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Arresting Developments

How and why arrests and citizen contacts are declining in Milwaukee

The total number of arrests, traffic stops, and contacts with citizens conducted by the Milwaukee Police Department dropped precipitously in recent years, raising questions about the impact of these trends on public safety and police-community relations, a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report finds.

The report examines how and why police-resident interactions have changed in Milwaukee during the last decade. It finds that the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) made 51,176 arrests in 2012, but just 9,061 in 2023 – a decline of 82.3%, with declines occurring in years before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Milwaukee police contacts with citizens also saw a sharp decline: in 2023, MPD made 27,715 traffic stops, 81.5% fewer than it made in 2015; the department also conducted only 708 subject stops last year, a 98.5% decrease from 2015.

The report provides added context by comparing Milwaukee to a group of 11 peer cities, finding that since 2012, the decline in Milwaukee's arrest rate was the largest of any city in that group. Milwaukee's rate of 85.5 arrests per 1,000 residents in 2012 was the highest of any of the peer cities, but its 2023 rate of 16.1 arrests per 1,000 residents was higher than only two of those peers: Seattle (10.8) and Cleveland (9.3).

"Our analysis shows that policing in Milwaukee has changed markedly over the last decade," the report says. "Police are now coming into contact with residents at significantly lower rates than they used to, and far fewer arrests are being made – particularly for lower-level crimes."

The report examines what factors are causing these reductions, what impacts they are having on Milwaukee's residents and public safety, and what policy or procedural changes – if any – the department may wish to consider in response.

A closer look: MPD arrests fall into three categories. "Taken into Custody" arrests, which are made based on a warrant of a previously submitted incident report, and "On-View," arrests, which are made on the basis of what an MPD officer or Milwaukee resident witnesses, result in an offender being taken into custody. "Summons and Citations" arrests involve individuals who are simply served notice to appear in court at a future date, and typically only are used for misdemeanor cases.

About 82% of the total decline in MPD arrests since 2012 can be explained by a drop in Summons and Citations arrests, which fell by 95.7% from 36,055 in 2012 to 1,568 in 2023. Crimes that saw a high concentration of these types of arrests include disorderly conduct, drug abuse and equipment,

and destruction and vandalism. MPD “On-View” arrests dropped by 64.6% since 2012; “Taken into Custody” arrests declined by 24.0%.

Possible contributing factors: The following list includes factors that likely contributed to the above trends, though we cannot say definitively that all of these explanations are causal. They are based on the Forum’s review of data, news articles, and discussions with public officials and public safety professionals in Milwaukee:

- **Reported offenses in Milwaukee have been falling.** In Milwaukee, reported offenses fell from 64,116 in 2012 to 45,173 in 2023 – a decline of 29.5%. This logically would have contributed to the decline in arrests.
- While the drop in MPD’s arrest rate was the largest we observed in our peer city analysis, total arrest rates from 2012 to 2023 declined at least somewhat in 11 of those 12 cities, and **six other cities experienced drops of at least 50%**. This might be attributed to a nationwide shift in policing tactics after the murder of George Floyd and several other highly publicized incidents involving alleged excessive use of force by police.
- Given the concurrent large declines in traffic and subject stops, it would be logical to assume that a decline in arrests also would have occurred in light of the **reduced interaction between officers and citizens** and reduced opportunity to observe potentially suspicious activities.
- **Declines in sworn staff and unfilled detective positions** have diminished MPD’s capacity to make arrests and stops. From December 2018 to May 2024, there was a 16.6% decline in the number of sworn staff actively employed by MPD. The department also has had a significant number of unfilled detective positions.
- Since 2012, on a per capita basis, **Priority 1 calls for service have increased by nearly a third**, diminishing MPD’s capacity to conduct proactive policing, as **logged instances of proactive policing activity have fallen** from nearly 368,000 in 2012 to just under 80,000 in 2023. At the same time, response times for Priority 1 calls for service - the highest level of priority - have increased by 19.9% since 2019.
- Homicide, aggravated assault, and motor vehicle theft all surged in Milwaukee beginning in 2020. While violent crimes make up a small fraction of all reported offenses, the response to, and investigation of, these crimes **require a significant amount of police resources**.
- The **Collins Settlement**, reached in 2018 after MPD was sued over its stop-and-frisk practices, requires MPD to provide more concrete justifications and record data points “for each traffic stop, field interview, and no-action encounter” that takes place. **This has almost certainly contributed** to the accelerated reductions in both stops and arrests in recent years. However, the report notes that the declines in both preceded the settlement, and the decline in traffic stops in particular “from what appeared to be extremely high levels a decade ago” appears to be a “positive development.”
- **The MPD Chief position** turned over from Edward Flynn to Alfonso Morales in 2018, then to Jeffrey Norman in 2020. Different chiefs can have different approaches to policing; of most relevance here may be Flynn’s emphasis on the use of data to deploy resources and gauge officer performance. Several interviewees noted that **officers’ performance during Flynn’s tenure was evaluated, in part, by activity levels** such as the numbers of stops and arrests they made.

Resident satisfaction with MPD down: Our review of data from surveys commissioned by the Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission finds Milwaukee residents’ concern with MPD was highest, and satisfaction lowest, in 2022 relative to three prior survey years: 2019, 2017, and 2014. In particular, there was widespread dissatisfaction with MPD’s enforcement of traffic laws in 2022, with only 41.2% of survey respondents “very” or “somewhat” satisfied, a decline of 34.8 percentage points since 2014. There also have been significant declines in the proportion of respondents who

say police are “very” or “somewhat” visible in their neighborhood, or that say they feel Milwaukee is “very” or “somewhat” safe.

The report concludes that “determining whether the sharp downward trend in arrests and stops has made Milwaukee a safer or more dangerous city is a very challenging and nuanced endeavor.” It notes that the declines may reflect “positive changes to the ways officers interact with citizens on a daily basis,” but also suggests that given that they exceed those seen in most peer cities, they “raise the question of whether policymakers should consider steps that will at least halt or perhaps to some extent reverse these trends.” Such steps might include the following:

1. Developing additional strategies to address MPD's staffing challenges, especially its recruitment issues;
2. Better understanding the impact of the Collins Settlement on traffic stops and considering whether new strategies may be warranted to increase stops related to reckless driving without infringing on the Settlement's critical Constitutional safeguards for citizens;
3. Understanding how and why Priority 1 calls for service have increased, which could help to better direct resources to reduce them and increase proactive policing activity;
4. Requiring every officer to spend a share of their time on community-oriented policing efforts, which could help to boost officer-resident contacts;
5. Undertaking more refined and extensive analysis of data to determine how MPD officers are spending their time and what might be done to free up more time for proactive policing.

[Click here](#) to read the report.

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