

SEPTEMBER 2022



A Tale of Two States

*Wisconsin Crime Trends:
2017-2022*

By Sean Kennedy



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A P R E F A C E T O

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A glance at the news is enough to tell you that the United States has been suffering a spike in crime, a reversal in a years-long trend toward peace. For many Wisconsinites, the 10 o'clock news brings a numbing stream of mayhem and disorder.

If we're going to do something about it other than being appalled, the picture needs higher resolution: Where exactly is crime worsening, and which crimes? Here, scholar Sean Kennedy dives into Wisconsin's data for answers.

The big picture is that Wisconsin remains, on the whole, a safe place that's been getting safer. But Wisconsinites who live and work in our largest city, Milwaukee, suffer worsening depredations from criminals, particularly in homicide, auto theft and aggravated assault, which includes shootings. And for some specific offenses, especially auto theft and homicide, other cities in Wisconsin are seeing a worsening trend, sometimes dramatically worse.

Arrests, meanwhile, are falling, meaning more offenders face little to no accountability. Kennedy, who has written widely on issues of crime and justice, points out that limitations to the data available to policymakers limit their ability to target a policy response.

But this is not a lost cause. Quite the opposite: We think this analysis offers hope — not by minimizing a grim and worsening reality but by pinpointing the trouble that afflicts Wisconsinites, so that known, proven remedies can be directed to where they have greatest effect. Our fellow citizens, especially those suffering in Milwaukee, need and deserve such protection. Providing it is the first duty of government.

— *Badger Institute*

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Introduction

Looked at as a whole — from the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers across the state to Lake Michigan, from Lake Superior and the Menominee River down to the Illinois line — Wisconsin appears safer than it was five years ago.

Overall crime (so-called Group A crimes, which include assault, robbery, rape, homicide, theft, arson and human trafficking) was down 11% from 2017 to 2021. There was a notable 17% decrease in property crime in the state over that period, while violent crime remained essentially unchanged, down a little under 1%.

But that big, general picture in this place of 5.8 million people masks dramatic differences between most parts of the state and its crime-ridden largest city, Milwaukee. It papers over the fact that, while there have been substantial decreases over that period in crimes such as burglary and larceny-theft, other crimes such as homicide, auto theft and aggravated assault are much more prevalent. Moreover, while the five-year overview shows some generally positive trends throughout Wisconsin as a whole, a swift, more recent spike in some serious crimes since 2020, particularly in Milwaukee, must be addressed if the city and state are to prosper.

The latter period, in short, is much more troubling than the longer five-year view. Those five-year trends do not tell the whole story. The advent of 2020 — with COVID-19 lockdowns and post-George Floyd unrest — reversed the trend as many offenses, especially in Milwaukee, have risen again well above or at least approaching 2017 levels.

Crimes such as homicide and car theft have increased dramatically in the past few years and, compounding the problem, arrests have dropped significantly. In Milwaukee in particular, this raises concern about both police staffing levels and failures of the criminal justice system to charge and incarcerate offenders.

Wisconsin's crime trends in essence reveal two different states: the city of Milwaukee (and other select urban areas) and the "Rest of Wisconsin." In short, while most of the state is relatively safe in comparison to five years ago when considering most crimes, troubling trends in Milwaukee — one of the primary economic engines of the Badger State and home to 10% of its citizens — are undermining the health and safety of the state in general.

The disparity between Milwaukee and most of the rest of the state is troubling almost

regardless of which set of data one peruses. Property crimes, for instance, have decreased 25% outside Milwaukee since 2017 and continue to drop. In the largest city, to the contrary, overall property crime has risen 10% since 2017 and a stunning 64% since 2019.

There are a few glimmers of good news in Milwaukee. The city, notably, reported a decline in simple assaults, down 6.8% from 2017 to 2021 and only a small uptick, 2.5%, since 2019. Statewide, simple assaults increased slightly over both the five- and two-year periods.

But that is a rare bit of good news for Milwaukee. For the most part, when crime trends were negative outside Milwaukee, they were even worse inside the city in recent years. And even when the trends in specific crimes were positive in Milwaukee, they were much more positive outstate. Robbery, for instance, dropped 25% in the rest of Wisconsin since 2019 but only 2% in Milwaukee over the same span.

In some instances, the trend in Milwaukee is completely counter to what transpired in the rest of the state. For example, larceny in the rest of Wisconsin fell 16% since 2019 but rose 20% in Milwaukee — a wide divergence.

The greatest changes in 2020 and 2021 were in three categories: homicide, aggravated assault (which includes shootings) and auto theft. Homicides increased 41% in the rest of Wisconsin but doubled in Milwaukee. Aggravated assaults increased 26% in Milwaukee but were unchanged elsewhere in the state. Auto thefts rose 255% in Milwaukee but only 46% in the rest of Wisconsin, and much of that increase was concentrated in suburbs adjacent to Milwaukee.

While most of the state is relatively safe in comparison to five years ago when considering most crimes, troubling trends in Milwaukee — home to 10% of its citizens — are undermining the health and safety of the state in general.

There are many ways to report crime data. This analysis gives a picture of the state as a whole but also parses the data to gain more local and time-specific views for a variety of crimes. In doing so, it will enable both state and local officials to make the decisions necessary to ensure everyone in every part of Wisconsin is safe and in a position to prosper.

The Research

This study uses available data derived from the state Department of Justice's Wisconsin Incident-Based Reporting System (WIBRS) and supplemented, where applicable, by city agency and FBI data for greater context and granularity.¹

Key Findings: 2017-2021

1. Overall, between 2017 and 2019, Wisconsin witnessed a dip in most property, violent and disorder/society crimes before reporting a sustained increase across most categories of crime since 2020. Homicides, aggravated assaults and auto thefts have increased significantly.
2. Numerous quality-of-life crimes, including property and society offenses, have risen

since 2019. These nuisance crimes are becoming pervasive and are especially acute in Milwaukee and other large urban centers.

3. Proxy measures for violence (weapons violations and gunshot detection data) suggest that the volume of firearm-related violence is at record levels since the summer of 2020 and is continuing apace well into 2022, without interruption.

4. Arrests have fallen dramatically across almost all offense categories, especially for juvenile offenders, despite those offenses rising in volume over the past two years. As police make fewer arrests amid more crime, more offenders face little to no accountability and likely are free to commit more and future crimes, further accelerating crime totals.

5. While most offenses rose and fell across the state in tandem across the period, Milwaukee recorded larger percentage and volume increases in some offenses than most other jurisdictions. Conversely, Milwaukee's decline or rise in some crime categories bucks trendlines in other jurisdictions to such a degree that the city's reduction in offense totals actually obscures the trend elsewhere.

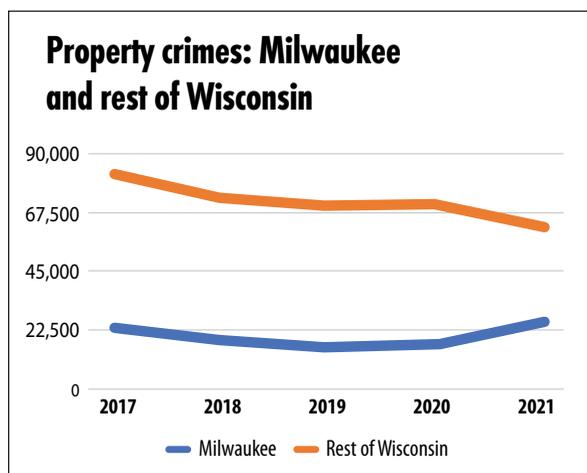
6. Reporting anomalies mar crime trend analysis in two critical ways:

- First, many jurisdictions (across diverse geographic and population profiles) were not fully compliant with the state's new Wisconsin Incident-Based Reporting System prior to 2019, some extending into 2020, making offense-level analysis by jurisdiction difficult or unreliable.
- Second, Milwaukee's reported offense-level figures appear to be incongruous with trends in the rest of the state. Since that city represents an outsized share of offenses across almost all categories of crime, reporting inconsistencies there would significantly alter statewide totals and render state-level trends incomparable.

