

WISCONSIN'S NET MIGRATION SOARS TO LEVELS NOT SEEN IN DECADES

Wisconsin recently has seen its highest levels of net migration in at least two decades, bolstered by a national increase in migrants entering the United States from abroad. Until recently, natural population change accounted for most of Wisconsin's population growth. But with births exceeding deaths by a dwindling amount, the state's chances for population growth may depend more on its domestic and international migration levels.

Net migration to Wisconsin has seen a marked increase since 2022, rising far above pre-pandemic levels. During the 12-month period that ended June 30, 2024, Wisconsin saw an estimated net gain of 22,146 residents through international migration, recently released U.S. Census Bureau estimates show.

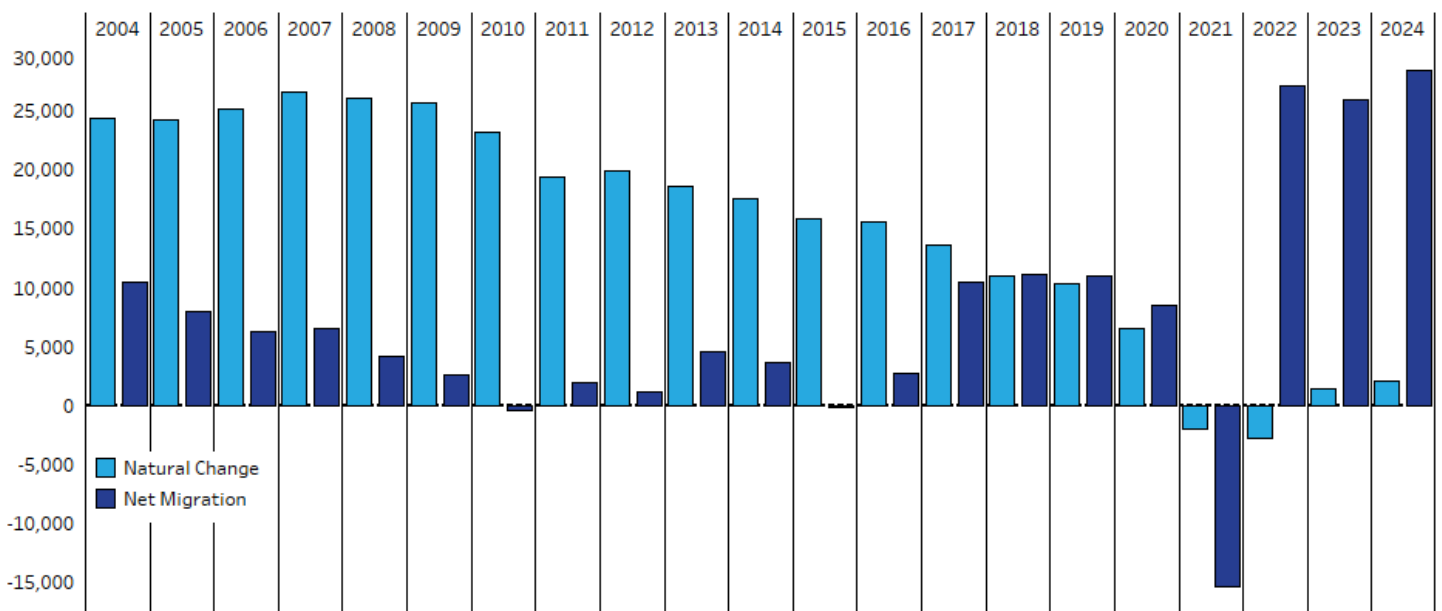
That, coupled with a net gain of 6,332 residents through domestic migration, spurred an estimated net migration of 28,478 residents to Wisconsin during this period. These two sources accounted for the vast majority (93.2%) of Wisconsin's population growth during this period, estimated at 30,570 residents. The remainder came from natural population change, with

births exceeding deaths by only slightly more than 2,000 residents.

Both forms of migration to Wisconsin – international, in which migrants arrive from abroad, and domestic, in which they arrive from another state – began to increase significantly during the 12-month period that ended June 30, 2022. (Unless otherwise noted, when a specific year is referenced in this brief, it means the 12-month period ending on June 30 of that year.) The Census Bureau estimates that migration remained at elevated levels during the following two years.

During the last three years for which data are available, Wisconsin's net migration levels were at their highest

Figure 1: Net Migration Drives Population Growth Post-Pandemic
Population change from natural change and net migration, 2004-2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau and CDC Wonder. Years run July-June, year shown is for end of time period. Note: Small amounts of residual change from 2020 to 2024 not shown.



point since at least 2004, a Forum analysis shows. (See Figure 1.) Each of the last three years, net migration to our state was at least 25,000 – more than twice the previous annual record during the last two decades. Recent changes at the federal level, however, might reduce future net migration nationally.

