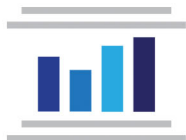


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ARRESTING DEVELOPMENTS

How and Why Arrests and Citizen Contacts are Declining in Milwaukee



WISCONSIN

POLICY FORUM

In our August 2023 report, [Under Pressure](#), the Wisconsin Policy Forum uncovered a striking decline in arrests made by the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) from 2018 to 2022. Subsequently, we discovered that police-citizen contacts in Milwaukee had also dropped sharply, falling 41.0% from 2021 to 2022.

What factors are causing these reductions, have they continued, and what impacts are they having on Milwaukee’s residents and public safety? What types of policy and procedural changes – if any – should be considered in response?

This report seeks to answer those questions by conducting a deeper analysis of MPD offense, arrest, and citizen contact data than we were able to conduct in our 2023 study, and providing additional context by looking at peer cities. Our aim is to better understand how police-resident interactions have changed in the city over the last decade and why.

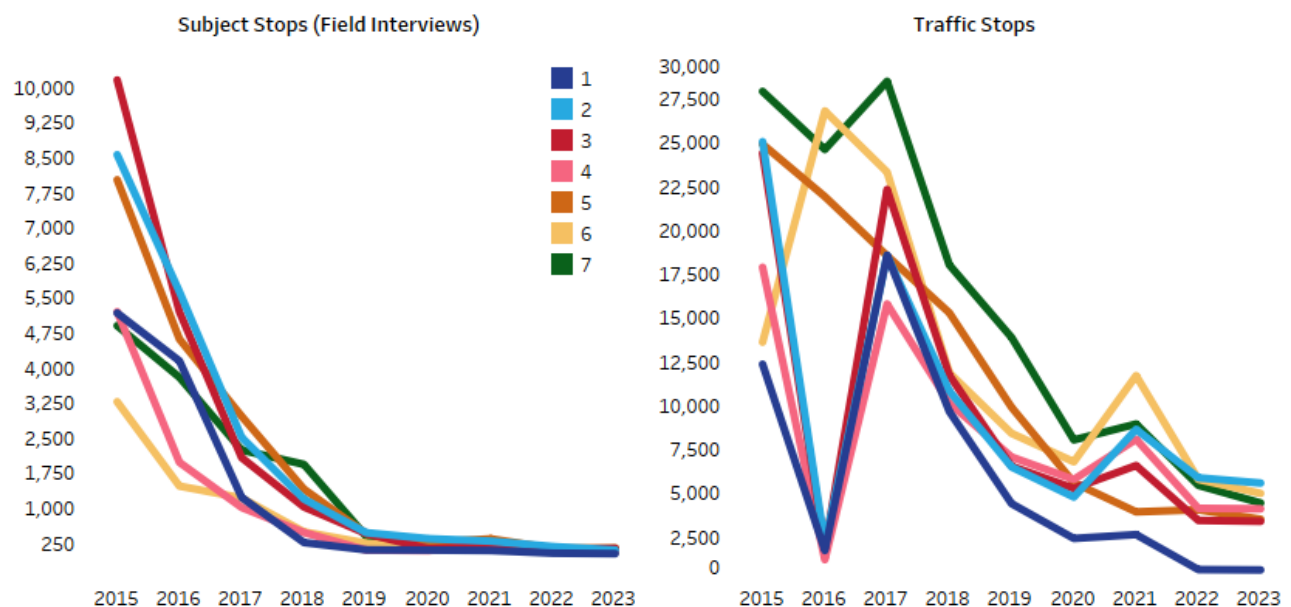
The Environment in Milwaukee Today

Arrests and citizen contacts have precipitously declined in Milwaukee over the last decade. Key observations from our broad analysis of the data – and our comparison of Milwaukee to 11 peer cities – include the following:

- According to state Department of Justice (DOJ) data, **MPD made 51,176 arrests in 2012, but just 9,061 in 2023 – a decline of 82.3%**. The drop in arrests was not just linked to the pandemic, as there was a year-over-year decline in arrests of at least 10% in eight of the last 11 years.
- **The drop in Milwaukee’s arrest rate since 2012 was the largest among a group of 12 peer cities.** Those peers each have a population between 350,000 and 750,000 and have used incident-based crime reporting since the beginning of that time period. They include Aurora, Colorado Springs, and Denver, Colorado; Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee; Virginia Beach,

Citizen Contacts Have Plummeted

MPD subject and traffic stops, by police district, 2015 to 2022



Source: Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission



Virginia; Cleveland, Ohio; Seattle, Washington; Kansas City, Missouri; Detroit, Michigan; and Wichita, Kansas. Milwaukee's rate of 85.5 arrests per 1,000 residents in 2012 was the highest of any peer city, but its 2023 rate of 16.1 arrests per 1,000 residents was higher only than Seattle (10.8) and Cleveland (9.3).

