U.S. Government Accountability Office

Law Enforcement Officers: Observations on Recruitment and Retention at the Federal, Tribal, State, and Local Levels

GAO-26-108495
Q&A
Report to Congressional Committees
February 2026

Why This Matters

Law enforcement officers play a critical role in supporting public order and safety across the United States. However, recruiting and retaining a sufficient number of officers has been a challenge for federal, tribal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. This challenge is likely to grow as these agencies expect the number of officer retirements to increase. For example, approximately one-third of federal law enforcement officers will be eligible to retire in the next 5 years. Moreover, the Police Executive Research Forum has reported that staffing is a top concern for many police chiefs and sheriffs because the demand for officers exceeds the supply of qualified candidates interested in taking the job.

The Recruit and Retain Act includes a provision for GAO to report on the effects of recruitment and attrition rates on federal, tribal, state, and local law enforcement agencies in the United States. (Pub. L. No. 118-64, § 6, 138 Stat. 1435, 1437-38 (2024)). This report provides information on staffing levels at eight selected federal law enforcement agencies from four departments and how they changed from fiscal years 2020 through 2024, recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers, and the effects staffing levels may have had on public safety.

Key Takeaways

- According to a survey of law enforcement agencies nationwide, the number of law enforcement officers who resigned increased by 18 percent and the number who retired increased by 2 percent from 2019 through 2024. These retirements and resignations contributed to overall large decreases in officer staffing.
- Federal law enforcement officer staffing levels varied from fiscal years 2020 through 2024 across eight selected federal law enforcement agencies.
- Law enforcement agencies reported taking steps to recruit and retain officers by enhancing benefits and compensation and diversifying their recruitment techniques.
- The Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Hiring Program provides grant funding to support hiring initiatives at tribal, state, local, and territorial law enforcement agencies.
- Peer-reviewed studies included in our literature review showed that higher numbers of local law enforcement officers resulted in a reduction in crime. In addition, one study found that an increase in funding for homicide detectives helped improve the city's homicide clearance rate.

What do the data show about staffing levels at the eight selected federal law enforcement agencies from 2020 - 2024?

Federal law enforcement officer staffing levels varied across eight selected agencies during fiscal years 2020 through 2024, according to agency provided data. For the purposes of this report, we use the term “law enforcement officer” to include supervisory and nonsupervisory personnel with arrest authority who are also authorized (but not necessarily required) to carry firearms while on duty. We asked the selected federal law enforcement agencies to identify the population that would meet our definition of a law enforcement officer and provide data related to staffing for those positions.

Specifically, the eight selected federal agencies from four departments reported data, including their staffing levels, vacancies, and staffing targets:

Department of Homeland Security

Customs and Border Protection (CBP). CBP data show that from fiscal years 2020 through 2024, the agency’s law enforcement officer staffing levels ranged from a low of 46,646 in 2022 to a high of 47,346 in 2024, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Law Enforcement Officer Staffing Levels

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
CBP law enforcement officer staffing level[a]	47,043	47,036	46,646	46,779	47,346

Source: GAO analysis of CBP data. | GAO-26-108495

[a]CBP identified law enforcement positions as Border Patrol Agents, CBP Officers, Air Interdiction Agents, Marine Interdiction Agents, Aviation Enforcement Agents, and Criminal Investigators. CBP identified staffing targets for Border Patrol Agents and CBP officers, but not for its other law enforcement positions. Agency officials said this was due to their smaller size.

- For its CBP officers and Border Patrol agents, which CBP characterized as law enforcement officers for the purposes of our review, CBP provided both staffing targets and vacancy data.
- Specifically, for CBP officer positions, the agency experienced its highest staffing level in 2024 when it exceeded its staffing target by 52 positions and had no vacancies. In 2022, CBP reported 212 vacancies in its officer positions—its lowest staffing level for the selected period.
- For its Border Patrol agents, CBP data show that the agency had 2,732 agent positions vacant in 2024. In 2020, its data shows that the actual staffing level for Border Patrol agents exceeded its staffing target by 185.[1]

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). ICE data show that from fiscal years 2020 through 2024, the agency’s law enforcement officer staffing levels ranged from a low of 12,280 in 2023 to a high of 12,803 in 2021, as shown in table 2.[2]

Table 2: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Law Enforcement Officer Staffing Levels and Target Staffing Levels

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
ICE law enforcement officer staffing level (target staffing level)	12,749 (13,368)	12,803 (13,640)	12,459 (13,116)	12,280 (12,304)	12,296 (12,477)

Source: GAO analysis of ICE data. | GAO-26-108495

As shown in table 2, ICE data show that ICE ranged from having 1,082 officer positions vacant in 2021 to exceeding its staffing target by 42 positions in fiscal year 2023.

Department of Justice

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). FBI data show that from fiscal years 2020 through 2024, the agency's staffing levels for special agents ranged from a low of 13,566, in 2020, to a high of 13,969, in 2022. Staffing levels for police officers ranged from a low of 202, in 2024, to a high of 219 in 2023, as shown in table 3. FBI data show its highest vacancy of 983 special agents in 2024, and its lowest vacancy of 362 special agents in 2021. For its police officers, data show that the highest number of vacancies the bureau experienced was 44 vacancies in 2020, and its lowest number was 21 vacancies in 2023.

