

# OUR TOP FIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR 2023

Forum researchers churned out 54 reports and interactive data tools in 2023 that covered a wide variety of timely issues. Our annual top five list features research findings related to marijuana policy, state parks, and city of Milwaukee arrests, as well as two related to policy areas that are more traditional for us: early childhood and K-12 education.

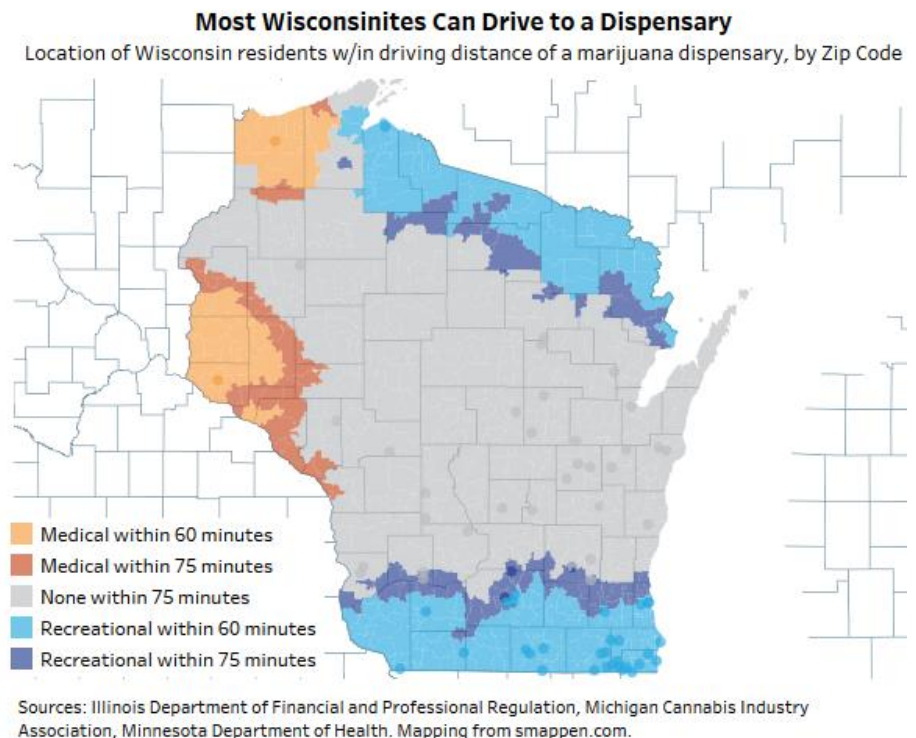
Given that 2023 was a state budget year, it should come as no surprise that state and local government finances represented the Forum’s most prominent research topic in 2023, accounting for 20 of our 54 research products. Yet what may be more surprising for those most familiar with our work on budgets, education, and the economy was the diverse range of policy areas we addressed this year, including public health issues like [cigarette sales](#) and [mortality trends](#); environmental issues like [solid waste collection](#) and [water conservation](#); and justice system issues like [corrections populations](#) and [district attorney pay](#) and turnover.

In fact, while this year’s list of top five Forum research findings does feature two on education, the remaining three cover important policy concerns in areas that are not typically part of our research agenda. Also notable is the fact that none of our key findings this year involve our work on local government and school district budgets.

It was not easy to choose our top five from our dozens of in-depth reports, policy briefs, and interactive data tools. However, after considering our full portfolio, we made the tough decisions based primarily on which findings uncovered new and important information that is relevant to policymakers at the state or local level.

Here is this year’s top five list in order of publication.

