

# Pontiac struggles with depleted police force

## From 170 officers in 2004, department currently has 65

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Associated Press

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Michigan's slow economy and tight government budgets are taking a toll on law and order. Police departments are seeing their numbers cut, resulting in fewer arrests. Police are coping as best they can, but for many communities, "police presence" is more a goal than a reality. In part two of a two-day series, *The Associated Press* takes a look at how these changes are affecting communities.

PONTIAC — Even with emergency road patrol help from the Michigan State Police and the Oakland County Sheriff Department added this year, the loss of more than half its officers over the past few years means Pontiac's short-staffed police department sometimes struggles to keep up with the volume of crime-related calls.

On a recent Friday night, 20 calls that the day shift couldn't get to were waiting for the next crew, including seven calls on the southeast side patrolled by Officer Scott McDonald and a partner in a separate car. Such holdovers are so routine that officers didn't consider this a busy night.

McDonald, who's 36 and has been with the department about

11 years, is one of seven officers on duty this night, down from an average of at least 12 a few years ago. Pontiac had 170 police officers in 2004. Now it has 65. The detective ranks have been trimmed from 21 to four. The drug unit was virtually disbanded, although it does have representation on a countywide team.

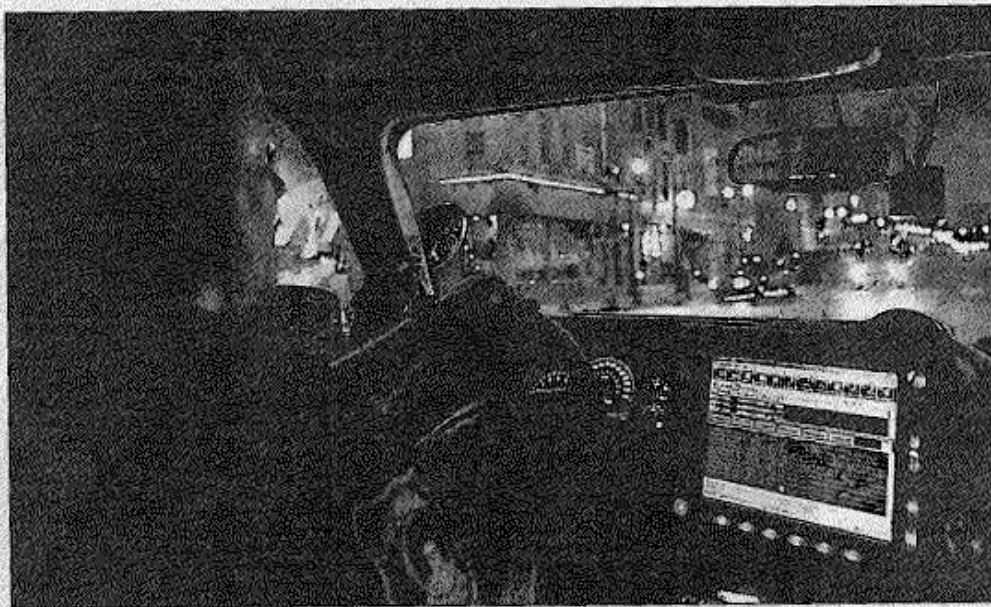
### "They feel for us"

Several Michigan cities have lost 10 percent or more of their police officer positions since 2001. The state's economy has taken a toll on the tax revenues that state and local governments use to pay for police protection.

But few places have been hammered as hard as Pontiac, a suburban Detroit city of roughly 66,000 reeling from automotive and other industrial layoffs. The city's seasonally unadjusted unemployment rate for March was 17.4 percent, more than double the state average.

"They feel for us ... and themselves," McDonald said of the community's general reaction to the swamped police staff. "They've been pretty understanding with the response times being up. Well, for the most part. Obviously some people aren't going to be happy with the response time being what it is."

Democratic Gov. Jennifer



GARY MALERBA/Associated Press

**Keeping patrol:** Officer Scott McDonald of the Pontiac Police Department patrols the downtown Friday. The department sometimes struggles to keep up with the volume of crime-related calls due to the loss of more than half its officers over the past few years.

Granholm has appointed a five-member panel to investigate Pontiac's finances, citing the failure of local officials to agree on how to handle a budget crisis.

The situation is complicated in Pontiac because voters early this year voted to keep the city from making cuts in the fire department but turned down a millage request that would have beefed up police. That leaves the city with fewer options when it comes to cutting personnel.

### Economy affects crime

Pontiac Police Chief Valard

Gross says a city police officer will get to an urgent crime scene in 6 minutes or less, but response time to calls for other incidents such as minor property theft might take longer.

Some types of crime, including larcenies and break-ins, have risen in Pontiac the past few years. Gross attributes rising crime primarily to the economy. And it stretches his thin department even thinner.

"My guys and ladies are working their tails off," Gross said. "We're still getting 70,000 calls a year. They don't just go away."

Before the state police and Oakland County Sheriff's department began providing emergency back-up and monitoring heavy traffic areas this year, there were times when Pontiac would have had to call in help from nearby cities if they had received another call needing immediate attention.

"The crime rate's up. And the (number of) officers are down. I don't know if the two are connected, but it definitely causes some problems for us," McDonald said. "As it's getting warmer, it's getting busier — and we just don't have enough people."

## Police: Agencies getting by

CONTINUED FROM 1B

"As long as we're able to provide services and still hold crime down, I'm not going to bark," he said. "If I see a major increase in crime, then I'll be barking."

The Eaton County Sheriff's Department has not increased the number of county road patrol officers in decades, Underhill said.

The county has added three deputies to its Delta Township Division since Sheriff Mike Raines took office in 2005, according to McPhail.

He credited effective fiscal management by Delta Township and the county Board of Commissioners, as well as the Sheriff's Department.

"We're watching our dollars and cents and not spending frivolously," McPhail said.

Despite zero-growth budgets, Grand Ledge Chief of Police Marty Underhill said his department, since 2001, has been able to keep its staff the same.

Underhill said a millage passed a few years ago to support the city's fire authority meant the city could direct more money to the Police Department.