



# WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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## **Common Ground: Enhancing Community Oriented Policing in Milwaukee**

*Public listening sessions, observations from other cities could inform MPD plan*

Milwaukee residents who spoke at recent public listening sessions generally voiced support for the Milwaukee Police Department's interactions with the community, even as some called for it to improve its community engagement practices, according to a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report.

Milwaukee already has a solid framework in place for community oriented policing, our report found. However, examples among its peer cities and resident suggestions point to ways in which it could improve such practices, including better use of data, engaging all police officers in community policing initiatives, and enhanced public communication and partnerships.

Community oriented policing (COP) is a federally recognized model that centers around community partnerships, acknowledging that effective public safety practices require cooperation between law enforcement and residents. In its recent adoption of a new set of standard operating procedures, the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) signaled its intent to eventually roll out a more comprehensive community oriented policing plan.

To incorporate resident voices from all parts of the city into that plan, in 2022, MPD, the Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission, and the resident-led Community Collaborative Commission initiated a series of public listening sessions. The Forum was contracted by MPD to attend these listening sessions, deliver an independent summary, and provide insights gained from research on COP policies and practices in peer cities that could inform deliberations on a new COP framework for MPD.

Spanning the city of Milwaukee, discussions from the 16 public safety listening sessions covered a range of topics. We distilled them into the following 10 themes.

**The Scope of Policing:** While some attendees criticized MPD's comparatively high funding levels when measured against other city departments, most wanted to see more, better, or different service provision by the department. Some listening sessions featured extended conversations on how MPD could best interact with residents.

**Accountability and Transparency:** Some listening session attendees said they want MPD to be more transparent, accountable, and communicative. Many requested that officers have calmer interactions with civilians or provide faster response times.

**A Friendly, Neighborly Society:** A desire to live in a place with friendly neighbors was perhaps the theme most often expressed at the sessions. Attendees were appreciative of programs and events that fostered social connection.

**Clean Neighborhoods and Parks:** Attendees agreed safe neighborhoods have clean, well-kept public spaces. Some saw a role for law enforcement that was punitive (i.e., enforcing litter laws); others said community cleanups could be a way in which MPD and residents could work together.

**Well-Resourced Neighborhoods:** Attendees recognized that neighborhoods with access to certain resources felt safer and more socially connected. As it relates to law enforcement, some attendees urged greater availability and responsiveness by MPD to calls for service.

**Lighting and Noise:** Residents said street lights were out for long periods of time in some neighborhoods, which increased the risk of crime. Excessive, loud noise also was cited as making a community feel less safe.

**Youth, Entertainment, and Recreation:** Whether at or after school or elsewhere in the community, attendees wanted to see more opportunities for and outreach to young people. This included spaces for youth to engage in activities like sports, arts and crafts, and finding employment. Youth attendees also expressed a need for relationships with law enforcement built on mutual trust and respect.

**Safety from Violent Events:** The prevalence of firearms and gun violence first and foremost, as well as car thefts and reckless driving, were top concerns. Regarding gun violence, suggested steps that MPD or another city department could consider included gun buybacks, more patrols in areas with higher levels of gun violence, and helping to address underlying causes of crime.

**Safe Streets:** Attendees wanted to see law enforcement take a stronger stance against reckless driving. Many suggested that creative infrastructure – like bollards, speed bumps, sidewalk bump-outs, additional signage, and even red light cameras – could shift some of the burden away from MPD. Others discussed the critical role of driver's education for newer drivers.

**Mental Health:** There was near-unanimous agreement that Milwaukee faces an epidemic in this area. Most agreed that MPD could do more to deploy mental health resources, though attendees had varying degrees of awareness of MPD's participation in Crisis Assessment Response Teams – which consist of officers and trained clinicians from Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Services that field calls for service involving individuals in mental health crisis.

As part of this report, we also conducted a broad overview of COP initiatives in other cities. We found that Milwaukee already operates many programs that have equivalents in peer cities, such as mental health crisis teams, block watches, youth programming, police athletic leagues, sharing of security camera footage, and more.

Insights gained from review of cities with more expansive COP practices include:

- Milwaukee police could do more to target neighborhoods and individuals most in need, such as seniors or the homeless. Some cities take a more in-depth approach to victim services, while others dedicate officer time to specific residents of their communities, for purposes of future safety.
- Data plays a key role in COP in peer cities. For example, some use data-driven approaches to deploy officers and others do more to solicit community feedback.
- COP requires participation by community members and from all police department personnel. In cities with comprehensive plans, emphasis is placed on the specific role of each employee of the police department in implementing COP.

We also offer a few policy suggestions MPD may wish to consider as it builds out a new standard operating procedure for COP, drafts a community engagement plan, and continues to improve its community oriented policing:

- Expand COP practices to include every sworn and non-sworn member of MPD;
- Increase data collection and sharing;
- Take a more active role on social media, and organize the MPD website(s) in a way that is more user-friendly;
- Continue to study the ways in which MPD could take a more neighborhood-specific approach to patrolling and COP;
- Build out the assets the department offers, particularly in the area of youth engagement, by collaborating with existing community organizations;
- Continue to develop strong working relationships with relevant city agencies to solve problems that detract from public safety.

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

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