SENTINEL COMMUNITIES INSIGHTS

Spotlight on COVID-19

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

July 2020
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Photos: AP Photo/Morry Gash (people with masks in Milwaukee, cover); peeterv, iStock (houses in Milwaukee’s Lower East Side, p. 3); AP Photo/Morry Gash (physical distancing sign at polling place in Milwaukee, p. 6)
As the nation confronts the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the legacy of racial inequities that the disease highlights, there is an opportunity to review how diverse communities across the United States are planning for, mitigating, and recovering from the pandemic’s effects. Here, we take a deeper look at Milwaukee, Wis., exploring the impact of and the city’s response to COVID-19 based on information available through early June 2020.

Community Overview

Milwaukee 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. Despite a strong industrial history, Milwaukee’s three largest employers are currently in the health sector. Milwaukee is one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States. Significant income disparities exist within the city, with Black and Hispanic households earning between half to two-thirds of white households’ earnings.

Wisconsin’s Medicaid program covers adults up to 100 percent of the federal poverty line, and the state did not adopt Medicaid expansion. Milwaukee experiences higher rates of diabetes, obesity, asthma, and infant mortality compared to national averages.

Disparities by race/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. Several regions within Milwaukee are Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA)-designated medically underserved areas for primary care.

**About Milwaukee**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population: 590,157</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian: 0.6%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian: 4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black: 38.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaiian, Pacific Islander: 0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino: 18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, not Hispanic: 35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races: 4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate: 83.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median income: $40,036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 65 and older: 10.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persons in poverty: 26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninsured: 10.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages of population by race/ethnicity may add to more than 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.
COVID-19’s Community Impact

Wisconsin had around 20,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of the end of May. The first case of COVID-19 in the city of Milwaukee was reported on March 13, 2020, and Milwaukee County currently has more than 40 percent of the state’s cases. State health officials have seen increases in mental health needs as a result of COVID-19, noting a 70 percent increase in emergency medical services response related to mental health concerns compared to this time last year, and an 80 percent increase in suicide attempts.

The economic impacts have been significant as well. The unemployment rate increased from 4.1 percent in March to 16.8 percent at the end of April. Tourism revenues in the state have also decreased. The city also furloughed or reduced hours for some Milwaukee city government employees due to a projected loss of $26.5 million as a result of the pandemic. Since February, over 3,500 calls for services have also come into Wisconsin’s 211 hotlines, with the majority of callers requesting assistance with food.

The Community Response to COVID-19

On March 25, the Office of the Governor established the Safer at Home order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The order noted that individuals must stay at home as much as possible and nonessential businesses and operations were required to close. On April 16, public schools were closed for the remainder of the year. In Milwaukee, there was an effort to enforce the stay-at-home order, empowering the Milwaukee police and the local

COVID-19 in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Map was obtained from the CDC website on June 13, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/county-map.html?state=WI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total cases: 9,310</th>
<th>Total number of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cases per 100,000: 984</td>
<td>0 -&gt; 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of state's cases: 41.9%</td>
<td>20-&gt;30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31-&gt;55</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>56-&gt;90</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>91-&gt;180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>181-&gt;607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>608-&gt;10,355</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As of June 13, 2020
health department to issue citations up to $500 in rare instances of individuals deliberately violating Safer at Home.\textsuperscript{22} When the governor extended Safer at Home until May 26, the order supported continued social distancing measures, but also allowed for more opening up of the economy with safe business practices.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{The city and county governments responded to COVID-19 swiftly to support particularly vulnerable populations.}

- The county posted a crisis hotline on their community resources website,\textsuperscript{24} and caregiving services information has been publicly available.

- Milwaukee County also has a community resources guide, including links for dementia care as well as recommendations for prevention of COVID-19 in long-term care and assisted living facilities.\textsuperscript{24}

- Milwaukee Public Schools has been providing free meals to students in need every day, and Chromebooks and enrichment materials were also provided to students in April for continued instruction.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Many of the organizations that were working on health issues and associated social and economic challenges facing Milwaukee prior to the pandemic have ramped up their efforts in response to COVID-19.}

- The Community Advocates Public Policy Institute, a policy and social change organization focused on poverty reduction based in Milwaukee, has offered supports and housing guidance for tenants and renters. The organization also provided information on the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, social services, and mental health care.\textsuperscript{26}

- The Milwaukee County Community Justice Council has been working to develop comprehensive strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 throughout the justice system, such as using videoconferencing for some court appearances and modifying cell occupancy in jails and prisons.\textsuperscript{27}

- Local philanthropy, which had been key to addressing health and well-being before the pandemic, also has organized a collaborative, MKE Responds, led by the Greater Milwaukee Foundation to provide emergency response funds in areas such as housing, food, and health.\textsuperscript{28}
The Role of Health Equity

Before COVID-19, efforts to address impacts of racial residential segregation, high racial unemployment gaps, and high rates of gun violence included the city-led initiative called Blueprint for Peace run by the Office of Violence Prevention and grassroots efforts that focus on neighborhood revitalization and community trauma. Due to the influence of these efforts, Milwaukee has prioritized tracking COVID-19 cases and deaths by key demographics such as age and race/ethnicity on a dashboard that can be monitored by the community. Further, the city is discussing the impacts of inequities on COVID-19 response.

Data as of May 19 show that there are higher rates of infection and deaths for Black residents than for residents of any other race or ethnicity. The city’s health commissioner acknowledged these disparities and social determinants of health in targeted COVID-19 public service announcements in neighborhoods with a high density of Black residents, stating, “We must remember now and in the future that public health goes beyond just diagnosis and treatment and should be considered more holistically.” At the grassroots level, many members of the Black community have been mobilizing in response to COVID-19 to address differential health care access and raise awareness about underlying inequities.

What’s Next

In future reports, we will monitor how government and community organizations within Milwaukee work together to address disparities and systemic problems underlying the inequities in COVID-19 response and recovery.

“We must remember now and in the future that public health goes beyond just diagnosis and treatment and should be considered more holistically.”
References


