

Local police funding a mixed bag in Beaver County, rising as living wages increase

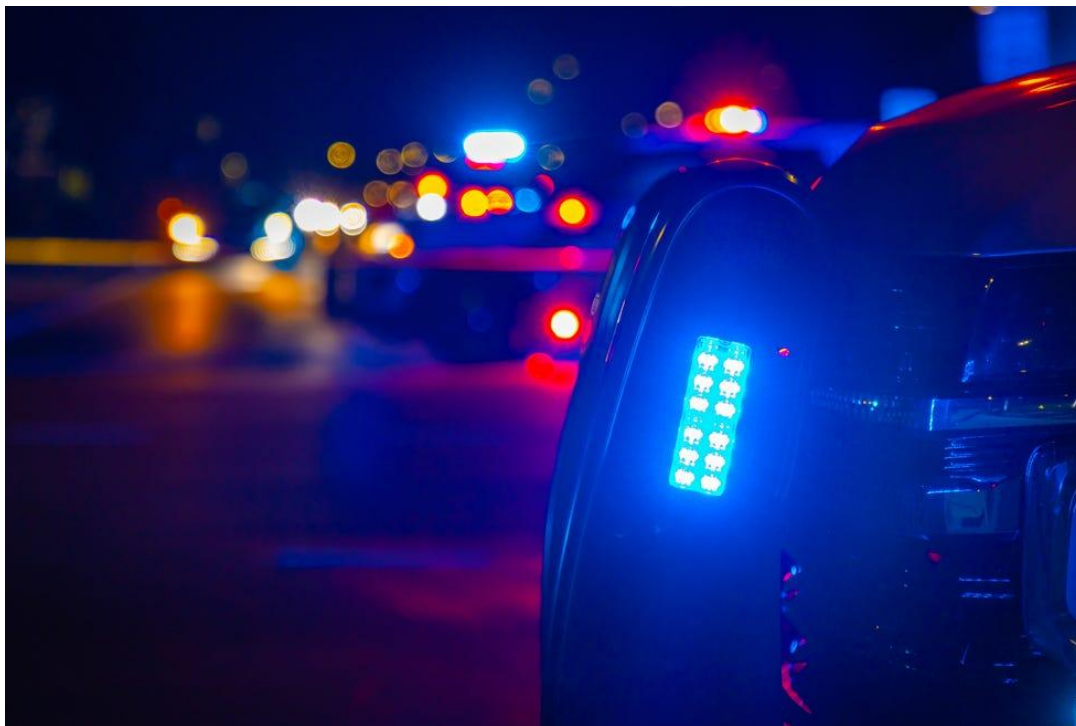


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Beaver County Times

Across the 12 largest municipalities in Beaver County, communities spend an average of 35% of their annual budget and a combined total of over \$23 million for police protection.

While spending millions of dollars on police protection may seem like a hefty fee for community members to pay, the agencies across Beaver County typically receive less funding than other police departments around the United States. The average per-capita cost of policing in the largest local communities is around \$270 per household during 2023, but reports from the Department of Justice share that the average per-capita cost for policing was around \$304 in 2017 and has continued to grow each year.



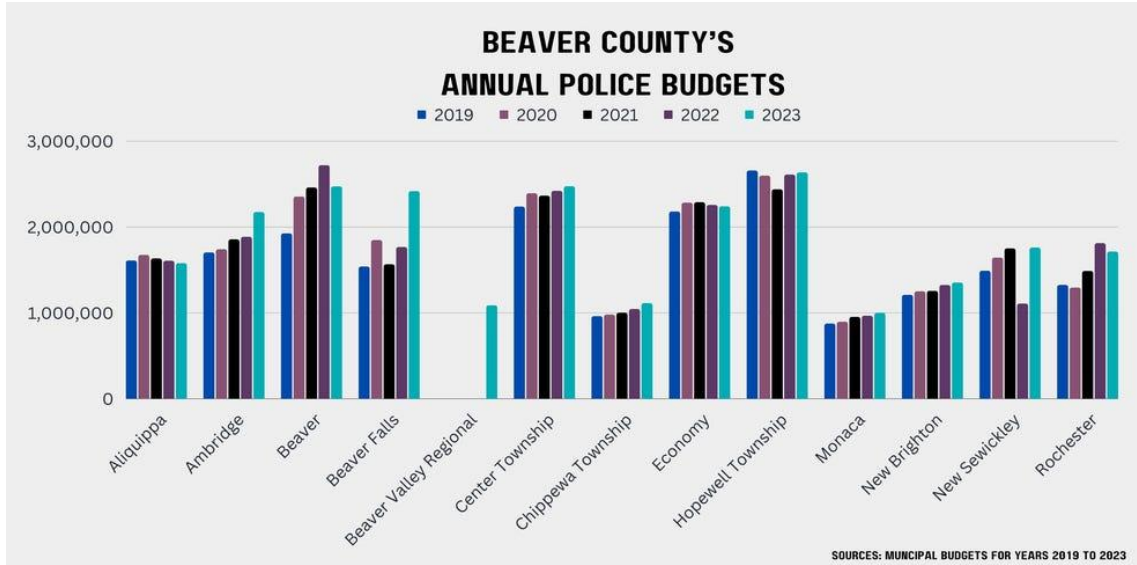
These differences in public safety funding are not only on a national level, as departments that are in neighboring jurisdictions can see drastically different budgets in Beaver County. While some of these funding differences can be explained by geography, as most rural regions typically require smaller budgets to operate police departments, many of the county's high-population communities are scrambling to find enough money to offer officers livable wages and draw in new hires.

