

Wisconsin Commuting Trends: Selected Measures and Selected Contributing Factors

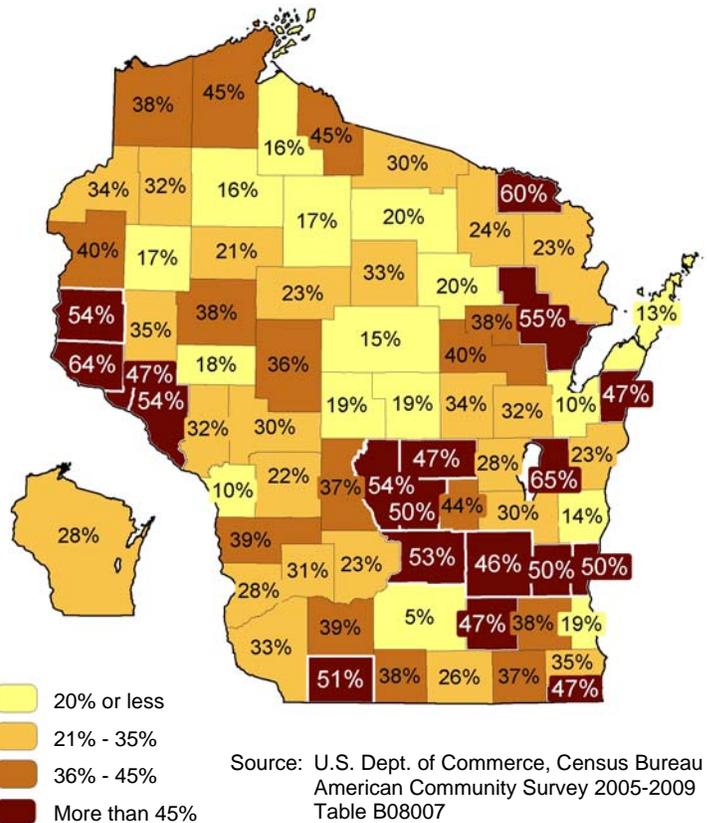
When discussing commuting, the most basic question is this: "How many of the county's working residents leave the county for work?" Each day, 28% of Wisconsin's working residents leave the counties where they live; they work in other counties and return home after work. The map in the upper right portion of this page reveals some ways in which some counties can be grouped and some interesting ways in which the groups differ from one another.

For example, some of the counties nearest Minneapolis-St. Paul see particularly high shares of working residents commuting out of their counties of residence. In northeastern Wisconsin, three of the six counties adjacent to Brown County lose over 45 percent of their working residents each day, and two of those counties (along with Brown County) belong to the Green Bay Metropolitan Statistical Area. (See page 4 map, labeled with county names.)

The pull of nearby metropolitan areas probably explains high commuting numbers in Columbia County (just north of Madison), Dodge and Jefferson Counties (between the Madison and Milwaukee areas) as well as Washington and Ozaukee counties (northwest and north of Milwaukee, respectively).

In the center of the state, Adams, Marquette, Waushara, and Green Lake counties include a good deal of rural area with high shares of outbound commuters. On page two, the

Share of Working Residents who Leave County for Work



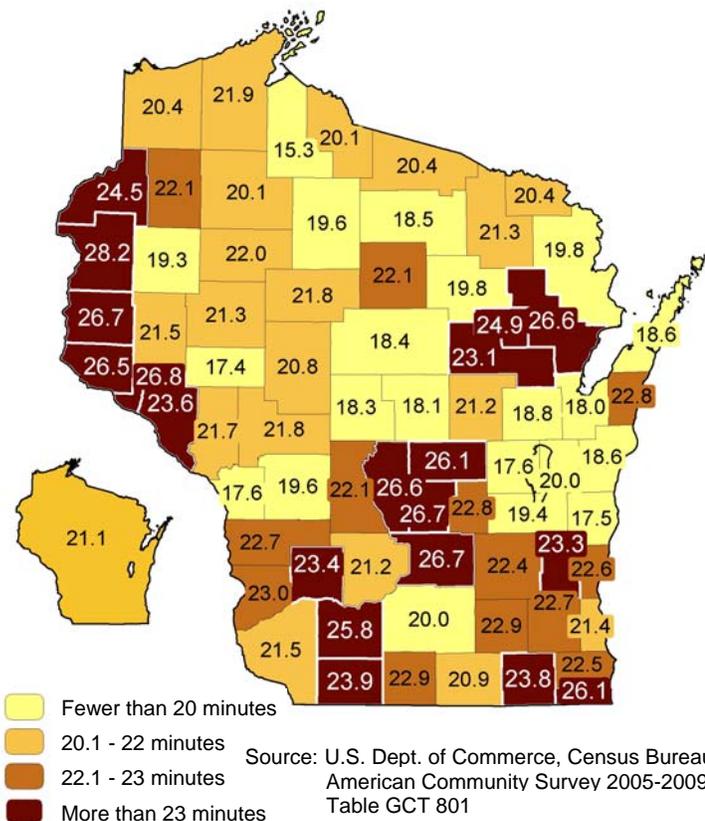
analysis of job density and average weekly wage is relevant to this area of the state and to Florence County, whose outbound commuters constitute 60% of its working residents, the highest share in any Wisconsin county.