Statewide Crime Trends

Property Crimes

Overall property crime fell 17% from 2017 to 2021 but rose 1.8% statewide from 2019 to 2021. Auto theft has increased significantly, while larceny-theft and burglary are trending downward. As with many categories of crime, property crimes have increased in Milwaukee in recent years but decreased elsewhere.



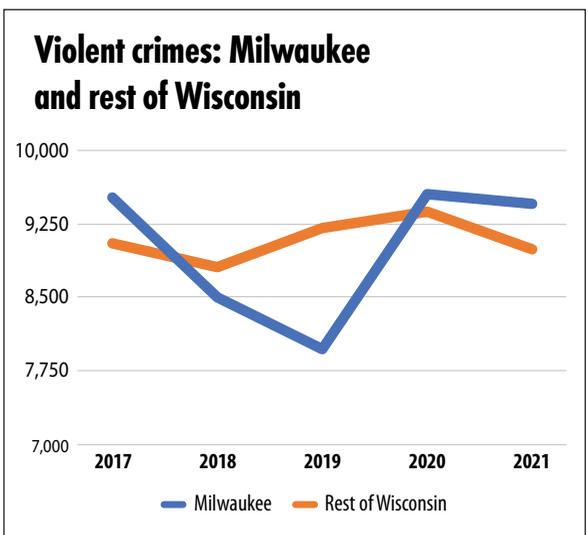
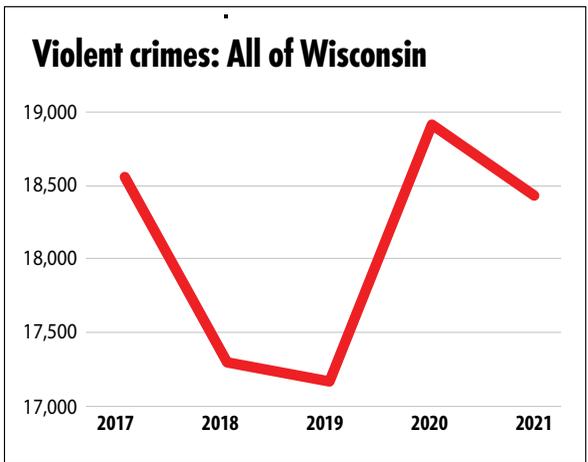
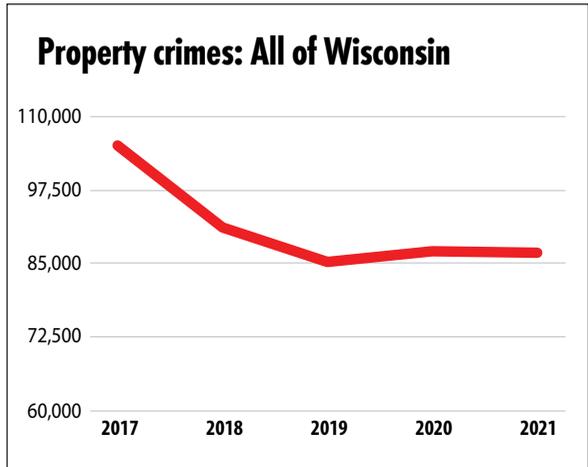
Violent Crimes

Violent crime volume was statistically unchanged (down 0.7%) from 2017 to 2021 levels across the state as a whole. Robbery fell most dramatically in Wisconsin as a whole, down almost 40% across the state and down 45% outside Milwaukee. In Milwaukee, robberies declined 34% between 2017 and 2019 and have remained essentially flat (down 2.1%) since then.

The state as a whole was on a positive, safer trajectory between 2017 and 2019, when violent crime decreased 7.5%. But a spike since then reversed the gains. Trends since 2019 are much more troubling across the state as a whole. Violent crime (homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault) jumped 7.4% from 2019 to 2021, with a 71.7% increase in homicides and a 12.2% uptick in aggravated assaults.

With approximately 10% of the state’s population, the city of Milwaukee accounted for an outsized share of the total crime volume (in 2021, 60% of homicides, 53% of aggravated assaults and 68% of auto thefts) and is driving the statewide increase in these rising serious crime categories.

In 2021, Milwaukee reached its record homicide total (194), and the number of aggravated assaults, which include shootings, remained elevated (up 26% from 2019).



Homicides

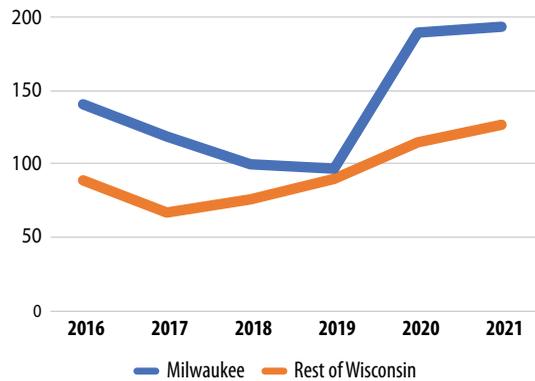
There are more homicides in Milwaukee each year than in the rest of Wisconsin combined — a record 194 in 2021 in Milwaukee, for example, vs. a total of 127 everywhere else.

That means the city with only 10% of the state's population had 60% of the state's homicides in 2021. Madison, the state's second-largest city with a population of 269,000, about half as large as Milwaukee, had 10 homicides. The city of Racine, with slightly under 80,000 people, had five.

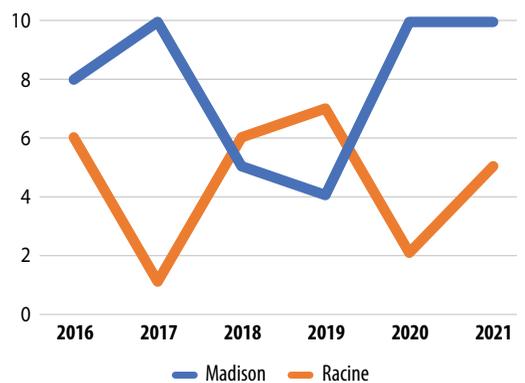
Milwaukee has seen a troubling spike in homicides since 2019, when there were 97. Just two years later, that doubled to 194 — a 100% increase. The rest of the state over those two years, meanwhile, saw a 41% increase, from 90 to 127.

That increase outside Milwaukee is cause for concern when looked at in aggregate, but the reality is that murder is unheard of across vast swaths of small-town and rural Wisconsin. In 2021, there were no homicides at all in 32 of the state's 72 counties, including fairly sizable ones such as Adams, Dodge, Door and Walworth. Outside the city of Milwaukee, the most homicides in Wisconsin in 2021 were in Kenosha County (16), Dane County, which includes Madison (15), suburban Milwaukee County (11), Racine County (nine) and Rock County (seven). Brown County, which includes Green Bay, had just five. Waukesha County had four.

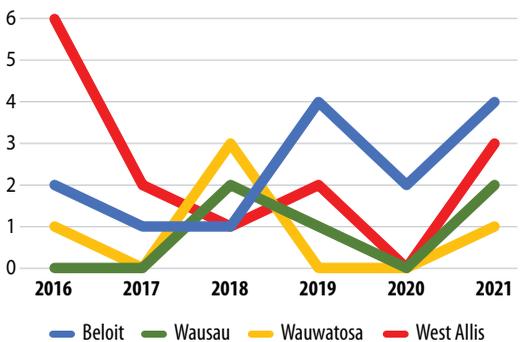
Homicides: Milwaukee and rest of Wisconsin