Table 3: Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Staffing Levels and Target Staffing Levels for Special Agents and FBI Police Officers

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
FBI special agent staffing level (target staffing level)	13,566 (14,186)	13,941 (14,303)	13,969 (14,447)	13,927 (14,628)	13,635 (14,618)
FBI police officer staffing level (target staffing level)	203 (247)	215 (248)	216 (240)	219 (240)	202 (239)

Source: GAO analysis of FBI Data. | GAO-26-108495

Bureau of Prisons (BOP). BOP data show that from fiscal years 2020 through 2024, the agency's staffing levels for all law enforcement officer positions ranged from a low of 32,565, in 2023, to a high of 35,052, in 2021, as shown in table 4. In 2023, BOP data show that it had 5,082 law enforcement officer positions vacant. In 2020, BOP data also show that it had 2,466 vacancies.

Table 4: Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Law Enforcement Officer Staffing Levels and Target Staffing Levels

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
BOP law enforcement officer staffing level (target staffing level)	34,821 (37,287)	35,052 (37,390)	33,134 (37,357)	32,565 (37,647)	33,244 (37,791)

Source: GAO analysis of BOP data. | GAO-26-108495

Department of the Interior

Bureau of Indian Affairs. Bureau of Indian Affairs data show that from fiscal years 2020 through 2024, the agency's staffing levels of law enforcement officers ranged from a low of 338 in 2021 to a high of 370 in 2024, as shown in table 5. The agency did not provide vacancy rate or staffing target data.

Table 5: Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Law Enforcement Officer Staffing Levels

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
BIA law enforcement officer staffing level[a]	340	338	358	351	370

Source: GAO analysis of BIA data. | GAO-26-108495

[a]BIA did not provide staffing targets or vacancy data

Bureau of Land Management. Bureau of Land Management data show that from fiscal years 2020 through 2024, the agency's law enforcement staffing levels ranged from a low of 253 in 2020 to a high of 299 in 2023, as shown in table 6. Data show that the number of Bureau of Land Management law enforcement officers ranged from 61 officer positions vacant in both 2021 and 2022, and 52 officer positions vacant in 2024.

Table 6: Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Law Enforcement Officer Staffing Levels and Target Staffing Levels

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
BLM law enforcement officer staffing level (target staffing level)	253 (313)	256 (317)	265 (326)	299 (352)	289 (341)

Source: GAO analysis of BLM data. | GAO-26-108495

U.S. Park Police. U.S. Park Police staffing levels for law enforcement ranged from a low of 623 in 2021 to a high of 663 in 2023, as shown in table 7. U.S. Park Police did not provide vacancy data or staffing targets.

Table 7: U.S. Park Police Law Enforcement Staffing Levels

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
U.S. Park Police law enforcement officer staffing level[a]	625	623	624	663	629

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Park Police data. | GAO-26-108495

[a]U.S. Park Police did not provide staffing targets or vacancy data

Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration (VHA). VHA data show that from fiscal year 2020 through 2024, the agency's law enforcement officer staffing levels ranged from a low of 4,669 in 2021 to a high of 6,281 in 2024, as shown in table 8. VHA data show that it had 2,236 officer positions vacant in 2023 and 897 officer positions vacant in 2020.

Table 8: Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Law Enforcement Officer Staffing Levels and Targets

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
VHA law enforcement officer staffing level (staffing level target)	4,699 (5,596)	4,669 (5,710)	4,891 (7,001)	6,017 (8,253)	6,281 (8,281)

Source: GAO analysis of VHA data. | GAO-26-108495

What have tribal, state, and local law enforcement associations reported about law enforcement agency staffing levels?

All 10 law enforcement associations selected for our review told us their tribal, state, and local law enforcement member agencies had faced staffing shortages or challenges with law enforcement officer recruitment or retention. According to these associations, there has been an overall decrease in law enforcement staffing levels due to various factors, such as increases in resignations and retirements. For example:

- According to a 2025 Police Executive Research Forum survey,[3] the number of law enforcement officers hired nationwide increased each year from January 2020 to January 2024.[4] However, overall, law enforcement officer staffing levels decreased during this time. The Police Executive Research Forum attributed this to an excess demand for officers compared to the supply of qualified candidates interested in taking the job. Additionally, overall, the number of law enforcement officers who resigned nationwide increased by 18

percent and the number who retired increased by 2 percent from 2019 through 2024, although the number of resignations and retirements began decreasing in 2023.

- A 2024 International Association of Chiefs of Police survey found that more than 70 percent of respondents reported that recruitment was more difficult in 2024 than it had been 2019.[5] Moreover, it found that, on average, agencies were operating at approximately 91 percent of their authorized staffing levels, indicating a staffing deficit of nearly 10 percent.

What is reported about the reasons people join law enforcement?

According to information from all 10 selected law enforcement associations and all eight federal law enforcement agencies, people join law enforcement for various reasons. For example:

Appeal of public service

Officials from all 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated that people enter law enforcement with an interest in public service and a desire to help and serve others. Specifically, National Sheriffs Association discussion session participants stated that seeing the impact local law enforcement had on the community and being service-minded drove them to join law enforcement.

Additionally, officials from all eight selected federal law enforcement agencies noted that an agency's mission and public service are primary reasons individuals seek to become officers. For example, officials from the VHA noted that the most common reason individuals sought to become their agency's law enforcement officers related to the mission of serving veterans.

