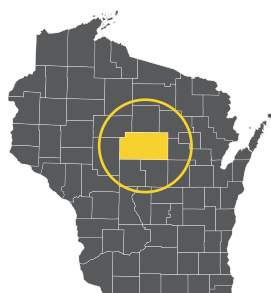


A POOR PEOPLE'S PANDEMIC REPORT:

MAPPING THE INTERSECTIONS OF POVERTY, RACE AND COVID-19

County Snapshot



Marathon County, Wisconsin



Britnie Remer at a water distribution project of survival in Wausau
PHOTO: SARAH WEINTRAUB

Before the pandemic, there were approximately [2 million](#) poor or low-income people in Wisconsin, accounting for 35% of its population (SPM). This included 49% (643,000) of children, 71% (241,000) of Black people, 62% (276,000) of Latino people and 32% (1.4 million) of white people. No other state has seen a more rapid decline in [union membership](#) over the past 20 years,

a condition hastened by legislation passed by Gov. Walker in 2011. It is also one of the 12 states that did not expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Although the state health care system, Badgercare, attempts to fill this gap, a [2020 analysis](#) found that 120,000 uninsured people in Wisconsin would gain access to Medicaid if the state accepted federal funding to fully expand coverage.

During the pandemic, in order to ensure access to basic needs, state regulators enacted a [temporary moratorium](#) preventing utility companies from shutting off water, power or heat.

Marathon County is right in the middle of Wisconsin. Its population is predominantly white (88.7%), and typical of the “Rust Belt” in its experience of deindustrialization and ensuing challenges. It is at the same time a higher median income county (\$62,000) where poverty is prevalent, with one in four residents living under 200% of the poverty line (OPM). Its COVID-19 death rate was 324 per 100,000 residents.

Wausau is the county seat of Marathon. Wausau residents have been facing the impacts of industrial contamination for decades: the 3M plant, which has been operating there since 1929, is one of the [worst polluters in the country](#).

In early 2022, Wausau residents found that [every single drinking water well in their municipal water system revealed higher levels of PFAS](#) than recommended by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Similar results were found in tests dating back to 2019, however, the results were never made public. While the health impacts of PFAS are still being studied, research suggests that these contaminants can: have negative effects on reproductive health; cause developmental effects or delays in children; increase the risk of prostate, kidney, and testicular cancers; interfere with the body's natural hormones; and cause increased cholesterol levels and risk of obesity. They can also reduce the ability of the body's immune system to fight infections, including reducing the body's response to vaccines.

Britnie Remer is from Wausau and has been organizing water deliveries to residents so they have access to clean water. After receiving her first COVID-19 shot, Britnie had an allergic reaction that lasted for several months. Upon her doctor's orders, she cannot receive a second shot and remains only partially protected against COVID-19.

In 2021, Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce (WMC), the largest business and industry lobby in the state, sued the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to stop enforcement of any PFAS clean ups. According to Laura Beltz, a resident of Wausau and member of the Wisconsin Poor People's Campaign, "I am left feeling angry and uncertain...When we found out [about the PFAS], we stopped drinking the water. The public should have been made aware of this two years ago when it was first known. I have lost trust. I am concerned about the long-term health outcomes, especially if it means vaccines might not work as well because of this. My son is immuno-compromised. I am also left wondering if my daughter's health issues could have been caused by this pollution. How long have we been drinking, cooking with and using this contaminated water? My children and many children in the city have had their formula prepared with city water. I am left wondering. It is a terrible thing to wonder."