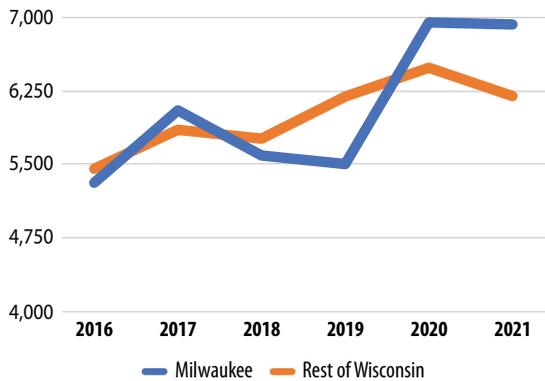
Homicides: Madison and Racine



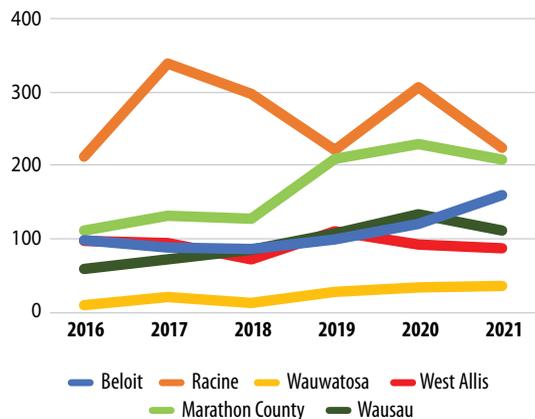
Homicides: Other cities



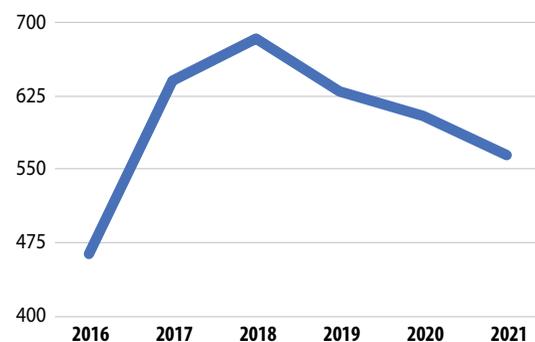
Aggravated assaults: Milwaukee and rest of Wisconsin



Aggravated assaults: Other cities



Aggravated assaults: Madison



About Wisconsin crime data

The available crime data for Wisconsin suffers a few noteworthy limitations:

First, the statewide Wisconsin Incident-Based Reporting System (WIBRS) is based on the FBI's updated crime reporting system — the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) — which became mandatory for all law enforcement agencies in June 2022. WIBRS/NIBRS reporting offers greater offense-level and offender-specific data but is more onerous for agencies to collect.

While many local agencies, including the Milwaukee Police Department, adopted the WIBRS methodology prior to 2017, or backfilled their data, others did not. As a result, some prior years are not available for specific offenses at the agency level or the statewide totals are incomplete (for example, for vandalism). This study sought to correct for those data gaps or excluded data that was not directly comparable.

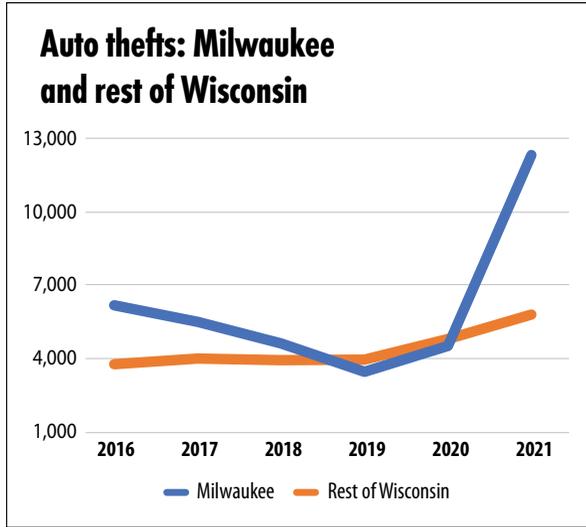
Second, there are a few instances in which the WIBRS portals' figures differ for the same offense category based on differing reporting methodologies. In 2021, "Group A Offense Counts by Agency" reports 4,911 simple assaults in Milwaukee using the new methodology, whereas "Offense Over Time by Agency," using the FBI's old Uniform Crime

See DATA, page 9 →

Auto Thefts

Auto thefts spiked precipitously (144%) across Wisconsin and dramatically in Milwaukee (255%), while thefts from vehicles are up 50% from 2019.

In Milwaukee suburbs, auto theft is up 436% in Wauwatosa from 2019 to 2021 and up 142% in West Allis. Madison also witnessed a 26% increase over the same period, Racine saw a 46% increase, and Beloit experienced a 10% jump. In volume, Milwaukee's 12,304 auto thefts in 2021 exceeded the total recorded for the rest of Wisconsin for the three-year period of 2017, 2018 and 2019.

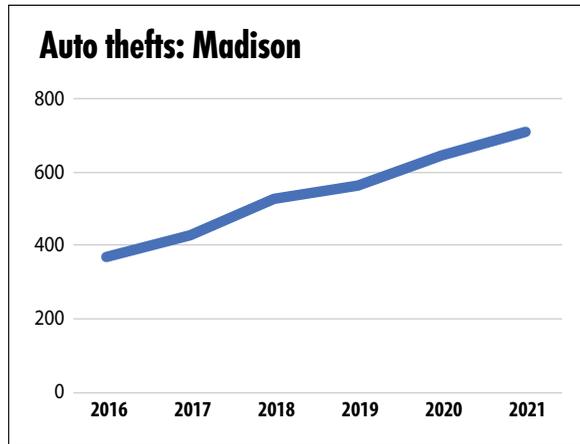
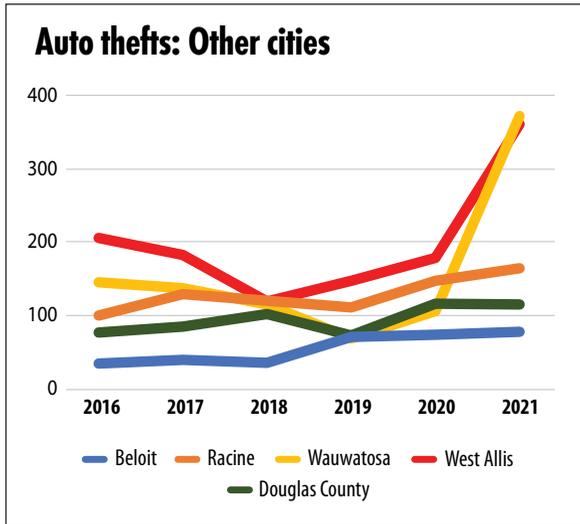


Auto thefts

There is a worsening epidemic of auto thefts in the city of Milwaukee and in neighboring suburbs, and while the problem is not as monumental throughout the rest of Wisconsin, there are numerous areas that have seen large spikes in recent years.

Milwaukee had 12,304 auto thefts in 2021 — a 124% increase over 2017. Wauwatosa and West Allis, both of which border Milwaukee, had increases over that same period of 170% and 96%, respectively, although the raw numbers in both cities are far below Milwaukee's total; the two large Milwaukee County suburbs had a combined 726 auto thefts in 2021.

On average, auto thefts throughout the rest of the state increased at slower rates, but the upward trend has still been dramatic in many cities, large and small. Hudson, for example, had only 12 auto thefts in 2017 but had 40 in 2021 — a 233% increase. Beloit went from 40 to 78 — a 95% increase. Superior went from 71 in 2017 (up from 58 in 2016) to 96 in 2021 — a 35% increase. A quick review of a dozen cities and counties throughout the state showed double-digit increases in all of them over the past five years, although 68% of all auto thefts in the state in 2021 were in the city of Milwaukee.



DATA, from page 7

Reporting (UCR) methodology, reports 7,516 simple assaults in Milwaukee. This study adjusted for this by using the same dataset, “Group A Offense Counts,” for offense-level analysis, but UCR data for aggregated crime totals (i.e., property and violent) to enable cross-jurisdictional comparisons.

Third, Milwaukee’s reported offense-level figures starting in 2018 appear to be incongruous with trends in the rest of Wisconsin, among similarly sized cities nationwide and in adjacent offense categories. For example, from 2017 to 2019, all property crimes declined 15% across the rest of Wisconsin but fell 33% in Milwaukee — led by the largest categories by volume: burglaries and larceny-thefts. While Milwaukee’s overall property crimes returned to 2017 levels in 2021 — driven by the spike in auto thefts — burglaries reached a new low and shoplifting offenses fell to half the number five years before. At the same time, thefts from vehicles rose dramatically in 2020 and 2021 off 2019 lows.

