**A high-level look at police funding trends in Wisconsin**

Law enforcement has been the biggest expense for Wisconsin municipalities over the last three decades. Communities spent about $1.28 billion on law enforcement in 2018, up from $353 million in 1986, an increase of 262% in raw dollars and nearly 60% after accounting for inflation. On a per-capita basis, police spending rose from $74 in 1986 to $219 in 2018, a 197% increase in raw dollars and a 30% increase after adjusting for inflation.

State data show law enforcement spending comprised 17.8% of total municipal operating and capital spending in 1986 and was somewhat higher at 20.0% in 2018, although the percentage has trended downward since peaking at 22.1% in 2013. Every year during the period, law enforcement was the largest municipal spending category in Wisconsin. On a per-capita basis, Wisconsin spent $219 on police in 2018 — inflation-adjusted increases of 29.8% since 1986 and 6.4% since 2000.

Over the same period of rising police spending, the state’s overall crime rate fell by nearly 55%, although violent crime increased. That does not necessarily imply a cause-and-effect relationship between spending and crime; police also respond to medical emergencies and provide security at public events in addition to responding to crimes.

In the wake of protests surrounding the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police in May, local leaders entering the 2021 budget season are hearing calls to “defund” local police departments. For some, that may mean shifting resources to other budget priorities, like public health or workforce development. For others, it may mean a desire to disband existing departments and re-create public safety models.

In the end, however, fiscal reality will likely drive these decisions. Given law enforcement’s large share of overall local government spending in Wisconsin, many of the state’s municipalities may have little choice but to consider cuts or freezes to police spending as their financial challenges intensify from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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