THE CASE FOR COPS 3.0

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Law Enforcement Recruitment and Retention is at a Crossroads

Police are the element of the criminal justice system most visible to the public and the arm with which citizens are most likely to interact. When managed effectively, policing can be a powerful crime deterrent and can meaningfully impact crime rates. In fact, as Dr. Gary Porter, Professor of Justice Studies at Eastern Kentucky University has put it, “[t]he American system of criminal justice is predicated on an assumption of effective policing. After all, in order to deter criminals and punish the evildoers you have to catch them.”

The United States is policed by just under 18,000 law enforcement agencies and over the last few decades, their numbers have been in decline. This poses problems for public safety and quality of life in communities.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the number of full-time sworn officers in U.S. law enforcement agencies declined by more than 3 percent between 2013 and 2016. The number of officers per capita is down 10 percent since 1997.

A 2019 report by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) identifies three factors contributing to the current decline in officers:

- **Fewer people are applying to become police officers.** Sixty-three percent of agencies that responded to the PERF survey said the number of applicants for police officer positions had decreased, either significantly (36 percent) or slightly (27 percent), over the past five years.

- **More officers are leaving their department (and law enforcement altogether) before retirement age.** Among agencies that conduct exit interviews, the most common reason officers gave for resigning was to accept a job at another local law enforcement agency, but a close second reason for leaving was to pursue a career outside of law enforcement.

- **A growing number of officers are at or approaching retirement age.** The PERF survey found that about 8.5 percent of current officers are eligible for retirement, and 15.5 percent will become eligible within five years. Roughly a quarter of all officers in the U.S. could retire within the next five years.
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This is exacerbated by state and local budgetary constraints that prevent new hiring or more competitive pay. To alleviate these problems that will compound in the coming years, a third round of federal COPS funding is needed. This funding could help reverse this trend and help bolster police department and make communities safer.

A History of COPS Funding

On September 13, 1994, President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (P.L. 103-322), which – along with many other provisions – established the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) inside the Department of Justice. The goal of this provision of the law was an infusion of federal dollars into state and local policing with the goal of hiring 100,000 new officers. It authorized $8.8 billion in spending between 1994-2000. The funding of new officers was distributed through the new COPS Universal Hiring Program (CHP), which covered 75 percent of the cost of each new police hire. These CHP grants typically lasted for three years. CHP funding exceeded $1 billion from 1995 through 1999 but dropped considerably in the 2000s. Less than $200 million were allocated for the program in 2003 and 2004 and less than $20 million were allocated in each year from 2005 to 2008.

In the wake of the 2008 recession, President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (P.L. 111-5), which increased funding for the COPS hiring program back up to $1 billion. This increase in funding is often referred to as COPS 2.0. The COPS grants awarded between fiscal years 2009 and 2011 covered 100 percent of the hiring costs of new officers rather than the previous 75 percent.

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How Many Officers Were Hired?

On May 12, 1999, the Justice Department announced it had funded its 100,000th officer thought the COPS program. This number included not just new hires but officers who were able to be repurposed onto the street because of the acquisition of new equipment and the hiring of civilian employees.

A September 2000 evaluation from the Heritage Foundation’s Center for Data Analysis sought to measure the actual impact of COPS on the hiring of new officers.2 From 1993 to 1998, the total number of full-time sworn police officers in the United States grew from 553,773 to 641,208, an increase of 87,435 officers. Using various growth projections from the passed 19, 10, and 5 years, the authors of the Heritage report found that an increase of between 6,231 and 39,617 in new officers could be attributed to the COPS program.
A February 2007 study in the Journal of Public Economics found that through 2001, $5 billion in federal funds had been used to hire around 64,000 new officers. It also found that in cities above 10,000, for every officer paid for by grant funds, the size of the force grew by 0.70 officers.

An April 2019 study in the Journal of Public Economics examined the COPS 2.0 funding and found that grants were enabled the hiring of over 7,000 new officers.

**Redeployment**

In addition to the CHP funds, the Office also started to fund redeployment grants under the Making Officer Redeployment Effective (MORE) program. These funds were typically granted for one year and could be used to buy new equipment and technology as well as to hire civilian support staff.

