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The Thinning Blue Line: Milwaukee Police Department's Attrition Crisis

By Sean Kennedy



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Milwaukee is among the cities that have repeatedly cut law enforcement positions in recent years.

Not only has the city reduced the number of authorized police positions, it has fewer officers to fill them, leading to higher vacancy rates. This inability to fill what remaining positions the city is funding includes leadership ranks: The Milwaukee Police Department is facing a damaging loss of institutional knowledge and practical skills, a loss that could worsen policing just when Milwaukee needs its force to perform at its peak.

Here, researcher Sean Kennedy measures the results in reduced police protection for the city's beleaguered citizens.

Politicians who wanted to defund the police have backpedaled as crime has surged. But Kennedy finds they need to begin to repair the institution that serves as the frontline defense of Milwaukeeans' right to live in peace. Here is how.

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Overview

The Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) has experienced a dramatic reduction in sworn officer staffing levels from its 1995 levels in both authorized (budgeted) and actual (staffed) positions. The decline in the number of sworn officers, especially those in leadership and critical functions, has become more pronounced in recent years as the need for greater policing has grown amid rising violent and property crime since 2019.¹

While the challenge of rising law enforcement attrition is not unique to the City of Milwaukee, the problem is more acute due to both the scale and type of staffing losses. As the city grapples with record levels of homicides, shootings and auto thefts, city leadership has implemented plans to further shrink MPD's authorized sworn officer level.

Meanwhile, voluntary departures (resignations and retirements) are increasing force-level losses beyond intended attrition rates. The 2022 vacancy rate (open vs. staffed positions) stands at 11.2% — more than *six times* the 2019 rate of 1.8% and *16 times* the 1997 rate of 0.7%. Of late, MPD cannot maintain its significantly reduced staffing levels due to severe recruitment and training problems.

Figure 1

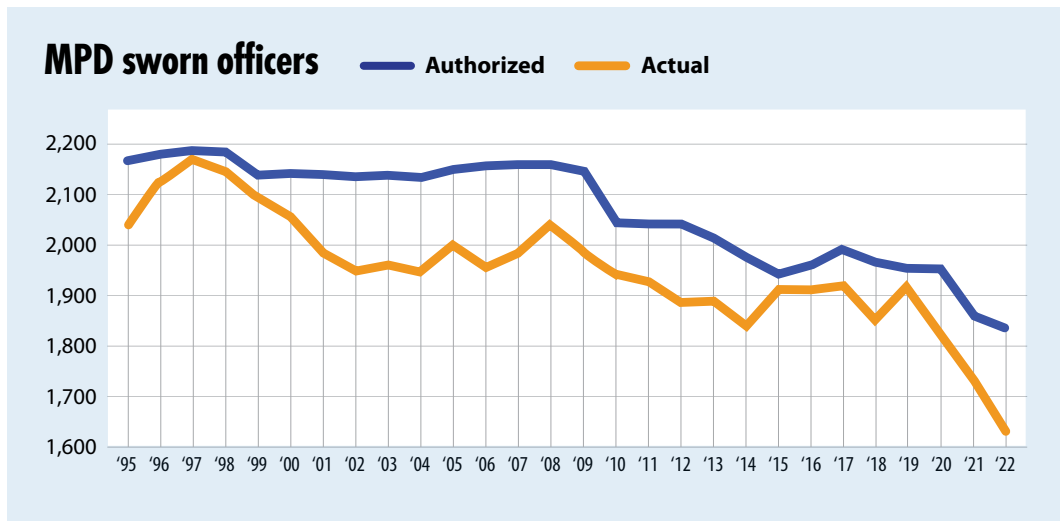
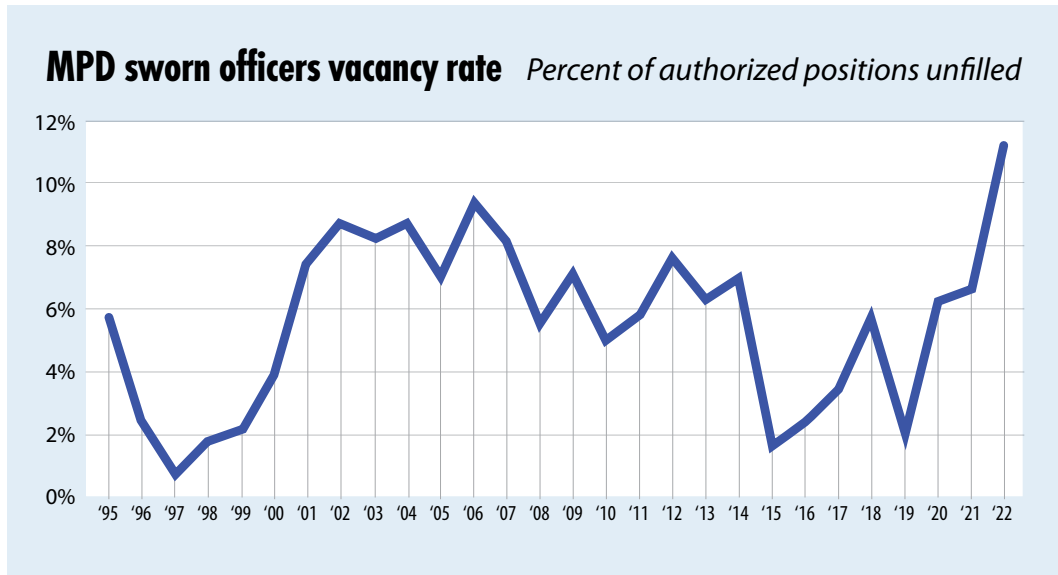


