

# Hawaii Law Enforcement Workforce Crisis: Assessment and Evidence-Based Policy Response

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Honolulu Police Department has operated at approximately 80 percent of authorized strength for multiple consecutive years — a documented workforce crisis that standard recruitment marketing has not resolved because it addresses the symptom rather than the structural cause. ISPI's assessment identifies the primary driver as a structural real compensation disadvantage: Hawaii's nominal law enforcement salaries are offset by cost-of-living conditions that make Hawaii officers materially poorer than mainland officers earning nominally lower salaries. This assessment examines the evidence base for interventions that address the structural cause and provides actionable policy recommendations for the City Council, the Mayor's Office, and the Hawaii State Legislature.

## KEY FINDINGS

- HPD operates at approximately 80% of authorized strength — a vacancy level that produces compounding consequences including response time degradation, investigative capacity reduction, mandatory overtime escalation, and community engagement loss.
- A mid-career Honolulu officer earning \$85,000 faces median home prices exceeding \$900,000 — a real compensation disadvantage relative to mainland departments that no signing bonus or recruitment campaign can offset.
- Hawaii agencies consistently attract qualified applicants — confirming that the crisis is a retention failure, not a recruitment failure. Trained officers leave for mainland departments within 5-10 years of service.
- Housing assistance programs produce the strongest documented retention evidence of any non-salary compensation mechanism for high-cost-of-living law enforcement environments.

- Federal grant allocation formulas for law enforcement workforce development are population-based and do not account for Hawaii's cost-of-living premium — systematically underfunding Hawaii relative to mainland agencies receiving equivalent grants.

## **The Diagnosis: Retention Failure, Not Recruitment Failure**

The standard policy response to law enforcement vacancy rates is enhanced recruitment — signing bonuses, advertising campaigns, outreach to military veterans and out-of-state applicants. This response is appropriate for agencies that cannot attract qualified applicants. HPD consistently attracts qualified applicants. The problem is that trained officers leave.

ISPI's analysis of lateral transfer patterns in Hawaii law enforcement agencies identifies the departure decision as driven predominantly by housing cost — specifically, the point at which an officer with 5-8 years of experience calculates that their real purchasing power is substantially higher in a mainland department offering nominally lower pay.

An officer who achieves Hawaii homeownership is significantly more likely to remain in Hawaii law enforcement than a renting officer receiving equivalent nominal compensation. This finding has direct policy implications: the intervention that most reliably retains experienced officers is one that removes the housing cost as the primary departure driver.

## **The Compounding Consequences of Chronic Vacancy**

An agency at 80% staffing is not delivering 80% of public safety. The consequences of chronic vacancy compound in non-linear ways that ISPI's analysis identifies across four dimensions.

### **Emergency Response Time Degradation**

Fewer officers covering larger geographic areas produces measurable response time increases — with documented community safety consequences that are hardest to measure but most consequential for public trust.

### **Investigative Capacity Reduction**

Chronic patrol vacancies require redeployment of detectives to patrol functions — reducing the investigative capacity that solves violent crimes, builds prosecutable cases, and maintains the deterrence effect that patrol operations alone cannot sustain.

### **Mandatory Overtime and Officer Wellness**

Agencies at chronic vacancy must maintain coverage through mandatory overtime — elevating officer fatigue, wellness risk, and the probability of the use-of-force incidents that generate liability and erode community trust.

### **Community Engagement Capacity Loss**

The community engagement work that prevents crime — school resource programs, youth intervention, community policing relationships — is the first function eliminated when agencies must cover basic patrol requirements with insufficient staff. This investment is the hardest to rebuild once lost.

## Evidence-Based Interventions

### Hawaii Law Enforcement Housing Assistance Program

A below-market mortgage product and down payment assistance program modeled on Hawaii's existing teacher housing program would directly address the primary driver of lateral transfer decisions. The evidence base for housing assistance as a law enforcement retention mechanism in high-cost jurisdictions is the strongest available for any non-salary compensation intervention.

### Education Loan Forgiveness

A Hawaii Law Enforcement Education Loan Forgiveness Program providing loan forgiveness in exchange for multi-year service commitments directly addresses the financial calculation that drives departure decisions for officers with educational debt.

### Cost-of-Living Retention Supplements

Non-taxable cost-of-living supplements indexed to Hawaii's actual cost of living — rather than national salary benchmarks — address the real compensation gap without requiring civil service classification changes that slow base salary adjustments.

### Federal Formula Reform Advocacy

Hawaii law enforcement agencies systematically receive underfunded federal grants because allocation formulas do not account for island cost-of-living premiums. The State of Hawaii should formally petition DOJ and DHS for formula reform.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish a Hawaii Law Enforcement Housing Assistance Program providing below-market mortgages and down payment assistance for law enforcement personnel — modeled on the existing teacher housing program.
2. Create a Hawaii Law Enforcement Education Loan Forgiveness Program providing loan forgiveness in exchange for 5-year service commitments to Hawaii agencies.
3. Implement non-taxable cost-of-living retention supplements for law enforcement personnel indexed to Hawaii's actual cost-of-living rather than national benchmarks.
4. Commission independent research quantifying the full cost of the law enforcement workforce crisis — including response time degradation, investigative capacity loss, mandatory overtime costs, and community engagement reduction — to build the evidentiary basis for sustained investment.

**5. Petition DOJ and DHS formally for law enforcement workforce development grant formula reform to account for Hawaii's island cost-of-living premium.**

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