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# State and Local Law Enforcement Officer Staffing

Some policymakers have raised concerns about a perceived police staffing crisis and what this might mean for public safety. This In Focus provides an overview of state and local law enforcement officer (LEO) staffing levels, a discussion of some factors identified as potentially contributing to LEO attrition, what effect attrition might have on public safety, and federal funding to help law enforcement agencies (LEAs) hire officers.

## Number of LEOs

**Table 1** presents data on the number of full-time LEOs employed by state and local law enforcement agencies from the Census Bureau’s Annual Survey of Public Employment and Payroll.

**Table 1. LEOs in the United States, 2012-2021**

Year	Number of LEOs	Rate per 1,000 People
2012	674,614	2.1
2013	672,060	2.1
2014	678,896	2.1
2015	683,850	2.1
2016	687,643	2.1
2017	698,277	2.1
2018	710,428	2.2
2019	711,387	2.2
2020	719,325	2.2
2021	712,112	2.1

**Source:** Census Bureau’s Annual Survey of Public Employment and Payroll. Rate calculated by the Congressional Research Service using U.S. population estimates from the Census Bureau.

The Census Bureau’s data provide insight into how the number of LEOs nationwide changed from year-to-year, but they do not provide insight into how staffing levels might have changed at individual agencies. While the total number of LEOs decreased from 2020 to 2021, it is possible that not all law enforcement agencies experienced a decrease in their ranks.

A June 2021 report from the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) suggests that some LEAs continue to struggle to fill open positions. In May 2021, PERF surveyed a non-representative sample of 194 LEAs about staffing changes in their agencies. LEAs were asked how many LEOs were hired, resigned, or retired during two periods: April 1, 2019, to March 31, 2020, and April 1, 2020, to March 31, 2021. Responding agencies reported a 5% decrease in the overall hiring rate, an 18% increase in

the resignation rate, and a 45% increase in the retirement rate. The combination of reduced hiring and increases in resignations and retirements led to a 1.6% decrease in the number of LEOs among these agencies, though in the largest agencies (500 or more officers) the decrease was 3.1%.

## Factors Potentially Affecting Staffing

Some point to increased scrutiny of LEOs and their tactics in the wake of cases where on-duty police officers killed alleged suspects as a reason why officers are leaving the force and why LEAs are having difficulty recruiting new officers. Evidence of how heightened scrutiny of LEOs might contribute to reductions in LEO staffing is largely anecdotal.

A 2021 study of LEO turnover in one “large, capital city jurisdiction in the western [United States]” found there were no changes in trends in retirements and involuntary separations after the 2020 death of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the resulting scrutiny of LEO tactics, but there was a nearly three-fold increase in resignations compared to what would have been expected if past trends persisted, though the authors were not able to identify the specific reasons why officers resigned. Some LEOs have reportedly left their departments because they feel they do not have the community’s support or fear they will be charged with crimes for actions that result in someone’s injury or death, even if they were following departmental policies.

While some point to current tensions around law enforcement as the reason for why LEOs are leaving their departments, law enforcement was facing staffing issues before George Floyd’s death. A 2019 PERF report on a workforce crisis noted that “most law enforcement agencies are sensing a crisis in their ability to recruit new officers, and to hold on to the ones they have.” PERF identified three reasons why law enforcement leaders were concerned about staffing: (1) fewer people are applying to become police officers; (2) more LEOs are leaving their departments, and in many cases the profession, before retirement age; and (3) a growing number of current LEOs are becoming eligible for retirement. More recently, it is not clear to what extent stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., potential exposure to COVID-19, requirements to work extensive overtime to cover shifts because other officers are sick) contributed to any recent LEO departures across the country.

Some point to efforts to “defund the police” in some cities (i.e., efforts to move resources from law enforcement agencies to other social service agencies that can aid in addressing social problems that LEAs currently handle) as a

reason for decreases in LEA staffing. An analysis of the budgets of the 50 largest cities in the United States by Bloomberg CityLab found that in aggregate these cities reduced funding for LEAs by 5.2% from 2020 to 2021. However, the LEAs' share of general expenditures in these cities increased from 13.6% to 13.7% during the same period. In many cases, LEAs' budgets were reduced as a part of a broader pandemic-related budget cut, hence LEA funding accounted for a slightly higher proportion of overall general expenditures even though funding for the LEAs decreased. Of the 50 cities in the analysis, 23 reduced funding for their police departments, with reductions ranging from 5% or less in most cities to 15% in both Minneapolis, MN, and New York City, and 33% in Austin, TX. It is unclear whether any of these budget reductions resulted in a reduction in force by terminating or reassigning LEOs. It is possible that some LEAs absorbed the budget cuts by leaving positions unfilled, not replacing retiring officers, or not funding planned raises.