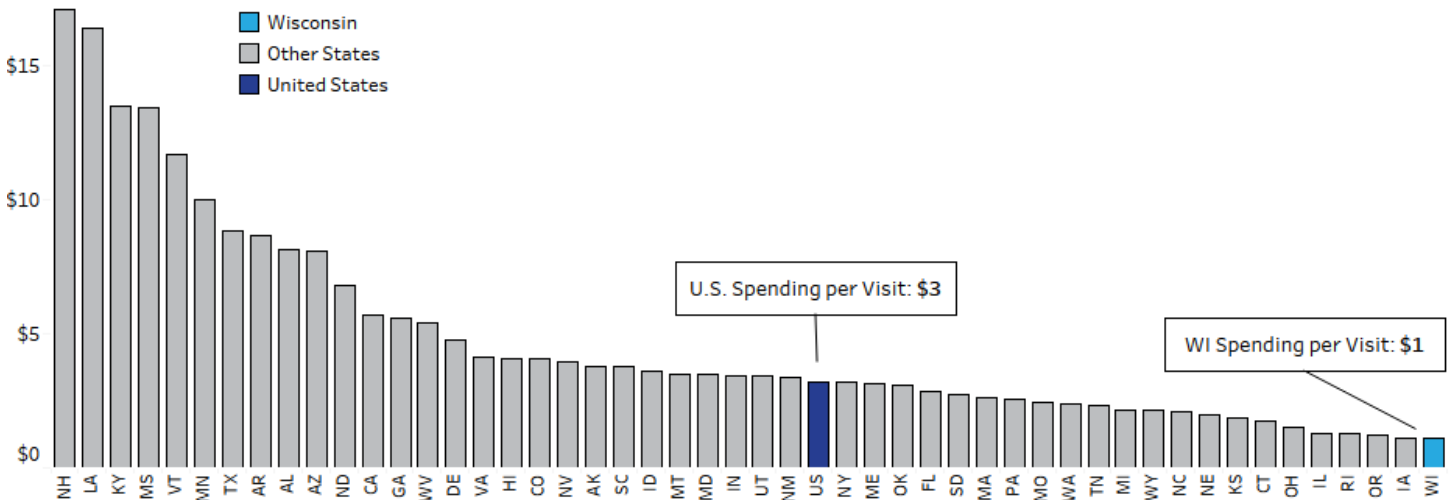
1. **Millions of Wisconsinites have easy access to marijuana.** In February, we reported the legalization of adult recreational marijuana in Michigan and Illinois meant that three out of every 10 Wisconsin residents above the age of 21 were living within an hour’s drive of a marijuana dispensary. Also, half of all such Wisconsinites (about 2.16 million individuals) were able to drive to a dispensary within 75 minutes. Since then, the approval of recreational marijuana in Minnesota (our map from February shows only medical marijuana dispensaries in the state) has only reinforced our point. Our report – [Changing Midwest](#)



[Marijuana Landscape Impacts Wisconsin](#) – was not cast as an argument for legalization here, but instead was intended to lay out the implications for policymakers, including the increased difficulty the state and its municipalities may have in enforcing marijuana prohibitions here and the loss of potential revenues to neighboring states.

2. **Wisconsin is at rock bottom in supporting its state parks.** [This Land is Your Land](#) – published in March – took a look at conservation funding in Wisconsin and found the state spent only \$19.6 million in 2017 (the last year for which national data are available) to operate its parks, or \$1.08 per visit. According to an association of national park directors, that was the lowest level of support per visit in the country. We suggested that one contributor to Wisconsin’s low ranking was the complete elimination of state general purpose revenue support for parks over a 20-year period from 1995 to 2015, which has led to a near complete reliance on fees.

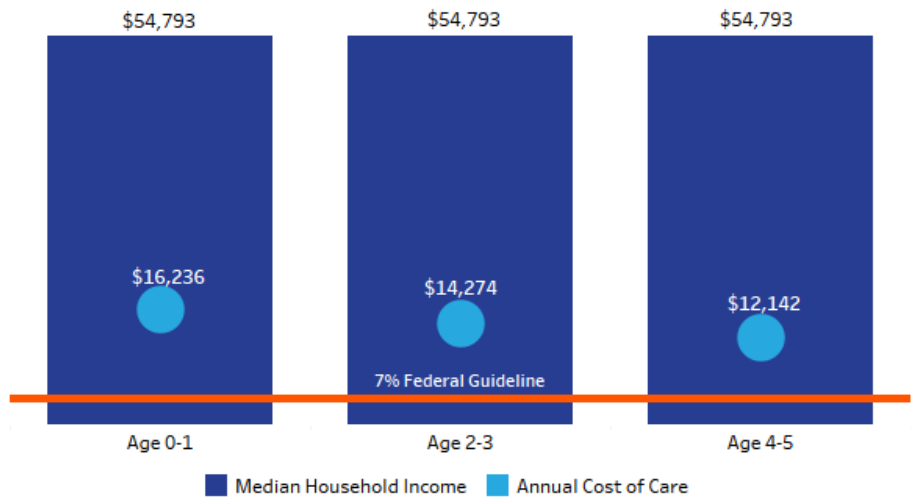
**Wisconsin Spends Less on Parks Compared to Other States**  
Ratio of state park spending on operations to visits to state parks, 2017



Source: National Association of State Park Directors; data for New Jersey not available.

