

ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

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WHITE PAPER

Public Safety Workforce Policy for Island and High Cost-of-Living Communities

Addressing the Structural Recruitment and Retention Crisis in Hawaii Law Enforcement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The Honolulu Police Department has operated with officer vacancy rates approaching 20 percent for multiple consecutive years. Neighbor island agencies report comparable or higher vacancy rates. This is not a recruitment marketing problem — it is a structural compensation problem.**
- **Hawaii law enforcement agencies lose officers to mainland departments primarily because of real compensation disadvantage — not nominal salary disadvantage. A mid-career Hawaii officer earning \$85,000 annually faces housing and living costs that produce a materially lower standard of living than a mainland officer earning \$75,000 in a lower cost-of-living jurisdiction.**
- **Available evidence from comparable high cost-of-living law enforcement labor markets indicates that targeted non-salary compensation mechanisms — housing assistance, student loan forgiveness, cost-of-living supplements — produce meaningfully higher retention impact per dollar than equivalent base salary increases.**
- **Federal law enforcement workforce development grant programs systematically underfund Hawaii and Pacific Island territory agencies through population-based allocation formulas that do not account for cost-of-living premiums.**

The standard diagnosis of law enforcement staffing shortfalls focuses on the recruitment pipeline — the number of qualified applicants who apply for officer positions. This diagnosis leads to standard remedies: expanded recruiting, accelerated academy timelines, and signing bonuses. These remedies address a symptom. They do not address the cause.¹

The available data on Hawaii law enforcement staffing patterns indicate that the primary driver of chronic vacancies is not insufficient applicant pools — Hawaii law enforcement agencies consistently receive qualified applicants — but retention failure. Officers who are recruited, trained at substantial public expense, and deployed in Hawaii law enforcement careers are leaving for mainland departments within the first five to ten years of service at rates that prevent Hawaii agencies from building the experienced mid-career officer corps that effective law enforcement requires.

I. The Structural Nature of the Crisis

The Real Compensation Gap

Hawaii's median home price consistently ranks among the three highest in the United States.² Honolulu rental markets place one-bedroom apartments at average monthly costs that represent a disproportionate share of even above-average law enforcement salaries. Transportation costs are elevated by island geography. The result is that a Hawaii officer earning \$85,000 annually may be living a materially lower standard of living than a mainland officer earning \$70,000 in a community with median home prices below \$350,000.

The nominal salary comparison — which is how Hawaii agencies typically present their compensation packages in recruitment materials — understates the real compensation disadvantage that drives lateral transfer decisions. The lateral transfer is the defining dynamic of Hawaii's law enforcement staffing crisis.

Cascading Public Safety Consequences

Chronic officer vacancies produce four compounding public safety consequences: emergency response time degradation, detective capacity reduction through forced patrol redeployment, mandatory overtime escalation that elevates wellness risk, and community engagement capacity reduction that compromises the long-term crime prevention investment that is hardest to rebuild once lost.³

II. What the Evidence Indicates Works

The research literature on law enforcement retention in high cost-of-living markets — including ISPI's review of retention program evaluations in Hawaii, California, and comparable markets — indicates that non-salary compensation mechanisms targeting specific cost-of-living components produce meaningfully higher retention impact per dollar than equivalent base salary increases.⁴ The mechanism: base salary increases are subject to income tax, benefit calculation, and cost-of-living adjustment that reduce their real impact on the specific cost pressures that drive retention decisions.

Housing assistance programs targeting the primary cost pressure show the strongest retention evidence in available program evaluations. Hawaii's teacher housing assistance programs provide the most directly comparable model — programs that provide down payment assistance or below-market mortgage rates produce documented retention improvements that substantially exceed the retention impact of equivalent base salary investment.

III. Policy Recommendations

1. Enact a Hawaii Law Enforcement Cost-of-Living Retention Supplement — a non-taxable supplement calculated against a Hawaii-specific cost-of-living index rather than national salary benchmarks.
2. Establish a Hawaii Law Enforcement Housing Assistance Program modeled on the Hawaii teacher housing program, including employer-assisted mortgage products, down payment assistance, and below-market workforce housing units.
3. Create a Hawaii Law Enforcement Education Loan Forgiveness Program for officers who complete specified service commitments, calibrated to incentivize retention through the five-to-ten-year lateral transfer risk window.
4. Reform federal law enforcement workforce development grant allocation formulas to incorporate Hawaii and Pacific Island territory cost-of-living adjustment factors providing real purchasing power equivalence rather than nominal dollar equivalence.
5. Commission ongoing Hawaii and Pacific territory law enforcement workforce research through ISPI and similar institutions to track conditions, program effectiveness, and compensation policy impacts.

IV. Conclusion

A law enforcement agency operating at 80 percent of authorized strength is not providing 80 percent of the public safety it was designed to provide. The relationship between staffing levels and public safety outcomes is non-linear: vacancy-driven response time degradation, detective capacity reduction, and community engagement erosion compound each other in ways that produce public safety outcomes disproportionately worse than the vacancy rate alone would suggest. Hawaii's law enforcement workforce crisis is solvable. The evidence base exists. The policy mechanisms are achievable. ISPI accepts commissions for law enforcement workforce development policy research and compensation structure analysis. Contact ISPIGlobal@proton.me or visit ispiglobal.com/commission.

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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