

# ARRESTING DEVELOPMENTS

*How and Why Arrests and Citizen Contacts are Declining in Milwaukee*



WISCONSIN

**POLICY FORUM**

## ABOUT THE WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

The Wisconsin Policy Forum was created on January 1, 2018, by the merger of the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum and the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Throughout their long histories, both organizations engaged in nonpartisan, independent research and civic education on fiscal and policy issues affecting state and local governments and school districts in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Policy Forum is committed to those same activities and to that spirit of nonpartisanship.

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was undertaken to contextualize and explain the drop in arrests and citizen contacts the Forum uncovered in our 2023 report, *Under Pressure*. We hope the findings and policy insights from this report will be used by city leaders in Milwaukee to inform public safety policymaking.

Report authors would like to thank the Greater Milwaukee Committee and its Public Safety Committee for sponsoring this research and being committed partners throughout the process. We also thank the Milwaukee-based Argosy Foundation for its generous support of this research.



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December 2024

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# INTRODUCTION

In August 2023, the Wisconsin Policy Forum published [Under Pressure](#), a report that explored how the pandemic had impacted the justice system in Milwaukee County and the extent to which the system had recovered to its pre-pandemic functioning. The report found a number of key impacts, including a drop in district attorney charge rates, a rise in case dismissals, and a growing felony backlog in the courts.

The finding that stood out the most, however, was a striking decline in arrests made by the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD). We found that from 2018 to 2022, “arrests for [more serious] Part I and [less serious] Part II crimes decreased by 36.8% and 61.0% respectively” in Wisconsin’s largest city. We also noted that the sharp decline had preceded the pandemic and that, unlike some other justice system disruptions, had continued even as the pandemic’s impacts waned.

Subsequently, in our annual report prepared for the Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission on citizen complaints, we discovered in November 2023 that police-citizen contacts in Milwaukee for field interviews and traffic stops also had dropped sharply, falling 41.0% from 2021 to 2022.

These precipitous declines in police interactions with citizens clearly merit careful consideration by police officials and policymakers. As we pointed out in *Under Pressure*, a confluence of factors may be contributing to these changes, including a reduction in sworn officers at MPD and increasing numbers of emergency calls for service, the combined impacts of which have diminished the capacity of police officers to conduct investigations and proactive policing activities.

The declines also have taken place in the wake of a 2018 legal settlement that requires MPD officers to take additional steps to document the facts related to frisks, traffic stops, and other encounters with citizens after plaintiffs argued that MPD was unconstitutionally stopping and frisking citizens without reasonable suspicion of criminal activity. They also follow the 2020 murder of George Floyd, which prompted a national conversation about policing tactics in U.S. cities and prompted officials in Milwaukee and many other cities nationwide to [explore various reform efforts](#). Additionally, 2018 marked the transition from longtime police chief Edward Flynn to Alfonso Morales; over the course of 2020 and 2021, Jeffrey Norman assumed departmental leadership.

In this report, supported by the Greater Milwaukee Committee (GMC) and Argosy Foundation, we seek to dig deeper into the notable change in policing in the city of Milwaukee and provide further insight into the following questions:

- What factors are causing the reductions in arrests and citizen contacts and why did arrests begin to plummet even before the pandemic and George Floyd-inspired protests?
- What impacts – both positive and negative – might these reduced interactions be having on public safety, city residents, and police-community relations in Milwaukee?
- What types of policy and procedural changes, if any, should be considered to respond to these recent trends?

Overall, we seek to convey an updated and more complete understanding of these trends so that policymakers and citizens can determine whether corrective actions are needed and what such actions might entail.



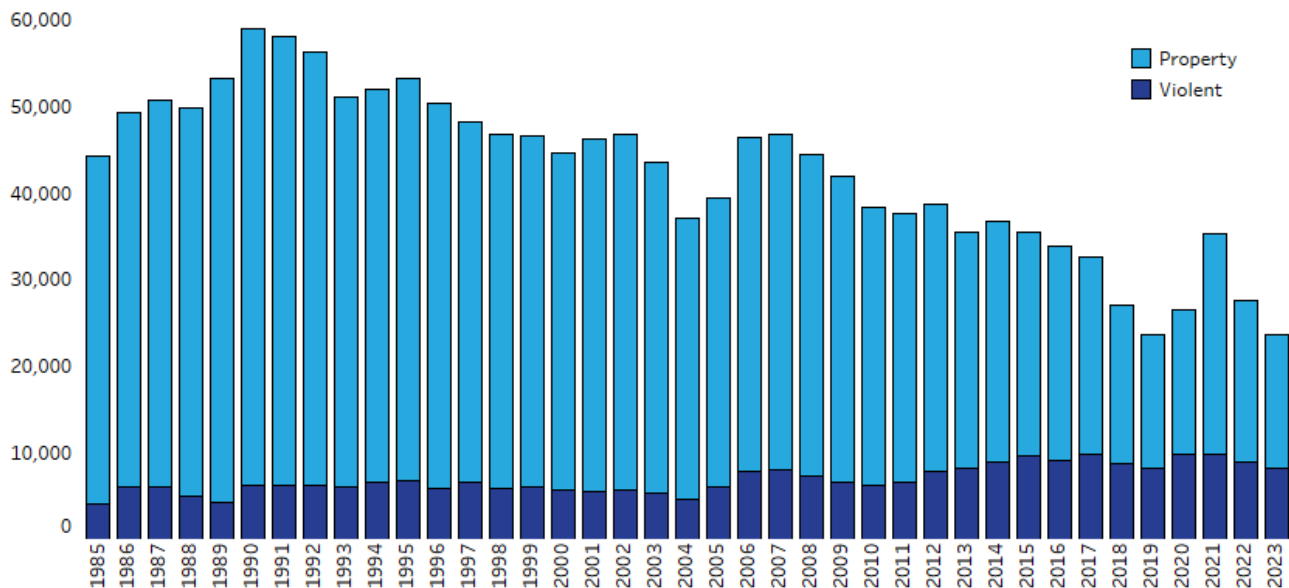
# MILWAUKEE'S PUBLIC SAFETY LANDSCAPE

Any effort to understand what is happening with police activity in Milwaukee must be preceded by an understanding of changes in the incidence of crime in the city as well as other environmental factors that may be impacting how officers carry out their work.

Information on crime rates can be obtained from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program, which has been administered since 1930 as a source of nationwide comparative statistics on crime in the United States. The UCR differentiates between two types of crime. Part I [crimes](#) are "serious," "occur with regularity," and "are likely to be reported to the police." Part II crimes are considered to be less serious and, in many cases, may be victimless.

Four Part I crimes are considered "violent." These are murder and non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. The remaining Part I crimes are "property" crimes – these include burglary (breaking or entering), larceny theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1: Property Crime Falling, Violent Crime at Higher Levels**  
Part I crime counts reported to MPD, 1985 to 2023\*



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reporting. \*Unlike the rest of this report, this visual uses summary crime counts (rather than incident-based), the method MPD used to report to the FBI prior to 2004.

According to UCR data, violent crime in the U.S. peaked in the early 1990s, fell significantly into the late 2000s, and has remained fairly stagnant since that time. **The opposite is true in Milwaukee – each of the 10 most recent years of data show higher counts of violent crime reported to MPD than in any other year since at least 1985** (see Figure 1). In Milwaukee, this trend is driven by aggravated assault. Reports of this crime have been rising fairly consistently over the last two decades but fell in 2022 and 2023 and have continued to fall through September 2024, according to data from MPD.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of calculations in this section, we exclude human trafficking from Part I crimes, as it was only recently added to this definition and accounts for fewer than 100 instances of Part I crime in Milwaukee each year.



## National Crime, Arrest, and Victimization Data

National data on offenses and arrests come from the UCR. Since 2004, Milwaukee has reported its **offenses** using the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which provides additional levels of detail that include information on offender and victim gender, age, and more. Many departments switched to incident-based reporting from summary reporting in 2021, when NIBRS became the standard for law enforcement reporting nationwide. When looking at offenses going back before 2004, we use summary reporting data. We also supplement offense data pulled from the UCR with information from MPD when we wish to provide more up-to-date numbers.

When we discuss offenses and arrests in this report, users should take note that data from the UCR represent the best possible source of national level information. However, they are not perfect. Data are frequently updated, and because the UCR uses information from tens of thousands of individual police departments, there is room for error in reporting.

Additionally, there are a significant number of crimes that go unreported each year – not just in Milwaukee, but in every city. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) questions hundreds of thousands of Americans each year regarding their interactions with crime. The NCVS is a helpful companion to the UCR, as it can theoretically track the “true” incidence of crime – both reported and unreported. National NCVS data show that violent victimizations dropped substantially from the 1990s through the 2010s, and have plateaued since that time. Property crime victimizations show similar trends, but have continued a slight decline over the last decade.

NCVS data also show that the willingness to report violent crime in the U.S. has not changed substantially over the last few decades, but in most years, a majority of violent crime victims do not report to the police. A wider majority do not report instances of property crime, and the percentage of those not reporting has been slowly but steadily increasing over the last few decades. In 2023, the plurality of individuals (41.5%) who did not report a property crime said the most important reason for not doing so was because they thought the police could or would not do anything to help.

The number of crimes that go unreported may also vary significantly city by city, depending on community trust in police, frequency of crime, and more. The NCVS does not currently produce longitudinal, subnational data sets, so it is not possible to know how behaviors look or have changed in Milwaukee. Variances also likely exist for different types of crime – a homicide is much likelier to be reported than an instance of drug paraphernalia possession.

When we discuss offenses in Milwaukee compared to other cities, we use NIBRS data, but when we compare arrests, we use UCR data for peer cities, as it allows the best means of comparison for arrests at the national level. However, in looking at arrests in Milwaukee from 2012 to 2023, we use data provided to us by the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ), the state institution responsible for receiving MPD data and transmitting it to the FBI. This is because the DOJ was able to provide an additional level of detail – the manner in which an arrest was made – which is not present in UCR data.

Though data on offenses and arrests in this report come from a few different sources, readers can rest assured that even in places where numbers differ slightly, whenever we discuss a trend in overall or crime-specific trends in offenses or arrests, all data sources mentioned agree on that trend and differ minimally in their total numbers reported.

Robbery has been falling until recently – fewer robberies were reported to MPD in 2022 than in any prior year, and the same amount were reported in 2023. Trends for rape are less clear.<sup>2</sup>

As was the case in many other cities, **Milwaukee experienced a spike in homicides during the pandemic**. According to UCR data, the number of victims of murder and non-negligent manslaughter



surpassed 190 in 2020, 2021, and 2022 – the only years in which homicides reached that level since at least 1985. That said, we have reason to believe that spike has subsided, as the department registered 173 homicides in 2023, and 2024 year-to-date numbers from MPD show continued declines.

As is the case nationally, **property crime in Milwaukee has been falling fairly consistently since 1990.** Nevertheless, these types of crimes significantly outnumber violent crimes in the city. UCR data show there were 52,520 property crimes reported to MPD in 1990, but just 15,262<sup>3</sup> in 2023. There were fewer burglaries and instances of arson reported to MPD in 2022 and fewer larceny thefts reported in 2023 than in any other year since at least 1985. Motor vehicle thefts hit a low of 3,470 in 2019 but spiked in 2021 (12,388) and 2022 (8,026). UCR data from 2023 shows a continued drop to 5,596 motor vehicle thefts in 2023 – in line with numbers from the mid-2010s.

## Policy and Leadership Changes

The trends above should be considered against a backdrop of certain key developments that may have impacted policing policies and procedures in the city over the last decade. One was the killing of Dontre Hamilton in 2014. Hamilton had a history of mental illness and was shot 14 times after an encounter with police when they approached him for sleeping in a downtown park. While no charges were filed against the officer who fired the shots, he was subsequently fired and the incident prompted a citywide discussion around policing in general and more specifically about MPD’s approach when encountering individuals in mental health crisis.

In 2017, a group of plaintiffs filed a lawsuit against MPD alleging unconstitutional stop-and-frisk practices; the resulting 2018 [Collins et. al. Settlement Agreement](#), which we will subsequently refer to as the “Collins Settlement,” required the department and the city’s Fire and Police Commission (FPC) to reform their policies and procedures with regard to traffic stops and frisks (as well as for arrests), including a requirement that officers increase the amount of documentation related to such actions. Further reforms to department policies have taken place since the George Floyd protests and related to the Collins Settlement, including the adoption of a new Standard Operating Procedure regarding Community Oriented Policing.<sup>4</sup>

Also in 2018, MPD Chief Edward Flynn retired after more than a decade in that role. Flynn had been known for his data-oriented approach to policing, which included the use of metrics like arrest frequency to monitor and gauge officer performance. His successor, Alfonso Morales, served in the role until 2020 before being replaced by current chief Jeffrey Norman.<sup>5</sup> Both Morales and Norman stated publicly that they wanted to focus more on community-based policing. According to *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* [coverage](#), Morales “[vowed] to work closely with nonprofits, businesses and residents” and “put more resources into each of the department’s seven police districts,” while [Norman](#) told the *Journal Sentinel* that “his department would prioritize building trust and legitimacy” and that he would “strive to build an efficient department with a mixture of sworn and non-sworn staff.”

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<sup>3</sup> For ease of comparison to years prior to MPD’s switch to incident-based reporting (pre-2004), we use summary reporting numbers in this paragraph that do not differ substantially from incident-based numbers.

<sup>4</sup> For more, refer to the progress reports on the Collins Settlement published by the Crime and Justice Institute: <https://www.cjinstitute.org/city-of-milwaukee-settlement-agreement/>

<sup>5</sup> There was a brief interlude in which Michael Brunson served as acting chief of MPD from August to December 2020.





An additional important development in recent years was the intensification of budget challenges for the city of Milwaukee. No single department garners a larger share of the city's budget than MPD; in 2024, MPD's budget eclipses \$300 million for the first time, accounting for 43.6% of all general purpose city spending. That said, for years the Wisconsin Policy Forum has [documented](#) financial struggles facing the city; given stagnant revenues, ballooning pension obligations, and depleted reserves, MPD – like other city agencies – has seen its budget fail to keep pace with the department's "cost to continue" requests and its staffing numbers decline.

More recently, state [legislation](#) passed in the summer of 2023 (Wisconsin Act 12) has brought additional impacts to MPD's budget and staffing. Milwaukee saw a significant boost in state aid in 2024 (as well as enhanced prospects for smaller annual increases in the future), and it received permission to levy a 2% city sales tax. Tied to these revenue gains are a number of stipulations, including that within 10 years, **MPD must employ 1,725 sworn law enforcement officers, including 175 detectives, and continually match the department's level of employment from the year prior.** As of May 2024, numbers provided by the department indicate sworn strength of 1,599 officers and 142 detectives.