3. **The economics of early childhood education don’t work.** In May, we released an analysis of the early childhood education sector in Wisconsin ([Not Mere Child’s Play](#)). One startling finding was that the average annual cost of early childhood care and education for a four year-old in Milwaukee County is \$12,142 and for an infant is \$16,236. That is more expensive than in-state tuition at any University of Wisconsin campus, and it equates to 22.2% (for a four-year-old) or 29.6% (for an infant) of the 2021 annual median household income in Milwaukee County. Yet these high prices do not translate into competitive pay for Milwaukee

**Cost of Child Care Exceeds Federal Recommendation**  
2022 Average cost per child care slot in Milwaukee County compared to 2021 county household median income

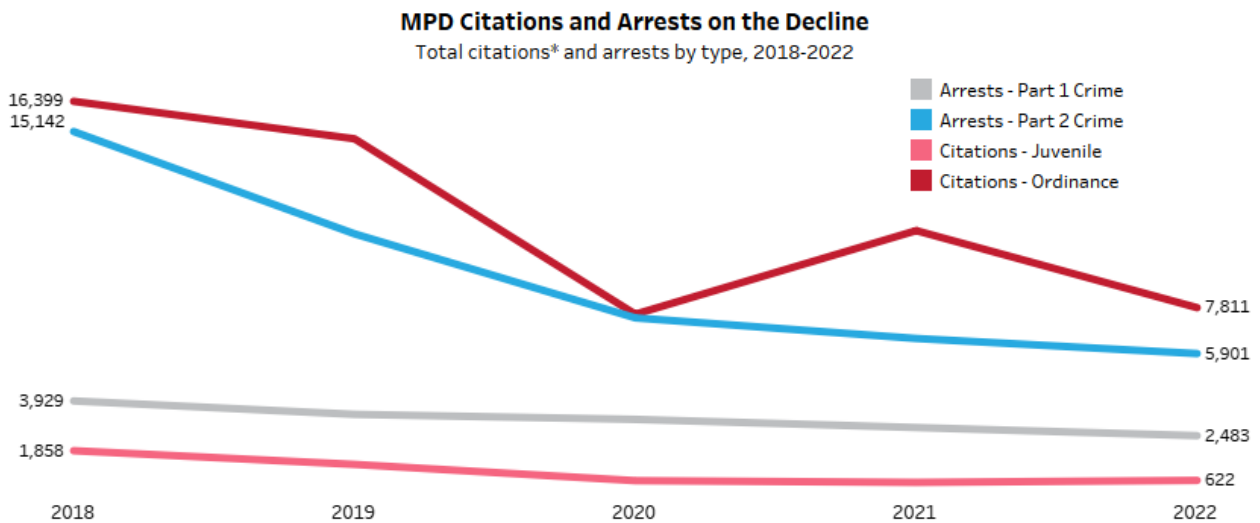


Source: DCF 2022 Market Rate Survey Results, Census Bureau



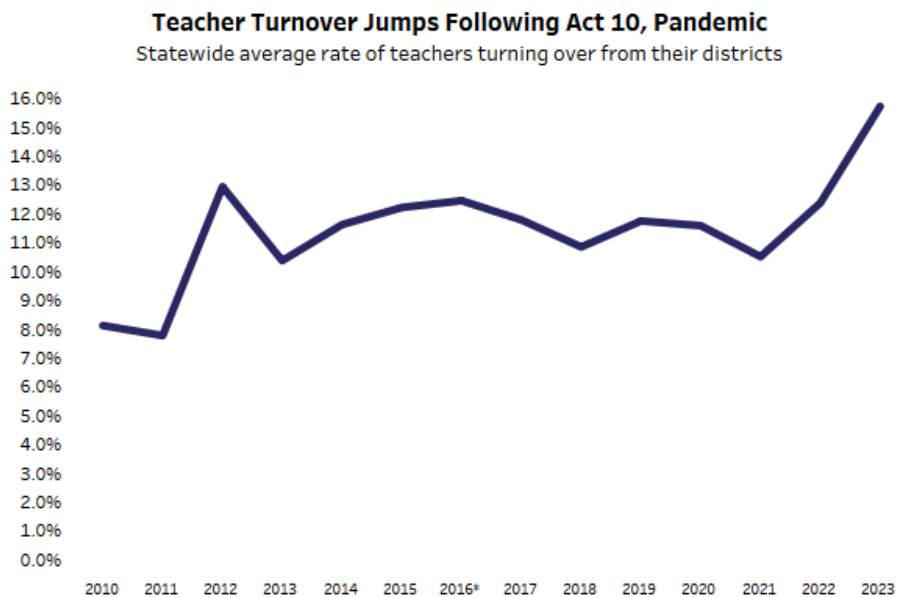
County child care workers, whose average hourly wage is less than the \$15 per hour increasingly adopted by “big box” stores like Target. Overall, we found that the infusion of temporary federal pandemic relief aid made the economics of early childhood education temporarily more tenable in recent years and warned of the consequences when that aid expires.

4. **Arrests plummet in the city of Milwaukee.** In [Under Pressure](#), our August report that explored how the justice system in Milwaukee County was recovering from COVID-19, we found a striking trend that had taken shape before the pandemic and had continued even as it subsided. In 2022, arrests were 36.8% lower for serious “Part 1” crimes and a whopping 61.0% lower for less serious “Part 2” crimes in the city than in 2018. We also found sizable drops in certain citations issued by the Milwaukee Police Department and we later discovered in subsequent research that field interviews and traffic stops also declined dramatically. Why police interactions with citizens have plummeted and what this means for public safety and police-community relations in the city will be a primary research topic for the Forum in 2024.



Source: City of Milwaukee Municipal Court. \*Does not include citations for state statutes, primarily related to driving - 29.8% decrease over this time period.

5. **Statewide teacher turnover is surging.** Many school districts across Wisconsin have been citing concerns with teacher recruitment and retention as the labor market has tightened, but the magnitude of the problem was unknown to many prior to the publication of our August report, [Revolving Classroom Doors](#). The report found that while an average of 11.5% of the state’s teachers turned over each year from 2009 to 2023, that rate rose to 15.8% in the 2022-23 school year – the highest percentage in the 14 years of transitions and almost three percentage points higher than the previous high in the year following the adoption of 2011 Wisconsin Act



