Comprehensive
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Strategy

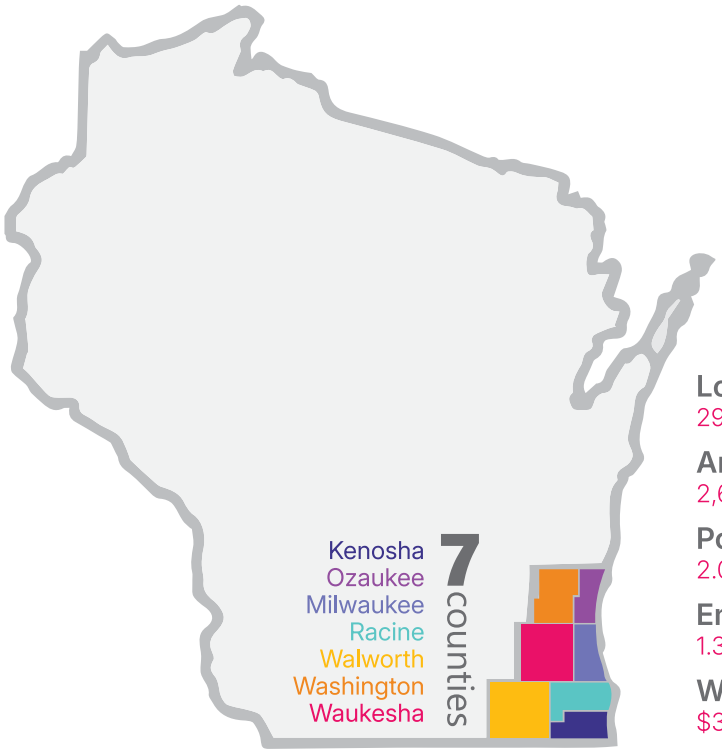
SUMMARY BACKGROUND

Overview

The Summary Background information establishes a foundation for the rest of the CEDS by presenting information that affects the regional economy. This section takes an inventory of the current conditions of the economy, including its population, demographics, education, housing, natural resources, infrastructure, income levels, areas of economic distress, and other important components of the regional economy. Comparing these conditions to historical trends and future projections is vital to generating sound economic development strategies and providing insight into how to grow the Region's economy. Key conclusions from the Summary Background are presented at the end of this section.

The Region is geographically in good position regarding continued growth and development and has grown slowly but steadily for many decades. Southeastern Wisconsin is bounded to the east by Lake Michigan, which is an integral part of a major international transportation network. The proximity to the greater Chicago metro area directly to the south has significant ramifications for the Region's economy. To the west and north of the Region are the fertile agricultural and desirable recreation areas of the rest of the State of Wisconsin. Many of the most important industrial areas and heaviest population concentrations in the Midwest are within 250 miles of the Region. Southeastern Wisconsin should leverage these advantages to achieve desires and sustainable growth. Insights into the historical, existing, and projected conditions impacting the Region's economy follow.

Region Overview



Local Governments
29 Cities | 67 Villages | 50 Towns

Area
2,689 Square Miles | 5% of State

Population
2.04 Million | 35% of State

Employment
1.34 Million Jobs | 35% of State

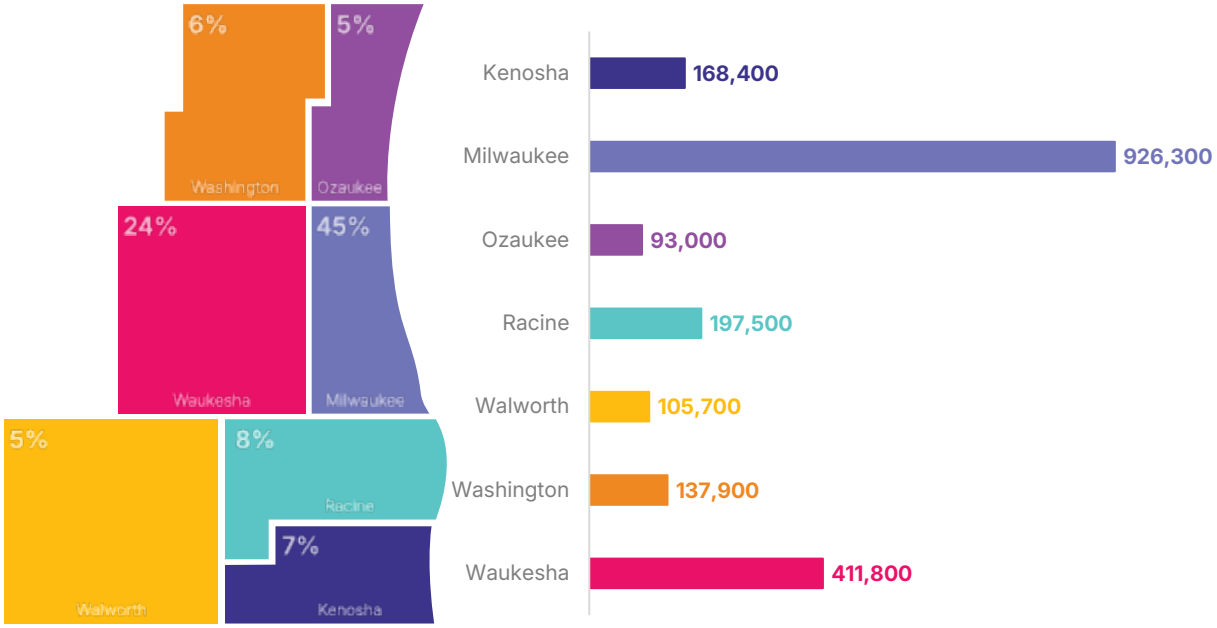
Wealth
$313.2 Billion Equalized Valuation | 35% of State

Population and Demographics

Population Size, Growth, and Distribution

The population in Southeastern Wisconsin was 2,040,600 in 2024, which accounted for more than one-third of the state's population. The Region's most populous counties are Milwaukee and Waukesha. From 1970 to 2024, the Region has grown slowly (16%), substantially outpaced by both statewide (34%) and national growth (65%). An implication of a slow growth rate on the Region's economic competitiveness is a shortage of workers to fill job openings.

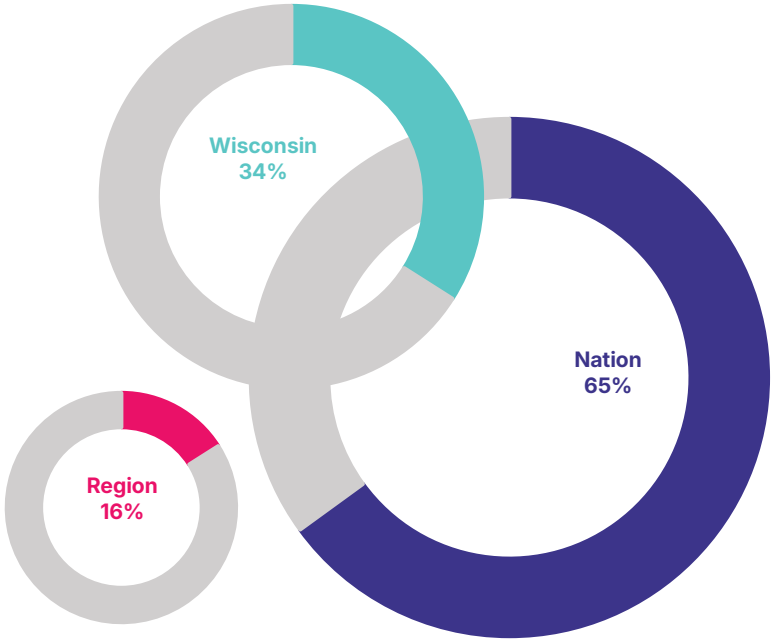
Population by County: 2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (2020-2024) and SEWRPC, 11/2026

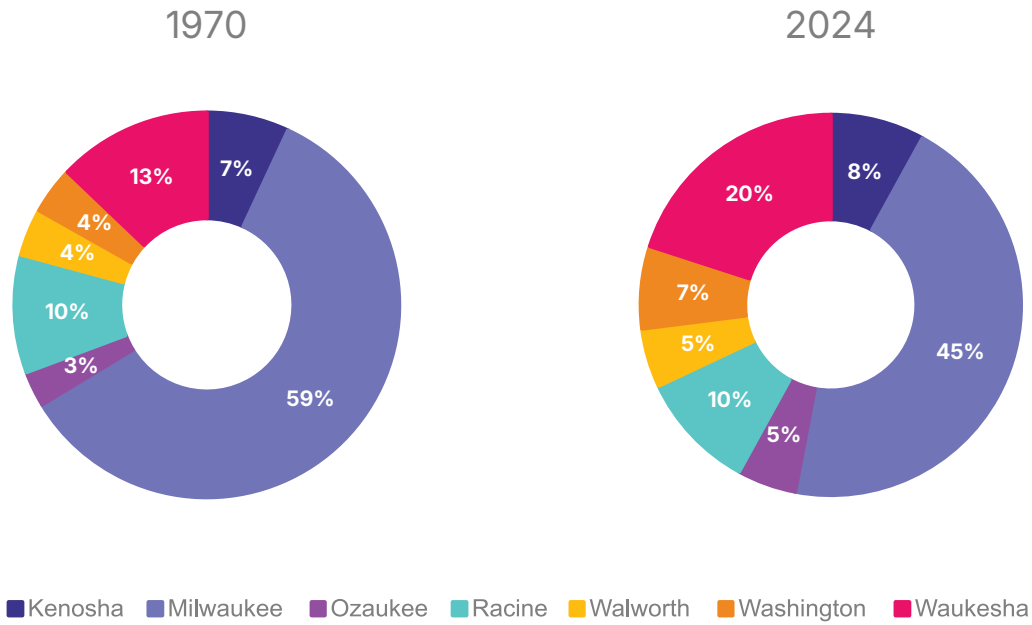
The Region's population distribution has shifted over the past several decades, with Milwaukee County's share of the regional population declining while the share for the remaining six counties, especially Waukesha, increased. From 1970 to 2000, Milwaukee County's population decreased by about 11%, while the total population of the other six counties increased by about 42%. Since 2000, however, Milwaukee County's population decline has slowed, decreasing by about 1%. There has been significant development activity in several Milwaukee neighborhoods, particularly in and near Downtown, as well as other Milwaukee County communities; however, development activity has lagged in other parts of the city.

Population Growth: 1970-2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (2020-2024) and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Population Distribution: 1970-2024

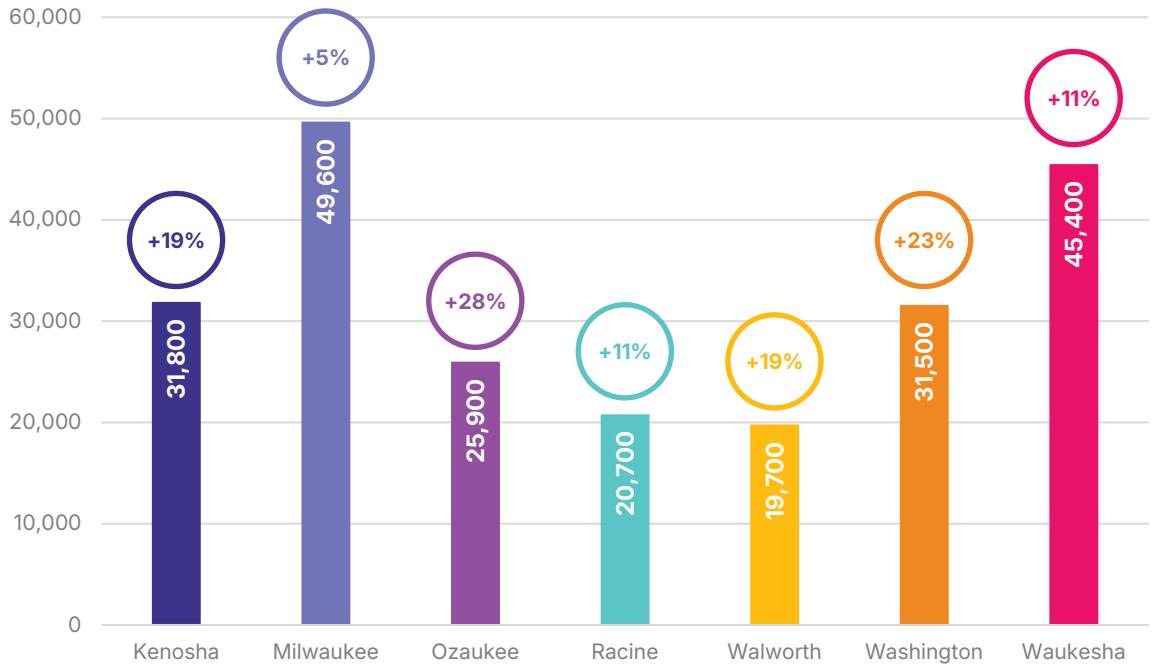


Source: U.S. Census Bureau (1970), U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (2020-2024), and SEWRPC, 11/2026

By the year 2060 the Region's population is projected to increase by 11% from 2.04 to 2.27 million. All counties in the Region are projected to grow to varying degrees over the next few decades. Kenosha County is projected to experience the highest growth rate, with Milwaukee County experiencing the lowest growth rate. However, while Milwaukee County is projected to have the lowest percentage increase, it is projected to have the highest population growth in absolute numbers.

