

WISCONSIN FARES WELL IN RANKINGS, BUT WORSENS ON SOME MEASURES

Wisconsin ranks eighth among the states in a new national report that assesses 31 measures of each state’s economy, environment, and labor force, as well as the education, health, safety, and wellbeing of its residents. Yet our state also is trending downward in a number of areas, potentially putting our top-10 standing at future risk. At a national level, the report also paints a worrying picture about our personal and social wellbeing.

As our nation approaches its 250th anniversary, the [2026 State of the States report](#) offers a sweeping, data-intensive assessment of where each U.S. state currently stands in actualizing our founders’ lofty ideals: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

A product of the bipartisan State of the Nation Project, the report provides data on 31 metrics for all 50 states. The metrics are grouped into the following 14 categories: children and families, citizenship and democracy, civil liberties, economy, education, environment, inequality, life satisfaction, mental health,

physical health, trust, violence, and work and labor force. As the report notes, states are the laboratories of democracy, and its findings are meant to help identify where each state is succeeding or struggling.

This report was made possible through a Forum partnership with the [State of the Nation project](#), which brings together a diverse group of thought leaders from across the political spectrum. Housed at Tulane University and funded by the Murphy Institute, it includes leaders of seven of the nation’s leading think tanks and senior officials and advisors to the past five presidential administrations.

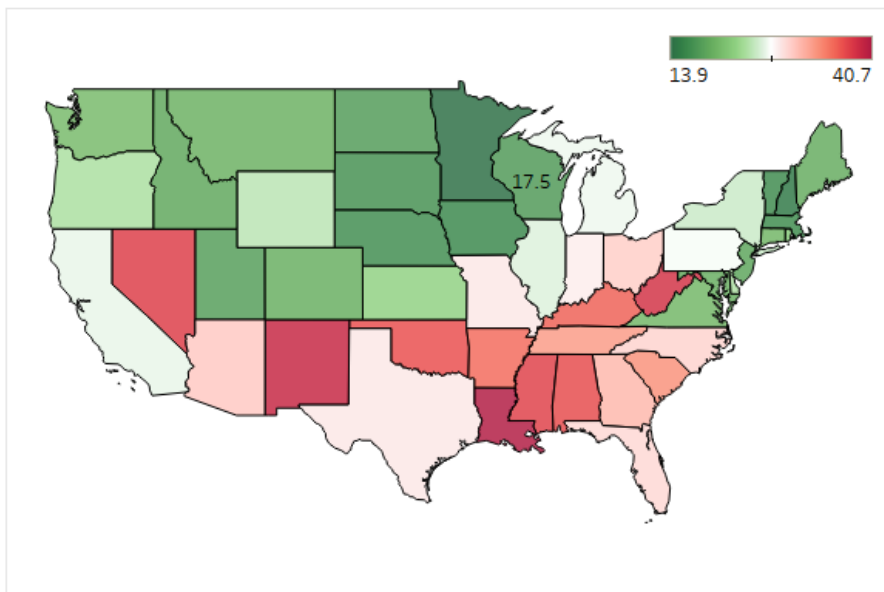
Each state is ranked on each measure, and those rankings are then averaged across all 31 indicators to

determine its overall rank among the 50 states. Wisconsin’s average is 17.5, placing it eighth overall, just behind number seven South Dakota and just ahead of number nine North Dakota (see Figure 1). Among neighboring states, Minnesota ranks first, Iowa third, Illinois 27th, and Michigan 29th.

At the same time, the report indicates that Wisconsin’s strong standing may be at risk. Our state is losing ground relative to the nation on significantly more metrics than it is gaining. Unless it reverses course in a number of these areas, it may not hold its top 10 distinction for much longer.

Relative to other states, Wisconsin’s strengths in these rankings are in the areas of its work and labor force –

Figure 1: Midwest States Rank Highly on Average, Wisconsin Places Eighth
Average rank across 31 measures of social and economic wellbeing, by state



Source: State of the Nation

metrics in which the Upper Midwest region is a national leader. Other strengths include measures of income inequality, social isolation, trust in other people, and voter participation.

Areas in which Wisconsin compares less favorably to other states include measures such as child mortality, net greenhouse gas emissions, the life satisfaction of residents, civil liberties, and trust in the federal government.

Distinct [regional patterns are apparent](#) in these rankings. Nine of the top 10 states are located in the northern Midwest, northern Great Plains, or New England; eight of the bottom 10 are located in the South.

MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA

Data used for these measures come from federal sources including the U.S. Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Education Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and more. Other data sources include widely respected, nonpartisan institutions such as the University of Chicago’s General Social Survey.

For each measure, the report provides the following state-level information: the state’s ranking in the most recent year of available data, whether the state’s trend is improving or worsening in absolute terms, and whether the state is improving or worsening relative to other states.

For this report, the Forum analyzes this information as it relates to Wisconsin. There are many possible stories that can be told with these data, and we do not suggest that our interpretation is all-encompassing. A broader examination of why Wisconsin fares well or poorly on a given measure, or what is influencing its trend on a given measure, is beyond the scope of this report. But we hope it helps Wisconsinites better understand what these measures indicate about where our state currently stands, and where trends may be taking us.

Though all the metrics contribute to our state average, we are highlighting 10 of

these 31 measures, each of which we have grouped into one of three categories. These include measures on which our state performs well relative to other states and is improving or holding steady in absolute terms or relative to the nation; or measures on which we perform well but on which our standing is deteriorating. Lastly, we also highlight measures on which we do not rank as highly.

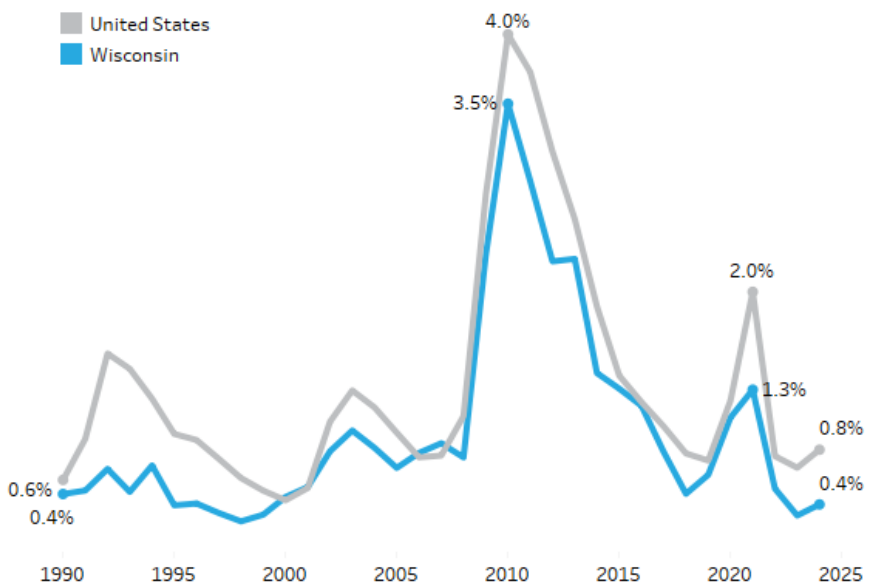
OUR STRONG SUITS

The State of the States report includes several measures for which Wisconsin ranks in the top 10 – and in addition, is trending positively or is stable.

These “strong suit” measures include [income inequality](#), on which Wisconsin ranks fourth among the states. The report measures this via the Gini coefficient, an index that is meant to quantify the extent to which all income within a given jurisdiction is concentrated among a few individuals, or shared more broadly. Wisconsin’s rank means its index is lower than the nation’s, suggesting a lower level of income inequality.

The second measure is [poverty](#), on which our state ranks ninth, as Wisconsin’s poverty rate is lower than the nation’s. This is measured through the U.S. Census Bureau’s supplemental poverty measure, which looks at the share of households with incomes below a certain threshold per person, while also including several additional factors.

Figure 2: Wisconsin’s Long-Term Unemployment Rate Lower Than Nation’s
Share of the labor force ages 25-54 unemployed for six month or more, 1990-2024



Source: State of the Nation



The work and labor force category includes four measures. Wisconsin ranks in the top 10 in all four, one of which merits inclusion in this group: the [long-term unemployment rate](#). On this measure, Wisconsin ranks sixth nationally (meaning its rate is lower than the nation's) and it has consistently performed better than the national rate during the last three decades (see Figure 2 on the previous page).

Lastly, we highlight Wisconsin's showing in [voter participation](#) – measured here by voter turnout, or the share of the voting-age U.S. citizen population who voted in recent elections. Wisconsin's voter turnout rate is higher than the nation's, and it ranks eighth in this category.

SOLID BUT SLIPPING

Some measures find our state in a relatively strong position vis-à-vis most other states, but trending in a negative direction in the state rankings. We dub these our “solid but slipping” measures, on which we are in danger of losing our top-10 status in future rankings if Wisconsin fails to alter its trajectory.

