



SENTINEL COMMUNITIES INSIGHTS

Collaboration in Communities to Address COVID-19

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

October 2020

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[July 2020 Report](#)

Photos: Steve Apps/Wisconsin State Journal via AP (a voter checks into the Will-Mar Neighborhood Center in Madison, Wis., cover); Pixabay (the Milwaukee skyline, p. 3); iStock/adamkaz (a boy using a computer at home, p. 5); AP Photo/David Goldman (people at a food distribution center in Chicago, p. 8)

In July 2020, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) released the first set of [reports](#) in the Sentinel Communities: Spotlight on COVID-19 project. Those reports summarized the early impacts of the pandemic in nine communities around the United States. In this second set of 10 reports—one for each community and an overview—we take a deeper look at how [cross-sector collaboration](#) has contributed to ongoing response and recovery efforts.

Improving overall health and well-being in any community requires creative solutions driven by collaboration across sectors. Trajectories of community response and recovery to the COVID-19 pandemic can be shaped by how well individuals and public and private institutions work together within communities. Successful cross-sector collaboration encourages people to see the connections between their work—whether in health care, education, transportation, community development, law enforcement, business, or other fields—and the broader health and well-being of their community. This set of reports examines how elements of cross-sector collaboration—such as sharing data or investments, developing mutually beneficial policies, or forming innovative partnerships—have shaped each community’s response to the pandemic.

In this report, focused on Milwaukee, Wis., and based on information available through September 2020, we look at how community collaborations that existed before the pandemic are being leveraged to meet emerging needs. We also describe how health and equity concerns in the community are catalyzing new partnerships and cross-sector collaborations.

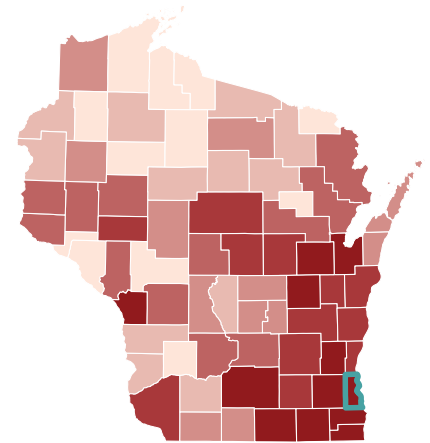
COMMUNITY OVERVIEW

Milwaukee^{1,2} is the largest city in Wisconsin, located in the southeast corner of the state, adjacent to Lake Michigan. As a commercial and industrial hub for the Great Lakes region, it is home to several large manufacturing companies.^{3,4} Despite a strong industrial history, Milwaukee’s three largest employers are now in the health sector.⁴ Milwaukee is one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States,⁵ and significant income disparities exist within the city, with Black and Hispanic households earning between half to two-thirds of white households’ earnings.⁶ Wisconsin’s Medicaid program covers adults up to 100 percent of the federal poverty line, and the state did not adopt Medicaid expansion.⁷ About 10.7 percent of the population is uninsured.⁸ Milwaukee experiences higher rates of diabetes, obesity, asthma, and infant mortality compared to national averages.⁹ Disparities by race and ethnicity are notable, with more Black residents experiencing high cholesterol relative to white residents (30% vs. 23%), and Black residents reporting having a mental health condition at a rate almost double that of whites.¹⁰



COVID-19's Community Impact

- **Total COVID-19 cases in Milwaukee County:** 30,277
- **Percent of state's cases:** 24.7
- **Cases per 100,000:** 3,201
- **Total COVID-19 deaths in Milwaukee County:** 528
- **Unemployment:** In August 2020, unemployment in Milwaukee County was estimated at 8.9 percent, down from 10.1 percent in July. In August 2019, unemployment in the county was 4.1 percent.⁸



