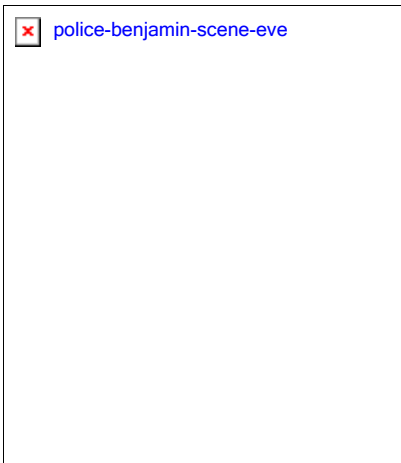




SWAT standoff cost taxpayers thousands in police pay

[Corey Friedman](#)

2010-04-15 17:55:57



A gunman's nine-hour standoff with police cost Gaston County taxpayers more than a new compact car or a minimum-wage worker's yearly earnings.

Gastonia police estimate the April 2 tactical operation to remove 48-year-old Gary Burch from his South Marietta Street home carried a price tag of about \$15,500. Nearly all of that expense was overtime and special duty pay for police officers, said Capt. Steve Duncan, commander of the special weapons and tactics team.

"The cost of an operation is not the main consideration, but it's always a consideration," Duncan said. "The cost of a human life is absolutely first. We would not refrain from doing something we should do because of cost, but at the same time, we need to be good stewards of the taxpayers' money."

Police closed several blocks of Marietta Street, evacuated nearby homes and a convenience store and massed in a church parking lot when Gastonia patrol officers found Burch barricaded in his home after allegedly pointing a gun at his brother. Officers had heard what sounded like muffled gunshots inside the home.

Public safety's price

Fifty-two officers responded to Burch's home at 1516 S. Marietta St. during the course of the nine-hour standoff, Duncan said, including the 16 tactical officers who comprise one of the SWAT Team's two squads. Roughly 35 percent of those on the scene were not scheduled to work and had to be called in.

"We call in the number of people that we do because of the potential moreso than the actual," said Duncan. "The suspect actually dictates the tone of the scenario."

About \$15,000 was spent on police pay, and the four or five canisters of tear gas used to flush Burch out of his home account for the remaining \$500. Duncan said the cost of fuel for the SWAT mobile command center and other police vehicles could add an additional several hundred dollars.

The other figure not included in police estimates is the cost of using special vehicles and other equipment. Duncan said much of that equipment is purchased and maintained with federal grants and drug asset forfeiture funds, so the cost to city taxpayers would be negligible.

"The people are our biggest expense," he said. "We don't want people standing around, so we'll call in the people that we need, and if it turns out we don't need all of them, then we can send some back."

Duncan said the April 2 standoff cost taxpayers roughly \$1,560 an hour, with one hour added for investigation and command shutdown after Burch surrendered to police.

While large-scale tactical operations will always be expensive, the SWAT Team has worked to scale back its cost. In 2007, the team expanded into two 16-member squads, reducing the number of personnel

dispatched to many incidents and providing a backup unit to relieve the first team in protracted incidents.

“The division of the team was probably the biggest savings to the taxpayer,” Duncan said. “We have thought a lot about it, and we’ve cut our costs a lot from what our operational costs used to be.”

Response justified

Activating the SWAT Team was a legitimate response to Burch’s alleged show of aggression, according to a journalist and researcher who studies the rising use of paramilitary tactics by law enforcement agencies across the United States.

“If it’s true that he pointed the gun at someone and there was a credible reason to think that he was an immediate threat to other people, then I think that’s a reasonable use of the SWAT Team,” said Radley Balko, a senior editor at *Reason* magazine.

The length of time negotiators spent trying to coax Burch out of his home and the escalation to tear gas rather than a forced entry of the home show that Gastonia police were working toward a peaceful end to the standoff, Balko said.

Using tear gas “is certainly preferable to storming the place with guns and flash grenades and triggering a confrontation,” he said.

Balko is the author of “Overkill: The Rise of Paramilitary Police Raids in America,” a study he wrote while working as a policy analyst for the Cato Institute. His research concluded that the most common use of police SWAT teams is to serve arrest warrants on suspected drug dealers and users.

Such drug raids — many of which include forced entry into a suspect’s home — create violent confrontations that could be avoided and jeopardize the safety of police officers and bystanders, Balko said.

“When you break into someone’s house in the middle of the night, you’re evoking a sort of primal response,” he said. “It’s really a horrible way to serve these warrants. You’re basically evoking this primal fight-or-flight response in people, and if they can’t flee, they fight.”

Duncan said Gastonia police avoid storming a suspect’s home in the pre-dawn darkness. The SWAT Team is only used to serve warrants when authorities believe a suspect is armed and may turn violent.

“We’d use that only in an extreme circumstance,” he said. “We certainly prefer to have people come out to us every single time if we can do it, but as a last resort, that is one tactic that would be used if it was needed. It’s not used very frequently.”

An example of overkill from Balko’s research occurred outside Wilmington in October 2002 when a sheriff’s department SWAT team raided the home of a 25-year-old accused of buying crack cocaine from a police informant. The man, Paul Pelham, woke to exploding grenades and shot at tactical officers — whom he said he thought were intruders.

Pelham shot and wounded a New Brunswick County sheriff’s deputy, and police returned fire, shooting him 17 times. Both men survived the shootout, but the deputy is permanently disabled and Pelham was sentenced to 19 to 26 years in prison, according to a case study from “Overkill.”

In another case, SWAT officers opened fire on a Greensboro college student accused of stealing a video game system.

“That was a very clear example of where you have a nonviolent crime and you’re using an overwhelming amount of force to deal with it,” Balko said.

Top-flight team

The Gastonia Police Department SWAT Team is composed of 32 officers from four local law enforcement agencies. Six are from the Gaston County Sheriff's Office, two each are from the Belmont and Mount Holly police departments, and the remaining 22 are Gastonia police officers.

Duncan, who has been on the tactical team since its formation in 1988, said Gastonia's group has developed a reputation as one of the region's premier SWAT teams. The group competes in police and military marksmanship events and hosts the annual Gastonia Police Sniper Conference, which draws top sniper teams from across the Southeast.

"Any time we go to something like that, we are always in the top few," Duncan said. "Most of that is due to our training and experience."

New SWAT officers complete a 40-hour training session and serve as probationary members for one year. All members of the team train for two to four days each month, with courses divided between the entry and sniper teams.

Gastonia's tactical team completes an average of 10 to 15 operations a year. When not responding to SWAT calls, team members are assigned to regular police duties.

"I think our team would be in line with any agency our size anywhere in the nation," Duncan said. "I think our training, our equipment, the attitude of our guys and the dedication of our guys is second to none."

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