

# MIGRATION CHALLENGES

## Trends in People's Movement to and from the Milwaukee Area and Wisconsin Illuminate Important Issues

By John D. Johnson and Charles Franklin

Marquette Law School launched the **Lubar Center for Public Policy Research and Civic Education** in 2017. Part of the Lubar Center's work is the **Milwaukee Area Project**, which aims to increase understanding of trends and forces shaping the Milwaukee region (in particular, the five-county area of Racine, Milwaukee, Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington). In this piece, John D. Johnson, the Lubar Center's research fellow, and Charles Franklin, the Law School's professor of law and public policy, use census data to examine population growth in the Milwaukee area and across Wisconsin.

While debates about immigration nationwide focus on the in-flow of people from other nations, immigration and emigration of a different kind also continue to have important effects on the United States. People relocating from one place to another within the country shape the social and economic life of the places they leave and the places to which they move.

Wisconsin as a whole has been a slow-growth state in terms of population. But some areas are doing better than others when it comes to attracting people. The five-county Milwaukee area (made up of Racine, Milwaukee, Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington counties) may provide a good window: The area's growth has been slow in recent times, which has implications for the future of jobs and businesses in the region.

Consider that as the state develops new economic centers—such as the anticipated Foxconn complex for making liquid crystal display equipment in Racine County, the distribution center for Amazon in Kenosha County, and the fast-growing Epic electronic medical records technology business in suburban Madison—the hope for economic growth rests in part on the availability of a labor force sufficient to meet the needs of employers. With a state unemployment rate of about 3 percent, and a relatively high workforce-participation rate, it is a challenge to expand the labor force.

Thus, if natural population growth is likely to remain at low levels, given long-term declines in the birth rate, the state must rely on attracting new residents to expand its workforce and economy or face a shrinking human-resource pool.

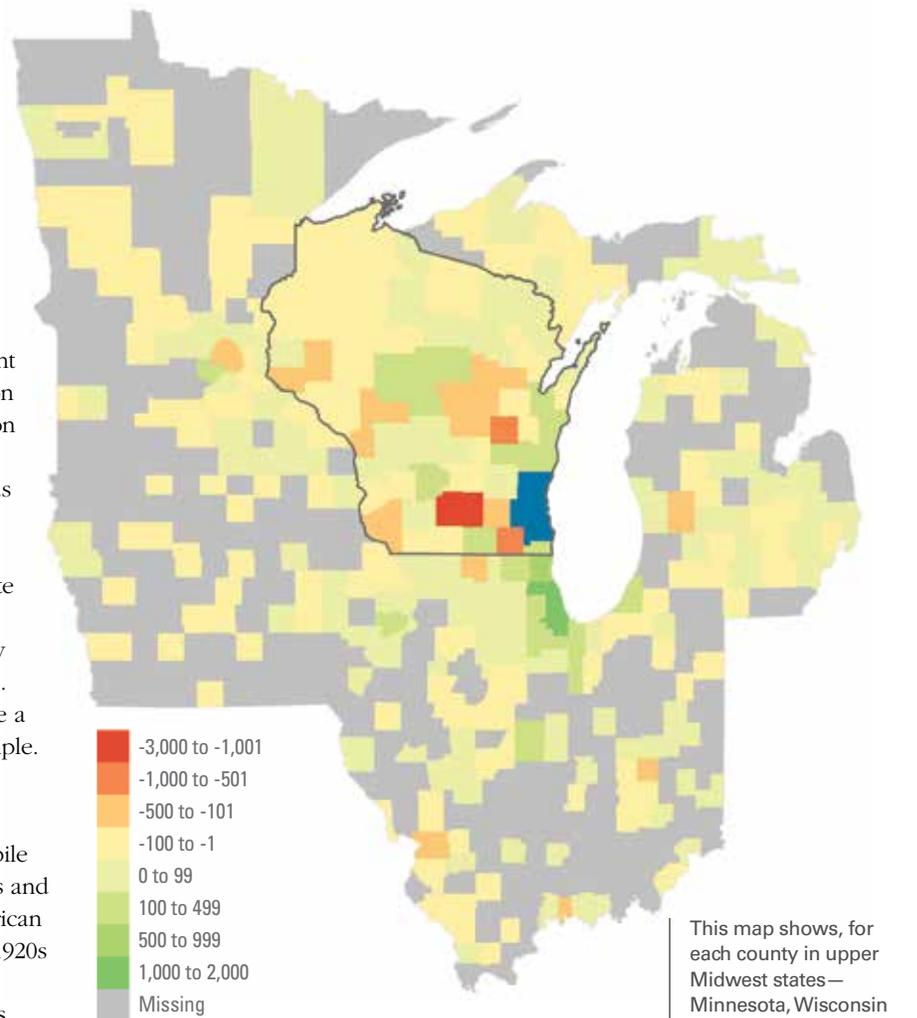
Detailed analysis of U.S. Census data sheds useful light on trends in the population flow. This analysis offers some highlights of what can be seen in those data. The focus here is on the overall numbers associated with the movement of people and not on racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic aspects of movement trends. Likewise, international immigration is an important (though much smaller) piece of the total migration puzzle. These other important aspects of migration will receive attention from the Milwaukee Area Project in subsequent analyses. Most of the census data used here are adapted from the 2011–2015 American Community Survey (ACS), a project of the U.S. Census Bureau. This provides an estimate of population flows and characteristics at small geographic levels based on a large pool of survey responses conducted over the previous five years. As with all surveys, statistics from the ACS include a margin of error dependent on the size of the sample.

