

Police Spending Rises, Staffing Levels Fall

Police staffing levels were hotly debated during recent budget deliberations in Milwaukee and Madison. We analyzed a decade of data for Wisconsin’s 10 largest cities to determine if these communities were facing similar pressures and found police spending and violent crime rates have risen, but compared to a decade ago there are fewer police officers per capita in seven of the 10 cities.

The city of Milwaukee’s recently adopted 2020 budget drew headlines for cutting 60 police officer positions. In Madison, city leaders said their budget allowed for only three new police positions instead of the 12 sought by the chief.

Our 2020 budget briefs for Milwaukee and Madison analyzed these issues and also led us to consider whether other large Wisconsin cities are facing similar questions about appropriate and affordable levels of sworn police officers. We examined data on police staffing levels and related metrics in Wisconsin’s 10 largest cities by population and found that several other communities are grappling with similar trends.

Our findings lend context to tough budgeting decisions and show how police spending can outpace inflation even as staffing levels fall. They may also provide insight into how cities are handling core public safety duties during a time when they face limits on property taxes

and little to no increase in state aids.

Number of Officers

Our analysis of police sworn strength levels used Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data from 2008 to 2018. The FBI defines law enforcement officers as “individuals who ordinarily carry a firearm and a badge, have full arrest powers, and are paid from governmental funds set aside specifically for sworn law enforcement.” In 2018, sworn officers per 10,000 residents in the state’s 10 largest cities ranged from a low of 13.6 in Eau Claire to a high of 31.1 in Milwaukee. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Total Sworn Staff, Population, and Violent Crimes Per 100,000 Residents in Wisconsin’s Top Ten Cities, 2018

City	Population	Number of Sworn Officers	Officers per 10K Residents	Violent Crime Rate
Milwaukee	595,555	1851	31.1	1475.3
Madison	252,546	482	18.6	429.9
Green Bay	105,477	180	17.1	509.1
Kenosha	99,263	196	19.6	338.2
Racine	77,807	195	25.2	619.1
Appleton	74,734	109	14.5	292.3
Waukesha	71,731	117	16.1	126.6
Oshkosh	66,945	104	15.6	172.3
Eau Claire	65,993	94	13.6	356.9
Janesville	63,570	103	16.0	279.2

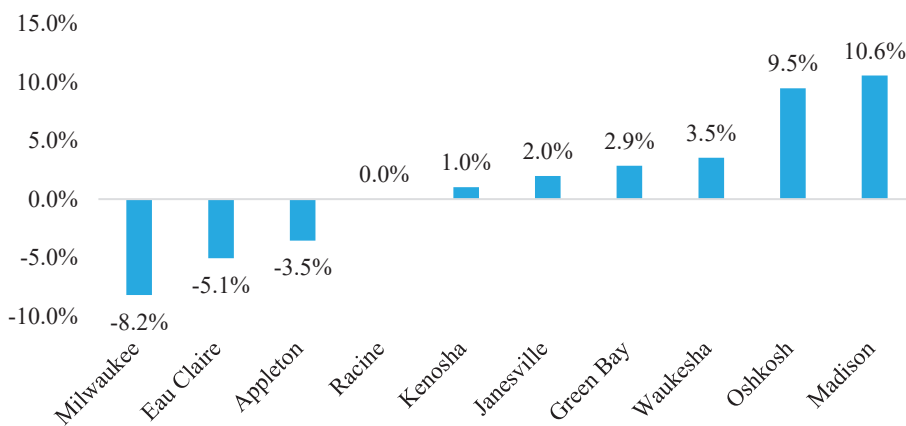
Sources: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Wisconsin Department of Administration

The table also shows violent crime rates for the 10 cities. While violent crime does not necessarily correlate directly with the need for police officers, it can be an important indicator and provide context for sworn strength levels. As shown in the table, the two cities with the highest violent crime rates (offenses per 100,000 residents) in 2018—Milwaukee and Racine—also had the most sworn officers per capita.

In six of the 10 cities, the number of officers increased between 2008 and 2018. Three of the cities had fewer officers while Racine had the same number in both years. (See Figure 1.)

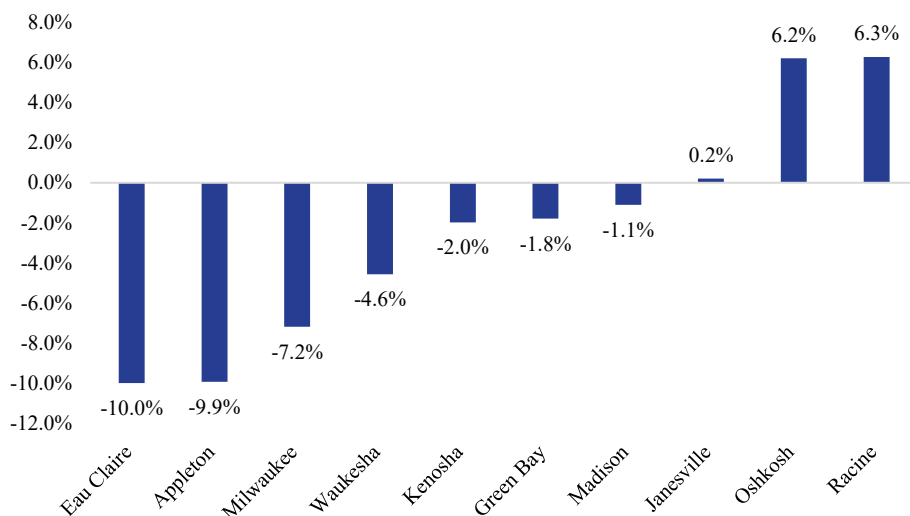
Combined, the total number of officers in the 10 cities decreased by 3% to 3,431 in 2018 from 3,537 in 2008. That was largely a function of the decrease in officers in Milwaukee, which has more police than the other nine cities combined. However, it is also in line with national trends. According to FBI data, the number of sworn officers in U.S. cities decreased by 3% from 449,896 officers in 2008 to 436,603 in 2018.