Figure 2



The consequence — designed and collateral — is that MPD’s ranks have been depleted over the past 25 years by 24.8%, or an actual reduction of 538 officers, between a peak in 1997 and 2022. The number of budgeted positions has been reduced by 16%, while the city’s population has fallen only 4% during that period. So, the number of officers per capita dropped from 350 per 100,000 residents in 1997 to 280 per 100,000 in 2022.

Projections suggest the ranks will fall even further — to as few as 1,432 sworn officers by the end of 2023, a 34% drop from 1997, when MPD had 2,169 sworn officers.

Department-wide Trends

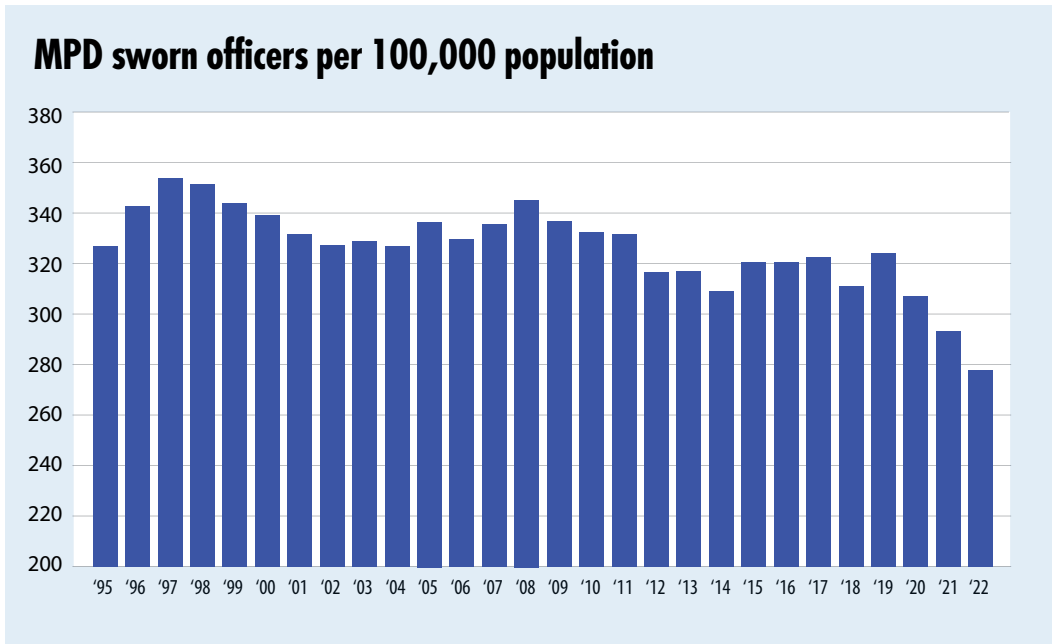
As the historical trends show, authorized force levels declined slightly between 2010 (2,043) and 2019 (1,951) prior to the city leadership’s 2020 announcement that it would cut another 120 officers through attrition.²