# OVERVIEW OF MPD ARRESTS, STOPS, AND CONTACTS

In *Under Pressure* and our subsequent work on citizen complaints for the FPC, we only examined recent data on Milwaukee arrests, traffic stops, and field interviews. *Under Pressure* looked primarily at the 2018 to 2022 period, while our work for the FPC covered 2019 through 2022. In this section, we add a longer-term perspective as well as some comparative data from peer cities to provide a more complete picture.

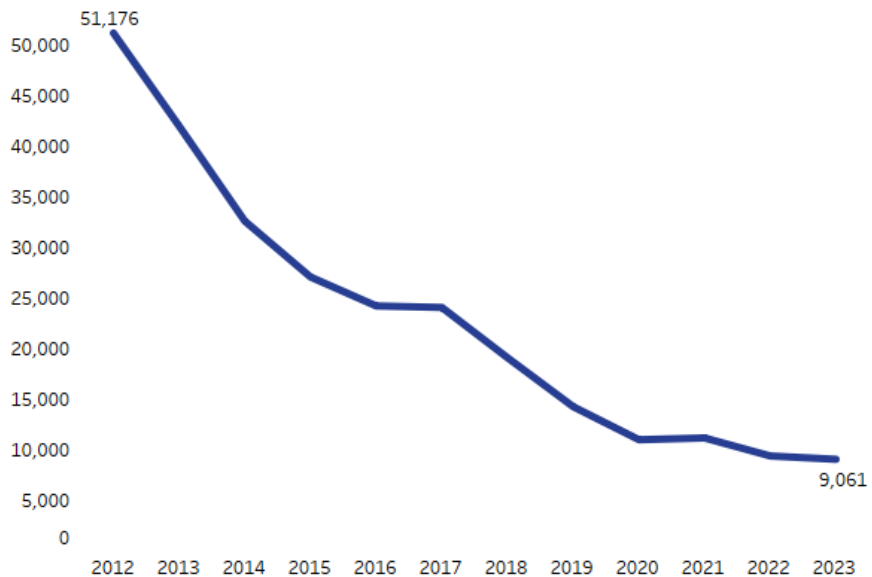
## Arrests

As mentioned previously, publicly available UCR arrest data also include information for less serious Part II crimes, which significantly outnumber Part I crimes. When we combine arrest data for the two categories, we find that from 1985 until 1997, total arrests in the city rose from 57,407 to 101,742 (77.2%), spurred by increases in arrests for simple assault, larceny theft, drug abuse, disorderly conduct, and the catch-all “all other offenses” category. Data is missing from 1998 through 2000, but arrest counts in 2001, 2002, and 2003 show slight declines.

MPD switched to a new form of reporting at the beginning of 2004, a year that is also missing from the UCR data. Starting in 2005, UCR data show MPD consistently making between 50,000 and 56,000 arrests each year through 2012.

Starting the following year, UCR and state DOJ data both show consistent, large declines in arrests. As shown in Figure 2, state DOJ data show that from 2012 to 2023, MPD made fewer arrests than the year before in every year except 2021. **There was a year-over-year decline in arrests of at least 10% in eight of those 11 years.** The largest single-year decline came in 2019, when MPD made 14,257 arrests – 25.3% fewer than the 19,020 it made in 2018. Simply put, MPD is now making far fewer arrests than it did a decade ago. According to state DOJ data, **MPD made 51,176 arrests in 2012, but just 9,061 in 2023 – a decline of 82.3%.**

**Figure 2: Arrests in Milwaukee Plummet**  
Number of arrests made by MPD, 2012 to 2023



Source: Wisconsin Department of Justice

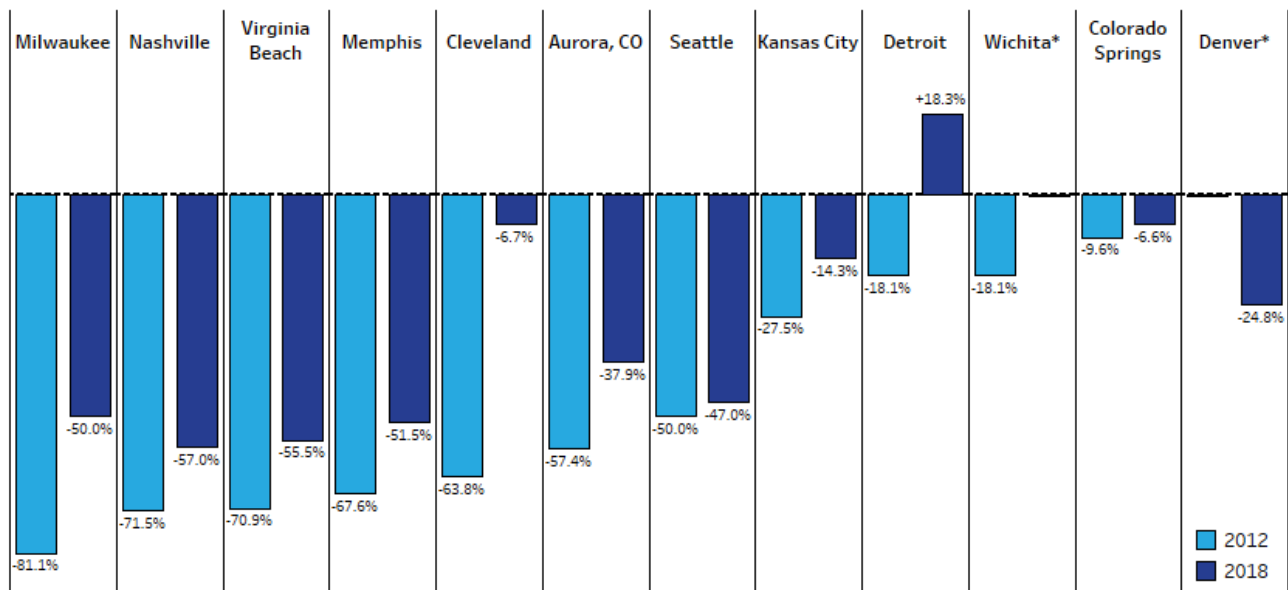


We were curious to see whether other cities with similar populations saw similar declines in arrests during this period. In 2022, there were 37 cities that had a population between 350,000 and 750,000 and that reported their data to the UCR program. Of that group, 12 cities (including Milwaukee) switched from summary to incident-based reporting on or before January 1, 2012.

We use this group of cities as peers, recognizing that their demographic and socioeconomic makeup may differ in meaningful ways from that of Milwaukee. This group includes Aurora, Colorado Springs, and Denver, CO; Nashville and Memphis, TN; Virginia Beach, VA; Wichita, KS; Cleveland, OH; Detroit, MI; Kansas City, MO; and Seattle, WA. For ease of use later in this report, we compare DOJ arrest numbers for Milwaukee with UCR arrest numbers for peer cities; totals using DOJ or UCR data do not differ meaningfully for Milwaukee.

Though six of Milwaukee’s peers saw declines of at least 50% over that same time period, **Milwaukee’s drop in arrest rate was the largest among these peers over the last 11 years** (see Figure 3). When we look only at the 2018 to 2023 period similar to the one we used in *Under Pressure*, we find that MPD lowered its arrest rate by 50.0%, the fourth-largest drop among these peers after Nashville (-57.0%), Virginia Beach (-55.5%), and Memphis (-51.5%). **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)** (see Figure 4 on the following page).<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 3: Milwaukee Sees Largest Drop in Arrest Rate Among Peer Cities over Last Decade**  
Change in arrests per 1,000 residents by 2023, compared to 2012 and 2018 levels, Milwaukee and 11 peer cities



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Justice and FBI Uniform Crime Reporting. \*Data from Denver in 2012 and Wichita in 2018 excluded due to apparent anomalies in reporting.

Drops in certain arrest categories underscore this trend. From 2012 to 2023, Milwaukee saw a larger drop in arrest rates for simple assault and larceny theft than any peer city and a larger drop in

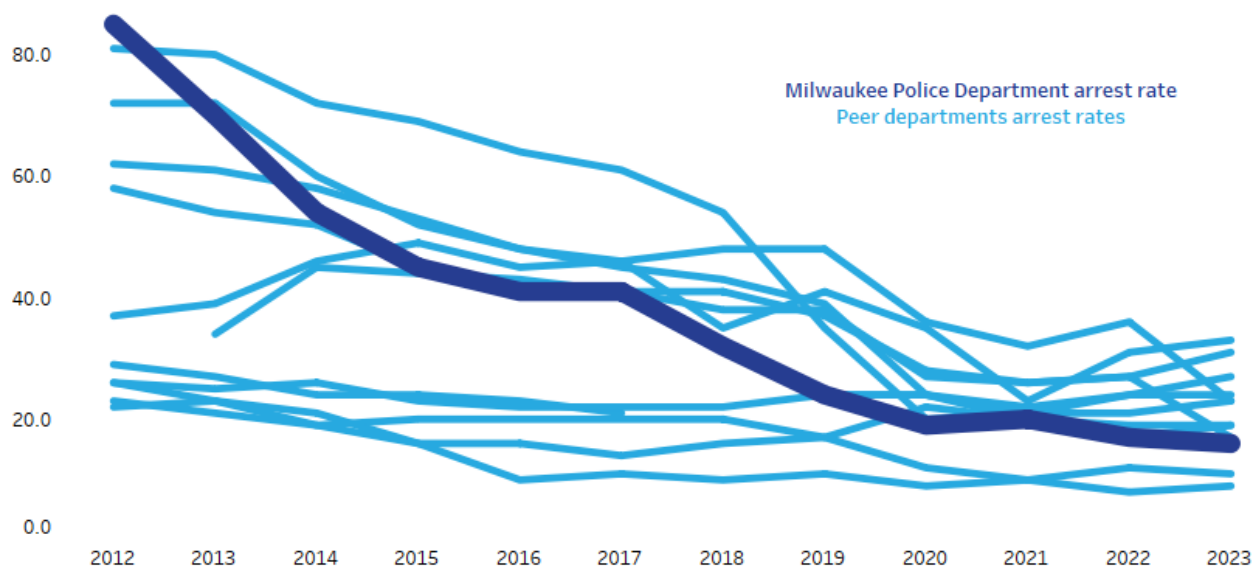
<sup>6</sup> Notably, [Cleveland](#) and [Seattle](#) were both under settlement agreements similar to that of Milwaukee’s at some point during this time period.



its disorderly conduct arrest rate than any city besides Memphis; these three categories alone accounted for more than a third of all arrests made by MPD in 2012.

These data points raise two questions. First, was MPD arresting too many people in the years before 2012 (a point backed somewhat by the Collins lawsuit)? Second, some also may cite the city's comparatively low arrest numbers in 2023 and question whether the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. Of course, those are somewhat subjective questions, but they are ones on which we will attempt to shed further light later in this report.

**Figure 4: Milwaukee Arrests Plummet Relative to Peer Cities**  
Arrest rate per 1,000 residents, 2012 to 2023, Milwaukee and 11 peer cities\*



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Justice and FBI Uniform Crime Reporting. \*Includes all cities with populations between 350,000 and 750,000 that switched to incident-based reporting on or before 1/1/2012. 2012 Denver and 2018 Wichita data excluded due to apparent data anomalies.

## Traffic Stops and Citizen Contacts

Beyond arrests, officers also frequently come into contact with citizens when they stop an individual or a vehicle, primarily due to witnessed unsafe or strange behavior (e.g. swerving, stumbling, etc.). Sometimes such proactive policing encounters can lead to arrests, but they also can result in the issuance of a citation, a warning, or in no action being taken.

We were able to obtain data from the FPC on traffic and subject (pedestrian) stops made by MPD from 2015 to 2023. These data show **significant, swift declines both in subject and traffic stops**, with 2023 levels well below those from just eight years prior. 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.

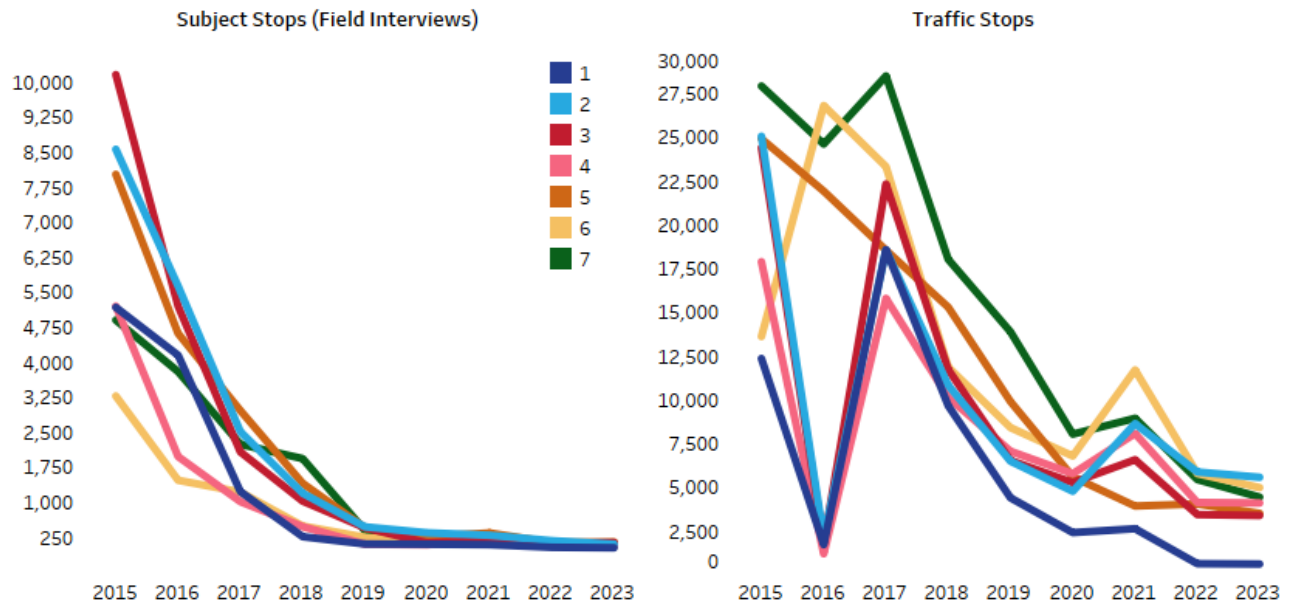
Both traffic and subject stops could have been expected to drop precipitously during the height of the pandemic in light of more citizens staying home and a desire by officers to avoid unnecessary contact with citizens.<sup>7</sup> However, the data show that the declines preceded the pandemic and have

<sup>7</sup> From March 2020 until March 2021, Gov. Tony Evers' COVID-19 public health emergency order and its subsequent renewals prevented law enforcement officers from pulling drivers over on the basis of expired licenses. Then, an additional



continued as it subsided. From 2016 to 2022, MPD made at least 40% fewer subject stops every year than in the prior year except in 2021. For traffic stops, while declines have also been long-lasting, much of the overall decrease happened prior to the pandemic between 2017 (150,616 traffic stops made) and 2019 (59,262). Declines are consistent across all police districts, covering the full geography of the city of Milwaukee (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Citizen Contacts Have Plummeted**  
MPD subject and traffic stops, by police district, 2015 to 2022



Source: Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission

While comparable data for peer departments are not publicly available, the *New York Times* recently [published](#) an analysis of traffic stops for dozens of large U.S. cities (though not including Milwaukee), from 2018 to 2023. Their authors found similar trends: **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.**

The article cites a number of possible explanations for this trend, including the pandemic’s role in discouraging face-to-face contact and the outcry after the killing of George Floyd, which perhaps made officers more hesitant to conduct traffic stops, particularly without clear justification. In cities with data going back to 2010, the authors suggested that large drops seen around or immediately after 2015 may have been caused, in part, by a similar outcry following an incident in Ferguson, Missouri, where Michael Brown was shot and killed by an officer.

