

**Hospital Lawsuits Over Unpaid Bills Increased By 37 Percent In Wisconsin
From 2001 To 2018**

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Summary

Lawsuits over unpaid hospital bills and wage garnishments are rising dramatically in Wisconsin

The research team analyzed Wisconsin court records to document trends in hospital lawsuits to recover patients' unpaid medical bills from 2001 to 2018. Wisconsin is one of the 12 states in the US that did not expand Medicaid coverage.

Between 2001 and 2018 in Wisconsin, lawsuits over unpaid hospital bills increased by 37% and wage garnishments among these cases increased by 27%. On a per capita basis, Black patients and lower-income patients living in rural areas are disproportionately impacted by these lawsuits. The study adds further evidence to a growing body of literature that documents the financial hardship caused by the American health care system. From high levels of medical debt in collections to the prevalence of surprise bills from out-of-network physicians, to the rising cost of out-of-pocket healthcare expenses, the findings underscore the need for reform to a system that unfairly punishes those who are not healthy, not wealthy, or get injured.

Key Takeaways

Hospitals Are Increasingly Taking Their Patients to Court

- **Critical access hospitals** receive large subsidies from the federal government and are oftentimes the only accessible option for rural residents in need of essential services. However, the research found that **Critical access hospitals are more likely to sue patients than other types of hospitals.**
- **Nonprofit hospitals are more likely to sue than for-profit hospitals.**

- Hospitals with higher shares of Medicare discharges and lower shares of commercial discharges were more likely to sue patients.
- A small set of hospitals are much more likely to sue their patients (e.g., the 10% of hospitals that sued the most were responsible for 40.7% of lawsuits).
- A number of large hospitals paused lawsuits during the pandemic. While this is a step in the right direction, there is no certainty that this pause will continue. Now is the time for hospitals and policymakers to come together to enact a more comprehensive and permanent fix to this issue.

Racial and Economic Disparities

- **On a per capita basis, Black patients and poor patients in rural settings are more likely to be sued over medical debt.** This is happening in a state that has one of the highest racial income inequalities in the country. **A separate study examining racial disparities in the Midwest finds that Wisconsin has one of the highest gaps between its Black and white residents in terms of household income and labor force participation rates among the US states. The median yearly income for a Black household in Wisconsin is less than half the white level. Black Wisconsinites are nearly three times more likely to be unemployed than white Wisconsinites.**
- Being taken to court over medical debt can be a major blow for low-income patients. Hospitals can get a court-ordered judgment to garnish the patient's wages and take money directly from their paycheck in order to collect unpaid bills. **Wage garnishments from hospital litigation have increased in Wisconsin over the last twenty years. In 2018, more than half of hospital lawsuits in Wisconsin resulted in wage garnishments.**
- The long-standing practice of suing and garnishing wages may make financially vulnerable communities more reticent to access care.

Lawsuits by Wisconsin Hospitals, 2014-2018

Rank	Hospital Name	Total Lawsuits	Share of Admissions (%)	Share of Net Patient Revenue (%)
1	St. Agnes Hospital/Agnesian Health	2,632	7.783	0.352
2	Mile Bluff Medical Center	1,763	27.376	1.038
3	Waukesha Memorial Hospital	1,687	2.563	0.249
4	Aurora St. Luke's Medical Center	1,604	.929	0.074
5	Divine Savior Healthcare	1,572	16.190	0.780
6	Ascension Northeast Wisconsin St. Elizabeth Hospital	1,504	3.724	0.440
7	Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center	1,431	1.976	0.093
8	Reedsburg Medical Center	1,354	22.270	0.813
9	Aurora Medical Center of Oshkosh	1,209	7.443	0.451
10	St. Joseph's Hospital	920	4.848	0.311
11	Aspirus Wausau Hospital	885	2.087	0.114
12	Community Memorial Hospital	885	1.403	0.217
13	Marshfield Medical Center-Rice Lake	874	7.848	0.474
14	Aurora West Allis Medical Center	866	1.397	0.168
15	Aurora Medical Center Kenosha	823	3.072	0.192

