



DIGGINGS

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The myth of inherently violent cops (and offenders)

Pages 18-25

**Media helps oversimplify
affordable housing problem**

BY KEN WYSOCKY

**Violent offenders
without the violence**

BY JULIE GRACE

**Sen. Ron Johnson on
national debt lunacy**

BY MICHAEL JAHR



In a truly horrible year, perhaps there have been planted the seeds of miracles

Maybe it's human nature that the term *annus horribilis* is more a part of our modern lexicon than its counterpart, *annus mirabilis*.

But it wasn't always so.

The term "*annus mirabilis*," literally meaning "a miraculous year," has been around since the Seventeenth Century. It is thought to have described the wonderful developments of 1666 when 23-year-old Isaac Newton made a new future possible with his discoveries in the fields of calculus, physics and optics.

"*Annus horribilis*" has only been around for 35 years, when a writer for *The Guardian* used it to describe the horrors of 1968 — the year Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated and the deadliest year of the Vietnam War.

It's never good form to compare tragedies and deaths. But 2020 surely qualifies as an *annus horribilis* — with the COVID-19 crisis, violent protests, skyrocketing government debt and the potential for electoral turmoil. We provide ample evidence in the stories you'll find inside. Read Michael Jahr's interview with Ron Johnson for a sense of just how big a hole America is digging itself.

Read Julie Grace's piece on idiotic protestors in Madison and their mindless destruction. Donovan Newkirk shows us who is trying to burn the Black Lives

Matter doctrine into the minds of Milwaukee Public School students.

But our issue is much more than a recitation of horrors. Our cover package makes the case that neither police nor most of the offenders who end up in our prisons are as violent as you've been told.

While there's certainly potential for enormous conflict over the upcoming election, you'll see in Mark Lisher's story about absentee ballots there's also a way to restore faith in how we go about choosing our leaders.

Restoring faith in the "mainstream" media, in the meantime, could be a much tougher lift, according to Ken Wysocky's excellent piece on housing policy and how it is covered by the *Journal Sentinel* and other papers.

Yes, it's been a tragic year. There's no glossing over it. Tragedies are apparent while miracles take time to reveal themselves. Perhaps it is the same with years of horror and wonder.

Newton had so much time to work on his world-altering discoveries of 1666, according to one of his biographers, because the Great Plague forced his school, Cambridge University, to close the year before.

Think about that.

Mike@BadgerInstitute.org

MISSION STATEMENT/

Badger Institute

Founded in 1987, the Badger Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) guided by the belief that free markets, individual initiative, limited and efficient government and educational opportunity are the keys to economic prosperity and human dignity.

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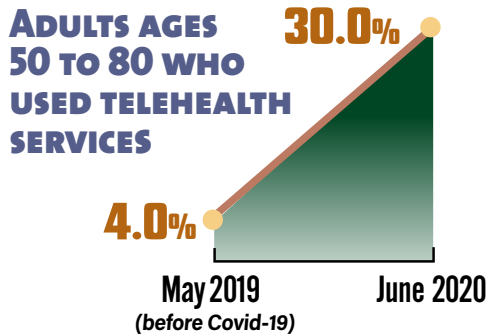
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Free Markets ■ Opportunity ■ Prosperity



Source: University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging

COVID-19 DEATHS



Wisconsin ranks **41st** among states

22 people per 100,000 at end of September

At the end of July, the death rate was **15 people per 100,000**, but the state's ranking dropped eight places.

Sources: Wisconsin Department of Health Services; 247WallStreet

Of Wisconsin restaurant operators... **1 in 3**

say it's **unlikely they'll still be in business early next year** if business doesn't improve from current levels.

Source: National Restaurant Association national survey Aug. 26-Sept. 1

"It's an emotional roller coaster. I've cried with the respiratory unit, I've cried with managers. I cry at home. I've seen nurses crying openly in the hallway."

– Melissa Resch,
a nurse at Aspirus Wausau Hospital, discusses the coronavirus burden

\$500 million

Cost estimate for a new 1,200-bed maximum security prison – from a report commissioned by the state of Wisconsin

Source: Badger Institute's "State budget realities make new prison construction unlikely" report

11.7%

The second biggest average decrease in the monthly rent for a one bedroom apartment over the past year in the nation's 100 largest cities was in Madison.

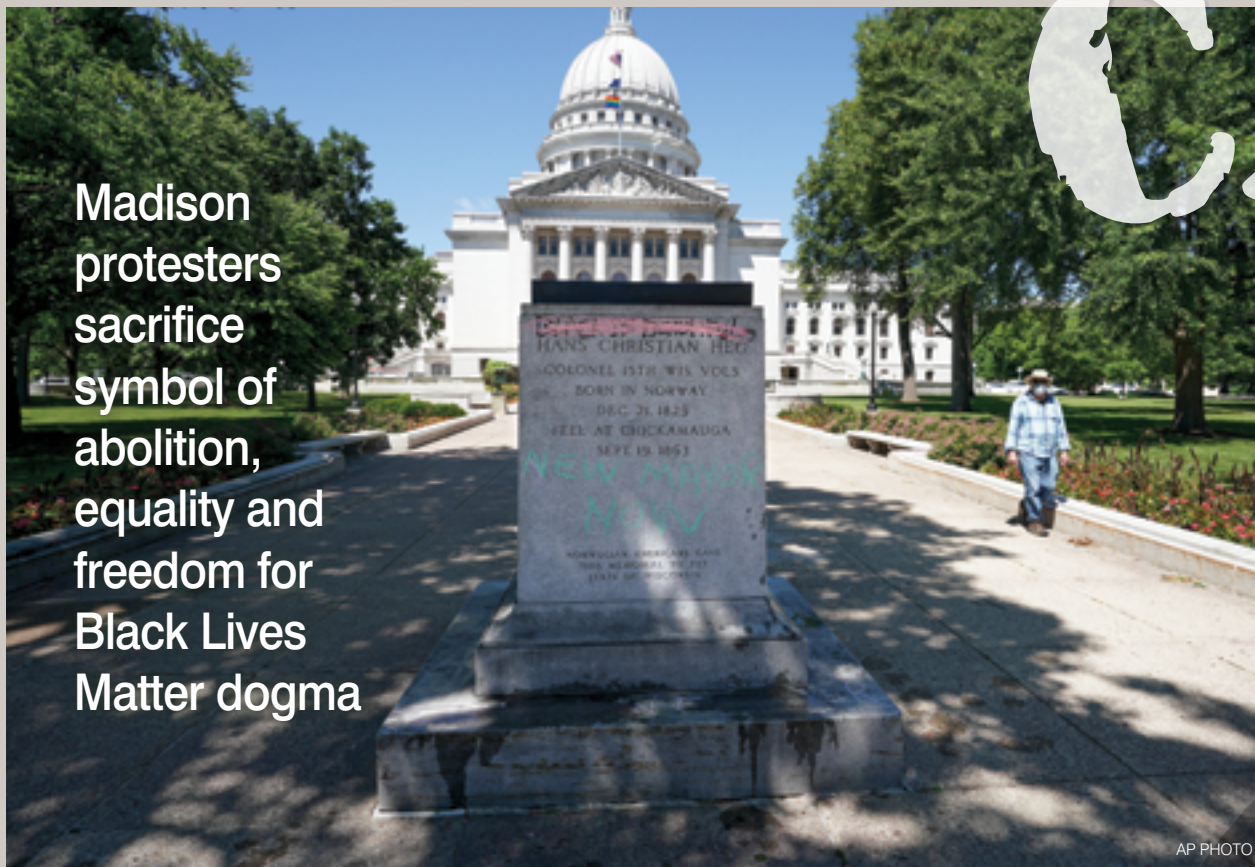
Source: MagnifyMoney study



Source: Badger Institute paper by Dr. Angela Rachidi on W-2.

Civil War Hero –

Madison protesters sacrifice symbol of abolition, equality and freedom for Black Lives Matter dogma



AP PHOTO

Graffiti on the pedestal from which protesters pulled down the statue of Union war hero Hans Christian Heg. The statue (right) lost its left leg and its head while being dragged and dumped into Lake Monona. Once refitted, state officials intend to return Col. Heg to his place in front of the Capitol.

By Julie Grace

“It’s a revolution!” someone shouted in the darkness at the Lake Monona shoreline.

On June 23, a crowd of protesters pulled a 1.5-ton bronze statue of Colonel Hans Christian Heg from its pedestal on the east side of the Capitol building, dragged it down Main and Butler streets and pushed it into the lake. The crowd erupted into cheers.

Protesters, ostensibly taking to the streets over the death of George Floyd at the hands of four Minneapolis police officers, were tearing down monuments all over the country. At first, it was Jefferson Davis and Gen. Robert E. Lee, the most prominent reminders of the Confederacy and slavery.

UNCANCELLED

author and historian Theodore C. Blegen noted for the Wisconsin Magazine of History in 1920.

As a boy, Hans Christian Heg and his family immigrated to Muskego from Norway in 1829. He developed a respect for American ideals and an interest in politics.

As a young man, he was a supervisor in the Town of Norway, chairman of the board of supervisors and a member of the county board.

As a Racine County delegate to the 1859 Republican state convention, fellow delegates nominated him to be the next State Prison Commissioner



Col. Heg

But very soon, statues of presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were toppled because they owned slaves. Christopher Columbus came down because he was a colonialist. The abolitionist, Union war hero and architect of emancipation Ulysses S. Grant had to be removed because, well, because.

On the same night Heg was brought down in Madison, Forward, the statue standing at the Capitol as “an allegory” — not of oppression and bigotry, but “of devotion and progress,” according to Wisconsin State Historical Society records — also came down.

Town supervisor, prison reformer

Why Heg? He was an immigrant, a public servant, a prison reformer, an activist and a soldier who died fighting to end slavery. ***He had “a deep faith in American ideals, in democracy, equality, and human freedom,”***

and shortly after was elected to the statewide office.

Heg championed better living conditions at Waupun State Prison and supported good time credits for prisoners — five days off a sentence for every month of good behavior. He implemented job training and asked the state to more fairly compensate the woman in charge of the female inmates. “The wages paid are not, I think, a fair compensation for the duties required of her,” he wrote.

Near the end of his tenure as commissioner in 1861, he clearly and eloquently articulated to the governor his views on prison discipline. “Experience has confirmed my conviction that a mild and merciful application of the rules of discipline is sufficient in all cases to reduce the most hardened offenders to obedience.”

“Nothing will arouse the virtuous aspirations of a fallen man so powerfully as the conviction that it still lies in his power to regain the rights he has forfeited, and that he yet can be respected by society as a fellow man,” he later wrote. →

Cut down at Chickamauga

Heg declined a second term to accept a commission as colonel of the Fifteenth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry in 1861. He was a tireless recruiter of his fellow Wisconsinites, many of them immigrants, to fight with him in his pursuit of equality and freedom.

“That which we learned to love as freemen in our old Fatherland — our freedom — our government — our independence — is threatened with destruction. Is it not our duty as brave and intelligent citizens to extend our hands in defense of the cause of our country and of our own homes?” he wrote in one newspaper.

Heg vehemently opposed slavery and often reminded fellow Norwegian immigrants that they left “one of the most beautiful lands in the world” to come to America “because it was a free country, whose principles struck a responsive chord in their hearts,” one of Heg’s biographers wrote.