- There have been significant, swift declines both in subject (on-foot) and traffic stops of Milwaukee residents, as shown in the charts below. **In 2023, MPD made 27,715 traffic stops, 81.5% fewer than the 149,721 it made in 2015; the department also conducted only 708 subject stops, a 98.5% decrease from the 46,438 it made in 2015.** Drops were consistent across every police district, and similar to arrests, they happened progressively over the time period for which we were able to obtain data. That said, according to an [analysis](#) of traffic stops conducted by the *New York Times*, **in nearly every large U.S. city for which they obtained data, there were significant declines in traffic stops starting in 2018 or 2019 and persisting into 2023.**

A More Granular Look at MPD Arrest Data

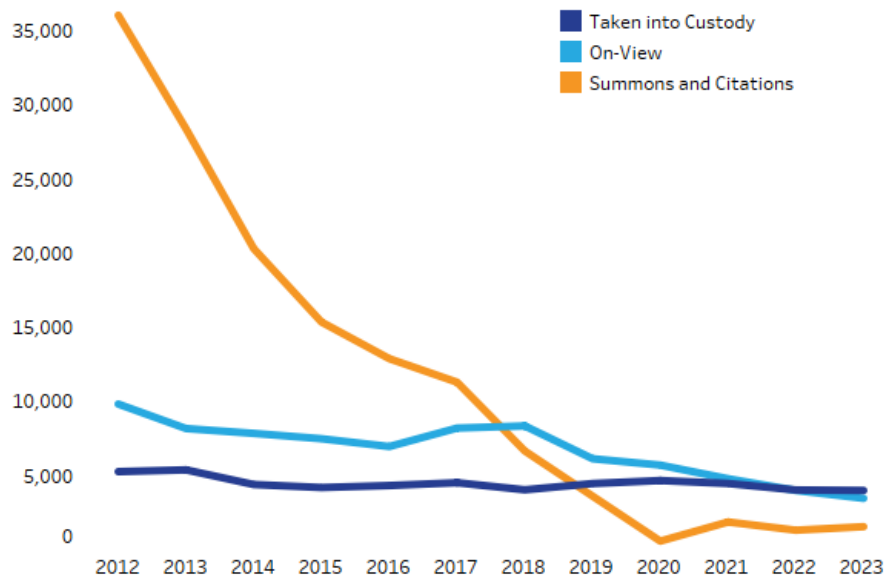
Data from the Wisconsin DOJ on arrests in Milwaukee allow us to refine our analysis by considering different types of arrests. **Taken into Custody** arrests are made based on a warrant of a previously submitted incident report, while **On-View** arrests are made on the basis of what an MPD officer or Milwaukee resident witnesses; both result in an offender being taken into custody. On the other hand, **Summons and Citations** arrests involve individuals who are simply served a notice to appear in court at a future date. Summons and Citations arrests are typically only used in the case of a misdemeanor.

When examining how each of these three types of arrest have changed in the last decade, clear trends emerge:

- **The overwhelming majority (81.9%) of the decline in arrests made by MPD 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**

(see chart). For virtually every type of crime, Summons and Citations arrests dropped by 80% or more. Crimes that saw a high concentration of these types of arrests include disorderly conduct, drug abuse and equipment, and destruction and vandalism. Summons and Citations arrests

All Types of Arrests Decline, None More So Than Summons and Citations
Number of MPD arrests by arrest method, 2012 to 2023



Source: Wisconsin Department of Justice



bottomed out in 2020 at just 595 and have since steadied between 1,000 and 2,000 each year.

