

North Central Wisconsin Regional Recovery Plan



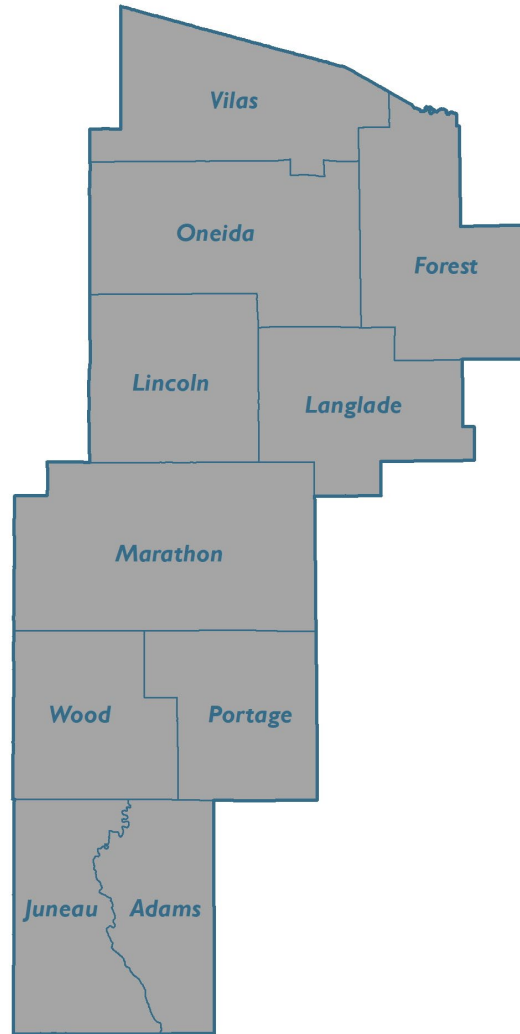
Broadband



Childcare



Tourism &
Hospitality



Housing &
Transportation



Workforce &
Talent Attraction



North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission

Regional Recovery Plan Advisory Committee

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This plan was prepared by the North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (NCWRPC) under the advisement of the Regional Recovery Plan Advisory Committee

Adopted January 26, 2022 by the North Central Wisconsin Planning Commission

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Chapter 1: Introduction

North Central Wisconsin Region

In the summer of 2020, the North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (NCWRPC) was awarded a grant from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to assist with the economic recovery of the Region, as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The scope of work supports activities to prevent, prepare for, and to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and associated economic injury. Part of the scope of work includes the development of a Regional Recovery Plan. The Regional Recovery Plan includes both short-term and long-term strategies to guide the Region's economic stabilization and recovery from current and future economic shocks and to help the North Central Wisconsin Region build a resilient and sustainable region.

The NCWRPC provides assistance throughout a ten-county region in the areas of economic development, geographic information systems (GIS), intergovernmental cooperation, land use, and transportation. The Region consists of a ten-county area stretching one hundred and eighty-five miles in a north-south direction, extending from Forest and Vilas Counties in the north to Adams and Juneau Counties in the south. The region roughly follows the upper Wisconsin River Valley and covers 9,328 square miles, or about 17 percent of the state's total land mass. The ten counties are: Adams, Juneau, Forest, Langlade, Lincoln, Marathon, Oneida, Portage, Vilas, and Wood. The Region includes 268 units of local government: 198 towns, 39 villages, 21 cities, and ten counties and four tribal regions. NCWRPC staff regularly provides professional planning to communities, for projects of both local and regional significance.

The North Central Wisconsin Region is home to approximately 439,000 people and is also home to approximately 210,000 jobs and 12,500 businesses. The Region is known for an abundance of outdoor amenities, affordable cost of living and high quality of life. In addition, it has a diverse array of resources, partners and assets that support the regional economy. However, the Region also faces a variety of complex issues including uneven population and housing growth, an aging population, lack of adequate broadband access, and a constantly changing economic landscape often resulting in lower employment and lower incomes.