### Some Historical Context

The United States was once an extremely mobile population, with westward migration in the 1800s and during the Depression, the Great Migration of African Americans from the south to the north from the 1920s through the 1960s, and the explosion of suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s. That idea of Americans as extraordinarily mobile has largely become a modern myth as geographic mobility has declined in each decade since the 1980s.

To give a sense of it: In the post-war period from 1948 through 1970, an average of 19.9 percent of residents in the United States annually changed their home address. To be more specific, 3.2 percent moved to a different county in the same state; slightly more, 3.3 percent, moved to a new state; and the other 13.4 percent moved but stayed in the same county. During the 1970s and 1980s, geographic mobility began a steady decline nationally, so that from 1990 through 2017, in an average year, only 12.8 percent of the population changed residence, with 4.4 percent changing counties within the same state and only 2.0 percent changing states. Looked at in a different way: In 1970, 13,316,000 people moved to a new county. In 2017, a smaller number, 12,033,000, changed counties, even though the population of the country had increased by 60 percent in the almost half-century in between.

Wisconsin and Milwaukee have their own specific stories. For many decades, Wisconsin was a place with rapidly growing population. In the 1830s and

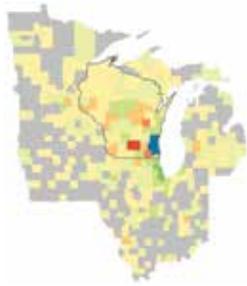


### Net domestic migration per year to (or from) the Milwaukee area for other Midwestern counties

1840s, lead mining brought a surge of immigrants to the Wisconsin territory. Population increased by a factor of 10 between 1840 and 1850, from 31,000 to 305,000. By 1860, population had more than doubled again, for a total of more than 775,000. Migration from the eastern United States or from overseas at that time, predominantly by German and British immigrants, drove population upward and formed the base for a thriving economy.

Urban centers in the state grew quickly. That was particularly true for Milwaukee. From its founding as three feuding villages (Juneautown, Kilbourntown, and Walker's Point) in the 1830s, Milwaukee developed into a single city by 1846, with a population of 10,000, then as now the largest city in the state. Population boomed for the next century. In 1960, Milwaukee was the 11th-largest city in the United States.

This map shows, for each county in upper Midwest states—Minnesota, Wisconsin (outlined), Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana—the net flow of migration between the county and the five-county Milwaukee area (blue), as estimated by the U.S. Census for 2015. For example, the Milwaukee area received a net *gain* of about 1,300 people from Cook County, Ill., and had net gains from most counties in the greater Chicagoland area; shades of the color green are thus used for those Illinois counties. By contrast, the Milwaukee area lost a net of 2,300 people to Dane County, Wis., which is thus depicted in red. Counties in gray had too few migrants to and from the Milwaukee area for reliable estimation. (Data source: 2011–2015 ACS.)



### More-Recent Times

But the natural rate of population growth slowed over the past half century or so, which has made a big difference in demographics and economic vitality, both in Milwaukee and across Wisconsin. Milwaukee is now around 30th place in population in the country. Wisconsin's gradual decline in ranking of states by population had the effect of reducing the number of Wisconsin seats in the U.S. House of Representatives from ten to nine following the 1970 census and then from nine to eight after the 2000 census.

