



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 3, 2023

**Milwaukee Community Justice Council (CJC) Partners with Argosy Foundation and Wisconsin Policy Forum (WPF) to Analyze the Impact of COVID-19 on Public Safety in Milwaukee County**

**"Under Pressure: Milwaukee County Justice System's Recovery from COVID-19"**

[Milwaukee, WI] - Since its establishment in 2008, the [Milwaukee Community Justice Council](#) (CJC) has been promoting national best practices and employing research- and data-driven decision-making to shape policy for Milwaukee County's justice system. In alignment with these values, CJC leadership welcomed the opportunity to partner with the Argosy Foundation and the Wisconsin Policy Forum (WPF) to conduct an [independent, comprehensive analysis of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Milwaukee County's criminal justice system and to assess whether policies implemented during the pandemic had any impact on public safety within Milwaukee County](#).

The [newly released Wisconsin Policy Forum report](#) highlights how justice system operations and trends have changed over time. The justice system and many facets of our community faced unprecedented challenges with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Disruptions to traditional workflows and massive in-person operations resulted in delays across all aspects of the criminal justice process. As the pandemic progressed, retirements and staff departures also became and remain a top concern. Throughout the pandemic and still today, the CJC's membership was responsive to the dynamic challenges and formed nimble teams who meet frequently to address critical issues. Many groups still meet today, including those targeted at reducing violence and the court backlog.

The report also points out that as the pandemic unfolded, our community also found itself in a state of crisis. Individuals within the justice system — staff, attorneys, judges, defendants, victims, witnesses, etc. — were grappling with a convergence of social and economic pressures, which are more difficult to quantify; however, the Medical Examiner's reports (see below) indicate significant increases in non-natural deaths, which emphasizes just how challenging times have been for the residents of Milwaukee County.

Tom Reed, Regional Attorney Manager for the State of Wisconsin Public Defender's Office stated, "Beyond the financial perils many disadvantaged individuals faced, we witnessed an alarming surge in trauma stemming from substance abuse, overdose deaths, traffic accidents, disrupted education, suicides, and other manifestations of societal suffering; all while community-based services were also limited or unavailable. These overwhelming circumstances significantly hampered individuals' ability to engage or stay engaged in court proceedings even when the court was available."

In response to the report, Milwaukee Police Chief Jeffrey Norman stated, "The Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) is committed to thoughtful and intentional law enforcement, and one of the most useful tools we rely upon is data to both understand where we have been and to drive us to serve our community even better. MPD is grateful for the work of the Wisconsin Policy Forum. The results are certainly thought-provoking, and we recognize that several factors -- internal and external -- have impacted our work and the important work of the entire Milwaukee County criminal justice system. We look forward to the next steps that perhaps include further analysis to understand the true causation of these trends and what factors impacted our work most significantly."

CJC Chair and Chief Judge Carl Ashley also noted, "The Courts have a history of utilizing data and evidence to guide decision-making, and the Wisconsin Policy Forum's report will play a pivotal role in shaping the prioritization and direction of our work.

Working collaboratively to ensure a fair, efficient, and effective justice system that promotes public safety and quality of life in our community.

[www.milwaukee.gov/cjc](http://www.milwaukee.gov/cjc)

As the Chair of the CJC, we are committed to improving the trends highlighted in the report. We have already implemented several initiatives to reduce court backlogs and increase access to justice, yielding encouraging signs of improvement to crime data and adjudication rates.”

In closing, the Milwaukee Community Justice Council is grateful for its longstanding partnership with the Wisconsin Policy Forum and the knowledge and expertise its team brings to analyzing complex issues in Wisconsin. The CJC's membership will use the report as a roadmap, along with input from the community, for further in-depth discussions and action in the weeks and months ahead. As individual agencies and as a body, we remain steadfast in our commitment to working collaboratively to ensure a fair, efficient, and effective justice system that promotes both public safety and quality of life in our community.

##

[A copy of the full report can be accessed here](#)

Figure 1: Milwaukee County Deaths - Source: Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office via email 07/20/2023

