

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-599](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

About 5,000 VA police officers are responsible for securing and protecting 138 VA medical centers across the country. These officers are authorized to investigate crimes, make arrests, and carry firearms.

The Dr. Chris Kirkpatrick Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017 included a provision that GAO assess aspects of the VA police services. This report addresses (1) what the VA's policies are on the use of force by police officers at medical centers, and what training officers receive on the use of force; (2) how VA records and investigates use of force incidents at medical centers; and (3) the extent to which VA sufficiently collects and analyzes use of force data at medical centers.

To address these objectives, GAO reviewed VA policies, procedures, and training materials on the use of force and interviewed VA officials at headquarters and six local medical centers, selected to represent varying size and locations. GAO reviewed VA data on use of force incidents recorded from May 10, 2019, through May 10, 2020—the most recent full year data were available.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that VA improve the completeness and accuracy of its use of force data; implement a tool to analyze use of force incidents at medical centers nationwide; ensure that medical centers submit all use of force investigations to VA headquarters; and analyze the use of force investigation data. The VA concurred with each of GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-20-599](#). For more information, contact Gretta L. Goodwin at (202) 512-8777 or goodwing@gao.gov.

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VA POLICE

Actions Needed to Improve Data Completeness and Accuracy on Use of Force Incidents at Medical Centers

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) policy on use of force states that police officers must use the minimal level of force that is reasonably necessary to gain control of a situation and should only utilize physical control methods on an individual when the force is justified by the individual's actions. To guide officers, VA developed a Use of Force Continuum Scale to define and clarify the categories of force that can be used.

Categories of Force on the VA's Use of Force Continuum Scale



Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) use of force policy; Art Explosion (clip art). | GAO-20-599

According to VA policy, all police officers must receive training on the VA's use of force policy when hired and biannually thereafter. Officers are trained—through classroom lectures and scenarios that emphasize effective communication techniques—to use the minimal level of force to deescalate a situation.

Officers record use of force incidents electronically and the chief of police decides which, if any, use of force incidents need to be investigated in accordance with VA guidance. Chiefs of Police at the six facilities GAO visited conducted investigations in a similar manner, by reviewing evidence and comparing an officer's action with the VA's use of force policy to determine whether actions were justified. While most investigations are conducted at the local level, VA headquarters may also run investigations for certain incidents, such as when it receives a complaint against an officer.

VA police officers record incidents in a database, Report Executive, but GAO's analysis indicates that VA data on use of force incidents are not sufficiently complete and accurate for reporting numbers or trends at medical centers nationwide. For example, GAO found that 176 out of 1,214 use of force incident reports did not include the specific type of force used. Further, Report Executive does not track incidents by individual medical centers. By addressing these limitations, VA can more effectively monitor use of force trends by type of force or medical facility, among other variables, to understand the VA's use of force incidents nationwide. GAO also found that VA does not systematically collect or analyze use of force investigation findings from local medical centers, limiting its ability to provide effective oversight. Specifically, there is no policy requiring Chiefs of Police to submit all investigations on use of force to VA headquarters, and VA does not have a database designed to collect and analyze data on use of force investigations. Collecting and analyzing such data nationwide would allow VA to better assess the impact of its deescalation policies and improve the agency's oversight efforts.