

Research Plan: Public Chapter 1121, Acts of 2026, State and Local Law Enforcement Officers Compensation

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Support:

Deputy Executive Director Approval: Initial: *MMB* Date: June 1, 2026

Executive Director Approval: Initial: *CML* Date: June 1, 2026

Purpose

To study how salaries and other benefits paid to state and local law enforcement officers in Tennessee affect recruitment, staffing, and retention of state and local law enforcement officers.

Background

Law enforcement officers play a crucial role in maintaining public safety, but law enforcement agencies must maintain sufficient staffing levels to operate effectively. Law enforcement agencies in Tennessee are finding this difficult. According to the Municipal Technical Advisory Service 2019 study, *Tennessee Municipal Police Recruitment and Retention*, maintaining adequate staffing is a major concern for municipal law enforcement agencies. Similar staffing challenges have also been experienced by county law enforcement agencies and correctional facilities. For example, last year the Trousdale County Sheriff's Department was so understaffed that they reassigned criminal investigations deputies to help cover patrols and assigned a deputy to answer 911 calls.

Similarly, the Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC) has had ongoing challenges recruiting and retaining correctional officers and, to improve staffing, the department offered signing bonuses, increased pay, and restructured salaries. In 2025, TDOC invested approximately \$37 million in salary increases for correctional officers, raising starting salaries to about \$51,000, with scheduled increases to about \$60,000 after 18 months of service. While staffing shortages remain a concern, a TDOC report shows an improvement in overall correctional officer vacancy rates, which declined from 30.8% in FY 2021 to 16.5% in FY 2025, representing approximately 554 vacant positions in 2025 statewide. In addition, TDOC facilities experienced 726 employee separations during FY

2025, resulting in an overall turnover rate of 19.1%. Despite these initiatives and improvements, state audits continue to identify staffing shortages and safety concerns within Tennessee correctional facilities.

These staffing challenges are influenced by a range of factors, including salaries and benefits, and can affect an agency's ability to recruit and retain qualified officers. Law enforcement agencies operate in a competitive labor market in which officers may move from one agency to another in search of better pay and benefits. As a result, differences in compensation among state and local law enforcement agencies may contribute to difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, particularly for smaller city and county agencies. Smaller cities and counties often have more limited tax bases and budgets, which can restrict funding for personnel and make it difficult to offer competitive compensation packages.

In response to these concerns, Senator Yager and Representative Williams introduced Senate Bill 2177 and House Bill 2204 in the General Assembly, which passed and became Public Chapter 1121, Acts of 2026. It directs the commission to conduct a study of the salaries and other benefits paid to state and local law enforcement officers in Tennessee. The legislation requires the commission to study how

- current salaries and benefits paid to state and local enforcement officers affect recruitment, staffing, and retention, particularly in smaller city and county departments, and evaluate potential alternatives for improvement, and
- state salary increases and adjustments for state law enforcement officers affect recruitment, staffing, and retention of local law enforcement officers.

Define the Problem

Law enforcement agencies in Tennessee face recruitment and retention challenges, which may be influenced by the level of compensation and benefits provided to officers.

Assemble Some Evidence

- Review referred legislation, Public Chapter 1121, Acts of 2026, to determine what it asks the commission to study and review any other related legislation.
- Interview the sponsors of the legislation, Senator Yager and Representative Williams, and any other members of the General Assembly who have shown interest in the bill.
- Interview other stakeholders to determine what is driving this issue. These include but are not limited to the representatives of:

- Police Executive Research Forum (PERF)
- Tennessee Alcoholic Beverage Commission
- Tennessee Association of Chiefs of Police
- Tennessee Bureau of Investigation
- Tennessee County Services Association
- Tennessee Municipal League
- Tennessee County Technical Advisory Service
- Tennessee Department of Correction
- Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security
- Tennessee Fraternal Order of Police
- Tennessee Municipal Technical Advisory Service
- Tennessee Peace Officer Standards & Training Commission (P.O.S.T.)
- Tennessee Sheriffs Association
- Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
- Review Tennessee's statutes and regulations relevant to state and local law enforcement salaries and benefits.
- Review compensation for the state and local enforcement officers in the surrounding states.
- Review relevant literature.
- Review similar policies and laws of other states.
- Gather relevant data sets, including salary ranges, benefits, salary difference between state and local agencies, vacancy rates, turnover rates, average tenure of officers, hiring rates, recruitment cost and incentives (sign on bonuses, tuition assistance), and transfers between local and state agencies.

Proposed Research Timeline

- Problem statement and research plan (June 2026)
- Research
 - Assemble evidence (June - August 2026)
 - Construct alternatives and select criteria (August - September 2026)
 - Convene panel for discussion at Summer commission meeting
 - Project outcomes, confront trade-offs, and select draft recommendations (September 2026)
- Storyboard, outline, and write the report (October-November 2026)
- Draft report to the commission for comments (Fall 2026 commission meeting)
- Final report to commission for approval (January 2027 commission meeting)



State of Tennessee

PUBLIC CHAPTER NO. 1121

SENATE BILL NO. 2177

By Yager, Bailey, Bowling, Crowe, Jackson, Seal

Substituted for: House Bill No. 2204

By Williams, Littleton

AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 4; Title 8; Title 9 and Title 38, relative to compensation of law enforcement officers.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE:

SECTION 1. The Tennessee advisory commission on intergovernmental relations (TACIR) shall conduct a study of the salaries and other benefits paid to state and local law enforcement officers in this state. The study must include:

(1) Analysis of how current salaries and benefits paid to state and local law enforcement officers affect recruitment, staffing, and retention, particularly in smaller city and county departments, and evaluate potential alternatives for improvement; and

(2) Analysis of how state salary increases and adjustments for state law enforcement officers affect recruitment, staffing, and retention of local law enforcement officers.

SECTION 2. TACIR shall publish a report of its findings and recommendations and deliver a copy of the report to the governor, the speaker of the senate, the speaker of the house of representatives, and the legislative librarian no later than January 31, 2027. The report may be delivered electronically.

SECTION 3. TACIR may request information and input from other appropriate state and local governmental entities, as necessary, and such entities shall comply with TACIR's request. The study must be conducted from TACIR's existing resources.

SECTION 4. As used in this act:

(1) "Local law enforcement officer" means a full-time, salaried employee of a political subdivision who is a sheriff, sheriff's deputy, police officer, chief of police, or other law enforcement officer whose primary responsibility is the prevention and detection of crime and apprehension of offenders, or who is a correctional officer with the political subdivision; and

(2) "State law enforcement officer" means a full-time, salaried employee of the state who is a commissioned member of the department of safety, an agent of the Tennessee bureau of investigation, a commissioned employee of the wildlife resources agency engaged in law enforcement activities on a day-to-day basis, a commissioned member of the alcoholic beverage commission who is engaged in law enforcement activities on a day-to-day basis, or a correctional officer vested with the powers of a law enforcement officer by the commissioner of correction.

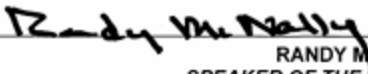
SECTION 5. Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 4, Chapter 7, Part 2, is amended by adding the following as a new section:

The commissioner of safety may establish a hazardous duty designation for members of the highway patrol that may be used to authorize additional compensation for designated members.

SECTION 6. This act takes effect upon becoming a law, the public welfare requiring it.

SENATE BILL NO. 2177

PASSED: April 21, 2026


RANDY McNALLY
SPEAKER OF THE SENATE


CAMERON SEXTON, SPEAKER
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

APPROVED this 22nd day of May 2026


BILL LEE, GOVERNOR