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis. \*2016 turnovers are likely overstated due to an apparent reporting error of Milwaukee Public Schools staffing data.



10. We also found that turnover was highest within districts serving vulnerable student populations and among teachers of color as well as small, rural districts; and that the decline was largely due to exits from public school classrooms in the state rather than moves between districts.

Because we limit our annual list to five, we had to leave out several other important 2023 findings. Those included new insights on statewide issues like the rising rate of chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools, historic turnover in the state government workforce, and the notable progress but still considerable task of removing lead water laterals in Wisconsin communities. Important findings on metro Milwaukee issues that did not crack our top five included the slow pace of affordable housing development in Waukesha County, the steep workforce challenges facing Greater Milwaukee's construction industry, the continuing financial challenges facing the Milwaukee County Transit System, and the impacts of the recently passed Wisconsin Act 12 on city and county budgets in Milwaukee. Those interested in reviewing these and other research findings can access the Forum's full portfolio of research publications on our [website](#).

We're proud that in 2023 we were able to exceed our goal of publishing an average of one report or brief for each of the 52 weeks in the year. Our staff is also excited that our work on city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County finances played a big role in the adoption of local government finance reforms in the state Capitol this year and that our multiple reports on state budget issues enhanced the debate on critical items like [district attorney and public defender pay](#), [early childhood education funding](#), and [use of the state surplus](#).

We also want to thank our members and supporters, whose generosity fuels our productivity and allows Wisconsin residents to benefit from the existence of one of the nation's top nonpartisan policy think tanks. We look forward to the launch of dozens of timely and provocative research projects in 2024 and we hope to see many of our members at our annual meeting on January 31!