The pattern of discrepancies raises questions about how Milwaukee is classifying and reporting offenses and about the data’s reliability. Since Milwaukee represents an outsized share of Wisconsin’s crime volume, any data errors would undermine the reliability of statewide crime figures and preclude their comparison to other jurisdictions or past years.

Quality-of-Life and Disorder Crimes²

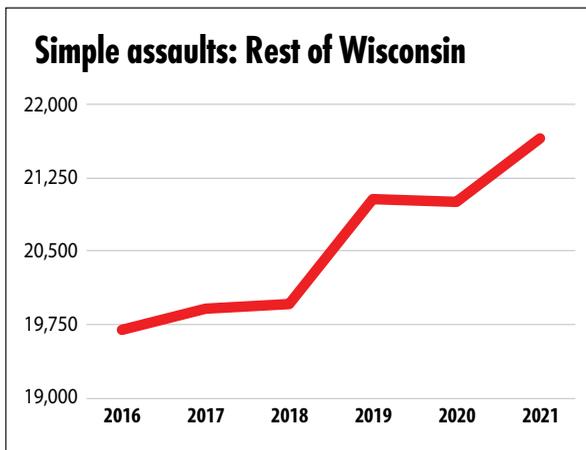
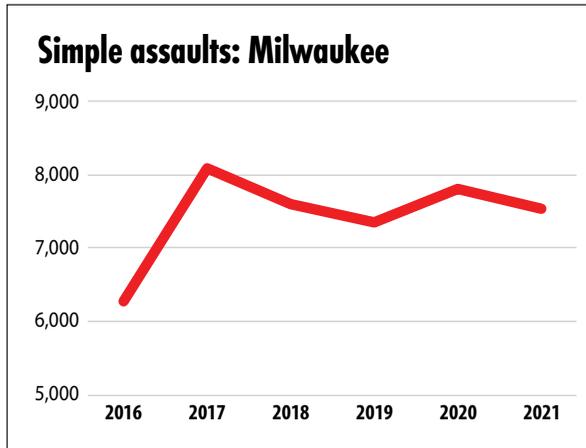
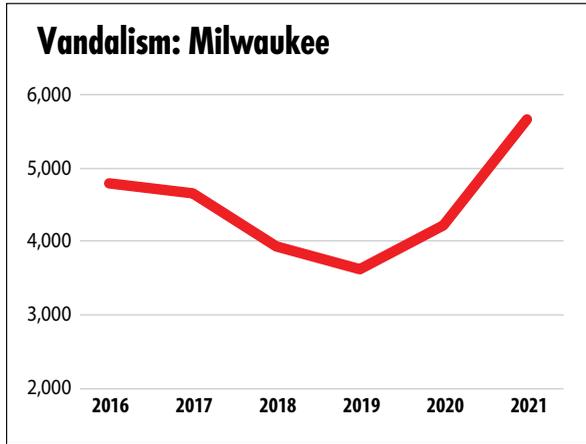
Vandalism

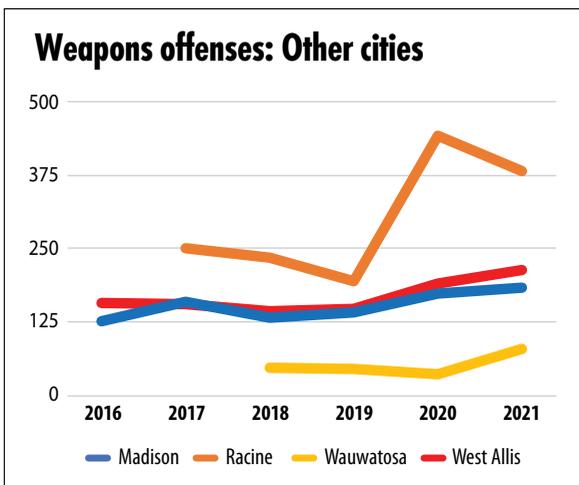
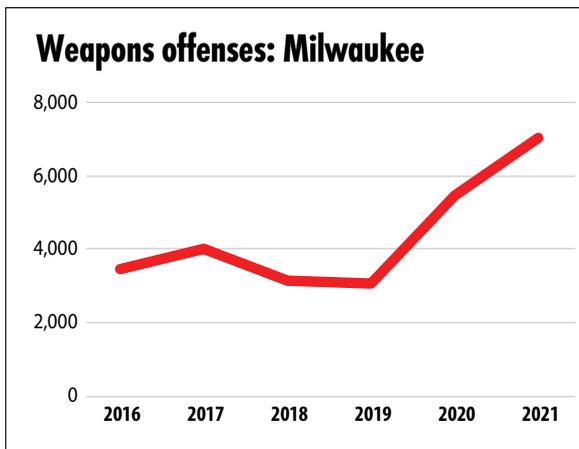
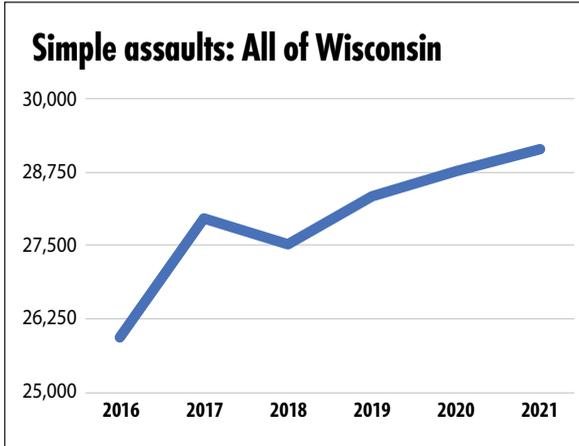
Vandalism (malicious destruction of property) statewide rose 39% in the post-2019 period. Statewide totals are not available for the full five-year period due to inconsistent data collection by agencies, but for agencies that did report consistently, vandalism rose only 3.6% from 2020 to 2021 after rising across all selected jurisdictions (i.e., Racine up 65%, Wauwatosa up 76%) and 27.6% statewide in 2020. Anomalously, Madison did not see a significant uptick in vandalism and actually reported a 12.5% decline between 2019 and 2021 — leaving it well below 2017 and 2019 levels.

In Milwaukee, vandalism increased 18.7% from 2017 to 2021, with a 56.5% increase after 2019 following declines in previous years. Notably, Milwaukee vandalism increased 34.3% in 2021 over the year prior, suggesting the trend was not isolated to the 2020 unrest.

Simple Assaults

Simple assaults rose 4.2% across the state from 2017 to 2021, with the overall number of incidents ticking up only slightly (2.8%) after 2019. But the rest of Wisconsin — outside Milwaukee — trended upward (up 8.7% from 2017 to 2021 and up 3% after 2019). Milwaukee reported a 6.8% decline in simple assaults from 2017 to 2021 and small uptick (2.5%) since 2019, bucking the statewide trend in offenses.



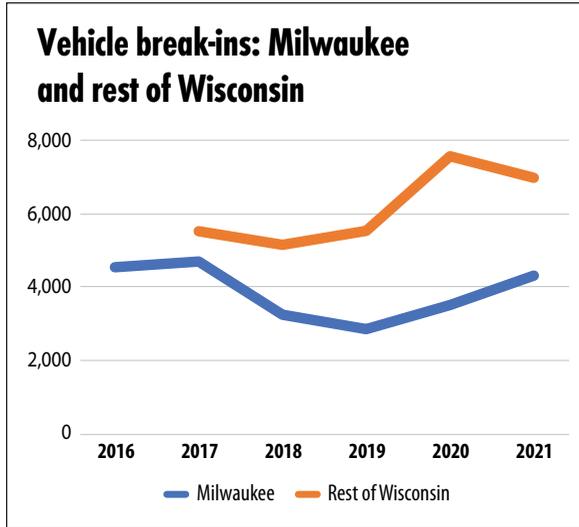


Weapons Offenses

Weapons offenses (for instance, illegally carrying a firearm), which are notably linked to increased violence, rose across all selected jurisdictions. In Milwaukee, weapons offenses rose 127% from 2019 to 2021 (3,500 offenses vs. 7,059), further increasing 28.5% from 2020’s record totals. Statewide figures suggest weapons offenses rose 96.4% in Racine, 30% in Madison, 75.6% in Wauwatosa, 45% in West Allis and 43.4% in Beloit, after falling in those jurisdictions in the prior period (2017-2019).