The *New York Times* article also explored the possible impacts of reduced traffic stops, including the potential connection with higher numbers of road deaths and increased incidences of reckless driving. It noted that “as American roads have grown more deadly, many people interviewed for this article blamed a breakdown in the social contract – the basic expectation that drivers will follow the

emergency order related to wildfires reinstated that directive from April to June 2021. See <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2021/06/08/city-hall-police-again-enforcing-expired-plates/>.



rules. But reversing that will be difficult when the chief enforcement mechanism of road safety for decades in America – the traffic stop – has been a recurring scene of police misconduct.”

Later in this report, we will explore a larger list of reasons why both stops and arrests might have dropped, including a number of other factors mentioned in the *New York Times* piece. We will also consider implications for public safety in Milwaukee.



# A MORE GRANULAR LOOK AT MPD ARREST DATA

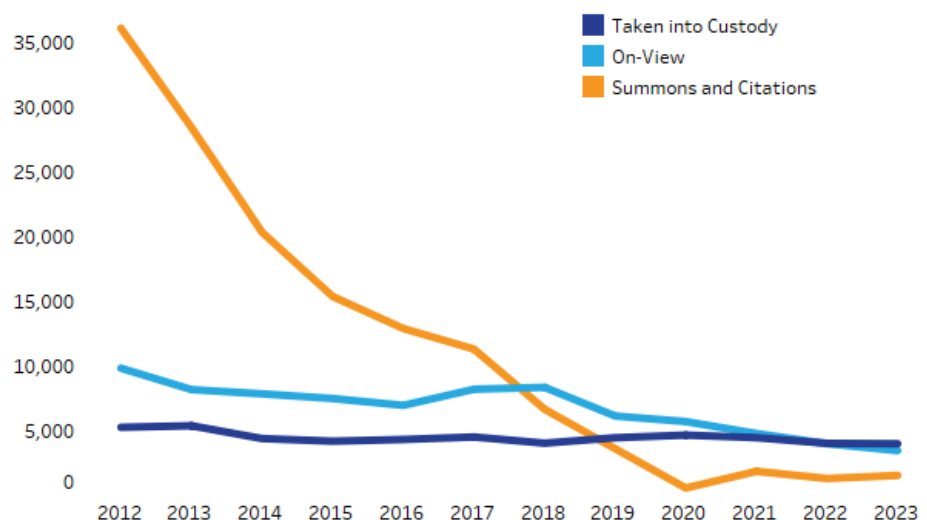
In this section, we take a more detailed look at MPD arrest data since 2012 – the year before arrests began to fall. We use data reported to the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ), and we are also able to update the analysis we provided in *Under Pressure* by including data from 2023. By choosing 2012 as our starting point, we are able to see trends prior to the killing of Dontre Hamilton, the pandemic, and summer 2020 protests, as well as through two changes in MPD police chiefs.

We also build on our work from *Under Pressure* by examining arrests by different categories as defined by DOJ. Those categories are outlined below.

- **Taken into Custody:** these arrests are made based on a warrant or a previously submitted incident report, and the offender is taken into custody. For example, a victim goes into a police station to report an instance of assault, and MPD is able to locate and arrest the offender based on that incident report.
- **On-View:** these arrests are made without a warrant or previously submitted incident report on the basis of what an MPD officer or Milwaukee resident witnessed; the offender is arrested at or near the scene of the crime and is taken into custody. For example, an officer witnesses someone abscond with a catalytic converter from a resident’s car, pursues the offender, and makes an arrest.
- **Summons and Citations:** these arrests involve individuals who are served a notice to appear in court but who are not taken into custody. For example, an officer issues a citation and notice to appear in court to an individual caught shoplifting a low-value product from a convenience store. In Wisconsin, this action is considered an arrest, with an individual being released on their own recognizance, and officers can arrest an individual in this manner when they have “reasonable grounds to believe [he or she] has committed a misdemeanor” (see [Wisconsin State Statutes 968.085\(2\)](#)).

Looking at reported arrests in these categories yields important findings: arrests of all three types have declined since 2012, but in distinctly different ways (see Figure 6). Relative to 2012 levels, there were 24.0% fewer Taken into Custody arrests, 64.6% fewer On-View arrests, and 95.7% fewer Summons and Citations arrests in 2023.

**Fig. 6: 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

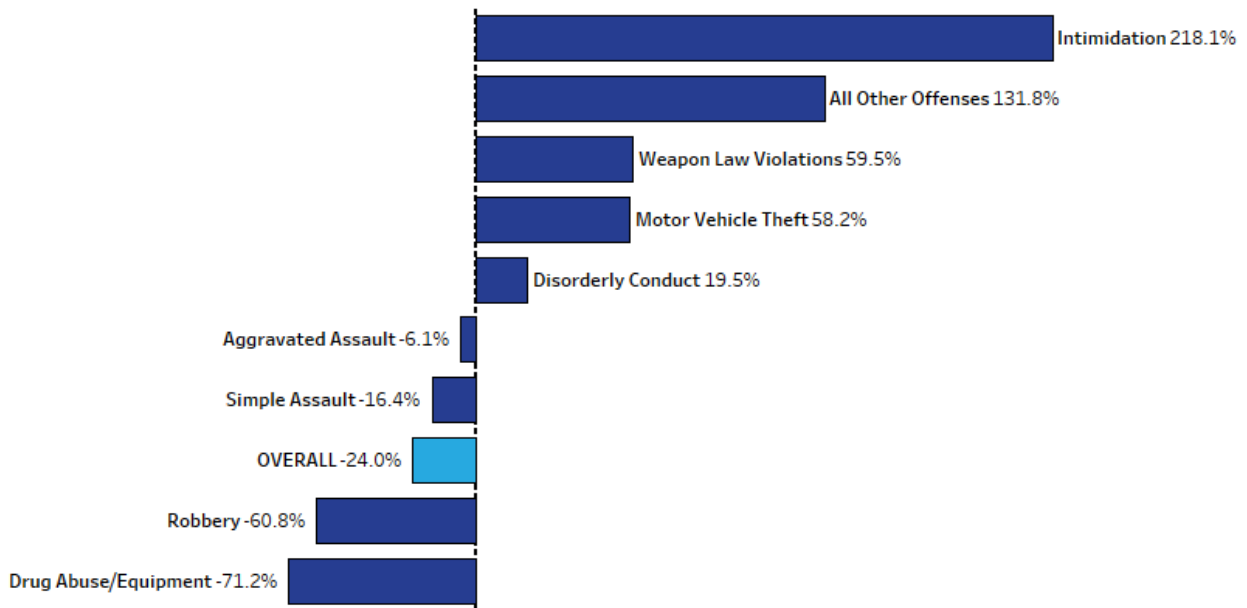


## Taken into Custody Arrests

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: in 2018, MPD made 4,055 Taken into Custody arrests – barely more than it did in 2023 – and the total number of these arrests has been between 4,000 and 4,700 in each year since 2014, with the highest total during that period coming in 2020, when 4,680 such arrests were made.

Trends for Taken into Custody arrests by crime since 2012 are not uniform (see Figure 7). For example, Taken into Custody arrests for Motor Vehicle Theft and Weapon Law Violations have been at their highest levels over the past decade in the last few years, but offense data suggest those increases are in reaction to higher levels of crime. Arrests for simple and aggravated assault, meanwhile, account for a quarter to a third of Taken into Custody arrests in most years, and both are down in 2023 compared to 2012.

**Figure 7: Taken into Custody Arrest Types Show Diverging Trends**  
Change in MPD Taken into Custody arrests, 2012 to 2023, by major category of crime



Source: Wisconsin Department of Justice

Why, then, did total Taken into Custody arrests drop by more than 1,000 over the time period we analyzed? First, a few types of crime have seen **falling offenses committed over a long period of time**, contributing to a subsequent drop in arrests. In 2012, there were 1,336 Taken into Custody arrests made for robbery, burglary, and theft, accounting for just over a quarter of arrests in this category. By 2023, the combined number of Taken into Custody arrests for these three crimes had fallen to just 317 – a decline of 76.3%.

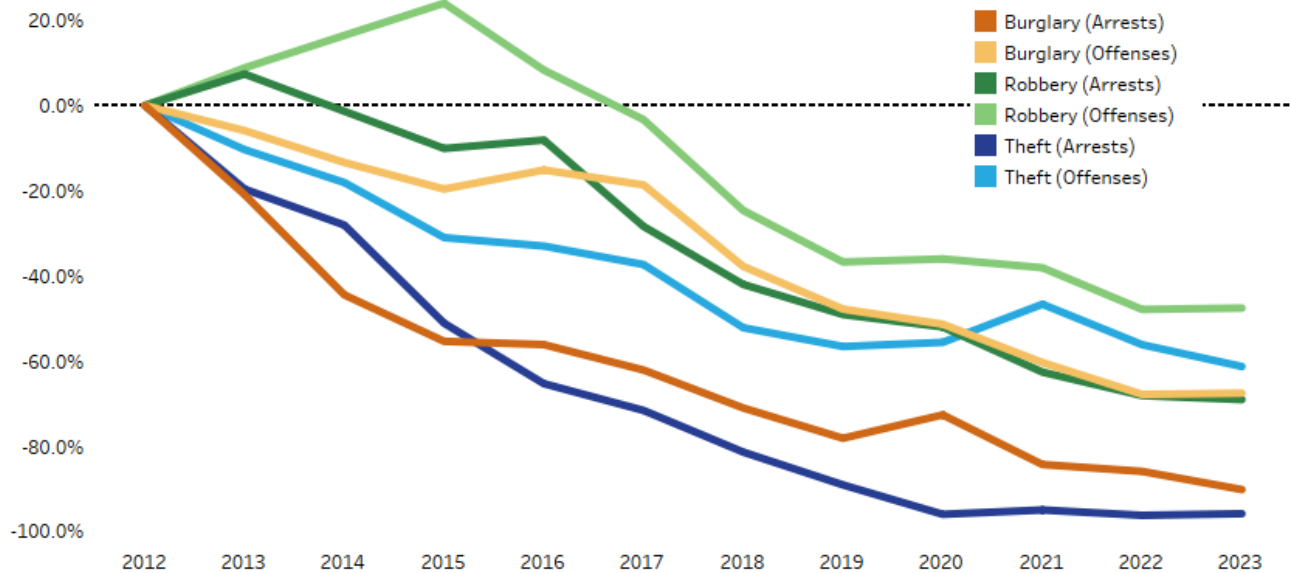
But reported instances of these crimes has been plummeting as well, decreasing by a combined 52.7% over the period. In 2012, MPD recorded 28,956 total robberies, burglaries, and thefts, with thefts alone (29.5%) making up nearly a third of all Part I crimes. As shown in Figure 8 on the next page, since that time, the number of reported burglaries and thefts has fallen in nearly every year,





and robberies also began to drop noticeably around 2015. When viewed alone, the drop in Taken into Custody arrests for burglaries, robberies, and thefts may seem alarming, but the decline must also be viewed in the context of substantial declines in reported offenses.

**Figure 8: Arrest Declines Follow Declines in Crime for Certain Categories**  
Change in MPD offenses and arrests relative to 2012 for burglary, robbery, and theft



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Justice, FBI Uniform Crime Reporting

Drug-related crimes are the other category that has seen a very large drop in Taken into Custody arrests. These are crimes involving the “cultivation, manufacture, distribution, sale, purchase, use, possession, transportation, or importation” of illegal drugs and the equipment used in their preparation or usage.

There were more Taken into Custody arrests for drug abuse/equipment in 2012 (723) than for any other crime besides simple assault, and even more in 2013 (803). However, after 2013, Taken into Custody arrests for drug abuse/equipment began to plummet, and after 2014 have not been higher than 400 in any year. **The 208 Taken into Custody arrests for drug abuse/equipment in 2023 were the lowest in the time period we analyzed – a 71.2% decline since 2012.**

These declines likely go in tandem with **changing attitudes and practices towards substance use and its criminalization**. For example, 2015 – the first year with fewer than 400 Taken into Custody arrests for drug abuse/equipment – was the same year that the District Attorney’s Office in Milwaukee County [implemented](#) a policy to not prosecute non-violent individuals who possess 28 grams or less of marijuana, the substance for which there were the most arrests made for possession or sales in the prior year.

