

WHY IS WISCONSIN'S RURAL POPULATION GROWTH OUTPACING THE MIDWEST?

Wisconsin ranks near the top among Midwestern states for rural population growth in recent decades, as many of its peers have experienced a decline. Yet its rural population growth remains modest, has slowed over time, and did not accelerate during the pandemic like some other Midwestern states. Rural Wisconsin counties that have seen the most recent growth are tourism and recreation hubs in the state's Northwoods.

Wisconsin's rural population increased 5.1% between 2000 and 2022, ranking the state second in the Midwest behind only North Dakota.

At just a 0.23% average annual increase, this is a tepid rate of growth compared to many other parts of the U.S. But it's relatively strong compared to a 12-state Midwest region in which rural population declined 1.1% since 2000.

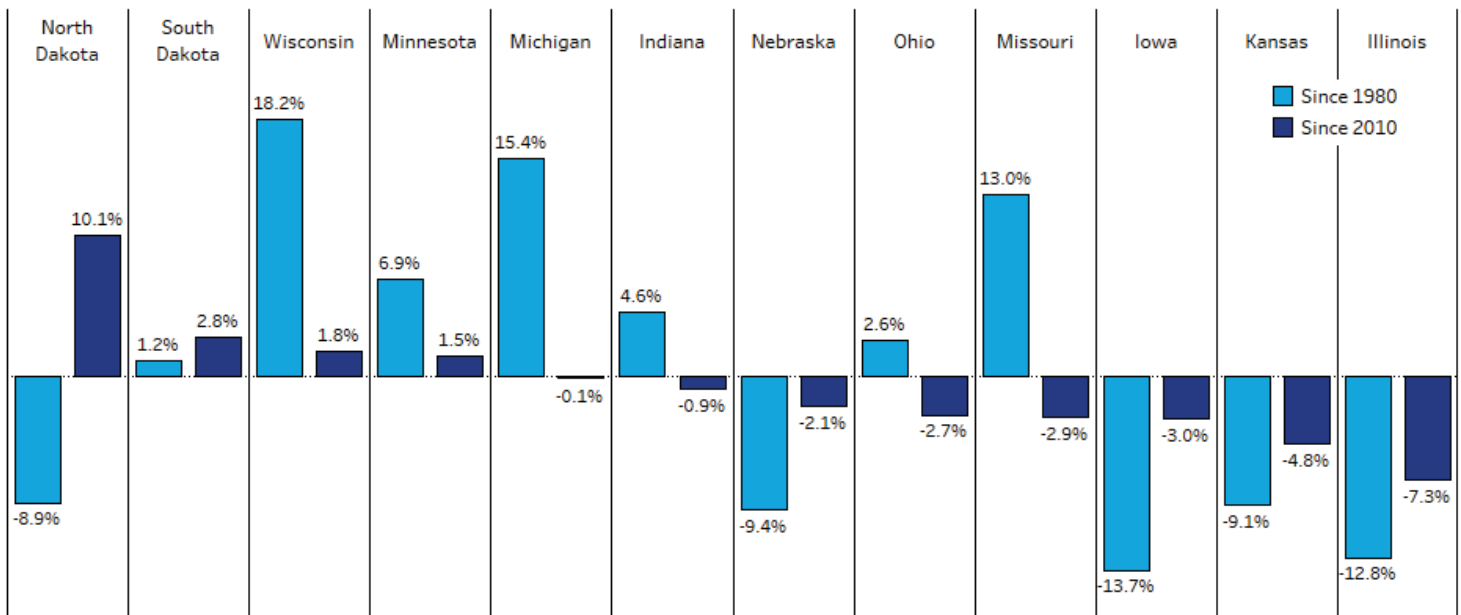
These figures offer an important counterpoint to an oft-repeated narrative of rural decline. While nearly one-third of Wisconsin's non-metropolitan counties have lost population in the 21st century, in other Midwest states,

that share was far higher. Most of Wisconsin's rural counties, meanwhile, held steady or gained residents.

Population decline has become a central challenge for many parts of the rural Midwest, which are contending with demographic shifts, agricultural trends, and other factors. Since 2010, Wisconsin was one of just four Midwestern states – in addition to North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota – to avoid rural population decline (see Figure 1).

To be clear, rural Wisconsin has not been spared from many of the challenges facing the rural Midwest. On a proportional basis, rural counties are counted among

Figure 1: Rural Population Growth in Wisconsin Highest in Midwest Since 1980
2022 change in population in rural counties by Midwest state, since 1980 and since 2010



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service



both the fastest and slowest-growing in our state. But certain characteristics seem to be helping some of Wisconsin's rural communities avoid the kinds of scenarios seen elsewhere – and helping their economies evolve and adapt in the 21st century.