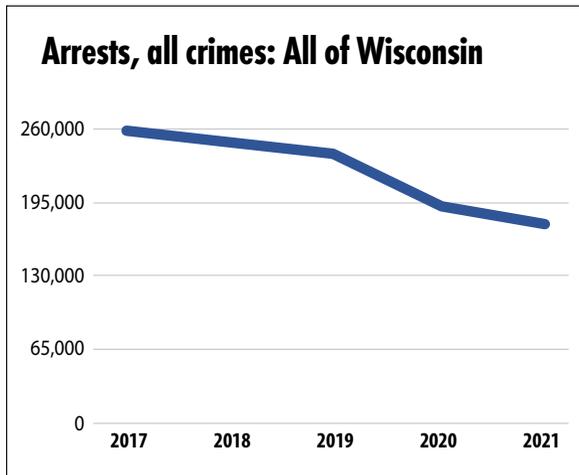
Thefts / Shoplifting

Overall, larceny decreased 25%, or by about 20,000 offenses, from 2017 and fell 11.2% since 2019. While larceny dropped by a quarter from 2017 to 2019, it spiked 20% in Milwaukee after 2019 while continuing to fall in the rest of the state. A subset of larceny-theft, shoplifting, was largely unchanged even as overall theft declined 25% statewide from 2017 to 2021 and 15.7% since 2019. This indicator can be misleading due to law enforcement directives to not pursue shoplifters or by victims failing to report the crime. For example, Milwaukee’s shoplifting offenses plummeted 56% from 1,526 in 2017 to 671 in 2020. They increased slightly to 763 in 2021, down 50% from 2017 and 7.4% lower than 2019. The trendline is similar in other large jurisdictions, where the adjacent category “other theft” increased slightly.



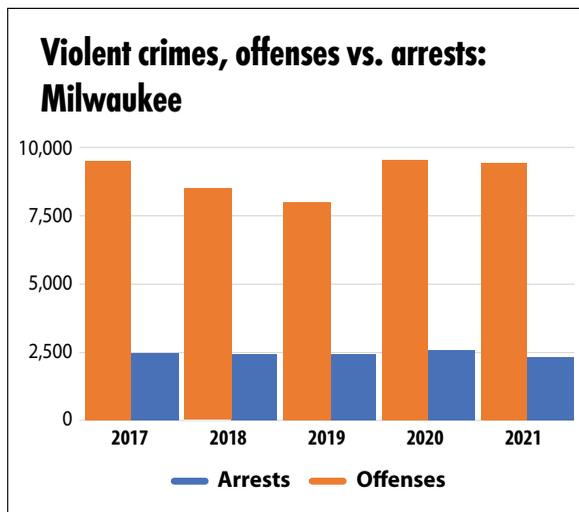
Vehicle Break-ins

Vehicle break-ins around the state (for places where reliable data is available) saw continued downward trends in 2021 after one-year increases for 2020, with annual fluctuations in most jurisdictions. Milwaukee spiked dramatically (50.6%) after 2019, with double-digit increases each year, after falling 39% from 2017 to 2019. Milwaukee’s share of these crimes rose to 39% of the total “theft from motor vehicle” crimes reported for 2021 — up from 32% of the statewide total in 2020. Although Milwaukee’s total volume rose significantly, the reported statewide incidents dropped 8%.



Arrests

Statewide, arrests fell 32% between 2017 and 2021 — 82,437 fewer arrests by 2021. While the trend of fewer arrests began before 2017, it tracked closely with respective crime numbers — as crime fell, fewer were arrested for offenses. But in 2020, as crime spiked, arrests plummeted from 2019 levels, falling from 238,608 in 2019 to 192,214 in 2020 and further still to 176,508 in 2021. While “discretionary” arrests for drug crimes, liquor law violation and disorderly conduct fell, so, too, did arrests for more serious crimes, including burglary (down 50% from 2017 and down 28% from 2019), non-rape sex offenses (down 49% from 2017 and down 34% from 2019) and robbery (down 50% from 2017 and down 37% from 2019).



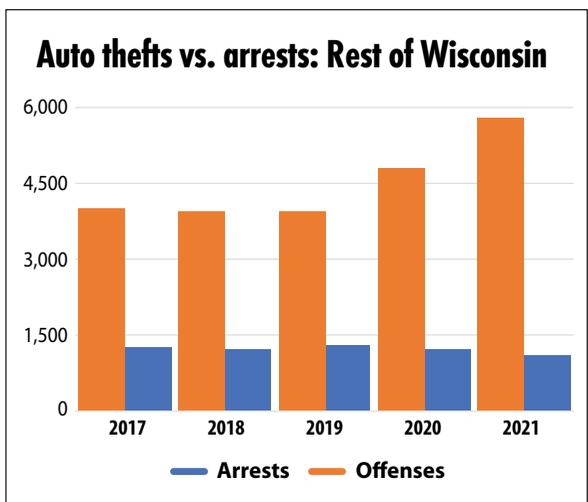
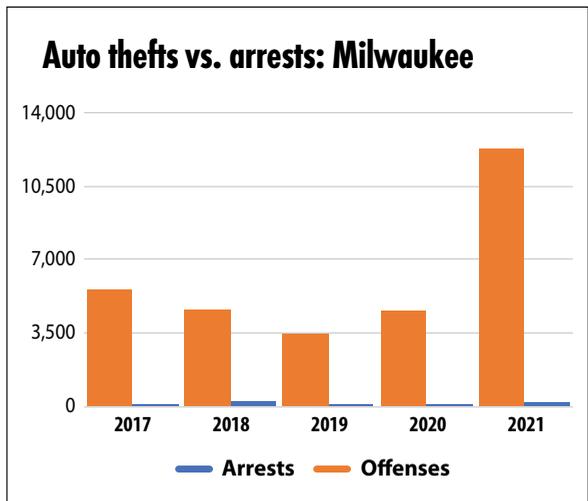
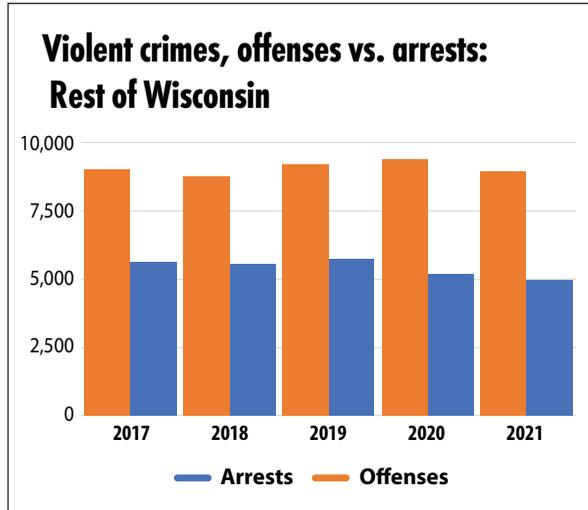
Notably, Milwaukee’s persistently low arrest-to-offense ratio worsened with only 24 arrests per 100 violent

offenses, down from 31 in 2019. For homicides, Milwaukee police made arrests in fewer than half of homicides in 2021 — a dramatic decline from 88 arrests per 100 homicides in 2017. The rest of Wisconsin also saw a decline in both violent and homicide offense arrest shares but less dramatically so. Outside Milwaukee, police make arrests in more than half of violent crimes and eight for every 10 homicides.

Statewide, a shrinking share of offenses also resulted in arrest, with a pronounced decline in the offense-to-arrest ratio since 2019, continuing to fall through 2021 for aggravated assaults (down from 51% to 42%), robberies (down from 39% to 27%) and larceny-thefts (down from 33% to 22%). Auto thefts, where offenses more than doubled over the period, actually saw fewer total arrests in 2021 than in either 2017 or 2019, as the share fell from 19% of offenses resulting in arrests to 7%. In Milwaukee, less than 2% of auto thefts results in an arrest, while nearly one in five elsewhere in the state do.