Historically, the economy of the North Central Wisconsin Region has historically depended on the manufacturing and agricultural industries, with a particular reliance on the paper and wood products sectors. Before the pandemic struck, many sectors within the manufacturing and agricultural industries were facing challenges in hiring staff, experiencing declines in employment, the number of businesses and farms, and in demand for products. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated these declines, leading to several major employers permanently shutting their doors, and an uncertain outlook for many more. Additionally, the Region's aging workforce leaves many employers, especially in the manufacturing industry, at risk of labor shortages, as there are not enough workers within the Region with the knowledge or skills to fill the jobs vacated by retirees. The economic, health and social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated these issues, while also creating or identifying new issues, helping to lead to the largest global recession since the Great Depression.

Purpose and Scope

In the aftermath of disasters, the most important questions typically center around recovery, how to become less vulnerable to a disaster, and how to be better prepared to deal with a disaster event in the future. When attempting to find answers to these questions, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many issues and vulnerabilities to the forefront, as communities, businesses, residents, and the entire world-at-large were not well-prepared to deal with the health emergencies and economic shocks that resulted from the pandemic.

The purpose of this plan is to [guide economic stabilization, recovery, and resiliency efforts within the North Central Wisconsin Region](#) in the face of the current pandemic as well as future events that cause economic shocks. The scope of this plan will support activities that [prevent, prepare for, and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic](#), or [respond to economic injury](#) caused by the pandemic, within North Central Wisconsin.

The goal of this plan is to develop a set of strategies that will help the Region's local economies recover from and become more resilient to economic shocks by identifying best-practice strategies that help spur economic stabilization and recovery in the wake of economic shocks and that will help build local economic resilience. Helping local recovery and resiliency efforts will help the regional economy as a whole recover and grow back even stronger than before the disaster struck.

The set of strategies developed by this plan will include both short-term economic stabilization efforts and long-term economic recovery efforts. Short-term economic stabilization strategies will be focused on identifying best practices for preventing further business closures and job losses in the face of a disaster, while long-term economic recovery strategies will focus on how to enhance key aspects that will contribute to economic prosperity at both the local and regional levels. The key aspects for long-term recovery include business retention, entrepreneurship, workforce development, community development (housing, quality of schools, childcare options for working families, and transportation), and the provision of essential infrastructure such as healthcare and broadband throughout the Region.

Key Considerations for Recovery, Resiliency, and Sustainability

The strategies developed in this plan will have a particular emphasis on addressing the opportunities and challenges in five foundational pillars that are expected to have a major impact on the future prosperity of North Central Wisconsin. These foundational pillars include **Broadband, Childcare, Housing & Transportation, Workforce & Talent Attraction, and Tourism & Hospitality**; each of which are vital components of strong and resilient communities in both today's and the future economic landscape. Disaster scenarios such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic often highlight the need for adequate opportunities and/or access to each of these pillars, as communities and businesses that can provide suitable access to or opportunities for each pillar are often more resilient to disasters and are better positioned for economic recovery in the wake of a disaster. The current lack of options or opportunities available within each of these pillars within the Region produces barriers for economic growth and resilience in local communities, including struggles attracting and retaining residents, filling and creating jobs, attracting and retaining businesses, and struggles stimulating entrepreneurship and innovation within the region. Developing a set of best-practice strategies to guide local communities in addressing the challenges facing these five foundational pillars within their community will help spur economic recovery and help build economic resilience and sustainability within local communities throughout the Region.

Advisory Committee

Committee Members

The Advisory Committee was represented by economic development professionals throughout the Region, bringing a diverse set of experiences, connections to local communities and economic development knowledge to inform the planning process. Overall, the Advisory Committee included ten members, with eight of the Region's ten counties being represented on the committee, while the two counties that were not represented (Adams and Lincoln Counties) were represented in the Peer Review group that provided feedback on the plan during the Plan Finalization Phase.