That was also prior to Mayor Cavalier Johnson’s announcement in late September 2022 that his budget proposal cuts more positions. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported that in the proposed budget, the average sworn strength in the Police Department would drop from 1,657 officers to 1,640.

Actual force levels dropped even more sharply than intended after 2019, creating a widening vacancy gap between budgeted and filled positions. In 2019, less than 2% of budgeted sworn positions were vacant; by 2022, that climbed to 11.2% (206), even as the authorized force level decreased.

This vacancy gap has two related causes: persistent staff departures and the failure to

Figure 3



recruit and onboard new officers to fill the growing vacancies. In short, MPD officers are leaving faster than they can be replaced.³

Rising Attrition

The department has experienced a steady increase in attrition from voluntary departures (resignations and retirements) between 2018 and 2021. Over those four years, 523 officers have left willingly, compared to only 52 who were terminated, disabled or died, for a total of 575 in departures. Thus 90% of the raw attrition was due to officers' own decisions.

Following June 2020 — the month after civil unrest began related to George Floyd's death while in Minneapolis police custody — voluntary departures soared, rising 33% in the last seven months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 and 2018. While resignations declined by a third in that period, retirements — a much larger category by volume — rose by 57%.

Adjusting for a longer time frame, the trend of increasing voluntary departures holds (while involuntary ones declined). Retirements increased by 26% between June 2020 and January 2022 compared to the same 20-month period between June 2018 and January 2020, and retirements rose 18% compared to the prior 22-month period (June 2018 to March 2022).

Since 2020, when then-Mayor Tom Barrett and the Common Council pushed to reduce, through attrition, the police force even further out of a desire to cut costs and out of political hostility toward law enforcement,⁴ the number of retirement-eligible officers has only grown, presaging even more dramatic staffing declines.

Approximately 180 MPD personnel were eligible for retirement in 2021, and nearly 200 more will be eligible in the following two years, for a total of 371 potential voluntary departures on the immediate horizon.⁵ Of those 180 retirement-eligible officers, 107 accepted their retirement. Based on that share, the department is on track to lose 300 officers between 2021 and 2023 with 220 retirements in addition to 75 resignations and a dozen other miscellaneous departures — averaging a net annual loss of 100 officers per year.