## On-View Arrests

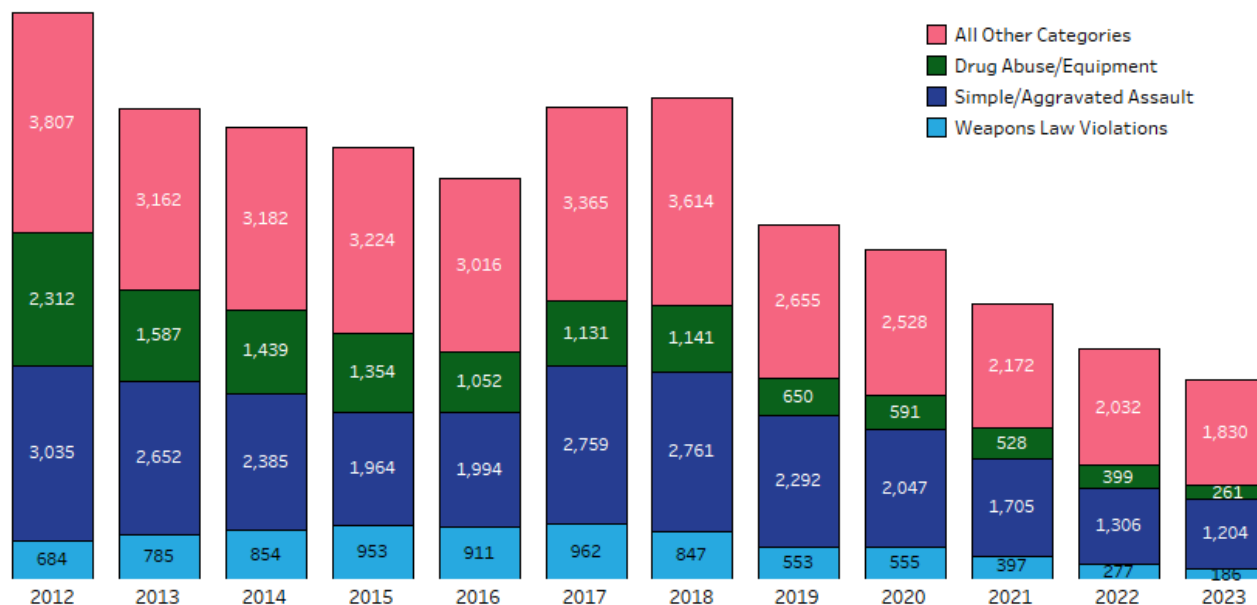
As mentioned previously, an On-View arrest takes place when an officer or resident observes a crime taking place and the offender is apprehended at or near the scene of the crime. In 2012, MPD made 9,838 On-View arrests, by far the most in a year since that time. **By 2023, the number of On-View arrests MPD made had dropped to just 3,481, a decline of 64.6%.**



Much of this decline has happened in just the last five years. MPD made 8,363 On-View arrests in 2018, slightly below 2012 levels but more than the 8,186 the department made in 2013. However, **between 2018 and 2019, MPD On-View arrests dropped by 26.5% - the most in a single year in the last decade** – and in each of the last three years, On-View arrests have dropped by at least 13% relative to the prior year (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9: On-View Arrests Show Large Drops Since 2018**

Number of On-View arrests made by MPD, 2012 to 2023



Source: Wisconsin Department of Justice

Nearly every On-View arrest category has shown a decline. Combined, MPD made 3,035 On-View arrests for simple or aggravated assault in 2012, but that had declined to just 1,204 in 2023, a drop of 60.3%. As was the case for Taken into Custody arrests, one of the largest declines came from drug abuse/equipment arrests. In 2012, that one type accounted for just under a quarter of all On-View arrests, but in 2023 accounted for only 7.5%. **MPD made 261 On-View arrests for drug abuse/equipment in 2023 – fewer than one a day. That was an 88.7% decline from the 2,312 made in 2012.**

MPD has also begun to make far fewer On-View arrests for weapons law violations. In each year from 2014 to 2018, the department made at least 840 On-View weapons arrests, but that dropped to just 553 in 2019 and fell much further to 186 in 2023. **In 2018, MPD made more than three times more On-View weapons arrests than Taken into Custody weapons arrests, but in 2023 it made more Taken into Custody arrests for weapons than On-View arrests for them** (see Figure 10 on the next page). Across all manners of arrest, those made for weapons law violations in Milwaukee declined by 61.7% at a time when [data](#) on firearm background checks seem to indicate that legal gun ownership in Wisconsin (and nationally) has skyrocketed. That is not to say that an increase in gun ownership has likely led to fewer cases of weapons law violations – rather, it is likely that *illegal* gun ownership also rose over this time period, but data do not exist for this sort of black market.

These four crimes – simple and aggravated assault, drugs, and weapons – accounted for 61.3% of On-View arrests made by MPD in 2012 and 47.4% made in 2023. As we discussed in the prior

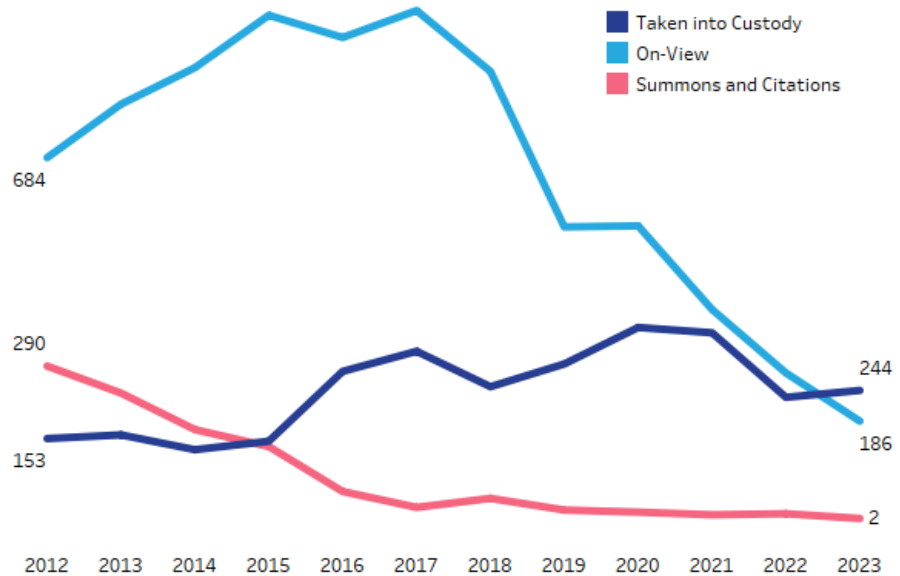


section, other large declines in On-View arrests for crimes like robbery (-78.4%), burglary (-90.3%), theft (-88.4%), and stolen property (-79.4%) likely have much to do with similar reported offense declines.

One additional category that has seen a decline in On-View arrests is disorderly conduct. MPD made 123 On-View arrests for this offense in 2023, 47.0% below the 232 it made in 2012. However, On-View arrests for disorderly conduct have risen as high as 1,027 in 2017 and numbered fewer than 100 in 2020, 2021, and 2022. The UCR program defines disorderly conduct as “any behavior that tends to disturb the public or decorum, scandalize the community, or shock the public sense of morality.” This broad definition may lead to larger swings in arrest numbers, and there is not an equivalent category for offenses – in other words, a police department may choose to arrest someone for disorderly conduct, but it is not a reported offense. Additionally, DOJ data counts arrests based on a hierarchy so that only the most serious crime committed by an individual is cited in the data. As disorderly conduct ranks fairly low on that hierarchy, it is possible that the overall decline in citizen contacts means that fewer individuals are being arrested *only* for disorderly conduct.

**Figure 10: On-View Arrests For Weapons Show Stunning Decline**

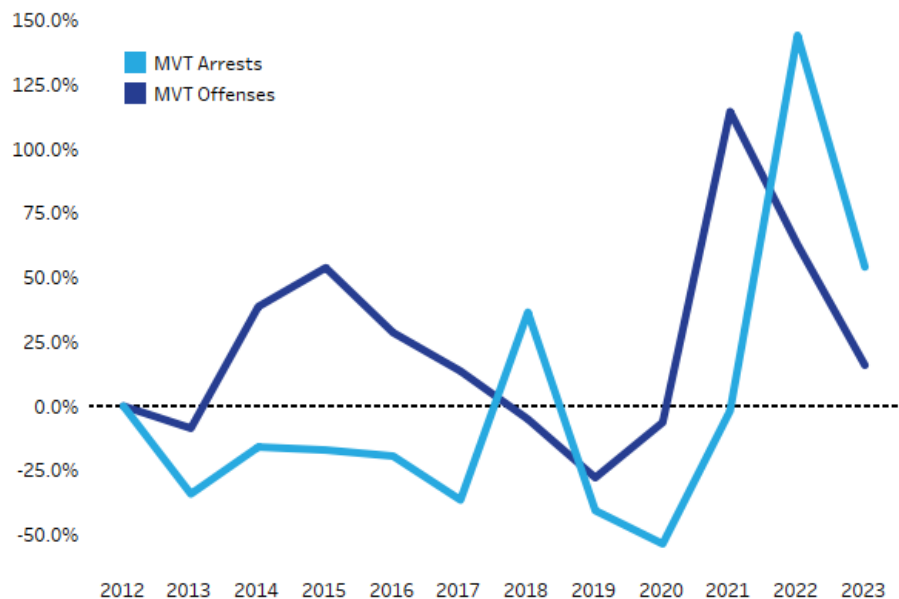
MPD arrests for weapons law violations, by type of arrest, 2012 to 2023



Source: Wisconsin Department of Justice

**Figure 11: Motor Vehicle Theft Arrests Lag, but Track, Offenses**

Change in MPD motor vehicle theft offenses and arrests relative to 2012 levels, 2012 to 2023



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Justice and FBI Uniform Crime Reporting



Three offenses saw increased On-View arrests in 2023 relative to 2012. First, arrests for intimidation rose by 13.0% from 299 in 2012 to 338 in 2023, but got as low as 11 in 2014 and as high as 550 in 2020. Taken into Custody intimidation arrests also have increased over time; it is possible that more arrests in this category may help to explain lower arrests in an offense category like disorderly conduct, as the definition of intimidation – “to unlawfully place another person in reasonable fear of bodily harm through the use of threatening words and/or other conduct” – may overlap. Additionally, arrests for driving under the influence rose substantially. It appears this may be due to shifts towards Taken into Custody and On-View arrests and away from Summons and Citations arrests for this infraction.

The final offense category to see a rise in On-View arrests was motor vehicle theft. MPD made more On-View arrests for motor vehicle theft in 2022 (232) and 2023 (155) than in any other year since at least 2012. As was the case with robbery, burglary, and theft, **offenses and arrests for motor vehicle theft have largely tracked each other** (see Figure 11 on the previous page). This is especially true over the last few years, as MPD has acknowledged putting more of its own resources into securing arrests after vehicles have been stolen in the wake of a sizeable increase in thefts in 2021 and 2022.

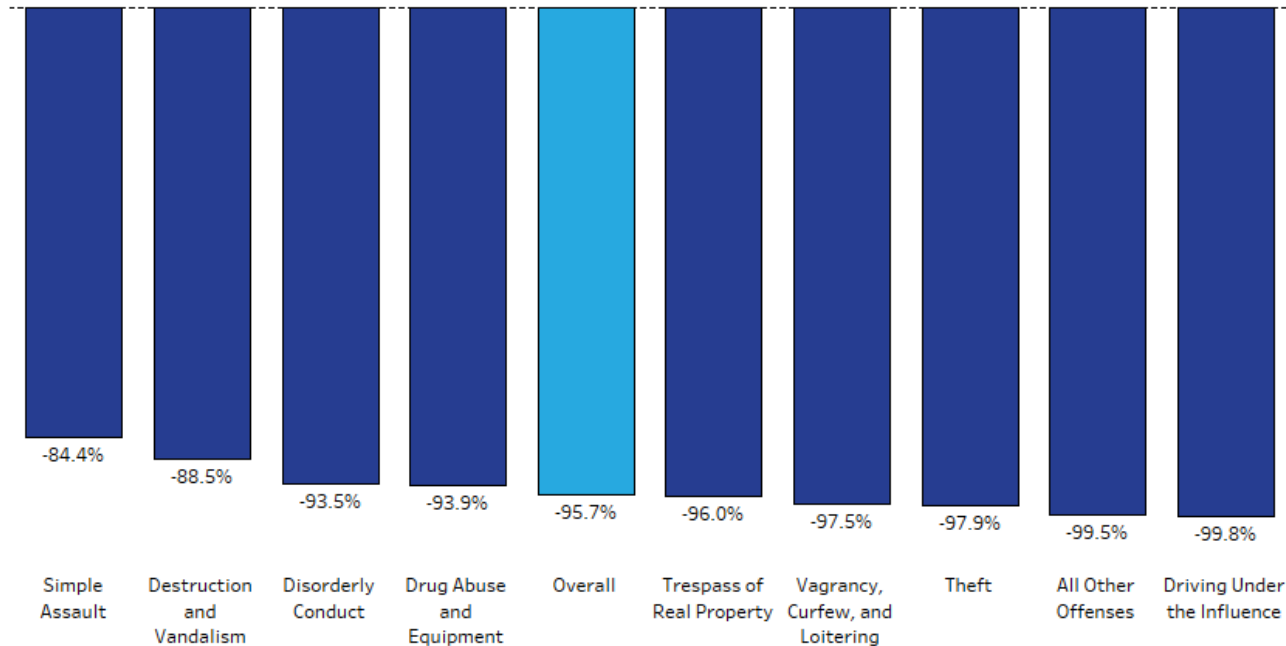
## Summons and Citations Arrests

As noted earlier, from 2012 to 2023, total arrests made by MPD dropped by 42,115. The overwhelming majority of that decline – 34,487 arrests, or 81.9% - can be explained by the decline in Summons and Citations arrests, which **dropped by 95.7% from 36,055 in 2012 to 1,568 in 2023**. Across this time period, Summons and Citations arrests for virtually every individual crime category dropped by at least 80% (see Figure 12). Most of this decline happened prior to the pandemic – by 2019, MPD made just 3,630 Summons and Citations arrests. Summons and Citations arrests bottomed out at 595 in 2020 and have increased since then, though to levels nowhere near those seen a decade ago.



**Figure 12: Summons and Citations Arrests Nearly Cease for All Major Categories**

Change in MPD Summons and Citations arrests by type of crime, 2012 to 2023



Since 2012, MPD has not made more than a handful of Summons and Citations arrests each year for Part I crimes of any type, with theft the only exception. Because these arrests technically involve a release on recognizance, and because state statutes permit them only for misdemeanors, it is understandable that officers do not use them for more serious crimes in which the offender might be considered dangerous.

Instead, Summons and Citations arrests in Milwaukee were used for less serious, Part II offenses. In each year but 2019, at least one in every five Summons and Citations arrests made by MPD was for disorderly conduct; in 2023, close to one-third of these arrests were for disorderly conduct. As discussed earlier, the broad definition of this crime gives officers more latitude to make (or not make) arrests where they see fit. MPD made more than 8,000 Summons and Citations arrests for disorderly conduct in 2012, but just 520 in 2023, with a low of just 148 in 2020.

In 2023, three crime categories accounted for another 45.7% of all Summons and Citations arrests made by MPD: simple assault, destruction/vandalism, and drug usage/equipment. Relative to other types of crime, these three have declined less acutely – simple assault and destruction/vandalism were the only major Summons and Citations arrest categories to experience declines of less than 90% over the 11-year time period. Still, for these three crime categories combined, MPD made over 6,600 Summons and Citations arrests in 2012 but just 716 in 2023.

