



Highlights of [GAO-06-104](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Between 1994 and 2001, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) provided more than \$7.6 billion in grants to state and local communities to hire police officers and promote community policing as an effective strategy to prevent crime. Studies of the impact of the grants on crime have been inconclusive.

GAO was asked to evaluate the effect of the COPS program on the decline in crime during the 1990s. GAO developed and analyzed a database containing annual observations on crime, police officers, COPS funds, and other factors related to crime, covering years prior to and during the COPS program, or from 1990 through 2001. GAO analyzed survey data on policing practices that agencies reportedly implemented and reviewed studies of policing practices. GAO assessed: (1) how COPS obligations were distributed and how much was spent; (2) the extent to which COPS expenditures contributed to increases in the number of police officers and declines in crime nationwide; and (3) the extent to which COPS grants during the 1990s were associated with policing practices that crime literature indicates could be effective.

In commenting on a draft of this report, the COPS Office said that our findings are important and support conclusions reached by others.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-104.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Laurie Ekstrand at (202) 512-8777 or ekstrandl@gao.gov.

COMMUNITY POLICING GRANTS

COPS Grants Were a Modest Contributor to Declines in Crime in the 1990s

What GAO Found

About half of the COPS funds distributed from 1994 through 2001 went to law enforcement agencies in localities of fewer than 150,000 persons and the remainder to agencies in larger communities. This distribution roughly corresponded to the distribution of major property crimes but less so to the distribution of violent crimes. For example, agencies in larger communities received about 47 percent of COPS funds but accounted for 58 percent of the violent crimes nationwide. From 1994 through 2001, COPS expenditures constituted about 1 percent of total local expenditures for police services.

For the years 1994 through 2001, expenditures of COPS grants by grant recipients resulted in varying amounts of additional officers above the levels that would have been expected without the expenditures. For example, during 2000, the peak year of COPS expenditures by grant recipients, they led to an increase of about 3 percent in the level of sworn officers—or about 17,000 officers. Adding up the number of additional officers in each year from 1994 through 2001, GAO estimated that COPS expenditures yielded about 88,000 additional officer-years. GAO obtained its results from fixed-effects regression models that controlled for pre-1994 trends in the growth rate of officers, other federal expenditures, and local- and state-level factors that could affect officer levels.

From its analysis of the effects of increases in officers on declines in crime, GAO estimated that COPS funds contributed to declines in the crime rate that, while modest in size, varied over time and among categories of crime. For example, between 1993 and 2000, COPS funds contributed to a 1.3 percent decline in the overall crime rate and a 2.5 percent decline in the violent crime rate from the 1993 levels. The effects of COPS funds on crime held when GAO controlled for other crime-related factors—such as local economic conditions and state-level policy changes—in its regression models, and the effects were commensurate with COPS funds' contribution to local spending on police protection. Factors other than COPS funds accounted for the majority of the decline in crime during this period. For example, between 1993 and 2000, the overall crime rate declined by 26 percent, and the 1.3 percent decline due to COPS, amounted to about 5 percent of the overall decline. Similarly, COPS contributed about 7 percent of the 32 percent decline in violent crime from 1993 to 2000.

From 1993 through 1997, agencies that received and spent COPS grants reported larger changes in policing practices and in the subsets of practices that focus on solving crime problems or focus on places where crime is concentrated than did agencies that did not receive the grants. The differences held after GAO controlled for underlying trends in the reported use of these policing practices. From 1996 to 2000, there was no overall increase in policing practices associated with COPS grants. In its review of studies on policing practices, GAO found that problem-solving and place-oriented practices can be effective in reducing crime.