Demographic shifts appear likely to limit population growth in the coming years if birth rates continue to decline and as mortality rises among the Baby Boomer generation. With little net change in population expected from births and deaths, migration is likely to play an increasingly central role in Wisconsin’s population trajectory.

NATIONAL UPTICK IN IMMIGRATION

Wisconsin’s net migration increase is part of a national trend linked to a record influx of international migrants. The [Census Bureau found](#) that in the 12-month period that ended June 30, 2024, international migration resulted in a net population increase of 2.8 million residents nationwide. This followed net international migration increases of 1.7 million in 2022 and 2.3 million in 2023. Notably, there is now some evidence that [this national immigration surge has abated](#) after peaking in calendar years 2022 and 2023.

This has translated to increased overall migration to all 50 states, including Wisconsin. Since July 2021, our

state has seen a total population increase of 81,605 residents due to net migration. To put this in perspective, this tops the total amount of net migration Wisconsin saw during the preceding 18-year period from 2004 – the first year in our analysis – through 2021. Of the total net migration to Wisconsin since 2021, nearly three-fourths, or more than 60,000, came from international migration, Census estimates show.

The remainder, just over 21,000, came from domestic migration. This is also notable as it would appear to mark a significant increase from pre-pandemic years, when Census estimates showed Wisconsin experiencing domestic out-migration.

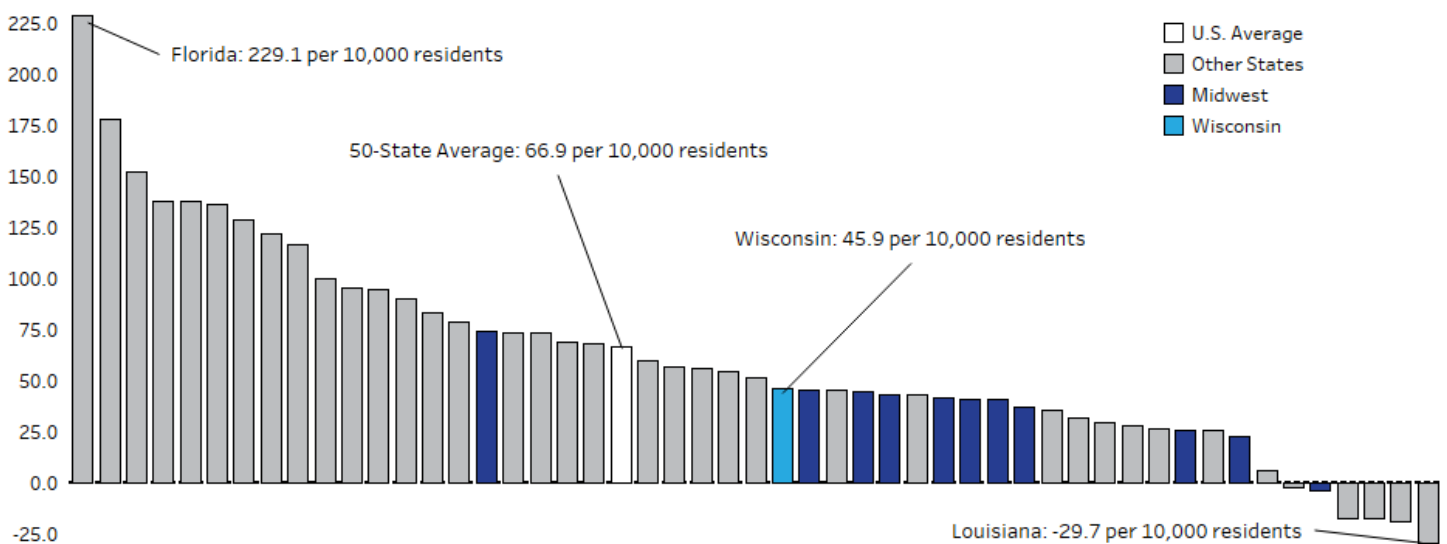
COMPARING TO MIDWEST NEIGHBORS

Wisconsin’s recent net migration levels, on a per capita basis, place it roughly middle of the pack among the 50 states, a Forum analysis shows. Net migration figures are subject to volatility, so for our analysis, we calculated average annual rates of net migration for all 50 states for the most recent three years for which we have data, ending June 30, 2024. Wisconsin ranked 26th among the states for its average annual rate of per capita net migration during this period, at 45.9 per 10,000 residents. (See Figure 2.)