He ultimately died fighting for this belief following the battle of Chickamauga in 1863. Shot in battle, Heg rallied his troops and led them on horseback for a quarter of a mile before being taken to the hospital.

One of his close friends, Knud Langeland, who visited him on his deathbed the following day, recalled Heg telling him he was willing to die for this just cause “and that he was but one of hundreds of thousands who had laid down their lives, gladly sacrificing them on the altar of their country.” He was just 34.

Someone who personally knew Heg once wrote that his beliefs were inspired by “freedom, equality and the spirit of brotherhood.” His successor, Col. John A. Martin, described Heg as “everywhere present, careless of danger.”

Of his death the Wisconsin State Journal wrote, “The

“The State has sent no braver soldier, and no truer patriot to aid in its mighty struggle for national unity, than Hans Christian Heg.



The valorous blood of the old Vikings rain in his veins, united with the gentler virtues of a Christian and a gentleman.”

– Wisconsin State Journal story, 1863.

State has sent no braver soldier, and no truer patriot to aid in tis mighty struggle for national unity, than Hans Christian Heg. The valorous blood of the old Vikings rain in his veins, united with the gentler virtues of a Christian and a gentleman.”

False representation of the city?

City workers recovered the statues of Forward and Heg early June 24. Forward was missing a finger. One of Heg’s bronze boots was torn away, and the head, which had been sheared off, has not been found.

The state intends to replace Heg’s head, repair the statue and return it to the place it has stood since 1925 as early as next spring.

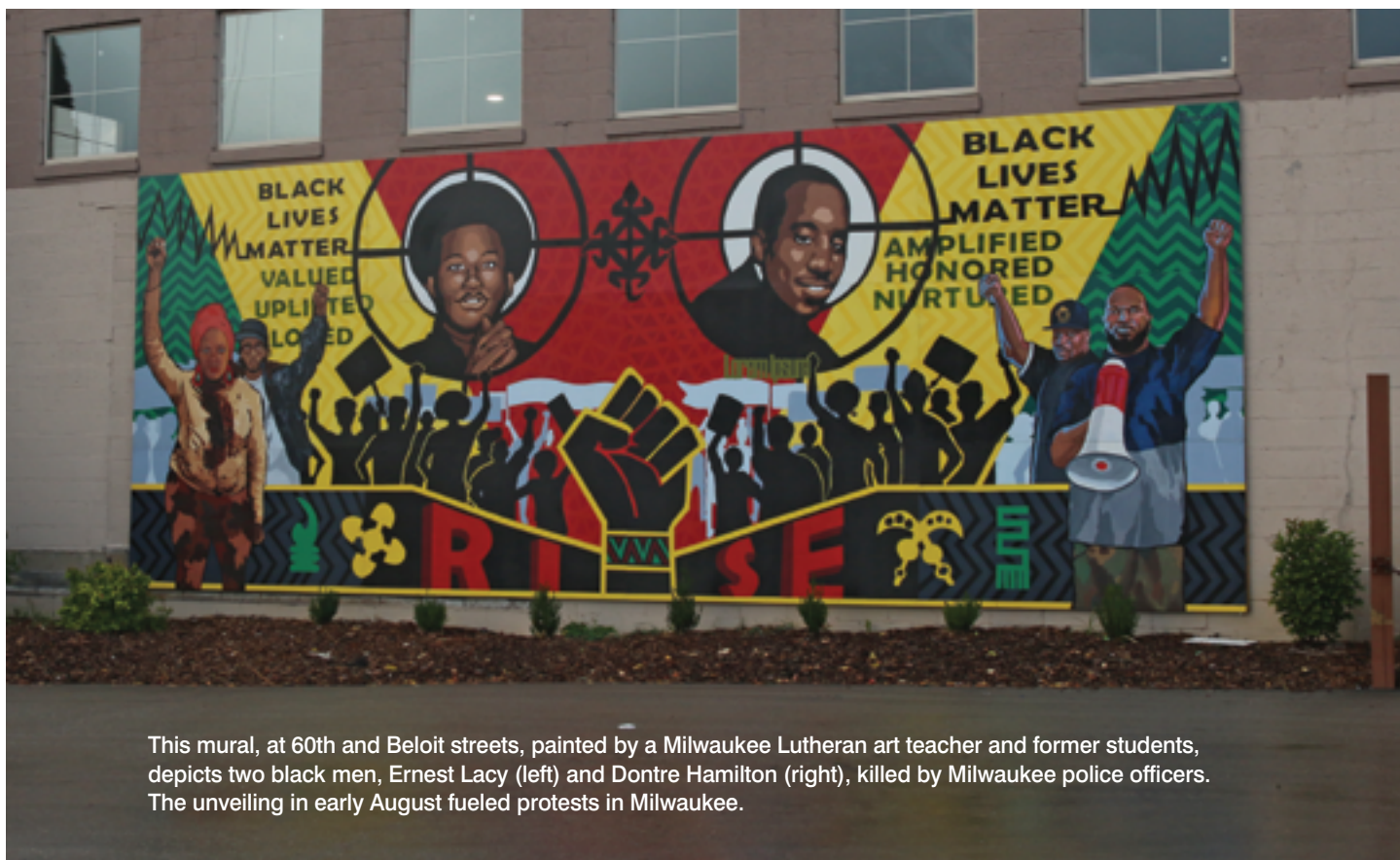
Protesters defended tearing down the Heg and Forward statues, claiming they are a “false representation of what this city is.” The protesters who pulled down Heg claimed it was a “strategic political move” to force politicians in the state to take “the same stand with the Black Lives Matter movement.”

Apparently, devotion and progress, public service, faith in democracy, equality and freedom — not to mention heroism — are false representations of Wisconsin’s capital city. Replacing them with the socialism underpinning Black Lives Matter is a bizarre, rather than a strategic, political move.

A mindless and hypocritical act may help restore the reputation of Hans Christian Heg, whose statue people may have passed by for decades without knowing who he was. It certainly helped the public understand what the “revolution” is really all about. ❌

Julie Grace is a policy analyst in the Badger Institute's Center for Opportunity.

MPS not done with BLM at School



This mural, at 60th and Beloit streets, painted by a Milwaukee Lutheran art teacher and former students, depicts two black men, Ernest Lacy (left) and Dontre Hamilton (right), killed by Milwaukee police officers. The unveiling in early August fueled protests in Milwaukee.

ROBERT HELF PHOTO

By Donovan Newkirk

The district failed to fund the curriculum and the teachers, but some MPS believers are pressing on

After criticism from parents and other taxpayers, the Milwaukee Public School District will not be moving forward with its plan to incorporate the controversial Black Lives Matter at School curriculum district-wide this academic year.

But some individual MPS schools will be implementing at least some aspects of the curriculum as BLM supporters around the country continue to argue it should be used to formally shape the minds and views of young students.

MPS initially embraced the controversial organization. →

Just three days after the death of George Floyd on May 28 in Minneapolis, the MPS School Board passed a resolution to spend nearly \$190,000 to develop and implement a curriculum centered around the Black Lives Matter movement. The resolution also called for hundreds of thousands of dollars more annually for the salaries and benefits for 12 ethnic studies teaching positions, five of them new.

At the same meeting, the board unanimously passed a resolution urging the district to “reduce the funding of contracts with the Milwaukee Police Department.”

“I certainly have received pushback from parents,” said Angela Harris, a first-grade teacher at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in Milwaukee and chair of the Black Educator Caucus. “We received a lot of criticism during the Black Lives Matter Week of Action back in February.”

Marxist roots

Black Lives Matter at School, with its Marxist ideological roots, got its start in the fall of 2016 with a rally of Seattle public school teachers all wearing “Black Lives Matter: We Stand Together” shirts on the same day.

Teachers in two dozen major city school districts, including Milwaukee, Seattle, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., organized a week of classes decrying structural racism and promoting Black pride under the Black Lives Matter banner during Black History Month in February 2018.

In New York, the City Department of Education announced its plan to fight systemic racism, white privilege and police brutality in its classrooms. The department calls it Revolutionary Love in the Classroom.

In Buffalo this fall, Black Lives Matter lessons were added to the curriculum.

In Wake County, North Carolina, a “racial equity resources” webpage for teachers and staff features quotes from Patrisse Cullors, who has described herself and her BLM co-founders as “trained Marxists.”

It’s an overtly political message directed at children — that the United States has always been, and still is, a racist

and oppressive nation. The U.S. is currently fighting two “deadly viruses,” the BLM website says, COVID-19 and white supremacy.

Bad history

Almost a year before the death of George Floyd, Peter Myers, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, warned parents to be very concerned about Black Lives Matter in School.

In a piece for City Journal, Myers reveals doctrinaire preaching determined to “disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure,” and replace it with socialist values.

“On its own, [BLM curriculum] is not good history and tends to poison students’ minds toward their country, especially students who need to be encouraged by the idea that the country does provide opportunities for people like them,” Myers said in a phone interview.

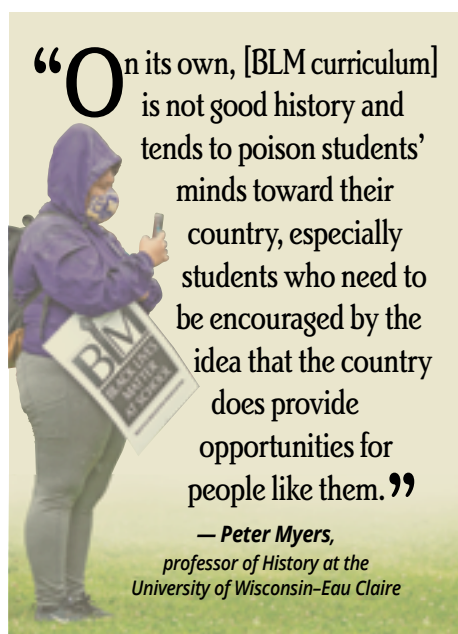
Myers wasn’t familiar with MPS’ resolution, but he said he believes that school programs such as BLM at School and the notorious New York Times 1619 Project, which managed simultaneously to win a Pulitzer Prize and be disemboweled by respected historians, do more harm than good.

Instead of systemic oppression, Myers wrote that educators ought to be teaching the successes and achievements

of Black people, “rather than begloom[ing] students’ imaginations with oppression stories — as though the main object of their education should be to swell the ranks of street protesters, classroom agitators, community organizers, diversity consultants, and the like.

“Shouldn’t a genuinely antiracist education inspire them with stories of positive accomplishment,” he wrote, “drawn from authors ranging from William Wells Brown to W. E. B. Du Bois to Carter Woodson to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar? Throughout U.S. history, African-Americans have been inventors and discoverers, producers of great works of art, leaders in industry and commerce, and founders and sustainers of schools and churches and businesses and other institutions of social uplift.”

The Badger Institute contacted the Black Lives Matter





BLM's principles, such as transgender advocacy, are at odds with Milwaukee Lutheran's biblical views, school officials say.

ROBERT HELF PHOTO

at School director of curriculum, Christopher Rogers, for comment, but did not receive a reply.

Milwaukee Lutheran responds

In recent months, ardor for Black Lives Matter has cooled. In a Marquette University poll, favorable views of BLM dropped from 59% to 49% from mid-June to early August, while unfavorable views rose to 37% by early August from 27 percent in June.