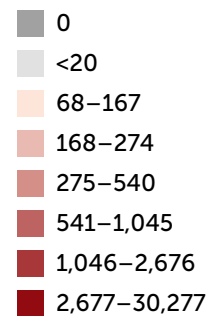
COVID-19 CASES BY RACE/ETHNICITY: MILWAUKEE COUNTY

| Race/ethnicity | Cases ⁶ | Population ⁷ |
|---|--------------------|-------------------------|
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 120 | 9,457 |
| Asian | 949 | 44,449 |
| Black | 6,793 | 257,237 |
| Hispanic | 8,377 | 147,533 |
| Two or more races | 128 | 26,480 |
| Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | — | — |
| White | 8,724 | 478,537 |
| Unknown | — | — |

As of September 29, 2020

The total number of cases reported by state/local health departments may vary slightly from those reported by the CDC and our corresponding maps given slight data lags in reporting.

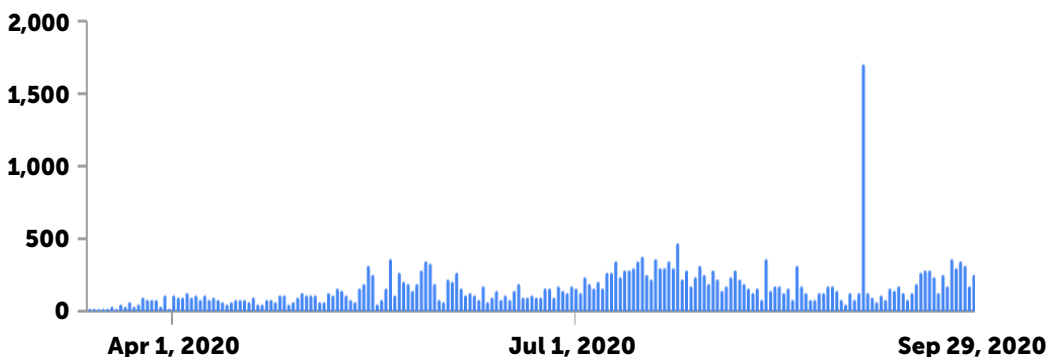
Total number of cases



As of September 29, 2020

Source: <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-map>

CASES OVER TIME: MILWAUKEE COUNTY



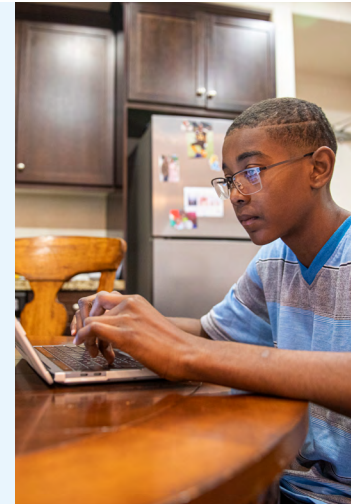
As of September 29, 2020

Each day shows new cases reported since the previous day.

Source: <https://news.google.com/covid19/map?hl=en-US&mid=%2Fm%2F0mkqr&gl=US&ceid=US%3Aen>

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON THE 2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR

In June, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction published "Education Forward," a report to help school leaders plan for the 2020-21 school year.¹² Milwaukee Public Schools' reopening plan includes three phases; the school year began with virtual learning on September 1. Should COVID-19 numbers continue to decline, the schools will enter phase two: a hybrid approach in which students will attend school in person two days a week. When it is safe to return to school full-time, all schooling will take place in person (phase three).¹³ Models of school instruction are likely to change as the school year proceeds, based on changes in local COVID-19 context and preparedness levels of schools.



Working Together to Address COVID-19

When the pandemic began, several established partnerships and cross-sector collaborations were able to expand their efforts to meet emerging needs in the community. These included strengthening supports for local organizations working on the front lines and supporting the mental and behavioral health needs of children and youth. New cross-sector collaborations were also developed to manufacture, assemble, and distribute 3.5 million masks to underserved residents who may be at increased risk for COVID-19. In the following sections we describe collaborations that existed before the pandemic and those created in response to it. We also share how these collaborations are being leveraged to address emerging needs in the community.