Prior military experience

According to selected law enforcement associations and agencies, some people seek to join law enforcement because they want to continue a career in public service after serving in the military. Seven out of the 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated that many law enforcement recruits have previous military experience. For example, officials with the VHA told us that about 80 percent of their agency's law enforcement officers had prior military experience.

At the federal level, according to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report, more than half (56 percent) of federal law enforcement agencies targeted military veterans for recruitment in fiscal year 2020.[6]

Family connections

Another key motivator for people seeking law enforcement careers is wanting to extend a family's legacy within the field, according to our analysis of literature and interviews with 10 selected law enforcement associations. Specifically, studies have shown that those with relatives in law enforcement cite a desire to continue in the "family business."[7] Further, officials from five of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated that familial connections to law enforcement were a driving factor for their members seeking a law enforcement career.

Job security and benefits

Other primary reasons reported as to why people choose a career in law enforcement include job security and benefits. In particular, 10 of the studies in our literature review cited salary and benefits as top motivators for entering a career in law enforcement.[8] We heard similar responses in our interviews with law enforcement associations. For example, when asked to describe the primary reasons that police officers choose a career in law enforcement:

- Officials from four of 10 selected law enforcement associations stated that some people join law enforcement because they consider it to be a secure job with benefits, including a pension and health benefits.
- Officials we interviewed from three of the eight selected federal law enforcement agencies listed job security and benefits as primary reasons to join.

How did the reasons people cited for joining law enforcement after 2020 differ from previous years?

The reasons people cited for joining law enforcement from fiscal years 2020 through 2024 differed from those typically cited prior to 2020, according to officials from selected law enforcement associations. For example:

- **Seeing law enforcement as a short-term rather than a long-term career.** Officials from five of 10 selected law enforcement associations stated that, from fiscal years 2020 through 2024, more police officers viewed their jobs as short-term—with plans to stay at their agency for less than five years, or a bridge to another career altogether. According to the Department of Justice's COPS office, fewer people than in previous generations were entering policing with the plan of staying for 25 years or more.
- **Placing less emphasis on family connections to law enforcement and prior military experience.** Officials from three of 10 selected law enforcement associations stated that traditional policing hiring pipelines, such as familial connections and military experience, were becoming less prevalent. For example, officials from one law enforcement association said that some agencies had shifted to new recruiting pools, such as hiring social workers as law enforcement officers.
- **Wanting to change the profession from within.** Officials from three of 10 selected law enforcement associations stated that a desire to change policing from within was a more recent reason people cited for having chosen a career in law enforcement. Additionally, officials from one of the selected federal agencies in our review noted that younger generations were inspired by justice reform and the chance to contribute to positive change.

What is reported about the primary reasons law enforcement officers retire and resign?

According to our analysis of literature and interviews with 10 selected law enforcement associations and seven selected federal law enforcement agencies, law enforcement officers retire or resign for various reasons. These include reaching retirement age, retirement laws and policies, wanting to improve their mental health and work-life balance, seeking new career opportunities or increased compensation, and negative perceptions of policing.

Reaching retirement age

According to our analysis of literature and interviews with 10 selected law enforcement associations, people most often leave policing because they are eligible to retire. Additionally, reaching retirement age was one of the most common reasons why officers retire according to law enforcement association officials we spoke with. In addition, in 2023, the Office of Personnel Management reported that about a third of federal law enforcement officers would be eligible to retire in the next five years.[9]

Further, federally funded hiring programs, such as those funded by the Department of Justice's COPS grants, led to large cohorts of officers being hired at the same time, and therefore generally being eligible to retire at the same time. The COPS Office awards grants to tribal, state, local, and territorial law enforcement agencies. As we reported in 2005, grant recipients used those funds to assist in hiring initiatives, resulting in hiring rates of additional officers being above the levels that would have been expected without the grant funds.[10] Specifically, we estimated that COPS expenditures yielded about 88,000 additional officer-years hired from 1994 through 2001. An officer-year refers to each year of service a law enforcement officer position received COPS funding.

We heard similar information from law enforcement associations. For example:

- In their 2019 survey, Police Executive Research Forum found that responding agencies said more than 20 percent of their officers had been eligible for retirement or would become eligible in the next five years.[11] The Police Executive Research Forum reported this may be due to a growing number of officers who entered policing during the federally funded hiring programs of the 1990s were now reaching retirement age.

- Officials from the International Association of Chiefs of Police, one of 10 law enforcement associations we met with, told us that agencies may not have been prepared for multiple, simultaneous retirements as officers hired under the original COPS grants reached retirement eligibility.

Retirement laws and policies

According to officials from the federal law enforcement agencies and law enforcement associations we met with, law enforcement officers retire when they are subject to mandatory separation or choose to retire as soon as they are eligible to avoid being subject to certain changes in retirement policies.

- At the federal level, statutorily defined law enforcement officers are generally subject to mandatory separation at age 57.[12] Officials from three of the eight selected federal law enforcement agencies in our review reported that mandatory separation is a main reason these law enforcement officers leave.

- Whereas some officers who are not subject to mandatory separation provisions but who qualified for retirement might have previously stayed on, more officers are retiring as soon as eligible, according to selected law enforcement associations in our review. For example, in its 2024 survey report, the International Association of Chiefs of Police stated that most agencies reported that the rate of retirement in 2024 was relatively stable compared to that of five years ago. However, some agencies responding to the survey reported a perceived increase in retirements.