Since the 2010 census, while the U.S. population has grown 5.9 percent, Wisconsin has grown 1.9 percent, ranking the state 40th in the country in growth, one spot behind Alabama, which grew 2.0 percent. In contrast, Minnesota grew 5.1 percent, a rate ranking 21st in the nation, while Illinois lost 0.2 percent, ranking 49th.

Patterns of movements have differed across Wisconsin, with some areas gaining and others losing. For example, booming business in electronic medical records and biotech has given Dane County the highest rate of growth in the state since 2010. Overall, Dane County's population has grown 43,200, or 8.9 percent, since 2010. That accounts for 47 percent of Wisconsin's total population growth. Population in the five-county Milwaukee area has increased by 16,306, or 0.9 percent, since 2010, accounting for 17.8 percent of the state's growth.

### Migration to and from the Milwaukee Area

Let us focus more specifically on the Milwaukee area. In 2015, about 47,000 people moved to the Milwaukee area (recall that this area consists of the five counties of Racine, Milwaukee, Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington). Of these people, 18,000 were from another part of the state, and 29,000 were from a different state. In the same year, 54,000 people left the Milwaukee area: 22,000 moved elsewhere in Wisconsin, and 32,000 moved out of the state entirely. Thus, net migration cost the Milwaukee area about 7,000 residents.

Gross migration flows (the sum of inflows and outflows) are a measure of the connection between places. Predictably, a substantial amount of the Milwaukee area's gross migration is with other

places in Wisconsin. As the numbers in the previous paragraph disclose, 40 percent of the five-county area's gross migration is with the rest of Wisconsin.

At the same time, a majority of the Milwaukee area's gross migration involves other states. Of the combined inflows and outflows, 12 percent involve Illinois, and 4 percent involve each of Florida, California, and Texas. Two out-of-state counties make it into the region's top 10 counties by gross migration. The first is Illinois's Cook County—home to Chicago and some 130 other municipalities. Cook County is a net contributor to the Milwaukee area's population. About 3,600 people move from Cook County to the Milwaukee area each year, compared to 2,300 going the other direction. An opposite relationship exists with Phoenix's Maricopa County. Maricopa has the eighth-largest gross-migration relationship with the Milwaukee area, but 63 percent of this exchange consists of people moving *there*, from Wisconsin. And this is not simply a flight of "snowbird" retirees. The Census Bureau estimates that 42 percent of those moving to the Arizona county are 20-somethings. About a quarter are over 54.

The people moving into the Milwaukee area come primarily from within the state and from Illinois: Thirty-nine percent of people arrive from elsewhere in Wisconsin, and 16 percent are from Illinois. California provides 4 percent, and 3 percent are from each of Minnesota, Florida, Michigan, and Texas.

Let's turn our focus to net migration. The Milwaukee area primarily enjoys *net* gains from counties within Wisconsin and from the Chicago region of Illinois. A number of counties to the north, running up to Green Bay and in the Wausau area, are net contributors to the Milwaukee area. By far, the state (besides Wisconsin itself) with the highest net flow of migrants to the region is Illinois, whose surplus of in-migration into the Milwaukee area amounts to nearly 3,000 people annually. Most of this is from northeastern Illinois: While Chicago's Cook County is the largest individual source, each of the five suburban counties surrounding Cook County sends more people to the Milwaukee area than that county receives. The net flow from Cook County is around 1,300 people, but the flow from the surrounding counties is 1,400. North Carolina

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and Iowa are distant runners-up, with the Milwaukee area gaining a net of 400 from North Carolina and 200 from Iowa.