As these budgets continue to increase, it can be important for residents to follow along and know what these budgets look like around the county and how their local budgets have changed over the years. Across the county's 12 largest communities, budgets are exponentially increasing, but that may not be enough to keep the lights on in some of these municipal police departments.

Police funding remains unequal among Beaver County's neighborhoods

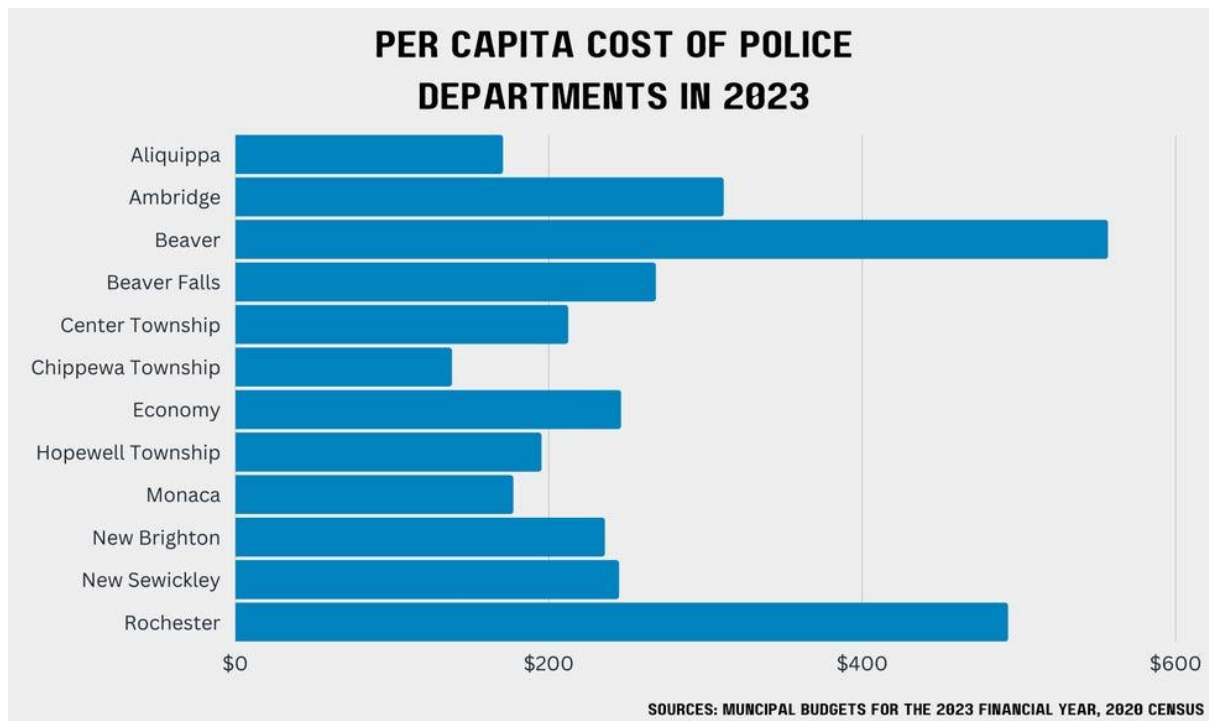
Funding for police departments is a mixed bag in Beaver County, with no municipality providing a "typical" model for how they decide to allocate their annual budgets.

Hopewell Township is currently home to the highest-funded police department, with the well-staffed department of first responders budgeted at a total of \$2,632,904 for expenses in 2023. The police budget is less than \$200,000 from Center Township's departmental expenses, with the two communities being home to the highest populations in Beaver County.



On the opposite side of local police funding is Monaca, which allocated a budget of \$996,300 for its police department in 2023. While the borough does not have the smallest budget in the communities measured in the Times research, the lower police department funds are reflective of the community's available expenses. Monaca had the third lowest per capita cost for taxpayers, with each household contributing around \$177 a year, and was the community with the second lowest percentage of their annual budget spent on police, with around 24% of their budget going to police protection.

Where the data starts to become unpredictable is when measuring how much of a community's annual budget is spent on police funding each year. Rochester and Beaver spend roughly 53% of their annual budget on police department expenses in the boroughs, but the overall funding of both departments reflects the different tax bases of these communities.