- **By 2023, MPD's On-View arrests had dropped to just 3,481, a decline of 64.6% since it made 9,838 in 2012.** Much of that decline happened between 2018 and 2019; between those two years, On-View arrests dropped by 26.5% -- the most in a single year in the last decade. That said, declines since 2019 have continued. There have been drops in On-View arrests across most categories of crime, including the three that make up most of these arrests each year: drug abuse/equipment, simple and aggravated assault, and weapons law violations. Most notably, MPD made 261 On-View arrests for drug abuse/equipment in 2023 – fewer than one a day, and an 88.7% decline from the 2,312 it made in 2012. On-View weapons law violation arrests have also dropped precipitously from a high of 962 in 2017 to under 200 in 2023.
- **In 2023, MPD made 4,012 Taken into Custody arrests, the fewest in a year since at least 2012, when officers made 5,281 such arrests (24.0% more).** However, the decline in these arrests has not been linear over the last decade; Taken into Custody arrests in any given year tend to more closely reflect reported offenses. The decrease since 2012 might be attributed to a combination of genuine declines in instances of certain crimes (such as robbery) and a shift in attitudes towards others (such as drug possession).

Why Has Policing in Milwaukee Changed?

There likely is no one cause for the trends described above, but the following reflects our insights on several factors that likely contributed to them. **We cannot say definitively that any of the explanations cited below are causal.** They are based on our review of updated and additional sources of data, news articles, and discussions with public officials and public safety professionals in Milwaukee.

1. **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 decline logically would have contributed to the decline in arrests. In 2012, Milwaukee made 85.5 arrests per 1,000 residents, the most of any peer city we examined, while its offense rate (107.1 per 1,000 residents) ranked seventh among the 12 cities. By 2023, both offense and arrest rates in Milwaukee ranked 10th among the 12 cities. This further reinforces the notion that Milwaukee was making far more arrests than might have been expected when comparing it to peer cities a decade ago, but now is more in line with its peers. Additionally, the fact that the decline in arrests has not been coupled with increases in reported offense totals may indicate that MPD's plummeting arrest numbers have not produced a surge in overall crime.
2. **Other data from peer cities suggest larger, nationwide societal factors may be at play.** 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 retreat from confrontational policing after incidents such as the killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and George Floyd in Minneapolis.
3. **There is a connection between the declines in stops and arrests.** Given the huge decline 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 for activities deemed suspicious. Reckless driving might elicit a traffic stop, for example, which could uncover other alleged illegal activity that might produce an arrest. This is particularly true for crimes such as possession or usage of illegal weapons or substances, both of which have seen substantial arrest declines since 2012.
4. **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