Summons and Citations arrests for most other crimes have virtually disappeared. For a number of different crimes, MPD made at least 1,000 Summons and Citations arrests in 2012 but under 100 in 2023, including theft, trespassing, vagrancy/curfew/loitering, and driving under the influence (DUI). As we noted, the drop in DUI arrests in the Summons and Citations category may have been influenced by a shift at MPD toward bringing individuals into custody for this offense. Or, conversely, it may have resulted from greater use by officers of options like encouraging individuals to call a friend to drive them home or call a taxi or rideshare service.



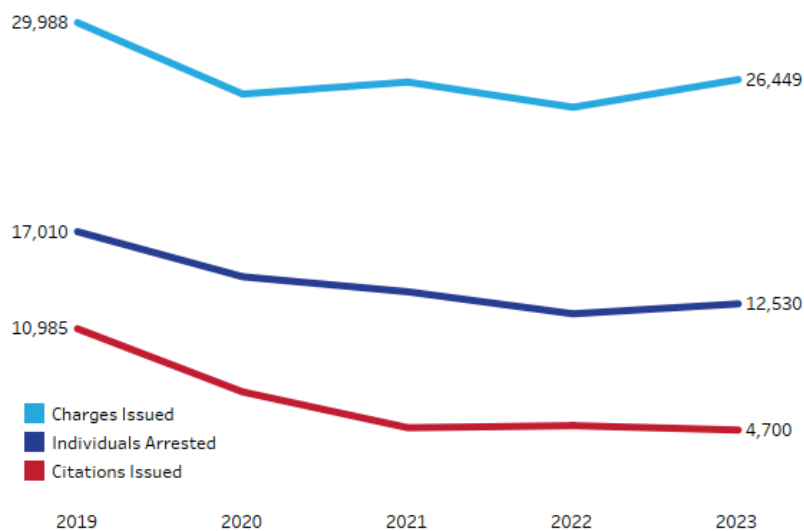
## MPD Data Offer More Perspective

To better understand the striking decline in arrests over the past decade, we also sought data directly from MPD in the hope that it would yield further insights as to why and in what particular categories the declines were occurring. While the DOJ data discussed above come directly from MPD, we felt that obtaining the data in its original form could be instructive to our analysis.

MPD switched data collection systems in 2018, which means that they were only able to provide us with the number of arrests made for violations of state statutes or city ordinances from 2019 onward. They collect data on arrests and citations separately, and arrest data from MPD tracks the number of *charges issued* rather than the number of individuals arrested.

Per these MPD data, we found that **from 2019 to 2023, the number of charges issued by MPD declined from 29,988 to 26,449, a drop of 11.8%.** However, separate data obtained from MPD show that **the number of individuals arrested over the same time period declined from 17,010 to 12,530, or 26.3%** (Figure 13). This is much closer to the 36.4% decline in arrests that DOJ data show in the same years. It is possible that the difference can be at least partially explained by the treatment of traffic violations, which the MPD dataset includes in its arrest totals but the UCR program does not. These data also demonstrate that in each year since 2019, **the number of charges issued per individual arrested has increased**, from 1.76 in that year to 2.11 in 2023.

**Figure 13: MPD Data Show Similar but Less Extreme Declines in Arrests**  
Charges issued, individuals arrested, and citations issued by MPD, 2019 to 2023\*



Source: Milwaukee Police Department. \*MPD changed data systems in 2018, so comparable data exists only from 2019 to present.

At the same time, MPD data show a significant decline in citations issued from 10,985 in 2019 to 4,700 in 2023 – a drop of 57.2%. It is difficult to know which of these citations resulted in an arrest that is recognized by the UCR, but the fact that we see similar trends in both sets of data is notable.

## Summary

Arrests in Milwaukee have fallen considerably over the last decade. Much of that decline comes from a 95.7% fall in the number of MPD arrests for crimes that do not involve an individual being Taken into Custody. That said, a 64.6% drop in On-View arrests from 9,838 in 2012 to 3,481 in 2023 is notable, particularly for crimes like weapon law violations, simple assault, and aggravated assault. While the 24.0% decline in Taken into Custody arrests is also notable, these arrests do not follow the same downward trajectory as arrests of other types, and likely rise and fall with trends in offenses.



# WHY HAS POLICING IN MILWAUKEE CHANGED?

We first observed Milwaukee’s declines in arrests and stops in *Under Pressure*, which included analysis of data through 2022. New data from 2023 show that MPD arrest and citizen contact totals declined again. Key questions are what these trends mean for public safety and police-community relations in Milwaukee, and whether they should be viewed in a positive or negative fashion.

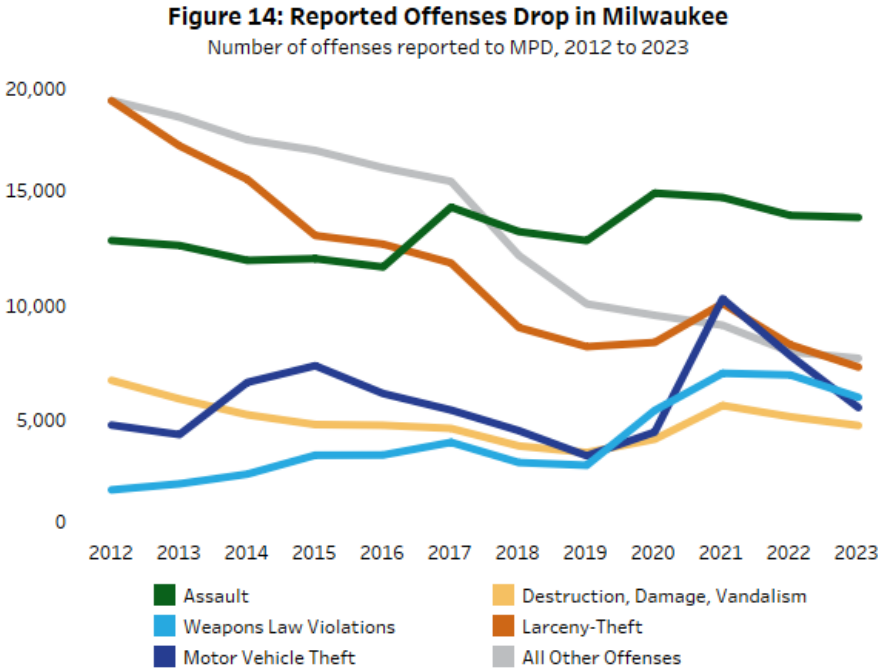
In this section, we lay out possible explanations for these changes in policing practices. Readers should take note that **there likely is no one cause for these trends**, and we also **cannot say definitively that any of the explanations cited below are causal**. Rather, our list reflects our best approximation of the factors behind these trends, based on our review of updated and additional sources of data since *Under Pressure*, news articles, and discussions with public officials and public safety professionals in Milwaukee.

## Reported offenses in Milwaukee have been falling.

The number of arrests made in any city will be impacted greatly by how many crimes were committed and reported. Notably, in Milwaukee, reported offenses **fell from 64,116 in 2012 to 45,173 in 2023 (29.5%)**. Across the past decade, only 2019 (41,190) saw fewer crimes reported than in 2023.

A few categories of crime drive this trend (see Figure 14). As discussed earlier, larceny theft has dropped precipitously; there were more than 10,000 fewer reported thefts in 2023 than in 2012. Reported offenses for the damage, destruction, and vandalism category have declined by 29.1% over the time period, and combined, all offenses not named in the figure declined by 59.3%.

Perceptions of crime may not always track with actual offense numbers because of the outsized influence of certain types of crime. As mentioned earlier in this report, some of the most serious crime categories saw significant upticks in Milwaukee during the pandemic. According to NIBRS data, at least 190 homicides were committed in Milwaukee each year from 2020 to 2022, with no prior year since at least 2012 reaching more than 150. Motor vehicle thefts also spiked in 2021 and



Sources: FBI Uniform Crime Reporting - National Incident-Based Reporting System



2022, and weapons law violations have totaled more than 5,400 in each year since 2020 but did not surpass 4,100 prior to that over the previous decade.

More recent data from MPD show positive signs for all three of these crime types – each fell by at least 10% from 2022 to 2023, and homicide has continued year-to-date declines in 2024 as of the end of September.

With drops in the number of offenses reported to MPD, we would also expect the number of arrests to fall, even if reported offenses for the most serious violent crimes bucked those trends. That expectation was borne out, but the 29.5% decline in offenses from 2012 to 2023 does significantly trail the 82.3% decline in arrests over the same time period.

We also looked closer at offense levels in peer cities, all of which switched to NIBRS reporting on or before the beginning of 2012. In 2012, Milwaukee made 85.5 arrests per 1,000 residents, the most of any peer city. However, its offense rate was only marginally higher, at 107.1 per 1,000 residents – a rate that ranked 7<sup>th</sup> out of the 12 cities. By 2023, both offense and arrest rates in Milwaukee ranked 10<sup>th</sup> among the group of 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 or even on the low side when compared to 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.** However, the increase in the most severe violent crime categories (homicide, motor vehicle theft, aggravated assault) also must be noted, as must the fact that offense totals only reflect those that are reported and may not fully reflect the rate of crime in the community.

## 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.<sup>8</sup> Aurora, Virginia Beach, Nashville, Memphis, Seattle, and Cleveland all experienced drops in arrest rates over this time period of at least 50%.

We noted earlier an analysis from the *New York Times* that looked at traffic stops in dozens of cities throughout the United States and similarly found that stops declined in nearly every city included in the analysis – in many cases by more than 50% – from 2015 to 2023. The piece cites a number of factors that could explain this drop, including a retreat from confrontational policing after Michael Brown was shot and killed by an officer in Ferguson, Missouri; increased scrutiny after nationwide protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis; and the pandemic moving many facets of life away from face-to-face contact.

This is not to say that Milwaukee is not exceptional – the 79.1% decline in traffic stops we identify over the same time period for MPD would only rank below Burlington, Nashville, and San Francisco, placing Milwaukee fourth among the 66 police departments (city and state patrol) in the *Times*' analysis. Most departments in the *Times*' analysis had also seen their traffic stops start to increase

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<sup>8</sup> The only city that did not see a drop was Denver, and the cause may be anomalous data in 2012, as there was a decline from 2013 to 2022.





again by 2023, which cannot be said for MPD. Still, many cities around the country are trending in a similar direction as Milwaukee, meaning **there are likely factors that are societal in scope that are impacting the decline we see in Milwaukee.**

## 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. As discussed in earlier sections, the 28,423 combined traffic and subject stops MPD recorded in 2023 represented just 14.5% of the nearly 200,000 stops the department made in 2015. During this time period, traffic stops declined by 81.5%, while subject stops virtually ceased, dropping by 98.5% citywide and by no less than 97% in each of the city's seven police districts.

Driving that is suspicious (swerving, sudden turns, etc.) or reckless (exceeding speed limits, going the wrong way down a one-way street, etc.) might elicit a traffic stop. Traffic stops might also occur based on equipment violations, like cellphone usage, broken headlights, tinted windows, and more. These interactions may lead to an arrest or citation based on the driver's behavior, **but also could uncover other alleged illegal activity that might produce an arrest.** Examples are the possession or usage of illegal weapons or substances, both of which have seen significant declines in arrests in Milwaukee over the last decade.

The drop in subject stops is even more stark. In 2015, officers in six of the city's seven police districts made at least 10 subject stops per day; in 2023, no district saw more than a single subject stop every two days. MPD Standard Operating Procedure 085 defines these stops as "the brief detainment of an individual...based on individualized, objective, and articulable reasonable suspicion of criminal activity, for the purposes of determining the individual's identity and resolving the member's suspicions concerning such criminal activity." As is the case with traffic stops, fewer pedestrian stops may mean officers are less likely to encounter lower-level crimes like weapon or drug possession.

## Declines in sworn staff and unfilled detective positions have diminished MPD's capacity to make arrests and stops.

Data provided by MPD indicate the department had 1,917 full-time equivalent (FTE) sworn officers at the end of 2018.<sup>9</sup> That number has hovered slightly below 1,600 since 2022 (see Figure 15 on the next page). Overall, from December 2018 to May 2024, there has been a 16.6% decline in the number of sworn staff actively employed by MPD.

Importantly, data from the UCR – which differ slightly from those collected internally by MPD – show the historical significance of the recent drop in sworn law enforcement employees for the department: starting in 1985, UCR data show that MPD employed between 1,800 and 2,150 sworn staff in every year until 2020. Since then, the department has fallen to 1,617 in 2023. Though the trend in officer employment had been downward before the pandemic, there was a larger drop in

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<sup>9</sup> These employment numbers refer to filled positions at the end of each year, as opposed to budgeted or authorized positions.



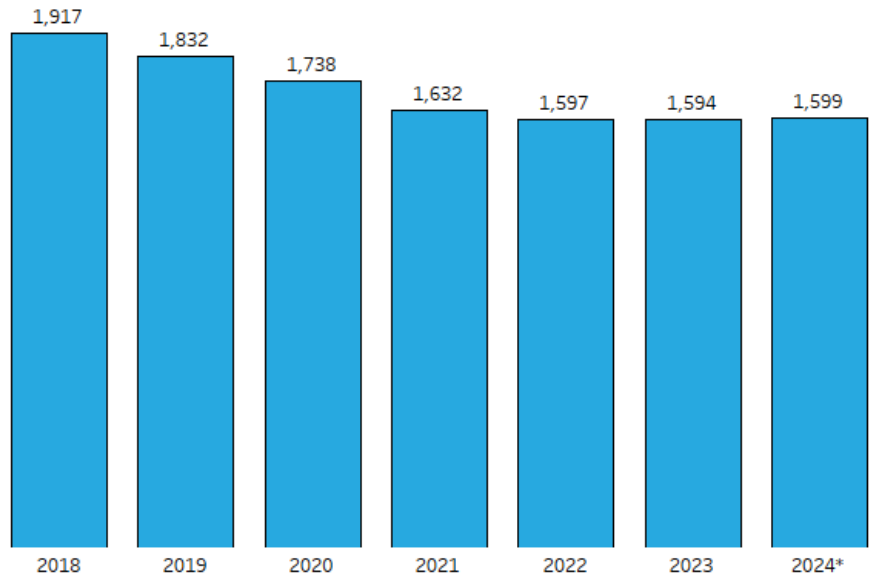
sworn employment for MPD from 2019 to 2022 (-13.9%) than there was from peak sworn employment in 1996 to 2019 (-13.1%).

MPD also provided data on staffing levels for detectives within the department. From 2018 until 2023, the department was authorized to employ 191 full-time equivalent (FTE) detectives, but authorized positions fell to 183 in 2024. MPD *actually* employed 160 FTE detectives in 2018 – a vacancy rate of 16.2% – and that number fell to just 141 FTEs the following year for a vacancy rate of 26.2%. Since 2019, MPD has not employed more than 142 FTE detectives in any year, and the vacancy rate for detectives has not fallen below 22% (see Figure 16).