The first of these is [labor force participation](#), on which our state outpaces the nation, ranking eighth. This is among the cluster of measures of work and the labor force on which Wisconsin and other Upper Midwest states historically have performed very well. However,

Wisconsin's edge on its national peers in this area is eroding.

The second measure in this group is [fatal shootings](#), one of two measures of violence included in the report. This is measured as a per capita rate of all fatal shootings, including homicides, suicides, and accidental shooting deaths.

Wisconsin has a lower rate of fatal shootings than the nation, ranking 16th. The national rate of shootings rose during the latest years for which data are available, the last of which was 2023, and Wisconsin's rate rose even more on a proportional basis (see Figure 3). However, in a hopeful sign, it did decline more sharply than the nation's in 2023.

The third measure is the prevalence of newborns with a [low birth weight](#), which is associated with many short- and long-term health and developmental issues for children later in life. Both the state and national trends for this metric are worsening, but Wisconsin's is worsening to a greater extent.

OUR WEAKER POINTS

Our final group includes the state's “weak points.” Notably, Wisconsin ranks near the top or at least near the middle-of-the-pack on nearly all measures cited in this report (it ranks in the top or middle third of states in

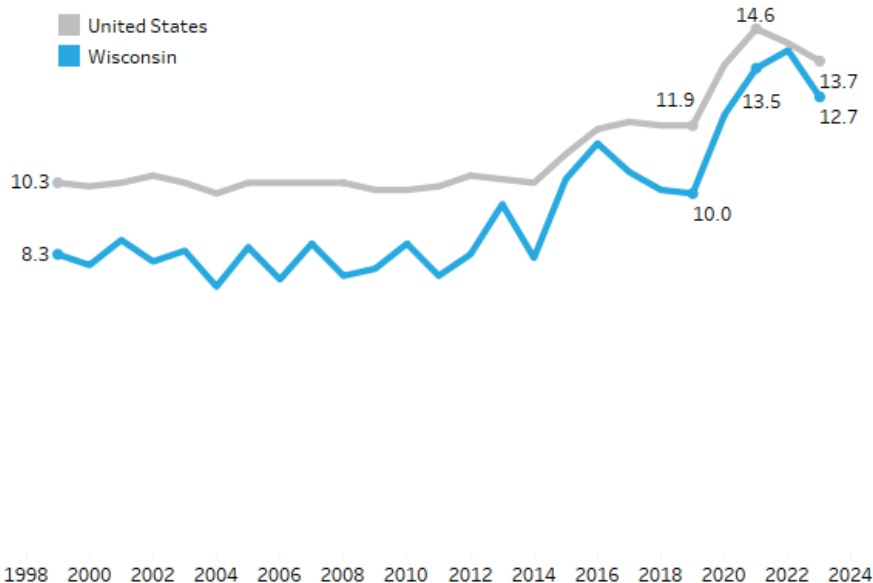
all but two measures). However, there are a few measures on which it ranks near or below average, and in some cases, it is also trending in the wrong direction.

The first of these is [volunteerism](#), measured as the share of the population age 16 and over who have volunteered through an organization in the past year. Wisconsin ranked 25th in this measure in 2023, with a volunteerism rate of 31.1%, compared to 28.3% nationally.

This may not seem like a weak point until recent trends are considered. Not long ago, Wisconsin's volunteerism rate was far above the nation's. But in recent years, it has declined both in absolute terms and relative to the national rate. In the 2000s and 2010s,

Figure 3: Wisconsin's Fatal Shooting Rate Nearing Higher National Average

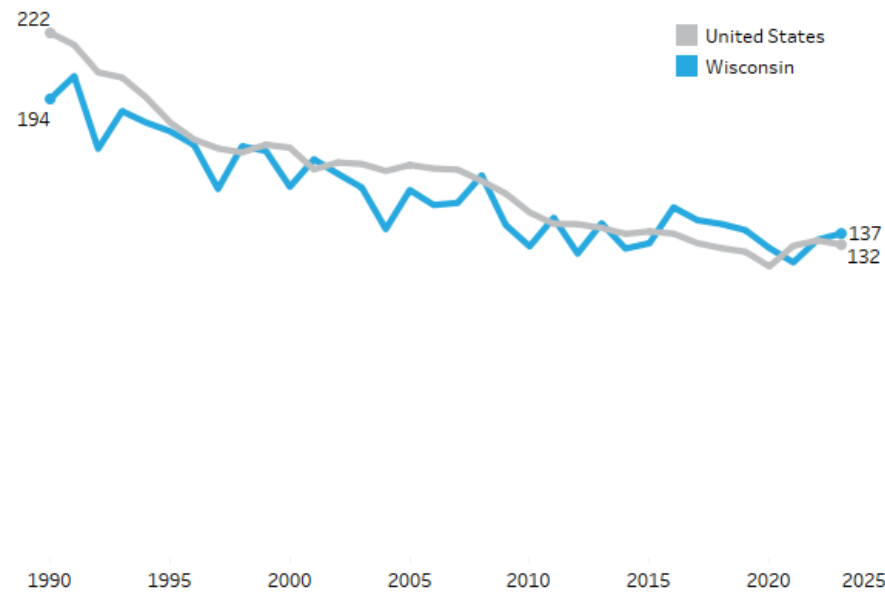
Rate of fatal shootings per 100,000 population, 1999-2023