### Effects on Public Safety

Interest in LEA staffing levels stems from concerns among some policymakers about what effect they might have on public safety. Some have pointed to cities that reduced their police department's budget and experienced increases in homicides and other violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) in the first three quarters (i.e., through September 30) of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020 to suggest that the cuts contributed to higher crime rates. However, increases in violent crime were widespread in the first three quarters of 2021 and occurred in many of the country's largest cities, even in those that increased funding for LEAs. Also, for many large cities, violent crimes increased in 2020 relative to 2019, so for many of these cities, the increases in 2021 were the continuation of what occurred in 2020.

Those concerned about the effect of fewer LEOs on public safety point to studies showing that more police officers contribute to decreases in crime. They argue these studies suggest a decrease in police force size will result in more crime. While research on the relationship between the size of police forces and crime is mixed, a 2016 meta-analysis of 62 studies conducted from 1971 to 2013 concluded the relationship between the size of a police force and crime is "negative, small, and not statistically significant." However, more recent research suggests that increases in the number of LEOs might contribute to decreases in crime, especially violent crime, and particularly murder. For example, a 2019 study used a natural experiment created by cities that received Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) hiring grants in 2009 under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-5); it estimated hiring grants increased police forces by 3.2% and crime rates in cities that received grants were 3.5% lower relative to cities that did not receive a grant.

While some research on increases in the number of LEOs, which tend to be gradual, suggests that more police can reduce crime, there is little research on the effects of marginal decreases in the size of a police force and its effects on crime. A 2020 study of a significant and drastic reduction in the size of a police force found there were

increases in violent and property crimes after Newark, NJ, laid off 13% of its police officers in 2010. In comparison, the adjacent Jersey City, NJ, was able to forgo layoffs, and experienced decreases in violent and property crime during the same period.

Research suggests that police practices, rather than the size of the police force, are a more important consideration for crime prevention. A 2018 review of the literature by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found that certain targeted, proactive policing strategies—such as hot spots, problem-oriented policing, and focused deterrence—are effective at reducing crime. Other research suggests crime is not equally distributed across a city; it tends to be concentrated in certain neighborhoods or even on particular blocks, so even with fewer LEOs available to a department, the LEA still might be able to have a significant deterrent effect if it can properly reallocate its resources. There may be a point at which staffing is too low for an LEA to effectively implement targeted, proactive policing strategies in all of the jurisdiction's hot spots.

### COPS Hiring Grants

The Department of Justice awards grants to state, local, and tribal governments to hire LEOs through the COPS hiring program (CHP). While a potential increase in the amount of CHP grants might be able to help more LEAs hire new LEOs, this solution assumes that LEAs are not filling their ranks because they do not have the necessary budgetary resources. Additional funding for CHP might not help LEAs fill vacant positions if agencies have difficulty attracting new recruits. Grant funds cannot be used to provide incentives to help recruit or retain officers.

Congress has continued to fund CHP although authorization of appropriations for the program expired at the end of FY2009. Reauthorization of the COPS program might present policymakers with a chance for amending the program to encourage LEAs to adopt policies and practices that could help foster better police-community relations, which in turn might help LEAs retain current and recruit new LEOs. As a means of promoting better police-community relations, Congress could consider requiring LEAs to demonstrate that they are trying to recruit a diverse set of candidates for LEO positions that reflect the jurisdiction's demographics, require LEOs hired with CHP funds to be bilingual, or require LEOs to reside in the jurisdiction in which they work. Policymakers might consider whether to allow LEAs to use COPS grants to survey the public about the LEA's performance.

Congress could also consider allowing COPS grants to be used for purposes other than LEOs' salaries that could help LEAs hire and retain officers. Policymakers might consider whether to allow LEAs to use COPS grants for hiring or retention bonuses, to provide housing stipends for officers who live in the jurisdiction, or to help LEOs repay student loans or take college courses that could help them advance in the department. Congress might also consider whether to allow COPS grants to be used for programs to promote law enforcement careers in high schools and colleges.

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