In early August, Milwaukee Lutheran High School, condemned the Black Lives Matter organization and isolated itself from the movement. The rebuke echoed concerns of MPS parents and neighbors who objected to some of the principles undergirding the Black Lives Matter movement, in particular that it be transgender affirming.

After Milwaukee Lutheran High School Art teacher Jason Crayton and more than 20 former students unveiled a Black Lives Matter mural Aug. 2 on a building in West Allis, the school issued a statement on Facebook disavowing the founding principles of the Black Lives Matter organization.

"Milwaukee Lutheran High School serves, educates, and invests in over 800 black students and their families each year," the statement read. "We have supported black lives long before the BLM foundation started in 2013."

Later in the statement, the authors differentiated the goal of the protesters in Milwaukee with the political goals of the national BLM group.

"We do not endorse the beliefs of the Organization called Black Lives Matter (blacklivesmatter.com) as the founding principles and their beliefs, as outlined in the "About Us" section of their web site, do not align with biblical views," according to the statement.

Badger Institute contacted a representative from the

Wisconsin Education Association Council to determine whether teachers expressed misgivings about BLM at School but did not receive a response.

Won't give up

In an interview this summer, Harris said there has been "no conversation" about the district's plan to go ahead with a BLM curriculum after the MPS resolution passed.

A supporter who said she intends to promulgate "inclusivity and awareness" in her classroom, Harris said she has had to defend the school program from criticism. "While I am always willing to listen to their concerns, I try to emphasize that Black Lives Matter didn't start out as a political movement," Harris said. "I just try to teach my students that they matter and that they are important, even if the world that they are living in leads them to believe otherwise."

No matter how it got its start, Harris said its importance has increased "given the heightened state-sanctioned violence." When asked to clarify what she meant by state-sanctioned violence, Harris responded, "You know, the police hunting down innocent black men. The people whose salaries are paid by our tax dollars are hurting and killing us. It isn't right."

Earl Arms, the district's media relations manager, said the district would continue to try to fill the five teaching positions in the future. "It is my understanding that the district has had an extremely challenging time filling the [ethnic studies] positions." Arms could not say why the district could not find the teachers for the BLM program.

While a district-wide plan has stalled, Nuntiata Buck, a district curriculum specialist, said five high schools will be adding elements of Black Lives Matter at School curriculum to their ethnic studies programs. They are: The Barack Obama School of Career and Technical Education; James Madison Academic Campus; Washington High School of Information Technology; Casimir Pulaski High School; and Milwaukee School of Languages.

"Topics include, but aren't limited to, racism, disinvestment, police brutality, political action and civil disobedience," Buck said. ❏

Donovan Newkirk is an intern at RealClearPolitics and a contributor to The College Fix





The wrong prescription

Raising the minimum wage is an overly simplistic way to make housing more affordable for low-income people

By Ken Wysocky

A COMMENTARY

Solving the national affordable housing crisis is pretty darn easy: Just raise the minimum wage.

Or at least that's what the national and local media, including the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, would have their readers believe with their coverage of a report issued in July by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC). The coalition, as its mission statement announces, is dedicated solely to achieving socially just public policy that ensures low-income people affordable homes.

The coverage of the report, which focused almost exclusively on liberal talking points, does a disservice to readers, citizens and policymakers. With almost no challenge from other perspectives, these stories offer an absurdly simplistic solution to an extremely complicated problem, one that has defied solution for decades and that cost taxpayers \$51 billion in federal housing assistance last year alone.

The media narrative conveniently ignores the many

studies that show raising the minimum wage can actually hurt employment of unskilled workers.

Liberal newspapers championing a liberal cause isn't exactly a man-bites-dog story. But readers are taxpayers, too, and if they're paying the freight for these housing policies, shouldn't they be afforded information from a wide variety of sources? Aren't supposedly trusted news services obligated to provide that information?



McBride

for an interview. Neither did a host of journalism educators and pundits whom we contacted for comment.

Kelly McBride of the Poynter Institute, who described herself as one of the nation's foremost experts on journal-

ism ethics, said she doubted that our journalist would be fair to her or to the affordable-housing coverage.

Let the market work

Here is our reporting on affordable housing. You can decide what's fair.

The NLIHC has been issuing its annual report, "Out of Reach," for 30 years. The report documents the gap between renters' wages and the cost of rental housing. In Wisconsin, this year's report says, renters must earn about \$17.25 an hour in order to afford the \$898 monthly fair-market rent for a two-bedroom apartment without busting the coalition's housing-affordability benchmark of 30% of a renter's overall income.

Renters in Wisconsin earn an average of \$14.32 an hour, crossing the affordability threshold and leaving them unable to afford other necessities, according to the report.

The NLIHC's solution? Raise the federal minimum wage, which has remained at \$7.25 an hour since 2009.

In story after story, reporters localized the NLIHC numbers, then trotted out spokespeople for local affordable-housing activist groups who agreed with the coalition's prescription. *The Journal Sentinel* story follows that pattern and uses a single expert, Mike Bare, research and program coordinator for Com-



munity Advocates, a nonprofit advocate for low-income people in the Milwaukee area.

The story makes no mention of a Congressional Budget Office study last year that estimated the cost-cutting needed for businesses to offer a \$15-an-hour minimum wage would mean the loss of 1.3 million jobs.

The cities of New York, Seattle and Minneapolis and several others in Illinois reported businesses shedding jobs after their minimum wages increased.

"That's a very simplistic and bogus argument," says Edward Pinto, director of the American Enterprise Institute Housing Center, which advocates for market-based solutions to the affordable-housing shortage. "It's much more complicated than just raising the minimum wage.

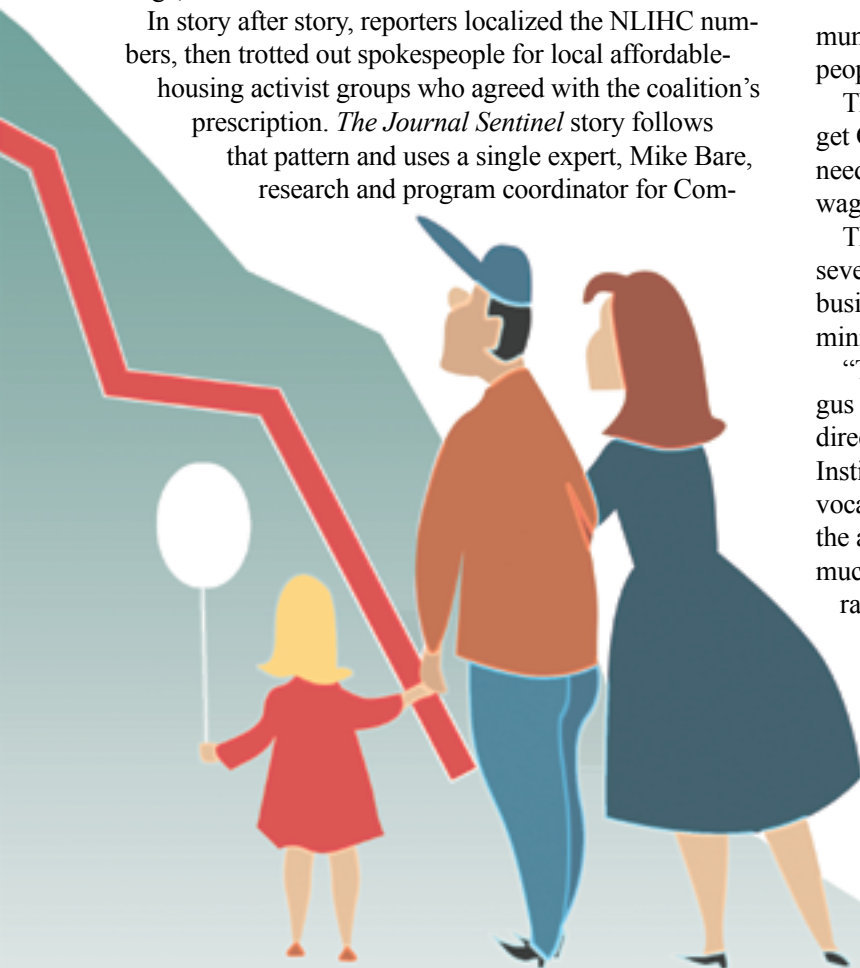


Pinto

Very few people who are renters make minimum wage," he says.

In 2018, just 1.7 million, or 2%, of all hourly paid, non-self-employed workers made the minimum wage or less, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). In that same year, 39% of American wage earners with either service or

light-production jobs earned a median salary of nearly \$27,000, or roughly \$13 an hour — not much lower than the proposed →



The media narrative conveniently ignores the many studies that show raising the minimum wage can actually hurt employment of unskilled workers.

\$15-an-hour minimum wage.

“So, the real issue here is how do you supply enough housing so individuals making this amount of money can afford it,” Pinto says.

As one might expect, Pinto has the answer. “Where market forces are allowed to provide (housing) supply, it tamps down demand and prices decrease. But when you restrict supply through zoning, you drive up the price of land — and of housing.”

Government subsidies also distort the housing market at the expense of renters. The result? Nothing more than expensive housing made “affordable” through subsidies, Pinto says. “Subsidies have only made a lot of developers very rich — crony capitalism at its worst.”

Rehab abandoned homes

Part of the progressive narrative is accurate. Single-family zoning codes, with a history of economic and

racial discrimination dating back to the early 1900s, have made it too expensive for low-income people to build new homes, Pinto says.

Cities with affordable-housing shortages would be better served by “light-touch density” codes, allowing for two-, three- and four-unit homes and apartments above garages or in basements, he says. Cities in California, Minnesota, New Jersey and Oregon have had some success with this approach. Los Angeles, for instance, has successfully increased affordable housing by allowing so-called accessory dwellings, such as garage-top apartments, he points out.

“This problem is 100 years in the making, so it won’t be solved in three or four years. It might take 15 or 20 years,” Pinto says. “But if we allow light-touch density, the market will take advantage of that new right.”

Stewart Wangard, owner of Wangard Partners, a prominent Milwaukee real estate developer, also has some ideas that don’t involve a federally mandated wage increase. He strongly advocates establishing a major home-rehab program to encourage smaller developers to restore the city’s stock of rundown homes with “good bones.” Rehabbing existing housing stock is always less expensive than building new housing, he says.

There are reportedly thousands of homes in Milwaukee that are either tax-foreclosed and owned by the city, owned by banks through loan foreclosures or just outright abandoned.



Wangard



“Milwaukee has a large amount of residential units, single and multifamily, that have sound basic structure,” Wangard says. “There are neighborhoods suffering from great economic distress that have large amounts of such housing available, which creates opportunities.”

Associates in Commercial Real Estate (ACRE), an initiative committed to increasing the number of minorities involved in development of commercial real estate, might be the place to start, Wangard says.

A joint effort between the Marquette University College of Business Administration, the Milwaukee School of Engineering, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the Local Initiatives Support Corp., ACRE has helped people, some of them elected and appointed government officials, get into housing development, he says.

But more access to capital, experience and mentorship is needed, he says.

Wangard hopes Lafayette Crump, the recently appointed commissioner of Milwaukee’s Department of City Development, will provide additional leadership from City Hall. Crump’s department oversees the Redevelopment Authority and the Neighborhood Improvement Development Corp.