Committee Members

- Myles Alexander, UW-Extension Oneida County
- Angie Close, Langlade County Economic Development Corporation
- Ted Cushing, Oneida County
- Jason Grueneberg, Wood County
- Todd Kuckkahn, Portage County Business Council
- Paul Millan, Forest County
- Vicki Resech, McDEVCO
- Kathy Schmitz, Vilas County Economic Development Corporation
- Jane Spencer, North Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board
- Terry Whipple, Juneau County Economic Development Corporation

Role of the Committee:

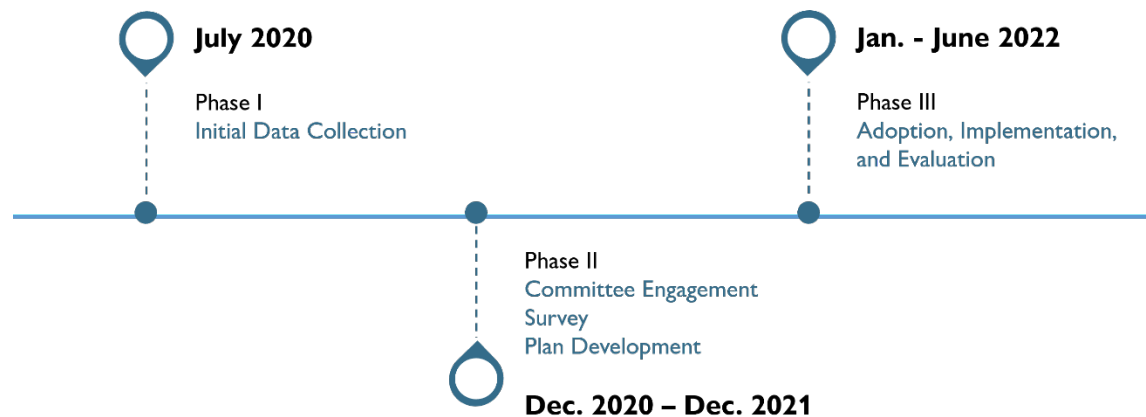
The overall role of the Advisory Committee was to provide oversight for the Regional Recovery Plan. This included the Advisory Committee reviewing all demographic and economic information and reviewing each of the five pillar assessment reports that are associated with the Regional Recovery Plan. In addition to their role in providing general oversight for the plan, the Advisory Committee also helped inform the Region's economic recovery, resiliency, and visioning efforts. The Advisory Committee provided policy and legislative recommendations on economic recovery, resilience, and vision in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The recommendations produced by the Advisory Committee seek to support economic recovery, build community resiliency, promote prosperity within the region, and to improve the region's ability to adapt to and absorb future economic shocks.

The Committee's work consisted of virtual meetings to assess the impacts of the pandemic on the economy, local businesses, and people, and by discussing the key information that is produced during the planning process. The Advisory Committee also helped to draft a regional survey by identifying the questions that needed to be answered in order to improve the region's recovery and resiliency efforts, and also identified the lessons learned from the pandemic and provided advice on the changes needed to help the region's businesses, residents, and governments become better prepared for future disruptions.

Planning Timeline

In an effort to help the Region recover from the harmful impacts incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the NCWRPC was awarded a CARES Act Grant in mid-2020 to help with the economic recovery of the North Central Wisconsin Region as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the project deliverables of this grant is the development of a Regional Recovery Plan that seeks to prevent, prepare for, and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, or respond to economic injury as a result of coronavirus, within the region. The Regional Recovery Plan planning process was conducted through a two-year process involving three major phases – initial data collection; committee engagement, survey development, and plan development; and plan adoption, implementation, and evaluation.