Pre-Pandemic Collaborations

Philanthropic partners are aligning resources and increasing the capacities of local agencies and programs on the front lines of the pandemic.¹⁴ This effort builds on existing community investments; it helps ensure resources are aligned and deployed strategically, including being used to plan the long-term recovery of the community.¹⁵

- This coordinated response is occurring through the MKE Responds Fund, which is managed by the Greater Milwaukee Foundation in partnership with other foundations, community organizations, and collaborators.
- Collaborators in this philanthropic partnership identify the greatest needs within the community and quickly activate funding support and volunteer resources for maximum community impact.
- Leaders committed to this collaboration are from the mayor's office, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), Brewers Community Foundation, and United Way of Greater Milwaukee and Waukesha County.

Children's Wisconsin, which addresses mental and behavioral needs of children, leveraged its partnerships with schools and the business sector to further support children and families during the pandemic. Shine Through is a multifaceted effort of Children's Wisconsin to address the growing mental and behavioral needs of kids through awareness, education, advocacy, philanthropy, and partnerships.¹⁶

- Children's Wisconsin partners with schools across the state on school-based mental health and a range of e-learning programs.¹⁶
- Michelle Gass, Kohl's Corporation chief executive officer and a funding partner for Children's Wisconsin, said, "The pandemic has brought a great deal of uncertainty and unforeseen challenges for families and it can be incredibly difficult to navigate without a support network ... It has never been more important to support our local community and provide increased access to mental and behavioral health services that support a child's holistic well-being."¹⁷

The Wisconsin Partnership Program at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health recently awarded grants to community organizations in Milwaukee to address COVID-19 challenges.¹⁸ The Wisconsin Partnership is an ongoing effort that seeks to improve the health and well-being of Wisconsin residents through innovative research and education programs and community partnerships.

- The partnership program awarded 22 grants, four of which were in Milwaukee.
- Grant recipients in Milwaukee are working to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on uninsured populations, immigrant communities, and people of color by addressing financial, transportation, and other barriers to screening and health services.

New Collaborations Catalyzed by the Pandemic

The MaskUp Coalition was formed to manufacture and distribute over 3.5 million masks to higher-risk individuals at no cost.¹⁹ Because of this high level of coordination, partners are leveraging one another's expertise for maximum impact.

- The coalition was initiated by Rebel Converting, a manufacturer of hospital-grade disinfectant wipes. MCW's Kern Institute informs the strategic distribution of masks using a public health- and science-based approach.
- The Milwaukee Civic Response Team guides strategy and manages volunteers, and the United Way coordinates volunteers and funding.
- Habitat for Humanity is assisting in the physical distribution of face coverings to those most at risk of contracting COVID-19.
- More than 20 local organizations, businesses, and volunteer groups assembled masks and

* All quotations used in this report are drawn from public sources.

sent them to the coalition for distribution.

VoteSafe Wisconsin, a bipartisan coalition, was created to help ensure residents continue exercising their right to vote during the pandemic. The coalition is expanding voter education around safe voting procedures and the new laws in place to ensure voters know the options available to them.^{20,21} Attorney General and VoteSafe Co-chair Josh Kaul said, "Nobody in Wisconsin, or for that matter in the country, should have to choose between their right to vote and their safety."^{20,21}

- The coalition is comprised of voting experts, elected officials, health care professionals, and community leaders. The bipartisan coalition is co-led by Attorney General Josh Kaul (Democrat) and former Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen (Republican).
- The coalition is advocating for the use of accessible, secure absentee ballots and safe in-person voting sites.