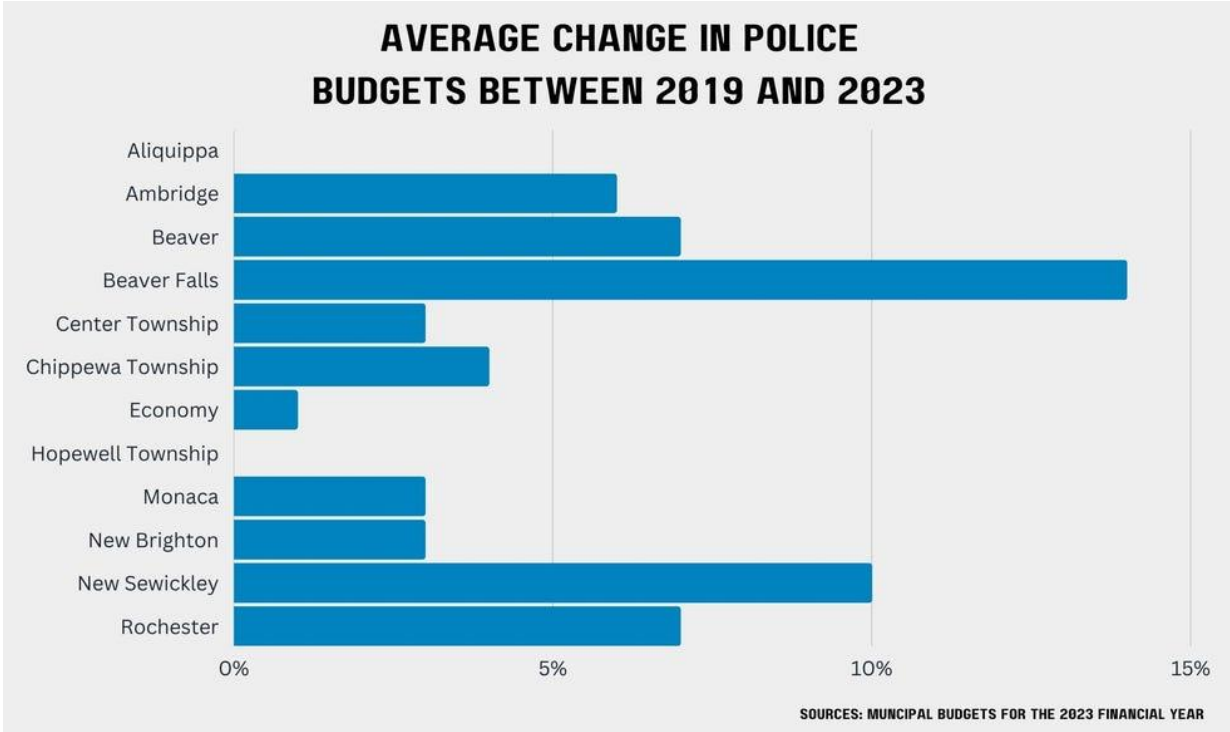
Beaver's budget is the third highest in the county, with this year's budget calculating \$2,470,024 in expenses and the highest per capita cost of \$556. Rochester's budget was lower, only reaching \$1,710,787 for the year, but it had the second-highest per capita cost of around \$492. Rochester's household cost is around \$180 more than the costs in Ambridge, which was the third highest per capita department and has nearly twice the borough's population.

Officials in Chippewa Township contribute the least to their local police protection, with only 23% of their annual budget covering police expenses. Chippewa's police forces have the second lowest budget for municipal departments in the county, with the 2023 budget estimating expenses of \$1,109,515 to cover over 8,000 people who call the community home.

Budgets struggle to accommodate rising costs and growing amounts of overtime pay required for small forces

Even as communities contribute large amounts of their annual budgets to police services, it can be difficult for these departments to reach peak operations on their limited budgets each year.

While residents may grumble about millage increases to pay for police services, the increased cost of living in the United States means that police officers also need to be paid competent wages. In addition to salaries, these tax bases must cover the department's gas prices, mandatory state training, new equipment and other similar expenditures.



Departments are often forced to exceed their projected budgets throughout the year, especially when departments are short-staffed. According to the 2022 municipal budget for Beaver Falls, funding for the police department was originally set at \$1,764,364 for the year. Due to a need for overtime and vehicle fuel, the department required an additional \$477,000 for operations that year and has budgeted for similar needs during 2023.

Overtime isn't a problem unique to Beaver Falls, as understaffed departments across Beaver County rely on the practice due to a lack of new officers entering the field. While some departments have a healthy supply of available officers to cover shifts, the low annual budgets among these local departments do not offer the competitive salaries or reliable scheduling that larger city agencies can provide.



While some communities remain wary of the process, regionalization is one way some local municipalities have consolidated police resources and mitigated increasing budgets. With a central force to cover several communities, police forces are not stretched as thin, and a larger pool of resources is available to officers. As more

communities become involved in these departments, it helps to decrease the annual costs for communities without cutting police officers' salaries.

Beaver County formed its first regional department earlier this year, with predictions for the annual budget of the Beaver Valley Regional Police Department coming in as the second lowest budget when added to the local police force budgets while having several more officers than other local departments. Rather than several communities each paying the average cost, the three communities have broken down the budget in a way that each region pays a fair share for their community.

The operational cost may rise with the recent addition of Rochester Township to the regional force, but this also adds another community paying into the unified department and overall reducing each community's costs. This is also likely to bring more officers onto the force, further reducing the strain on overtime budget and officers' fatigue.