And what about the *Journal Sentinel* story touting the minimum wage increase as a solution to affordable housing?



“It basically says this (raising the minimum wage) is the only way to address the lack of affordable housing, when in fact there are diverse ways of doing so,” Wangard says. “It was about as fulfilling as eating cotton candy.” ❌

Ken Wysocky of Whitefish Bay is a freelance journalist and editor.

Media honcho pushes back

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* story about the National Low Income Housing Coalition’s annual “Out of Reach” report was written by two reporters whose salary is shared by the newspaper and the nonprofit group Report For America (RFA). Newspapers, which have been shedding experienced journalists by the thousands in the last 20 years, are increasingly turning to less expensive ways to generate content.

Curious about the story, we contacted *Journal Sentinel* Editor George Stanley, the two reporters who wrote the story and several journalism experts.

The only one who responded was Kelly McBride, senior vice president and chair of the Craig Newmark Center for Ethics and Leadership at the Poynter Institute. McBride waved off any problems with the story or its creators.

“It seemed fine to me,” she said. “All the work that I’ve seen (by RFA reporters) has been credible, including this. It’s based on a credible study, and the work looks like it has decent analysis and science behind it.”

When asked whether a complex issue such as affordable housing deserves more than just a simplistic solution like raising the minimum wage, McBride couldn’t say. She isn’t a housing policy expert, she said.

She questioned the motives of the *Badger Institute* and doubted we’d publish her criticism. She found the angle of our story “concerning” because to her it wasn’t objective. But unlike the *Journal Sentinel* story and the others, we didn’t have an angle until we talked to the experts whom no one else talked to.

— Ken Wysocky

Elections commission is confident that ballot tracking and barcoding will mean smooth and secure voting



State readies for absentee ballot crush

By Mark Lisher

If there's any question come the early morning hours of Wednesday, Nov. 4, about whom voters have elected leader of the free world, there's another query almost sure to follow:

Did the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) and 1,850 local clerks do enough to ensure the integrity of the use of absentee ballots?

After the April primary, there were plenty of doubters expressing concerns about everything from lost absentee ballots to the possibility of ballot “harvesting” to fraud in the Badger State — one of very few key swing states that will decide the presidential election.

A record voter turnout here in the spring election drew national attention when it was learned that 144,185, or

about 10%, of all the absentee ballots sent to voters, either were tossed out or never returned. Thousands more were requested but were never sent to voters at all.

The WEC responded with a 126-page report released on Sept. 1 outlining preparations for the Nov. 3 election.



Wolfe

“After the April election, we had some pretty major adjustments to make,” WEC Administrator Meagan Wolfe said in an interview in early September. “We had a lot to do on the front end for November. With our technology, cybersecurity and the human element — 1,850 local officials — we were able to address them. We stressed that it was so important for

people to act early.”

Tracking website, barcoding

The two biggest adjustments were the creation of a ballot tracker called My Voter Info on the commission’s MyVote Wisconsin website and the use of intelligent barcoding on ballot envelopes to help clerks and voters track absentee ballots.

By requesting an absentee ballot on MyVote and registering, a voter is able to track the ballot in real time, from receipt of the ballot to its tally by a clerk, Wolfe said.

The commission did not have the authority to require all clerks to use barcodes, Wolfe stressed, and those clerks who do not use the state’s WisVote voter registration and election management system cannot take advantage of barcode tracking. Interest in using the system, which has had success in Colorado, increased significantly after the problems in April, Wolfe said.

One potential minefield — ballot harvesting — appears to have been side-stepped.

In June, Wolfe provided guidance to clerks that said, “A family member or another person may also return the ballot on behalf of the voter” — a stance that raised concern at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty.

WILL sent a letter to Wolfe in June saying her recommendation conflicted with state election law that says absentee ballots “shall” be mailed by or delivered in person to the clerk by the person casting the ballot.

Harvesting has led to problems elsewhere. Election officials in North Carolina enacted reforms after they were forced to repeat a congressional election when they discovered partisans harvesting, or turning in,

absentee ballots favoring the Republican candidate.

WEC member Dean Knudson, who in June failed to convince the commission to issue a statement condemning ballot harvesting, by September had backed away from predictions of harvesting in the presidential election.

Still, Knudson told Diggings he was strongly suggesting that, if possible, voters take advantage of COVID-19 precautionary measures in place at the polls and vote in person.

“We have a lot of ballot integrity safeguards, including voter ID in Wisconsin, more than there are in some other states,” Knudson said. *“But there are more safeguards voting in person than there are voting absentee.”*

Clerks expect crush

All told, between 1 million and 2 million Wisconsinites will cast an absentee ballot in November.

Wisconsin, unlike 10 other states, has resisted the pressure to mail ballots directly to all its registered voters.

The WEC did, however, commit as much as \$2.2 million from a federal stimulus grant to send absentee ballot request forms and voter information to 2.6 million registered voters.

By the end of August, more than 1 million Wisconsinites already had requested absentee ballots.

The mailer with the absentee ballot application encouraged voters, who got their ballots as early as Sept. 17, to return them as early as possible.

Clerks anticipating a voter surge in November have, in the meantime, reported to the WEC that they ordered more absentee ballots early and have considerably increased the number of polling places where voters can drop off absentee ballots as well as vote in person.

By mid-fall, some fears about the November election process had abated.

In June, for instance, Knudson told The Center Square, a conservative news website, “If you think there’s no ballot harvesting in Wisconsin, buckle up because there most definitely will be.”

Less than three months later, he was no less adamant that people will be perfectly safe voting in person. But his views on the potential for ballot harvesting and other forms of fraud had softened considerably.

“Let me be clear about this,” Knudson said. “I have confidence in our process. It is very difficult to commit ballot fraud in Wisconsin. Not impossible, but difficult.”

In the weeks before an acrimonious presidential contest, confidence was high that all of the advance preparations will mean not only a more efficient but more honest and accountable election.

If that confidence isn’t justified, add the Wisconsin election to what almost certainly will be the most picked over and fought over presidential election of our time. ❏

Mark Lisheron is the managing editor of Diggings.



Knudson



Police use

What happened in Kenosha is an anomaly, defying the critique that police violence is systemic

By Patrick Hughes and Mike Nichols

The hardscrabble neighborhood where Jacob Blake was shot – a mix of shabby apartment buildings and the occasional pristinely kept home not far from boarded-up stores – looks like hundreds of other places in Wisconsin and the rest of America.

There is a presumption that what happened there after Kenosha police were called to the shooting scene happens everywhere else, too.

“I definitely think it is prevalent elsewhere,” a young woman sitting outside a home nearby said. “It happens all around the world. It happened here. It could happen down on the next block.”

There were “a lot of opportunities” to de-escalate before a police officer had to fire seven shots, said the woman who wanted to be identified only as Kris. “Like if you were a cop, you could have stopped it a different way.”

Questions about better de-escalation by police will go on for months, maybe years (see sidebar). Questions about the prevalence of use of force by officers are more easily answered.

Force is used by police in the largest cities – Madison is roughly only one of every 100, just over 3%, according to a 2019 Institute policy brief, “How Common Is It?”

No systemic evidence

The vast majority of officer-involved shootings in Milwaukee, Madison and

	Number of Officer-involved shootings	Number of OIS resulting in death
2019	32	18
2018	25	12
2017	28	24
2016	26	17
2015	29	12
2014	24	10

Wisconsin Professional Police Association data

Association (WPPA). In Kenosha, over a quarter of a million people live there were 25 officer-involved shootings, 12 of them fatal.

Most use of force by police involves any weapon at all, the Institute found. More than 70% of police incidents in Madison involve bodily

ROBERT HELF PHOTO

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Police Use of Force –

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So-called officer-in-
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The year before, with
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After days of rioting, business owners in Kenosha who boarded up after being looted and vandalized taped up signs pleading for help.

finances and reports on use of force differently, but the types of force and frequency during arrest percentages appear to be similar there, as well.

Use of force is most likely to occur during an arrest, the Badger Institute analysis shows. Arrests, however, are only a small subset of all interactions.

“There are hundreds of thousands of contacts between police officers and citizens in a year, from traffic stops to conversations, and the vast majority do not result in a use of force,” said Green Bay Police Chief Andrew Smith. “I personally have dozens of contacts a day with people, it’s hard to quantify it.”

Use of force is infrequent enough that Smith says he is aware of every incident.

“I personally receive a notification, an email on my phone whenever a use of force oc-

curs, day or night,” said Smith. “I know what happened, what the circumstance are and can follow up.”

The Institute did not analyze the propriety or justification for using force, which would have required an examination of hundreds of arrests, often with incomplete reports, and drawing inherently subjective conclusions.

A lack of standards and legal requirements for reporting use-of-force incidents make it difficult to know what many departments in the state are doing, and whether officers are being held accountable for unjustified use of force. It is impossible to compare some departments of similar size and similar levels of crime to determine which are outliers deserv-

FORCE →

The undersheriff of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department discusses a cop's toughest call: **if and when to use force to apprehend a suspect**

Q&A with **Kevin McMahill**



The following was excerpted from a webinar the Badger Institute sponsored on use-of-force and police-community relations. Badger Institute President Mike Nichols spoke to Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Undersheriff Kevin McMahill about de-escalation, training police officers to quickly process ways to reduce the need to use force in making arrests without compromising public safety and enforcement of the law. McMahill addresses so-called sanctity of life policies, which spell out a department's commitment to protecting human life in the daily course of policing. A full recording of the webinar with Nichols, McMahill and Jon Ponder, founder of Hope for Prisoners, is available at www.Badgerinstitute.org.

Q Nichols: Can you talk a little bit about whether police can do a better job of de-escalating and whether it's a training issue or not?

McMahill: Yeah, so listen. Not every instance can be de-escalated. That just has to be said from the very beginning. But that being said, I'll tell you that in 2010, metro, we had shot 25 people, and two of those were very high-profile incidents that, quite frankly, they did not need to be shot. And so, we underwent a comprehensive reform process with the Department of Justice COPS (Community Oriented Policing Services) office.

Prior to 2010, we didn't have some very key things when it comes to training. Things like a sanctity of life statement in your use of force. If you're not, from the very get-go, teaching that life matters the most to your people that have the ability to take life, then where are you really at?

Then, secondly, we didn't have a de-escalation policy. What's really interesting about de-escalation is that what you really need to be focused on is, how do you de-escalate from the sense that you're taking into account things like time and distance, numbers of officers, education, training and then, realistically, if you're not getting to this

point is, what is the humanity of it?

We all know that there are shootings all over the country that they describe as lawful but awful, right? Those are the ones that seem to cause a lot of challenge for people.

Our experience here is that, after 72 hours, the sheriff and I

receive a video with all the body-worn cameras. The day that the shooting occurs from the scene, one of our captains puts out a YouTube video about what they know. Seventy-two hours later, we play all of that video: good, bad and ugly. The community at least has a sense of what happens.

What I can tell you after doing that for 10 years now, I don't even really think they care if we provide any commentary whatsoever anymore. It seems like what the community reacts to is, we press play and they make a determination. Did that individual need to be shot or did the police screw it up?