Figure 1: Change in Total Officers Mixed
% Increase or Decrease in Total Police Officers by City, 2008-18



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

Figure 2: Most Cities Have Fewer Police Per Capita
 % Change in Sworn Officers per 10,000 Residents by City, 2008-18



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

Picture Changes When Population Considered

Valuable context for considering police staffing levels in these cities is provided by also looking at changes in population. According to data from the Wisconsin Department of Administration, the population in all of the 10 cities except Racine increased between 2008 and 2018, rising at a faster rate in most of the cities than the number of police officers.

As a result, seven of the 10 cities had fewer sworn officers per 10,000 people in 2018 than in 2008. (See Figure 2.) The only exceptions to this trend were Janesville, where the ratio of officers to 10,000 residents was essentially flat, and Oshkosh and Racine, which saw increases of 6.2% and 6.3% respectively. (Although the number of sworn officers in Racine did not change over the past decade, it had more police per 10,000 people because its population decreased by 2,513 people, or 3%.)

In the 10 cities combined, the number of officers per 10,000 people was 23.3 in 2018, down 5.7% from 24.7 in 2008. As with the change in total officers, this change in the ratio of officers to population is also in line with national trends: FBI data for U.S. cities show a decrease of 5.1% from 23.2 officers per 10,000 residents in 2008 to 22.1 in 2018.

Here two caveats are in order. First, this analysis doesn't take into account any potential change in police overtime hours or other staffing patterns that might change the actual hours worked by each city's of-

ficers. Second, it doesn't look at changes in civilian police department staff that might affect how much time sworn officers have to devote to the jobs only they can perform.

A decrease in per capita police staffing could have important consequences. For example, police staffing in certain discretionary functions may need to be reduced to ensure enough officers in core areas such as patrolling. Earlier this year, the acting Madison police chief warned that if sufficient officer positions were not added, he would need to redeploy some officers from their current duties on community policing teams, the gang unit, community outreach and education, and neighborhood police in order to adequately staff patrols.

Spending, Violent Crime Rise

Despite the per capita drop in sworn staff in most of the cities, their police spending increased substantially. Violent crime rates also rose, though we are not suggesting a link between those factors.

To analyze police spending in the 10 cities, we looked at net figures from the Department of Revenue, subtracting revenues paid by neighboring communities for police services provided to them. The analysis looked at data from 2008 to 2017, the most recent year available.

Overall, net police spending per capita in the 10 cities increased by 23% between 2008 and 2017, from \$299.94 to \$368.88. That compares to a 13.8% increase in inflation during those years.

Given the decrease in police officers per capita, this finding suggests that increased police spending in the 10 cities is attributed mainly to rising costs for police salaries or overtime and benefits as well as other department needs. Unlike most public employees in Wisconsin, police officers are still covered by broad union contracts, but this analysis did not examine whether that is affecting their compensation.

Meanwhile, according to FBI data, violent crime rates from 2008 to 2017 increased in all but two of the cities (Green Bay and Oshkosh). For the 10 cities combined, the violent crime rate increased 24%, from 717.9 offenses per 100,000 residents to 890.3. It is important to note the overall violent crime rate in 2017 was modestly impacted by a change in the definition of sexual assault. Three of the 10 cities changed their reporting practices during the period (Madison and Green Bay in 2010 and Racine in 2017), which can also impact crime statistics, though collectively the remaining cities also saw a rise in violent crime rates.

The Wisconsin figures run contrary to the national trend. According to FBI data, the violent crime rate for all U.S. cities decreased by 14.4%, from 547.2 offenses per 100,000 residents in 2008 to 468.2 in 2017. On the other hand, the total crime rate for the ten Wisconsin cities, including both violent and property crimes, fell by 28.3%, primarily driven by a decrease in property crimes.

Food for Thought for Policymakers?

The state's 10 largest cities have increased police spending substantially in recent years despite budget pressures. Those increases, however, have not been sufficient to maintain per capita police staffing levels in most of those communities despite rising violent crime rates.

Municipal elected officials must consider many factors within their budgets and communities when deciding whether to maintain or increase police sworn strength levels. However, given the priority that is typically given to public safety, the fact that police staffing in many large cities is not keeping pace with population growth could be a sign of intensifying fiscal constraints.

This trend is one more element to consider in the ongoing conversation about appropriate levels of local spending and property taxes as well as state aid to cities and villages in Wisconsin.