In this report, we examine some of Wisconsin's fastest-growing rural, or nonmetropolitan, counties and what they share in common. We also look at how broader state and regional trends may jeopardize this growth in the future.

DEFINING RURAL

In this report, we use the U.S. Census Bureau definition for “Midwest,” which includes Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

Defining “rural” is a more complex task, one we acknowledge could be done many ways. Here we rely on the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definition that divides U.S. counties into urban and rural classifications based on whether they are part of an OMB-defined metropolitan statistical area (MSA).

There are [15 MSAs](#) that are fully within, or extend into, Wisconsin, covering 26 of its counties. They are: Appleton, Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, Duluth, Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, Green Bay, Janesville-Beloit, La Crosse-Onalaska, Madison, Milwaukee-Waukesha, Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, Oshkosh-Neenah, Racine, Sheboygan, and Wausau-Weston.

The remaining 46 counties not included in MSAs are defined by OMB as nonmetropolitan. These are the counties which we are defining as rural.

Among available options, the OMB definition is among the simpler definitions of “rural.” Yet it also is imperfect, since it excludes rural areas within metropolitan counties and classifies as “rural” many counties with small urban areas. However, since many sources of public demographic and economic data are available at the county level, we rely on the OMB definition.

GROWTH SLOWED AFTER THE 1990S

While Wisconsin's rural population has increased in recent decades, the pace of growth varies significantly depending on which decades are included.

Wisconsin's rural population increased 18.2% from 1980 to 2022, ranking first among the 12 Midwestern states during that time, in which the region's rural population increased just 1.8%.

Since 2010, Wisconsin's rural population has increased 1.8%. Though this again marks a tepid pace of growth over the 12-year period, it was good for third in the Midwest behind North Dakota and South Dakota.

The difference between these figures in part reflects broader rural population shifts at the state and national level. During the period studied in this report – 1980 to 2022 – the population growth rate of the rural Midwest peaked during the 1990s, as did national rural population growth. After the 1990s, rural population growth in the Midwest and the nation steadily slowed, and the 2010s marked the start of an era of decline.

The 1990s were a particularly strong period for population growth in rural Wisconsin; it expanded at rates of about 1% annually. This ranked second in the Midwest, narrowly trailing only Michigan. However, in tandem with the region, Wisconsin's overall population growth – and to a greater extent its rural population growth – have leveled off since then. Since 2000, Wisconsin's rural population has grown at only about one-fourth of the 1990s pace, or 0.23% annually.

TOURISM COUNTIES FARING BEST

Since 2000, 12 rural, or nonmetropolitan, Wisconsin counties saw their population increase by 10% or more. In order of percentage increase, those counties are: Sauk, Walworth, Dunn, Trempealeau, Sawyer, Jefferson, Vilas, Monroe, Vernon, Polk, Bayfield, and Juneau. (The differences in the level of urbanization between these counties illustrate the limitations of the county classification system we use here. All are nonmetropolitan but some, such as Jefferson, have multiple small urbanized areas and might not be seen by some readers as rural.)

