

Brief

Law Enforcement Certification and Discipline

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Related Topic: [Labor and Employment](#)

Like many other regulated professions, requirements for peace officer training and certification vary greatly from state to state and lack a cohesive regulatory approach. Unlike many other regulated professions, states often lack the ability to track prior disciplinary action taken against officers. This resource provides information on key issues related to officer training, discipline and decertification, and regulation.

Licensing and Certification

No national governing body enforces nationwide education and certification standards for peace officers. Instead, all states maintain Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) boards or similar agencies. Many of these POST boards are established under statutory law and have a range of authorities and duties. Recently, [New Jersey](#) and Hawaii (HRS § 139-6. Standards; Certification) codified police certification and POST boards in state statutes. All existing POST boards establish guidelines and requirements for peace officer training, and most are responsible for officer certification, decertification and continuing education. State POST boards vary in the amount of regulatory authority they have and in how active they are in exercising that authority. Four states – California, Hawaii, New Jersey and Rhode Island do not decertify officers at the state level. In recent months, however, California, Illinois, New Jersey, Ohio and Michigan have [proposed](#) an occupational licensing system for police officers, including procedures for officer delicensing. In December 2020, Massachusetts enacted a certification program as part of a [police reform bill](#). The [International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training](#) (IADLEST) provides guidance for state POST boards and the minimum standards for certification programs such as:

- State and national criminal background check
- General Education Development (G.E.D.)
- Human relations courses
- Training on the “ethical use of discretion”

IADLEST also operates the National Law Enforcement Academy Resource Network (NLEARN), which offers opportunities for collaboration on training and best practices. In addition to NLEARN, IADLEST offers a voluntary auditing service for state POST boards and an accreditation process for state POST boards and academies. IADLEST provides several resources for peace officers and police departments but has no enforcement authority. There are no compulsory national standards for police officers. Each state POST board can determine their own guidelines, leaving ample opportunity for variability in police officer training and practice.

Michigan uses a licensure system through its [Commission on Law Enforcement Standards \(MCOLES\)](#). To obtain a license officers must meet selection standards, including obtaining a G.E.D. and successful completion of basic academy, as well as completing the MCOLES licensing exam.

[Colorado's POST Board](#) requires peace officers to pass the basic academy, a POST certification examination, a physical and psychological examination and a background check. Individual police departments may have their own additional minimum requirements, such as a written examination or some college education. For example, the [City of Boulder, Colo. police department](#) requires applicants to have 60 college credit hours and complete the [Frontline standardized police officer test](#) in addition to state standards. The City of Denver also requires that applicants undergo screening which can include background investigations, physical agility testing, a polygraph examination, language skills testing, a written suitability test, and an interview with a psychologist.

Police Officer Discipline and Decertification

Defining Discretion

According to a report by Simon Bronitt and Philip Stenning at Griffith University, discretion in policing refers to a police officer's duty to make time-sensitive, on-the-job decisions without significant oversight. "Ethical use of discretion" refers to training a police officer to make decisions based on a set of firm, applicable, ethical guidelines.

Officer discipline for professional misconduct is often handled as an internal personnel matter at the local level, but state POST boards can also have the authority to decertify officers who are convicted of criminal offenses or commit other violations. A statute can in some instances require decertification. For example, [Colorado law](#) requires the POST board to decertify an officer convicted of a crime involving the unlawful use of physical force.

There is no comprehensive national database with information on professional ethical violations or officer decertification. The best available national information is [the National Decertification Index \(NDI\)](#) maintained by IDALEST. The NDI has information from agencies in 44 states, but participation is voluntary and not all states require officer certification. The NDI also includes integrity bulletins from 11 states that provide links to decertification record databases for states in which this information is available. All information, however, is reported on a voluntary basis only and is not complete. Furthermore, the information can be obtained only by request.

In a joint effort among U.S. newspapers, USA Today published a [database](#) of police officers across the nation who have been investigated for "serious misconduct." The database includes 30,000 officers from 44 states. Interest in creating a comprehensive database is growing, and on June 16, 2020, the Trump Administration issued an [Executive Order](#) on "Safe Policing." The Order provides for the establishment of a database by which law enforcement agencies can identify officers who have been decertified in their state.

Several states have or are considering legislation concerning decertification registries. New York already maintains a [registry](#) of police officers which is updated annually with information about police officers who were fired for a cause. Louisiana has also begun to maintain a similar [database](#). In 2020 two states, Colorado and Oregon, established new state decertification databases.

There are several barriers preventing easy access to information about police officer history. Some states have statutes that prohibit the public from accessing information about disciplinary action for police officers. Recently, Governor Cuomo of New York signed the [“Say their Name” reform package](#). As part of the reforms, New York [repealed section 50-a](#) of the New York State Civil Rights Law, which covers the privacy of police officers and firefighters. The repeal ensures that the public will have access to law enforcement disciplinary records. For further reference, WNYC Public Radio station’s Project WNYC has a [map](#) indicating the states in which police records are confidential.

Recently Considered Legislation

More than half of the states have introduced or filed legislation addressing policing issues since May 25, 2020. Legislation enacted in 2020 so far has addressed police oversight, data collection, use of force, including restrictions on the use of chokeholds, training, officer certification and discipline, and law enforcement use of body-worn cameras.

Occupation Comparison: Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs)

The POST boards of each state enforce a minimum number of hours required in basic academy. The minimum hour requirements range from 404 basic academy hours in Georgia, to 1,032 in Hawaii. Minnesota requires officers to earn an associate degree. This means that officers in Hawaii complete over 600 more hours of training than their colleagues in Georgia. That amounts to about 16 more weeks, almost four more months, of training from one state to another. Thus, the minimum level and depth of knowledge and expertise attained by peace officers varies widely by state.

In comparison, a significantly higher degree of regulation is present in the Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) field. The National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) maintains a nationwide certification system for EMTs and paramedics which is accredited through the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA). EMTs must obtain a certification through a program that meets both state and NREMT requirements. EMTs and paramedics are also required to pass a certification exam administered through the NREMT. The average EMT course length is 120-150 hours while certified paramedics complete up to 1,800 hours of training or earn a bachelor’s degree in the field.



[Occupational Licensing Database](#)

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Related Resources

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Democratizing Police Oversight

Following increased interest in police oversight, state legislatures are enacting new laws to give the public a greater role.

Civil and Criminal Justice, Labor and Employment

Updated July 26, 2023

Plagued by Teacher Shortages, Some States Turn to Fast-Track Credentialing

Virginia is just the latest state to turn to for-profit teacher certification companies in an urgent effort to recruit and train more teachers. The states hope the new paths to certification will help ease the shortages, but critics argue those who take the programs are not as well trained as traditionally credentialed teachers and will do a disservice to young students.

Education, Labor and Employment

State Legislatures News

Updated July 25, 2023

Measuring the Quality of Nondegree Credentials

More and more students are earning nondegree credentials, but quality is not always guaranteed. To help students and policymakers, notable organizations created consensus measures for high quality credentials. Some states have created data systems to measure these indicators and provide statewide definitions for high value credentials.

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