For perspective, one of the largest arrest categories, disorderly conduct, fell from 32,797 in 2017 to 30,237 in 2019 and further to 22,430 in 2021 — below 2020 levels. But that raw reduction of 10,367 arrests is less than the total reduction in larceny-theft arrests over the period (25,300 arrests in 2017 to 21,665 in 2019 to 12,586 in 2021) and a much steeper drop than the decreased volume of reported offenses.

But this trend is not isolated to the



Badger State, as the FBI reported that nationwide arrest volume declined almost 30% from 2017 to 2020 and 25% from 2019 to 2020. (As of this analysis, FBI data is not available for 2021 and is likely to be both incomplete and unreliable due to reporting issues.)

While vandalism offenses fell between 2017 and 2019, those crimes spiked in 2020. By 2021, total vandalism exceeded 2017 levels, but arrests continued to fall sharply, especially in Milwaukee. Although the city saw more than 2,000 additional instances of property destruction in 2021 (5,661) than in 2019 (3,618), arrests fell by almost half to 216 — an already reduced figure from the 910 vandalism-related arrests in 2017, when vandalism crimes were fewer in number (4,789) than 2021 levels. The resulting vandalism offense-to-arrest ratio in Milwaukee went from 2017's 19% to 11% in 2019 to 3.8% in 2021. Other jurisdictions, including Racine and Madison, witnessed similar but less steep declines in vandalism offense-to-arrest ratios in the period.

Most alarmingly, weapons violations skyrocketed in Milwaukee in 2020 and 2021, up 74% (or 3,008 additional offenses) from 2017. At the same time, weapons arrests dropped 42% from 2017 to 2021. The resulting offense-to-arrest ratio dropped from 32% in 2017 to 28% in 2019 and then to 11% in 2021. These crimes, mostly related to firearms, are growing across the state (though at a much lower rate), but police agencies are making comparable numbers of arrests and achieving significantly higher offense-to-arrest ratios. In Madison, weapons arrests amounted to 60% of weapons offenses each year, while in Racine the figure was lower, ranging between 33% and 50%, but still significantly higher than in Milwaukee.

In 2021, there were 18,239 fewer juvenile arrests — almost half the number in 2017 and 46% less than 2019. While juveniles made up 15% of arrestees in 2017, they accounted for only 12% of those arrested in 2021. Even as weapons offenses and overall weapons arrests increased 5%, juvenile weapons arrests fell 26% since 2019. Although numerous violent and property crime offenses rose in volume from 2019, the number and share of juvenile arrests for those crimes fell substantially, with the notable exception of homicides, where the juvenile total and share rose.

Robberies and burglaries

Assuming available data is accurate, there are two crimes in particular for which positive trends throughout Wisconsin are roughly in line with trends in Milwaukee: robbery and burglary.

Robberies were down 35% in Milwaukee between 2017 and 2021 and down approximately 45% throughout the rest of the state. Madison, Marathon County (including Wausau) and West Allis, for instance, all had drops between 30% and 51% over the same period.

Burglaries were down 48% in Milwaukee between 2017 and 2021 and down 37% in the rest of the state. Beloit, Hudson, Racine, Superior, Wauwatosa and West Allis were among the cities that saw decreases of between 27% and 58%.

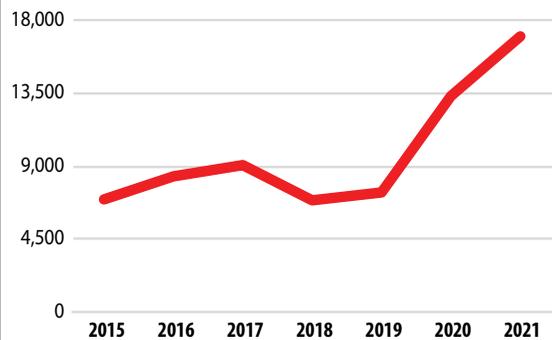
Metrics for Violence

Cities across the country deploy ShotSpotter, an elaborate system of microphones designed to detect and geolocate gunfire, to direct police and emergency medical services to crime scenes and assist victims in real time. That data, unlike reported incidents logged in official reports or even emergency calls, reflects the “invisible” level of potential violence in large urban centers. Data retrieved from a Freedom of Information Act request to the Milwaukee Police Department illustrates how elevated and pervasive gunfire is in the city.

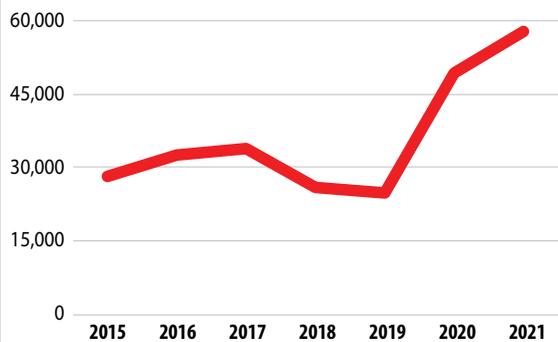
From 2015 to 2021, gunfire incidents rose 145% from 6,950 to 17,004 in 2021, while the total number of gunshots recorded more than doubled, as did the number of incidents involving multiple gunshots. The most precipitous increase in gunfire occurred between 2019 and 2020, and gunfire further increased in 2021. The first four months of 2022 show that gunfire incidents remain on pace to match or exceed 2021’s record levels. But deeper in the data, below the annual totals, a breakpoint emerges in the early summer of 2020, when the rate of gunfire doubled in the wake of the George Floyd unrest, then stayed at levels twice the seasonally adjusted figures for prior years.

In short, the origins of Milwaukee’s wave of gun violence can be traced not to the pandemic lockdowns or to 2020 as a whole but to the summer of 2020, in keeping with the rise in ho-