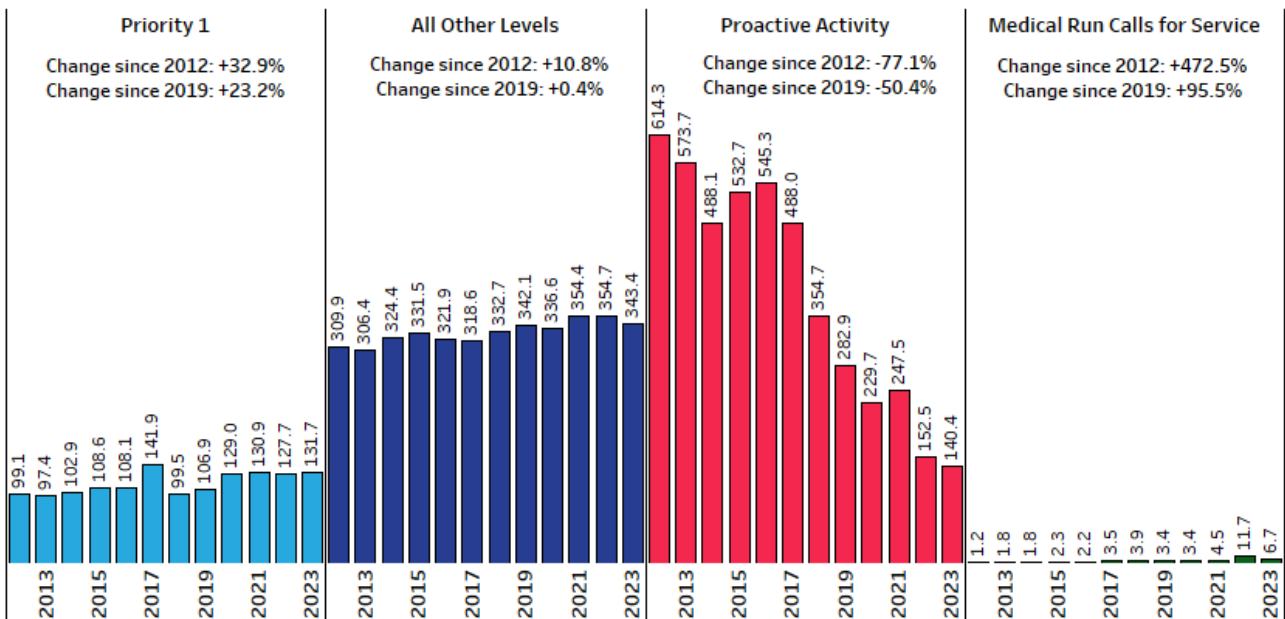


the number of sworn staff actively employed by MPD, from 1,917 to just under 1,600. Additionally, despite authorizing more than 180 full-time equivalent detective positions since 2018, the department has not employed more than 142 since 2019. Response times for Priority 1 calls for service – the highest level of priority – have increased by 19.9% since 2019, when staffing began to decline, and response times have increased by larger amounts for lower priority calls. Drops in sworn strength clearly impede MPD’s capacity to do routine patrolling, which can lead to more stops and arrests. Further, the lack of detectives could impact the ability of MPD to make Taken into Custody arrests that rely on a warrant, which requires reasonable cause. MPD’s staffing challenges do not stem only from the city’s budget woes; interviewees pointed to a combination of a historically tight labor market, competition with suburban departments, and an aging workforce.

5. **The number of Priority 1 calls for service has increased significantly, diminishing MPD’s capacity to conduct proactive policing.** Since 2012, on a per capita basis, Priority 1 calls for service have increased by nearly a third, while all other call levels increased by only 10.8% (see chart below). At the same time, logged instances of proactive policing activity have fallen much further, dropping from nearly 368,000 in 2012 to just under 80,000 by 2023. Officers have also had to spend more of their time on medical runs in which they escort someone in their custody to a health care setting for necessary treatment. With medical runs and high priority calls occupying more officer time, something must give, especially in the context of the accompanying drop in sworn strength.

Proactive Policing Declines While Priority 1 Calls, Medical Runs Increase

MPD logged activity by type of call per 1,000 residents, 2012 to 2023



Sources: Milwaukee Police Department, U.S. Census Bureau

6. **MPD has placed a greater focus on low volume but high priority crime.** Homicide, aggravated assault, and motor vehicle theft all surged in Milwaukee beginning in 2020. Combined, there were 17,455 crimes committed in these categories in 2021, nearly double the 9,346 in 2012. While violent crimes make up only a small fraction of all reported offenses in Milwaukee, the response and investigation of these crimes require a significant amount of law enforcement resources.
7. **The Collins Settlement produced substantial changes in policing practices.** The Collins Settlement was reached in 2018 after a group of plaintiffs sued MPD over alleged



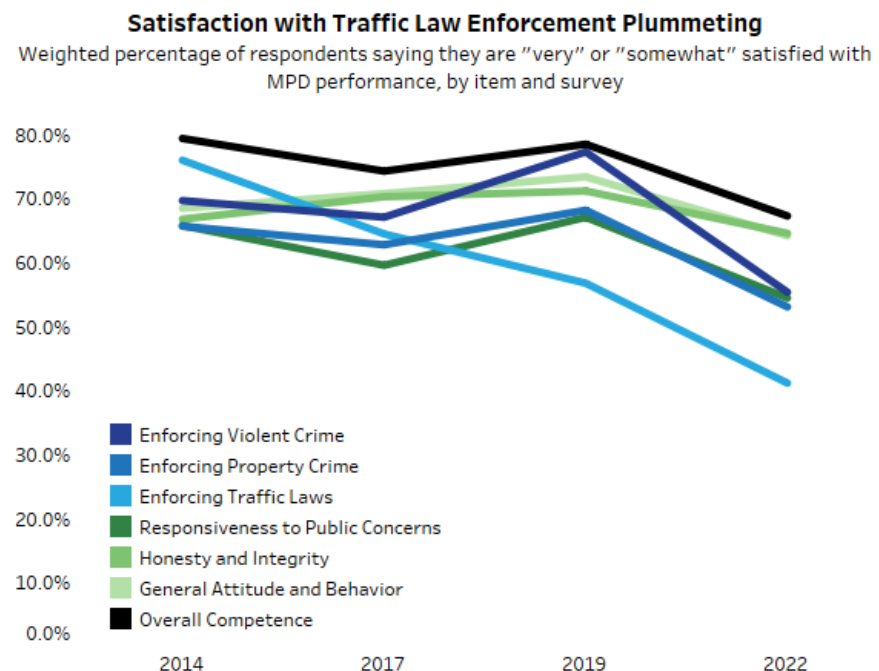
unconstitutional stop-and-frisk practices (for more, see [Common Ground](#) and [Taking Stock](#)). Among other requirements, the Settlement calls upon MPD to record several data points “for each traffic stop, field interview, and no-action encounter” that takes place. The ultimate goal of the Settlement is to justifiably ensure that MPD is conducting its stops and frisks in accordance with the constitutional rights of citizens. There can be little doubt that the Settlement’s fundamental intent to eliminate unjustified stops has, indeed, been a contributor to the reductions in both stops and arrests, especially viewed in context of the noticeable decline in On-View arrests from 2017 to 2018 and beyond.