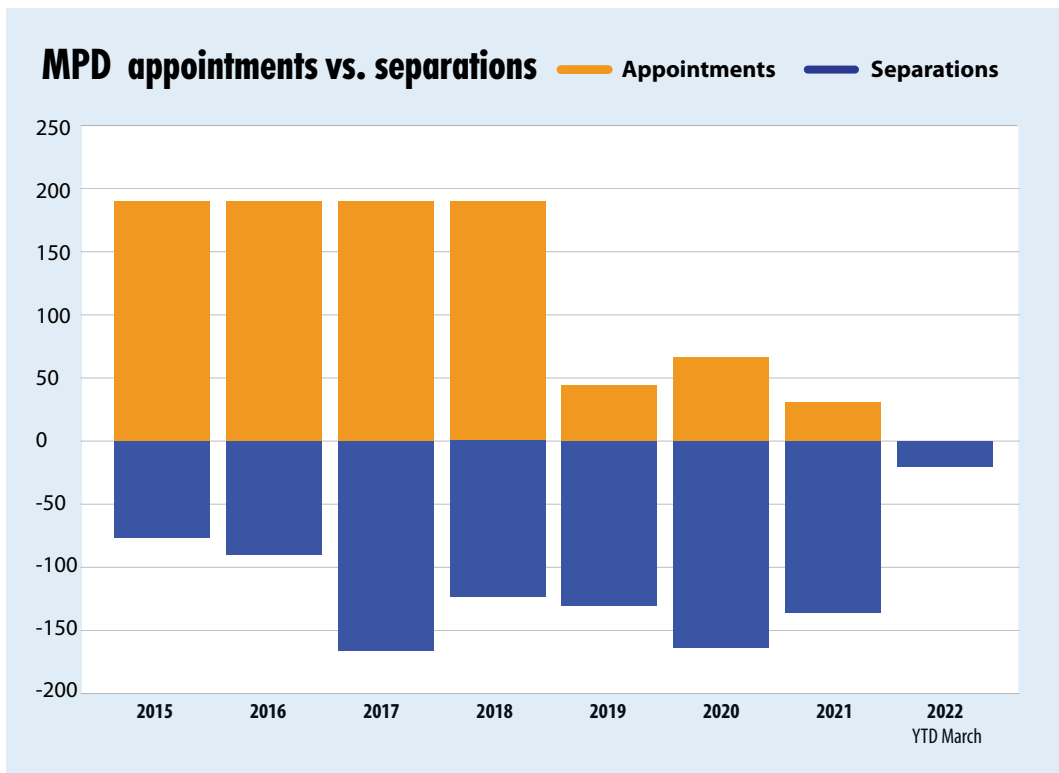
But counting total separations, MPD lost 164 officers in 2020 and another 135 in 2021, so if last year’s trend holds, total attrition would exceed 400 officers, reducing the force to just over 1,400 sworn personnel.⁶

While these figures (a total combined attrition loss of 249 between June 2020 and March 2022) are elevated, the staffing crisis is compounded by the department’s inability to recruit, train and appoint new officers to replace the departing ones.

Recruitment Woes

Milwaukee’s police force was already understaffed following a slowdown in recruiting and onboarding cadets. Each year between 2015 and 2018, MPD appointed roughly 190 new officers to the force, but that fell to 45 in 2019, 66 in the March 2020 class (pre-COVID), 31 in 2021 and none in the first three months of 2022. In the last full three-year period (January 2019 through December 2021), MPD lost through all separation types 430 offi-

Figure 4



cers and appointed only 142, for a net loss of 288 officers.

For the first time in recent memory, the department has reached a level of vacancies such that it could not fill all the needed officer slots to maintain current force levels even if it did not sustain a single retirement, resignation or other separation.

The declining availability of new recruits, due to both city-implemented hiring freezes and budget cuts and a lack of applicants, creates another type of crisis — a crisis of quality.⁷ As the supply of quality recruits shrinks and as demand rises, MPD may be compelled to accept less qualified or previously unsuitable applicants. This phenomenon is likely to exacerbate any discernible police-community tensions and further degrade the department's ability to address public safety challenges in the future.

Leadership Loss

Quality leadership and role model officers become even more critical in this situation, but underlying trends showing an acute exodus of police leadership personnel bode poorly for MPD's future. Unlike ongoing recruitment challenges, the consequences cannot be remedied with more resources — either funds or effort.

More than frontline officers, veteran cops, especially senior and mid-level leadership, are departing en masse — taking their institutional knowledge, decades of experience and practical skills with them.