16	United Hospital System St. Catherine's Medical Center	779	2.217	NA
17	Aurora Baycare Medical Center	764	1.699	.097
18	Fort Healthcare	714	7.295	0.364
19	Tomah Memorial Hospital	707	14.355	0.726
20	Froedtert and the Medical College of Wisconsin Froedtert Hospital	648	0.473	0.029
21	The Monroe Clinic	631	4.826	0.246
22	Aurora Sinai Medical Center	618	1.54	NA
23	Holy Family Memorial Hospital	617	4.825	0.354
24	Beloit Health System	595	2.893	0.229
25	Ascension St. Michaels	580	2.616	0.155
26	Aurora Medical Center – Bay Area	533	3.531	0.331
27	Westfields Hospital and Clinic	528	12.282	0.316
28	Watertown Regional Medical Center	526	5.685	0.315
29	University Hospital	492	0.310	0.021
30	Aurora Medical Center Grafton	475	1.287	0.125
31	Black River Memorial Hospital	451	9.772	0.655
32	Aurora Sheboygan Memorial Medical Center	450	1.648	0.162
33	Upland Hills Health	450	7.661	0.404

34	Gundersen Moundview Hospital and Clinics	434	46.717	1.194
35	Aspirus Langlade Hospital	432	7.068	0.252
36	Marshfield Medical Center	425	0.627	0.209
37	HSHS Sacred Heart Hospital	417	0.893	0.048
38	Aspirus Riverview Hospital and Clinics	394	2.932	0.143
39	Aspirus Medford Hospital & Clinics Inc	384	8.549	0.216
40	Memorial Medical Center of Ashland	352	3.488	0.301
41	Grant Regional Health Center	340	11.000	0.531
42	Ascension St. Clare's Hospital	309	1.100	0.132
43	Aurora Medical Center Summit	308	1.725	0.119
44	Aurora Lakeland Medical Center	296	2.125	0.220
45	Beaver Dam Community Hospitals	290	2.904	0.149
46	Aurora Medical Center Burlington	289	2.502	0.199
47	Oconomowoc Memorial Hospital	284	1.907	0.201
48	Aurora Medical Center in Washington County	284	3.608	0.256
49	Aurora Medical Center - Manitowoc County	282	2.586	0.237
50	Vernon Memorial Healthcare	281	4.517	0.268

51	Thedacare Medical Center- Berlin	275	3.728	0.313
52	Crossing Rivers Health Medical Center	270	5.658	0.442
53	Ascension Good Samaritan Hospital	256	10.143	0.452
54	St. Croix Regional Medical Center	250	3.286	0.193
55	Columbus Community Hospital Inc	236	5.364	0.252
56	HSHS St Vincent Hospital	235	0.459	0.025
57	HSHS St Mary's Hospital Medical Center	234	1.146	0.088
58	Hayward Area Memorial Hospital	225	5.051	0.253
59	Ascension Calumet Hospital	207	9.668	0.328
60	Ascension Our Lady of Victory Hospital	206	17.224	0.471
61	Ascension St Mary's Hospital	177	1.195	0.065
62	Thedacare Regional Medical Center-Neenah	169	0.440	0.670
63	SSM Health St Clare Hospital- Baraboo	167	1.620	0.222
64	Western Wisconsin Health	167	7.612	0.235
65	Waupun Memorial Hospital	163	3.626	0.156
66	Ascension All Saints	159	.235	0.024
67	HSHS St. Nicholas Hospital	157	1.275	0.078

