

Mass. sheriffs' offices' finances like the 'wild west,' in need of reform, inspector general finds

By [Sean Cotter](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 1, 2026, 5:31 p.m.



Suffolk Sheriff Steven W. Tompkins, center, does not speak to the media as he walks to a waiting car after his arraignment on extortion charges in the John Joseph Moakley United States Courthouse, in Boston, on Aug. 21, 2025. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Massachusetts sheriffs are running their offices' finances like the "wild west," including millions of dollars passing through off-the-books bank accounts, [illegal spending, and scant oversight](#), according to a scathing report released Monday by a state watchdog.

The [Office of the Inspector General](#)'s report calls for urgent action by state regulators to clean up what's characterized as archaic, messy, and questionable spending practices across the state's 14 county sheriffs' offices, which oversee jails in Massachusetts.

One example of the potential illegal use of funds, the Office of the Inspector General wrote, is that the sheriffs collectively used more than 120 private bank accounts without proper state oversight. More than \$40 million passed through these accounts, according to the report, and it is unclear whether interest was sent back to the state's general fund as mandated by law.

The report makes short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations aimed at providing more state oversight of offices that have increasingly run into trouble.

"It is time for the chaos to stop," Inspector General Jeffrey S. Shapiro said in a statement. "The lack of a common understanding among sheriffs, lawmakers, and the Executive Office of Administration & Finance (A&F) on such foundational ideas as the role of the sheriff, what the state covers for mandated programs ... has resulted in uncontrolled spending with little to no oversight. To put it in sheriffs' terms, it's a bit like the wild west."

The Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association said it worked with the inspector general's office during the investigation. Among the inspector general's recommendations is empowering the association to standardize practices across sheriffs' departments.

"The Sheriffs will carefully evaluate the report's findings and recommendations and will study and deliberate them as part of our continued efforts to strengthen operations, enhance accountability, and ensure responsible use of public resources across the Commonwealth," said Carrie Hill, executive director of the sheriffs' organization.

The report issued Monday was the inspector general office's final treatise on the sheriffs' finances and expenses, following a preliminary one issued earlier this year with similar findings.

The state Legislature ordered the probe by the inspector general's office as troubling issues across sheriffs' offices became clear last year. Offices combined for a deficit of \$110 million last fiscal year, and some sheriffs ran into legal trouble.

Since the fall of 2024, sheriffs in Norfolk, Hampden, and Suffolk counties have been accused of [misusing campaign funds](#), drunken driving, and [extorting a cannabis company](#), respectively.

Steve Tompkins, Suffolk County's sheriff and a Democrat, pleaded not guilty to the federal extortion charges. He agreed in August to "step away" from his post while his criminal case unfolds, and an interim sheriff has run the department that oversees jails in Boston.

The problems across the sheriffs' offices are multi-layered, Shapiro's office said in the 190-page report.

Despite the fact the sheriffs came under the purview of the state 25 years ago, neither side acts like it, according to the report.

Sheriffs behave like the top local lawmen, playing fast and loose with funds and resisting state oversight, the report said. This is further enabled by Beacon Hill, which regularly underfunds the offices in the regular budget and then fills budget gaps through supplemental spending, the report said. This creates fiscal strain, a need for creative accounting, and a lack of accountability, according to the inspector general.

"Moreover, a patchwork of unique, outdated, and ambiguous statutes have made it impossible to easily and definitively determine the activities that sheriffs are authorized to engage in, further complicating the budget process," the report said.

The inspector general's office also found specific issues in certain sheriffs' offices.

In Franklin County, office spending cards seemingly were used by employees at Dunkin' Donuts, the inspector general found. In Suffolk, a deputy was sent to work as the Winthrop harbormaster — helping the town, but not the county. And in Hampden, the sheriffs' office was doing too much, conducting patrols outside of the scope of its duties, even as the Legislature underfunded its unusual center for holding people on mental health commitments, the report said.

The proposed solutions include actions by the sheriffs, the Legislature, and state budget oversight entities, like the comptroller, focusing on both simplifying and cleaning up the books. In the long term, Beacon Hill should fully fund the sheriffs offices and use supplemental budgets sparingly, the Office of the Inspector General wrote, codifying rules around accounting and spending.

Shapiro's office called the private bank-account issue the most concerning systemic problem, writing these accounts should be overseen by watchdogs.

Legislative leaders have said there's a need for changes around sheriffs' financing and policies. On Monday, a spokesperson for House Speaker Ron Mariano, a Quincy Democrat, said the Legislature was still reviewing the final report. The spokesperson referred to previous statements from the speaker in which he said there's "a clear need for reform."

The report also took aim at the sheriffs' handling of funds from their "civil process" divisions, which serve subpoenas, seize property, or make civil arrests. They collect various fees for that work but, despite recommendations from the state over the years, generally remain outside state oversight.

Shapiro's office recommends the Legislature update the laws around these fees.

“While it is true that the funds are not ‘taxpayer money’ in that they are not taxes, they are most definitely public funds,” Shapiro said. “Any funds collected by a public entity, whether they be taxes, fares, fines, or fees, are public and accordingly should be treated as such.”

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