In the wake of the George Floyd unrest in 2020, an increasing number of officers in highly

Figure 5

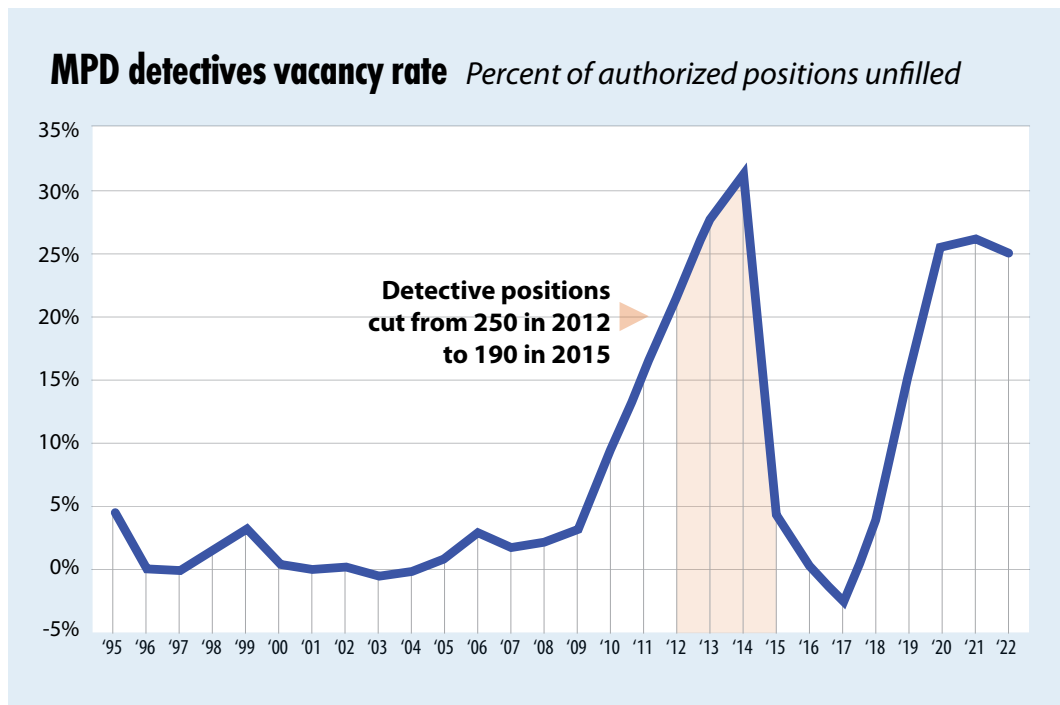
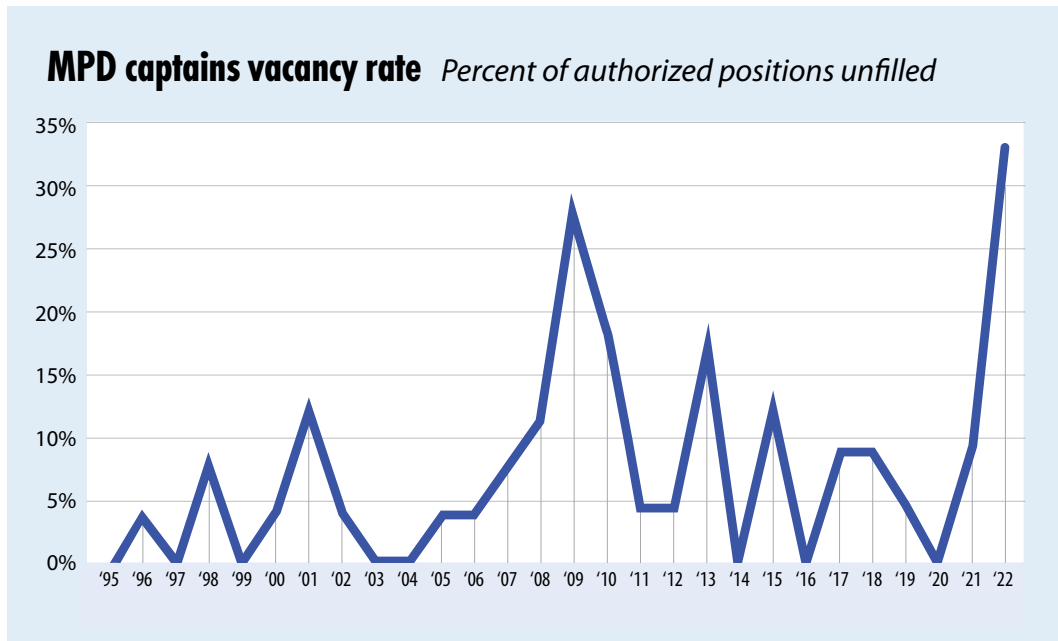


Figure 6



valued leadership roles left MPD. Retirements for senior ranking officers, including sergeants, lieutenants, captains and inspectors, more than doubled (+123%) from June to December 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. While the surge in senior-level retirements has slowed, retirements among these ranks are up 40% from June 2020 through March 2022, compared to the same period in 2018 to 2020.

