



# Law Enforcement is Single Biggest Cost for Wisconsin Local Governments

Local government spending on law enforcement has significantly increased over the past two decades in Wisconsin, becoming the single biggest category of public spending. Black community leaders have called on policymakers to put that money to better use, shifting resources away from law enforcement and towards mental health services, housing, job assistance, and other services that strengthen communities.

## Spending on Law Enforcement Makes Up a Major Part of Local Government Budgets in Wisconsin

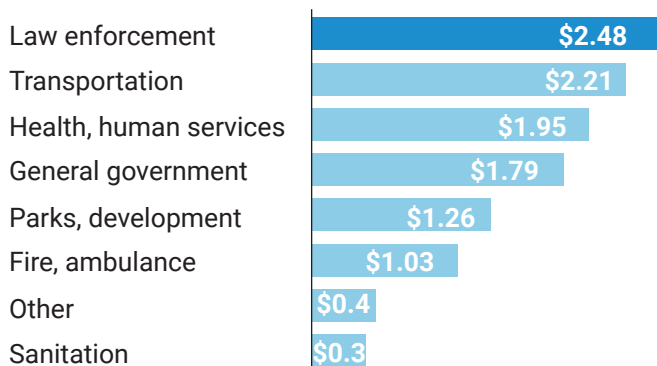
Wisconsin counties, cities, villages, and towns spent \$2.5 billion in 2018 on law enforcement and related costs like jails. That is more than those governments spent on any other purpose, including transportation, health and human services, general government, parks and development, and other services. Twenty-one percent of county and municipal government spending – more than \$1 out of every \$5 – goes to law enforcement.

### Highlights

- Local governments in Wisconsin spend more than \$2 billion on law enforcement annually
- \$1 out of every \$5 local governments spend goes to law enforcement
- Over the past two decades, spending on law enforcement has risen four times as fast as overall spending

## Law Enforcement is Largest Category of Spending for County and Municipal Governments in Wisconsin

Total 2018 spending by local governments by category, in billions.



Source: Analysis of Department of Revenue figures

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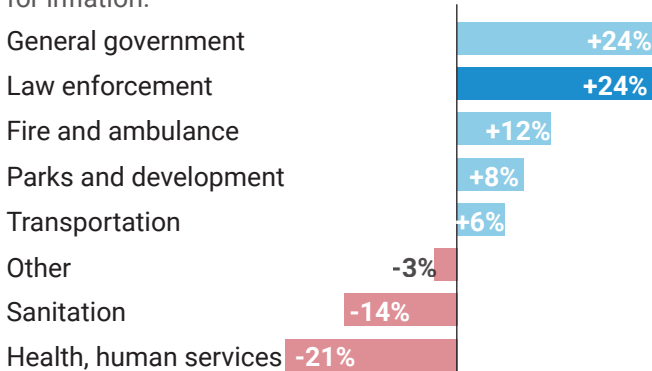
## Spending on Law Enforcement Has Increased Over Time

Spending on law enforcement and related purposes has swelled over the past two decades, squeezing out spending on other local services that are necessary for communities to thrive. In 1999, local governments in Wisconsin spent 18 cents out of every dollar on law enforcement, a figure that rose to 21 cents out of every dollar by 2018.

The increase in spending on law enforcement was larger than the growth in almost any other category of spending. Local government expenditures on law enforcement grew 24% between 1999 and 2018, after taking inflation

## In Percentage Terms, Spending on Law Enforcement Has Grown Much Faster than Spending in Other Categories

Percent change in county and municipal spending in Wisconsin by category, 1999 to 2018, after adjusting for inflation.



Source: Analysis of Department of Revenue figures WISCONSIN BUDGET PROJECT

into account. That is a bigger increase in spending than all other categories except for general government, which also grew by 24%.

The significant increase in spending on law enforcement occurred during a period when overall public spending increased only modestly. Between 1999 and 2018, local government spending increased by 5% overall after taking inflation into account, compared to the 24% increase in spending on law enforcement. Put another way, law enforcement budgets grew more than four times as fast as overall local government budgets did during this period.

