**Fiscal Facts: Wisconsin’s Workforce Challenges Intensify**

The number of working-age individuals living in Wisconsin has declined for several straight years, as has the state’s youth population. Meanwhile, the aging baby-boom generation is greatly expanding the population of retirees. These shifts signal challenges ahead for the state’s workforce and economy.

For many years, our research on demographic trends in Wisconsin has exposed an “[impending storm](https://wispolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/1403_Wisconsin-2025.pdf)” on the horizon. Those of working age (18-64) are critical to the state’s productivity and ability to fill and create jobs.

After peaking in 2011 at 3.6 million, Wisconsin’s working-age population has receded by over 35,000 (or 1%) since, U.S. Census data shows. While relatively small, this string of losses reverses a long-term growth trend.

Making matters worse, Wisconsin’s population of youth under the age of 18 — a key source of future workers — also has decreased in recent years. The youth population has declined by over 45,000 since 2011, a 3.4% drop. That trend is likely to continue in the future as well; our past research has shown the state’s birth rate is at its lowest point in at least a generation and its fertility rate also has declined over the past decade.

The latest population and employment projections only add to concerns that Wisconsin could experience future worker shortages. The state’s Department of Workforce Development [projects](https://jobcenterofwisconsin.com/wisconomy/pub/occupation.htm) that between 2016 and 2026, total jobs in Wisconsin will increase by 210,178 (6.8%), and many more job openings will be created as baby boomers continue to retire.

The statewide decline in working-age residents has affected most though not all counties. Among the state’s 23 most populous counties, 17 have seen their working-age populations shrink since 2011. The working-age population in Wood County (where Wisconsin Rapids and Marshfield are located) has declined by the largest percentage (-5.9%) during that period, followed by Manitowoc County (-4.6%). Milwaukee County has lost the largest number of working-age residents (-8,846).

On the other end of the spectrum, Dane County has increased its working-age population by the largest number (>15,000) and percentage (4.7%) since 2011. Another exception is Outagamie County, which has seen its working-age population grow by 2.9%.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at wispolicyforum.org.*