigative capacity, not just patrol coverage.

Remove Unnecessary Barriers to Qualified Candidates

Local agencies should audit their application requirements to identify barriers that screen out qualified candidates without serving a legitimate public safety purpose. Common examples include four-year-degree mandates without alternatives such as military service, rigid credit-history screens, restrictive upper age limits, broad residency requirements, and multi-month hiring timelines that lose strong candidates to faster-moving employers. Credential requirements that do not correlate with officer performance should be reviewed and, where warranted, reformed.

Invest in Culture, Wellness, and Physical Fitness

As noted above, Rapid City demonstrates that the highest-return retention strategies are often cultural rather than financial. Structured mentorship programs, co-responder models that reduce non-law enforcement calls on officers, on-duty fitness time, and career development pathways all produce documented retention improvements at comparatively low cost.

Conclusion

The law enforcement staffing crisis is a tangible public policy problem with real consequences. Homicides remain unsolved due to a lack of detectives; emergency calls go unanswered because of insufficient patrol officers; small towns lose their departments altogether. Officers driven away by poor pay, chronic understaffing, and public criticism leave a profession they love.

Evidence indicates that adequate staffing not only helps prevent and solve crime but also delivers a strong return on investment. States such as Arkansas, Florida, Tennessee, Missouri, and Nebraska, as well as cities like Birmingham and San Antonio, are successfully implementing solutions that make a difference. Policymakers who take action will save lives and improve public safety; inaction, on the other hand, can lead to ongoing unresolved murders, unanswered 911 calls, and officers leaving the force. Communities deserve effective and proactive support.



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