Drops in sworn strength clearly impede MPD’s capacity to do routine patrolling, which can lead to more stops and arrests. It is notable that per the UCR data, much of the drop in sworn strength occurred in just the last five or six years, which lines up with the drop in On-View arrests.

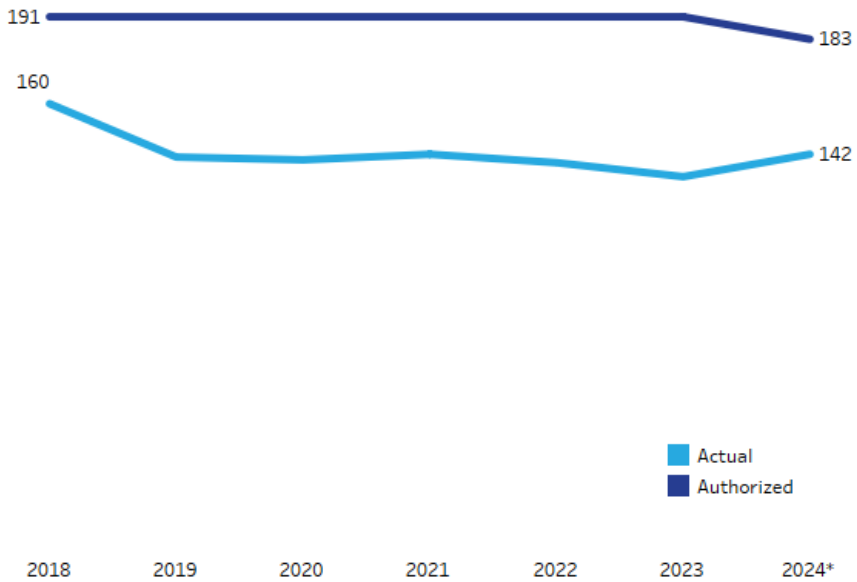
Response time data also speak to the drop in sworn strength within the ranks of MPD. Average response times across all calls for service were above 25 minutes in both 2022 and 2023; no other

**Figure 15: Sworn Staff Has Declined**  
MPD sworn staff at end of year, 2018 to 2024\*



Source: Milwaukee Police Department. \*2024 data as of May.

**Figure 16: MPD Detective Strength Has Declined, As Vacancy Rate Grows**  
MPD authorized and actual full-time equivalent detectives, by year, 2018 to 2024\*

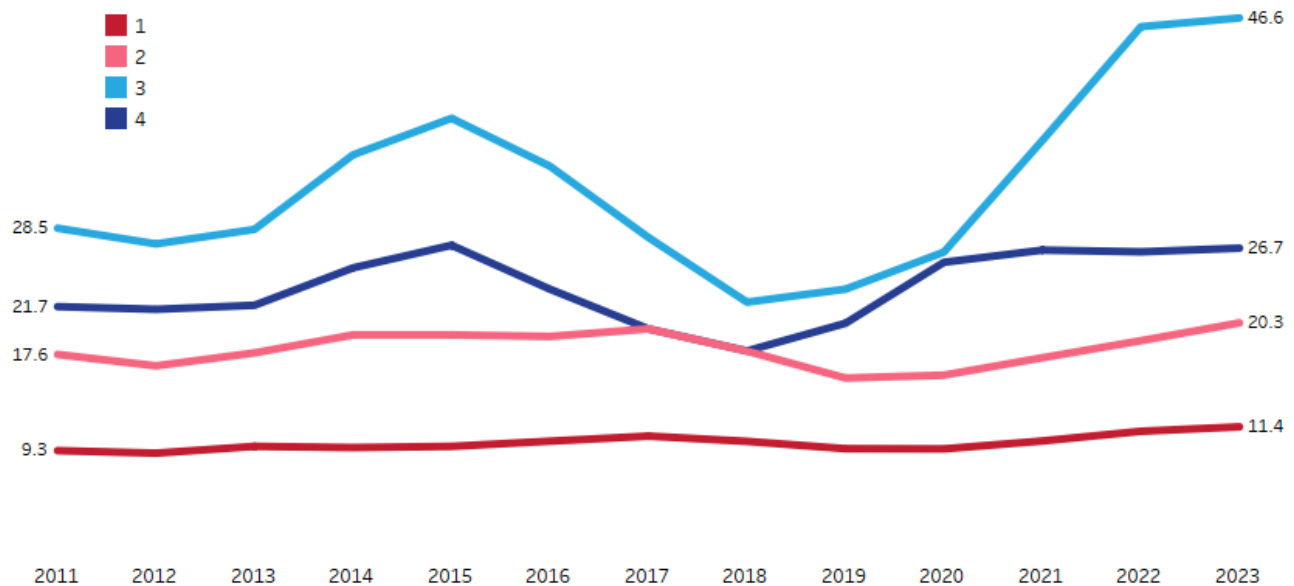


Source: Milwaukee Police Department. \*2024 data as of May.



year since at least 2012 saw average response times above 24 minutes, and averages were as low as 16 minutes, 38 seconds in 2019. Response times for Priority 1, 2, and 3 calls were longer in 2023 than any other year since at least 2012, while those for Priority 4 calls were slightly shorter than their peak (see Figure 17). Compared to 2019, MPD’s response times for Priority 1 were 19.9% longer in 2023, while response times for lower-level Priority 3 calls *doubled* during the same time period. MPD responded to 9.6% more calls for service in 2023 compared to 2012, fueled by a 25.5% increase in Priority 1 calls, but total time spent responding to calls was 51.4% higher in 2023; most of that time (81.1%) was spent responding to Priority 2 and 3 calls.

**Figure 17: Response Times Rise as Staffing Levels Fall**  
Average MPD response time in minutes, by call priority level



Source: Milwaukee Police Department

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. Despite the spike in homicides that took place over the first few years of the pandemic, MPD made a similar number of arrests in those years as it did a decade prior when the number of homicides was much lower. We were only able to obtain MPD clearance rate data going back to 2019, but in that year, 77.0% of homicides were cleared, compared to rates below 60% in each year since.<sup>10</sup> Homicide clearance rates also are affected by how homicides are committed – for example, gun homicides, which may be increasing, also may be more difficult to solve.

MPD’s staffing challenges do not stem only from the city’s budget woes. Even when funding exists to initiate new recruit classes to fill vacant positions, recruitment challenges have been intense. In fact, department officials cite much higher numbers of applicants for recruit classes in years prior to the pandemic than for the most recent class in 2024.

<sup>10</sup> There is evidence that homicide clearance rates have been in decline nationally over the last six decades, and that large declines particularly occurred during the pandemic. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/05/opinion/police-crime-data.html>



When asked about the reasons behind these challenges, most of our interviewees pointed to the historically tight labor market in general as being a key component. Some also cited difficulty competing with suburban police departments for an increasingly narrow pool of applicants. A cursory scan of police departments in the Milwaukee suburbs shows similar starting and upper-bound salaries for sworn officers when compared to MPD. However, given that MPD officers are likely faced with much busier days and more frequent responses to serious crimes, similar salaries may not be enough to incentivize officers to join or stay with MPD over moving to a suburban department.

The department also has been hit hard by an aging workforce that has resulted in a rash of retirements in recent years. Some also noted societal factors like the Floyd protests as an impediment to both officer retention and recruitment.

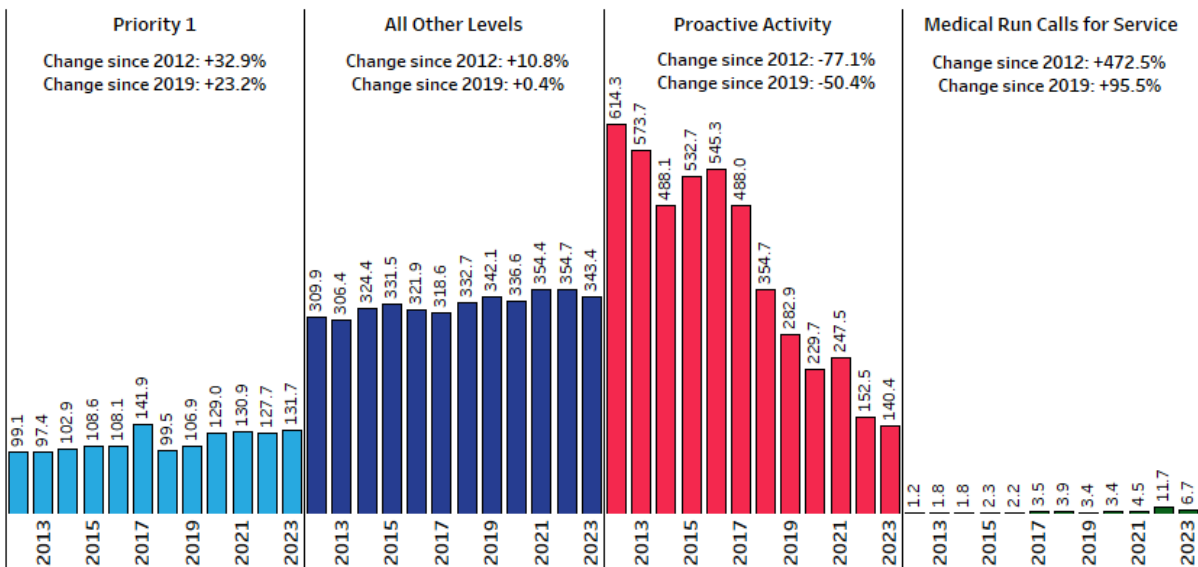
Finally, sworn officer vacancy challenges also impact the department’s ability to address vacant detective positions, which often are filled with promoted officers. Making such promotions, of course, would then exacerbate the attrition of sworn staff.

## The number of Priority 1 calls for service has increased significantly, diminishing MPD’s capacity to conduct proactive policing.

As mentioned above, when MPD dispatchers receive a call for service, it is categorized into one of four priority levels, with Level 1 being the highest priority and Level 4 the lowest. 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 Figure 18). Priority 1 calls for service accounted for 27.7% of dispatched calls in 2023 – a notable increase from 24.2% in 2012.

**Figure 18: 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



What has fallen much further, though, are logged instances of proactive activity.<sup>11</sup> These activities include traffic stops, subject stops, and many other activities that officers might undertake before an incident of crime has taken place. They totaled nearly 368,000 in 2012, but have fallen in nearly every year since. By 2023, there were just 79,385 instances of proactive activity; on a per capita basis, there were 614.3 instances of proactive activity per 1,000 residents in 2012 but just 140.4 in 2023, a decline of 77.1%. Just since 2019, per capita instances of proactivity activity have dropped by more than half.

The other type of activity that has seen a noticeable increase is medical run calls for service. If and when an individual in MPD custody is experiencing a need for medical attention in a health care setting, one or more officers must accompany the individual to that setting. These runs spiked in 2022; in *Under Pressure*, we cited overcrowding at the Milwaukee County Criminal Justice Facility (CJF) as a likely major contributor, as MPD was holding substantially more individuals at its own district stations for prolonged periods of time, thus increasing the number of instances in which officers were called upon to make medical runs when those being held had medical needs. Medical runs per capita declined by 42.5% from 11.7 per 1,000 in 2022 to 6.7 in 2023, an encouraging sign, but remained more than five times higher than their 2012 levels and nearly double their 2019 levels.

These trends may help explain the decline in both stops and arrests. With medical runs and high priority calls occupying more officer time, and lower priority calls remaining about the same, something must give, especially in context of the accompanying drop in sworn strength within MPD. The impact appears to have fallen on proactive activities such as traffic and subject stops. The pressure may also have added to the decline in arrests for the types of less serious crimes that we have already detailed. Clearly, there are other reasons why traffic and subject stops have plummeted besides diminished officer capacity for proactive policing. Yet the time-consuming nature of Priority 1 calls and their growing numbers would appear to be contributors.

Finally, interviewees noted that the city has switched to a modernized GPS-based dispatching system for MPD, which allows dispatchers to send the closest available squad to respond to a Priority 1 call, even if that squad is assigned to a different police district. They suggest that this change may be pulling more officers from districts with lower levels of Priority 1 calls into districts with higher levels, thus reducing their ability to conduct proactive policing in their own districts.

## 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 (see Figure 19 on the next page). While the numbers have begun to come down since that time, they are still substantially higher than in most years during the past decade.

While Part I 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. Consequently, the reductions in stops and arrests for less serious crimes may reflect (in

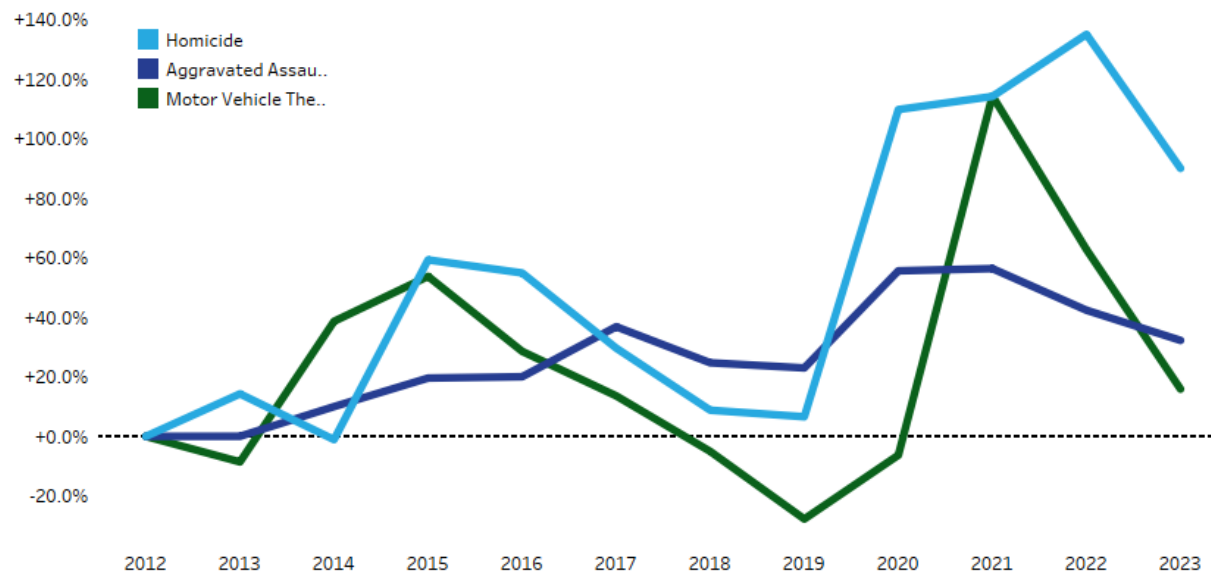
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<sup>11</sup> Includes plant car, traffic stop, targeted traffic stop, traffic laser, subject stop, tavern check, bus check, business check, probation/parole check, boat stop, after hours check, foot pursuit, fleeing, patrol, park and walk, vacant house check, vehicle pursuit, and street car check.



part) an increased focus on solving and otherwise addressing those more violent crimes that also draw significant community and media interest. If this is the case, then policymakers and the public may see it as a good tradeoff to focus on the crimes with the greatest impact to public safety.