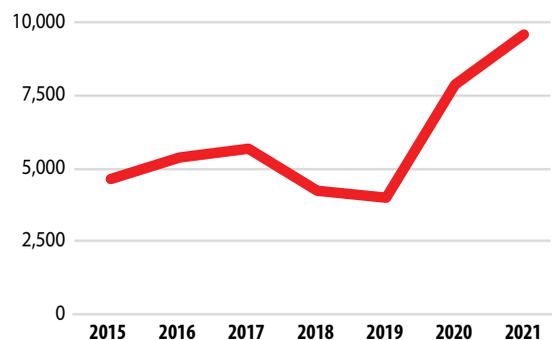
Gunfire incidents: Milwaukee

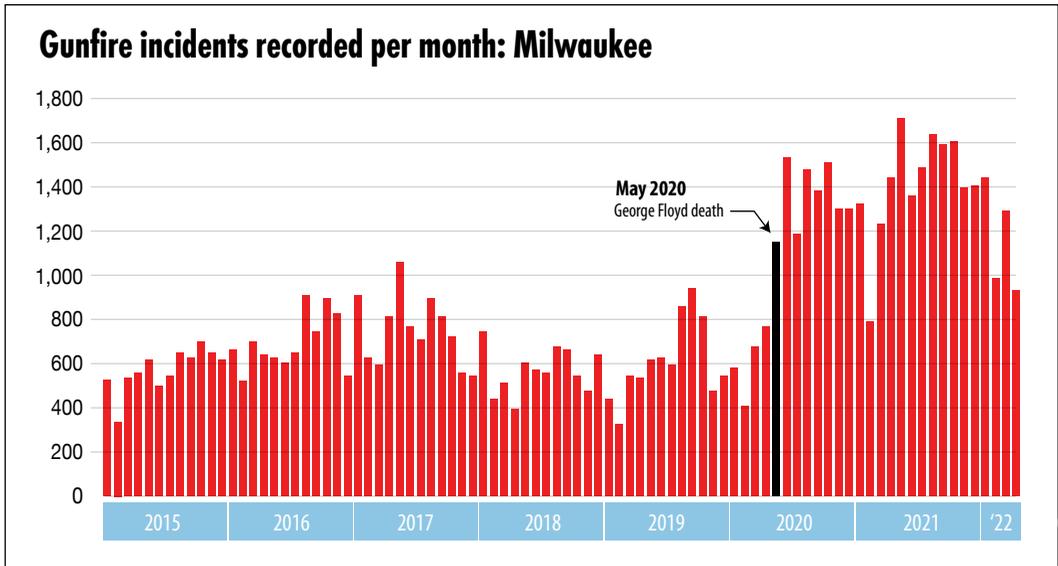


Shots recorded: Milwaukee



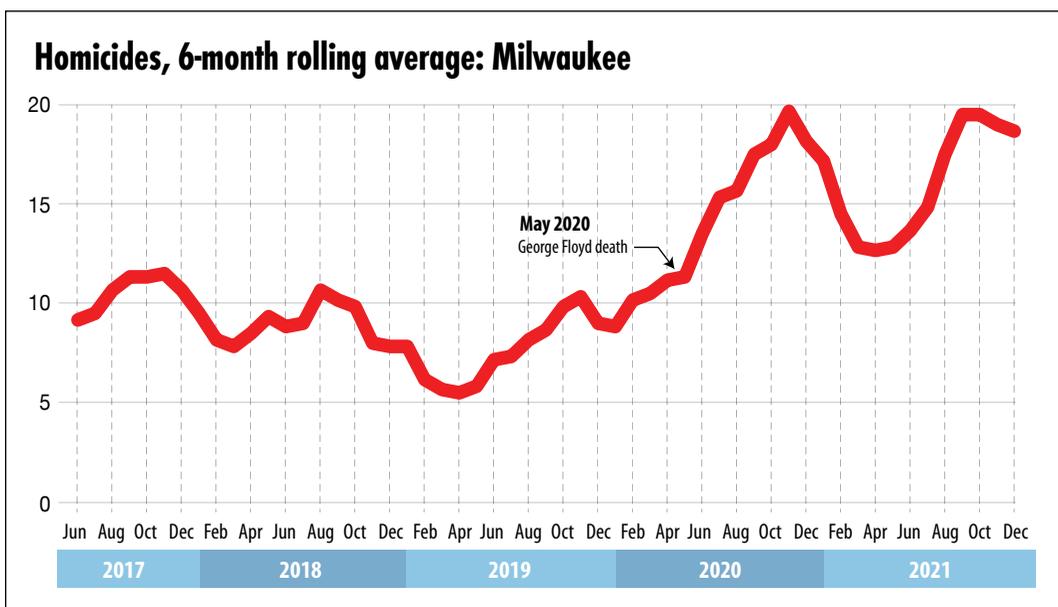
Multiple-shot incidents: Milwaukee





micides, aggravated assaults and other violent offenses. Concerningly, the late 2020 violent crime wave did not ebb in 2021, and early data shows it is keeping pace with recent trends in 2022 as well.

In Milwaukee, homicide figures track this summer 2020 breakpoint as well, with the monthly average after seasonal adjustments almost doubling in the second half of 2020. The trend continued into 2021 and 2022, with monthly murder tallies consistently outpacing previous years' highs (excepting February 2021, when totals dipped before spiking the following month).



And as with weapons, Milwaukee's inability to arrest homicide and other serious offenders stands in stark contrast to the rest of the state.³ In 2021, only 48% of the city's homicides (93 of 194) resulted in an arrest, while 80% of homicides in the rest of the state did. For aggravated assaults outside Milwaukee, 61% of offenses result in arrests, compared to just 24% in Milwaukee. Similarly, vehicle thefts elsewhere result in an arrest 19% of the time, compared to 1.4% in Milwaukee.

Conclusion

Current data suggests Wisconsin's historically low crime levels and reputation as a home to safe and secure communities are in jeopardy if action is not taken to halt recent trends. But those trends are limited — either to specific crime categories (homicide, aggravated assault and auto theft) or geography (Milwaukee vs. the rest of Wisconsin). Moreover, while this rise in some crimes is concerning, is it a very recent phenomenon that, if diagnosed properly, can be addressed and reversed.

Due to the concentration of violence and serious property offenses in Milwaukee, any crime strategy to reduce statewide levels should be focused there and in other major cities where effective policing and prosecution policies would have the most impact. That must include reinvigorating the Milwaukee Police Department, whose ranks are depleted, budget stagnant and hands tied by the 2018 ACLU Settlement Agreement limiting "stop and frisk" practices.

Other more systemic concerns persist with crime data and the justice system in Wisconsin. Incomplete and incongruous crime data reporting may obscure the true challenge that policymakers face, not fully reflecting the volume and nature of crime across jurisdictions.

An accelerating trend that predates the recent spike in certain crimes is the declining number of arrests, especially for offenses such as auto theft that are rising precipitously. This may indicate that a limited number of offenders, who are not being apprehended and adjudicated, are responsible for a larger and growing share of crimes in Wisconsin, especially Milwaukee.

Badger Institute takeaways

Rising crime in Wisconsin is a serious threat to the state, but it is limited in three ways:

- It is concentrated in specific offenses, most notably homicide, aggravated assault and auto theft.
- It is concentrated in Milwaukee, to the point that a city with 10% of Wisconsin's population suffers 60% of the state's homicides.
- It is concentrated in the most recent years. In most instances, increases after 2019 reverse trends that were declining until then.

Wisconsin policymakers should:

- Focus policy reforms and resources on Milwaukee.
- Focus on initiating and supporting the reinvigoration of the Milwaukee Police Department, which is hampered by insufficient staffing, budget and latitude for operation. Research elsewhere in the Mandate for Madison has details.
- Focus on restoring accountability to lawbreakers by reversing a declining trend in arrests.
- Prioritize full and accurate reporting of crime by law enforcement agencies.

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.

The Rest of Wisconsin

The founders of the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program grouped together so-called Part 1 offenses because they are all serious crimes that occur with regularity in all areas of the country and are likely to be reported to police. Part 1 statistics are arguably the best way to compare cities and measure the prevalence of crimes that most affect Wisconsinites' quality of life.

The tables that follow show Part 1 crimes for the state's largest cities (Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Kenosha and Racine) and other counties or places that we think are representative of the state.

For simplicity's sake, we include raw data for numbers of crimes and percentage changes over two periods, 2017-2021 and 2019-2021. We chose not to include crime rates, or crimes per 1,000 or 100,000 people, although that information would be valuable as well and will likely be the subject of a forthcoming report.

The main part of this report focused on the dichotomy between Milwaukee and the "Rest of Wisconsin" — a surprisingly stark comparison. The rest of the state includes 90% of our population, however, so we selected both larger cities and some counties and smaller locales for further analysis. They are far from homogenous. There are notable differences between places like Green Bay, Racine, Madison and Kenosha — not to mention Marathon County and Hudson.

For the most part, though, with the exception of homicide, aggravated assault and car theft (see related stories elsewhere in this report), Part 1 crimes are down in the larger cities we selected outside Milwaukee. Kenosha, Racine, Green Bay, Beloit and Superior all had fewer Part 1 crimes in 2021 than in 2017 or, with the exception of Racine, since 2019. Madison's numbers were about the same in 2021 as they were in both 2017 and 2019. Places like Hudson, Marathon County and Wauwatosa all experienced more crime in 2021 than in 2017 or 2019 — although, again, increases in the past two years were modest in comparison to Milwaukee.

