

SENATE PANEL TO WEIGH FBI CRIME SQUAD FUNDS - SUBCOMMITTEE MAY TRY TO REVERSE CUTS TO CRIMINAL DIVISION

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There is growing bipartisan support in the Senate to take on the Bush administration by overturning its crippling cuts to FBI crime squads.

But with the cost of restoring the bureau's traditional law enforcement units placed as high as \$400 million, it's unclear how far lawmakers are willing to go.

The first indication will come Wednesday when a Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees funding for the Justice and Commerce departments does its "mark-up" of the fiscal 2009 budget - setting the parameters for a battle with the White House over funding related to everything from civil rights to fisheries management.

A key item is the FBI budget. The bureau's ability to fight crime has deteriorated since the 9/11 terrorist attacks with the transfer of more than 2,400 agents from the criminal division to counterterrorism initiatives, a Seattle P-I investigation found.

The reassigned agents haven't been replaced, and President Bush's proposed budget doesn't add a single agent to crime squads despite a recent nationwide surge in bank robbery, mortgage fraud and white-collar crime.

"We need to give the FBI the resources they need so they can fulfill their new (counterterrorism) duties while protecting our communities at home," said Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., chairwoman of the subcommittee overseeing the FBI budget.

A challenge from Mikulski and other Democrats would likely draw a presidential veto that would require Republican support to override.

Bipartisan support is emerging to restore the FBI's depleted crime squads, but it's not clear how much money senators are willing to put up to fix the problem. A spokeswoman for Mikulski would not provide specific numbers.

A P-I analysis based on information provided by the FBI shows it would take about \$400 million to bring the bureau's corps of crime-fighting agents back to pre-9/11 levels.

Seven of the 17 senators on the subcommittee, responding to a P-I inquiry, expressed varying levels of support for restoring funding for the crime squads. Three of the seven are Republicans. None, however, gave specific dollar figures, despite being asked to do so.

Sen. Thad Cochran, R-Miss., has also expressed support for beefing up the FBI. Cochran is the top Republican on the Senate Appropriations Committee chaired by Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va.

"Since 2001," Cochran said, "the Federal Bureau of Investigation has focused more resources on counterterrorism activities than on domestic crime-fighting. However, crime-fighting measures should not be overlooked; so should resources be needed elsewhere within the bureau, I will work with the director of the FBI, Chairman Byrd and the subcommittee members to ensure that they have the resources needed to meet their goals."

His sentiments were echoed by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who complained that the bureau doesn't have the agents it needs to adequately address violent crime.

"I believe it is a big mistake to put violent crime at the bottom of their priority list," Feinstein said.

The depth of the problem was underscored two weeks ago when the FBI announced that it would have to further cut back its drastically reduced response to white-collar crime in order to address a burgeoning mortgage-fraud crisis.

Even FBI Director Robert Mueller - a political appointee - admits the bureau has been trying to fight crime with one arm tied behind its back.

"We have taken from the criminal side of the house to meet our national security responsibilities," Mueller said during a Senate hearing in April.

"The spike (in crime) - not across the country generally, but in certain places across the country - warrants a backfill of those agents who we've had to take from the criminal side of the house and put on the national security side of the house."

Earlier this year, the deputy White House budget director said the administration doesn't view restoring the FBI criminal division to its previous staffing levels as a serious priority.

"The assumption that how it was pre-9/11 is how it ought to be for all time is not the correct premise," Steve McMillin said.

However, the senior Republican on Mikulski's panel took a shot at Bush at the April hearing.

"It's also shortsighted for us to continue to cannibalize the criminal side of the FBI when we should be requesting more agents and resources to provide the FBI with the means to fight the threat of terrorism, as well as help state and local law enforcement fight the rising crime ripping our communities," said Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama.

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• **Caption:** PhotoGETTY IMAGES FILE: FBI Director Robert Mueller conceded that agents were diverted from crime fighting to counterterrorism. "The spike (in crime) <ellipsis> warrants a backfill of those agents," he said.

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