

Michigan's police officer shortage becoming dire: 'Where did everyone go?'

July 24, 2023

<https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/michigans-police-officer-shortage-becoming-dire-where-did-everyone-go>



Eaton Rapids Police Chief Larry Weeks said he sometimes pulls overnight patrol shifts because of staff shortages. (Courtesy photo from Ken Snyder)

- ***The number of Michigan police officers has plummeted 19 percent since 2001***
- ***Staff shortages are leading to fewer traffic patrols and mandated overtime, leading to possible burnout***
- ***Departments are stepping up advertising to compete for recruits and the state is offering financial incentives***

In 1992, early in his law enforcement career, Larry Weeks applied for one of 16 openings in the Grand Rapids Police Department. There were 250 applicants.

Three decades later, Weeks is the police chief in mid-Michigan's Eaton Rapids, and can't find people who want to be police officers. He had five vacancies out of 10 full-time positions in 2020. He now has eight officers, but still being short two employees means the chief has to pick up the occasional weekend graveyard shift along with his managerial duties.

"It's not just us, most employers are struggling to hire good quality folks," Weeks said. "We're competing against everybody."

Police departments across Michigan are struggling to fill positions, with the number of law enforcement officers statewide shrinking more than 4,500 since 2001 (a decline of 19 percent), and down about 900 in just the past three years.

Worker shortages are common across many fields in Michigan. With a current [unemployment rate of 3.6 percent](#) — the lowest in the state in 23 years — private businesses and public agencies alike are having trouble finding qualified job candidates.

But some worker shortages have bigger impacts than others. Police point to a decrease in road patrols as one reason accident fatalities are rising. With fewer officers on the street, it can take longer to respond to 911 calls. Stress from mandated overtime prompted by police officer shortages leads to burn out and resignations, exacerbating the problem.

“I think most people don’t realize the fragility of our public safety systems,” Weeks said. “Eventually people are going to call 911 and it’s going to take longer and longer for people to show up.”

‘Where did everyone go?’

The police officer shortage is [a national issue](#). With jobs available in many fields, law enforcement positions that offer the opportunity for public service — but also modest-pay and high stress — are proving less attractive than in the past. High-profile killings of African Americans by officers, including the [death of George Floyd](#) in Minneapolis in 2020, affected public attitudes toward police and made recruitment even more of a challenge, particularly in communities of color.

According to data from the [Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards \(MCOLES\)](#), the state agency that offers certification for police officers, there were slightly more than 23,000 police officers working in Michigan in 2001. Today, the figure hovers around 18,500.

There's no official state tally of police officer job openings, but police officials across the state who spoke to Bridge Michigan said the number of openings and the difficulty attracting candidates is unprecedented.

The MCOLES website lists job ads from 88 Michigan police agencies posted since June 1, a "huge increase" over past years, said Joe Kempa, acting deputy executive director of the agency.

The Macomb County Sheriff's office had 40 of its 230 deputy positions open recently, but a recruiting class has dropped the shortfall to about 20, said Macomb Sheriff Department Commander Jason Abro.

"There's a big financial impact (of officer shortages) because of overtime," Abro said. "We have a 24-7 operation and there are shifts you have to fill."

Retirements are outpacing new hires, Abro said, putting constant pressure on the remaining deputies to work more hours.

"I don't understand, where is everyone?" Abro said. "You go to restaurants and they're short staffed, too. My brother's working 80 hours a week because he can't find help."

"Where did everyone go?"

At the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Department, one third of patrol officer positions (16 of 48) are open.

"Our pool of people that we used to have to choose from is now a puddle." — Kalamazoo County Sheriff Richard Fuller

"We're killing it with overtime and our people are getting worn out," said Kalamazoo Sheriff Richard Fuller. "The people (we have) are leaving us for other positions. I was at the National Sheriffs Association conference (recently) and everyone was talking about this. Everybody has this problem."

Fuller has worked in law enforcement for 39 years and said it's never been this difficult to hire officers.

“Our pool of people that we used to have to choose from is now a puddle,” he said.

Part of it is that, with nearly full employment in the economy, people have many choices, Fuller said. Meanwhile, public respect for police has dropped in recent years, following the killing of Floyd and other cases of police misconduct. Just 27 percent of Black adults had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in police in a [2021 Gallup poll](#); 56 percent of white adults said they were confident in police.

“I’ve had parents say ‘I’m not sending my kid to a profession and being demonized in their career,’” Fuller said.



Kalamazoo County Sheriff Richard Fuller says police work is more dangerous and stressful because of a critical shortage of officers. (Bridge photo by Ron French)

Fuller apologized for speaking to a Bridge Michigan reporter in his cluttered office rather than a nearby conference room, which was being used to interview a candidate for a county jail position. When someone walks in expressing interest in a position, department officials make time to talk to them immediately.