The population projections are based on consideration of the three components of population change: births, deaths, and migration. Net migration is the difference between the number of residents moving into the Region and the number of residents moving out of the Region. Net migration patterns in the Region since 1960 have generally reflected modest out-migration, with the only recent decade of regional net in-migration in the 1990s. International migration has been a key component of overall migration trends, and nearly 34,000 residents moved to the Region from other countries in the 2010s. With the overall population growing at a slower pace than jobs, to grow the economy, Southeastern Wisconsin will need to compete with other parts of the country and the world to attract new residents to fill additional, new jobs.

Projected Population Growth: 2024-2060

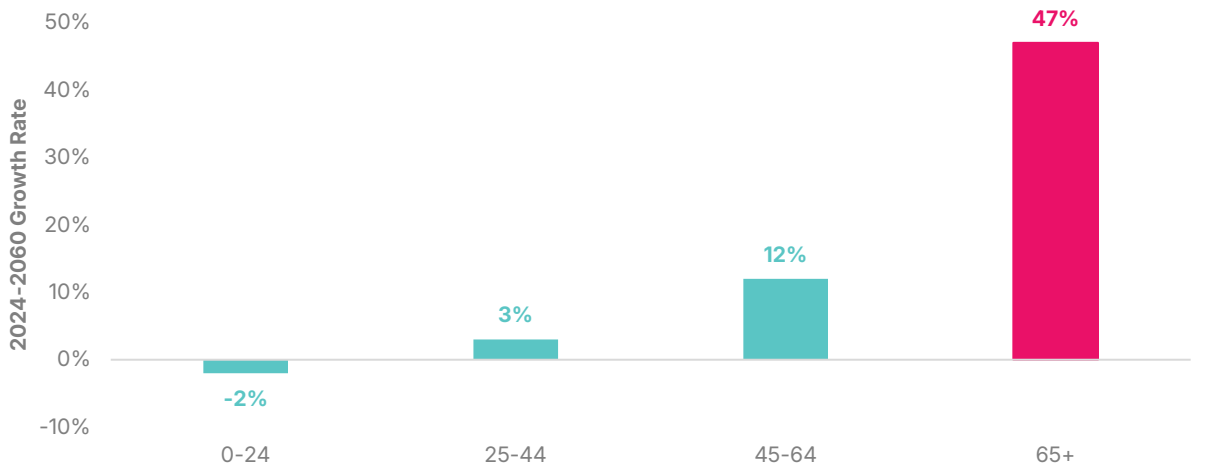


Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (2020-2024) and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Aging Population

More than half of the Region's population falls between the ages of 25 and 64, which represents the prime workforce. However, the number of residents age 65 and older is projected to increase significantly, reflecting the aging of the Baby Boomer generation. The entire Baby Boomer population will have reached 65 by the year 2030, creating a need for replacement workers.

Aging Population



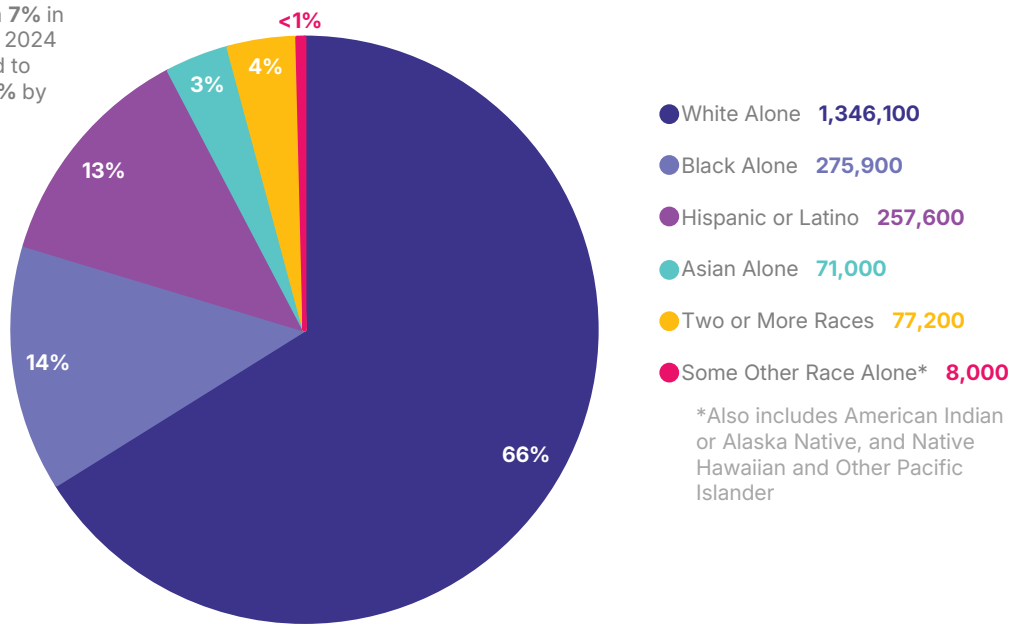
Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Race and Ethnicity

The Region grew more racially and ethnically diverse since 2010 as the racial and ethnic minority population increased approximately 19% between 2010 and 2024. Over the same period, the non-Hispanic White population declined modestly in both number and share of the total population. Minority populations grew in every county but remain heavily concentrated in the Region's largest cities. Nearly 70% of the Region's minority population lives in Milwaukee County and concentration patterns vary by group. Black or African American residents are especially concentrated in Milwaukee County, home to more than 84% of the Region's Black population. About 64% of Asian residents live in Milwaukee County, with an additional 22% of the Asian population living in Waukesha County. The Region's Hispanic population is concentrated in Milwaukee, Kenosha, and Racine Counties, which together accounted for about 83% of Hispanic residents in 2024. Non-Hispanic white residents remain the largest racial or ethnic in the Region, accounting for 66% of the population in 2024. Black or African American residents remain the second largest group and make up approximately 14% of the Region's population.

Population by Race and Ethnicity: 2024

The **minority** share of the population **increased** from **7%** in 1970 to **34%** in 2024 and is expected to **increase** to **49%** by 2060.



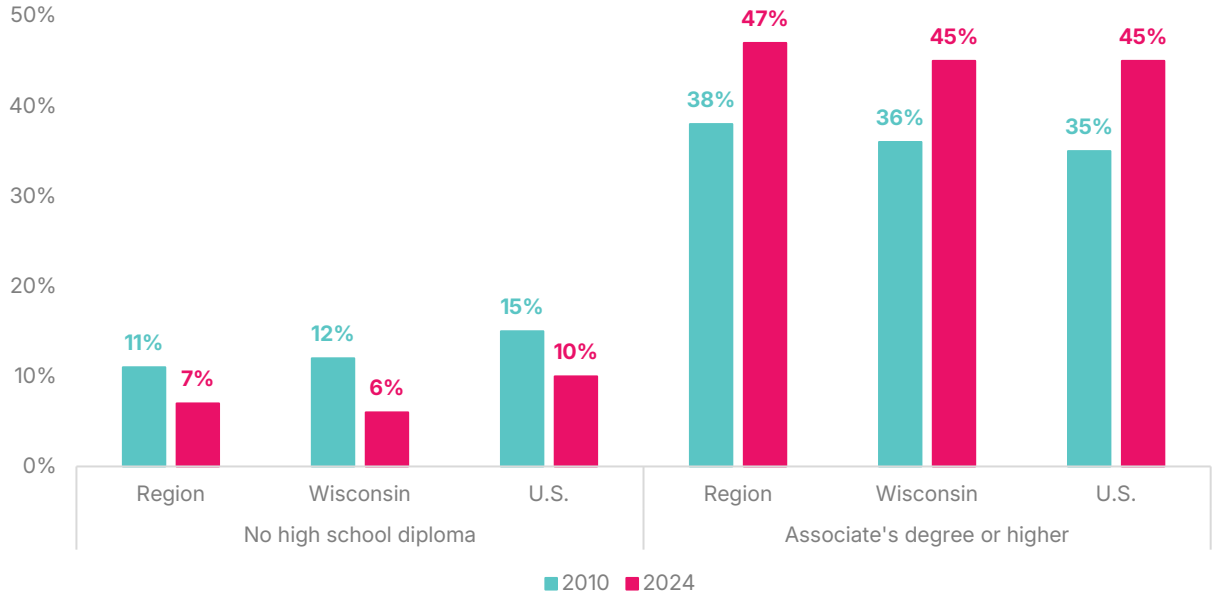
Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Educational Attainment

Since 2010, the Region has seen an overall improvement in educational attainment. Of the Region's population age 25 and older, the percentage with a college degree (associate's or higher) grew from 38% in 2010 to 47% in 2024 and the percentage without a high school diploma or equivalent dropped slightly from 11% in 2010 to 7% in 2024. The Region has a slightly higher proportion of college graduates than both the State and the Nation. However, educational attainment varies by county, with Kenosha, Milwaukee, and Racine Counties having 7% or greater of the population without a high school diploma. The geographical and racial disparities, particularly impacting lower-income students in the Region's central cities, present a major workforce challenge hindering the Region's economic competitiveness.

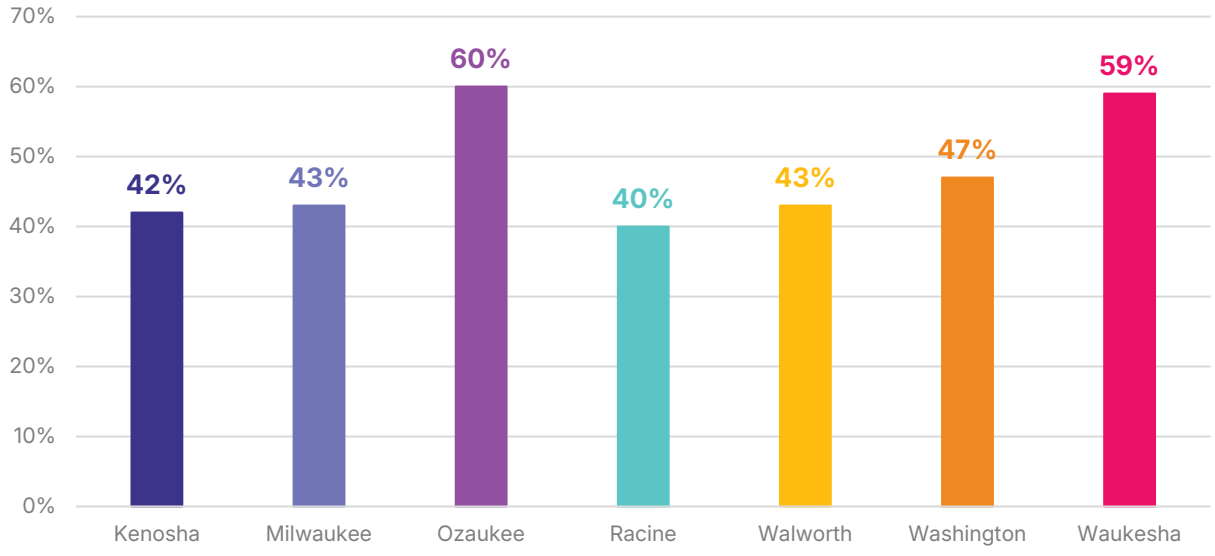
While the Region has relatively high educational attainment and a relatively high proportion of college graduates, regional stakeholders have emphasized the need to align educational programs and workforce training more closely to the needs of employers, particularly in the manufacturing sector. To do this it will be important to identify occupations or workforce skills that are critically important to the Region's economic growth strategy and provide training programs that have clearly understood outcomes with demonstrable job and career results.

Educational Attainment Levels: 2010-2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Percent of Population 25+ with an Associate's Degree or Higher: 2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC, 11/2026

The Region is home to 15 major colleges and universities and 9 technical college campuses, with a total enrollment exceeding 149,000 in 2023, per the *2025-2026 Wisconsin Blue Book*.

