



# Executive Memorandum

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## WHAT TAXPAYERS SHOULD ASK ABOUT COPS

DEXTER INGRAM

President Clinton vowed upon taking office to lower national crime rates by putting 100,000 more police officers on the streets to patrol crime-prone communities. The result was the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which tasked the Attorney General with implementing a six-year, \$8.8 billion grant program administered by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS). The mission: Hire or redeploy 100,000 state and local law enforcement officers.

The White House and other supporters maintain that the COPS program deserves part of the credit for decreasing the national crime rate. Skeptics say it is not administered properly and has not produced the planned number of new officers, and that there is no relationship between the awarding of grants and decreasing crime rates.

Adding more police can affect crime rates, but crime rates are also influenced by demographics, economics, and judicial and law enforcement policies. Moreover, the number of police officers can be expected to grow anyway because of normal local funding decisions. The issue is whether COPS has added to this natural growth. Three recent reports indicate that the program has fallen far short of its stated goals and that tax dollars are being used on haphazard projects or wasted on ineffective initiatives.

**Question #1: Has COPS put 100,000 more police officers on the street?** According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's *Uniform Crime Reports*,

between 1993 (the year before COPS grants began) and 1998, the number of full-time sworn police officers nationwide grew by 87,435—from 553,773 to 641,208. A Heritage Foundation study of the historical rates of growth found that the number who would have been hired without COPS funds during the same period was between 47,818 and 81,204: In other words, the number of officers on the beat in 1998 was just 6,231 to 39,617 higher than it would have been without COPS funds. (See “The Facts About COPS: A Performance Overview of the Community Oriented Policing Services Program, *Center for Data Analysis Report No. CDA00-10*, September 25, 2000.)

In an August 2000 study, *The COPS Program After 4 Years*, the Urban Institute found that COPS resulted in a net increase of between 36,300 and 37,500 officers by the end of 1998. The report also projects that the number of additional officers hired because of the program will peak at a maximum of 57,175 in 2001.

In an April 1999 study of police hiring and redeployment grants, the Justice Department Inspector

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General (IG) concluded that the COPS office had not been consistent in defining its goal of putting 100,000 additional community police officers on the street. COPS officials now state that their goal is to fund 100,000 new officers by the end of FY 2000, even though the original goal has been unambiguously reaffirmed in COPS publications and in speeches by many government officials. One of the most troublesome issues raised by the IG was whether several thousand of these “funded” officers that COPS counts toward its goal will ever materialize.

Another component of the program is the primary redeployment (MORE) grants, designed to enable police officers to spend more time on the street. The grants are given to agencies so that they may buy better equipment (such as computers) or even hire civilian personnel to do much of the administrative work that normally takes up an officer's time. COPS counts 35,852 officers under the MORE program toward its own goal of 100,000 additional officers. But according to the April 1999 IG report, which also audited 149 agencies thought to be out of compliance with the grant rules, 78 percent of the grantees “either could not demonstrate that they redeployed officers or could not demonstrate that they had a system in place to track the redeployed officers into community policing.”

**Question #2: Are COPS grants being used to hire or redeploy police for community policing?** Not necessarily. According to the Urban Institute study, some agencies used the money for telephone reporting systems, Computer Aided Dispatch systems, and other technology such as geomapping and reverse 911 systems.

The April 1999 IG report was based on an audit of 149 recipients of COPS and Office of Justice Programs hiring and redeployment grants totaling \$511 million. The IG found about \$52 million in

“questioned costs” and about \$71 million in funds that “could be better used.” This amounts to 24 percent of the total funds awarded to the 149 grantees. If this percentage is applied to the entire budget, questionable costs are over \$2.1 billion as authorized by Congress, or \$1.8 billion as appropriated by Congress.

**Question #3: Will agencies be able to retain the COPS-funded officers after the grants end?** Again, not necessarily. The IG “questioned the ability of many grantees to retain the COPS-funded officers after the grants ended,” since this could cause some cities to cut back in the future. In a sample of 144 of the 149 grantees audited, the IG found that 83 agencies (58 percent) “did not develop a good faith plan to retain officer positions or said they would not retain the officer positions at the conclusion of the grant.” The Urban Institute found that 52 percent of agencies that were asked “stated they were uncertain about long-term retention plans.” Some respondents reported that unforeseen conditions were likely to keep them from retaining all of the positions.

**Conclusion.** The COPS program has been shown to waste tax dollars. Community policing can be effective in controlling crime and has been successful in many localities around the nation, but it works only where properly implemented. Some public officials say they want to build on the current program and increase the funding for an additional 50,000 police officers, but Congress should not spend more money until it first holds the Justice Department and police forces accountable for how COPS grants are being spent.

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