

THREE 2020 CENSUS SURPRISES

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

The first batch of data from the 2020 census was released in mid-August to allow county and municipal officials to begin the decennial redistricting process. For economists and demographers, these numbers provide the first snapshot of how Wisconsin's population has changed over the decade.

Three data points stand out as somewhat surprising:

1. Wisconsin's state population grew more than expected.
2. The number of people moving to Wisconsin was significantly larger than previous estimates.
3. A significant number of baby boomers likely retired to northern Wisconsin, easing the rural to urban shift in population.

FASTER GROWTH

The 2020 census put Wisconsin's population at 5,893,718, an increase of 3.6% (206,732 people) over 10 years. Compared to the prior decade (+6.0%), growth was fairly anemic. However, 2010-2020 population gains were much higher than most had expected.

Just last year, the Census Bureau had estimated that Wisconsin added 135,448 people during 2010-19, a 2.4% increase. Based on the nine-year trend, the 2020 census population number should have come in near 5.83 million. Instead, it was about 60,000 higher than that.

MORE IN-MIGRATION

What did Census Bureau demographers miss? Migration to the state.

Population changes can be broken into two parts. The first component is natural change, or births minus deaths. When the Census Bureau publishes its population estimates for a particular year, births and deaths, or natural change, are known for all but the most recent year.

The second component is net migration, or the difference between the number of people moving into the state and the number moving out. In years between each census, that number is estimated using other data, such as tax returns and Medicare enrollments.

As of 2019, the Census Bureau estimated that about 12,000 more residents left Wisconsin since 2010 than moved here from other states or countries. However, we know that the state's natural population growth during 2010-2020 was approximately 150,000 (661,000 births and 511,000 deaths). With total population change over the decade of nearly 207,000, net migration into the state had to be around 57,000. While that was less than net migration between 2000 and 2010 (about 80,000), it was significantly more than the 2019 Census Bureau estimates.

RURAL GROWTH

Just as the migration numbers surprised, so did population gains in several rural northern counties. As expected, Dane (+15.0%) and St. Croix (+10.9%) counties led the way in terms of population growth. However, significant population increases in Sawyer (+9.2%), Door (+8.2%), Bayfield (+8.0%), Vilas (+7.5%), and Burnett (+6.9%) counties were not anticipated. Oneida, Washburn, Iron, and Florence counties also saw gains of more than 3%.



As a group, the Census Bureau estimated that these nine rural counties experienced a slight population loss during 2010-2019. However, the census showed a gain of 6.7%. What might be happening? Housing data from the 2020 census point to two possible explanations.

These nine counties were among the top 11 counties in the state in terms of unoccupied housing units in 2010. Most were vacation homes. The 2020 census figures show total housing units changed little over the decade. However, unoccupied housing units in these counties declined 11% since 2010 and the number of occupied housing units rose more than 10%.

One explanation for the changes in population and housing is related to COVID-19 and remote work. The pandemic allowed many people to “work from home,” and some may have chosen to work remotely from their vacation homes. Owners of these homes are required to fill out a census questionnaire for the property and indicate that it is a vacation home and that they do not live there permanently. For remote work during the pandemic to explain the population surge, significant

numbers of remote workers would have had to claim these properties as their primary residence. While possible, it seems unlikely.

A more probable explanation is a significant number of baby boomers retiring to northern Wisconsin. In 2010, Wisconsin had nearly 700,000 residents ages 55 to 64 and nearing retirement. During 2010-2020, the nine counties identified above had a net in-migration of more than 17,000 people. It is not improbable to conclude that over a 10-year period, less than 2.5% of the 700,000 opted to retire in northern Wisconsin. It is also possible that some residents of Illinois or Minnesota who had Wisconsin vacation homes chose to retire there.

Spread over nine counties and 10 years, much of this movement would likely go unnoticed as it would not require the building of new homes. It would be difficult for the Census Bureau to pick up on this migration, which could explain the relatively large population “miss” during 2010-2019.

Over the next couple of years, the Census Bureau will release more detailed data from the 2020 census. As those numbers become available, we may be able to shed more light on this surprising population shift. ♦

COUNTY POPULATION CHANGE
2010-2020