68	HSHS St Clare Hospital	151	5.368	0.325
69	Gundersen Tri-County Hospital and Clinics	149	9.019	0.360
70	Amery Hospital and Clinic	147	2.774	0.171
71	Sauk Prairie Healthcare	143	1.548	0.106
72	Door County Medical Center	133	1.761	0.084
73	Flambeau Hospital	132	4.579	0.302
74	Marshfield Medical Center-Ladysmith	127	5.423	0.261
75	Burnett Medical Center	122	6.028	0.369
76	Edgerton Hospital and Health Services	116	6.349	0.385
77	Ripon Medical Center	114	4.333	0.138
78	Ascension Eagle River Hospital	111	5.533	0.277
79	Ascension Northeast Wisconsin Mercy Hospital	103	0.555	0.091
80	Unitypoint Health Meriter	102	0.132	0.018
81	HSHS St Joseph's Hospital	99	.638	0.016
82	Cumberland Healthcare	83	2.938	0.132
83	Spooner Health	80	3.660	0.267
84	Adventhealth Durand	79	5.766	0.205
85	Oakleaf Surgical Hospital	79	2.474	0.100
86	Memorial Hospital of Lafayette County	71	4.491	0.232
87	Ascension Sacred Heart Hospital	68	4.462	0.155

88	Gundersen Boscobel Area Hospital and Clinics	64	6.136	0.267
89	Bellin Hospital	55	0.130	0.007
90	Froedtert South - Kenosha Medical Center	54	0.133	0.017
91	Mayo Clinic Health System in Eau Claire	51	0.101	0.023
92	Hudson Hospital and Clinic	51	0.712	0.027
93	Mayo Clinic Health System - Franciscan Healthcare in La Crosse	41	0.132	0.014
94	Marshfield Medical Center - Neilsville	39	2.524	0.116
95	Gundersen St Joseph's Hospital and Clinics	30	2.371	0.061
96	Mayo Clinic Health System – Northland in Barron	28	0.615	0.024
97	Howard Young Medical Center	27	0.220	0.026
98	Ascension Southeast Wisconsin Hospital - St Francis Campus	26	.070	0.010
99	Thedacare Medical Center- Shawano	23	0.315	0.017
100	Essentia Health St Mary's Hospital of Superior	19	0.733	0.002
101	Thedacare Regional Medical Center-Appleton	19	0.047	0.005
102	Southwest Health	18	0.382	0.101

103	Mayo Clinic Health System - Red Cedar in Menomonie	18	0.287	0.013
104	Bellin Health Oconto Hospital	16	2.029	.026
105	Ascension Southeast Wisconsin Hospital - Franklin Campus	15	0.163	.009
106	SSM Health St Mary's hospital	14	.014	.015
107	Orthopaedic Hospital of Wisconsin	14	0.52	0.026
108	Thedacare Medical Center - Waupaca	14	0.289	0.014
109	Ascension Southeast Wisconsin Hospital - Elmbrook Campus	12	0.052	NA
110	Indianhead Medical Center	11	0.688	0.034
111	Thedacare Medical Center- New London	10	0.281	0.016
112	Richland Hospital	9	0.159	0.026
113	Mayo Clinic Health System - Franciscan Healthcare in Sparta	7	0.437	0.008
114	Mayo Clinic Health System - Chippewa Valley in Bloomer	7	0.313	0.008
115	SSM Health St Mary's Hospital Janesville	6	.044	0
116	MercyHealth Hospital and	6	0.0160	0.001

	Trauma Center - Janesville			
117	Mayo Clinic Health System - Oakridge in Osseo	5	0.281	0.010
118	Ascension Southeast Wisconsin Hospital - St Joseph's Campus	2	0.005	0.000
119	Ascension Columbia St. Mary's Hospital Milwaukee	1	0.002	0.001
120	River Falls Area Hospital	0	0	0
121	Thedacare Medical Center- Wild Rose	0	0	0
122	MercyHealth Hospital and Medical Center - Walworth	0	0	0
123	Osceola Medical Center	0	0	0
124	Ascension Columbia St Mary's Hospital Ozaukee	0	0	0
125	Stoughton Hospital Association	0	0	0

Source: Authors' analysis of lawsuit data from the Wisconsin Circuit Court and hospital admissions and revenue data from the Healthcare Cost Report Information System (HCRIS).