Then what's really important about this throughout that entire process is, we see things that are horrific from a training and tactics, leadership and supervision perspective that people don't necessarily look at when you're a civilian watching a body-worn

camera (video) when a shooting occurs. But we have this robust review process on every single use of force incident that goes to a panel — the civilians outnumber the commissioned people.

“ What I know about policing is there are no secrets in policing. They always come to light sooner or later, and so why not put it out there, put out the information, let people see it, and they make judgments on it. ”

The reason that I'm bringing that up into de-escalation for you is that **you can't have an honest conversation about de-escalation until you have an honest conversation about the failures in a use of force.** When you look at it criminally, it's easy to say there's not a failure. When you look at it administratively, you can always find areas to improve it.

The last piece I've got to tell you, we also take what we learn from each one of those reviews, take it back to our reality-based training, and do those exact same scenarios for the entirety of the agency, but have them arrive at an ultimate different outcome than the use of deadly force by employing the time, the distance, the training, the education and the humanity. We also provided a lot more tools in the past than what we had that allows them to have options from further distances than only using the handgun.

Q Nichols: It seems like a lot of what you're talking about is basic transparency.

McMahill: That's a big part of it.

Q Nichols: You touched on it with body cameras. You touched on it with making video available pretty quickly. More often than not, I think what I'm hearing and have always assumed is that that benefits police officers. Most of the time they're doing their job the right way. Having some video and

being transparent about it is a good thing for law enforcement.

McMahill: The reality of it is that, in today's world — and this is what I would just say to those in law enforcement that are listening that are hesitant to release this video: If a citizen records it, it's going out, right? You had no control there in Kenosha of that guy putting out his cell phone video.

Every incident around the country that video comes out, there's somebody on the prosecution side. There's somebody in administration. Some lawyer that says you can't put that out. It's going to harm the future prosecution of the case.

It's never harmed the future prosecution of a case since we released this video. It's just not true. But what happens is, the community thinks that you're hiding something, that you're taking time to do something. What I know about policing is there are no secrets in policing. They always come to light sooner or later, and so why not put it out there, put out the information, let people see it, and they make judgments on it.

Subsequent to these riots, I believe we've had six officer-involved shootings. They all go out. You can find them all on lvmpd.com. You can go in and watch each and every one of those. They're all sent through the community, and we have a really good response. Today, we hover around 80% approval rating from our community in our latest polls. ❏

FORCE

ing closer scrutiny.

Standardized annual use-of-force incident reports from law enforcement agencies are needed, the Badger Institute has concluded. Gov. Tony Evers and State Sen. Van Wanggaard have offered legislative proposals requiring police departments to report all officer-involved shootings and incidents in which a civilian suffers great bodily harm.

The legislation should be amended to require departments to agree on a definition of use of force and report on those incidents uniformly and annually.

Disturbing trend in Milwaukee

A closer look at the numbers by the Institute revealed that some officers in Milwaukee have used force much more frequently than their fellow officers. In 2018, when more than two-thirds of the 1,900 officers never used any type of force and over 86% never used it more than once, one officer was involved in 24 incidents. Another 39 officers used force five or more times. And fourteen percent of all officers used force more than once in 2018.

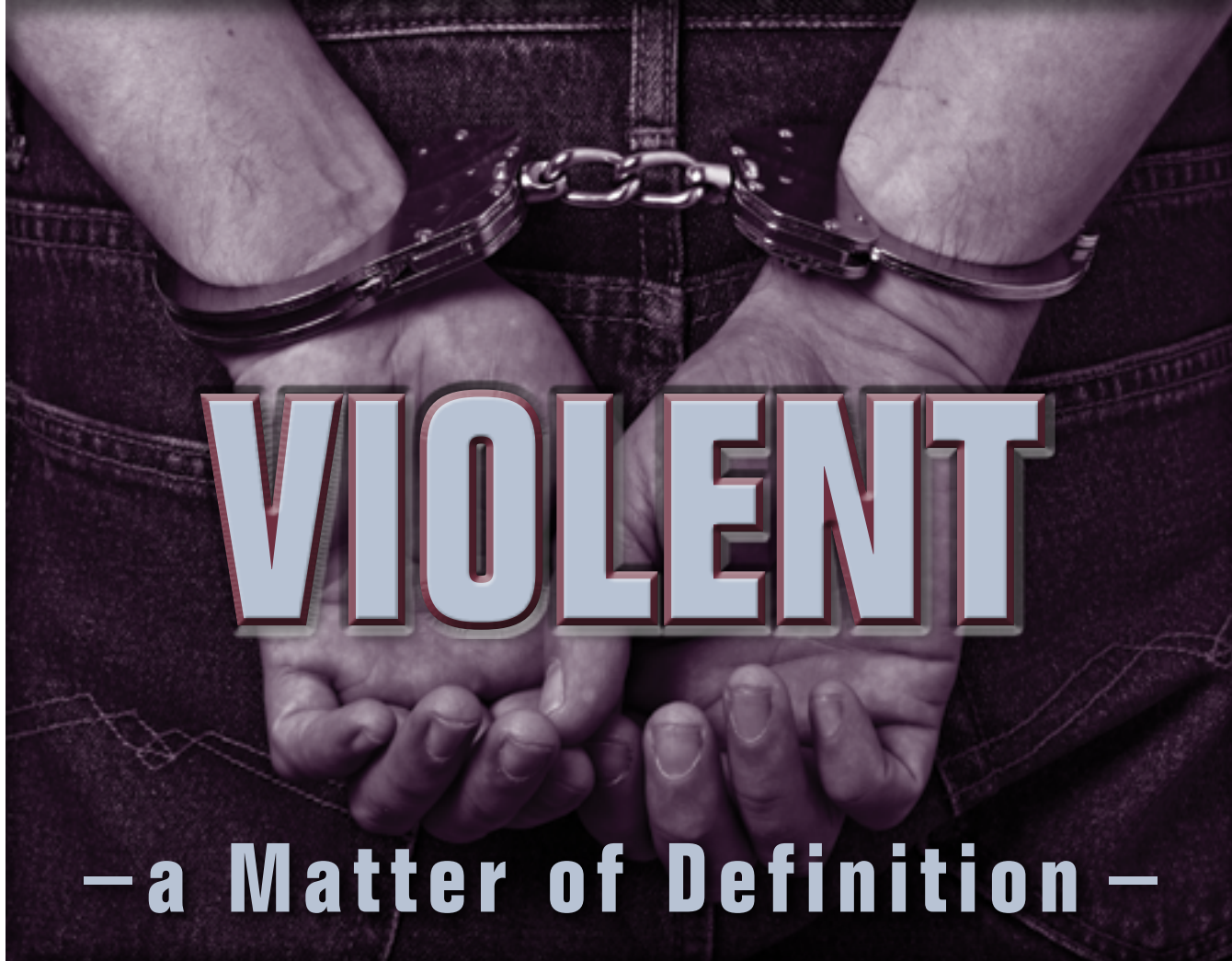
The statistics suggest a department rarely using force, particularly in low-crime neighborhoods. In largely impoverished aldermanic districts with much more crime and a greater number of arrests, however, officers use force more than seven times as often as those in districts surrounded by more affluent suburbs.

The disparity makes some sense, but it doesn't explain why some officers are so far outside the norm or why a small percentage use force much more frequently than fellow officers working the same districts.

It is those officers using force in those poverty-stricken areas whose actions prompt protestors and other critics to claim the violence is systemic to all police.

"While we do not believe there are systemic problems with the way our officers are doing their jobs, we do believe that we can always improve and that better outcomes — especially with use of force considerations — should always be sought," Madison Assistant Chief of Police John Peterson said. ❏

Patrick Hughes is a Badger Institute corrections consultant. Mike Nichols is the president of the Badger Institute.



By Julie Grace

The state classifies many people as “violent” who never committed an act of violence against another person. Nick Watry is one them.

In April 2019, Watry pleaded guilty and was convicted of his third Operating While Intoxicated violation, fleeing an officer and causing property damage. He was driving drunk, his blood-alcohol level much higher than the legal limit, when he damaged a Glendale Police car and an irrigation system and struck a light pole near Bayshore Mall. No one was hurt.

At his sentencing hearing, Watry’s lawyer, who is currently one of his employers, called him “an intelligent, smart, decent, compassionate person, a hard-working person, honest to a fault, patient.” He also acknowledged Watry’s alcohol and mental health problems.

He completed alcohol abuse and anger management courses and regularly sought mental health treatment while

working more than 40 hours a week combined at a law firm and a Marcus Cinema, the jobs he had before he was sentenced.

The state labels thousands of offenders violent when they’ve never committed an act of violence

“I make no excuses for my actions,” Watry told a Milwaukee judge at the hearing. “I’ve made mistakes. I realize that I do have issues.”

“I was going through some personal, serious stuff at the time, and I self-medicated with alcohol,” Watry told the Badger Institute. “It all came to a culmination with this incident. I realize it was unhealthy.”

The incident also left him with a record in Wisconsin as a violent offender.

“To me, it’s ridiculous (to be considered violent),” Watry says. “Absurd. You can speak to anyone who knows me. The word violent would never come to mind.”

A matter of definition

The State Department of Corrections’ definition of a

violent crime encompasses the FBI's definition – murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault – but also includes many other lesser crimes the FBI does not: driving recklessly or intoxicated and causing injury or death, for instance, pointing a firearm at person, and threatening use of force.

In 2019, 18% of people sent to a state prison in Wisconsin committed the FBI definition of a violent crime. The other 82%, including Nick, were convicted of offenses the FBI does not classify as violent in its Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program.

“If a crime is defined as violent in one place and non-violent in another, it makes it difficult to interpret violent crime rates, which are key to many policy-making decisions,” state public defender Kelli Thompson said. “Also, certain categories of ‘violent’ crimes impacts certain groups of individuals more disproportionately, which exacerbates racial disparities.”

Kendell Joshua, a woman with no prior criminal history, found out that making a phone call can be a violent crime in Wisconsin. Last year, Joshua pleaded guilty to intimidating a victim, a Class A misdemeanor, for calling the victim of a crime that got Joshua's son sentenced to the Milwaukee House of Corrections.

A record of a call from Joshua to her son in jail was the damning piece of evidence. “I called the young girl, I talked to her ... She said she's not going to put everything on you,” Joshua told her son. “Ma, you can't say that over the phone,” the son replied.

Although she never had physical contact with the victim, a judge sentenced Joshua to a one-year probation and six months in the House of Corrections if she violated that probation.

A series of bad decisions turned Azendis Johnson into a violent offender. Johnson, 25, of Milwaukee, bought a car from a man for \$800, not realizing the car had been stolen.

On Jan. 6, 2019, when officers in a Milwaukee Police squad car started following him, a panicked Johnson called the seller, who told Johnson not to stop for the police. Johnson took off and led officers on a 27-mile high-speed chase through Milwaukee before they stopped and arrested him. No one was injured.

Johnson, who has had no arrests since, was convicted July 7, 2019 of second-degree recklessly endangering safety. “I feel like I threw my whole life away just because I made a poor decision by running from the law,” he told

VIOLENT →

MIKE
NICHOLS



With the police in retreat, the view from a Fond du Lac Avenue stoop is pretty bleak.

Milwaukee – Carl Henderson sits out on the front stoop of a Fond du Lac Avenue duplex he is busy renovating just up the street a bit from the Seventh District Police Station. It's late in the day. He's sipping a beer and watching the cars fly by on this residential street.