Under this program, for every $25,000 in federal funds received, agencies must redeploy the equivalent of one full-time sworn officer to community policing. According to the COPS office, between fiscal years 1995 and 2000 the program funded the redeployment of 35,852 officers at a cost of just over $1.1 billion.

This program caused more controversy than the CHP funding. As noted in the Heritage Foundation analysis, an audit by the Justice Department Inspector General of a selection of “high risk” grantees found that 78 percent of agencies that received grants for equipment or clerical staff “either could not demonstrate that they redeployed officers or could not demonstrate that they had a system in place to track the redeployment of officers into community policing.”

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<th>If the # of officers increased at the same rate as 1975-1993</th>
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<th>If the # of officers increased at the same rate as 1989-1993</th>
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<tr>
<td>1998 projections</td>
<td>601,591</td>
<td>608,682</td>
<td>634,977</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actual # of officers in 1998</td>
<td>641,208</td>
<td>641,208</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net Change attributable to COPS funding</td>
<td>+39,617</td>
<td>+32,526</td>
<td>+6,231</td>
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“IN 2004 ECONOMIST STEVEN D. LEVITT EXAMINED DATA FROM 122 CITIES AROUND THE U.S. FROM 1975 TO 1995 AND FOUND THAT INCREASED POLICE NUMBERS BROUGHT DOWN VIOLENT CRIME BY 12 PERCENT AND PROPERTY CRIME BY 8 PERCENT.”
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The Impact of More Police Officers on Crime

For much of the past twenty years, studies have found that more police officers can reduce crime. In 2002, criminologists from the University of Alabama at Birmingham found that “a 10 percent increase in police levels lowered crime rates by 1.4 percent over time.” In 2004 economist Steven D. Levitt examined data from 122 cities around the U.S. from 1975 to 1995 and found that increased police numbers brought down violent crime by 12 percent and property crime by 8 percent.

More recently, a 2015 Brennan Center for Justice report found that that “increases in the number of police officers had a modest, downward effect on crime in the 1990s, likely between 0 and 10 percent.” Further, a 2018 study in the Review of Economics and Statistics looked at police and crime data from 1960 through 2010 and concluded that every $1 spent on policing generates about $1.63 in social benefits, mostly through reductions in homicides.

Specific to crime reduction and COPS, a 2007 study by William Evans and Emily Owens found that additional police hired with COPS funding “generated statistically significant reductions in auto thefts, burglaries, robberies, and aggravated assaults.” Additionally, Steven Mello’s 2019 study analyzing COPS 2.0 found that departments that received COPS grant money saw a 3.2% increase in police staffing and a 3.5% reduction in crime as compared to similar departments that did not receive the grant money.

Cautions

While both COPS and COPS 2.0 led to the hiring of large numbers of new full-time sworn officers and have been associated with meaningful crime reductions, a 3.0 version of the program should learn from some of the shortcomings of its predecessors. In particular, any “repurposing” funds should be closely monitored to ensure a full-time officer actually ends up policing on the street as intended.

Additionally, the Heritage Foundation evaluation found that some recipients of the initial COPS dollars reduced the size of their departments. They found that both the Atlanta Police Department – received $15.3 million, reduced total number of officers by 4.9 percent – and the Seattle Police Department – received $4.4 million, reduced the total number of officers by 3.2 percent.

A COPS 3.0 should take measures to ensure that federal funds are tied to increasing full-time sworn officers – not just broadly – but within the specific departments that receive the grants.

Conclusion

Both COPS and COPS 2.0 have a strong track record of increasing the hiring of new officers and reducing crime. An injection of federal funds could help state and local law enforcement departments struggling with persistent recruitment and retention issues – as it did in 1995 and again in 2009.


About the Author

Joshua Crawford is the Interim Executive Director of Pegasus Institute as well as the Director of Criminal Justice Policy. He oversees all criminal justice policy research and advocacy and has published a number of white papers and policy briefs. His areas of research include urban violence, firearms policy, and criminal justice reform.

His work has been cited on the floor of the Kentucky State House and Senate as well as in publications all across Kentucky. He is a graduate of Penn State University and Suffolk University Law School.
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