To lure employees, the sheriff's office is now paying \$10,000 in academy training that in the old days — when recruits were aplenty — officers paid for themselves. The department pays the recruits nearly \$1,000 a week while they take that 16-week training, and offer a \$10,000 signing bonus.

By the time they are ready to hit the streets, taxpayers have invested more than \$35,000 in a new deputy. All too often, Fuller said, freshly minted deputies quit within a year or two and take a hiring bonus at another department.

There's currently a bidding war going on among some Kalamazoo County law enforcement agencies, with the sheriff's department's \$10,000 signing bonus being met and raised by \$15,000 bonuses at the city police departments of Kalamazoo and Portage, Fuller said.

Calls to those departments were not returned.

Pension systems used to keep police officers in one department for a career, because pensions take years to become vested. Today, most pensions have been dumped for 401(k) retirement accounts that typically are portable between jobs. The result is police officers "department-hopping" for bonuses, better hours and higher wages, said Matt Saxton, executive director of the Michigan Sheriff's Association.

"That's not putting more officers on the street, it's just changing the street they're patrolling," Saxton said.

"When you're short, you start to cut things like community service (and) DARE officers. You have fewer detectives, fewer school resource officers." — Robert Stevenson, executive director, Michigan Association of Police Chiefs

Adds Fuller, "We're all faced with this huge dilemma where we want to make sure that people that are brought into this profession understand that this is an honorable profession, and that it's something that we would hope that they come in with the mindset that they're here to protect their community, be a part of their community and grow their community. And that's a really difficult thing to get across to people who sometimes might just be looking for the next job."

Robert Stevenson, executive director of the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police, said the public suffers when there are significant police shortages.

"When you're short, you start to cut things like community service (and) DARE (drug education) officers," Stevenson said. "You have fewer detectives, fewer school resource officers."

The Kalamazoo Sheriff's office has fewer officers on traffic patrol, which some studies say [leads to more traffic fatalities](#), and 911 calls where fewer officers respond to an incident than Fuller would like.

"There are calls happening now where you're sending one person to, that should be two or three (officers)," he said. "There are calls that you send two people that you might need four, and it's just not happening."

"I swore in (as an officer) a young man yesterday and he is going to be out there responding to calls with fewer backup people than I ever had (when Fuller was a patrol officer), with more violent calls on a regular basis, with more mentally unstable (people) and more drug situations," he said.

"I have more mandatory overtime than I've ever had before," said Fuller, now in his 14th year as sheriff. "They have to go from one high stressful call to the next. And then they go home but they went home hours late because of overtime. And then they have to be in tomorrow. And it really cuts into the time a body needs to recover."

Earning more hauling trash

Stevenson, of the police chief association, said "no state has figured out" how to erase law enforcement officer shortages, but Michigan departments and the state Legislature are scrambling to find solutions.

The chief's association has put together a [promotional video](#) as a recruitment tool and individual departments are advertising on social media. One department, which Kalamazoo's Fuller wouldn't name, is spending money on a digital billboard in Kalamazoo to lure recruits to a nearby community.

"I know for a fact that we have higher wages and better benefits than that department," Fuller said. He checked into the possibility of a billboard of his own, but decided the cost wasn't worth it.

The kind of signing bonuses the Kalamazoo Sheriff's office has used since the fall of 2022 are becoming more common. Some departments are now trying to distinguish themselves by offering more flexible work schedules.

It's a job candidate market now, and police departments have to adjust, said Chad Trussler, labor representative for the Michigan Association of Police labor union. "I've told administrators, 'Hey, you need them more than they need you, because they can go down the road.'"

Last year, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer announced [\\$30 million in grants](#) to help departments pay for police academy recruits, and in April the Legislature passed a bill that allows departments to [recoup all or some training costs](#) from recruits if they leave for another department within four years.

In Eaton Rapids and many other small departments, low pay is part of the problem, Chief Weeks said. The local waste management service advertises starting salaries of [\\$24 an hour](#), with pay rising to more than \$30 an hour. Eaton Rapids starts its officers at about \$20 an hour.

"When you can be a garbage person and make more money and have peace of mind (compared to the stress of police work)," carrying a badge for less money makes recruitment a challenge.

When Weeks was young, his father was almost shot in a robbery. That's when Weeks decided he wanted to be a police officer.

"You have to feel the call" to serve, Weeks said. He sees that less and less nowadays.

"It's difficult for me to understand why people don't want to serve," Weeks said. "It's not a judgment, it's just not a mindset I understand."