- Wisconsin Technical College System (2023 Total Enrollment: 76,400)
    - Gateway Technical College
    - Milwaukee Area Technical College
    - Moraine Park Technical College
    - Waukesha County Technical College

- Public Universities and Colleges (2023 Total Enrollment: 39,000)
    - UW-Milwaukee
    - UW-Parkside
    - UW-Whitewater
    - UWM-Washington County
    - UWM-Waukesha

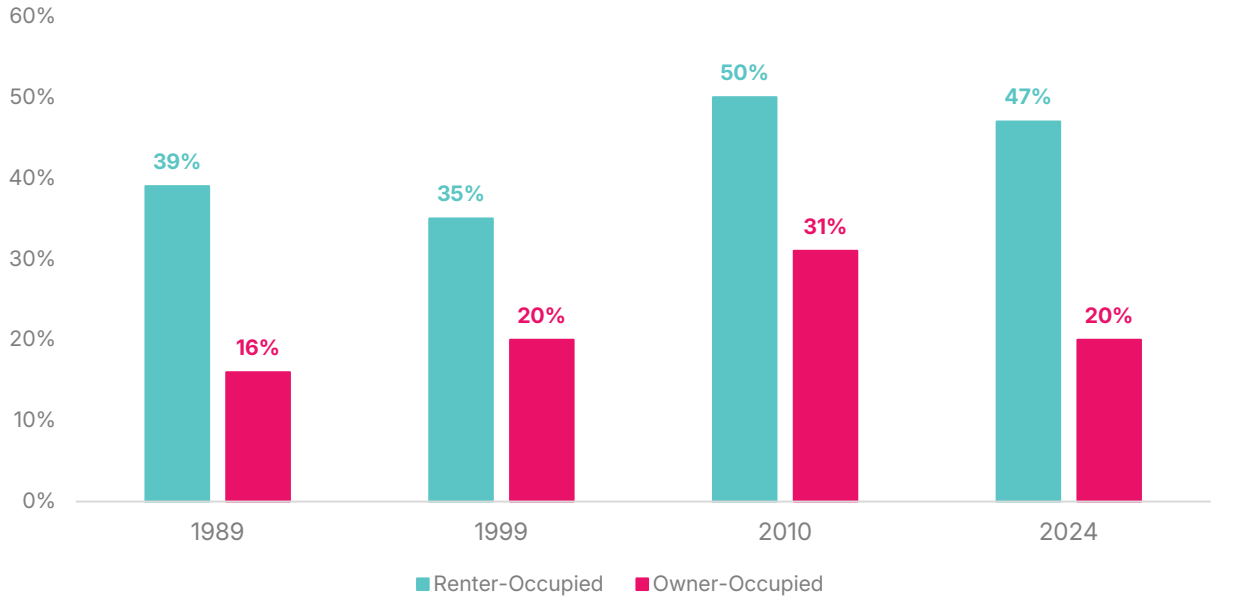
- Private Universities and Colleges (2023 Total Enrollment: 28,200)
    - Alverno College
    - Carroll University
    - Carthage College
    - Concordia University Wisconsin
    - Marquette University
    - Mount Mary University
    - Wisconsin Lutheran College

- Private Technical and Professional Colleges (2023 Total Enrollment: 5,600)
    - Medical College of Wisconsin
    - Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design
    - Milwaukee School of Engineering

Housing

Access to affordable housing plays a major role in the Region's economic competitiveness and resilience. Housing costs are considered affordable if they do not exceed 30% of a household's monthly income. The percentage of households paying more than 30% of their monthly income for housing costs in the Region has increased significantly since 1989.

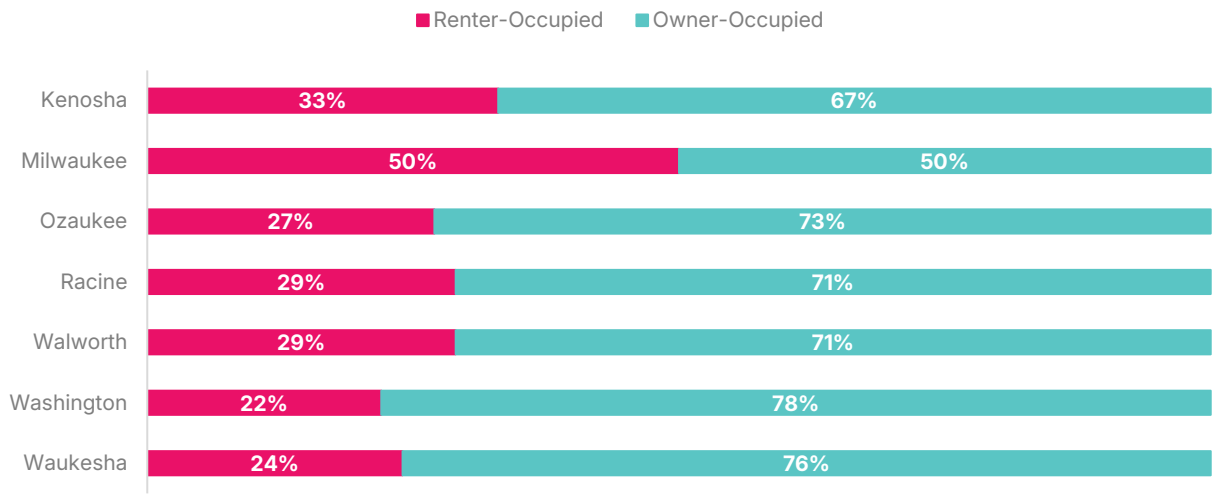
Households Paying More than 30% of Their Income for Housing: 1989-2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (2020-2024) and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Comparing housing affordability to other peer metros across the country, the median value of owner-occupied housing for the Milwaukee metro area in 2022 ($289,600) ranks fourth highest among Midwest peers and in the lower third among national peers outside the Midwest. The median monthly rent for renter-occupied housing in the Milwaukee metro area ($1,054) ranks in the middle among Midwest metro areas and is second lowest among national peers outside the Midwest.

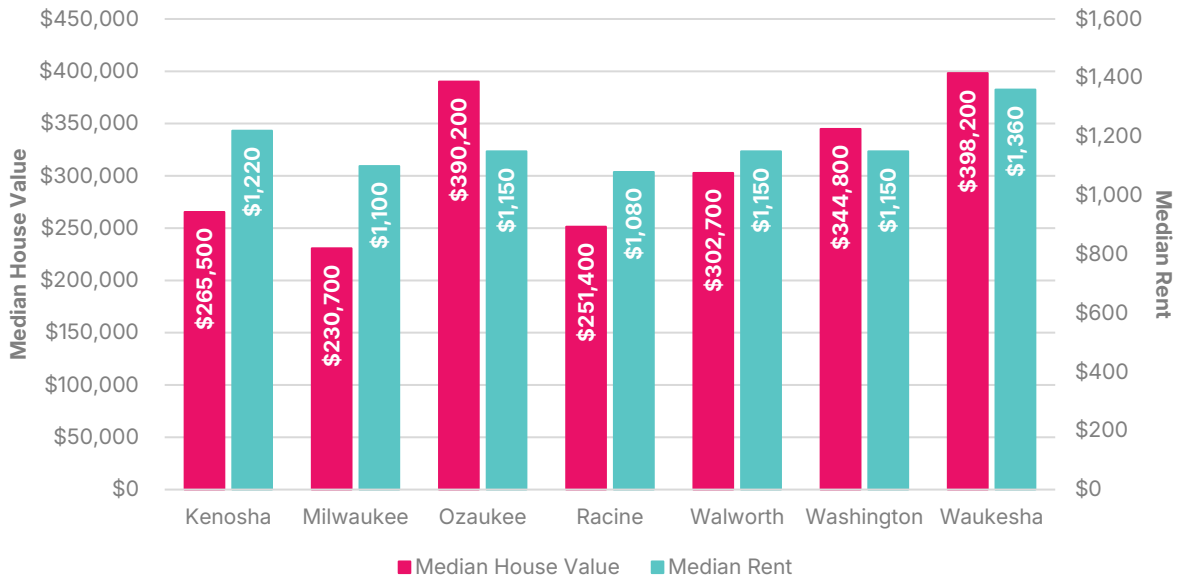
Housing Unit Occupancy by County: 2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Since 2020, housing values and rents in the Region have risen sharply. Median monthly rent in 2024 ranged from $1,080 in Racine County to $1,360 in Waukesha County. In constant dollars, five counties experienced double-digit increases in median monthly rent, led by Racine County (16.5%). In 2024, median home values ranged from $230,700 in Milwaukee County to $398,200 in Waukesha County, while the Wisconsin Realtor's Association reported 2024 median sale prices ranging from $260,000 in Milwaukee County to $458,754 in Ozaukee County. Walworth County experienced the most dramatic increase among the Region's counties at 38.2%.

Median House Value and Median Rent by County: 2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC, 11/2026

The Region's central cities have substantial concentrations of unemployed and under-employed individuals and low-income households. In many of the communities surrounding these central cities, there are significant job concentrations. A portion of these jobs pay moderate and lower wages, and many of these communities lack the modest single-family and multifamily housing that would be affordable to those earning moderate and lower wages. The shortage of affordable housing near these job concentrations makes it more difficult to attract or retain workers, hurting the economic competitiveness of businesses, communities, and the Region. Potential remedies for the imbalance between jobs and affordable housing include constructing more multifamily housing and smaller single-family homes on smaller lots to provide a more diverse and affordable housing stock for both renters and owners, as well as improving transit connections between areas of existing affordable housing and job locations.

Environment

Climate

Climate refers to an area's temperature, precipitation, and snow cover, and has important economic implications. Climate affects the types of agricultural crops that can be produced and how much can be produced. It influences the design of buildings, structures, and other types of infrastructure, and determines what types of cultural and recreational activities are possible. Far from the moderating effect of the oceans, Southeastern Wisconsin experiences markedly different seasons and a large range in annual temperature.

Extreme variations in temperature and precipitation can be particularly impactful to the economy. Since 2012, record high averages have occurred for five months (January, February, March, October, and December) and the City of Milwaukee has experienced seven of the 10 hottest years in its history, including 2024 and 2023, which were the hottest and second-hottest years, respectively. The Region has also seen an increase in intense rainfall events (2 or more inches of rain within a 24-hour period). These events can result in increased flooding, especially flash flooding, which occurs very quickly and can put lives in danger and cause millions of dollars in property damage.

Natural Resources

Surface water resources are integral to the Region's natural resource base. They contribute not only to the recreational opportunities and quality of life within the Region but also to the economic development opportunities. The Region is bisected by the subcontinental divide. About 62% of the Region is located west of the divide and drains into the Upper Mississippi River system. This area relies heavily on groundwater resources for its water supply. The remaining 38% of the Region is located east of the divide and drains into the Great Lakes system. Lake Michigan is a major source of water for this area, in addition to providing numerous recreational and economic development opportunities.

In Southeastern Wisconsin, environmental corridors have been delineated to help preserve the Region's best remaining natural resources. Primary environmental corridors are at least 400 acres in size, two miles in length, and 200 feet in width. Secondary environmental corridors typically connect with primary environmental corridors and are at least 100 acres in size and one mile in length. Isolated natural resource areas are smaller areas physically separate from environmental corridors, which are at least 5 acres in size and contain concentrations of natural resource base elements. The Region contains 633 square miles (about 24% of the Region) of environmental corridors and isolated natural resource areas.

Tourism and Cultural Resources

Tourism and cultural resources are important components of the regional economy as the Region plays host to numerous pro and semi-pro sports teams, musical and cultural heritage festivals, theaters, museums, and other cultural resources that provide entertainment and cultural engagement to residents and visitors alike. The Leisure and Hospitality sector employed about 112,300 workers in 2025, accounting for about 10% of the Region's total employment. In 2024, the Region saw visitors spend $5.0 billion, a 42% increase over 2011 spending.

Parks

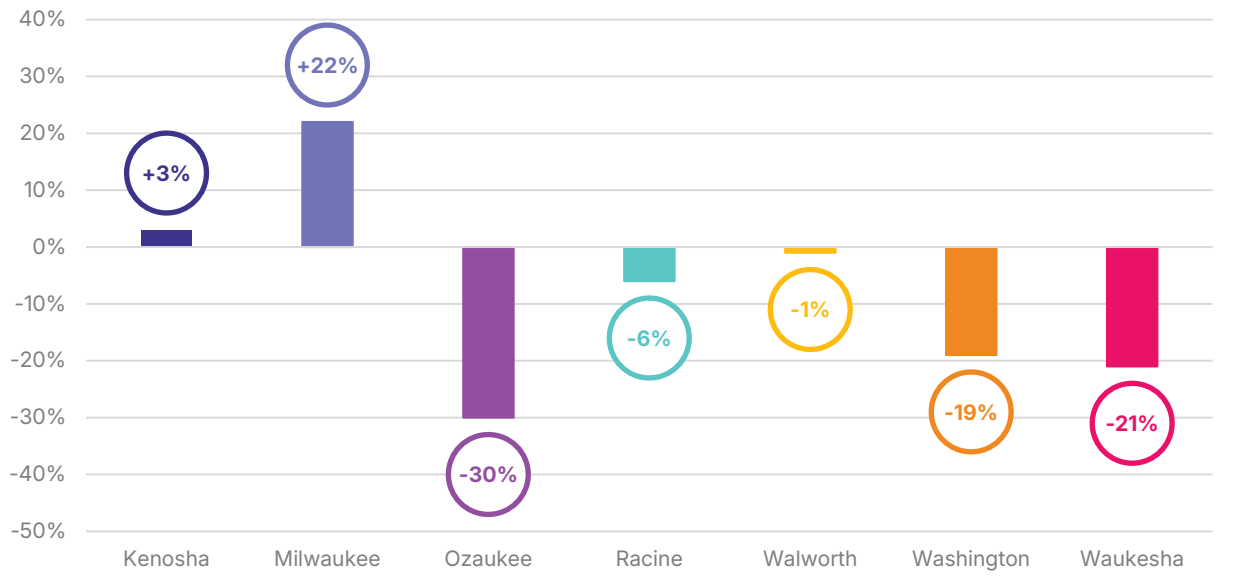
While Southeastern Wisconsin is the most urbanized area of the State, it is blessed with an abundance of natural amenities and a network of regional parks that provides access to them. The system includes major parks in every county where residents and visitors can golf, camp, fish, boat, swim, and explore miles of trails and scenic landscapes, including world class recreational areas such as Lake Michigan, and the hills and glacial formations of the Kettle Moraine. In addition to the Region's major parks, there are community and neighborhood parks found throughout Southeastern Wisconsin where residents can stay active within walking distance of their own homes. The park system helps to ensure that the Region's abundant natural resources are preserved and enjoyed for generations to come.