- When asked to describe the primary reasons that law enforcement officers choose to retire, officials from six of 10 law enforcement associations we met with listed changes in retirement policies as a reason for leaving the profession, including for the purposes of retirement. Policy changes the associations told us about were law enforcement officers' retirements not transferring if they move agencies and increases to the required terms of service for retirement.

Wanting to improve mental health and work-life balance

Law enforcement associations and law enforcement agencies reported that some officers retire because they want to improve their mental health or work-life balance. A 2021 survey conducted by the National Fraternal Order of Police found that among active officers, about 54 percent of law enforcement officers surveyed reported experiencing high levels of burnout.

- Officials from five of 10 law enforcement associations we met with shared that law enforcement agencies often addressed low staffing levels with increased overtime—which could have a negative impact on officers' mental health and contributes to burnout. Nine out of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated that burnout or mental health concerns were significant contributing factors to officer attrition.

- Officials from four of eight selected federal law enforcement agencies stated that mental health was frequently cited in decisions to leave the profession. For example, according to FBI officials, mental health concerns were frequently cited in decisions to leave the agency. Moreover, based on our review of exit survey data for FBI special agents in fiscal years 2023 and 2024, among the most often cited factor listed on the FBI exit surveys for why special agents left the agency was the inability to maintain a work-life balance.[13]

Seeking new career opportunities or increased compensation

New career opportunities in other agencies or departments. According to selected law enforcement associations and selected federal law enforcement agencies, officers cited reasons to move from one agency to another or the desire to pursue a career outside law enforcement as factors for resigning.

- In its 2019 survey, the Police Executive Research Forum found that among officers who were resigning or retiring, the most common reason officers gave was to accept a job at another local law enforcement agency. A close second reason for leaving was to pursue a career outside of law enforcement. In our discussion with the National Sheriffs' Association, nine out of 12 participants agreed that leaving for another agency was the top reason why officers resign.

- Officials from six of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated that officers often resign or retire to work for a different sized agency, for example, one of a different size or one located in what they perceive to be a more pro-law enforcement jurisdiction.

- Officials from six of eight selected federal law enforcement agencies stated that officers left to pursue career opportunities at other agencies or outside of law enforcement. According to federal law enforcement agencies and

law enforcement associations in our review, one factor driving agency competition is differing financial incentives, such signing bonuses. In particular, officials at the National Sheriffs' Association expressed concern that some sheriffs may leave their agencies for opportunities at others that have increased funding for hiring.

Increased compensation

Officials from six of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with reported that officers leaving their agency to join another or leaving the profession, were often motivated by improved salaries and financial benefits.

Negative public perception

Officials from seven of 10 selected law enforcement associations and officials from four of eight federal law enforcement agencies stated that negative public perception of policing was a primary reason why officers choose to resign or retire. For example:

- According to a 2021 National Fraternal Order of Police survey, respondents identified community relations as a critical issue for law enforcement officers. Within the category of community relations, officers rated negative news media about law enforcement and other anti-police rhetoric as the most serious. Additionally, according to the survey, over 77 percent of officers indicated they 'somewhat,' 'quite a bit,' or 'very much agreed' that negative publicity impacted their motivation to do the job.

- According to the survey, respondents stated that critical issues facing the law enforcement profession included violent crime, negative news media about law enforcement and other anti-police rhetoric, and the potential removal of state-level qualified immunity—a legal doctrine that can shield officers from civil liability for constitutional violations.[14] Within the category of the police profession, officers rated the removal of qualified immunity for officers and insufficient staffing as the most serious issues.

- When asked to describe how the primary reasons that law enforcement officers choose to retire has changed over the last five years, officials from five of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with cited public perception of the law enforcement profession as a driving factor.

- Additionally, three of eight selected federal law enforcement agencies cited negative public perception as a reason why officers leave their agency or the profession.

What is reported about the efforts law enforcement agencies have made to recruit and retain officers?

Officials from seven out of eight selected federal agencies and all 10 selected law enforcement associations reported their member agencies engaged in various efforts to recruit and retain officers, including diversifying recruitment techniques and enhancing benefits and compensation.

Recruitment strategies

According to selected law enforcement associations and federal agencies, law enforcement agencies reported using a variety of recruitment strategies, such as the following:

- **Creating supportive environments for police officers.** Officials from nine of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with discussed the importance of having a supportive environment to recruit and retain police officers. They stated that this included support from the community, agency leadership, and elected officials, as well as general positive perception of the profession.

- **Using electronic media.** Officials from eight of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with found the use of electronic media helpful in their recruitment efforts. Association officials stated that social media was best for attracting younger generations and highlighting the uniqueness of their specific agency. In addition, members from the National Sheriffs' Association, one of the 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with, highlighted that the more an agency can communicate its value to the community, the more it helps its recruitment efforts. Officials from eight of eight selected federal agencies also used electronic media as a recruitment tool.

- **Targeting recruitment efforts.** Officials from four of 10 selected law enforcement associations and two of eight selected federal agencies we met with mentioned agencies used targeted recruitment efforts like attending job fairs, to effectively recruit people with diverse backgrounds.