In addition to increasing four times faster than overall spending, law enforcement spending rose faster than Wisconsin's population during this period. While law enforcement spending increased by 24% between 1999 and 2018, Wisconsin's

population increased by 10%. In other words, law enforcement spending grew more than twice as fast as Wisconsin's population during this period.

The growth in law enforcement spending represents a significant increase in resources that local governments are dedicating to policing, jails, and related purposes. Local governments in Wisconsin are spending nearly half a billion dollars – \$479 million – more on law enforcement in 2018 than they did in 1999, after taking inflation into account.

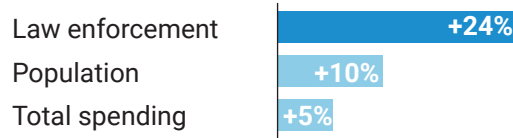
## Evaluating the Effectiveness of Resources

Spending on law enforcement, jails, and similar costs make up the biggest share of local government spending in Wisconsin, amounting to billions of dollars each year. Public spending on law enforcement has grown faster than budgets or population, suggesting that local governments have gradually shifted their approach towards keeping communities safe.

Recent killings by police officers have heightened concerns that local governments use resources for law enforcement in ways that harm individuals and communities. Enormous racial disparities in arrest rates show how Wisconsin's law enforcement system treats Blacks and Whites differently; arrest rates among Blacks were over four times higher than among Whites in 2019. In that context, we should assess spending on law enforcement and if necessary, reallocate resources in a way to better support all communities and allow them to thrive.

## Spending on Law Enforcement Has Far Outpaced Both Overall Growth in Local Budgets and Population

Percent change in spending on law enforcement and related services by Wisconsin county and municipal governments, overall change in county and municipal spending, and change in Wisconsin population, 1999 to 2018. Spending is adjusted for inflation.

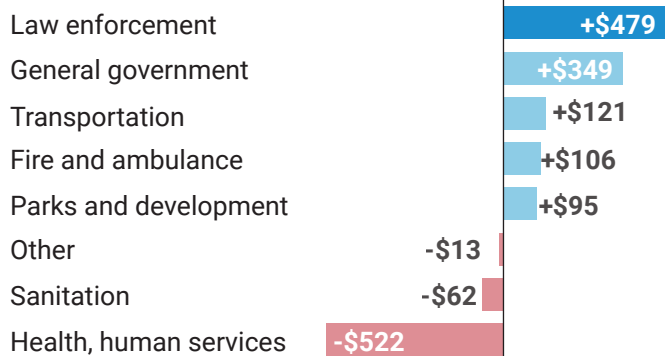


Source: Analysis of Department of Revenue figures

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## Local Government Spending on Law Enforcement Has Increased by Almost Half a Billion Over Last Two Decades

Change in county and municipal spending in Wisconsin by category, 1999 to 2018, after adjusting for inflation. Amounts are shown in millions.



Source: Analysis of Department of Revenue figures

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### Notes and methodology

Spending figures and population numbers are taken from the Wisconsin Department of Revenue's annual County and Municipal Revenues and Expenditures report, which includes information on spending categories for all counties, cities, villages, and towns in Wisconsin. The figures in this analysis represent actual spending, and are different from figures presented by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy which include adjustments to standardize spending across states.

This analysis uses the sum of operational and capital expenditures to represent total spending. Dollar amounts are adjusted for inflation.

In addition to a category called "Law Enforcement," the County and Municipal Revenues and Expenditures report includes a category called "Other Public Safety," which includes spending on correction and detention, inspections, emergency communication, and other miscellaneous public safety

purposes. The DOR's "Other Public Safety" category includes spending on jails, which represents a significant law-enforcement related cost for counties. For purposes of this analysis, total law enforcement spending is considered to be the total of the "Law Enforcement" category for all units of local governments, plus "Other Public Safety" for counties. For cities, villages, and towns, the "Other Public Safety" spending is included in the fire and ambulance category for this analysis since it is less likely to include spending on jails and other actions related to law enforcement. This is different from the method used in a recent report by the Wisconsin Policy Forum, which did not combine "Other Public Safety" spending with the "Law Enforcement" category for counties.

Local governments may have revenue sources that must be used for specific purposes, such as law enforcement. Some funding currently used for law enforcement purposes may not be available to allocate to other purposes.