While it follows that veteran officers are closer to retirement and more likely to depart, the increased number of departures represents an outsized share of senior staff relative to their total number. In other words, there are many more frontline police officers than lieutenants, sergeants, captains and inspectors, but leadership personnel are leaving in disproportionate numbers.

As the overall budgeted force levels have diminished since their 1990s peak, so have actual totals, but none more so than in specialized roles (for example, detectives) and key leadership posts (sergeants, lieutenants and captains).

The number of detectives — a critical role in solving serious crimes and identifying offenders before they reoffend — has dropped, and now that position is severely understaffed by any available metric. In 2001, MPD employed 245 detectives, with every position filled. As role vacancies slowly climbed in the following years (and serious crime declined), MPD reduced the budgeted number of detectives from 250 in 2012 to 190 in 2015, shrinking the detective vacancy rate from 32% in 2014 to less than 1% in 2016 by simply eliminating the positions instead of filling them.

But the gap between filled and budgeted detective positions widened again starting in

2018 (-8), growing to -50 in 2021, leaving 26% of positions unfilled with 106 (-43%) fewer detectives than the peak of 247 employed in 2004.

Similarly, the share of sergeant vacancies remained consistently low from 1995 to 2020 (with the single-year exception of 2014, when it reached 16% before reverting to the norm in 2015). But it jumped to 13% in 2021 and remained at 12% for 2022, the first consecutive years with double-digit vacancy rates. By 2022, the vacancy rates for lieutenants (19%) and captains (33%) also rose dramatically due to attrition.

The month-by-month attrition data in leadership positions comports with larger force-wide trends, tracking the unrest of mid-2020 and growing political hostility toward law enforcement.

In the last seven months of 2020, 30 frontline MPD police officers retired, while another 31 in leadership roles did (including four captains, 10 lieutenants and 14 sergeants). From June 2020 to March 2022 compared to the same period in the years prior, senior leadership retirements rose by 43%, with 11 captains (+83%), 19 lieutenants (+46%) and 30 sergeants (+25%) retiring.

The Milwaukee Police Department's success as a crime-fighting agency is a necessary precondition for the city to thrive, more so than any other agency or service.

While 60-some departures out of a force of 1,630 may seem relatively small, the figures demonstrate massive leadership turnover just as the department grapples with rising crime, budget challenges and political hostility. There are only 21 captain positions, so the 11 captain retirements represent 52% turnover in divisional leadership (MPD captains lead 21 police subdivisions, including police districts and the homicide, forensics and internal affairs subdivisions).

The department's severe institutional brain drain, combined with a growing need for more personnel, creates conditions for compounding crises. MPD could be compelled to lowering its recruiting standards to expand the applicant pool. Lower-caliber recruits coupled with the knowledge loss from veteran departures could lead to poorer policing and potentially more police misconduct. This in turn would further sour public attitudes toward MPD, depress officer morale and drive away even more potential applicants. Such a reinforcing cycle would make Milwaukee less safe, more hostile to law enforcement and, over time, poorer as residents and businesses flee the city.

Conclusion

The Milwaukee Police Department's success as a crime-fighting and emergency response agency is a necessary precondition for the city to thrive, more so than any other agency or service. If residents and businesses feel unsafe and leave the city, its tax rolls will shrink and its vitality as a community will be diminished.