Agricultural and Mineral Resources

Agricultural land use made up an estimated 1,028 square miles (or 38%) of the Region's area in 2020, which is down 5% from 2010. The Region's agricultural challenges relate to the continuing trends of land leaving agricultural use and a declining number of farm operations. Between 2012 and 2022, the Region saw an 11% decrease in the number of farms, with Ozaukee, Washington, and Waukesha Counties seeing the greatest decrease.

The mineral resources, specifically nonmetallic materials, within the Region offer a specific advantage in reducing the cost of road and other construction by minimizing the expense of transporting aggregate material.

Change in Number of Farms by County: 2012-2022



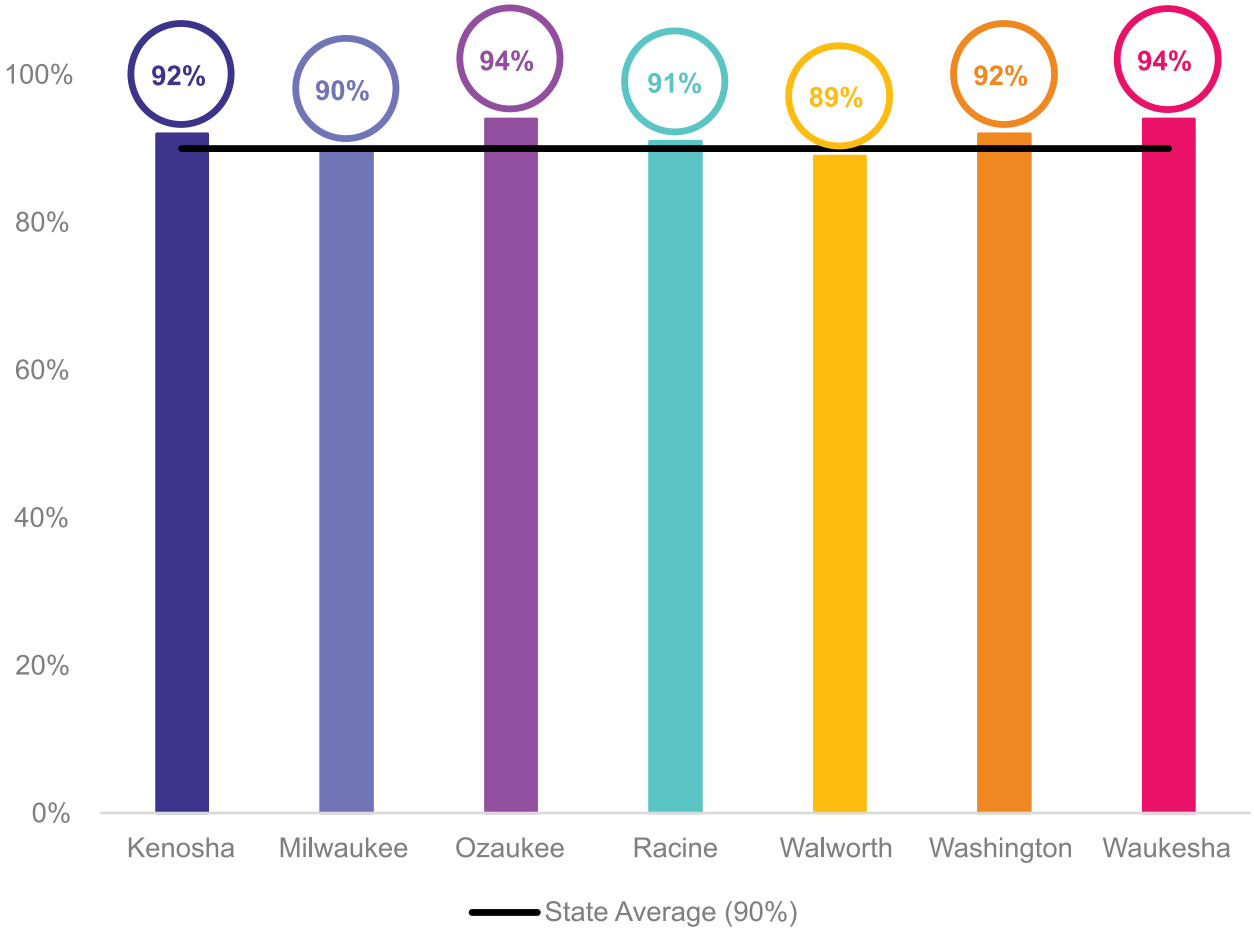
Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture (2022) and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Infrastructure

Broadband

The availability of high-speed broadband internet is essential to the Region's economic competitiveness and quality of life. The vast majority of the Region has access to internet service at download speeds exceeding the current broadband standard of 25 megabits per second (Mbps). The percent of households with a broadband internet subscription in each of the Region's counties meet or exceed the State average of 90% except for Walworth County at 89%. Some rural communities with more limited broadband service have been active in seeking grants to expand coverage in their areas.

Percent of Households with a Broadband Internet Subscription: 2024

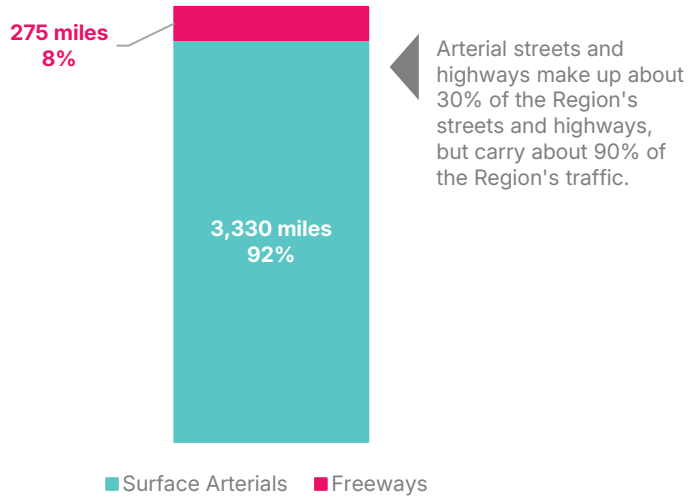


Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (2020-2024) and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Transportation

The arterial street and highway system is a critical transportation infrastructure component in the context of economic development, providing the basis for not only most employee travel, but also for most of the movement of raw materials and goods in the manufacturing sector of the Region's economy.

Arterial Street and Highway Network

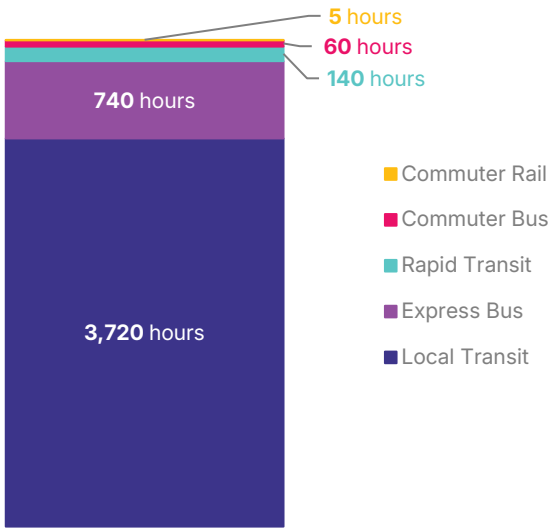


Source: SEWRPC, 11/2026

In general, the street and highway system performs well compared to other metropolitan areas. Travel time delay and congestion costs for auto commuters in the Milwaukee area are below the averages for other peer metro areas. The increase in travel time delay for auto commuters in the Milwaukee area over the past 40 years is also below average compared to peers. However, the Region's street and highway system faces a funding shortfall that will restrict new construction, reconstruction, and maintenance projects moving forward. Addressing this funding situation to allow arterial streets and highways to be reconstructed in a timely manner is a major challenge facing the Region. It is also important to ensure the transportation system is resilient to the effects of flooding, particularly given the Region is expected to see an increase in the frequency of large storm events. Flooding can have major negative economic impacts on the Region such as disruptions to traffic flow and public transit operations and increased costs due to unplanned roadway repairs or reconstruction.

Public transit facilities and services represent a second critical transportation infrastructure component in the context of economic development. Currently, the Region is served by several individual transit systems, with the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) being by far the largest transit service provider in the Region. MCTS provides a robust level of service per capita compared to peer metro areas.

Annual Weekday Fixed-Route Transit Hours of Service: 2024

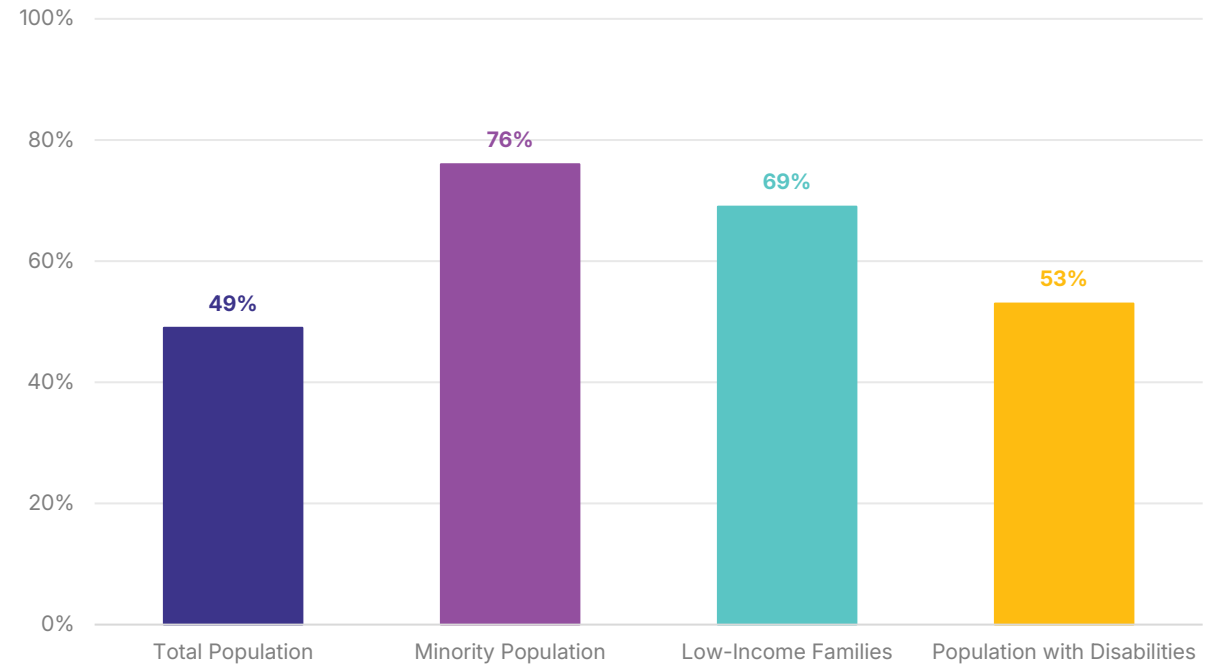


Source: SEWRPC, 11/2026

MCTS is also by far the largest transit system of the Milwaukee metro area's peers not supported by dedicated funding. Other peer metro area transit systems without dedicated funding provide substantially less transit service per capita, suggesting that without additional funding Milwaukee's transit levels are in jeopardy of shrinking. Southeastern Wisconsin also faces a challenge connecting residents to jobs in adjoining counties, lacking a regional transit agency with the ability to provide transit services across city and county boundaries. A comprehensive transit system is important for many reasons; it supports the local economy through increasing access to employers, it can promote focused development and assist in building walkable neighborhoods, it allows residents to age in place by providing alternative transportation options, and it provides equitable access to employment, recreation, healthcare, education, and other daily needs.