8. **Leadership turnover at MPD led to policy and procedural changes.** Since 2018, there have been two instances of turnover in the MPD Chief of Police position, first from Edward Flynn to Alfonso Morales in 2018 and then from Morales to Jeffrey Norman in 2020. Different chiefs can have vastly different approaches to policing; of most relevance to the decline in arrests and stops was Flynn’s emphasis on the collection and use of data to strategically deploy resources and gauge officer performance. Several interviewees noted that officers’ performance prior to 2018 was evaluated, in part, by activity levels such as the numbers of stops and arrests they were making.

Resident Satisfaction with MPD

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, St. Norbert College, and Neighborhood Analytics, LLC were commissioned by the Fire and Police Commission (FPC) to conduct surveys of Milwaukee residents on policing and public safety in 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2022. The results of these surveys can help to explain how the major declines that have occurred in MPD arrests and citizen contacts have been viewed by city residents.

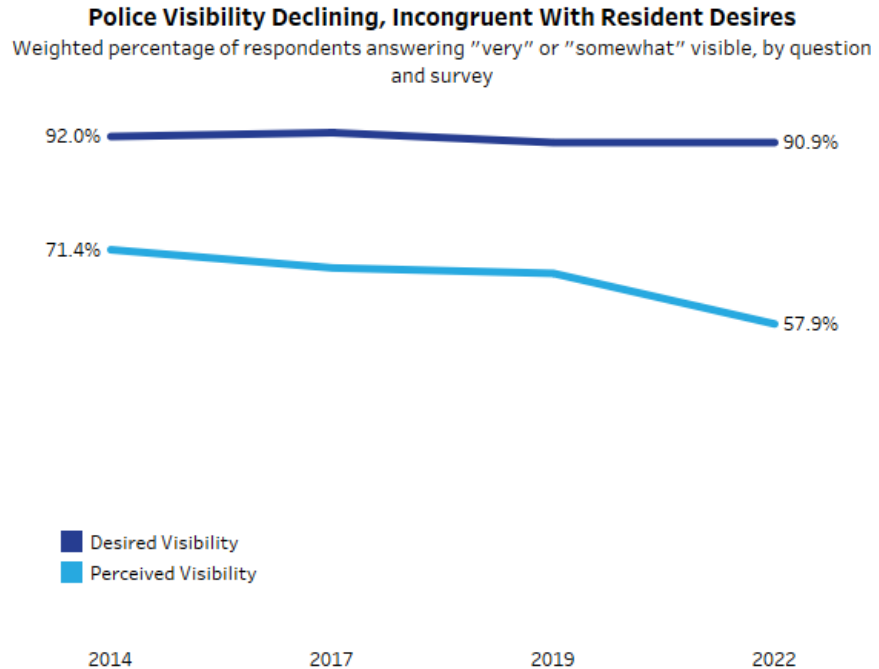
Our review of these surveys yields the finding that **resident concern was highest, and satisfaction lowest, in 2022.** In 2022, the lowest percentages of Milwaukee residents said they were “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with MPD’s efforts to address all types of crime, enforce traffic laws, respond to public concerns, be honest and have integrity, and more across the four surveys (see chart). 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. **The fact that MPD is conducting significantly fewer traffic stops now relative to a decade ago obviously is notable given resident perception that MPD is doing a poorer job enforcing traffic laws and responding to reckless driving.**



Source: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, St. Norbert College, Neighborhood Analytics, LLC



