

## A Declining Resource

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In a 1963 statement related to the U.S. Committee for UNICEF, President John F. Kennedy said “Children are the world’s most valuable resource and its best hope for the future.” His statement is appropriate today as Wisconsin is one of many states in which the number of children is falling.

Wisconsin’s youth<sup>1</sup> population declined in each of the past two decades and has continued to shrink through 2024. Figures from the U.S. Census Bureau show the Badger State was not alone. Seventeen other states, including neighboring Illinois and Michigan, also saw reductions in the number of youths in each of those time frames. Wisconsin’s 9.3% drop during 2000 through 2024 was the 16th largest decline nationally.

The shrinking youth population has been affecting many of Wisconsin’s public schools for years, is beginning to impact the state’s universities, and will likely influence the size of our future workforce.

### TRENDS AND CAUSES

During the 1990s, Wisconsin’s under-18 population rose by nearly 80,000 due in large part to the migration of young families with children into the state. In the subsequent decade, growth turned to decline as this cohort contracted by just over 29,000.

The downward trend continued during 2010-20 with the pace of decline growing; the youth population fell by 58,000. Census Bureau figures for 2024 show the trend continuing with 40,000 fewer youth compared to 2020. If this rate of decline were to continue throughout the decade, the 10-year drop would be 95,000. Recently released [population projections](#) from the state estimate a decline of about 80,000.

#### *Behind the Fall: Fewer Births*

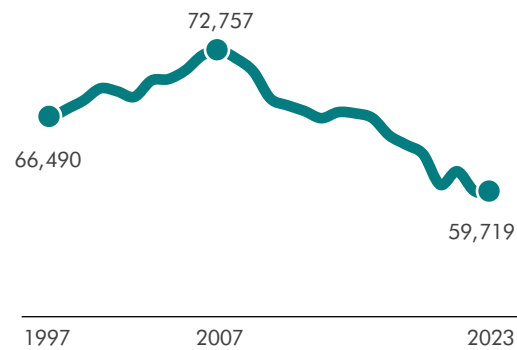
The decline in young residents was driven primarily by two factors: declining births since 2007 and fewer young families with children moving into Wisconsin.

<sup>1</sup> Under 18 years of age.

Forward Analytics (FA) first wrote about [declining births](#) and birth rates in 2019. Since then, births have continued to fall. From 2007 to 2023, the number of Wisconsin births declined in every year but two (see Figure 1), dropping a total of 18%. This followed a period in which the number of babies born increased 9.4% over 10 years. The result of the recent decline was that in 2023<sup>2</sup>, the number of Wisconsin births was the lowest since 1941.

<sup>2</sup> Provisional numbers from the U.S. Centers For Disease Control.

Figure 1: Births Falling Rapidly  
Number of Wisconsin Births, 1997-2023



This trend was due mostly to a falling fertility rate (the number of births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44). A decline of about 9,000 women in the 20-44 year old age group was a smaller contributing factor.

#### *Behind the Fall: Less In-Migration*

Young families moving into or out of the state also impact the number of youth. Over the past two decades, the net migration of these families declined significantly. Relative to the 1990’s, net migration of children dropped more than 20% from 2000 to 2010. Over the ensuing 10 years, it dropped another 30%.

### FEELING THE IMPACT

The effects of fewer children are felt in a wide range of areas. Most visible may be the effect on K-12

schools and universities. Longer term, fewer children today can portend fewer workers in 20 or 30 years.

#### *K-12 Schools*

Wisconsin's K-12 schools were the first to feel the effects of fewer children as enrollments fell in many school districts. Of the 426 public school districts that existed in 2000, 63% had fewer students by 2010, with 39% seeing enrollments decline more than 10%. This phenomenon occurred largely in rural parts of the state, particularly in northern Wisconsin.

Since 2010, falling enrollments have become a bit more commonplace. From 2010 through 2022 (2022-23 school year), 70% of districts saw enrollments fall and 32% experienced declines of at least 10%. Over the entire 22 year period, nearly one in three districts saw student counts drop 20% or more and another 25% had declines of at least 10%.

The impacts of declining enrollment on school districts are many, but the financial effects can create real challenges. Wisconsin's K-12 schools are subject to state mandated revenue limits, which tie revenues to student counts. As student numbers fall, revenue growth first slows and ultimately declines. This puts significant pressure on school budgets. Declining enrollment is one factor behind the [surge in school referenda](#) over the past 15 years.

#### **IMPACT: HIGHER EDUCATION**

As K-12 enrollments fall across the state, it would be expected that the number of high school graduates would eventually decline. Indeed, that happened after 2007. However, the decline did not continue over the entire 2008-23 time frame.

From 2008 and 2016, the number of Wisconsin high school graduates fell 5.5%. The number rebounded a bit in subsequent years, but in 2023 remained 4.3% below the 2007 level.

As Wisconsin students graduate high school, many move on to college, with a large share entering a university or college within the UW System. As the number of high school graduates in the state declines, so too will the number of resident college freshmen.

Since 2007, the in-state freshmen enrollment in the UW System declined in every year but two, dropping a total of 23% by 2023. Since this drop was five times greater than the decline in high school graduates, there must be other drivers beyond demographics. Fewer high school graduates may be choosing to go to college, and of those that do choose college, an increasing number may be choosing an out-of-state

or private university instead of the UW System, or a technical college.

The UW System has been able to lessen the impact of fewer resident freshmen by admitting more out-of-state students. In 2024, the System admitted 2,785 freshmen from other states, which made up for almost half of the decline in resident freshmen. Residents are now 68% of the new freshman class, down from 81% in 2007.

#### **IMPACT: FUTURE WORKFORCE**

Looking to the future, it would make sense that fewer young people today would likely translate into a smaller workforce 20, 30, and 40 years down the road. That is particularly true in Wisconsin which has one of the lowest rates of in- and out-migration in the nation. Since 2017, the state's outmigration rate was ninth lowest while its immigration rate ranked 5th lowest.

We tracked the size of Wisconsin's under 15 cohorts as they aged over the ensuing 20 and 30 years. This allowed us to see the relationship between the youth population and segments of the future workforce.

Over the 20-year period, Both the 1990 and 2000 youth cohorts were within a half of a percent of the size of the corresponding 20 to 34 year old cohorts in 2010 and 2020. The 1980 youth cohort was 1.7% larger than the 2000 young adult cohort.

Over 30 years, only the 1980 and 1990 youth groups can be tracked. These two cohorts were within 0.7% of the 30 to 44 population thirty years later. Should these pattern continue, Wisconsin's recent decline the youth population could signal a small drop in the 20-44 population during this decade followed by declines of more than 60,000 and 120,000 over the following two decades. The only way for the declines to be smaller would be through increased migration into Wisconsin.

#### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

There are few signs that Wisconsin's youth population is going to stop getting smaller. In fact, the recent DOA projections show this cohort shrinking by another 35,000 during the 2030's.

This means continued pressures on Wisconsin's K-12 schools and universities. It also implies long term effects on our workforce and state tax revenues. This raises several questions for policy makers. Are we okay with this trend? If not, what policies can be put in place to stem the decline in birth rates and to increase the migration of young families to Wisconsin?