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Moving In, Moving Out

—Dale Knapp, Director of Research & Analysis, Wisconsin Counties Association

Wisconsinites must really like the Badger State. At least that

is what the latest migration estimates seem to say.

Recently released figures, based on IRS tax filings for 2016-2018, show that over three years about 300,000 people left Wisconsin for other locations. While seemingly large, that number was only about 2% of the state’s population. Just four states – California, Minnesota, Michigan, and Ohio – had smaller percentages of their residents moving out.

Since about the same number of people moved into the state, Wisconsin lost only 6,000 people to migration during those years.

Where To? From Where?

Because of proximity, Wisconsin’s neighbors are among the top source and destination states.

What may be surprising is that from each, the state gains more residents than it loses. Net gains during those three years were 23,896 from Illinois, 1,629 from Iowa, 768 from Michigan, and 321 from Minnesota.

The largest net losses for Wisconsin generally were to warm weather states with Florida

(-9,355) and Arizona (-6,299) leading the way. Other states where net losses topped 2,000 were Texas, North Carolina, Colorado, Georgia, and Tennessee.

Who Comes & Who Goes?

Because the data is based on tax filings, movers can be tracked by age and income. While the state had a small net loss among all movers, it gained among a small set of people. The state’s greatest success was with households headed by people 26 to 44 years of age with incomes between \$25,000 and \$75,000. Wisconsin added 2,336 people in this demographic.

Wisconsin historically has struggled retaining young people and the IRS figures confirm this. The state lost 5,537 residents in families headed by someone under 26 years of age.

The struggles with higher income families of this age was more troubling. Within the under 26 cohort, about 3% had incomes above \$75,000. However, 17%

Wisconsin Migration Patterns With Other States

Largest Net Gains and Losses, 2016-2018

State	Net	State	Net
Illinois	23,896	Florida	-9,355
Iowa	1,629	Arizona	-6,299
North Dakota	863	Texas	-3,925
New York	772	North Carolina	-2,545
Michigan	768	Colorado	-2,429

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of the net loss occurred in this income bracket. Wisconsin ranked 48th among the states in net retention of this group, with only Connecticut and Delaware worse.

Reversing a Downward Trend

While the state was a net loser of people during the entire three years, it added small numbers of residents in both 2017 (658) and 2018 (555). This was part of an important reversal of a long-term worsening of migration patterns.

In the 1990s, Wisconsin gained thousands of residents from other states or nations, peaking at 16,429 in 1993

according to the IRS. Net gains declined in most years during 1991-2004 and turned to net losses in 2005. Beginning in that year, the state went on a 12-year run of more people leaving the state than moving in. Net losses bottomed out in 2014 just over 10,000 people. In the last two years for which we have data, losses have again become gains.

Big Picture

The recent turnaround in migration is good news, especially considering the worker shortages reported throughout the state. However, small gains

History of Wisconsin Net Migration 1991-2018



are not enough. Wisconsin’s demographics are such that it needs to import tens of thousands of people annually just to maintain its workforce over the next decade. ♦