**Figure 19: Violent Part I Crimes Spike During Pandemic**  
Change in MPD-based offense counts relative to 2012 levels, by type of crime



Sources: FBI Uniform Crime Reporting - National Incident-Based Reporting System

## The Collins Settlement produced substantial changes in policing practices.

As discussed earlier in this report, the Collins Settlement was reached in 2018 after a group of plaintiffs sued MPD over alleged unconstitutional stop-and-frisk practices.<sup>12</sup> The Settlement required MPD to reform those practices and stipulated that an external organization, the Crime and Justice Institute (CJI), monitor compliance. CJI publishes annual and semiannual reports and data analyses that analyze and comment on MPD’s progress.

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. These include a written narrative, whether or not a frisk has taken place and if so a justification for that frisk, whether or not “contraband” was found, whether the encounter resulted in a use of force (and if so a justification narrative), the result of the stop, a relevant suspect description, and the names and ID numbers of all involved officers. In its most recent semiannual data analysis from [May 2024](#), CJI notes that while MPD has met individualized, objective, and articulable reasonable suspicion (IOARS) reporting standards in at least 85% of interactions for traffic stops since 2019, it has inconsistently been in compliance for field interviews, and has not yet come close to compliance for frisks, no-action encounters, and encounters that end in a citation or warning only.

<sup>12</sup> We have discussed items related to the Settlement in our [2021 report on police reforms](#) in Milwaukee and in our [2024 report](#) on community-oriented policing in the city.



Officers who do not adhere strictly to the reporting terms of the Settlement when conducting a stop face non-disciplinary corrective actions, such as counseling, remedial training, and more. CJI noted the rigor that is required to meet those terms, stating in its [Fifth Annual Report](#) on the Settlement that – for example – when it comes to inputting Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) data, “proving documentation exists for 100 percent of police encounters in order to achieve compliance is an exceptionally high bar that does not provide margin for human or technological error.”

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. Furthermore, many would agree that too many unnecessary stops and frisks were occurring prior to the Settlement, and that some substantial reductions in these activities were both necessary and appropriate. Consequently, 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 that accelerated in 2017 when the Collins lawsuit was filed and 2018 when the Settlement was reached, and most would agree this is a positive development.

Still, some of our interviewees for this report and *Under Pressure* question whether the Settlement’s extensive reporting requirements may be dissuading officers from making stops or arrests that *can* be justified on both a public safety and a constitutional basis because of the time needed to fill out paperwork and the increased scrutiny associated with their actions. While most would agree that much of the work MPD now does to document its encounters aids public safety and promotes transparency, any level of additional paperwork will necessarily take officers away from other tasks. Unfortunately, there are no quantitative data that would allow us to address the question of how much more time is spent filing paperwork now relative to before Collins, but as we will discuss in the final section of this report, we do believe it merits further exploration.

## Leadership turnover at MPD led to policy and procedural changes.

In 2018, after a decade at the helm of MPD, Edward Flynn retired as chief of the department. Alfonso Morales took over in that position, but served only until 2020, when he was [demoted](#) to captain by the FPC and then retired. From late that year until nearly a year later, Jeffrey Norman served as interim chief, until the interim title was removed in November 2021 and he was officially named to the lead role of MPD.

Different chiefs can have vastly different approaches to policing; the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, for example, [posited](#) that “Morales was chosen as chief in large part because he was seen as the anti-Flynn: focused on investigations instead of patrol, popular inside and outside the department.”

Of most relevance to the decline in arrests and stops – which began during the later years of Flynn’s tenure but have accelerated since he left – was Flynn’s emphasis on the collection and use of data to strategically deploy resources and gauge officer performance. For example, he brought [CompStat](#) to MPD, a performance management system that places a heavy emphasis on individual officer data. Several interviewees noted that officers’ performance was evaluated, in part, by activity levels such as the numbers of stops and arrests they were making.

Police chiefs have wide latitude to make policy changes that can impact police activity on the street, and those we interviewed noted that MPD has shifted away from a metrics-based approach to stops and arrests made by individual officers, thus potentially playing a role in the decline in stops and arrests. As noted earlier, both Morales and Norman stated that they would emphasize efforts to



establish community trust and build partnerships between MPD and the broader community; Norman, for example, was [described](#) to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* by residents “as someone who brought a less militaristic, more collaborative and hands-on approach” to MPD.

## Summary

We can say with greater confidence today than when we published *Under Pressure* in August 2023 that a combination of factors has contributed to the sharp declines in arrests and stops in Milwaukee. The city has experienced a drop in the number of offenses reported to MPD, which alone would cause an expected decline in arrests. A surge in emergency calls for service, depleted staffing levels, and greater attention to violent crimes have diminished officers’ capacity to conduct proactive policing activities that often result in certain types of arrests and stops. New department policies and procedures stemming from the Collins Settlement and performance measurement changes made by new MPD leaders also likely have played a role.

Our research also finds that Milwaukee is not alone among peer cities in seeing drastic declines in arrests and stops. These national declines are likely linked, at least in part, to new approaches to policing spurred by the murder of George Floyd and other high-profile incidents involving alleged abuse by officers. That recognition may reinforce the notion that the declines in Milwaukee may have brought positive changes to the ways officers interact with citizens on a daily basis. Yet, we also find that Milwaukee has seen the sharpest decline in arrests among its peers and one of the sharpest declines in traffic stops. These drops – though directionally similar to the decline in offenses – raise the question of whether policymakers should consider steps that will at least halt or perhaps to some extent reverse these trends. In the next section, we use citizen satisfaction data collected by the FPC to gain insight into that question.





# RESIDENT SATISFACTION WITH MPD

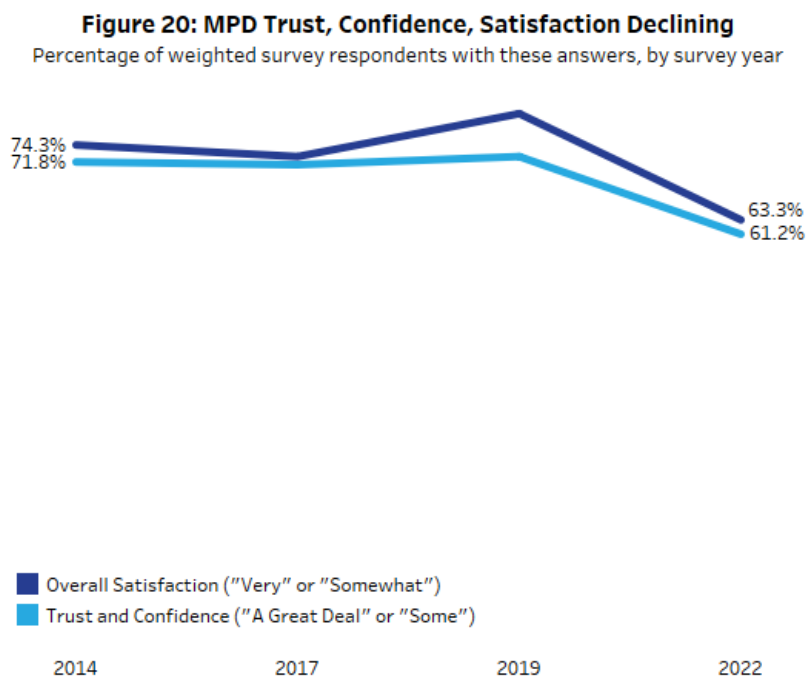
While the decline in arrests and resident contacts over the last decade in Milwaukee has been large and noticeable, it is difficult and subjective to assess this change in positive or negative terms. While some would argue that a precipitous drop in arrests has meant there are more individuals with criminal intent on city streets, others would argue that MPD was making *too many* arrests a decade ago, and that subsequent declines were an appropriate reaction to the “over-policing” that took place in the city during the last three or four decades.

To gain insight into how Milwaukee residents view the state of policing in the city, we are able to turn to citizen satisfaction survey data. Since 2014, researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, St. Norbert College, and Neighborhood Analytics, LLC have been commissioned by the FPC to conduct four surveys of Milwaukee residents around policing and public safety in the city. These surveys were conducted in 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2022 via telephone and mail, in English and Spanish, and each contain over 1,000 valid responses. Responses are weighted by age, sex, and race in line with the city’s demographics to account for differential response rates.

Examining these survey responses, it is immediately clear that **resident concern was highest, and satisfaction lowest, in 2022**. In 2019, 78.9% of respondents said they were very or somewhat satisfied with MPD; that declined to 63.3% in 2022. Significantly more respondents were very or somewhat satisfied with the department in both 2014 (74.3%) and 2017 (72.6%), which paints 2022 as an outlier year. Similarly, the percentage of respondents who said they had “a great deal”

or “some” trust and confidence in MPD was 61.2% in 2022, more than 10 percentage points below the shares in each of the other three surveys (see Figure 20). For each of the demographic groups broken out in the 2022 survey (men, women, white, black, other non-white, and four age brackets), the decline in satisfaction with the department from 2019 to 2022 is statistically significant.

The survey asks respondents to rate their satisfaction with MPD in regard to a number of items. These include their efforts to address violent crime, their efforts to address property-related crime, their efforts to enforce traffic laws, their responsiveness to public concerns, their honesty and integrity, their general attitude and behavior towards citizens, and their overall competence. **In 2022, Milwaukee residents were “very” or “somewhat” satisfied in regard to each of these items at the**



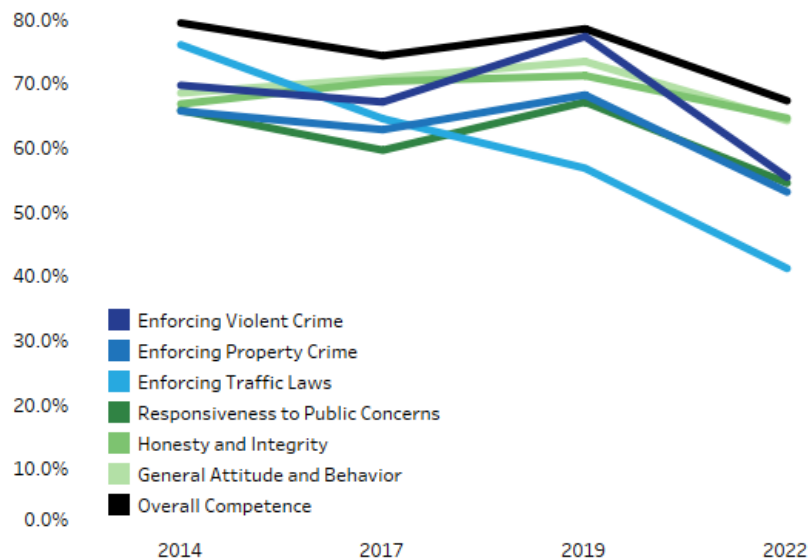
Source: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, St. Norbert College, Neighborhood Analytics, LLC



**lowest rate across each of the four surveys.** For each item besides overall competence and traffic laws, the largest makeup of “very” or “somewhat” satisfied responses took place in the 2019 survey.

The decline in resident satisfaction with the enforcement of traffic laws is by far the most notable from the above list. In 2014, 76.0% of respondents were “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with MPD’s enforcement of traffic laws, second only to “overall competence” on the list of items. However, satisfaction with traffic law enforcement has declined in each survey since; in 2022, **only 41.2% of survey respondents were “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with MPD’s enforcement of traffic laws, a decline of 34.8 percentage points** (see Figure 21).

**Figure 21: Satisfaction with Traffic Law Enforcement Plummeting**  
Weighted percentage of respondents saying they are “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with MPD performance, by item and survey



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

This phenomenon pairs with the fact that in 2022, nearly every survey respondent (96.9%) said they were “very” or “somewhat” concerned with reckless driving in the city, but only 36.2% of respondents were “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with MPD’s response to reckless driving. **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.** That said, while citizens may perceive that law enforcement should be the leader in addressing concerns about reckless driving, other types of solutions – like changes in roadway designs and traffic patterns – also could contribute to reducing it, as reflected by roadway and traffic calming changes the city is actively exploring and implementing.

As one might expect given the reduction in stops and arrests, increasingly fewer Milwaukeeans say that they have come into contact with MPD. Compared to just under a quarter of survey respondents who said an MPD officer had initiated contact with them over the past year in 2014 (24.4%), only 18.1% of respondents said the same in 2022, and the “yes” response rate has declined with each subsequent survey. Interestingly, however, in 2022, slightly *more* respondents who had an MPD contact within the last year said their most recent contact involved receiving a ticket or their arrest compared to 2014 levels. This may indicate that **the drop in arrests is driven more by a drop in contacts, rather than a decrease in the arrest/ticket rate post-contact.**

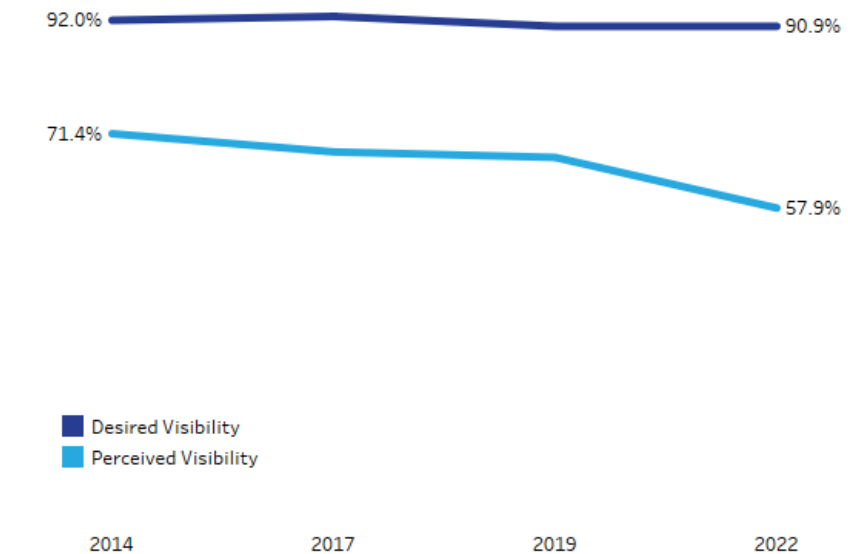
An overwhelming majority of Milwaukeeans in each survey (>90%) said police should be “very” or “somewhat” visible in their neighborhood, with responses in those categories dropping by only 1.1 percentage points from 2014 (92.0%) to 2022 (90.9%). However, there have been significant declines in the proportion of survey respondents who say MPD is “very” or “somewhat” visible in



their neighborhood – 71.4% responded in such a manner in 2014, compared to only 57.9% in 2022, and there have been declines in those proportions after each subsequent survey (see Figure 22). Satisfaction with MPD visibility (“very” or “somewhat” responses) has declined from 2014 to 2022 by a similar 15.5 percentage points.