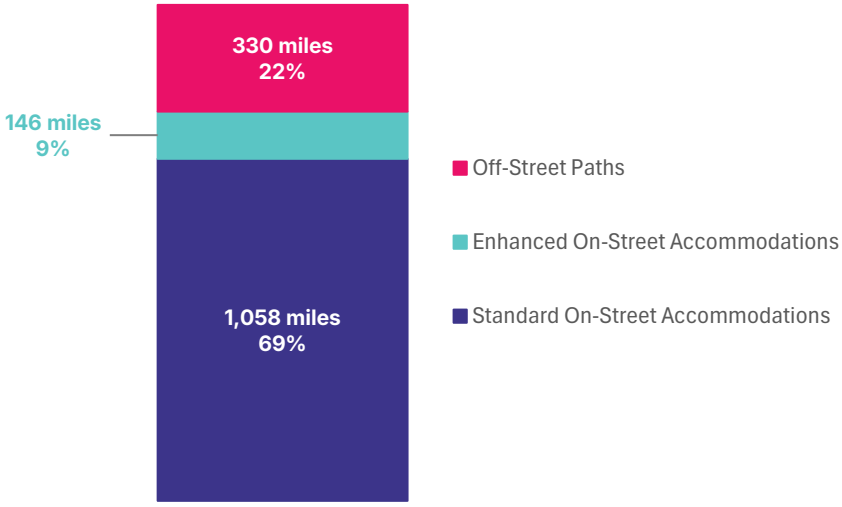
The ability to bike and walk is important to a high quality of life and healthy, vibrant communities. The Region boasts over 1,300 miles of bicycle facilities, including paths and on-street facilities, which have been continually expanding. Enhanced on-street facilities, such as a protected bike lane (protected by bollards, parking, or other physical barriers) or a separate path within a road's right-of-way, have become increasingly popular. The Region's many miles of off-street paths, the longest being the 108-mile Oak Leaf Trail, provide a particularly attractive recreational asset.

Populations Served by Transit



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Bicycle Network



Source: SEWRPC, 11/2026

The entire Region is within a 90-minute drive of Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport (MKE), which provides nonstop service to 38 destinations via eight airlines, serving about 6 million passengers and 123 million pounds of cargo in 2024. In 2026, the new MKE Air Cargo Center (MACC) began operating at the airport. This facility supports larger, and an increased number of, air cargo aircraft and is expected to greatly expand the amount of air cargo handled by the airport. In addition to MKE, the Region is also home to 10 smaller public-use airports.

Port Milwaukee, the State's largest intermodal sea container yard, has a significant impact on the economy of the Region, generating over $100 million in business revenue in 2024. Port Milwaukee handles a variety of commodities, including asphalt, cement, fertilizer, general cargo, grain, liquid bulk products, machinery, limestone, salt, and steel. The Lake Express also operates out of Port Milwaukee, providing high-speed auto passenger ferry service between Milwaukee and Muskegon, MI across Lake Michigan. According to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Milwaukee has become an increasingly popular cruise destination, with Port Milwaukee recording a record-high of nearly 20,000 cruise passengers in 2026, up from 11,000 in 2025. A new cruise dock is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2026 with the first cruise ships planning to arrive in 2027.

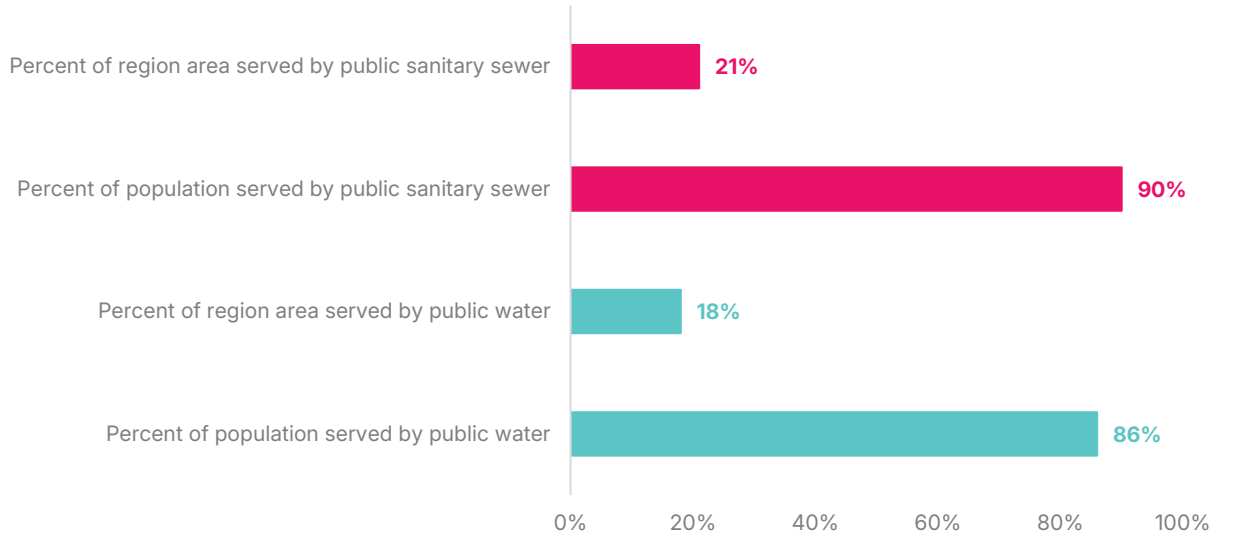
Southeastern Wisconsin is served by a network of pipelines that transports crude oil through the Region to refineries in the Chicago area, brings finished petroleum products (e.g., gasoline) back to the Region, and transports natural gas to the Region for distribution to homes, offices, and businesses. A cluster of pipeline terminals in northwestern Milwaukee County serves as a critical location for the distribution of finished petroleum products throughout the Region and Wisconsin.

The Region's railways are also important to the economy in terms of transferring both passengers and freight. Amtrak's Hiawatha line, which operates seven daily roundtrips between Milwaukee and Chicago, carried 665,000 passengers in 2024. In terms of freight, approximately 142 million tons of domestic and international cargo valued at about $182 billion were shipped to, from, and within the Milwaukee-Racine-Waukesha Combined Statistical Area, with about 14% of those freight shipments traveling by rail.

Utilities

The Region has 78 municipal water supply systems covering 475 square miles, while 560 square miles of the Region are served by public sanitary sewer. The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) is the Region's largest sewer district, providing water reclamation and flood management services to 28 communities and 1.1 million customers. MMSD maintains a major system of sewers and deep tunnels for collecting and conveying sewage and wastewater, which is treated and released by two treatment plants along Lake Michigan's shoreline.

Residents Served by Public Sewer and Water



Source: SEWRPC, 11/2026

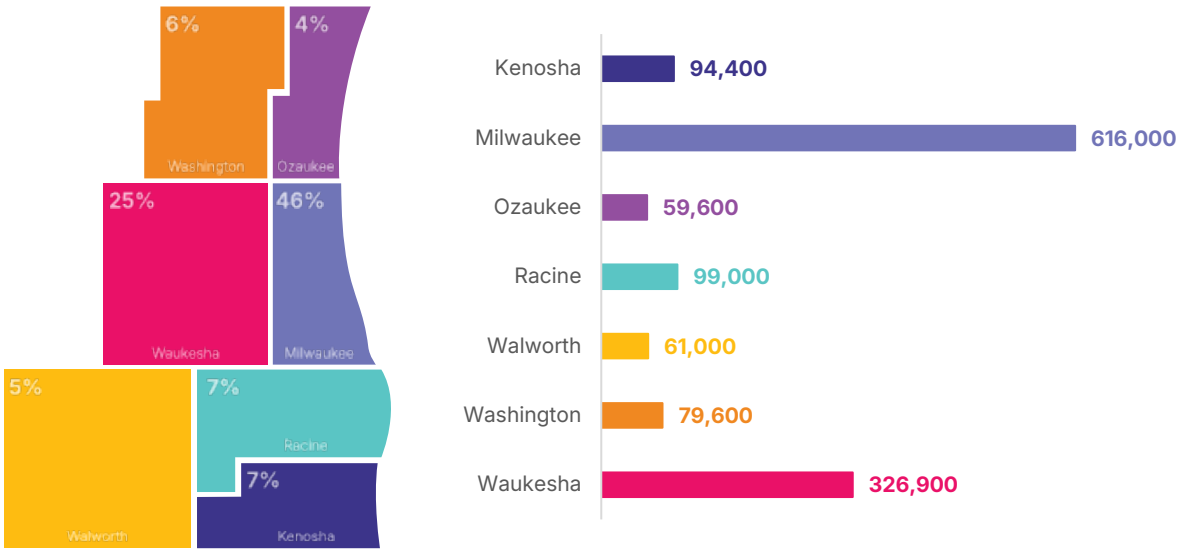
We Energies supplies natural gas service throughout the Region and supplies electric service to most of the Region. Alliant Energy supplies electric service to small portions of southern Walworth County and southwestern Kenosha County and five areas are served by municipal power companies (Cedarburg, Elkhorn, Hartford, Oconomowoc, and Slinger). Most electric energy is generated from coal and natural gas sources, with renewable energy sources making up about 10% of electric energy production. The electric and gas utilities offered throughout the Region are known to be widely available and reliable, and their cost is reasonable compared to other metro areas.

Economy

Employment

There were 1,336,500 jobs in Southeastern Wisconsin in 2022, which accounted for more than one-third of the State's jobs. Within the Region, the largest job concentrations are in Milwaukee and Waukesha Counties. Due to budget constraints at the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), the most current employment data from the BEA is for the year 2022.

Employment by County: 2022



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) and SEWRPC, 11/2026

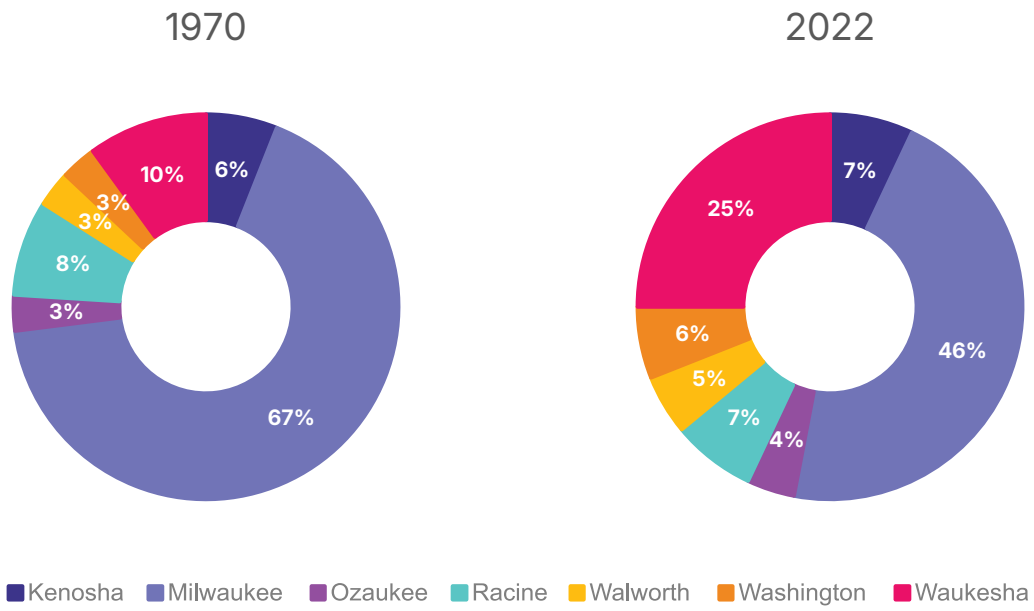
While some counties in the Region have experienced significant growth, employment in the Region as a whole has been increasing at a slower rate than in most regions of comparable size in the U.S., particularly those located outside the Midwest. Similar to population, the Region's job distribution has shifted over the past several decades. This is largely a product of expansive growth in Waukesha County. Growth in Ozaukee, Walworth, and Washington Counties also resulted in their shares of the Region's employment increasing.