- **Changing hiring policies and procedures.** Officials from four of ten selected law enforcement associations reported that agencies had made changes to certain policies, such as some physical standards, education requirements, tattoo restrictions, and those related to previous drug use. According to officials from three of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with, changes made to streamline the application process, such as reducing the length of time involved in hiring, can help agencies' recruitment efforts. One of the selected federal law enforcement agencies stated it has implemented recruitment marketing strategies, such as highlighting expedited hiring timelines.

Benefits and compensation

Selected law enforcement agencies and associations reported that law enforcement agencies had taken steps to enhance benefits and compensation as strategies for recruiting and retaining officers. For example, agencies offered the following:

- **Mental health and wellness services.** Officials from five of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated a focus on mental health and wellness services is an effective strategy for officer retention. Officials from one of the selected federal agencies in our review stated the agency has taken specific actions to support officers' mental and physical health.

- **Compensation and financial benefits.** Officials from seven of the 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated salary increases or other financial benefits, such as signing bonuses and housing stipends, were effective recruitment and retention strategies. Additionally, at the federal level, officials from three of the eight selected agencies noted challenges in recruiting officers for remote locations and using certain financial benefits to overcome this challenge. For example, Bureau of Indian Affairs officials told us the agency had introduced hiring flexibilities and recruitment and retention bonuses to increase the agency's hiring of law enforcement on tribal lands.

- **Retirement and health benefits.** Officials from five of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated that retirement and healthcare benefits help agencies retain officers.

- **Opportunities for growth.** Officials from five of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated opportunities, such as trainings and room for advancement, were effective strategies for officer retention.

- **Work-life balance and time off.** Officials from three of 10 selected law enforcement associations we met with stated policies and schedules that promote work-life balance and allow for more time off are effective recruitment and retention strategies.

- **Other recruitment and retention incentives.** According to interviews with law enforcement associations, other benefits agencies used as recruitment and retention strategies included tuition assistance for trainings, childcare, and programs for officer health and safety. For example, at the federal level, agencies may agree to repay officers' student loans to recruit and retain them.[15] Additionally, officers employed by federal, tribal, state, or local government organizations, agencies, or entities may be eligible for the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.[16]

What is reported about how law enforcement officer staffing levels relate to public safety?

Staffing shortages can adversely affect law enforcement officers' ability to carry out their public safety missions. This is according to our analysis of information obtained from federal law enforcement agencies and associations representing federal, tribal, state, and local law enforcement agencies and our review of literature.

Impact of federal law enforcement staffing shortages on public safety

Officials from multiple federal law enforcement agencies told us that staffing shortages could hinder their ability to effectively carry out law enforcement operations. For example:

CBP. CBP generally fell short of staffing targets in recent years, while its encounters with noncitizens at the U.S. border greatly increased.[17] According to CBP's *Fiscal Year 2025-2029 Human Capital Strategic Plan*, law enforcement attrition could directly result in an increase of fentanyl distribution in the United States. In addition, staff attrition decreased CBP's Air and Marine Operations capacity for drug, weapon, and migrant interdiction, as well as conducting rescue operations, according to *CBP's Fiscal Year 2025-2029 Human Capital Strategic Plan*.

Bureau of Land Management. The Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management experienced fewer law enforcement incidents when it maintained its highest number of uniformed officers in 2023 compared to other years, according to bureau officials. During that year, officials said that the bureau had 10 percent more law enforcement officers compared its average number of officers from 2020 through 2024. Moreover, bureau officials said staffing issues may jeopardize public safety on federal lands, among other locations.

Bureau of Indian Affairs. Bureau of Indian Affairs officials stated that not having adequate law enforcement staffing had jeopardized public safety throughout Indian Country. For example, they said that the bureau had limited capacity to patrol tribal lands and conduct criminal investigations.

VHA. Law enforcement officers are one of VHA's top non-clinical occupational shortages, according to agency officials. Specifically, officials said one factor leading to understaffing is budget constraints which required the agency to weigh competing priorities in hiring clinical and nonclinical staff. As a result, they said that officers were not always available to patrol facilities, potentially making them less safe.

Impact of state and local law enforcement staffing levels on public safety

According to our review of nine peer-reviewed papers that assessed the impact of law enforcement staffing levels on public safety, hiring additional law enforcement officers at the local level can have a positive impact on public safety. [18]

Studies we reviewed show that increased police presence resulted in a reduction in crime. Five of the nine empirical studies we reviewed found that an increase in police presence resulted in a reduction in incidences of both violent and property crime.[19]

Three of these nine studies examined the COPS program, to show that increasing the number of police officers caused a reduction in criminal activity.[20] Two of the studies showed that a one percent increase in uniformed officers led to approximately a 0.8 percent reduction in property crime and 1.3 percent reduction in violent crime.[21] Two of the COPS studies also estimated that each additional officer hired prevented around 20 crimes each year; one of the studies further broke that number down to 15 property crimes and 4 violent crimes.[22] Notably, these same studies did not show a significant increase in arrests, suggesting instead that increased officer staffing elevated local agency capacity for deterrence.