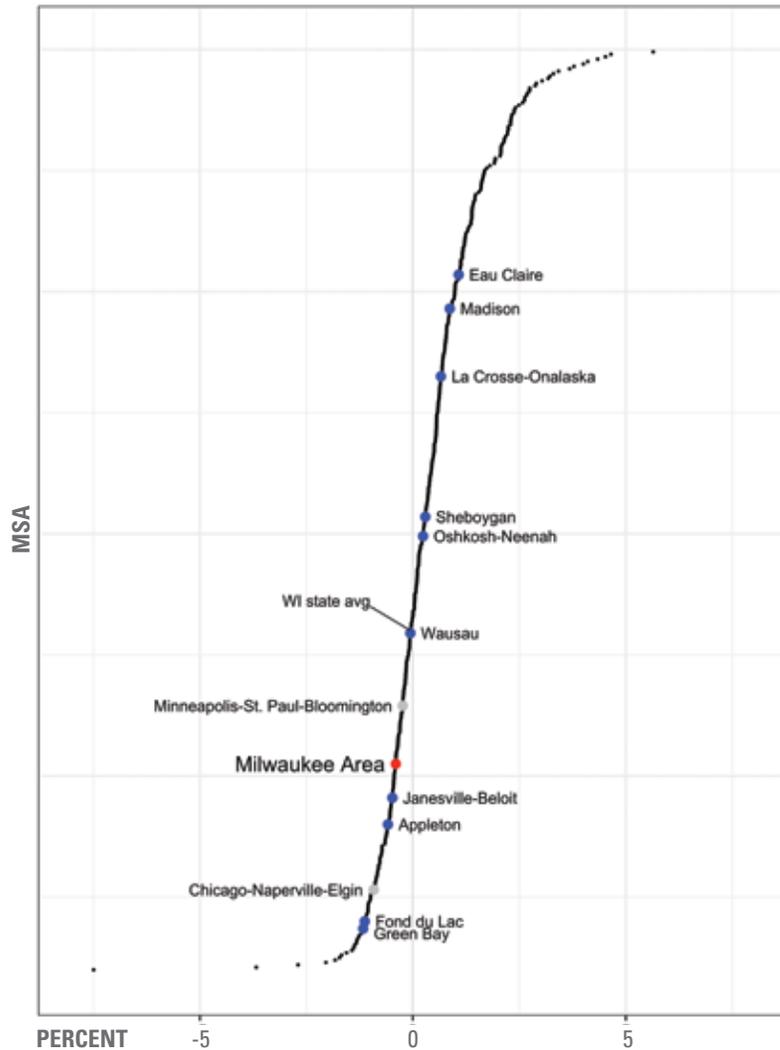
The Milwaukee area's greatest net loss from migration is to Dane County. About 4,500 people move to Dane from one of the five Milwaukee-area counties each year, while 2,200 move the other way. This net loss of 2,300 residents is nearly three times greater than the region's next-largest losses, which involve Winnebago and Walworth counties.

## Metropolitan Area Migration Patterns

To attract migrants, the Milwaukee area competes with other metropolitan areas nationally and in Wisconsin. For the most part, the competition is difficult.

We compare the performance of the five-county Milwaukee area to each of the country's other census-designated metropolitan statistical areas (at the time in question there were 379 other "MSAs") by calculating net domestic migration (newcomers minus leavers) for each one and dividing this number by the MSA's total population. The Milwaukee area is divided into two MSAs by the census, but we combine them into a single measure for this analysis.

The Milwaukee area lags both the state and the national averages of all MSAs in net migration, losing about 0.4 percent of its population annually. By this measure, the region still performs better than the MSAs of Green Bay, Fond du Lac, Appleton, and Janesville-Beloit, but it performs worse than the state's six other MSAs. Of these, the MSAs of Madison and Eau Claire perform the best, growing by 0.8 percent and 1.1 percent respectively as a result of net migration. La Crosse-Onalaska, Sheboygan, and Oshkosh-Neenah posted more-modest gains, while Wausau nearly broke even. Nationally, the Milwaukee area ranked 295th among metropolitan statistical areas.