Employment by County: 1970, 2022, 2060



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (1970), U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, and SEWRPC; 11/2026

Employment Distribution: 1970-2022

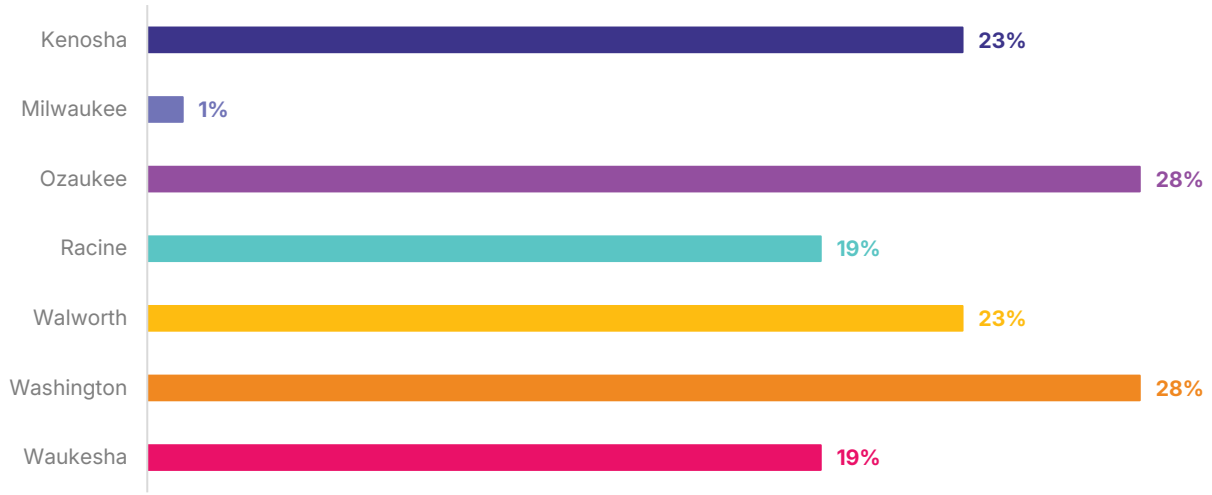


Source: U.S. Census Bureau (1970), U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), and SEWRPC, 11/2026

By the year 2060 the Region's employment is projected to increase by 12% from 1.37 million to 1.49 million. Employment in all counties in the Region is projected to grow to varying degrees over the next few decades. Ozaukee and Washington Counties are projected to experience the highest growth rate.

Employers' embrace of remote work arrangements helped facilitate a major shift to teleworking in Southeastern Wisconsin, consistent with national trends. By 2021, an estimated 16.4% of the Region's workforce was working from home, a nearly 12 percentage point rise from the 2019 regional average.

Projected Employment Growth by County: 2022-2060

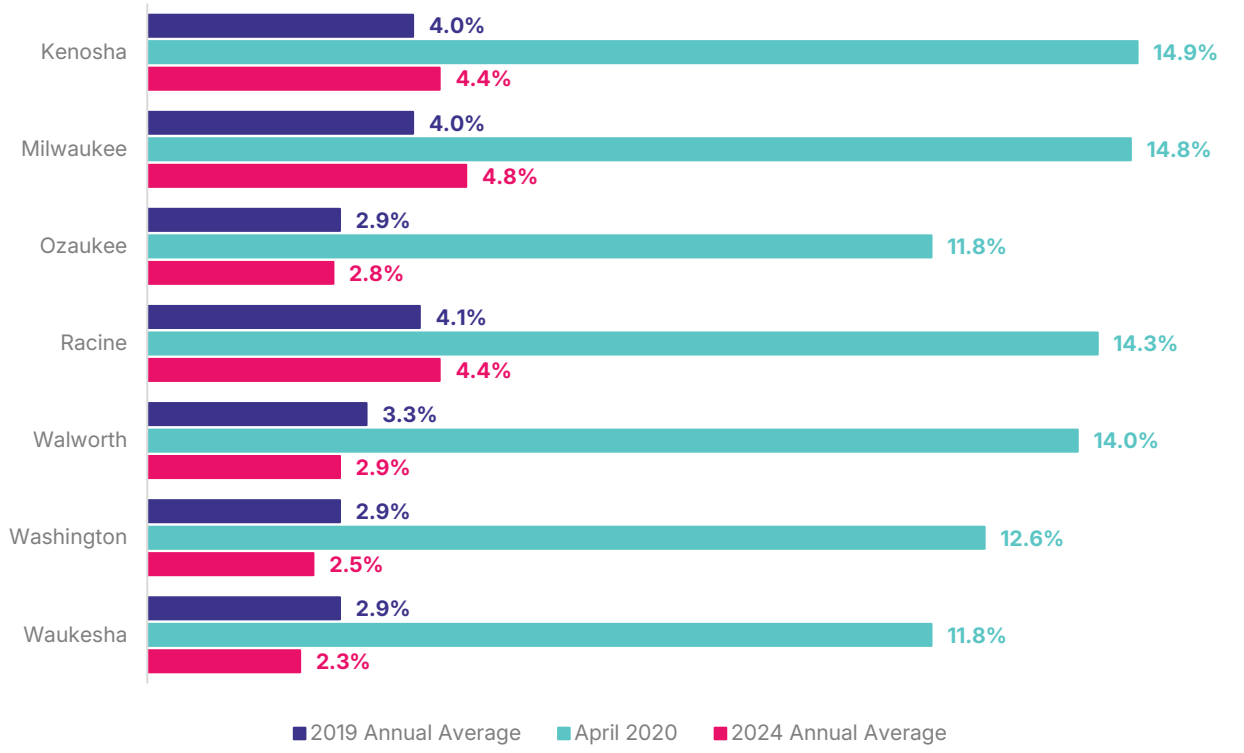


Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Unemployment

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment rates for April 2020 more than tripled the average rates for 2019 in every county in the Region. By 2024, unemployment had decreased to rates comparable to pre-pandemic levels. In 2024, the unemployment rate for the Region (3.9%) was slightly higher than the statewide rate (3.2%) and lower than the national rate (5.2%).

Unemployment Rate by County

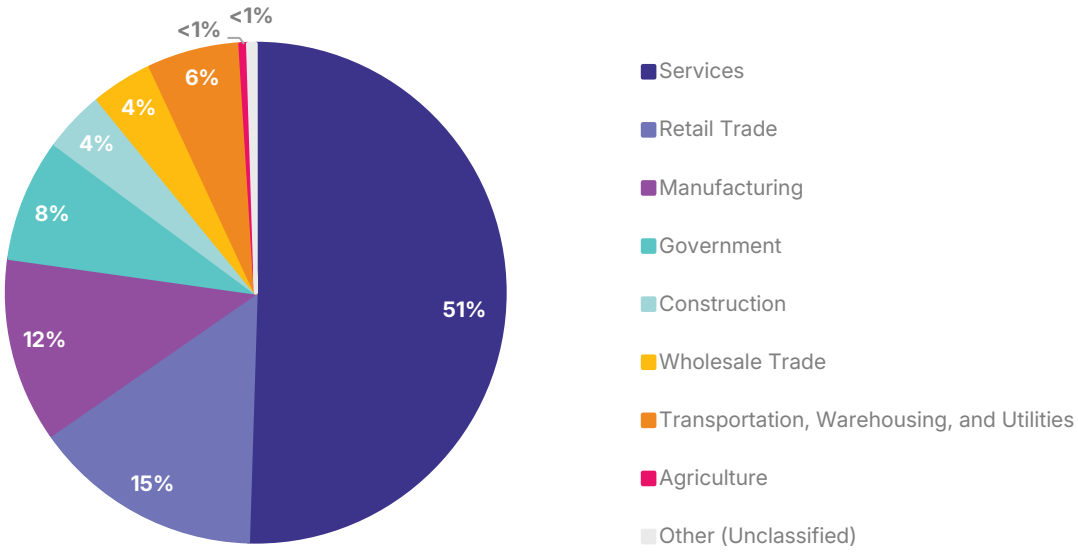


Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Industry Breakdown

The industry mix of employment in the Region reflects the continuation of a long-term shift from a manufacturing-oriented economy to a service-oriented economy. Although its share of the Region's employment has been declining, the manufacturing sector remains a significant source of jobs when compared to peer regions across the country.

Share of Jobs by Industry: 2022

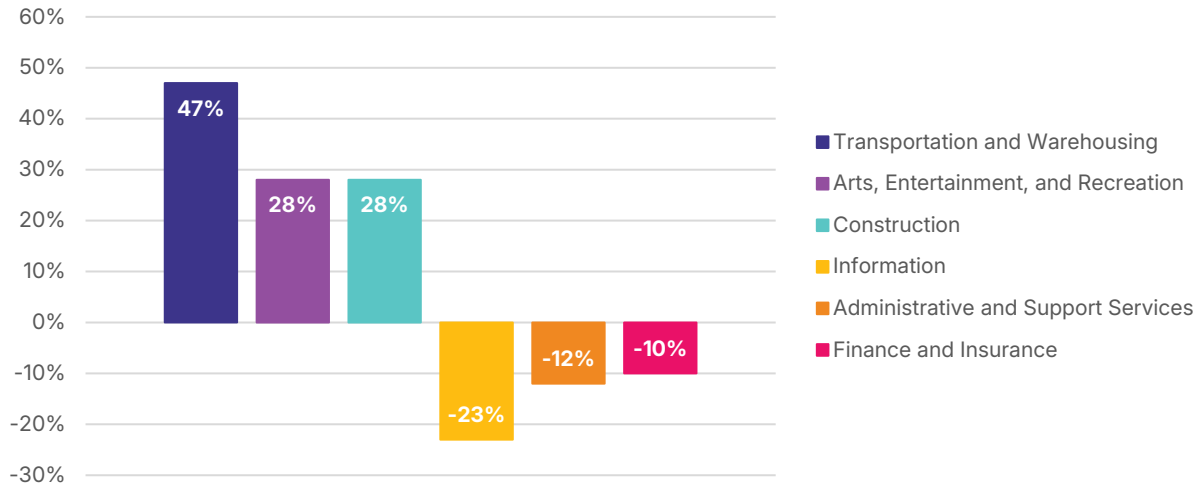


Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) and SEWRPC, 11/2026

The Region's industries that have seen the most growth since 2015 are transportation and warehousing, arts/entertainment/recreation, and construction. The information, administrative and support services, and finance/insurance industries experienced the greatest decline over the same period. Despite its decline in employment, it is worth noting that the finance/insurance industry still has a higher proportion of the Region's jobs than the national average.

The information, finance/insurance, and government industries are expected to see the largest decline in jobs over the next 10 years, and the health care/social assistance, construction, and arts/entertainment/recreation industries are projected to experience the largest growth.

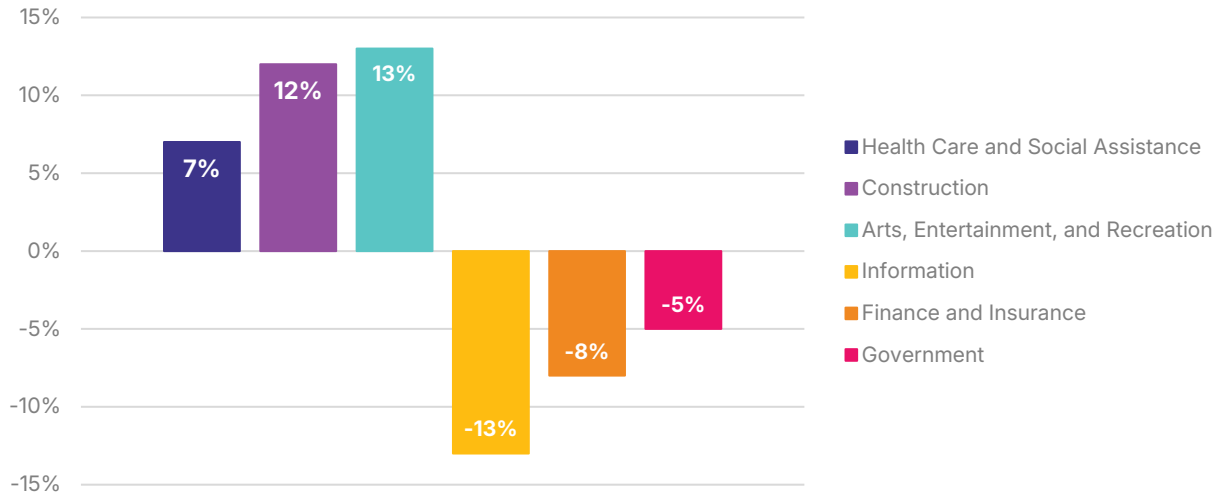
Industries* with Largest Positive and Negative Growth Rates: 2015-2024



*Only includes industries that account for at least 0.5% of the Region's jobs.