Further, three of the nine studies looked specifically at the effect of hiring more officers on homicide. One study found no significant effect, a second study found that hiring roughly 10 additional officers prevented one homicide, and the third study found that, on average, hiring an additional 10 to 17 officers prevented one homicide.[23] The latter study covers 38 years of crime data (compared to 10 and 15 years for the other two studies) and yielded the most precise estimates, indicating that there is evidence that increasing police officers could reduce homicide.[24]

Studies we reviewed show that increased funding for law enforcement may result in an increase in homicide clearance rates. Two empirical studies from 2019 and 2022 focused on the impact of law enforcement funding on homicide clearance rates.[25] The clearance rates reflect offenses that are cleared, or "closed," by law enforcement agencies in one of two ways—by arrest or by exceptional means. In certain situations, elements beyond a law enforcement agency's control can prevent the agency from arresting and formally charging the offender. When this occurs, the agency can clear the offense exceptionally. Examples of exceptional clearances include, but are not limited to, the death of the offender; the victim's not cooperating with the prosecution after the offender has been identified; or the denial of extradition because the offender committed a crime in another jurisdiction and is being prosecuted for that offense. Increasing homicide clearance rates is an important consideration for public safety because it helps reduce the chance that violent criminals would be able to commit future offenses.

One 2019 study found that an increase in funding for homicide detectives in the Boston Police Department in 2012 helped improve the city's homicide clearance rate.[26] A 2022 study broadened the scope to see how changes in police funding in the 47 largest cities between 2007 and 2017 impacted homicide clearance rate—and found no significant effect.[27] The authors of the latter study noted that police departments did not use the increased funding in the same way Boston did which could explain why there was no significant overall effect on homicide clearance rates from increased funding.

One study we reviewed showed fewer highway patrol officers may result in increased traffic fatalities. One empirical study suggested that a 2003 mass layoff of Oregon highway patrol officers resulted in an increase in fatal accidents.[28] Specifically, a 1 percent decline in the number of highway patrol officers resulted in a 0.33 percent to 0.38 percent increase in traffic fatalities. The authors estimate that had the state increased highway troopers commensurate with the increase in vehicle miles traveled, there would have been over 5,000 fewer fatalities between 1979 and 2005.

Agency Comments

In January 2026, the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Department of the Interior, and Department of Veteran Affairs provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

In its technical comments, the Department of Homeland Security added that the Federal Protective Service (which we did not review in our study) was experiencing a severe attrition crisis. It stated that it had 24 percent of its law enforcement officer positions vacant. It further stated that its exit surveys and interviews consistently identified the lack of enhanced federal law enforcement retirement coverage as the primary reason for its law enforcement officer departures. In addition, it stated that the agency had lost multiple recruits during training at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers to other agencies offering enhanced federal law enforcement retirement coverage, resulting in it experiencing significant financial losses and operational setbacks.

Finally, DHS stated that the Federal Protective Service's inability to offer the enhanced federal law enforcement retirement coverage created a difficult cycle. It stated that, as officers leave for agencies with better benefits, the remaining workforce faces increased workloads, leading to burnout, diminished morale, and further departures. It further stated that this cycle undermines the Federal Protective Service's ability to recruit, retain, and sustain a stable, effective workforce, directly impacting the security of federal facilities and the safety of employees and visitors.

How GAO Did This Study

For purposes of this report, we use the term "law enforcement officer" to include supervisory and nonsupervisory personnel with arrest authority who are also authorized (but not necessarily required) to carry firearms while on duty.
To inform all our work, we conducted a literature search to identify studies, articles, and other publications from peer-reviewed academic journals, law enforcement associations, and government sources relevant to the recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers as well as their impact on public safety.

We focused on publications from the past 10 years. To identify publications, we conducted keyword searches in scholarly databases including ProQuest, EBSCO, SCOPUS, and Lexis Nexis. Keywords included "police," "law enforcement," "recruit," "hiring," "retain," "crime," and "deterrence" among others. In total, we

reviewed 103 abstracts and identified 28 that were potentially relevant to the review. We reviewed the 28 abstracts and determined that 11 peer-reviewed studies and trade association reports were relevant for this engagement. Through the process of reviewing those 11 reports, we identified 7 more potentially relevant peer-reviewed published academic papers, bringing the total to 18.

To assess methodological soundness of the 18 reports, we reviewed the study's research design (data analysis, survey, literature review, etc.), data sources, sample size, empirical specification, and stated limitations. We sought papers that showed the causal impact of changes in law enforcement staffing levels on public safety. We identified nine peer-reviewed academic studies in our search that we determined were relevant for our audit purposes and had sufficiently rigorous methodologies. Eight peer-reviewed published papers were included because they used a high-quality instrument that exploited quasi-random variation in officer staffing and contained several robustness checks/alternative specifications that confirmed the results of the author's empirical model. One peer-reviewed published paper was a literature review that we included but did not end up citing in the final report.

We excluded five of the 18 papers/reports because they explicitly did not address the question of recruitment and retention of law enforcement on public safety. Four other peer-reviewed published papers were excluded because they had serious methodological flaws—including not properly controlling for confounding variables that affect both crime and police staffing levels—and not having a proper instrument.

We reviewed documentation and conducted interviews with officials from eight selected federal agencies that employ law enforcement officers from four departments: DHS—U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement; DOJ—Bureau of Prisons and Federal Bureau of Investigation; DOI—Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Park Police; and VA—Veterans Health Administration. We selected these agencies because their officers represented a cross-section of law enforcement officers from across the federal agencies from various regions of the United States, of different sizes, and from rural, suburban, and urban jurisdictions.

