

SEATTLE FBI OFFICE SEVERELY UNDERSTAFFED - THE NUMBER OF CRIMINAL CASES HANDLED HERE BY THE AGENCY IS OFF SHARPLY

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The FBI field office in Seattle, already stretched thin by anti-terrorism operations, is seriously understaffed compared with others around the country.

To be on par with the national average, Western Washington needs 53 additional special agents, for a total of 186, a Seattle P-I analysis shows.

Seattle, Atlanta and Detroit each host field offices staffed with fewer special agents per capita than those in other states, despite those cities' significance to commerce, industry and even national security.

While nationwide there are four FBI agents for every 100,000 people, the figure in Washington state is only 2.1 agents, according to the P-I's analysis of data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Discounting large agent concentrations in New York, Washington, D.C., and Virginia, which house national squads, administrators and the FBI Academy, the average rate is three agents per 100,000 residents.

The FBI is leaving Washingtonians especially vulnerable, and Congress or the Bush administration should take action to boost the number of agents assigned here, said Washington Attorney General Rob McKenna.

"It's disheartening to hear," he said. "I believe that - given the large numbers of terrorist targets, our position on an international border, our port issues - that our state ought to have a disproportionately high number of agents, not a disproportionately low number."

That opinion is shared by Seattle police Chief Gil Kerlikowske.

"I couldn't tell you how strongly I think a lot of local law enforcement officials feel there is a need for more staffing for the bureau here," he said.

Washington's ferry system has been identified as a top target for terrorists, and the state is one of the few places where an al-Qaida terrorist has been captured. This state is also home to the country's biggest manufacturers of commercial aircraft and heavy trucks, the world's biggest software company, Trident nuclear submarines, the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, an Army base, two Air Force bases and Navy home ports for two aircraft carrier battle groups.

Thirty-four states had higher per capita totals than Washington, as does the commonwealth of Puerto Rico, a U.S. dependency without voting representation in Congress or in the electoral college. The tropical island has 151 agents for a population of fewer than 4 million, while Washington has more than 6 million residents but only 133 agents.

Arizona, Alabama, Maryland, Louisiana and Tennessee all have more agents than Washington despite having smaller populations.

Many of the inequities are longstanding, but they have taken on a new importance since the FBI reoriented itself to counterterrorism after 9/11. In the states with fewer agents, the FBI appears to have been less able to continue crime-fighting at historic levels.

In Washington, the number of criminal cases handled by the FBI have precipitously declined: down by half overall and 88 percent in white-collar categories.

In California, which boasts more special agents than any other state per capita and in absolute terms, FBI criminal cases declined 10 percent and convictions declined 58 percent.

The data analyzed by the P-I are from the Census of Federal Law Enforcement released last year and covering staffing as of 2004. They are the most recent data available on the issue. The FBI field office in Seattle has not grown significantly since then.

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- Caption: ChartFBI AGENTS PER CAPITA
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