In recent decades, the Midwest region has seen relatively low levels of net migration, particularly when

Figure 2: Wisconsin Sees Below Average Net Migration, But Among Highest in Midwest

Annual average net migration, July 2021-June 2024, per 10,000 residents



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population and Housing Unit Estimates. Note: 50-state average includes only international migration, as state-to-state/domestic migration evens out to zero.



compared to the South and West regions of the U.S. During this period, Wisconsin ranked second among the 12 Midwest states – and first among its neighboring states – in per capita rates of net migration.

We also compared this most recent period to the period immediately preceding the pandemic – the three years that ended June 30, 2019. Nearly all states, including Wisconsin, saw large increases in net migration. Our state saw total net migration of 32,522 from July 2016 through June 2019, compared to 81,605 during the most recent three-year period, a 151% increase.

The 12-state Midwest region saw a whopping 21-fold increase in total net migration between these two periods, buoyed by particularly large increases in two of its three largest states, Illinois and Michigan. Notably, our western neighbor Minnesota was one of just six states nationwide – and the only one in the Midwest – to see a decline in net migration.

During the three pre-pandemic years, Minnesota was one of the Midwest's strongest net migration performers, as its per capita rate ranked second in the region. During the three post-pandemic years, by contrast, its net migration rate ranked 11th in the region.

LESS GROWTH FROM NATURAL CHANGE

Just 6.8% of Wisconsin's population growth in 2024 came from natural change, which is calculated as births minus deaths in a given geography during a given time period. This marks a major shift from nearly all pre-pandemic years during the period we analyzed – and likely going much farther back in time – when natural change accounted for the large majority of Wisconsin's population growth.

For most of state history, births predictably outnumbered deaths each year. This natural population growth added about 25,000 residents annually during the 2000s.

That number began to decline throughout the 2010s, but remained solidly in positive territory, averaging around 10,000 annually by the end of that decade. But during the pandemic and post-pandemic era, it has plunged further, as births declined and deaths rose.

The impact was such that Wisconsin's natural change was net negative in 2021 and 2022 amid the devastating toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition,

mortality levels in Wisconsin and nationally have risen due to the advancing age of the Baby Boomer generation.

CONCLUSION

During the three-year period that ended on June 30 of last year, Wisconsin saw one of its largest influxes of new residents in recent history – almost certainly the largest since 2000. The available data make clear that this was largely a function of a nationwide increase in international migration.

These recent levels of immigration are a point of great contention in our nation's politics. Whatever one's views about them, these data make clear that the impact on our state's recent demographics has been significant.

This surge of immigration occurred under the Biden administration, and President Donald Trump campaigned on ending it. While it is not yet possible to know how successful his administration will be at accomplishing this, it seems likely that international migration to our state and nation will decline from their recent high levels, potentially by a considerable amount.

Meanwhile, our state will continue to grapple with the reality of an aging population. Wisconsin's birth and death rate trends are on track to increase the likelihood that natural population change [will become net negative](#) in the near future.

Whether the state's population continues to grow, stagnates, or begins to decline could have major implications for its economy and quality of life. Employers already face significant worker shortages in key industries, including health care, education, agriculture, and construction. Some Wisconsin counties already have begun to grapple with a [shrinking base of working-age residents](#) supporting an expanding population of retired and elderly residents.

With two of the state's three sources of population growth – natural change and international migration – showing signs of vulnerability, Wisconsin and other states in similar positions may wish to double down on efforts to attract residents from other states and to retain those already here.

Expectations for increasing domestic migration to Wisconsin, especially via policy levers, should remain realistic. Factors such as weather and economic



opportunity in the private sector are among the key drivers of domestic migration and present challenges for Wisconsin and our neighboring states. Strategies also should vary locally, as some parts of the state anticipate solid population growth, while others may need to manage some degree of population decline.

Still, compared with international migration or natural change, domestic migration may be the area where state and local policymakers can have greater influence. In the past, the state has sought to entice residents of other states, primarily Illinois, through marketing campaigns. Additional strategies to consider may include measures to boost the supply and affordability of housing, attracting more out-of-state students to the Universities of Wisconsin, or tax or worker incentives. In particular, elected officials may wish to consider policies that are attractive to parents of young children since that could encourage both net migration and additional births among existing residents.

For nearly all of the period since Wisconsin's statehood, population growth was a given. Due to a convergence of demographic trends, we are entering an era in which it no longer can be taken for granted. Policymakers may wish to act with creativity and urgency to tackle this challenge, particularly at a time when state finances provide them the resources to do so.

