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COPS grant program past its 'peak,' gets slashed in Trump budget

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Indeed, COPS has lived 18 years past its six-year proposed life cycle and spent considerably more than its \$8.8 billion initial price tag. In addition, the administration says that overlapping pieces within the Justice Department and COPS can be merged and thus save money by streamlining bureaucracy and eliminating redundancies.

By putting it all under the Office of Justice Programs umbrella, more than 210 positions will be cut by the end of fiscal year 2019, officials said.

“Generally speaking, I would say ‘no’ to things like COPS because policing is a completely local issue,” said Jonathan Blanks with the Project on Criminal Justice at the Cato Institute. “But I liked the Obama administration’s ‘21st Century Policing’ report and the emphasis on building bridges between the community and the police. But it’s not a priority of this administration, and the way the grants work now, it simply isn’t something we need.”

State and local law enforcement agencies, however, argue that the U.S. has received a solid bang for its buck with COPS and say the money should keep flowing.

“We remain big believers in the adage ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,’” said Jim Pasco, executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police.

As the name suggest, the brunt of COPS was more cops, with grants mandated to provide some — but not all — of a law enforcement officer’s salary and benefits. Local revenue was to cover the remainder.

The notion that more police equals less crime grew out of the successful crime fighting strategies of New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and the police department put into place there in the 1990s. The emphasis shifted from solving crimes to deterrence, and the tactics involved a combination of statistical patterns mapped at headquarters and visible cops out of their cars and on the beat in neighborhoods.

New Yorkers called it the “broken windows” strategy — that getting to small problems prevented bigger problems later.

But once federal bureaucrats got at it, their English alchemy defined community policing as “a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systemic use of partnerships

and problem-solving techniques to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder and fear of crime.”

In 2017, that meant \$5 million on an anti-methamphetamine program, more than \$3.5 million on the Community Policing Development Program, and more than \$7.1 million on the Anti-Heroin Task Force, which also dealt with opioids, according to Justice Department figures. But the bulk of the money was the \$98,495,397 spent on the COPS hiring program in fiscal 2017.

Just how effective all this spending has been in reducing crime is hotly debated among social scientists.

One of the COPS program’s sharpest critics was David Muhlhausen, a former scholar at the conservative Heritage Foundation. In September 2000, he co-authored a paper that indicted COPS as an expensive disappointment.

“At a cost of almost \$7.5 billion at the end of FY 2000,” Mr. Muhlhausen and two other scholars wrote, “the COPS program represents the federal government’s most significant criminal justice initiative of the last decade. However, the COPS program has not fulfilled its goal: Far fewer officers have actually been placed on the streets than the more than 100,000 [that] President [Clinton] claims.”

A principal reason for the failure was the use of COPS grants, despite explicit guidelines prohibiting the practice, “to supplant money that state and local authorities would have spent otherwise to hire additional officers,” the conservative scholars wrote.

The Heritage study criticized COPS on other grounds, too — chiefly the pattern of grants, and for the federal government taking over duties properly left to state and local authorities.

“Regrettably, much of the funding has flowed to communities that have a relatively low need for additional community policing while areas with more pressing needs have received little or no assistance,” they concluded.

Mr. Muhlhausen is now director of the National Institute of Justice, making him one of the bosses of COPS, which could be why the Trump administration has sent the program under the knife.

His findings, though, were disputed in a study by the liberal Brookings Institution. In March 2007, two scholars credited COPS with contributing to the nationwide decline in violent crime rates. Consequently, in an argument that mirrors what supporters offer today, they said cutting the COPS budget would be unwise.

“It would be unrealistic to expect crime to continue dropping sharply as it did in the 1990s, but that is no reason to undermine the progress brought by successful policies,” they wrote.

Some law enforcement organizations, with many members who supported Mr. Trump in the 2016 presidential election, are miffed that the administration is proposing broad cuts to a popular program, although Mr. Pasco said the FOP remains behind the president and believes he retains trust in community policing.

“We’re all trying to get to the same place; we just have a disagreement about the best way to get there,” Mr. Pasco said.

Yet even many agencies that received grants struggled to provide descriptions of how the money was spent. The Washington Times contacted myriad law enforcement agencies in big cities and smaller communities that received grants in fiscal 2017, according to Justice Department records.

The biggest 2017 grants were for \$3.125 million, and they went to four agencies: police departments in Chicago (for “gun violence”), Houston (“assault”), Miami-Dade County (“gun violence”) and San Antonio (“gun violence”). The grants presumably provided some percentage of salary and benefits for what Justice said would be 25 additional officers in the next three years.

In Houston, which already spends a substantial portion of its annual budget on law enforcement, a spokeswoman for the force said 25 officers had been added and that the city would assume the full cost in three years. This is not the first COPS grant Houston has obtained, she said, and it’s been “a way for us to grow the department because we are understaffed to begin with.”

San Antonio’s police did not respond to questions submitted to its public affairs office. Similarly, the Kansas City Board of Police Commissioners, which got \$1.875 million to hire 15 officers on homicide, did not respond to questions or a request for comment.

In some cases, the law enforcement agency has yet to touch the grant money. That’s true in St. Louis, where the police are still using a 2014 COPS grant and have not tapped the \$1.875 million it received for gun violence in 2017, according to a department spokeswoman. The police chief in St. Louis has “no historical perspective on COPS funding” and thus declined to comment, the spokeswoman added.

The homicide rate has surged in St. Louis and Kansas City and did not abate in either city in 2017, according to crime reports.

Some smaller agencies did offer details on their spending. The St. Tammany Parish Sheriff’s Office in Louisiana, for instance, received more than \$1 million to deal with assault. While the incidents of aggravated assault there rose a modest 2.7 percent in 2017, according to its crime reports, the area north of New Orleans is hardly a crime hotbed.

The sheriff’s office used that money to cover some 75 percent of the salary and benefits of 9 deputies it retained, a spokeswoman said. The parish was required to come up with another \$336,598 to cover its portion in the three-year stretch and has agreed to keep the deputies on the payroll for at least 12 months after the grant expires, the spokeswoman said.