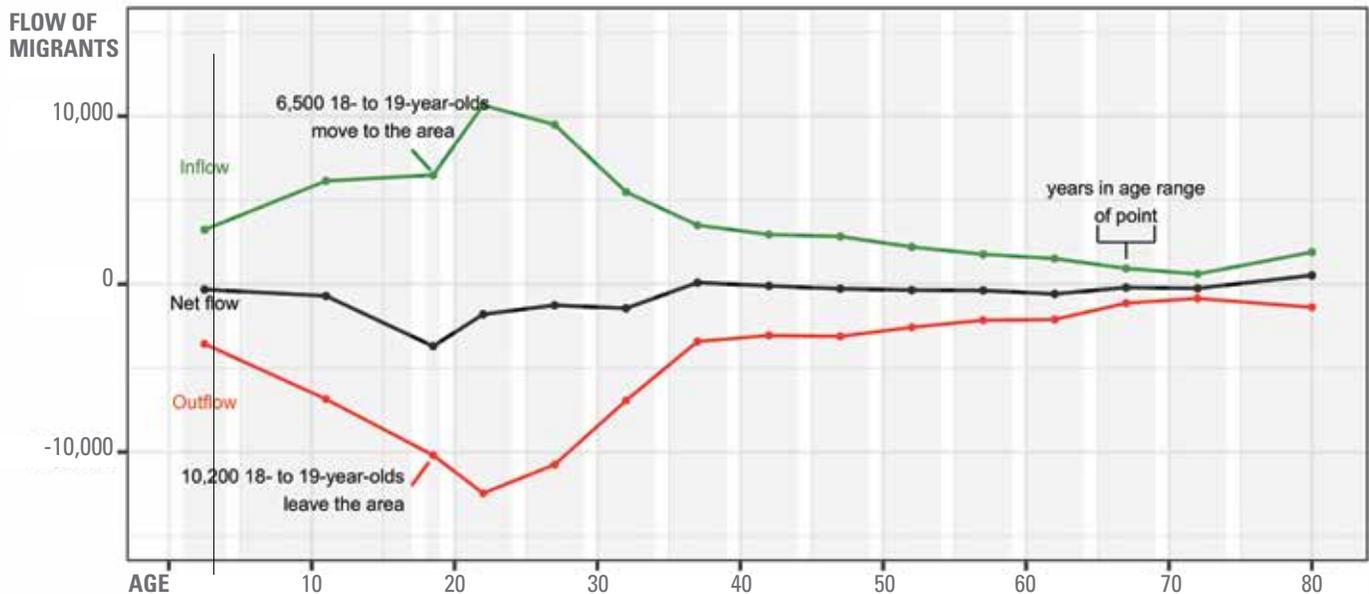


**Net domestic migration as a percentage of total population**  
All U.S. Metropolitan Statistical Areas

When the measurement is as a percentage of a local area's population, areas such as Eau Claire, Madison, and La Crosse-Onalaska are among the bigger gainers from the movement of people in and out, while Racine and the Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis Metropolitan Statistical Areas (combined here as "Milwaukee Area") have more people moving out than in, putting them much lower in national rankings. (Data source: 2011-2015 ACS.)

Migration patterns within the state disproportionately favor counties outside the Milwaukee area, with Winnebago, Portage, Eau Claire, and Dunn counties enjoying more than their share of in-state movers. Milwaukee County trails proportionately as a destination for migrating Wisconsin residents. The county holds about 17 percent of the state's population but attracts only 11 percent of Wisconsin residents who move from one county to another. Racine and Washington counties also receive fewer intrastate migrants than their populations would suggest, while Ozaukee and Waukesha attract slightly more.

The situation changes when migrants from other states are considered. Sixteen percent of the people who move from out of state come to Milwaukee



**Inflow, outflow, and net domestic migration by age, five-county Milwaukee area**

The net outflow of 18- to 19-year-olds from the five-county Milwaukee area is notable. Among people older than that, the trends, as shown in the chart above, are toward less movement both into and out of the Milwaukee area, with the net numbers moving closer to zero (meaning equal numbers of people coming and going). (Data source: 2011–2015 ACS.)

County, just one point less than the county’s share of population. Racine and Waukesha counties perform slightly worse. In all, the five-county area contains about 31 percent of the state’s population and attracts 27 percent of the new residents coming to Wisconsin from out of state. By comparison, Dane County contains 9 percent of Wisconsin’s population, but it attracts 16 percent of interstate migration.

**Age and Geographic Mobility**

The crucial ages for geographic mobility are the late teens and early 20s. These are the years that large numbers of young adults leave home, whether to attend college, to begin working, or for other reasons. In that initial burst of movement (ages 18–19), the Milwaukee area does not fare well. The region draws in about 6,500 people per year in this age group, but it loses 10,200, for a net loss of 3,700. The region improves among those 20 to 29, but still loses (net) in the neighborhood of 3,000. For those 30 to 34, there is a net loss of some 1,400. After these volatile years, the Milwaukee area’s migration trends stabilize at a net loss of a few hundred people per year across each older age group (aside from a slight population gain among those 75 and older).

