**Fiscal Facts: Police spending up, staffing levels down in Wisconsin’s biggest cities**

In seven of Wisconsin’s 10 largest cities, there were fewer police officers per capita in 2018 than a decade earlier, even as their police spending levels and violent crime rates both increased.

Police staffing levels were hotly debated during recent city budget deliberations in Milwaukee and Madison. We analyzed a decade of data for Wisconsin’s 10 largest cities to determine if others face similar questions about appropriate levels of sworn police officers.

Our findings show how police spending can outpace inflation even as staffing levels fall. They may also provide insight into how cities are handling core public safety duties during a time when they face limits on property taxes and little to no increase in state aids.

In six of the 10 cities studied – Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Kenosha, Racine, Appleton, Waukesha, Oshkosh, Eau Claire, and Janesville -- the total number of officers increased between 2008 and 2018. But population increases meant that seven of 10 cities had fewer officers per capita, with the exceptions being Janesville, Oshkosh and Racine.

Despite the per capita drop in sworn staff in most of the cities, their police spending increased substantially. Violent crime rates also rose, though we are not suggesting a link between these factors. Also worth noting is that the Wisconsin violent crime rate figures contradict the national trend for all U.S. cities, which saw their combined violent crime rate decrease from 2008 to 2017.

Municipal elected officials must consider many factors within their budgets and communities when deciding police sworn strength levels. However, given the priority that is typically given to public safety, the fact that police staffing in many large cities is not keeping pace with population growth could be a sign of intensifying fiscal constraints.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at wispolicyforum.org.*