“Young guys,” he says, “they have these cars; they don't care. I'm like, ‘How are you doing 70

or 80 with the police station right there?’”

But cutting cops unnecessarily to placate protesters will do nothing to help George Floyd or Jacob Blake.

In between Carl's stoop and the police station is Parklawn Assembly of God. And in between all the good people in this neighborhood who want to get home or to church or to the second shift without being run over by those

speeding cars or maybe shot, are the police.

There are folks at City Hall and lots of protesters who probably don't live anywhere around here who want to defund those officers. Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett has already proposed a budget that will cut another 120 cops he says Milwaukee can't afford.

That part about getting shot is no embellishment. Six people have died in shootings since May, all within half a mile of Parklawn. People are bleeding to death all the time around here. This is

NICHOLS →



VIOLENT

the judge at his sentencing hearing.

Watry, Joshua and Johnson confessed to reckless and dangerous actions deserving of punishment, restitution or treatment. But none of them ever committed an act of violence against another person.

They are among the 3,542 people sentenced in 2019 for crimes the DOC considers violent. Fewer than half of those people, 1,666, committed crimes defined as violent by the FBI:

MURDER AND NON-NEGLIGENT MANSLAUGHTER: 120

NEGLIGENT MANSLAUGHTER: 140

FORCIBLE RAPE: 498

ROBBERY: 384

AGGRAVATED ASSAULT: 524

The State Department of Corrections (DOC) includes the FBI's definition of a violent crime, which includes murder, nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault, plus many other crimes like driving recklessly or intoxicated and causing injury or death, pointing a firearm at a person, causing great bodily harm without intent and threatening use of force.

Better recordkeeping, clearer intent

This discrepancy has consequences.

“Even among those convicted of crimes, the impact of having been convicted of a ‘violent’ crime often has longer-lasting and more far-reaching impacts,” Thompson said. “Using the label of ‘violent crime’ makes communities less safe by blocking access to programming for people who would benefit from it by reducing the chances

of future criminal activity.”

One solution would be to require the state to more clearly classify crime data. The state of Wisconsin reports four types of crimes to the public: violent, property, drug and public order. Florida, by comparison, has more than 100 categories, making it harder to lump crimes under the “violent” designation. Lawmakers and law enforcers are better able to make criminal justice and public safety policy decisions with better offense information.

Another solution is making uniform the definition of violent crime, which differs not only with the FBI and the DOC, but in the language of state statute. It’s worth having a consistent guideline for those who are violent and more likely to be a repeat offender, and the nonviolent, whose sentences might include treatment, therapy and training as well as jail time.

Our three “violent” offenders are excellent examples. Joshua was never sentenced to prison.. Johnson got a sentence reduction for good behavior after serving 75% of his sentence.

Watry completed an early-release program. He returned to work at the law firm and is readjusting to life outside of prison.

“When I was in prison, I saw people who are dangerous, who should definitely not be in society,” he says. “Prison can be a breeding ground for these guys to engage in more serious criminal behavior.”

Watry says he isn’t one of them. “I’m just trying to move on and put this behind me,” he says. “It’s a small enough incident to not totally ruin me,” he says. ❏

Julie Grace is a policy analyst in the Badger Institute's Center for Opportunity.

NICHOLS

a slightly frayed but decent-enough neighborhood, where people like Carl renovate their cousin's duplex. But at night, it seems like a shooting gallery.

Murders have skyrocketed this summer. If things continue apace, there will be close to 200 homicides this year in Milwaukee, twice as many as recent years. In fairness, it's possible those killings have more to do with quarantines and job loss and substance abuse and the frustrations that boil over behind closed doors than a shortage of police.

"Shooting and all that, that's in-house stuff," says Carl. "Somebody catching somebody cheating."

Most people here have more commonplace concerns, like the jackasses flying past the childcare center. "I don't see police cars like I used to," says Carl. "As far as speeding and running red lights, yeah, that is bad."

Carl drives through much of Milwaukee to get to his home in Brown Deer. Traffic issues aren't confined to Fond du Lac Avenue, he says. I live downtown, a little south, and I know he is exactly right. It's anecdotal, but Milwaukee's police seem to have backed off further, and there just weren't enough officers on the streets to begin with.

You have to admit, Barrett has himself in a budgetary corner. When I covered City Hall for what was, many years ago, a pretty objective newspaper, former Mayor John Norquist could add cops and stress public safety because it was much less expensive for taxpayers to pay for the pensions of police and firefighters.

When Barrett was elected 16 years ago, the annual



taxpayer contribution to the pension fund was zero. By 2010, it was almost \$50 million. This year, it will be \$70 million. By 2023, the mayor pointed out recently, it could be \$160 million.

The calls for defunding police because officers are supposedly pervasively racist or brutal are crazy. But with the city locked into incredibly expensive fringe

benefits packages negotiated with the unions over the years — defunded or not — there are going to be fewer cops.

Unless something changes.

Barrett wants more money from the politicians in Madison, or the ability to raise sales taxes to help pay pension and benefit costs. Those politi-

cians in Madison have a right to want something too, like an outright admission from the city that Milwaukee would be much, much worse off if not for all the savings made possible by Act 10.

How about assigning someone in the city's budget office to calculate the potential savings over the coming decades of extending Act 10 and curbing the collective bargaining rights of police and firefighters?

We're in a bad place in America right now, and there are some police reforms worth pursuing. But cutting cops unnecessarily to placate protesters will do nothing to help George Floyd or Jacob Blake. All that will do is hurt a lot of people, and not just the people getting shot and killed or the families left behind without answers or charges.

"If [the cops] ain't doing anything now, just think what will happen when the snow falls and the streets are slippery," says Carl. "There will be more accidents, more casualties."

"It's gonna get worse." ❖

Stealing from our children

Sen. Ron Johnson's wake up call in a new era of federal spending insanity and its consequences

By Michael Jahr

This interview with Sen. Johnson has been shortened and edited for clarity.

Picture the national debt as a steady drive up a mountainside, with presidents and members of Congress from both parties taking turns at the wheel, accelerating as the incline increases, year after year driving to new altitudes.

Now picture those drivers installing a turbocharger.

Trillion-dollar COVID-19 aid bills, a virus-ravaged economy and the relentless growth of entitlement programs could, by one estimate, add \$5.8 trillion to the current \$26.6 trillion debt. With new “stimulus” packages in play in Congress, short-term deficits and long-term public

debt are likely to grow even more before the year is out.

Politicians are ignoring the long-term ramifications of spending trillions of dollars that don't exist. Are they selling out America's posterity for



short-term political gain?

Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson thinks so, and he is publicly calling on his congressional colleagues to exercise restraint. In a July *Wall Street Journal* op-ed titled “No More Blank Checks From Congress for Coronavirus,” he admonished them not to “authorize another dime” until they determined what had already been spent and whether it had worked. The man who made runaway national debt a centerpiece of his 2010 Senate campaign asked, “Is no one concerned about how much of our children's future is mortgaged?”

Badger Institute Senior

Vice President Michael Jahr sat down with Sen. Johnson in mid-August to discuss the debt crisis, federal spending realities, the likelihood of entitlement reform and the likelihood of restoring federalism as a governing philosophy.

Q Michael Jahr: Senator Johnson, thank you for taking time to sit down with the Badger Institute to discuss the public debt crisis.

Ron Johnson: I'm happy to. I'm glad somebody is also concerned about it.

Q Jahr: You are a businessman who decided to run for office in part because of your concern over federal spending and the growing national debt. Why did these issues grab your attention and prompt you to make a career change?

Johnson: I just remember, at the beginning of the Obama Administration, we were something like — this is off the top of my head — \$10.7 trillion in debt. By the time I ran, we were already over \$14 trillion in debt, and I primarily ran on a platform that we're mortgaging our kids' future. It's immoral. It's intergenerational theft. It's got to stop.

But I am very disappointed to say, here we are in 2020 in this COVID crisis, and we just authorized \$2.9 trillion to \$3.6 trillion of additional spending, which is 13.5% to almost 17% of our economy. Before the ink is even dry on the agreement, Nancy Pelosi passed another \$3.5 trillion (aid package).

We're \$26.5 trillion in debt. We're on our way to \$27 trillion to \$28 trillion by the end of this fiscal year, and there's just nobody talking about it. I would be one of the very few lonely voices out there. It seems like everybody else in Washington, D.C., just views this as Monopoly money, like we just keep printing it and there'll be no impact from it. I don't think anything can be further from the truth.

Q Jahr: The numbers are mind-blowing, and maybe that's part of the issue. It's hard to get your head around multiple trillions of dollars. Is that part of the problem? Are these numbers so unfathomable that people can't fully grasp their magnitude?

Johnson: I think it was Everett Dirksen who famously said decades ago, you know, "A billion dollars here, a billion dollars there, pretty soon you're talking about real money."

I was always concerned when we started talking not in hundreds of billions but in trillions. For some reason, \$700 billion sounds like an awful lot of money, but (now) it's a trillion. Now they're arguing over — you know, Nancy Pelosi won't even come to the negotiating table until Republicans

say, "Okay, we'll spend at least another \$2 trillion."

Think of that. We haven't spent or obligated at least \$1.2 trillion in what we've already passed almost unanimously in Congress. This is Democrats. This is Republicans. This is the president. They're all saying, at a minimum, we want to spend a trillion, and Nancy Pelosi is out there saying she wants to spend another \$3.5 trillion. It is beyond absurd.

I'm opposed to the Republican proposal to spend a trillion dollars until we actually spend and obligate the \$1.2 trillion of the over \$3 trillion we've already authorized but haven't either spent or obligated.

Q Jahr: We've observed this pattern, too. Regardless of who is in the White House, regardless of who controls Congress, the trajectory is inexorably upward. Is there an end in sight? At some point is there a wake-up call?

Johnson: I don't see one. We promised all these benefits. We haven't put in provisions to pay for them. To try and pay for them by increasing taxes, you harm economic growth. From my standpoint, the number one part of a solution for our debt and deficit is we have to grow our economy faster.

We were actually doing quite well in the first few years of the Trump administration because President Trump recognized that overregulation strangles the economy. Over-taxation does the same thing. So we stopped overregulating the economy. We actually reduced our regulatory burden a little bit. We

certainly made our tax system more competitive.

The result was pretty strong economic growth. Record low (levels) of unemployment across all demographic areas. But then COVID hit. We have this dramatic reduction in GDP, particularly because I think we overreacted. We shut down way too much of our economy.

I think there's a tendency, particularly on the part of Democratic governors, to keep it shut down. I fear that there's a little politics involved in that as well, which is unfortunate. We need to focus on economic growth because that's the only way we have a chance of digging our way out of this or preventing a debt bomb going off in the near future.

Q Jahr: Let's take a step back for a little Federal Spending 101. What are the elements that contribute to the national debt? Talk us through that. →



Johnson: Well, you have to understand we have discretionary spending, and we have mandatory spending. It ought to be all discretionary. All spending ought to be budgeted every year, but what past Congresses have done by creating these entitlements, if you're entitled to get the money, you get it no matter the cost. What has exploded since the Great Society is entitlement spending — Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, a host of other things — that are just mandatory spending to the point where the discretionary part of the budget, which is all the agencies, defense spending, all that type of thing, is less than 30% of total spending. Over 70% is mandatory spending, and it's completely out of control.