Unless measures are taken, Milwaukee's crime crisis is likely to be worsened by depleted police staffing numbers — with fewer officers responding to calls, doing so more slow-

ly and more infrequently.⁸ Crime investigations also would suffer as detectives become overburdened with increasing caseloads and a scarcity of colleagues to pick up the slack. A vicious cycle could ensue as veteran officers retire or resign in the face of unrealistic and unpleasant workloads.

Along similar lines, the growing brain drain among leadership reduces the training, support and institutional knowledge available to up-and-coming officers who one day will join the leadership. Circumstance then would compel the department to either promote unprepared officers or leave the positions vacant for undetermined periods. These short- and medium-term consequences would be exacerbated by the recruitment crisis, with fewer qualified cadets available to take over frontline roles.

The turnaround at the Los Angeles Police Department from the late 1990s to the 2010s offers an instructive model for Milwaukee.⁹ Following the 1992 riots, LAPD listed from scandal to scandal under the transitory leadership of four “reform-minded” police chiefs until former New York Police Commissioner William Bratton took the helm in 2002.

Morale had sunk, retirements surged and recruitment standards fell. Serious crime, which had been decreasing for a decade in Los Angeles, had begun to rise. Residents reported feeling unsafe and rated the department poorly. Meanwhile, officers retired in greater numbers, rated the job poorly and admitted to engaging in “de-policing” — reducing proactive policing due to bureaucratic hurdles and potential discipline. Bratton’s tenure reversed those troubling trends, and LAPD brought crime levels down faster and more dramatically than did the rest of the country in that period.

More than frontline officers, veteran cops, especially senior and mid-level leadership, are departing en masse — taking their institutional knowledge, decades of experience and practical skills with them.

The parallels between Milwaukee in 2022 and Los Angeles in 2002 are not perfect, but they are striking: rising crime, sinking morale, a depleted police force, tense community-police relations and greater and burdensome oversight. In 2000, LAPD entered into a federal consent decree with the U.S. Department of Justice to curtail perceived civil rights violations and corruption. In 2018, the City of Milwaukee signed a settlement agreement in federal court with the ACLU to end alleged racial bias in policing practices including stops and searches.¹⁰

These challenges were met head-on as LAPD actively sought to increase its force levels from below 9,000 in the early 1990s to over 10,000 by the 2000s while focusing on recruit quality, training and retention, and new crime-fighting tools. Critically, both LAPD’s internal strife and tensions with the community were alleviated by raising, not lowering, expectations for officers. This was accomplished largely because Bratton had the confidence of city leaders and earned the respect of frontline officers.

Bratton implemented strategic reforms that increased morale in the department and

prestige in the community, which in turn made recruiting high-quality candidates easier. In short, he created a “virtuous cycle” as the positive community response engendered by his changes motivated his officers and propelled the flagging institution toward a mission of excellence.

A 2009 study by the Harvard Kennedy School of Government summed up LAPD's turnaround:

We found the LAPD much changed from eight years ago, and even more so in the last four or five years. Public satisfaction is up, with 83 percent of residents saying the LAPD is doing a good or excellent job; the frequency of the use of serious force has fallen each year since 2004. Despite the views of some officers that the consent decree inhibits them, there is no objective sign of so-called “de-policing” since 2002; indeed, we found that both the quantity and quality of enforcement activity have risen substantially over that period. The greater *quantity* is evident in the doubling of both pedestrian stops and motor vehicle stops since 2002, and in the rise in arrests over that same period. The greater *quality of stops* is evident in the higher proportion resulting in an arrest, and the *quality of arrests* is evident in the higher proportion in which the District Attorney files felony charges.

The Milwaukee Police Department is not yet in existential crisis, but that time is quickly approaching — with a force too small to do its job, with an existing and future force incapable of sustaining its current level of performance, let alone meeting the challenge of rising crime. But that fate is not preordained. City leaders can and should choose another path to restore and revitalize the police force as an institution that is admired and prized by both its members and residents. That future is possible if city leaders choose to make the tough decisions necessary to make it a reality.



