

Badger Institute: Police discipline in Wisconsin rare, lacking in transparency

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Disciplinary actions against police officers in Wisconsin's largest cities are rare but marred by a lack of transparency that undermines public trust, according to a policy brief released today by the Badger Institute.

In the brief, titled "[How to Make Police Discipline Fair, Quick, Transparent and Decisive](#)," author Patrick Hughes surveyed an array of Wisconsin police departments to understand the processes used to discipline officers and ensure due process. He then looked more extensively at the Madison and Milwaukee police departments.

Hughes, a corrections consultant with the Badger Institute, found that in 2017 there were 61 disciplinary actions filed against 2,470 Milwaukee Police Department staff members, approximately one-fourth of whom were civilians — a rate of 2.5%. In Madison in 2019, there were only seven disciplinary actions in a department of 650 – more than 480 sworn officers and the rest civilians — a rate of 1.1%.

The reasons for discipline, the process for determining wrongdoing and the punitive actions taken by police departments or police and fire commissions are often ambiguous, according to Hughes.

"Our ongoing research into police use-of-force policies, public complaints against law enforcement and officer discipline a significant and systemic lack of transparency in most Wisconsin law enforcement agencies," said Hughes. "While these incidents are rare, when they do occur, officers must be held accountable in a way that allows the public to know what misconduct occurred and what actions

were taken to address it.”

One police department, however, stands apart for its transparency.

“Madison and Milwaukee offer a tale of two departments,” said Badger Institute President Mike Nichols. “Madison is laudably transparent regarding instances of discipline and should be a model for policymakers. Milwaukee, on the other hand, emphatically demonstrates the need for reform. A lack of transparency in police departments, compounded by redundant systems and unaccountable processes like arbitration, often foster community distrust.”

The brief includes several policy recommendations to help assure Wisconsin communities that all officers are committed to protecting their fellow citizens. Among these are greater transparency, extension of Act 10 to police, elimination of arbitration and the extension of probationary periods.

“Police officers deserve due process when accused of misconduct,” said Nichols. “At the same time, police chiefs and elected officials need the authority to act decisively in the case of bad actors. And Wisconsin residents deserve to know if the process is efficient, fair and decisive.”