

## **Shrinking Police Departments Risky for Residents**

By Gerald Cross

In the wake of recent violence in Plymouth borough, citizens expressed dismay over the perceived lack of borough police resources and the resulting threat to public safety.

Their concern should come as no surprise. The Pennsylvania Economy League sounded the warning as recently as 2010 concerning the evaporation of borough police forces in Luzerne County that places residents at higher risk. A joint study with the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development found that full-time borough police forces were being gutted for financial reasons. Communities are increasingly relying on part-time officers or the state police. Quality coverage suffers as a result.

The study advocated the creation of regional police forces as a solution but overcoming political obstacles to change have so far made that goal elusive.

While Luzerne County cities have largely maintained their full time police forces since the 1970s and second-class townships have increased their full-time officers to reflect population growth, the same cannot be said of boroughs.

In 1972, 57.5 percent of police officers in Luzerne County's boroughs were full-time. By 2006, the number of full-time officers had dropped to 31.6 percent. The result is police departments with inadequate back-up, training, preventative patrols or the ability to follow through on investigations. Genuine, full-time 24/7 police coverage is scaled back or non-existent. The result: residents at a Plymouth borough council meeting held shortly after a recent shooting complained about slow police response times.

The situation is particularly troubling given the influence that higher rates of poverty and unemployment – all of which have increased in Luzerne County - has on crime. Regional drug possession crimes spiked 200 percent from 2000 to 2006 and drug manufacturing crimes were up 155 percent during the same period.

Small police departments primarily staffed with part-time officers are ill-equipped to deal with the ramifications. Larger regional departments made up of full-time officers have more resources for investigation and training - including specialized training - that leads to more arrests. Regional forces also have the quantity and quality of officers necessary to ensure a community has adequate coverage if a number of incidents occur at once.

In Plymouth, the police department has shrunk from 12 full-time and two part-time officers in 1972 to four full-time and several part-time officers today. Meanwhile, the borough faces the challenges of a

declining population of taxpayers, empty storefronts, changing demographics, a high percentage of renters and a 24 percent poverty rate.

No one expects a small borough to have the same resources as a large city, which is why a regional approach to police services is critical. The Pennsylvania Economy League estimates that a regional force would have cost Plymouth Borough approximately the same yearly cost but would have resulted in a more professional compliment better able to handle the new economic and social realities that now strain resources.

Plymouth is not alone. Communities at all levels of the socio-economic spectrum in Northeastern Pennsylvania are sacrificing full-time police forces to budget constraints, leaving citizens with substandard coverage that often fails to provide a rapid response, investigation and arrest when crimes occur. It is past time for municipal leaders to put aside differences that have hampered the creation of regionalized police forces. Local residents deserve and should demand better of their local governments.

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