

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON VERMONT

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Police Services Spending: The Story from 98 Towns

New research from UVM's Center for Research on Vermont examines police service spending at the town level.

“As voters head to the polls on Town Meeting day,” said Emily Anderson, the research coordinator, “We thought it important to show trends in police spending at the town level.”

While there has been considerable news coverage of urban police department budgets, including the Burlington Police Department, little attention has been paid to spending in Vermont's more rural towns, said lead student researcher Valentina Czochanski.

“As the country re-examines the role of police and policing in society we were curious how much Vermont spends for policing at the town level” Czochanski said. “Given the calls to defund the police, we wanted to know what was happening at the town level,” Czochanski said. “Early indications are that police spending may be slowing.”

The new data seeks to shed light on the dynamics of town level police service spending. How much are towns spending? Is it increasing or decreasing? How much are towns spending per capita? Who is spending the most and the least?

FINDINGS

This report includes 98 towns

The researchers focused on FY 2022 (or in some cases CY 2021) proposed police service spending budgets – those budgets approved by town select-boards – but for voters to decide at town meeting March 2.

Across all 98 towns, police spending decreased .45% with a total spending of \$72 million. The overall decrease was driven by several towns that sharply reduced their police spending.

Across all 98 towns, 47 increased their police spending, 21 decreased and 7 remained the same. Researchers were not able to find the previous year's police spending from about 23 (mostly) very small towns.

Seven towns saw increases above ten percent:

Hinesburg, East Montpelier, Montpelier, Waterbury, Thetford, Georgia, St Albans (town),

Seven towns saw decreases of more than 20%

Rutland (town), Underhill, St Albans (City), Arlington, Lyndonville, Pomfret, Greensboro

The rate of increase for 21-22 (-.045) was less than the rate of increase for 20-21 (6.5%).

Some towns spend very little per capita (less than \$50) and some spend more than \$300.

Biggest spenders are generally the biggest towns but not always, as some larger towns spend less than their peers, such as Charlotte, Westford, Underhill and Derby.

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BACKGROUND

Student researchers examined town websites and wrote and called town officials to find the data, looking for funding allocated to police services, for FY 2022 or CY 2021 (towns can use different budget year approaches) and for total general fund spending.

Town population numbers were taken from the US Census American Community Survey five year rolling average, year 2018.

“Collecting data from Vermont town budgets is no easy task,” said Emily Anderson. “Aside from the frequent difficulty of locating the budgets on town websites, there are several key ways that budgets often vary from town to town, which can make comparisons challenging.”

First, not all towns propose and adopt their budgets on the same schedules. Some towns still use the calendar year—Vermont’s original town budget schedule—which runs from January 1st to December 31st. However, many towns have opted to use FY, which runs from July 1st to June 30th.

Second, some towns include salaries and benefits under their police budget lines while others provide these expenses elsewhere. Knowing whether a budget includes benefits is crucial; in some cases, excluding benefits can reduce a police budget to 10th its actual size. The researchers added a column to the spreadsheet to indicate that.

To maintain consistency and improve clarity, the researchers have noted the budget schedule and whether the police budget includes benefits alongside the data when that information is available.

“This data is meant as a starting point not an end point,” Anderson said, “but it is our hope that it will contribute to the conversation about police spending.”

This is a project of the Center for Research on Vermont.

A number of student researchers contributed to this report: Valentina Czochanski, Lucy Heisey and Emma Blahut. Valentina is the student leader, Emily the overall research coordinator.