Badger Institute takeaways

- Increase Milwaukee Police Department force levels, by increasing both authorized positions and recruiting efforts to ensure positions are filled.
- Bolster the detective ranks so that the department can solve more crimes.
- At least maintain, and where possible increase, recruiting and performance standards as a means of improving police morale.
- Emulate places that have succeeded in turning around negative crime and police morale trends.

About the Author



Sean Kennedy is a visiting fellow at the Maryland Public Policy Institute, where his work focuses on crime and justice issues. His research and writings have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Post*, *City Journal* and *The Baltimore Sun*, among other publications.

Endnotes

¹ All police staffing data is derived from Milwaukee Police Department figures provided to the author via public records requests including: “Sworn Separations and New Hires January 2018-October 2021” (received electronically Oct. 20, 2021); “Sworn Separations 2015-2017” (received electronically April 21, 2022); “Sworn Hires 2015-2017,” “Sworn Staffing Levels 1995-2014,” “Sworn Staffing Levels 2015-2022” and “Sworn Separated and New Hires December 1997-December 2014” (received electronically May 19, 2022). Materials were obtained under Wisconsin Public Records Law. Data is available upon request.

² Corinne Hess, “120 Milwaukee Police Officers Cut Under Mayor’s Proposed 2021 Budget,” Wisconsin Public Radio, Sept. 22, 2022; <https://www.wpr.org/120-milwaukee-police-officers-cut-under-mayors-proposed-2021-budget>

³ Derrick Rose, “Surging Retirements, slower recruiting plague Milwaukee police staffing,” WISN 12 News, May 6, 2021; <https://www.wisn.com/article/surging-retirements-slower-recruiting-plague-milwaukee-police-staffing/36357576>

⁴ Marla Hiller, “What Does ‘Defund the Police’ Mean in Milwaukee,” *Milwaukee Magazine*, June 26, 2020; <https://www.milwaukeeemag.com/what-does-defund-the-police-mean-in-milwaukee/>; Corinne Hess, “City of Milwaukee Turns Down \$9.7M in Federal Policing Grant,” Wisconsin Public Radio, Dec. 15, 2020; <https://www.wpr.org/city-milwaukee-turns-down-9-7m-federal-policing-grant>

⁵ Ben Jordan, “MPD dealing with nearly 200 law enforcement vacancies as retirements continue to reduce staff,” TMJ4, Aug. 4, 2021; <https://www.tmj4.com/news/local-news/mpd-dealing-with-nearly-200-law-enforcement-vacancies-as-retirements-continue-to-reduce-staff>

⁶ Since retirement “eligibility” is a continuing status, when officers become eligible for retirement but remain on the force, they retain their ability to retire at any time in the future. Thus, this is a rolling figure: The active-but-retirement-eligible total shrinks as officers retire but grows as other officers become retirement-eligible. Nonetheless, the share of retirement-eligible officers is growing, and the total number of those opting for retirement — leaving the force — is climbing relative to the share of non-retirement-eligible officers.

⁷ Jeramey Jannene, “Milwaukee Adopts ‘Calm Before The Storm’ 2022 Budget,” Urban Milwaukee, Nov. 5, 2021; <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2021/11/05/city-hall-milwaukee-adopts-calm-before-the-storm-2022-budget/>; Alison Dirr, “Milwaukee Common Council adopts \$1.76 billion 2022 budget that socks away funds for pension spike,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Nov. 5, 2021; <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/milwaukee/2021/11/05/milwaukee-common-council-adopts-1-76-billion-2022-budget-socks-away-funds-pension-spike/8559237002/>; Corinne Hess, “Milwaukee police chief threatens major cuts without staffing increase,” Wisconsin Public Radio, Oct. 14, 2021; <https://www.wpr.org/milwaukee-police-chief-threatens-major-cuts-without-staffing-increase>

⁸ Milwaukee Police Department, “2022 Milwaukee Police Department Community Report: Strategies, Initiatives and Partnerships,” June 2022; <https://smcv191.files.wordpress.com/2022/06/2022-milwaukee-police-department-community-report.pdf>

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