In the lower left portion of this page, the map showing average travel time to work for each county indicates that the statewide average is 22.1 minutes.

Jefferson County shows a fairly high share of working residents commuting out of county (47%), but its average commute time (22.9 minutes) does not seem exceptionally high. Two of its ten largest communities, Watertown and Whitewater, straddle county borders, so people leaving the county could be driving within their own hometowns. Also, I-94, the interstate highway connecting Madison and Milwaukee, bisects the county.

Conversely, Crawford and Richland counties have longer average commutes (23.0 minutes and 23.4 minutes, respectively) without having terribly high shares of workers leaving the county (28% and 31%, respectively). At least part of this dynamic is attributable to the absence of a nearby magnet for workers and the relatively low density of high-speed roads for leaving the county. Along Wisconsin's northern border, Florence County's main population centers (the Town of Florence, and the Town of Aurora) are both fairly close to the border that separates them from Iron Mountain, the local job magnet.

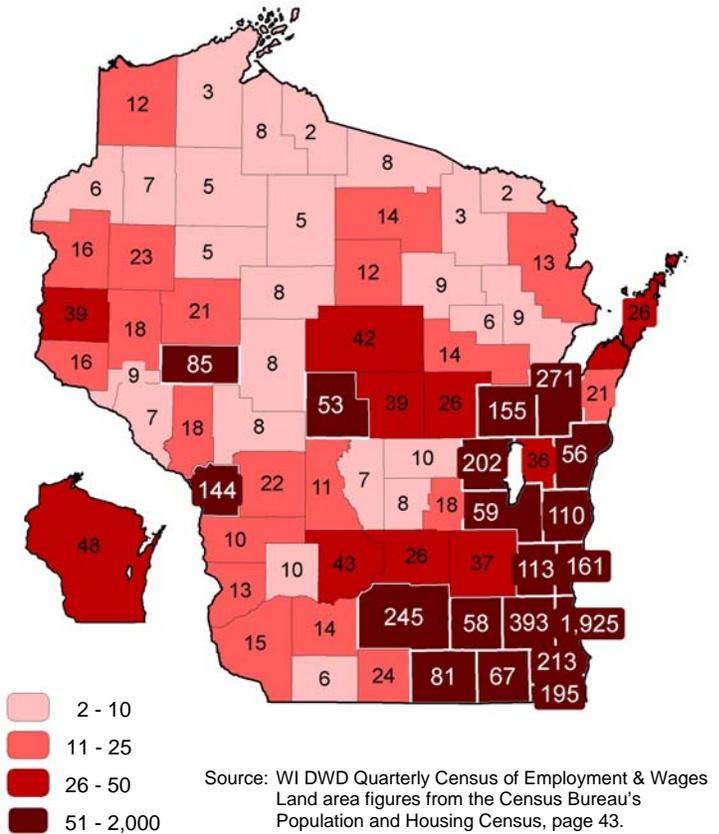
Average Travel Time to Work



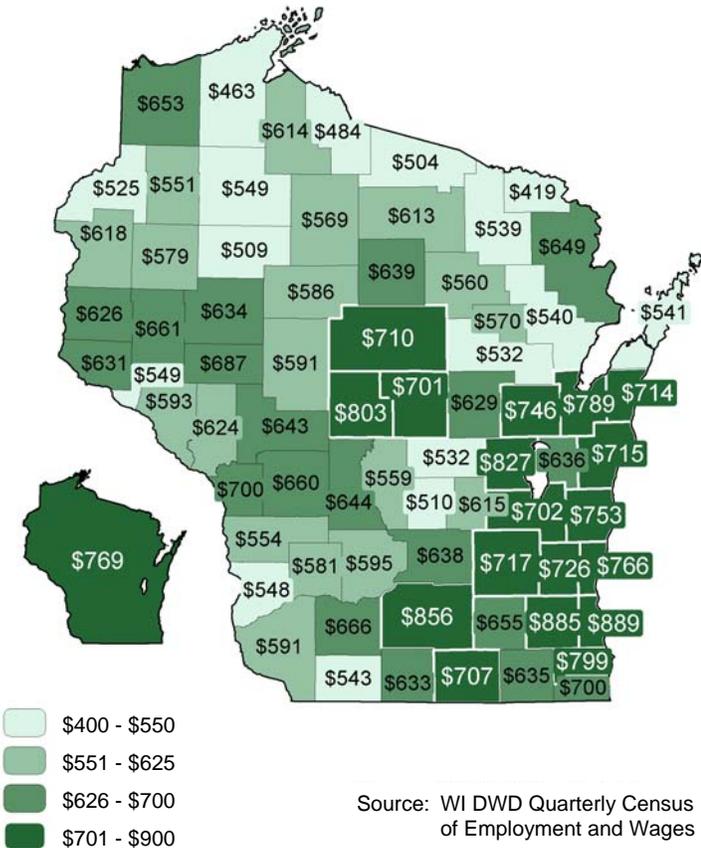
When workers decide where to work or where to look for work, two questions they are likely to ask are “How many jobs are there in my area and nearby areas?” and “How do pay scales compare in nearby areas?” The map in the upper right portion of this page addresses the first question, and it shows that job density varies significantly in Wisconsin. While the statewide average is 48 jobs per square mile, several counties in the southeastern corner of the state have more than 100 jobs per square mile while several counties in the northern tier of the state (say, north of highway 29) have fewer than 10 jobs per square mile. It will surprise almost no reader to see that counties with lower job density often see larger shares of their working residents commuting out for work. If all other things were equal, the fewer jobs per square mile there are in a county, the more likely that county’s residents are to consider leaving the county for work.