On the whole, 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.**

**Figure 22: Police Visibility Declining, Incongruent With Resident Desires**  
Weighted percentage of respondents answering “very” or “somewhat” visible, by question and survey



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

It is important to note that the 2022 survey was conducted at a time when auto thefts had skyrocketed and violent crime rates had surged, and that more recent data show the incidences of those crimes have now started to decline. That might lead to changes in future surveys and policymakers might wish to take that into account. Still, for now the citizen satisfaction survey results suggest the following important insights:

- In the midst of a decline in discretionary vehicle stops, city residents say the department is doing an inadequate job of enforcing traffic laws.
- Residents *want* officers to be more visible in their neighborhoods and their sense that visibility has declined may be linked to the drop in proactive policing.
- Fewer Milwaukeeans of every gender, age, and race feel safe in the city, and fewer are satisfied with or trust MPD.



# INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSION

Our analysis shows that policing in Milwaukee has changed markedly over the last decade. Compared to a decade ago, city police are 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. Specifically:

- Wisconsin DOJ data show that from 2012 to 2023, MPD made fewer arrests than the year before in every year except 2021, and there was a year-over-year arrest decline of at least 10% in eight of those 11 years. Overall, MPD made 51,176 arrests in 2012, but just 9,061 in 2023 – a decline of 82.3%.
- From 2012 to 2023, Milwaukee’s drop in arrest rate was the largest of any of the 12 cities we examined per federal UCR data. When we look only at the 2018 to 2023 period, we find that MPD made 50.0% fewer arrests, the fourth-largest drop among those cities.
- According to data from the FPC, traffic and subject stops made by MPD from 2015 to 2023 also declined substantially. In 2023, MPD made 27,715 traffic stops, 81.5% fewer than the 149,721 it made in 2015; the department also made only 708 subject stops, a 98.5% decrease from the 46,438 it made in 2015.

There is no single explanation for these trends. Rather, we can conclude that several policy, environmental, and societal factors – some interconnected – explain them.

As we have pointed out throughout this report, there is compelling evidence – both from quantitative and qualitative sources – that MPD was stopping and arresting individuals at high rates a decade ago, especially relative to peer cities. That evidence also lends credence to arguments in favor of subsequent steps to reduce the rates of encounters and arrests. That includes the shift required by the Collins Settlement to ensure more thorough and accurate documentation and justification for stops and related activities, and the end of the use of metrics like numbers of stops and arrests to gauge officer performance.

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. We know that reported offenses of serious, violent crime – homicide, aggravated assault, and motor vehicle theft in particular – rose during the onset of the pandemic and remained quite high through the end of 2022. But that was replicated in many other urban centers throughout the country, and data from 2023 and 2024 show that these crime spikes have begun to subside. Also, the decline in arrests we observe – particularly Summons and Citations arrests for low level crimes – preceded this spike by a number of years.

The question of whether lower level crimes are being committed with increased frequency is murkier. Societal shifts in attitude away from criminalizing activities like marijuana possession may have shifted reported offenses downward regardless of whether there were actually fewer instances of these activities, and it is possible that broader societal conversations around policing and criminal justice have led to fewer reported instances of petty crimes like theft or vandalism. We do know from the data that reported property crimes in Milwaukee have generally declined over the past several decades.



It is difficult, therefore, to conclude definitively from offense data that the significant changes in policing in Milwaukee have caused crime rates to increase. However, at a minimum, the sharp decline in MPD arrests for weapons violations – at a time when gun purchases and crimes spiked during the pandemic – makes for an unsettling combination.

Another important question is whether citizens actually feel safer. The citizen survey data we cite in the previous section are two years old and might be different today, but they show that at that time citizens felt less safe. The survey results indicate that citizens would like to see greater police visibility and enhanced enforcement of traffic laws.

Overall, though definitive conclusions are always elusive, we do believe our analysis leaves city, MPD, and FPC officials – as well as the broader community – with a series of potential action steps to consider.

## Continue to hone strategies to address human resources challenges

UCR data affirm that 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. The department's capacity has been stretched particularly thin since the onset of the pandemic, caused by a combination of challenges related to the city budget, a rash of retirements, recruitment challenges, and more.

While a move to expand police staffing levels 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 in the summer of 2023 may render that debate moot. The city now is heavily incentivized to return sworn strength to levels that would have been standard in years past, or risk losing out on a significant amount of state aids from the shared revenue program.

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. A new labor agreement between the city and the Milwaukee Police Association has been stalled for more than two years, and it would appear urgent for the city and union to resolve outstanding issues soon as a means of providing greater certainty to potential recruits and ensuring MPD remains competitive with suburban departments. A renewed focus on filling detective positions, which have seen a vacancy rate of more than 20% since 2019, also would appear to be a necessity, especially in light of continued elevated violent crime levels and decreasing homicide clearance rates.

MPD officials have noted a number of recruitment and retention challenges, including:

- A high proportion of their officers reaching retirement age;
- A historically tight overall labor market in the region that has persisted for several years;
- The high levels of stress experienced by officers in light of higher violent crime rates and other challenges specific to highly urbanized communities, which creates a competitive disadvantage with suburban departments despite competitive compensation rates; and



- The propensity of younger generations to switch jobs more often and be far less attracted to the promise of generous pension benefits, which are most advantageous for those who spend several decades on the police force.

They also note that the department is having a more challenging time reaching potential recruits with traditional outreach efforts, such as over the radio or on Facebook, as many other forms of social media have proliferated.

With Act 12 maintenance of effort requirements looming, MPD and FPC have already recognized the need to devise and implement new strategies. Recently, officials [announced](#) that the city would temporarily offer a \$10,000 bonus to incentivize officers in other departments to transfer to MPD, as well as reduced training requirements for in-state transferees. Should efforts like this one prove salient in raising the department's sworn strength, MPD could choose to continue keeping this program open after the four-week period it has designated.

They may wish to also look further for 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.”

The focus on human resources might also extend to MPD's broader staffing structure. For example, one of our interviewees suggested that the department review whether it has enough sergeants – and whether those sergeants are appropriately tasked – to supervise patrol officers and ensure they are making the most productive use of their time and that their activities align with departmental goals and priorities. Indeed, the need to comply with Act 12 sworn strength requirements may also represent an important opportunity for MPD to consider the larger question of whether it has the right balance of patrol officers, supervisory staff, and command staff going forward.

Finally, as city officials grapple with MPD staffing needs and requirements in the context of their overall financial challenges, they may wish to place a new emphasis on intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration with the Milwaukee County Sheriff and suburban police departments to generate efficiencies and reduce costs.

For example, are there still areas of overlap between MPD and the sheriff's office with regard to patrols of county parks and parkways within the city of Milwaukee that could be eliminated? Or, are there greater opportunities for MPD to share certain specialized positions or functions with suburban departments or the sheriff through contractual arrangements that could bring new revenues or lower costs to the city? Consolidation of public safety dispatch functions between the city, county, and suburban municipalities also might generate savings and efficiencies, as we suggested in our 2016 report, [Get Connected](#).

## Further explore the need for and efficacy of enhanced traffic law enforcement

We have stated clearly throughout this report our impression 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 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.

Strategies to reduce reckless driving can take many forms, and several have been implemented by city and county officials in Milwaukee and by MPD. Mayor Cavalier Johnson, for example, has made [Vision Zero](#) (“no traffic deaths or life changing injuries by 2037”) a major push of his administration, implementing strategies that include (but are not limited to) redesigning streets, creating protected bike lanes, advocating for installation of [red light cameras](#), and altering transit offerings. County Executive David Crowley has also [recently signed](#) similar legislation. We do not feel qualified to opine on the role that greater traffic law enforcement can and should play to accompany such efforts, but a 2022 survey indicates that citizens would like to see greater police visibility and enforcement of traffic laws.

If MPD leaders agree but face capacity constraints, then our discussion above regarding human resources challenges is highly relevant. As we will discuss in our next point below, addressing the surge in Priority 1 calls for service also would seem essential so that more officer time could be devoted to proactive policing.

Some might argue that a review of the Collins Settlement reporting provisions might also be in order, with an eye toward ensuring that unnecessarily onerous reporting requirements and unnecessarily harsh penalties for officers who fail to completely adhere to those requirements are not a factor in discouraging justifiable stops. Again, we would consider this to be a matter that is beyond our expertise and one that the department is best equipped to review if it feels such exploration is needed.

Overall, our discussions with key informants do lead us to wonder whether, if MPD possessed appropriate resources, more could be done to prioritize traffic law enforcement and boost the number of traffic stops irrespective of the Collins Settlement. As one informant put it, the Settlement simply has made the department “be more specific about how and why they are making a stop.” That does not mean that some tweaks in requirements or disciplinary actions should not be considered, but it is also possible that under its existing terms, the Settlement should not be precluding efforts to strategically deploy resources in ways that would increase justifiable stops in high-impact neighborhoods or throughout the city.

It is notable that in 2021, MPD created its Traffic Safety Unit (TSU), which “utilizes High Visibility Enforcement as a universal traffic safety approach designed to create deterrence and change unlawful traffic behaviors when it comes to Reckless Driving.” Starting in late February 2021, the TSU issued 21,015 citations that year, but total citations issued declined to 13,508 in 2022, 12,298 in 2023, and are on pace for about 8,900 in 2024 based on data through the end of September. Around 50% of citations in each year are for speeding.

Increased volumes of citations are not necessarily the best means of enhancing road safety, and there is evidence that the rash of reckless driving and motor vehicle theft the city experienced in 2020, 2021 and 2022 is starting to subside. However, both the 2022 citizen satisfaction survey and our experience listening to the concerns of citizens during more than a dozen MPD-organized listening sessions from late 2022 to early 2024 make it clear that many residents would like to see an uptick in traffic enforcement in the city. With a unit already created, an updated survey would give MPD an indication of whether or not the efforts of the TSU were coming to fruition. If residents



remain unsatisfied, the department might explore shifting more officers to this unit and working with city leaders in other departments to continue to curb reckless driving.

## 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 sat at elevated levels above 72,000 in each year since 2020, and MPD has noted how they can take away from other areas of policing. Our own data analysis shows that as Priority 1 calls for service have increased, for example, logged amounts of proactive policing have precipitously declined.

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. It is notable, for example, that from 2022 to 2023, Priority 1 calls for service *rose* by 2.5% despite the combined number of homicides, aggravated assaults, and motor vehicle thefts *falling* by 13.6% and the overall number of Part I crimes dropping by 9.0%.

Much like the Milwaukee Fire Department has devoted considerable resources to “mobile integrated healthcare” – a strategy in which paramedics conduct home visits and engage in case management to address health issues facing frequent callers of 911 in an effort to reduce those calls – MPD could attempt to do more to identify the causes of Priority 1 police calls for service and reduce them.

## Building on community-oriented policing, find new ways to come into contact with residents

Coinciding with the Collins Settlement, MPD and FPC have taken a more active interest in 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. The procedure notes that “all department members are responsible for engaging in community and problem-oriented policing on a daily basis,” including “conducting daily park and walks...to ensure members are engaging with individuals and businesses” and “maximizing positive interactions with the public throughout their shift and building positive relationships with residents, community groups, and businesses in their assigned squad area.”

Earlier this year, we published [Common Ground](#), our summary and analysis of 16 community listening sessions hosted by MPD, FPC, and the Community Collaborative Commission (CCC) intended to better understand how residents of Milwaukee view public safety in their communities. Our understanding is that these three entities are now in the process of creating a community engagement plan, which would delineate how each member of the police department is expected to uphold the values of community oriented policing.

A few policy considerations we lay out in *Common Ground* would also be germane in boosting resident contact numbers: we suggested that MPD might think about working into its engagement plan a charge that every officer spend a certain percentage of their time on community oriented policing efforts, and we also suggested that community oriented policing should be practiced not just





by community liaison officers and community partnership unit officers, but by all sworn and non-sworn staff in the department.

## Better understand how officers are spending their time

Our interviews and review of pertinent data suggest that MPD officers are likely busier than ever. Violent crime in the city is at some of the highest levels in recent memory, as are Priority 1 calls for service and medical runs, while staffing levels are at historic lows. As we have discussed, there is good reason to believe that these factors are contributing to the sharp decline in traffic and subject stops and are preventing officers from conducting more proactive policing in general.

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 (irrespective of the possible need to add more sworn strength). For example, MPD officials told us that officers are now spending far more time than they used to reviewing camera footage and other potential video evidence. Quantifying this relatively recent development may be instructive to MPD leaders; it might also inform discussions about staffing needs. MPD leaders may also wish to determine whether recent declines in proactive policing activity are due to more officer time being obligated to criminal activity that has already taken place, a shift in how officers are spending their unobligated time, or some combination of both.

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. Such efforts might be particularly useful as the department seeks to identify the most efficient use of its resources as it implements a community engagement plan, addresses the requirements of Act 12, and moves towards full compliance of the Collins Settlement.

## Conclusion

As we have stated throughout this report, 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. Ebbs and flows in crime rates – including rates of serious, violent crime – do not appear to be directly related to this decline. Also, despite Milwaukee standing out among peer cities for its drop in arrests over the last decade, many other cities have seen sharp reductions in arrests and resident contacts over time.

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. Because it appears that the surge in violent crime the city saw during the pandemic has begun to taper off, this consideration perhaps can be more measured and community-oriented than it could have been during a time when crime rates were rising. At the same time, the number of weapons and rate of violent crime and reckless driving in the city remain alarming and deserve continued efforts to address them. Moreover, with city leaders now essentially required by state law to add sworn strength to MPD over the next decade, the debate can focus on how to effectively recruit, retain, and train staff and how to strategically employ new resources to maximize their impact, as opposed to whether to add sworn strength capacity at all.



Important actions have occurred within MPD over the last few years, from meeting many of the requirements of the Collins Settlement to adopting a standard operating procedure on community oriented policing to [instituting key reforms](#) in the wake of the summer 2020 protests. Determining how those changes have impacted policing in the city and whether those impacts necessitate additional change or even reversal is a tall task, but one that is critical to public safety and police-community relations in the city. 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.