To examine the overall staffing trends for these agency law enforcement officers, we obtained and reviewed data on staffing levels for fiscal years 2020 through 2024. We asked each agency to identify the positions they considered to be law enforcement officers, that based on our definition that such positions have arrest authority and are authorized to carry firearms and provide data related to staffing for those positions. We assessed the reliability of the staffing data by reviewing written responses from knowledgeable officials regarding data integrity and controls over data systems and any known issues with the reliability (such as accuracy or completeness) of the data. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable to describe the overall staffing trends for law enforcement officers at these agencies.

We also interviewed officials from 10 law enforcement associations to obtain their perspectives on law enforcement officer staffing, recruitment, and retention. These included interviews with the FBI National Academy Associates, Inc.; Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association; International Association of Chiefs of Police; Major Cities Chiefs Association; National Association of Police Organizations; National Fraternal Order of Police; Police Executive Research Forum; Small & Rural Law Enforcement Executives Association; and the Western States Sheriff's

Association—and a discussion session with members of National Sheriffs' Association. We selected these 10 associations because their members represented a cross-section of federal, tribal, state, and local law enforcement agencies from various regions of the United States, of different sizes, and from rural, suburban, and urban jurisdictions.

In addition, we reviewed surveys of law enforcement officer recruitment and retention issues that were published from 2019 to 2025. They were conducted by law enforcement associations including the Police Executive Research Forum, the National Fraternal Order of Police, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police. The various surveys reached active and retired sworn officers, leaders from small (1–49 sworn officers), medium (50–249 sworn officers), and large (250 or more sworn officers) law enforcement agencies across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The surveys targeted the various law enforcement memberships of each association, but were appropriate for the purposes of our review.

We conducted this performance audit from May 2025 to February 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Chairman
The Honorable Richard J. Durbin
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate

The Honorable Jim Jordan
Chairman
The Honorable Jamie Raskin
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
House of Representatives

We are sending copies of this report to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary and the House Committee on the Judiciary. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at https://www.gao.gov.

GAO Contact Information

For more information, contact: Gretta Goodwin, Director, Homeland Security and Justice, GoodwinG@gao.gov.

Public Affairs: Sarah Kaczmarek, Managing Director, Media@gao.gov.

Congressional Relations: David A. Powner, Acting Managing Director, CongRel@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgments: Jason Berman (Assistant Director), Gary M. Malavenda (Analyst in Charge), Lauri Barnes, Ryan Bhandari, Elizabeth Dretsch, Melissa Hargy, Nicole Kelleher, Ben Neverov, Mary Offutt-Reagin, and Janet Temko-Blinder.

Connect with GAO on Facebook, X, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube. Subscribe to our Email Updates. Listen to our Podcasts.

Visit GAO on the web at https://www.gao.gov.

This is a work of the U.S. government but may include copyrighted material. For details, see https://www.gao.gov/copyright.

Endnotes

[1]CBP reported that it does not set targets for non-border patrol agent or non-CBP officer positions due to their smaller population.

[2]For fiscal years 2025 to 2029, ICE received $8,000,000,000 for hiring additional ICE enforcement personnel in Public Law 119-21 – commonly known as the One Big Beautiful Act. H.R. Rep. No. 119-106, tit. VI, § 70103, at 831 (accompanying Pub. L. No. 119-21, 139 Stat. 72 (2025)). As such, ICE has expanded their recruitment efforts.

[3]Police Executive Research Forum, PERF Survey Shows Police Staffing Increased Slightly in 2024 but Still Lower Than 2019 (July 2025).

[4]The 2025 Police Executive Research Forum survey also includes respondents from one federal agency.

[5]International Association Chiefs of Police, The State of Recruitment and Retention: A Continuing Crisis for Policing (2024).

[6]U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Federal Law Enforcement Officers, 2020—Statistical Tables* NCJ 304752 (Revised Sept. 29, 2023).

[7]Jennifer C. Gibbs, Mackenzie Bingaman and Baha Bachnak, Motivations for a Career in Law Enforcement: Comparing Police Officers and Deputy Sheriffs, Policing: An International Journal, vol. 48, no. 3 (2025): 568-579.

[8]Samantha S. Clinkinbeard, Starr J. Solomon, and Rachel M Rief, “Why Did You Become a Police Officer? Entry-Related Motives and Concerns of Women and Men in Policing,” *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, vol. 48, no. 6 (2021); Gibbs, Bingaman, and Bachnak, “Motivations for a Career in Law Enforcement”; Mathew J. Giblin and Phillip M. Galli, “Compensation as a Police Candidate Attraction Tool: An Organizational-Level Analysis” Police Quarterly. Vol 20, no. 4 (June 13, 2017). Brandon M. Lentz, “The National Crisis of Police Recruitment and Retention” (PhD diss., Walden University 2022) ProQuest (28965922); Mateus R. Santos, Chae M. Jaynes, and Danielle M. Thomas, “Informing the Recruitment Crisis in Policing: Evaluating Which Incentives Can Entice the Best Candidates Among College Students” *Criminology & Public Policy*, vol 23. no. 3 (May 14, 2024). Sherry Lynn Skaggs, Chris Harris, and Lauren Montgomery, “The Impact of Police–Community Relations: Recruitment and Retention Concerns of Local Police Agencies” *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Sept. 2022): 462–475; . Ashleigh N. Wojslawowicz, Jeffrey S. Payne, Anthony Gibson, and W. Terry Cherry, “I Really Felt Wanted': Police Recruitment Strategies Within a Competitive Labour Market” Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice, vol. 18 (Feb. 17, 2024), Aaron Abbott, “Improving Police Recruitment from Communities of Color: A Comparative Analysis of Gen-X and Gen-Z Motivations to Become Police Officers” (PhD diss., Tiffin University, 2024) ProQuest (30996840) . Sara Franceen Edel, "Representative Bureaucracy in Police Hiring Practices: A Case Study of a Diverse Police Agency” (2018). Jennifer C. Gibbs,” Diversifying the Police Applicant Pool: Motivations of Women and Minority Candidates Seeking Police Employment.” Criminal Justice Studies, vol. 32, no. 3 (Sept. 2019)