Regional Recovery Project Timeline



Phase I: Initial Data Collection

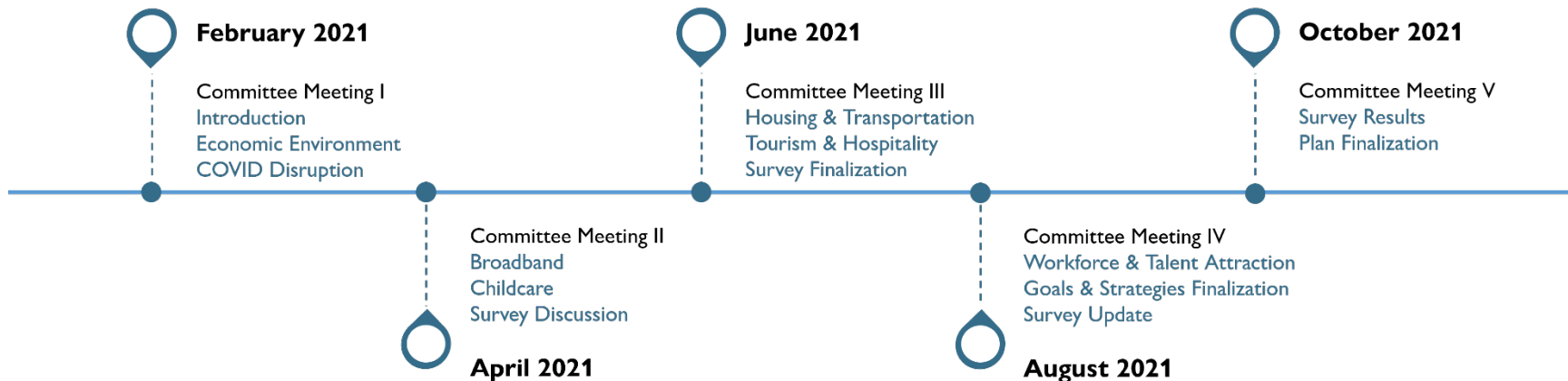
Initial data collection for the Regional Recovery Plan started soon after July 1, 2020, with an initial data collection timeframe spanning six months (through December of 2020). During the initial data collection phase, data focusing on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic was prioritized. This included data that depicted how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted employment and unemployment within the Region, as well as the size of the Region’s labor force. Additionally, data analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic also included the number of weekly unemployment claims within the Region throughout 2020, the impact COVID-19 had on monthly sales tax collections, and the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths throughout the Region. Other data that was collected during the initial data collection phase included pre-pandemic economic and demographic data for the Region. As the planning process moved forward, the RPC continued to collect monthly and quarterly data in an effort to help track the impacts of the pandemic.

Phase II: Advisory Committee Engagement, Survey Development, and Plan Development

Following initial data collection, the Advisory Committee was formed in January 2021. The Advisory Committee met a total of five times, on a bi-monthly basis, with their first meeting occurring in February of 2021. During the first of these meetings, the advisory committee reviewed the pre-pandemic economic environment of the Region, as well as the impacts that the pandemic had on the Region initially. The Advisory Committee also identified the core pillars (Broadband, Childcare, Housing & Transportation, Workforce & Talent Attraction, and Tourism & Hospitality) that are crucial for economic recovery and resilience efforts within the Region. The next three Advisory Committee meetings were dedicated to reviewing the status of each pillar, the issues facing each pillar, the impacts of COVID-19 on each pillar, and the benefits that improving and enhancing each pillar will have for the Region. Additionally, the Advisory Committee helped to develop a series of goals and strategies for each of these core pillars during the fourth Advisory Committee meeting. The Advisory Committee also helped to develop and conduct a regional business survey during this phase. During the final Advisory Committee meeting, which was held in November of 2021, the Advisory Committee analyzed the final results of the regional business survey, and also finalized and subsequently made a motion to approve the Regional Recovery Plan.

This phase also included the development and implementation of a regional business survey. The regional business survey was sent to over 700 businesses throughout the Region. The regional business survey was live from July 21 through October 1, and a total of 81 businesses responded to the survey. The regional business survey included questions grouped into the following categories: General Economic, Workforce/Talent Attraction, Housing/Transportation/Childcare, Broadband, and General Demographic questions.

Regional Recovery Plan Advisory Committee Meetings



Phase III: Adoption, Implementation, and Evaluation

The final phase of the planning process includes adoption of the plan, implementation of the plan, and evaluation of the plan. The Regional Recovery Plan identifies goals and strategies and recommendations that communities can implement to achieve these goals. Following adoption of the Regional Recovery Plan, the NCWRPC will create a dashboard including key metrics in an effort to track economic recovery and resilience progress throughout the Region. Tracking these key metrics will allow the NCWRPC to monitor the plan and identify the strategies and recommendations that are successful and further develop the recommendations and strategies that are unsuccessful.