Source: Lightcast and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Industries* with Largest Projected Positive and Negative Growth Rates: 2024-2033



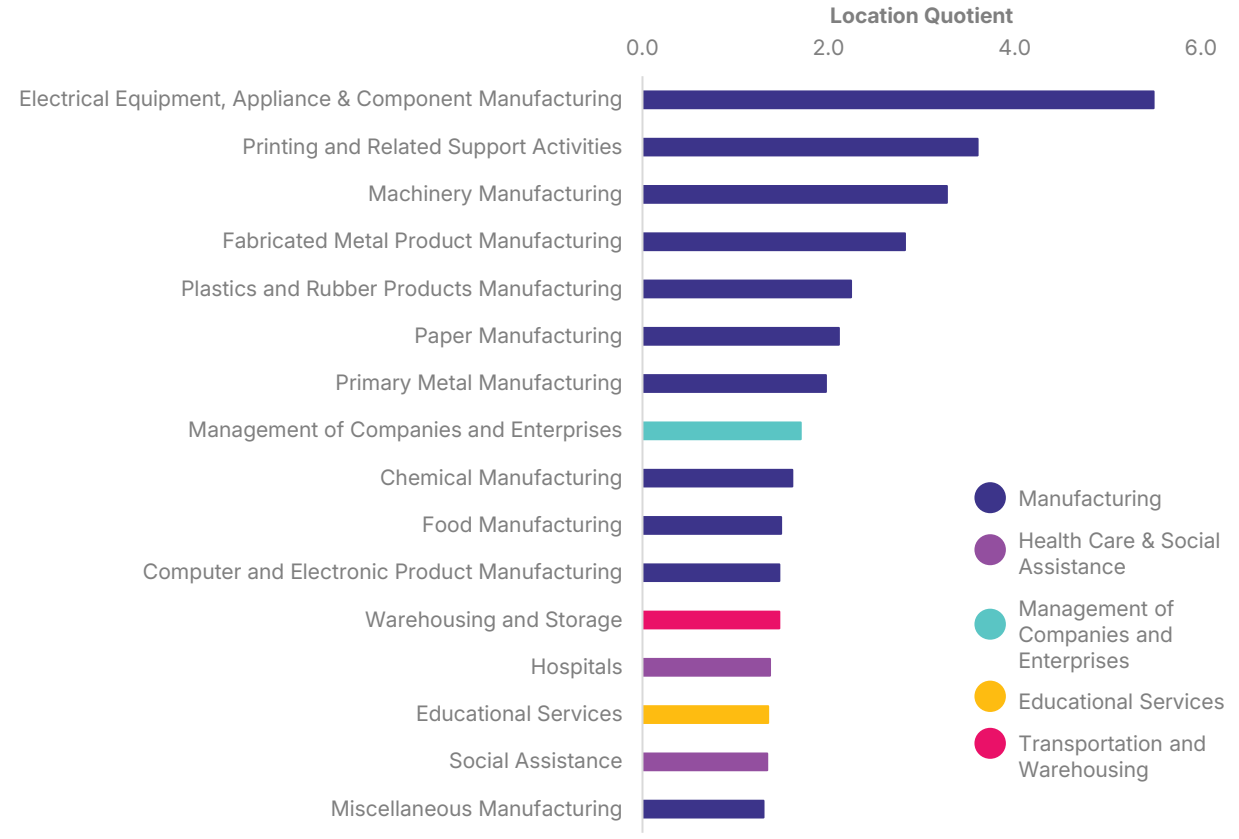
*Only includes industries that account for at least 0.5% of the Region's jobs.

Source: Lightcast and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Location Quotients

Location quotient refers to the proportion of jobs within specified industries of a specific geographic area (Southeastern Wisconsin in this case) compared to the proportion of jobs within those same industries of a larger reference area (the Nation). A location quotient greater than 1.0 demonstrates the Region has a larger share of jobs in an industry compared to the Nation and can indicate the industries that drive the regional economy. A high location quotient in a particular industry may present opportunities for additional growth of that industry, or related industries, because of competitive advantages such as an existing skilled labor pool, suppliers, facilities, or transportation hubs in the Region. The industries in the Region with the highest location quotients indicate that the Region has a significant competitive advantage in numerous advanced manufacturing sectors.

Highest Location Quotients: 2024



Source: Lightcast and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Industry Clusters

The following industry clusters (concentrations of related industries that share markets, suppliers, and worker skills) have been identified by M7 as significant to the success of the Region (with examples in parentheses):

- Mechanical Manufacturing (Harley-Davidson, Komatsu, Milwaukee Tool)
- Energy, Power & Controls (Eaton Corp, Generac, ABB, Leonardo DRS)
- Food and Beverage Manufacturing (MillerCoors, HARIBO)
- Water Technology (A.O. Smith, Badger Meter)
- Corporate Services (Northwestern Mutual, Fiserv, Manpower)
- Medical Technology (GE Healthcare, ThermoFisher Scientific)

Largest Employers

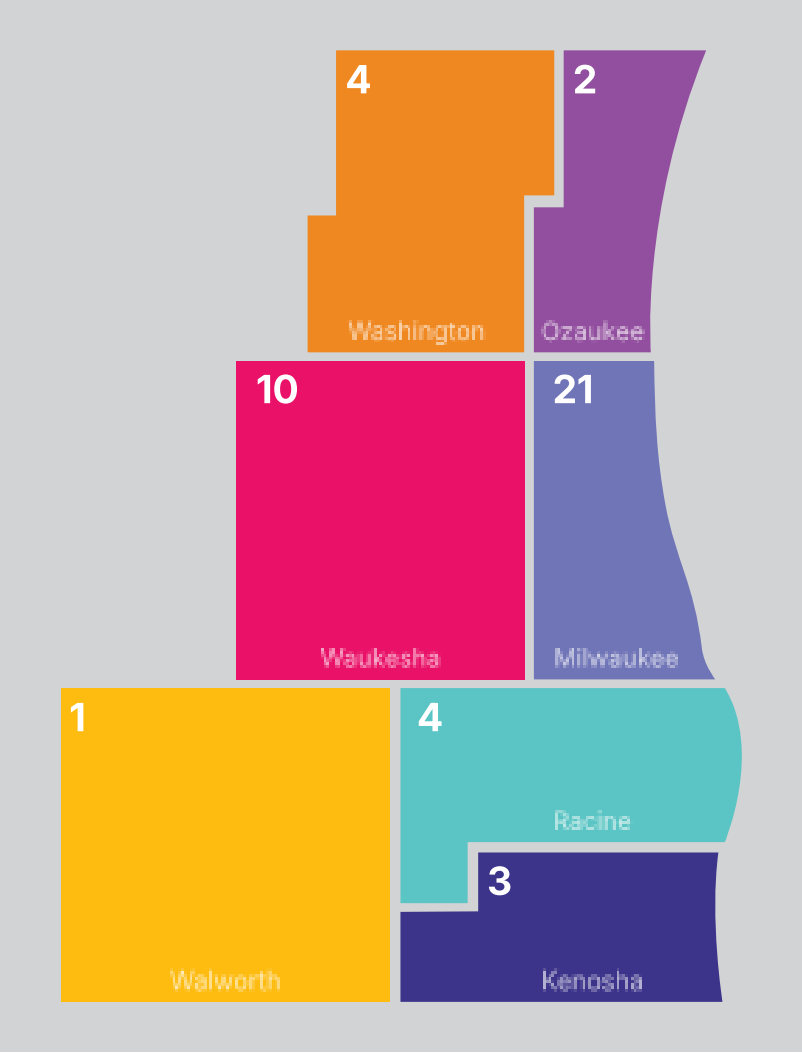
Many of the Region's largest employers are within the health care and social assistance industry. The following employers have been identified by the Milwaukee Business Journal as the Region's largest in 2025 (with employment in parentheses):

- Aurora (Advocate) Health Care (32,000)
- Froedtert Health (15,400)
- Ascension Wisconsin (10,400)
- Northwestern Mutual (7,600)
- Quad/Graphics (7,500)
- Medical College of Wisconsin (7,300)
- Kohl's (6,200)
- GE Healthcare Technologies (6,000)

Major Economic Activity Centers

The Region is home to 45 existing major economic activity centers. Major economic activity centers are defined as areas containing concentrations of commercial and/or industrial land with at least 3,500 employees or 2,000 retail employees. Major economic activity centers exist in each of the Region's counties and are generally concentrated in the most populous areas. Together, Milwaukee and Waukesha Counties account for nearly 70% of the Region's centers, with Milwaukee County alone accounting for 47% of the major economic activity centers in the Region.

Major Economic Activity Centers



Kenosha
- 1 Industrial
- 1 General
- 1 Retail

Milwaukee
- 8 Industrial
- 6 General
- 4 Retail
- 1 Office
- 2 Retail/Office

Ozaukee
- 1 Industrial
- 1 General

Racine
- 2 Industrial
- 1 General
- 1 Retail

Walworth
- 1 General

Washington
- 2 Industrial
- 2 General

Waukesha
- 6 Industrial
- 2 General
- 1 Retail/Office
- 1 Industrial/Office

Source: SEWRPC, 11/2026

Industrial/Business Parks

Maintaining enough available land, with the necessary infrastructure and transportation access, plays a key role in the ability to attract firms to the Region and to allow existing firms to expand. There are several resources that provide data and assistance in selecting sites in the industrial and business parks throughout the Region. The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) provides a free web-based site selection tool that allows the user to search for specific buildings or site types that are best suited to fit their need, www.wedc.org/doing-business-in-wisconsin/certified-sites/. SEWRPC has previously assisted county economic development organizations and local government planners in inventorying existing and proposed business parks. These listings may be updated in future years.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship

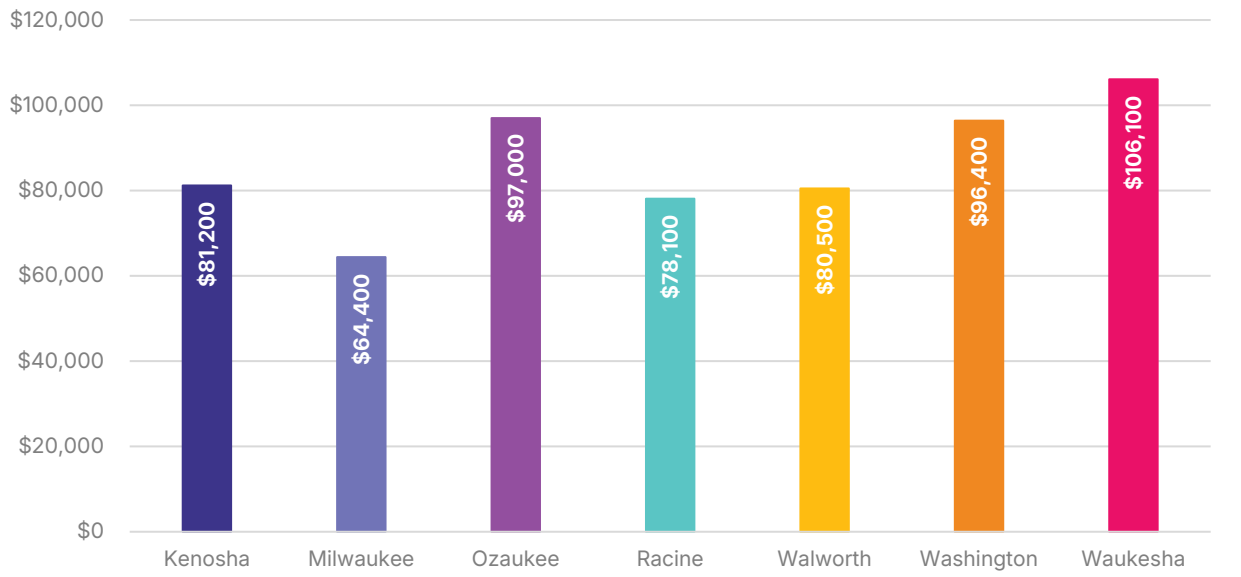
In an increasingly global economy, the capacity to foster innovation and entrepreneurship has become critical to the Region's economic competitiveness. To assess the performance of the Milwaukee metro area (consisting of Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Washington, and Waukesha Counties) in transitioning to a knowledge-based economy, the Wisconsin Policy Forum developed the Metro Milwaukee Innovation DataTool. This tool tracks the Milwaukee metro area's performance in a broad range of metrics tied to innovation and economic growth since 2005, as well as data for 10 peer metro areas.

Metro Milwaukee has been making progress on several fronts, particularly in its concentration of talent in occupations associated with innovation and the knowledge economy. The share of metro Milwaukee's working-age population employed as scientists and engineers, in technology-dependent occupations, and in occupations that typically require at least a bachelor's degree are higher than those of most of peer metros and the U.S. average. However, metro Milwaukee trails its peers in several measures related to entrepreneurship, and has performed relatively poorly in small business activity, minority business ownership, venture capital investment per capita, and ratio of business births to deaths.

Income and Wages

Household income is an important measure of an area's spending power and overall economic well-being. The median household income for the Region in 2024 was $77,312, comparable to that of the State ($77,485) and Nation ($80,734). However, there are considerable differences in household income among the seven counties, with higher income levels in Ozaukee, Washington, and Waukesha Counties.