Whether it's Social Security, whether it's Medicare — we haven't put in the payment mechanisms, the level of taxation, to match the level of benefits. Of course, everybody loves the benefits, but nobody wants to pay for it. Politicians take that signal very strongly and they continue to promise more benefits, and nobody ever considers how it's ever going to be paid for.

The solution isn't increasing people's taxes because, again, that would harm economic growth. When you reduce growth, you reduce revenue inside of the government, and so raising taxes reduces growth and is actually counterproductive. You may think you're going to raise more revenue by increasing taxes but, in many cases — in probably most cases — you actually reduce revenue.

Q **Jahr:** Chris Edwards, an economist at the Cato Institute, recently estimated that increased federal spending in the CARES Act, the Families First Relief Package and other stimulus spending, combined with the COVID-created recession, could add \$5.8 trillion to the national debt. That's before all of the new federal spending that you're talking about.

You mentioned Monopoly money. Are we basically spending money that doesn't exist? If we are, is there a better way to revive the COVID economy going forward?

Johnson: When we spend more than we have, we have to issue government bonds. When the government bonds aren't being purchased in the private sector, they're being purchased by the Federal Reserve. We're printing money. It's very easy to print money but nobody can really tell you at what point in time does all that additional money create a level of inflation that's simply unsustainable.

The other thing, and this is where we are really in big trouble, is when creditors from around the world — we are still selling some government bonds to creditors, you know maybe close to 50%. When creditors say, "U.S., you look like

kind of a credit risk. Rather than the reserved currency, you're a credit risk. We're going to demand a higher interest rate for whatever money we do loan to you."

If we would just revert to historic interest rates on government debt over the last 30 years, prior to these artificially low ones starting after the Great Recession, that would be over a trillion dollars just in interest expense — and total discretionary spending right now is a little over a trillion dollars.

Again, that is the debt bomb I'm talking about going off if creditors really start demanding more in terms of interest rates for the debt that we are issuing and we cease to be the world's reserved currency. Then we're in a heap of trouble.

Q **Jahr:** People, probably including some of your colleagues, don't often think about the fact that higher debt means higher interest payments. The Congressional Budget Office last year estimated that the federal government will soon spend more on interest payments than on Medicaid and that, in six years, interest payments will actually surpass national defense spending. By 2041, CBO projects that entitlement spending and interest payments on the debt will consume all federal revenues. These projections, again, will only be accelerated by what we're witnessing in 2020.

Does discretionary spending simply disappear? What happens at that point?

Johnson: Well, nobody knows. That's the grand experiment, and that's what's so dangerous about our current situation. Again, I know I'm not a very uplifting character, but we're in a very serious situation right here, and there's just not the political will to do anything serious about it mainly because the public is not demanding it. The public demands the benefits. Everybody likes their benefit.

The Paycheck Protection Program aimed to do something to provide financial relief for businesses that could be viable and could reopen and reignite our economy. But we didn't have to do it in such a shotgun approach. The reason the PPP is so popular is the initial certification was so low anybody could, with integrity, get a loan, and they're all going to be forgiven. No wonder the PPP is such a popular program. It's just the government literally giving away half a trillion dollars with very few questions asked.

That's the kind of oversight, that's the type of reform we have to make to these programs as we move forward. We have to make sure that we're spending these precious dollars that we don't have, that are going to further mortgage our kids' future, providing that fast relief to people who truly need it.



Q Jahr: I worked on Capitol Hill several years ago, and one thing I routinely observed was that all the incentives inside the Beltway are wrong. PACs and party leadership reward politicians who support their projects and toe the party line. Opponents will attack you as mean spirited if you vote against bloated spending bills. If a candidate or elected official puts forth even the most reasonable entitlement reform, it will be portrayed as an attack on the elderly, children and the poor.

You've described it in the past as "Washington's lust for spending and power." Is there a way to counter these incentives or are there better incentives that can help turn the ship?

Johnson: Until the American public educates themselves, until they truly understand the danger of the debt we're in, the deficits we're running, the fact is that we're mortgaging our kids' future. What we're talking about is reduced opportunity because too high a debt level is going to eventually erode economic growth and erode your economic prosperity. Until the American public is educated to the danger that we are in and demands from their politicians fiscal responsibility, it's not going to happen because, again, the political rewards right now are promising people everything, telling people what they want to hear as opposed to telling them the ugly and very, you know, not uplifting truth.

Q Jahr: Perhaps one reason that the American people aren't more vexed by the growing debt crisis is that it's hard for them to visualize a scenario that could shatter the American Dream. Paint for us a picture of what it could look like if one day this all goes south.

Johnson: We don't have to really think about or assume any-

thing. We can actually look at past examples. In the recent decade or so, we had Greece, Spain, Portugal. We had these countries have a debt crisis. It's again exactly what I was talking about in terms of America.

When creditors look at a country, a nation, and say, "You're really a credit risk. We're not going to loan you money at 1%, 2%, or 3%. You're like a junk bond. We're going to demand 8%, 9% and 10%." It crashes an economy.

All of a sudden, all those dollars that we were going to appropriate for benefits through government spending, they all get sucked up paying interest on the debt because interest payments to your creditors really have the first claim to those dollars. **If you don't pay off the debt, then you are in total chaos. It just crowds out all other spending, and that creates some real social upheaval.**

Q Jahr: Public debt as a percentage of GDP at this point is now over 100%. Is that a valid measure of the hole that we're digging?

Johnson: Well, people have used that in the past. Japan is way beyond that. But again, Japan has not had economic growth for decades. They've just been living through a kind of flat economy without the type of opportunity you need for a growing population.

Again, we don't have to theorize about these things. We can see examples of where it's happened in the past, and it's not pretty. It's nothing that is sustainable here in the U.S.

Q Jahr: Much of the debt is owned by the Social Security Trust Fund. Talk a little bit about the role that entitlements like Social Security and Medicare play in this. Given the political "third rail," is there any hope for reform in these areas? →

Johnson: Well, I came under a lot of criticism when I first ran in 2010 because I called Social Security a Ponzi scheme — and I was right. A Ponzi scheme is when a bad operator, a con man, takes your money and then pays off somebody else and pretends you have all kinds of returns. Then when you finally say, “Okay, I want to take my money out,” they say, “Well, we don’t have it because I’ve been paying it all to the early investors,” kind of in a Ponzi scheme, a pyramid scheme. They got the high returns, but it’s the latest investors that get left holding the bag. That’s basically what Social Security is. The trust fund is a fiction.

I used to give a PowerPoint presentation. It was just too depressing. I would show one of the slides that showed a four-drawer file in a little town in West Virginia that is the Social Security Trust Fund. It’s just a four-drawer file. It looks pretty secured. It even has locks on it, but it’s just government bonds.

We’re in this position right now where Social Security pays out more benefits than it takes in annually. It still may, off of that trust fund, make enough in terms of interest payments so that they maybe aren’t quite paying off those bonds. But in the not too distant future, if they’re not already doing it, they have to take those bonds to pay for the benefits. They give those to the Treasury Department, and the Treasury Department gives them the money for the bonds. But then the Treasury Department just has to create a whole new bond to sell to the general public or have the Federal Reserve pay it off.

Again, the trust fund has no financial worth. It would have if we actually would have taken those excess revenues and invested those in assets not owned by the federal government. If we would have invested those assets like in an ETF (Exchange Traded Fund) or private sector bonds, then you’d have real assets and the trust fund would have some worth. But a promissory note to the U.S. government is not worth the paper it’s written on. It’s a Ponzi scheme.

Q **Jahr:** Is reform simply beyond our reach in this political environment?

Johnson: George W. Bush tried a very modest reform.

He was just looking at young people, allowing them to keep some of their retirement savings rather than have all their retiring savings go into the Social Security Trust Fund, into that Ponzi scheme, just a very modest reform. Just take a small percentage of an employee’s contribution to their

retirement, and let them keep that themselves in their own retirement fund so they would have ownership of something.

He got slaughtered for it politically: the privatization of Social Security. So again, politicians learned from that. They realized rhetorically they can attack anybody who even proposes some kind of solution.

I’ll tell you, when I first started running, my campaign advisers told me to shut up about calling Social Security a Ponzi scheme and said, “Repeat after me: I’m going to protect your Social Security.”

For your audience, just think of how many politicians utter that phrase, “I’m going to protect your Social Security.” Protect it with what?

Q **Jahr:** Right. Their hope as a politician is that whenever this all goes south, they’re not in office at the time and don’t have to worry about it.

Johnson: Somebody else will be left holding the bag. Yep. The very definition of a Ponzi scheme.

Q **Jahr:** Congress rarely follows the budget process that’s been established by law. Budget deadlines and spending enforcement rules are routinely ignored. Other efforts over the years to rein in spending have also failed. There’s been Gramm-Rudman and PAYGO and the debt ceiling and so on. In the long run, none of these had the teeth or substance to have an impact on fiscal spending.

You support a constitutional amendment to limit the size of spending in relationship to GDP, and you also support a statute that would, in essence, do the same thing. How likely is it for a constitutional amendment to advance and, if there is a statute, would it have the necessary enforcement mechanisms, the teeth, to make it effective?

Johnson: Well, under the Budget Control Act — which I



voted against because of the sequestration — I thought that would be harmful when the military was already hollowed out and we had to increase military spending. But I will fully admit that the cost caps or the spending caps in the Budget Control Act worked. For a couple of years, we actually reduced, in real terms, discretionary spending for about two or three years by, I think, \$175 billion. That statutory cap had teeth, but just for a couple of years.

Eventually, Congress figured out some way to weasel around it. I think the only long-term solution would be some kind of structural constitutional control that would limit.

My concern about a constitutional amendment to balance the budget is you're going to have to have waivers for war, for emergencies. And again, those waivers would be routinely dismissed. I think that the best formula, really, is just a constitutional amendment to limit spending to a certain size of prior GDPs, so you know how to do that. That would be a real constraint.

The other thing I've been promoting is a pretty simple bill called Preventing Government Shutdown Act because what happens right now — by the way, when you hear bipartisanship, that's not always a good thing because what happens on a bipartisan basis is people figure out how to spend more of your money or money that we don't have. That's what happens at the end of these years anyway. It's not like we become fiscally prudent in these budget fights. What ends up happening to solve the budget impasse is we spend even more money.

Q **Jahr: Right.**

Johnson: What the Preventing Government Shutdown Act would do ... would just provide an automatic appropriation based on last year's spending when we come to an impasse. I think that would get rid of government shutdowns, which are economically harmful by themselves, but (would) also be a pretty powerful fiscal constraint to have people sit down at the bargaining table. Otherwise, all the government is going to get is what they spent last year. I think that would also be a structural discipline, and that's what Washington needs, is discipline.

Q **Jahr: Would the restoration of federalism, the constitutional delegation of specific and finite authority to federal and state governments, help bring about a return of fiscal responsibility and balance?**

If so, is there any way that those ideals can be revived?

Johnson: Long term I think that is the only solution. If you go back 100 years, the federal government spent about 2% of our economy and state and local governments spent

about 5%, so total government spending 100 years ago was about 7%. Today, it's approaching 40%, and that's flipped where state and local governments — I don't have the exact numbers — but state and local government are a far smaller percentage than what the federal government gobbles up.

