

More Tickets in Hard Times

Cities searching for revenue look to their police departments as a way to cash in.

By George Hunter of [Car and Driver](#)

Motorists beware: In some communities, police are issuing tickets during these hard times at a rate higher than ever in what critics say is an attempt to raise revenue in order to offset budget shortfalls.

Take, for example, the metropolitan Detroit area, which has been reeling economically much longer than has the rest of the country. The number of moving violations issued has increased by at least 50 percent in 18 communities in the metro area since 2002 — and 11 of those municipalities have seen ticketing increases of 90 percent or more. During that time, Michigan has cut revenue sharing to communities by \$3 billion. Officials are scrambling to balance their budgets amid the tumbling economy, and some people say the authorities are turning to traffic cops for help.

The president of a state police union isn't pretending it doesn't happen. James Tignanelli, president of the Police Officers Association of Michigan union, says, "When elected officials say, 'We need more money,' they can't look to the department of public works to raise revenues, so where do they find it? Police departments.

"A lot of police chiefs will tell you the goal is to have nobody speeding through their community, but heaven forbid if it should actually happen — they'd be out of money," Tignanelli says.

Police Chief Michael Reaves of Utica, Michigan, says the role of law enforcement has changed over the years. "When I first started in this job 30 years ago, police work was never about revenue enhancement, but if you're a chief now, you have to look at whether your department produces revenues," he says. "That's just the reality nowadays."

Motorists such as George Hilliard are outraged at the ramped-up traffic enforcement. Hilliard, a 49-year-old warehouse worker who's been laid off, says he got a ticket last year near his home in Dearborn Heights on a section of road where the speed limit drops suddenly from 45 to 35 mph. A few weeks later, his son got a ticket on the same stretch of road. A few weeks after that, according to Hilliard, his other son got a ticket in the same spot.

"The cops sit out there and pick people off, one by one," Hilliard says. "They're catching people left and right. There's a McDonald's right there, and they pull people in there all day. They'll give you a ticket for going five miles over the speed limit. They're making so much money off people, it's ridiculous." Driving 5 mph over the limit is a \$90 ticket in Dearborn Heights and tacks two points onto the motorist's driving record.

Garrett TeWinkle of Seal Beach, California, was headed to a wedding in Ohio recently

when he was given a speeding ticket in Taylor, a few miles from Detroit Metro Airport.

"I was astounded to get a speeding ticket," TeWinkle says. "Even my wife, who is my harshest critic, says there is no way I was driving as fast as the officer said. I hadn't had a ticket in years.

"I had been under the impression that Michigan was trying to promote tourism," TeWinkle says. "Great way to make a first impression — no wonder the state's economy is in the porcelain."

Kathleen Weckler of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, feels the same way. Last year, on her 80th birthday, she was on her way to the dentist when a police officer in nearby Birmingham gave her a ticket for running a red light. Weckler insists she didn't run the light — "but you can't fight them. It's their word against yours," she says.

"I told one officer that I used to tell my children that police officers are their friend — but with the [ticket] quotas, they are not any more," Weckler says.

Some police officers, such as Sgt. Richard Lyons of Trenton, Michigan, say they don't like being pressured to write more tickets.

"That's not what I got into law enforcement for — to hand out chintzy tickets," says Lyons, a 21-year veteran. "Things have changed from when I first started in this job. There was a time when you'd come in, do your job, and go home.

But I've never felt pressure to bring revenue to the city like we do now.

"It's a whole different ball game now," Lyons says. "They're trying to use police officers to balance the budget on the backs of drivers, and it's too bad. The people we count on to support us and help us when we're on the road are the ones who end up paying the bills, and they're ticked off about it. We might as well just go door to door and tell people, 'Slide us \$100 now since your 16-year-old is going to end up paying us anyway when he starts driving.' You can't blame people for getting upset."

Jack Walker of Flint was given two speeding tickets within a few weeks of each other last year while driving in Orion Township. He says police are more aggressive than ever about stopping motorists.

"It's getting ridiculous: Police are using us as their fundraiser, and it's not right," Walker says. "They have more important things to do."