

Badge Basics: Types of Law Enforcement Agencies

Within the United States alone there are more than one million full-time police officers, employed by more than 18,000 federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies. Each of these agency types provides different services to the public. This fact sheet explores the most common types of law enforcement agencies.

Federal Agencies

Duties

Federal agencies provide a wide array of services that vary by specialized agency. Some examples of their responsibilities include critical incident response, criminal investigations, court operations, security and protection, or corrections. Many train and support state, local, and international agencies to counter terrorism, trafficking, and narcotics. Federal law enforcement agencies include the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); United States Marshals Service (USMS); and many more.

Scope of Authority

Federal law enforcement officers enforce federal laws anywhere in the United States and abroad. These agencies typically have a central office in Washington, DC, with field offices in different regions, cities, and states throughout the United States. Many federal agencies also have field offices in other countries. Each federal law enforcement agency has its own set of requirements and duties.

State Agencies

Duties

In addition to patrolling the state roadways, they respond to traffic incidents, perform statewide investigations, and engage with communities across the state. Troopers and officers are typically assigned a patrol area but can be moved anywhere in the state.

Scope of Authority

State Police and Highway Patrol troopers and officers have jurisdiction throughout an entire state. These agencies have a central office, usually in the state capital, and have field offices throughout the state.

Municipal Police Departments

Duties

These officers' days involve patrolling, responding to calls for service, investigating, conducting traffic enforcement, and working with their communities. These officers may drive, walk, or bike around neighborhoods, coordinate traffic, and interact with businesses, neighborhood groups, and community members.

Scope of Authority

Local officers usually have jurisdictional law enforcement authority in the towns, cities, or counties where they are employed. They derive their authority from their state and local governing bodies.

Sheriff's Offices

Duties

The responsibilities of Sheriffs vary considerably by jurisdiction; in some areas, the sheriff's office has the responsibilities of the coroner's office and may collect taxes. Deputy sheriffs' duties may be similar to those of police officers in that they may conduct patrols, respond to calls for assistance, and perform community outreach. Many sheriff's offices operate the local jail and serve other judicial functions like performing court security, serving warrants and court summonses, and transporting prisoners.

Scope of Authority

Sheriff's and deputies have authority within the county or city where they are employed. In most cases, sheriffs are elected to the Office of Sheriff, which is not a department of county or city government, but an independent office. In some instances, they may be appointed by the county executive, county board of commissioners, or governor. Deputies are hired by the sheriff's office.

Special Jurisdiction Police Departments

Duties

Officers have similar patrol duties to city and county police but are focused on a particular entity or area.

Scope of Authority

Special jurisdiction officers often operate in specific entities or areas within another jurisdiction, such as university campuses, schools, parks, airports, housing authorities, and hospitals. Many are sworn officers with arrest powers, but some may only have authority to issue citations.

Tribal Police Departments

Duties

Generally, tribal officers operate like municipal police: they patrol, respond to calls for service, and interact with the community.

Scope of Authority

Tribal officers typically have jurisdiction in the tribal lands in which they are employed. Their authority and functions vary by tribe, according to federal, state, local, and tribal laws. Some tribal officers are tribal employees, while others are federal officers employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Some tribes are also served by state and local police, either exclusively or in partnership with tribal police.

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