Working Together to Create a More Equitable Community

Significant income and health disparities exist in Milwaukee, with Black and Hispanic residents reporting poorer health and lower incomes compared to white residents. Given high racial segregation in the region, prior to the pandemic, both city-led initiatives and grassroots efforts had been addressing impacts of racial residential segregation and high racial unemployment gaps.²²⁻²⁴ Due to the influence of these efforts, Milwaukee has prioritized tracking COVID-19 cases and deaths by key demographics, such as age, race, and ethnicity, and discussing the impacts of inequities on COVID-19 response.²⁵ In recent months, the city has made additional changes to policies and leadership and established partnerships to support those most directly impacted by the pandemic.

The Milwaukee Health Department is collaborating with Common Good to expand capacity for follow-up and care of individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19 and neither require hospitalization, nor have a medical home.^{26,27} This partnership is addressing a critical need in the community, improving equity of health care access and services, and increasing connections to resources.²⁶ A physician volunteer for Common Ground said, "This program provides crucial support to those who have COVID-19, but don't have a medical home. They get medical advice and daily reassurance that someone has their back throughout the course of their illness."²⁸

- Common Ground is a local, citizen-led group that focuses on addressing problems the community faces.
- At least 20 Common Ground volunteers from health care professions run the program and call patients daily to check their blood oxygen levels and heart rates.

March 25

Governor Tony Evers issues Safer at Home order.

April 16

Public schools close for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

May 26

Safer at Home order concludes, allowing for more opening up of the economy with safe business practices.

July 12

Mayor issues mandatory mask order.³²

July 30

Governor declares a public health emergency, establishing statewide mask mandate.³³

July 31

Milwaukee moves to phase 4.1 based on five metrics covering cases, testing, care, safety, and tracing.^{34,35}

August 11

Milwaukee public school reopening guidance provided to community.³⁶

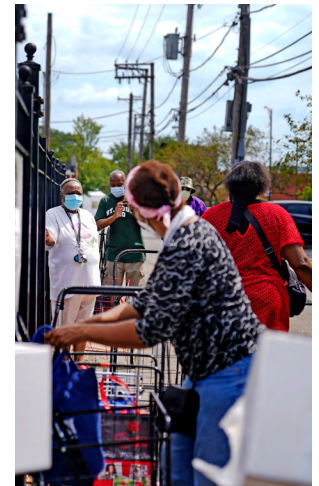
- More than 18 clinical volunteers staff a hotline for patients whose symptoms are worsening.

Recent changes in Milwaukee's policies and leadership are advancing diversity in governance and elevating racism as a public health crisis. These changes follow the release of Milwaukee's 2019 strategic plan, which included a health and equity framework and a focus on racial equity.²⁹

- In June, Milwaukee County affirmed Juneteenth (June 19) as a permanent holiday, with the administrative order acknowledging racism as a public health crisis.³⁰
- On April 7, David Crowley was elected Milwaukee County Executive, becoming the first African American and youngest person ever to be elected to the position.³¹

Conclusion

Numerous examples of cross-sector collaboration and alignment exist within Milwaukee, and these collaborations are leveraging the expertise and resources of the health care, nonprofit, business, government, and philanthropic communities. Despite these collaborations, COVID-19 cases continue to fluctuate and health and economic disparities remain. As one of the county's most racially segregated cities, racial equity remains a significant challenge in Milwaukee. However, there has been movement toward more racially diverse community leadership, recognition of racism as a public health issue, and coordinated efforts to support the health and rights of underserved residents.



What's Next

Given that many of these efforts were catalyzed by COVID-19, it is important to track the evolution of these efforts to meet the unique needs of the community and address health equity challenges. Although Milwaukee Public Schools have started out with virtual learning, it will be valuable to track when and how schools reopen for in-person learning and assessing what impact those decisions have on students and their families. As the CARES Act ends and protective policies around evictions lapse locally, it is important to monitor the impact that these changes have on the spread of COVID-19 and community recovery. Examining the effects of certain federal, state, and local protections for citizens and businesses on Milwaukee residents, such as federal moratoriums on foreclosures and evictions set to end in December, is also key. It is also useful to monitor how the

commitment to racial equity continues to evolve in Milwaukee and whether and how the commitment

influences local recovery efforts.

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