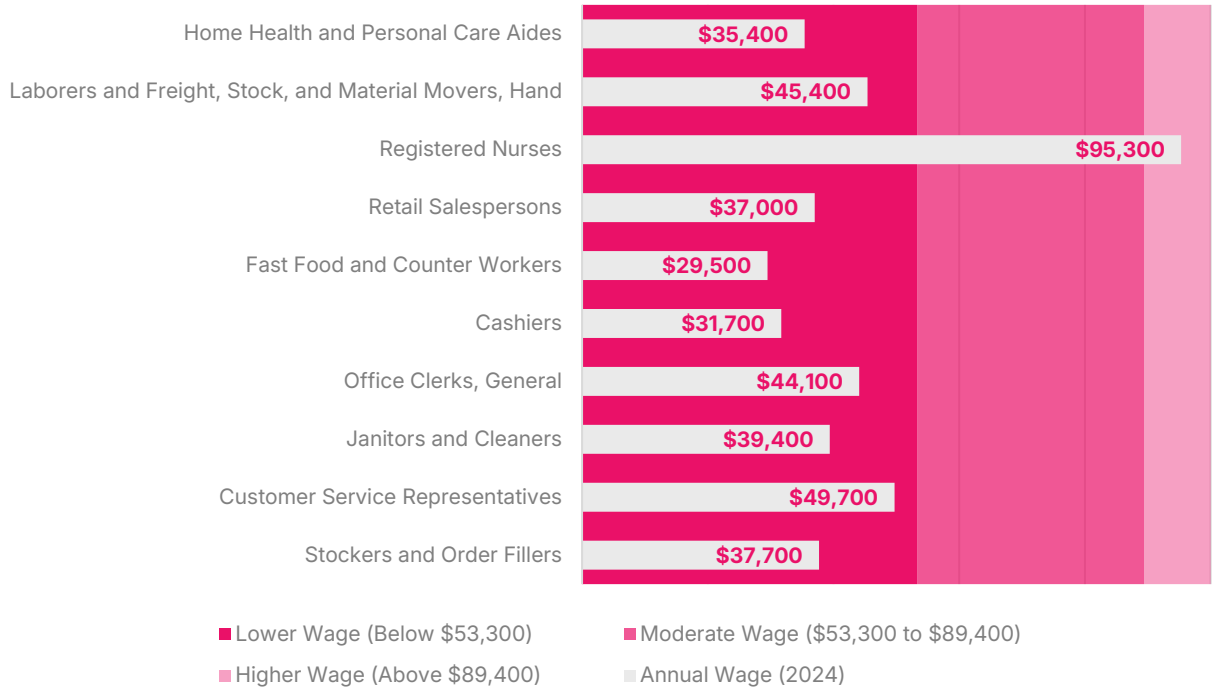
Median Household Income by County: 2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC, 11/2026

Nine of the Region's 10 largest occupations are considered lower-wage jobs, meaning they pay 80% or less (below $53,300) than the Region's average annual wage per job of $66,200. Registered nurse is the only occupation in the Region's 10 largest that is considered a higher-wage job meaning it pays 135% or more (above $89,400) than the Region's average annual wage per job.

The Region's 10 Largest Occupations and Their Average Annual Wage: 2024



Source: Lightcast, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and SEWRPC; 11/2026

Areas of Economic Distress

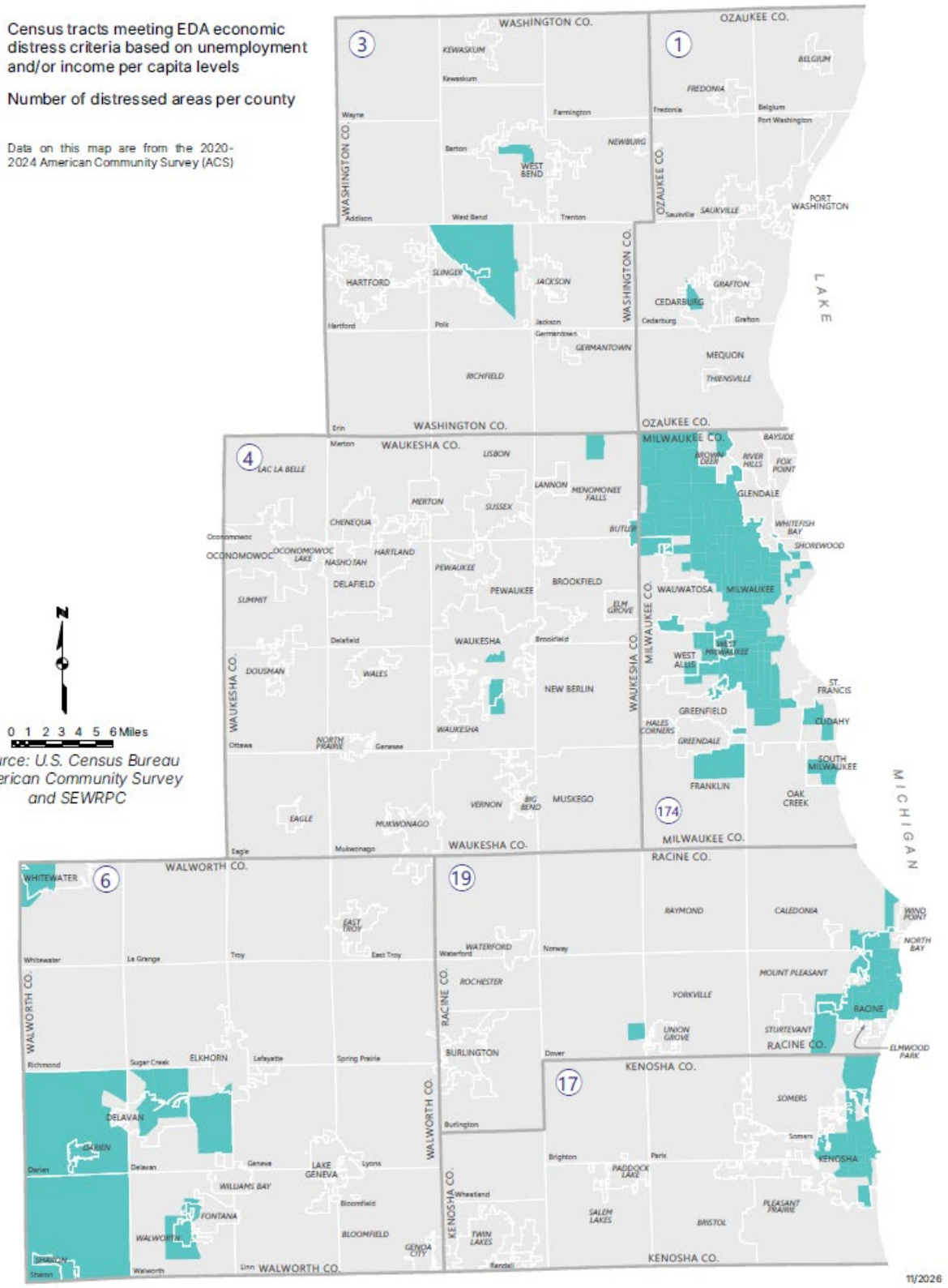
For the purposes of its grant programs, EDA identifies counties and census tracts in economic distress based on unemployment rate and per capita income. Counties or census tracts are considered economically distressed if they have an average 24-month unemployment rate above the U.S. average by one percentage point or more or an average annual per capita income level at or below 80% of the U.S. average. The national unemployment rate during the period 2020-2024 was 4.9. The national average annual per capita income was $66,814. In 2024, a total of 224 census tracts, or 42% of census tracts in the Region, met EDA economic distress criteria. Of the 224 distressed census tracts in the Region, 174, or 78%, were located in Milwaukee County.

Areas of Economic Distress: 2026

Census tracts meeting EDA economic distress criteria based on unemployment and/or income per capita levels

(6) Number of distressed areas per county

Note: Data on this map are from the 2020-2024 American Community Survey (ACS)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and SEWRPC

11/2026

Conclusions

This part of the CEDS summarized information regarding the existing population, housing, environment, resources, infrastructure, and economy and provided projections for select elements to inform strategies to address the conditions within the Region. Key conclusions that can be drawn from the information follow.

Population and Demographics

- Historically, the Region has experienced substantially slower population growth than Wisconsin and the Nation, which can result in a shortage of workers to fill jobs.
- The share of population within the Region has shifted for decades, with Milwaukee County's share declining and other counties increasing, especially Waukesha. Milwaukee County's population appears to have recently stabilized, with significant recent development activity in a number of areas within the County, although population decline has continued in some parts of the County.
- The Region's population is projected to increase 11% by 2060, from 2.04 to 2.27 million, with growth varying by county.
- The aging population of the Region, coupled with population growing slower than jobs, will require an in-migration of replacement workers to remain competitive and grow the economy.
- The minority share of the Region's population increased from 7% in 1970 to 34% in 2024 and is projected to increase to 49% by 2060.
- The Region has relatively high educational attainment and has seen an overall improvement in the past decade. However, educational attainment varies greatly by county.
- In addition, there is a need is to better align education and workforce training with the needs of employers, particularly in the manufacturing sector, which will require identifying occupations or workforce skills vital to the Region's economic growth strategy and providing suitable training programs.

Housing

- Housing affordability is a major obstacle faced by many communities within the Region as more than half of renters pay more than 30% of their income for housing compared to less than a quarter of owners. Since 2020, housing values, sales prices, and rents in the Region have risen sharply.
- A shortage of affordable housing near job concentrations outside the Region's central cities makes it more difficult for businesses to attract or retain workers, which limits economic productivity.

Environment

- Southeastern Wisconsin experiences markedly different seasons and a large range in annual temperature.
- Extreme variations in temperature and precipitation can be particularly impactful to the economy, and in recent years the Region has experienced record high temperatures and an increase in intense rainfall events. These events can result in increased flooding, especially flash flooding, which occurs very quickly and can put lives in danger and cause millions of dollars in property damage.
- The Region's water resources provide recreational and economic development opportunities.
- The Region's best remaining natural resources, such as wetlands, woodlands, surface water, and wildlife habitat, are being preserved, with almost a quarter of the Region under some sort of environmental delineation.
- Agriculture is a significant contributor to the Region's economy, but agricultural land and the number of farm operations continue to decline.
- Access to parks and natural areas is a major asset, making the Region an attractive place for residents and visitors.
- Tourism and cultural resources are integral facets of the economy as visitors spend over $5 billion annually and 10% of the Region's jobs are in the Leisure and Hospitality sector.

Infrastructure

- Much of the Region's population is served by both public water and sewer and reliable electric and natural gas utilities at a moderate cost.
- A vast majority of the Region has access to high-speed broadband, but there is a need to expand speed and availability in rural areas and increase access and affordability in urban areas.
- The street and highway system performs well compared to peer metro areas across the country; however, a major challenge lies ahead in identifying adequate future funding for new construction, reconstruction, and maintenance projects. Another challenge, given an expected increase in the frequency of large storm events, is ensuring the system is resilient to flooding.
- While MCTS continues to provide more transit service per capita than many peer metro area transit systems, transit systems across the Region face challenges associated with connecting residents to jobs in neighboring counties, declining ridership levels, and a lack of dedicated funding.
- The Region's extensive bicycle network compliments the park systems in providing attractive outdoor recreation activities.
- Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport, Port Milwaukee, and the railways round out a multimodal transportation system that supports moving passengers and freight into and out of the Region. Proximity to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport is also an important asset.

Economy

- The largest concentrations of jobs in the Region are in Milwaukee and Waukesha Counties. Employment as a whole has been increasing at a slower rate than in most regions of comparable size in the U.S
- Similar to population, Milwaukee County's share of jobs has declined while Waukesha County's share has increased significantly and the shares in Ozaukee, Walworth, and Washington Counties have also increased.
- The Region's employment is projected to increase 12% by 2060, from 1.34 to 1.49 million, with growth varying by county.
- Initial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in April 2020 unemployment rates in every county more than tripling their 2019 annual averages. By 2024, unemployment had decreased to rates comparable to pre-pandemic levels. In 2024, the unemployment rate for the Region (3.9%) was slightly higher than the statewide rate (3.2%) and lower than the national rate (5.2%).
- The regional economy has continued a long-term shift from manufacturing jobs to service jobs, but the manufacturing sector remains a significant source of jobs compared to peer regions.
- The arts/entertainment/recreation, healthcare/social assistance, and construction industries are projected to experience the greatest growth over the next decade.
- Based on the industries with the highest location quotients (meaning the Region has a larger share of jobs in these industries compared to the Nation), the Region has a significant competitive advantage in many advanced manufacturing sectors.
- The shares of the Milwaukee metro area's working-age population employed as scientists and engineers, in technology-dependent occupations, and in occupations that typically require at least a bachelor's degree are higher than those of most of peer metros and the U.S. average.
- The Milwaukee metro area has performed poorly relative to its peers in measures of entrepreneurship such as small business activity, minority business ownership, venture capital investment per capita, and ratio of business births to deaths.
- The Region's median household income of $77,812 is comparable to the State and Nation but is highly variable throughout the Region.
- Nine of the 10 largest occupations in the Region are considered lower-wage jobs (below $53,600), meaning they pay 80% or less than the Region's annual average wage per job ($66,400).

Areas of Economic Distress

- In 2024, a total of 224 census tracts, or 42% of census tracts in the Region, met EDA economic distress criteria. Of the 224 distressed census tracts in the Region, 174, or 78%, were located in Milwaukee County.