In other words, the crucial part of the area’s population loss to migration comes among people from 18 into their early 30s. These statistics are for the entire five-county region. Inflows and outflows

of migrants by age vary dramatically from county to county within the region because some communities are higher-education hubs while others are not. Likewise, some areas are more congenial to young professionals, while others are more popular with people establishing families.

Consider the area’s two largest counties, Milwaukee and Waukesha. Milwaukee County is home to more than a half dozen universities and colleges, and this is reflected in its net positive migration among the college-aged. This positive balance turns net negative, however, among those in their 20s and especially among those in their early 30s, after which the county shows a stable, though slightly negative, migration trend. Waukesha County, in contrast, shows a different pattern. About 3,400 people aged 18 to 19 leave the area from Waukesha County alone. Of these, only about 600 move to Milwaukee County, while most move out of the five-county area. Waukesha County loses smaller numbers of people in their 20s and achieves small net growth among 30-somethings—a group Milwaukee slips with.

**Changes in Migration Patterns over Time**

In the 2000 decennial census, U.S. residents were asked where they had lived in 1995. The information gathered shows that Milwaukee County lost an average of 9,600 more people than it gained to migration each year during the late 1990s. Over

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the same time period, a net of 1,800 people moved to Waukesha County each year; Ozaukee and Washington posted smaller gains; and Racine averaged a loss of about 800 annually.

By 2015, circumstances had changed. During that year, the Census Bureau estimates that Milwaukee County lost only 3,700 people in net migration—more than a 60 percent improvement from a decade and a half earlier. While Milwaukee's losses were stemmed, Waukesha's growth had slowed. Only 300 more people moved in than left.

The fact that Waukesha's growth slowed as Milwaukee's migration health improved is not a coincidence. In fact, Waukesha's comparatively robust late-1990s growth did not represent regional health at all. Waukesha was not attracting large numbers of migrants from elsewhere in the country. It was mostly collecting people leaving Milwaukee.

This is clear when we look at net migration in and out of the five-county region instead of in and out of each county. In the late 1990s, about 3,800 more people each year moved from Milwaukee County to somewhere beyond the five-county region than vice versa. About 2,100 more people from Waukesha left the five-county area than entered the county from outside the region. Ozaukee lost 400 people annually to regional net migration, Racine lost 1,000, and Washington lost 900. In other words, none of the five counties managed to attract more migrants from *outside* the region than it lost. The positive net migration posted by the individual WOW (Waukesha–Ozaukee–Washington) counties would instead have been negative but for their gains from Milwaukee and Racine.

Regionally, the situation has improved, if only a little. From 1995 to 2000, the five-county region as a whole lost around 8,000 people per year to net migration. Forty-six percent of the loss came from Milwaukee County. By contrast, in 2015 the region lost slightly fewer—7,000—people to net migration. Regional migration losses increased in Ozaukee and Racine, but they decreased in Waukesha, Washington,

and Milwaukee. Milwaukee County's improvement has been the most significant, accounting for only 34 percent of this loss. Waukesha County contributed 27 percent. The fact that no county was able to break even (let alone grow) in net regional migration is a reason not to celebrate yet. Still, there are positive signs. The five-county region's net losses have declined in both absolute terms and as a proportion of the total population. The greatest improvement has come in Milwaukee County, where the number of people leaving has dropped to a level such that it now contributes an amount of the region's leavers similar to Waukesha's. Along with similar trends in employment and commuting, this suggests that structural differences between the region's counties have declined.

### Conclusion

The Milwaukee area has improved its migration performance over the past decade and a half—most notably in Milwaukee County itself. But the area still falls behind other metropolitan areas of the state in attracting new residents. In terms of migrants from out of state, the Milwaukee area faces stiff competition, especially from Dane County. And much of the migration *within* the state goes disproportionately to neither Dane nor Milwaukee but rather to smaller metropolitan counties.

To the extent that the Milwaukee area seeks to expand its population and workforce through attracting migrants to the state, it may first look to Illinois, which is a net provider of new Wisconsin residents from the Chicago area. In fact, state officials recently began marketing in the Chicago area to encourage people to move to Wisconsin, a step that has stirred some controversy in both Wisconsin and Illinois.

In all events, Wisconsin's relatively slow population growth in recent years may limit the workforce that it can provide unless migration into the state, and specifically into the five-county Milwaukee area, improves further—indeed, becomes net positive. ■



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