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GROWING DIVERSITY IN WISCONSIN

30 Years of Racial and Ethnic Changes

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

Wisconsin's population in continually changing. After rising between 1990-2000, the state's under-18 population has declined over the past two decades. The state's senior population has increased nearly 60% since 1990 helping to increase Wisconsin's median age from 33 to 40. And, Wisconsin's population is becoming more racially diverse.

As recently as 1990, 91% of state residents were non-Hispanic white persons, a percentage that was significantly higher than the national average of 76%. Only 11 states, including Iowa and Minnesota, were less diverse in that year.

Since then, non-white populations¹ have increased significantly across the nation and in Wisconsin, while non-Hispanic white populations have barely

changed. By 2020, non-Hispanic white residents comprised less than 79% of Wisconsin's population and 58% of the U.S. population.

GROWING NON-WHITE POPULATIONS

The number of Wisconsin residents increased 20.5% from 1990 to 2020, with gains slowing during each decade. Despite the sluggish overall growth, the number of non-white residents nearly tripled, increasing 194.9%. Non-white population gains were 71.7% during 1990-2000, 39.9% from 2000 to 2010, and 33.4% during 2010-2020.

This growth is in sharp contrast to the 3.8% increase in Wisconsin's non-Hispanic white population during those years. This cohort actually declined 2.3% during 2010-2020.

By Race & Ethnicity

Some non-white groups have increased much more than others since 1990. Wisconsin's Hispanic population grew fastest, up 380% over 30 years. The rapid growth raised their share of total population from 1.9% in 1990 to 7.6% in 2020.

The state's Asian, Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander population grew 237% during this period. At just over 1% of the state's population in 1990, this cohort now accounts for 3% of the state total.

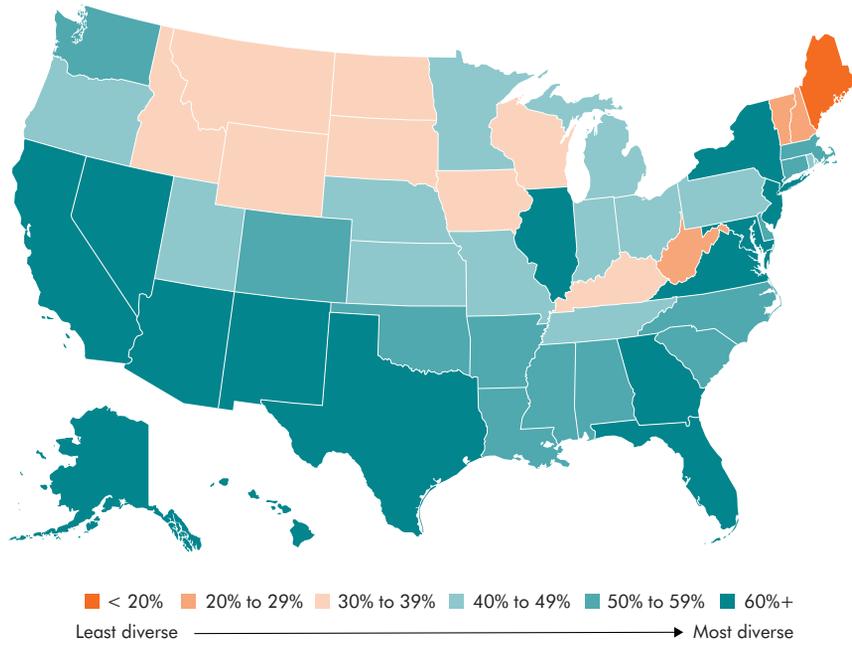
Wisconsin's Black or African American population grew 52% and their population share rose from 4.9% to 6.2% of the state total. The smallest gains (28%) occurred among American Indians and Alaskan Natives; their population share remained largely unchanged at 0.8%.

By County

Growth in non-white populations have been large across all Wisconsin counties except Menominee, where most residents are American Indian. Increases during 1990-2020 ranged from a near doubling in Milwaukee, Sawyer, and Forest counties to a more than 10-fold increase in nine counties that had few non-white residents in 1990.

¹ For this article, non-white groups are based on Census Bureau categories: Hispanic of any race and four non-Hispanic groups: Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; and other.

WISCONSIN LESS DIVERSE THAN MOST
Census Bureau Diversity Index, 2020



The widespread growth in non-white populations is illustrated by focusing on four counties. In 1990, the counties of Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha, and Dane were home to 33% of all state residents but 76% of non-white residents. In 2020, their share of total population was unchanged at 33%, but their share of non-white residents had fallen to less than 58%. This indicates a significant shift of non-white populations to the other 68 counties.

HOW DIVERSE ARE WE?

Clearly, Wisconsin’s population has become more diverse over the past 30 years. But compared to other states, how diverse was the state in 2020? The U.S. Census Bureau measures diversity with an index that answers the question: If two random people were selected from a state (or a county), what is the percent chance they would differ in terms of race and ethnicity? The larger the percentage the greater the diversity.

On this measure, Wisconsin has moved from 16.4% in 1990 to 37.0% in 2020. In other words, if two random Wisconsinites were chosen in 2020, there was a 37% chance they would differ in race or ethnicity. However, even with the large increase, Wisconsin ranked 39th among the states in 2020. Among midwestern states, only Iowa came in with a lower score.

Wisconsin’s 72 counties have also become more diverse over time, but the diversity index for most remains low. In 2020, half of the state’s 72 counties had a diversity index under 20% and another 24 were under 30%. The most diverse counties were Milwaukee (67%), Racine (50%), Kenosha (45%), and Dane (41%).

LOOKING AHEAD

During 2010-2020, there were stark differences in births, deaths, and migration of the non-Hispanic white population and the non-white population. During these years, the state’s non-Hispanic white population had about 8,400 more births than deaths. However, a net outmigration of approximately 117,000 residents resulted in the 2.3% population decline mentioned above. Despite being significantly smaller in number, the state’s non-white population saw births outpace deaths by 140,000 and a net in-migration of nearly 175,000.

If these rates of change continue over the next decade, Wisconsin’s population will continue to become much more diverse. It will also mean that the state’s population will grow faster in the current decade than in the last one. ♦