— *Badger Institute*

Wisconsin statewide

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	186	176	187	305	321	73%	72%
Rape	2,159	2,303	2,350	2,131	2,359	9%	0%
Robbery	4,330	3,482	2,954	3,073	2,655	-39%	-10%
Aggravated assault	11,885	11,337	11,677	13,408	13,099	10%	12%
Simple assault	27,987	27,546	28,363	28,791	29,166	4%	3%
Burglary	17,483	14,106	12,379	12,609	10,467	-40%	-15%
Larceny-theft	77,193	67,804	64,943	64,436	57,653	-25%	-11%
Auto theft	9,512	8,566	7,432	9,326	18,105	90%	144%
Arson	583	491	401	583	481	-17%	20%
Total	151,318	135,811	130,686	134,662	134,306	-11%	3%

Beloit	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	1	1	4	2	4	300%	0%
Rape	32	34	20	26	23	-28%	15%
Robbery	34	32	31	34	29	-15%	-6%
Aggravated Assault	89	87	100	121	160	80%	60%
Simple Assault	412	339	398	383	388	-6%	-3%
Burglary	211	116	123	117	88	-58%	-28%
Larceny Theft	863	735	930	881	670	-22%	-28%
Auto Theft	40	36	71	74	78	95%	10%
Arson	5	9	11	12	8	60%	-27%
Total	1,687	1,389	1,688	1,650	1,448	-14%	-14%

Green Bay	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	0	1	3	6	3	NA	0%
Rape	82	81	82	76	74	-10%	-10%
Robbery	66	56	49	45	39	-41%	-20%
Aggravated assault	362	350	399	426	355	-2%	-11%
Simple assault	983	1,016	1,023	797	767	-22%	-25%
Burglary	324	252	245	206	236	-27%	-4%
Larceny-theft	1,751	1,460	1,362	1,277	1,161	-34%	-15%
Auto theft	89	102	124	116	133	49%	7%
Arson	19	7	10	12	12	-37%	20%
Total	3,676	3,325	3,297	2,961	2,780	-24%	-16%

Hudson	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	0	0	0	1	0	0%	0%
Rape	2	2	2	1	4	100%	100%
Robbery	1	1	1	3	1	0%	0%
Aggravated assault	13	16	16	33	20	54%	25%
Simple assault	61	27	40	43	48	-21%	20%
Burglary	32	20	29	7	18	-44%	-38%
Larceny-theft	308	349	333	302	329	7%	-1%
Auto theft	12	14	22	20	40	233%	82%
Arson	0	0	0	0	0	0%	0%
Total	429	429	443	410	460	7%	4%

Kenosha	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	5	4	5	7	13	160%	160%
Rape	61	48	58	49	68	11%	17%
Robbery	116	80	53	85	30	-74%	-43%
Aggravated assault	219	206	195	267	253	16%	30%
Simple assault	803	801	757	613	617	-23%	-18%
Burglary	337	248	188	214	146	-57%	-22%
Larceny-theft	1,392	1,196	1,222	1,004	800	-43%	-35%
Auto theft	76	51	172	226	158	108%	-8%
Arson	5	3	7	35	14	180%	100%
Total	3,014	2,637	2,657	2,500	2,099	-30%	-21%

Madison	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	10	5	4	10	10	0%	150%
Rape	97	119	123	81	111	14%	-10%
Robbery	212	244	225	167	142	-33%	-37%
Aggravated assault	642	685	631	606	566	-12%	-10%
Simple assault	1,077	1,027	1,181	1,180	1,231	14%	4%
Burglary	927	1,060	1,072	1,309	974	5%	-9%
Larceny-theft	5,458	5,147	4,966	5,374	5,029	-8%	1%
Auto theft	432	531	567	649	713	65%	26%
Arson	10	16	9	15	14	40%	56%
Total	8,865	8,834	8,778	9,391	8,790	-1%	0%

Marathon County (including Wausau)	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	4	4	1	1	3	-25%	200%
Rape	55	48	78	60	68	24%	-13%
Robbery	17	11	12	19	9	-47%	-25%
Aggravated assault	132	128	209	229	208	58%	0%
Simple assault	539	498	531	473	457	-15%	-14%
Burglary	184	196	204	192	168	-9%	-18%
Larceny-theft	1,136	970	950	883	986	-13%	4%
Auto theft	41	60	73	96	89	117%	22%
Arson	5	4	7	5	9	80%	29%
Total	2,113	1,919	2,065	1,958	1,997	-5%	-3%

Milwaukee	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	119	100	97	191	194	63%	100%
Rape	434	524	453	480	462	6%	2%
Robbery	2,920	2,288	1,920	1,945	1,880	-36%	-2%
Aggravated assault	6,041	5,583	5,496	6,935	6,913	14%	26%
Simple assault	8,067	7,579	7,329	7,781	7,516	-7%	3%
Burglary	5,522	4,295	3,613	3,442	2,879	-48%	-20%
Larceny-theft	11,553	9,013	8,122	8,344	9,771	-15%	20%
Auto theft	5,504	4,624	3,467	4,519	12,304	124%	255%
Arson	313	252	198	288	240	-23%	21%
Total	40,473	34,258	30,695	33,925	42,159	4%	37%

Racine	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	1	6	7	2	5	400%	-29%
Rape	60	58	53	40	27	-55%	-49%
Robbery	122	80	62	90	45	-63%	-27%
Aggravated assault	338	297	221	306	224	-34%	1%
Simple assault	749	690	518	640	574	-23%	11%
Burglary	417	352	239	330	297	-29%	24%
Larceny-theft	1,208	1,202	755	937	652	-46%	-14%
Auto theft	129	120	111	147	162	26%	46%
Arson	13	17	5	17	8	-38%	60%
Total	3,037	2,822	1,971	2,509	1,994	-34%	1%

Superior	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	1	0	0	2	0	-100%	0%
Rape	8	11	14	6	12	50%	-14%
Robbery	8	16	4	10	7	-13%	75%
Aggravated assault	27	49	54	31	35	30%	-35%
Simple assault	189	193	202	199	260	38%	29%
Burglary	133	150	122	166	80	-40%	-34%
Larceny-theft	944	882	918	753	626	-34%	-32%
Auto theft	71	82	61	95	96	35%	57%
Arson	2	0	0	3	3	50%	NA
Total	1,383	1,383	1,375	1,265	1,119	-19%	-19%

Wauwatosa	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	0	3	0	0	1	NA	NA
Rape	0	6	8	2	2	NA	-75%
Robbery	42	38	28	32	29	-31%	4%
Aggravated assault	22	14	29	35	37	68%	28%
Simple assault	59	68	56	64	83	41%	48%
Burglary	173	127	90	76	80	-54%	-11%
Larceny-theft	1,417	1,019	1,197	986	858	-39%	-28%
Auto theft	137	115	69	106	370	170%	436%
Arson	1	2	1	1	1	0%	0%
Total	1,851	1,392	1,478	1,302	1,461	-21%	-1%

West Allis	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% CHANGE	
						'17-'21	'19-'21
Homicide	2	1	2	0	3	50%	50%
Rape	28	30	31	36	24	-14%	-23%
Robbery	81	76	68	72	40	-51%	-41%
Aggravated assault	95	73	111	93	88	-7%	-21%
Simple assault	665	599	713	700	607	-9%	-15%
Burglary	323	253	266	238	161	-50%	-39%
Larceny-theft	1,528	1,270	1,292	1,318	1,200	-21%	-7%
Auto theft	182	119	147	178	356	96%	142%
Arson	7	6	9	10	12	71%	33%
Total	2,911	2,427	2,639	2,645	2,491	-14%	-6%

Endnotes

¹ Data is derived from the Wisconsin Department of Justice data dashboard, "UCR Offense and Arrest Data by Agency" (www.doj.state.wi.us/dles/bjia/ucr-offense-and-arrest-data-agency) for both offense counts and arrest figures unless otherwise noted. Offense-level analysis for "sub offenses" not included or calculated separately from UCR are derived from the WIBRS Data Explorer including "Offense Counts" and "Agency Offense Trends" for 2017-2021, www.doj.state.wi.us/dles/bjia/wibrs-data

² These crime categories (except simple assault) under WIBRS are collected inconsistently by agencies; thus, statewide totals are not reflective of total volume due to multiple agencies failing to report in previous years. Only like-to-like totals of reporting agencies were used to report trends, and aggregated statewide totals are not comprehensive, thus are excluded.

³ This data differs from previous offense-to-arrest ratio figures due to this corresponding to a specific offense tied to a specific arrest, whereas previous data only corresponds to arrests per offense, not arrest for offense. A given crime could have multiple offenders and would increase the total share but not affect the arrests for a specific crime discussed here.