An overwhelming majority of respondents to each survey said police should be “very” or “somewhat” visible in their neighborhood, but there have been significant declines in the proportion of respondents who say that is the case (see chart). Additionally, **only 39.9% of survey respondents in 2022 felt that the city of Milwaukee was “very” or “somewhat” safe, compared to 61.2% in 2014 and 54.3% in 2019.**



Source: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, St. Norbert College, Neighborhood Analytics, LLC

Insights and Conclusion

Our analysis shows that policing in Milwaukee has changed markedly over the last decade. 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 like drug possession and usage, vandalism, and disorderly conduct. As we have pointed out, there is compelling evidence that MPD may have been stopping and arresting individuals at rates that were too high a decade ago, especially relative to peer cities. At the same time, a critical question is whether the changes in policing practices and the decrease in officer strength that have resulted in fewer stops and arrests have negatively impacted public safety in Milwaukee.

While our research cannot definitively answer that question, it leaves city, MPD, and Fire and Police Commission (FPC) officials – as well as the broader community – with a series of potential action steps to consider:

- Continue to hone strategies to address human resource challenges.** MPD’s sworn capacity is likely at its lowest levels in nearly a half century at a time when some of the most serious categories of violent crime rose to levels also unseen in that time period. While a move to expand police staffing ordinarily would engender passionate debate about affordability in light of the city’s continued fiscal woes and necessity given other priorities for scarce city resources, the adoption of Wisconsin Act 12 – which requires MPD to meet higher minimum staffing levels within the next decade – may render that debate moot. Consequently, it has now become imperative for MPD and FPC – the institution ultimately responsible for hiring – to quickly and effectively address the department’s recruitment challenges. The city already has recognized the need to devise new strategies, as officials recently [announced](#) a temporary initiative to offer a \$10,000 bonus to officers willing to transfer to MPD from other departments; should this program prove salient in pulling officers from other Wisconsin departments, it could be extended and expanded. They may also wish to look for additional



insights from peer cities who have experienced greater hiring success and, as we suggested in our [Common Ground](#) report, “take a more active role on social media” and “continue to build out the assets the department offers, particularly in the area of youth engagement.”

- **Further explore the need for and efficacy of enhanced traffic law enforcement.** Many would argue that the reduction in traffic stops in Milwaukee from what appeared to be extremely high levels a decade ago is a positive development, as are the improved documentation and justification requirements and elimination of performance metrics for individual officers that have significantly contributed to the decline. To the extent, however, that the huge decline in traffic stops is linked to a lack of patrol officer capacity to make legitimate stops – or that the Collins Settlement is having an unintended chilling effect on the willingness of officers to stop drivers who are flouting the law – then such impacts need to be better understood and addressed.
- **Further explore the nature and impacts of the increase in Priority 1 calls for service.** From 2018 to 2023, the number of Priority 1 calls for service made to MPD’s dispatchers rose by 27%, from 58,835 to 74,463. These calls have remained at elevated levels above 72,000 in each year since 2020, and MPD has noted that they can take away from other areas of policing. Understanding how and why Priority 1 calls for service have increased could help to better direct resources to reduce them, thus bolstering capacity for proactive activity.
- **Building on community-oriented policing, find new ways to come into contact with residents.** Coinciding with the Collins Settlement, MPD and FPC have prioritized expanding community oriented policing practices over the last few years. A [standard operating procedure](#) regarding community oriented policing was adopted in 2023, detailing what the term means and how MPD officers should be incorporating it into their everyday operations. A few policy considerations we lay out in our recent [Common Ground](#) report would also be germane in boosting resident contact numbers: for example, we suggested that MPD might consider working into its engagement plan a charge that every officer spend a certain percentage of their time on community oriented policing efforts.
- **Better understand how officers are spending their time.** Our interviews and review of pertinent data suggest that MPD officers are likely busier than ever. However, without more refined data and analysis of how much time officers are spending on their various tasks, it is difficult to determine where and how adjustments might be made to free up time for proactive policing. It is also possible that traditional metrics like arrests and resident contacts do not capture the ways in which officers are engaging with the community, and that greater efforts should be made to track specific forms of engagement and proactive policing to better understand the demands on officers’ time.

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. Still, we believe that now is the time for MPD, FPC, and city officials – as well as concerned citizens and advocacy groups – to put their heads together to better understand what is happening, and why. We hope this report provides analysis and insights that will enhance the efforts of city stakeholders to approach this task in a thoughtful and collaborative manner.

