

Guest column: Police officers, like elected officials, also need raises

By [John Covington](#), Guest Columnist

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The Memphis Police Department lost nearly 500 officers when police pensions and healthcare benefits were slashed in 2014. (Patrick Lantrip/ Daily Memphian file)

Congratulations to the Memphis City Council on its upcoming 19.9% raise. On Dec. 20, the Shelby County Commission approved a 19.9% pay raise for itself to take

GUEST COLUMNIST

John Covington

John Covington is the chief steward of the Memphis Police

effect in August. This bump will automatically trigger a 19.9% raise for the Memphis City Council as the result of a charter change. This triggering process dates back to a successful city referendum vote placed on the ballot by the City Council and successfully adopted on Nov. 5, 1996.

Association. He can be reached at john.covington@memphispoliceassociation.org.

Pating The Police: Comparing area officers' salaries

No one should begrudge the council's commitment to ensuring that they are paid at least the same as their counterparts at the County Commission. As leaders of such a large city as Memphis, with all of the complex challenges it faces daily, it is only right that they are not paid less than their Shelby County counterparts.

Given their commitment to pay parity for themselves, surely we can count on them to feel the same when it comes to the brave men and women of the Memphis Police Department. A raise in pay goes far beyond simple fairness; it is needed to confront a growing crisis.

Memphis desperately needs more police officers. The pandemic and societal upheaval have contributed to a nationwide police shortage. These factors have only exacerbated an issue Memphis has been struggling with since 2014 when the disastrous decision was made to slash police pensions and health care.

In the wake of the cuts, the Memphis Police Department lost nearly 500 officers. Any hopes of mitigating these losses, even slightly, were lost when then-Mayor AC Wharton cut the police budget and initiated a hiring freeze. Which, in turn, led to a lack of recruit classes for an extended period. At the time, then-Police Director Toney Armstrong presciently stated: "I don't want us to get into a situation where we're grossly understaffed and we have to have these big hiring frenzies." He was correct and here we are.

In recent years, the Memphis Police Association and Mayor Jim Strickland have worked collaboratively to implement a number of innovative, proactive programs designed to bolster recruitment and retention over the long term. These efforts, coupled with the work of the MPA, the IAFF and the citizens of Memphis in restoring benefits to first responders, have laid a solid foundation for long-term sustained success. Nevertheless, given soaring violent crime, it is clear that we need a major surge in recruiting ASAP.

Not so many years ago, MPD was first in pay in Shelby County and subsequently drew officers from other local departments. That is no longer the case. As stunning as it may be to believe, Memphis police officers are now paid less than every department in Shelby County (aside from Millington). Germantown currently enjoys an 8% advantage.

Area Patrolman Pay	
Police Agency	Patrolman Pay
Germantown Police Department	\$66,550
Shelby County Sheriff's Office	\$65,337
Bartlett Police Department	\$63,787
Collierville Police Department	\$62,439
Memphis Police Department	\$61,343
<i>Source: Memphis Police Association</i>	

If one adds incentive pay (such as Field Officer Training pay, college incentive, etc.), MPD still languishes behind Shelby County deputies by 8% in an apples-to-apples comparison. Over a 10-year period, from year five to year 15, an MPD officer will cumulatively make \$58,101 less than a Shelby County deputy. We simply cannot afford to make the Shelby County recruiter's job *that* easy!

It's just not practical to believe we can out-recruit local agencies in the face of such a pay disparity, especially when one factors in the amount of work (and added danger) MPD officers take on compared to local agencies. In 2019, MPD officers

answered 939,000 calls for service as compared to 86,617 for Shelby County and 40,177 for Germantown.

It is understood that this imbalance cannot be fixed overnight. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we assure possible recruits that there is a clearly delineated plan in place to be competitive with local departments. If we really want to move the needle with regard to recruitment and retention, it is time to commit to a two-year plan to get back to being first in Shelby County with a 5% raise in 2022 and a 5% raise in 2023.

Ultimately the decision to close the gap will rest with the Memphis City Council. Luckily for the citizens of Memphis, the council appears to be an avid proponent of pay parity with Shelby County.

We are told time and time again that budgets are a series of tough choices. I would respectfully disagree. Budgets are a reflection of priorities. The priority now must be to rebuild our police department and do all that is possible to protect the citizens of this city from violent crime.

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