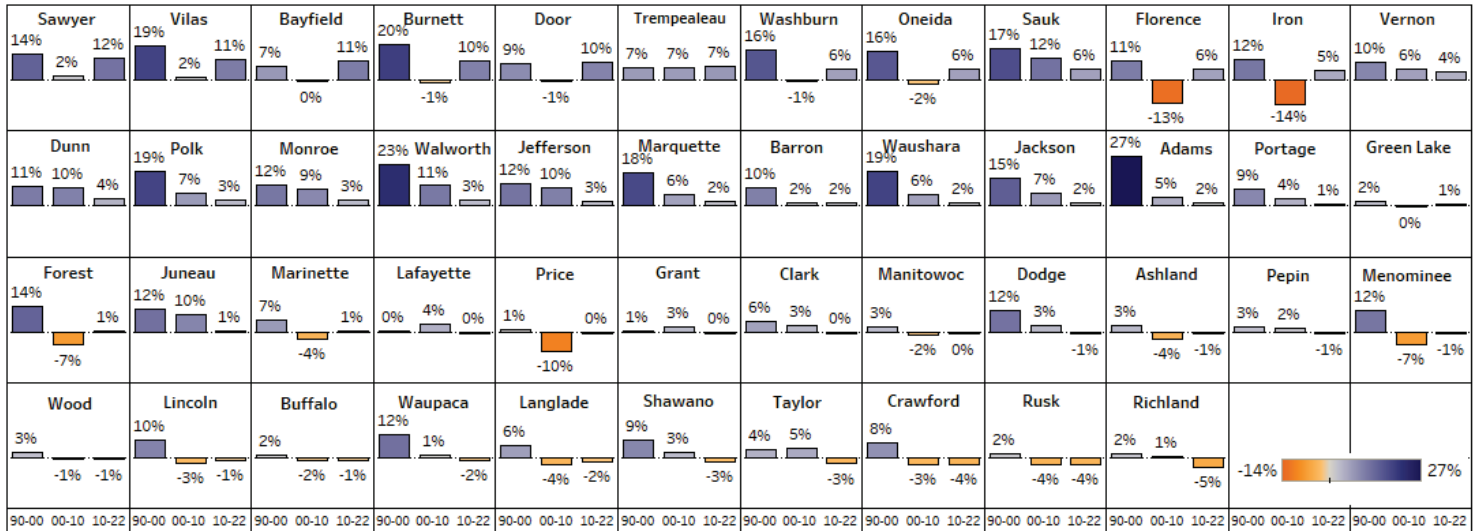
Some of these counties experienced stronger growth in the 2000s, however, and looking at only the period since 2010 provides a less positive picture. Figure 2 shows Wisconsin's rural counties ranked by population growth rate since 2010.

Still, since then, some rural counties have been among Wisconsin's fastest-growing on a percentage basis. Six counties in the state have seen population growth of



Figure 2: Most Rural Counties in Wisconsin Are Growing

Population change from 1990 to 2000, 2000 to 2010, and 2010 to 2022 by county



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service

10% or more since 2010, with the two atop the list being urban (Dane and St. Croix). But the next four on the list are rural: Sawyer, Vilas, Bayfield, and Burnett. Door County also narrowly missed the cutoff with a 9.9% population increase. Rounding out the top 10 were three more urban counties: Brown, Outagamie, and Eau Claire.

Meanwhile, seven counties experienced the state’s fastest rate of population decline, at 2% or more since 2010. Six of them are rural counties, listed here in order of percentage decrease: Richland, Rusk, Crawford, Taylor, Shawano, and Langlade. The one urban county on this list is also the state’s largest, Milwaukee.

It’s notable that the fast-growing rural counties listed above are dominated by many of rural Wisconsin’s top destinations for tourism and recreation, especially during warm-weather months. They may be particularly attractive migration destinations for retirees, particularly those who already own vacation properties there. These places also may appeal to remote workers, a group whose numbers [increased sharply during the pandemic](#).

The counties with the greatest declines have a mix of characteristics. At least several of them, however, have fewer tourist destinations such as lakes and other amenities that often draw visitors to rural Wisconsin (though Crawford and Richland have abundant natural beauty, including the Wisconsin and Kickapoo rivers, and the rolling topography of the Driftless Region).

Some also have economies that rely more on agriculture.

The counties cited above also rank among the top ones in Wisconsin for the share of their total private workforce employed in the leisure and hospitality sector, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show. We analyzed the most recent data available from the bureau’s Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages to find which rural counties in Wisconsin had the greatest share of their total private workforce employed in the leisure and hospitality super-sector.

This super-sector is closely associated with destinations for tourism and recreation, as it includes jobs in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector as well as in the accommodation and food services sector. As of September 2022, the most recent month for which these data were available, the top 10 rural counties by this measure were, ranked by share: Bayfield, Vilas, Door, Adams, Sauk, Florence, Walworth, Sawyer, Iron, and Burnett.

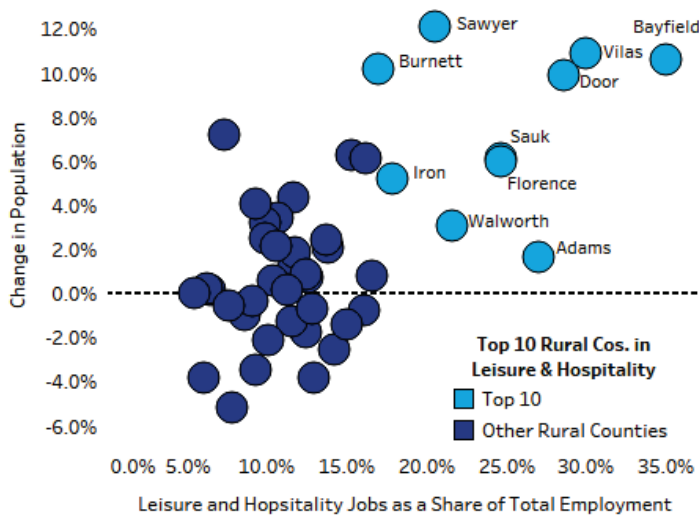
As illustrated in Figure 3, it appears that being a top tourist destination has served as a buffer against population loss for these counties as well as for Wisconsin’s rural economy as a whole.

