



States Are Trying to Exempt Cops From Paying Taxes

Republicans in Georgia, Kentucky, and New Mexico have all introduced bills that would spare police from having to pay state taxes.

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Taxpayers already foot the bill for police salaries. Now, several red states are considering exempting officers from paying their fair share back into the same system.

Georgia, Kentucky, and New Mexico Republicans introduced bills in January that would spare law enforcement officers from having to pay state taxes. Legislators in both states say the measures are meant to entice more people into the job, at a time when low morale among officers has boosted law enforcement retirements and resignations up 45 and 18 percent respectively, according to the Police Executive Research Forum.

But critics argue the plans ignore more practical solutions that could push the profession in a direction that civilians and cops can agree on and allow Republicans to cater to one of their most reliable voter bases. Taking an entire profession's tax revenue away from state budgets could also hurt funding for programs and projects that are helpful to the public but less popular for lawmakers.

"You're incentivizing the good officers, sure, but also the bad officers in the system who continue to make things worse by abusing their power," said Whit Whitaker, President of the Lexington-Fayette NAACP in Kentucky. "The marginalized and disenfranchised communities are going to be even more in uproar because it's going to feel like the profession is getting rewarded, regardless of how good or bad they are at their jobs."

This year wouldn't be the first time using taxes to incentivize cops has gained steam. In 2020, Missouri Republicans introduced a similar idea that eventually fizzled out in the state house. In that plan, the state would gradually reduce the tax rate by 25% for officers over four years, St. Louis Republican Rep. David Gregory, who introduced the plan in December 2020, told Fox affiliate WDAF-TV.

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Gregory said the state would ultimately lose 1% of its \$30 billion tax revenue, a setback he and his co-sponsors argue would be worth it if it kept officers on the streets and preserved

safety.

But when \$30 million dollars in public funds is on the line, even officers who stand to reap the benefits have questions.

“To me, it’s a tactic to secure the police vote,” said Sgt. Donnell Walters, an officer of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department and president of the city’s primarily Black union the Ethical Society of Police. His organization did not support the bill.

In some states, like Florida, law enforcement officials, alongside other first responders and educators, already get breaks on certain taxes, like the ones levied on properties. But how states would make back bigger cuts is unclear. Public aid and social services, however, often end up on the chopping block. In that way, exempting cops from taxes could be a double blow to the defund the police movement, which advocates for investing less in law enforcement as a way to pay for services that help citizens.

Walters, who’s also part of the St. Louis police’s Community Engagement and Recruiting Unit, said instead of helping those who Republicans can reliably count on for votes, that cash would be better spent on better health care benefits and student loan forgiveness.

He also wondered why other public safety professionals who need just as much of a break following the pandemic, aren’t seeing the same sort of support.

“Why not make these cuts for all public service jobs? Why are we forgetting the teachers? Why are we forgetting the firefighters and EMS?” Walters said. “Making the police a friend is not just advocating for us to get pay raises, but advocating for our friends who are firefighters, our friends who are teaching and saving lives.”

In Georgia, five Republican state senators introduced a law that would exempt all officers from having to pay state taxes as long as they continue to pay federal taxes. State Rep. Rick Williams, the bill’s lead sponsor, said that competitive pay allotted to state cops has lured officers away from more local positions. He and his colleagues hope that allowing officers to keep more of their base salaries will counterbalance that migration.

“It simply feels like political peddling,” said Thaddeus Johnson, an assistant professor at Georgia State University’s Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology who was also a former Memphis police officer for 10 years. “That there’s this fear of crime, and you have an opportunity and fertile ground for this type of bill to pass.”

In an interview with VICE News, Williams acknowledged that all public-facing professions should receive pay increases but prioritizing police at this moment is a result of the unique dangers they face.

“I hope that people will look at the big picture of what these police officers are facing,” Williams, the primary sponsor of the proposed bill said. “I’ve not heard of a school teacher

being executed because they were sitting in a car in the school parking lot. But you do hear these police officers being executed because of the car they're in or because of the uniform they have on."

The dangers that police officers face on the job have been especially relevant in recent months. In January, a police officer in New York was shot in the head while he napped in his car after a long shift. While the NYPD officer survived his injuries, the incidents don't always end that way. In December, a Baltimore police officer and mother of four was fatally ambushed as she sat in her patrol car. Police made two arrests in the deadly shooting two weeks later.

Kentucky state Rep. Ryan Dotson, who introduced his state's version of the bill just two weeks before Georgia, told the Lexington Herald-Leader he's also open to extending the break to other public servants eventually—and everyone else.

"I want tax reform in the state of Kentucky," Doston said. "I want to do away with state income taxes altogether."

For now though, he added, it's police officers who are facing the most severe staff shortages in his state. Kentucky, much like Florida and several other states, already provide tax breaks for active-duty members of the military, and this bill would essentially be an extension of those benefits to cops.

But instead of broadly improving how officers are compensated, Johnson suggests that a more subtle approach is likely to be more productive.

"It's a job, they're not doing this for free. If you're rewarded to make arrests, make stops, write citations, you're going to find ways to hit those benchmarks, whether you agree with the methods or not," he said. "We can instead reward officers and incentivize them in the way we want to see them police—maybe merit pay or tuition reimbursement."

While all Americans want cops to focus on investigating violent crime first and foremost, Black and Hispanic Americans, in particular, would like to see cops take on social service and community guidance roles as much as they'd like to see them enforce drug laws, according to data from the Cato Institute. The same study also found that 52% of millennials are critical of how policing uses force and wants to see a change.

Finding ways to make the job less polarizing to more diverse groups of people, Johnson argues, is an easy way to recruit more people to policing. But it's an idea politicians aren't considering for some reason.

"Until we do that, we're not going to recruit millennials, we're not going to recruit women officers or even minority officers," he said. "Research shows that they want to do a different

type of policing—not warrior policing but guardian policing. Unless we start rewarding and recruiting for that, all this shit means nothing to tell you the truth.”