Source: State of the Nation



Figure 4: WI's Child Mortality Rate Nears and at Times Exceeds the Nation's
Mortality rate of children under age five per 100,000 children under age five, 1990-2023



Source: State of the Nation

Wisconsin's volunteerism rate stayed between 25% and 40% above the nation's. But in 2023, it was just 9.7% above the national rate.

Next up is [child mortality](#), or the mortality rate per capita of children under age five (see Figure 4). Wisconsin ranked 28th on this measure in 2023, with a rate slightly above the nation's. Our child mortality rate increased relative to the nation's during the prior decade.

The last measure in this group is net [emissions of greenhouse gases](#) such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and fluorinated gases. Wisconsin ranked 31st on this measure in 2022. The report does not provide emissions per capita; Forum calculations show that Wisconsin's per capita net emissions were slightly higher than the nation's in 2022. A comparison of the trend shows that emissions have plummeted nationally since the Great Recession, while Wisconsin's have remained relatively stable.

An important note: the only two measures cited in this report for which Wisconsin ranks in the lowest third of states are trust in the federal government and satisfaction with current life. We do not highlight these measures because the report does not include data on them for all 50 states, making a traditional 50-state ranking impossible.

For this same reason, we also do not highlight the measure on which Wisconsin ranks most highly, trust in other people, in our "strong suits" group. With that said, our state's rankings on these three measures are notable and bear watching in future reports.

THE NATIONAL PICTURE

Viewed at the national level, the data in this report point to several areas of concern. No state is improving on eight of the 31 measures, including some that assess the mental health, wellbeing, and life satisfaction of residents, as well as their economic prospects. One of these measures is trust in the federal government – a troubling trend on the eve of our nation's 250th birthday.

The inaugural [2025 State of the Nation report](#) included only national data on these measures but did not break them down at the state level. It showed that the U.S. has worsened over time – and ranks low globally – on several key measures of personal and social well-being, such as life satisfaction, anxiety, depression, and trust in people and institutions.

The 2026 State of the States report concludes that "our new analysis does nothing to allay concerns about these metrics. Of the 225 cases where we can observe state trends in self-reported well-being, only 12 show improvement and more than half are worsening."

CONCLUSION

Some may read the State of the States report and object to the inclusion of certain of its measures. But most will agree that it offers an array of data points about each state, representing categories that matter to most citizens.

Many Wisconsinites may read this report and reasonably conclude that it paints our state in a favorable light. On many of its measures, we rank in the top third of states, and on most that remain, we rank near the middle of the pack. While a full examination of why Wisconsin ranks highly on these measures is beyond the scope of this report, demographic factors



may play a role. The median age of Wisconsin's population is slightly older than the nation's, which could contribute to our state having a higher rate of voting participation, or lower rates of violence or labor force participation, to cite a few examples.

Yet the findings contain an additional important dimension. Relative to the nation, Wisconsin is worsening on 13 of the report's 31 measures, while it is improving on eight of them. For the remaining 10, its trend relative to the nation is mixed, stable, or unclear.

Notably, Wisconsin is worsening relative to the nation on three of four measures in the "children and families" category, both measures in the "violence" category, and two of four measures in one of its traditional areas of strength: the "work and labor force" category. For a state that has long prided itself on being family friendly and boasting a high quality of life, these trends are worthy of attention.

The report concludes that "by providing a clear, comprehensive, and unvarnished picture of where we stand, and examining the reasons behind our successes and failures, we hope to motivate and guide action at local, state, and national levels." The Forum hopes this project, done in partnership with State of the Nation, can facilitate that process in Wisconsin.