All other things are rarely equal though, so there are some wrinkles in the narrative. Compared with the statewide average, job density seems fairly high in Washington and Ozaukee counties (113 and 161 jobs per square mile, respectively). However, both of these counties see half of their working residents leave the county for work. Milwaukee’s proximity and its 1,925 jobs per square mile probably contribute considerably to commuters leaving Washington and Ozaukee counties. Interstate Highway 43 and State Highways 41 and 45 facilitate these trips. The same analysis applies to Kenosha County with its proximity to the greater Chicago area.

Jobs per Square Mile



Average Weekly Wage



The average weekly wage map in the lower left portion of this page offers further insight into what might pull workers in (or pull workers out). While job density and wages would seem likely to pull people into Madison and Milwaukee, house prices and perceptions about school districts sometimes motivate workers to commute greater distances rather than live closer to work. Marathon County (average wage \$710) has one neighbor with nearly equal wages, Portage County (\$701), and one neighbor with higher wages, Wood County (\$803). Wood County’s higher wage is largely driven by an industry mix that leans more toward health care. The commuter maps on page one show that Marathon, Wood, and Portage counties lose relatively small shares of their working residents to outbound commuting and enjoy low average travel times to work.

Brown County, Milwaukee County, and Dane County have higher wages than the counties that surround them. On one hand, housing costs are often lower in an area like Marquette County than a place like Dane County, which is just one county away. On the other hand, the differential in average weekly wages (\$510 versus \$856, respectively), probably reflects at least some real difference in material well-being. We expect Milwaukee County’s commuters to be numerous because it is Wisconsin’s most populous city; we expect many inbound commuters to cross county lines because Milwaukee County is the third-smallest (by land area). Wausau is a less populous city in Wisconsin’s largest county, so the analysis is somewhat inverted.



If you have questions or concerns, please email the author or call him on the telephone.

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