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**INFLUX OF LATINOS LEADS TO SPIKE IN DIVERSITY IN LARGELY WHITE WISCONSIN COUNTIES**

An influx of Latinos is helping some of the least diverse counties in Wisconsin rank among those in the country seeing the greatest relative increase in diversity.

A WisPolitics.com comparison of recently released 2017 American Community Survey estimates to data going back to 2009 shows that 15 Wisconsin counties rank in the top 10% of the nation in increases to their Simpson index. This metric gauges the probability on a scale of 1-100 that two people chosen at random will be from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

In order of largest gains to diversity over the eight-year period, they are: Trempealeau, Lafayette, Pepin, Chippewa, Price, Clark, Door, Sauk, Vernon, Iowa, Kewaunee, Richland, Pierce, Green, and Rusk counties.

These counties remain overwhelmingly white. All 15 have a white population that encompasses at least 90 percent of the total population. They also fall on average roughly seven points short of the state’s overall index score of 17.2 and 47 points short of the nation’s overall diversity marker.

But ACS data shows the white population share is shrinking — due in large part to an influx of Latinos. While some of this is driven by Latinos who live in Wisconsin moving away from their traditional base in the southeastern part of the state, UW-Madison political science Professor Benjamin Marquez told WisPolitics.com that Wisconsin is seeing “a lot of movement” directly from Mexico and South and Central America.

“What’s happening is that they are responding to a market; they’re responding to a market for employment,” he said.

UW-Madison Applied Population Lab Associate Director David Long agreed, noting the phenomenon was also “due in part to out-migration of non-Hispanic whites from some of those same communities.”

“There’s some evidence that the exodus of young, mostly white workers from rural Wisconsin communities creates a vacuum in the labor market and demands for workers in those areas that the Latino population is moving in to meet,” he said

According to Marquez, the growth in population was being spurred not only by employers seeking to fill positions in a strong economy with low unemployment, but also by Latinos already in the country recruiting friends and family from their native country.

“When somebody shows up in one of these small towns, they don’t do so willy nilly,” he said. “They’ve been told that there are opportunities that there could be a job there for them.”

While this process may have been “an accident of history” at first, Long said, “once it gets going it becomes a self-reinforcing phenomenon.”

Long added that changes to certain industries were also playing a role in the shifting demographics of rural Wisconsin. He pointed to the dairy industry, noting the shift away from traditional small dairy farmers to concentrated animal feeding operations that require “a large hired workforce as opposed to a few kids and maybe a few hired hands.”

While much of the focus on Latino immigrant labor tends to fall on agriculture — an industry Long says is “particularly reliant” on immigrant labor — ACS stats also show manufacturing was a close second as the industry with the largest number of Latinos in a majority of the 15 counties.

Those two industries alone employed roughly 50 percent of the Latinos who worked in those counties. That figure nearly doubles the rate for Latinos in the state as a whole, where employment is spread fairly evenly across the 13 categories tracked in the ACS data.

Marquez credited the spike in Latinos taking labor-oriented jobs in rural areas to migrants who come to the United States without receiving higher levels of education in their home countries.

“The typical immigrant comes to this country, at least from Mexico, with about a sixth-grade education and that’s equivalent to about the eighth grade here,” he said. “That’s what you can get free in Mexico.”

Marquez said because the school system in Mexico is built for those who can afford to pay for it, a majority of first-generation immigrants coming to Wisconsin look to work in industries that “tend to be physically hard enough to make others shy away.”

But Long said he wonders how long the shift westward will last.

“There have been lots of reports of immigrant workers from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America leaving Wisconsin as a result of increasing political hostility and immigration enforcement at the state and national levels, so the trends may already be shifting back,” he said.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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