**Fiscal Facts: Possible Solutions to Wisconsin’s Workforce Challenges**

As Wisconsin’s demographic makeup skews older, its leaders must consider measures to ensure its working-age population can support future economic growth.

The recent decline in the state’s working-age and youth populations could have sweeping repercussions for its economy and fiscal health — affecting the state’s ability to fill existing jobs, to attract new businesses and convince existing businesses to expand. To address the challenge, a range of state, federal, and private sector strategies could be considered.

New or expanded efforts could be made to increase labor force participation for Wisconsin’s existing population. For example, creating more flexible, part-time employment options could make it more attractive for seniors to stay in the labor force longer or for stay-at-home parents to pursue paid work.

Other efforts to encourage teens to work part-time could be pursued as well, as teen labor force participation has declined substantially since the 1990s. Census data shows Wisconsin has been among the states with the highest teen labor force participation rates for at least a decade, but participation in Wisconsin has declined along with the national trend and was under 52% in 2017.

People with criminal records are another potential labor pool that could be better utilized. Reducing barriers to employment imposed by criminal records, such as by expanding re-entry services that help ease the transition of formerly incarcerated individuals into the community and workforce, could prove effective.

Another set of strategies could focus on attracting more people to Wisconsin from other states or countries. Our research has shown more people have moved away from Wisconsin than to the state every year for more than a decade. One option, for example, would be for the University of Wisconsin System to continue to increase enrollment of non-resident students at its institutions, which it has already been doing in recent years.

Though always a highly contentious topic, proposals to expand immigration in a targeted manner to fill identified workforce shortages have begun to garner national attention as well. For example, the bipartisan Economic Innovation Group has proposed a federal “Heartland Visa” program to attract skilled workers from abroad to areas of the country with declining populations.

While solutions to the challenges brought on by Wisconsin’s shrinking workforce could come in a range of forms, it is clear that the situation demands increased attention from state policymakers.

*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.*