Data published by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Applied Population Lab (APL) also suggests these counties are seeing an inflow of residents. It shows that from 2020 to 2022, the five counties in the state with



Fig 3: Tourism-Focused Counties See Population Growth

Leisure and hospitality employment as a share of total employment* (x) versus change in population from 2010 to 2022 (y), WI rural counties



Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, Bureau of Labor Statistics. *From Q3 2022 Data. *Menominee County has been excluded because of its unusual circumstances.

the highest net migration rates were Florence, Vilas, Adams, Burnett, and Sawyer. All five are among the 17 Wisconsin counties dubbed “recreation counties” under a typology developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service that classifies counties by the industry sectors on which their local economies depend.

Additional data provided by APL also makes clear that people at or near retirement age were significant contributors to in-migration to these counties during the decade from 2010 to 2020.

APL estimates counties’ net in-migration rates by age, divided into the following cohorts: under 15, 15 to 24, 25 to 29, 30 to 54, and 55 to 74. (Those ages 75 and older are not included in the estimates due to concerns about the accuracy of the data.) For the 55 to 74 age cohort, the Wisconsin counties with the highest net in-migration rates during the 2010s were Vilas, Burnett, Sawyer, Adams, and Door.

PANDEMIC BRINGS LITTLE CHANGE

This dynamic may also be helpful in understanding broader rural population trends throughout the Midwest region. Since 2010, Midwestern states ranking highest for rate of rural population growth included North Dakota, where rural growth is linked to an oil and natural gas boom in its western counties; and South

Dakota. They’re followed by Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan, all of which include rural destinations for tourism and recreation, especially in their northern areas.

Midwestern states struggling the most with rural depopulation are those with rural areas dominated by agriculture, such as Illinois, Iowa, and Kansas.

Relative to the decade prior (2010 to 2020), some Midwestern states saw modestly increased rates of rural population growth during the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2020 to 2022. Wisconsin’s rural population growth trends, however, appear to have been largely unaffected.

Missouri and Michigan saw rural population declines from 2010 to 2020. Yet from 2020 to 2022, these states saw upticks in their rural population. Meanwhile, the Midwestern state with the largest shift from before the pandemic to after was North Dakota, where growth reversed into a loss. Its rural population saw an average annual increase of nearly 1.2% from 2010 to 2020. However, it saw an average annual decrease of nearly 1.1% from 2020 to 2022.

CONCLUSION

In recent decades, some have come to link the rural Midwest with images of farming communities locked in a cycle of decline. Wisconsin, with its heritage in agriculture and manufacturing, is no stranger to the economic and demographic headwinds that have buffeted communities in these ways.

Yet on the whole, rural Wisconsin is fortunate to be gaining – or at least maintaining – population in many areas. Our findings show that when compared to states with which it shares the most in common, Wisconsin is more than holding its own.

Still, the slowing pace of population growth raises concerns, as the robust gains of prior decades have given way to tepid increases in recent years. Looking ahead, broader demographic trends, including the state and nation’s declining birth rates, suggest we are entering a new era of increased nationwide demographic pressures. The effects may be felt most acutely in places already facing demographic challenges.



[By 2040, 16 Wisconsin counties are projected](#) to have 41% or more of their populations comprised of residents ages 60 or older. All are rural counties, and they include all five of the fastest-growing from 2010 to 2022 (Sawyer, Vilas, Bayfield, Burnett, and Door). However, these counties may continue to attract future in-migration from groups such as retirees.

For local leaders and policymakers, reversing population stagnation or decline may prove challenging for places that are geographically isolated from metro areas and lack established tourism attractions or amenities. A growing tourism and service economy in some parts of rural Wisconsin has been a buoy, yet also potentially contributed to a “winners and losers” dynamic among our state’s rural regions. An influx of retirees now may also create some future challenges for the “winner” communities as these new residents age.

Though there admittedly will be difficulties, policymakers may wish to consider additional levers to help all of rural Wisconsin retain residents and attract new ones, and also cope with population decline when it does occur. These solutions are likely to look very different depending on which types of counties they are meant to assist, and state leaders could choose to factor in these distinctions in crafting solutions.

