

ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

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POLICY BRIEF

The Recruitment Crisis

Why Hawaii's Law Enforcement Agencies Cannot Hire — and What Policy Must Change

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The Honolulu Police Department has operated at approximately 80 percent of authorized strength for multiple consecutive years. This is a structural compensation problem — not a recruitment marketing problem.**
- **Hawaii law enforcement agencies lose trained officers to mainland departments because the real compensation disadvantage is larger than the nominal salary comparison reveals.**
- **Non-salary compensation mechanisms — housing assistance, loan forgiveness, cost-of-living supplements — produce higher retention impact per dollar than equivalent base salary increases.**

A mid-career police officer in Honolulu earning \$85,000 annually faces a median home price exceeding \$900,000 and average one-bedroom apartment rents exceeding \$2,200 per month.¹ A comparable officer in a mainland jurisdiction offering \$75,000 in salary may face a median home price of \$350,000 and rents of \$1,200 per month. The nominal salary disadvantage conceals a real compensation advantage that is driving lateral transfers to mainland departments at documented rates.

The Cascading Public Safety Consequences

Chronic officer vacancies produce four compounding public safety consequences: emergency response time degradation, detective capacity reduction, mandatory overtime escalation elevating wellness risk, and community engagement capacity reduction that compromises the long-term crime prevention investment that is hardest to rebuild once lost.²

Policy Recommendations

1. Implement a Hawaii Law Enforcement Cost-of-Living Retention Supplement indexed to Hawaii's actual cost of living rather than national salary benchmarks.
2. Establish a Hawaii Law Enforcement Housing Assistance Program modeled on the Hawaii teacher housing program.
3. Create a Hawaii Law Enforcement Education Loan Forgiveness Program for officers who complete multi-year service commitments.
4. Reform federal law enforcement workforce development grant formulas to incorporate Hawaii and Pacific territory cost-of-living adjustment factors.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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The Island Security Policy Institute (ISPI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Honolulu, Hawaii. ISPI produces practitioner-led research, policy analysis, training programs, and commissioned research on public safety, emergency preparedness, insider threat, and security policy for island and coastal communities worldwide. ISPI is registered as a federal contractor on SAM.gov under NAICS 541720. Warren Pulley, Founder & Executive Director.

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