[9]The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) does not define the term “law enforcement officer” in its report. According to its website, OPM defines law enforcement officers as employees who meet the definition of "law enforcement officer" in 5 U.S.C. § 5541(3) and 5 C.F.R. § 550.103. This is different than the definition used in this report, as outlined above.

[10]GAO, Community Policing Grants: COPS Grants Were a Modest Contributor to Declines in Crime in the 1990s GAO-06-104 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 14, 2005)

[11]Police Executive Research Forum, The Workforce Crisis, and What Police Agencies Are Doing About It (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2019)

[12]5 U.S.C. § 8425(b)(1); see 5 U.S.C. § 8401(17).

[13]FBI 2024 exit survey data had 680 respondents in 2024. However, of the 16 reasons available to select on the exit survey about the primary factor for leaving the FBI, the most commonly selected option was “None applicable,” with 28 percent of respondents selecting that option as their primary factor.

[14]Qualified immunity is a judicially created doctrine at the federal and state level that can provide immunity from civil liability for a public official who is performing a discretionary function, as long as the conduct at issue does not violate clearly established constitutional or statutory rights. There is variation in state law with regards to qualified immunity. For example, New Mexico has prohibited the defense of qualified immunity in claims brought under the New Mexico Civil Rights Act. N.M. Stat. § 41-4A-4 (2021). In contrast, Iowa has created a broader definition of qualified immunity than present at the federal level. See Iowa Code § 670.4A (2021).

[15]See 5 U.S.C. § 5379(b)(1).

[16]See 20 U.S.C. § 1087e(m); 34 C.F.R. § 685.219.

[17]GAO, U.S. Customs and Border Protection: Efforts to Improve Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention of Law Enforcement Personnel, GAO-24-107029 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2024).

[18]The literature review did not identify any studies measuring the impact of federal law enforcement staffing levels on public safety. We reviewed 18 studies that focused on the effects of law enforcement staffing levels on public safety at the local and state level. We focused only on studies published between 2014 through 2025. Out of the 18 we reviewed, nine were determined to have sufficiently rigorous methodologies by two GAO economist, eight were empirical papers and one was a literature review.

[19]Jacob Kaplan and Aaron Chalfin, "More Cops, Fewer Prisoners," Criminology & Public Policy, vol.18, no.1, (2019): 171-200. Emily K. Weisburst, "Safety in Police Numbers: Evidence of Police Effectiveness from Federal Cops Grant Applications," American Law and Economics Review, vol. 21, no.1, (Spring 2019): 81–109. Aaron Chalfin, Benjamin Hansen, Emily Weisburst, Morgan C. Williams Jr., "Police Force Size and Civilian Race," American Economic Review: Insights vol. 4, no. 2 (June 2022). Aaron Chalfin and J. McCrary, "Are US Cities Underpoliced? Theory and Evidence," The Review of Economics and Statistics, vol. 100, no. 1 (Mar. 2018): 167—186; and Steven Mello, "More COPS, Less Crime" Journal of Public Economics vol. 172 (Apr. 2019): 174-–200.

[20] Weisburst, "Safety in Police Numbers", Mello, "More COPS" and Chalfin, Hansen, Weisburst, and Williams "Police Force Size."

[21] Weisburst, "Safety in Police Numbers"; and Mello, "More COPS."

[22]Chalfin, Hansen, Weisburst, and Williams, "Police Force Size"; and Mello, "More COPS."

[23]Weisburst, "Safety in Police Numbers"; Mello, "More COPS" and Chalfin, Hansen, Weisburst, and Williams, "Police Force Size".

[24]Homicide is a relatively infrequent crime, which means it harder to get a precise statistical estimate for it than for more frequent crimes like robbery and assault.

[25]David Bjerk, "Does Greater Police Funding Help Catch More Murderers?" Journal of Empirical Legal Studies (July 20, 2022): 528–559, https://doi.org/10.1111/jels.12325; Anthony A. Braga, Brandon Turchan, and Lisa Barao, "The Influence of Investigative Resources on Homicide Clearances," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, vol. 35 (June 21, 2018): 337–364, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-018-9386-9.

[26]Braga, Turchan, and Barao, "Homicide Clearances."

[27]Bjerk, "Greater Police Funding."

[28]Gregory DeAngelo and Benjamin Hansen, "Life and Death in the Fast Lane: Police Enforcement and Traffic Fatalities," *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy,* vol. 6, no. 2 (May 2014): 231–257, http://dx.doi.org/10.1257/pol.6.2.231.