The federal government, again, is just completely out of control. State governments have to balance their budgets, so you have fiscal discipline kind of locked into that system. I've always said that, long term, the solution is economic growth. We need strong economic growth to have any chance. Then we need to limit the federal government. We need to shrink it long term in terms of what it represents, in terms of the size of our government, and shift that constitutional balance back to where our founders intended.

Government (should be) close to the governed, where most money is raised through taxes at the local level and spent at the local level rather than have the federal government confiscate all this growth out of the states and then figure out how it reallocates it based on political power. Again, we've turned the constitutional structure or frame work on its head, and our founders have to be spinning in their graves based on what our current situation is.

Q **Jahr: Given this dismal, bleak assessment, what do you say at your town hall meetings when you talk to Wisconsin residents and tell them, "This is what you need to do"?**

Johnson: Firstly, you have to get educated. You have to understand what's happening. You can't listen to the rhetoric, the demagoguery. You have to understand what the facts are.

We all have to grow up. We all have to become responsible. We all have to realize what we are doing to our future generations and how wrong and how utterly immoral it is.

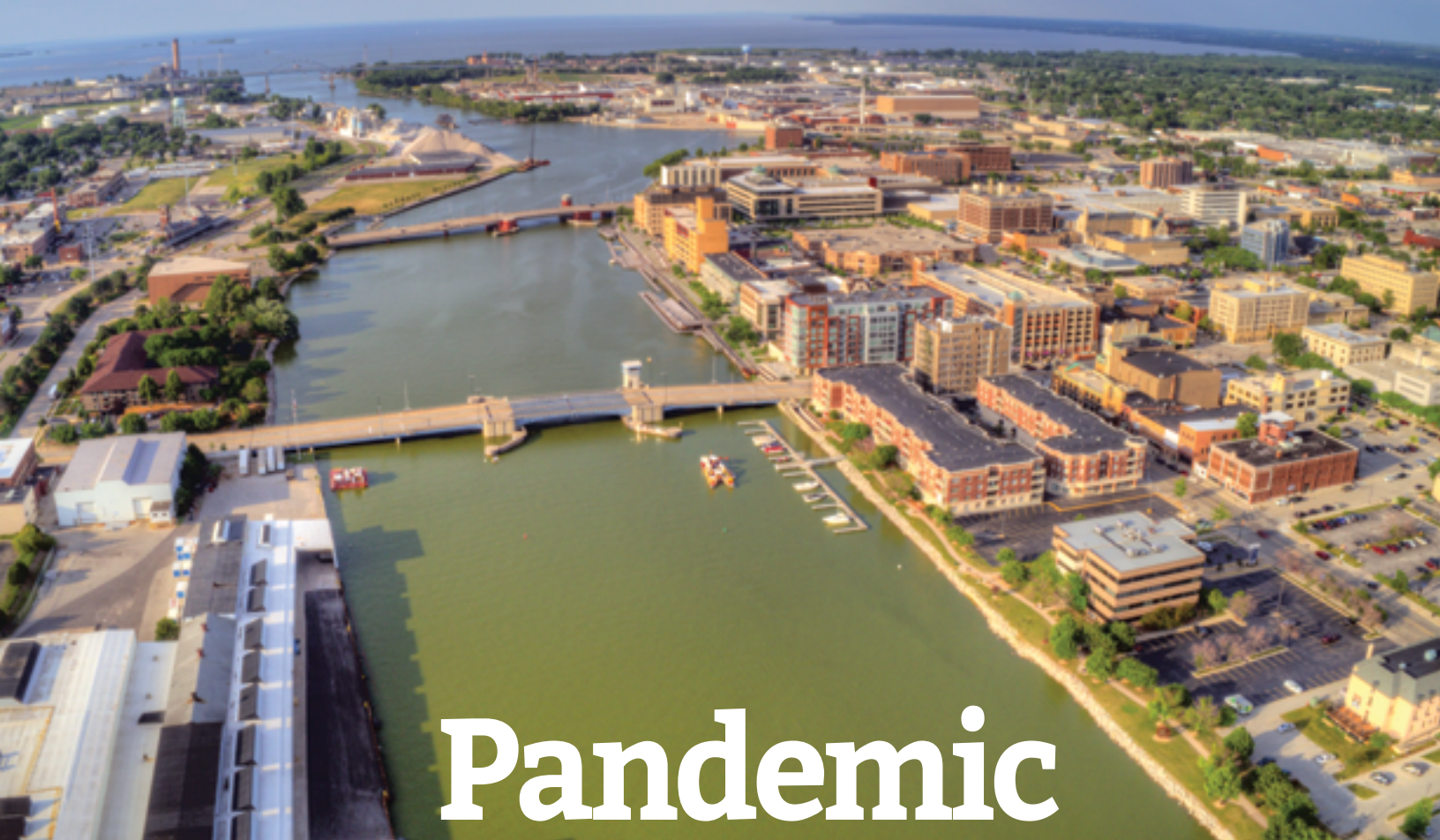
I'm a budget scold. I end up lecturing. It's not real popular. I'll repeat again, I'm not the most uplifting character because I'm going to tell people the truth. I can't operate any other way.

Q **Jahr: Senator Johnson, thank you for continuing to highlight this issue. We do appreciate that you've been a champion of this from the very beginning.**

Thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

Johnson: Well, I appreciate it, and I appreciate your efforts to educate the public as well. ❏

Michael Jahr is senior vice president of the Badger Institute.



Pandemic population push?

Wisconsin's small cities offer an escape for suddenly mobile metropolitan workers long cramped by a viral lockdown

By Ike Brannon

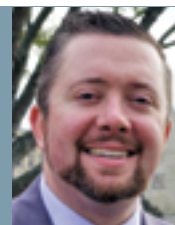
There is strong evidence the Covid-19 pandemic is causing people and companies to flee the nation's metropolitan areas, including Milwaukee. The reversal of a century-long urbanization of America begs a question: Where is everybody going?

A recent Harris survey found that nearly a majority of urban dwellers in America have considered moving to a less-crowded community. And why not with a virus that

has made life in close quarters unhealthy and has walled them off from the amenities that drew them to cities in the first place? Add to that threat from people who consider assault and looting in your neighborhood an honorable form of political protest.

Companies that have spent billions to headquarter in downtowns are now considering making permanent their remote work arrangements, potentially freeing millions to live and work wherever they want. The cost savings for everyone involved is staggering.

Fort Atkinson has done little self-promotion since the pandemic started, but Becker suspects that remote work might free workers who could still visit their downtown offices in Madison, forty minutes away, or Milwaukee, less than an hour to downtown.



Becker

The Badger Institute wondered if smaller cities in Wisconsin might be the beneficiaries of this Covid-19 flight. We contacted Troy Streckenbach, Brown County Executive; Mason Becker, city council president of Fort Atkinson, a city of 12,000 people midway between Madison and Milwaukee; and Jeff Bruss, chairman of Three Lakes, Wisconsin, an unincorporated resort community of about 3,000 people just south of Eagle River.

None of them reported any overt evidence of an urban migration—at least not yet. Demand for homes in their already heated real estate markets, however, has markedly increased in the last few months, at the same time overall moves across the U.S. have dropped, according to a Covid migration report.

This is a summary of our conversations with each of these officials.

Brown County

Streckenbach, a lifelong area resident, has been the Brown county executive since 2011. Pandemic or not, he anticipates no major population change in the 2020 census.

However, Streckenbach has noticed a marked demand for homes in the urban areas of Brown County, including Green Bay. The market for homes priced between \$150,000 and \$250,000 is even stronger than it has been for the last two or three years. Homes in this normally less fluid, less available price range aren't staying on the market very long, he said. While there has been no thorough analysis of the housing demand, it seems to Streckenbach it is consistent with a migration into Brown County.



Streckenbach

Balancing a real estate surge is an estimated \$14 million weekly economic hit from the NFL's decision to have the Packers play its games without the usual sellout at Lambeau Field. Hotels and renters to fans, many of whom live outside of Brown County, will bear the

brunt of this Covid 19 calculation, he said.

Fort Atkinson

The 2020 census will most likely show Fort Atkinson at a population standstill. But like Brown County, Becker told us that while he hasn't seen more people moving in, after a stall at the beginning of Covid-19 in March and April real estate demand is up. Homes in the upper price ranges are being snapped up above asking price within 24 hours of going on the market, something Becker hasn't seen before.

Fort Atkinson has done little self-promotion since the pandemic started, but Becker suspects that remote work might free workers who could still visit their downtown offices in Madison, forty minutes away, or Milwaukee, less than an hour to downtown. →



FORT ATKINSON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE PHOTO

People are snapping up homes in the upper price ranges in this Rock River city.



Long a vacation getaway, any economic impact from Covid-19 is as remote as its location.

ROYALBROIL/WIKIMEDIA PHOTO

Before the pandemic, the city incorporated 75 acres of land for residential development. Becker thinks the city's bet was a good one.

Three Lakes

The real estate market has gone from red to white hot in the last four months, Bruss told us in September. Demand is higher than at any point since prior to the Great Recession, a direct response to the pandemic, he says.

Bruss doesn't see it as a long-term trend, merely a short-term palliative for families. Without the need to get children home for sports and school activities canceled by Covid-19, families with second homes in Three Lakes have just extended their vacations in the area.

Demand from these vacation homeowners prompted companies to increase their internet speeds. Fuel companies sold a lot more propane through September, he said.

Even more than the other regions, Three Lakes is selling homes faster and for greater sums than the asking price than ever before, Bruss said. Realtors have started cold-calling homeowners to entice them to sell, something new for the area. And increasingly, buyers are razing homes to build bigger and better.

For all the activity, Three Lakes is probably never going to be a destination for a population in flight from a virus,

Bruss said. Like all northern Wisconsin resort areas, the summer is short and the winter is cold—and long. The year-round population can't support the kind of food, entertainment and other cultural amenities urban dwellers have come to expect. The outdoors—when you can enjoy it—might not be enough of a tradeoff, he said.

Once the Covid emergency has subsided, Bruss said he expects Three Lakes to be about the same size, perhaps with an improved stock of homes.

A Post-Covid Strategy for Wisconsin

Until now, few families have been forced by pandemic to make life-changing decisions. The uncertainty of the next few months, the concern that it might be years, makes waiting for clarity prudent. Maybe it's why Americans aren't moving right now.

But it seems likely that Wisconsin will be a net winner. The short-term response in the real estate markets in each of these communities suggest it. The state has always been known for its low cost of living, stable public finances, and the kind of amenities that make it a good place to live and raise a family.

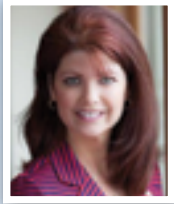
It's still too early, but smaller communities in Wisconsin that capitalize on those advantages might become home for some of the millions of workers suddenly with the freedom to choose not to be packed cheek-by-jowl in an expensive metropolis. ❏



Bruss

Ike Brannon is president of the consulting firm Capital Policy Analytics in Washington, D.C.

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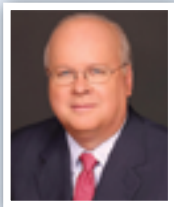


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