The first part of the final phase of the Regional Recovery Plan planning process is adoption of the plan. To start the adoption process, a draft of the Regional Recovery Plan was approved by the Regional Recovery Plan Advisory Committee in October of 2021. After the plan was approved by the Advisory Committee, the next step was to have the plan peer reviewed by a group of economic development professionals who were not previously involved in the planning process. A group of peer reviewers was then formed, and the group provided their feedback on the Regional Recovery Plan to the NCWRPC, and their feedback was incorporated into the plan. Following the peer review process, a final draft of the plan was created for adoption.

After the development of the final draft of the Regional Recovery Plan, the plan was then brought to the North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission for review and adoption. The North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission reviewed and ultimately adopted the Regional Recovery Plan on January 26, 2022.

After adoption of the Regional Recovery Plan, the next steps involve implementing and evaluating the Regional Recovery Plan. Implementation of the plan will include the efforts of many, as opposed to just being limited to the NCWRPC. Since the NCWRPC has no implementation authority, the NCWRPC will be limited to advocating and supporting strategies and recommendations in addition to coordinating efforts when appropriate. As a result, the NCWRPC will encourage the implementation of the goals, strategies, and recommendations of the Regional Recovery Plan at the local level, while also advocating for the strategies and recommendations that are targeted more for a regional- or state-level scale. Therefore, local governments throughout the Region will play a large role in the implementation of the strategies and recommendations of the Regional Recovery Plan.

Evaluation of the Regional Recovery Plan involves the utilization of the [North Central Wisconsin Regional Recovery Dashboard](#), a dashboard tracking several key metrics. Key metrics that will be tracked by the dashboard include indicators for each of the five foundational pillars of the Regional Recovery Plan, as well as economic and social indicators. Evaluating these metrics over time will allow the NCWRPC to track the progress of economic recovery and resilience efforts within the Region and will help to highlight areas of success within the Region as well as areas where improvements are necessary in order to boost recovery and resilience efforts.

Accessing the Regional Recovery Plan

The North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission has created a Regional Recovery Plan website, which contains the Regional Recovery Plan, an executive summary of the Regional Recovery Plan, Assessment Reports for each of the five foundational pillars of the Regional Recovery Plan, and the North Central Wisconsin Regional Recovery Dashboard.

The Regional Recovery Plan website can be accessed at: <https://ncwrpc.org/rrp/>

Foundational Pillar Assessment Reports Access

- Broadband Assessment Report: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Broadband-Assessment-Report.pdf>
- Childcare Assessment Report: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Childcare-Assessment-Report.pdf>
- Housing & Transportation Assessment Report: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Housing-Transportation-Assessment-Report.pdf>
- Workforce & Talent Attraction Assessment Report: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Workforce-Talent-Attraction-Assessment-Report.pdf>
- Tourism & Hospitality Assessment Report: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Tourism-Hospitality-Assessment-Report.pdf>

North Central Wisconsin Regional Recovery Dashboard Access

The North Central Wisconsin Regional Recovery Dashboard can be accessed at: <https://ncwrpc.org/rrp/north-central-wisconsin-regional-recovery-dashboard/>

Chapter 2: Economic Environment

The Region’s diverse natural and agricultural resources have historically been the basis of the Regional economy, whether it was the fertile soils of the central and southern areas of the Region or the vast forest of the north. As time passed and more people moved into the Region, the Region expanded beyond farming and logging operations and began to transform the products harvested within the Region into finished products. Communities like Rhinelander, Merrill, Wausau, Stevens Point, and Wisconsin Rapids capitalized on their location to form value added industries focused on wood products, agriculture, and manufacturing. As these industries progressed, so did the service-oriented industries such as government, health care, transportation, communications, public utilities, trade, finance, insurance, and real estate. Currently the Region has high employment levels within the manufacturing, health care and social assistance, government, retail trade, and accommodation and food services industries.

Assessing the state of economic development and the degree to which it is meeting the needs of both the businesses and workforce require knowledge of past and present conditions, but also a sense of future workforce demand and industries the Region can target for future growth. Understanding these strengths and weaknesses allows the Region to bridge those gaps, prepare our workforce for future employment opportunities, and attract businesses that can be successful in our Region. Understanding future workforce and industries will help shape where future businesses are located, the types of businesses in our communities, and where people will live.

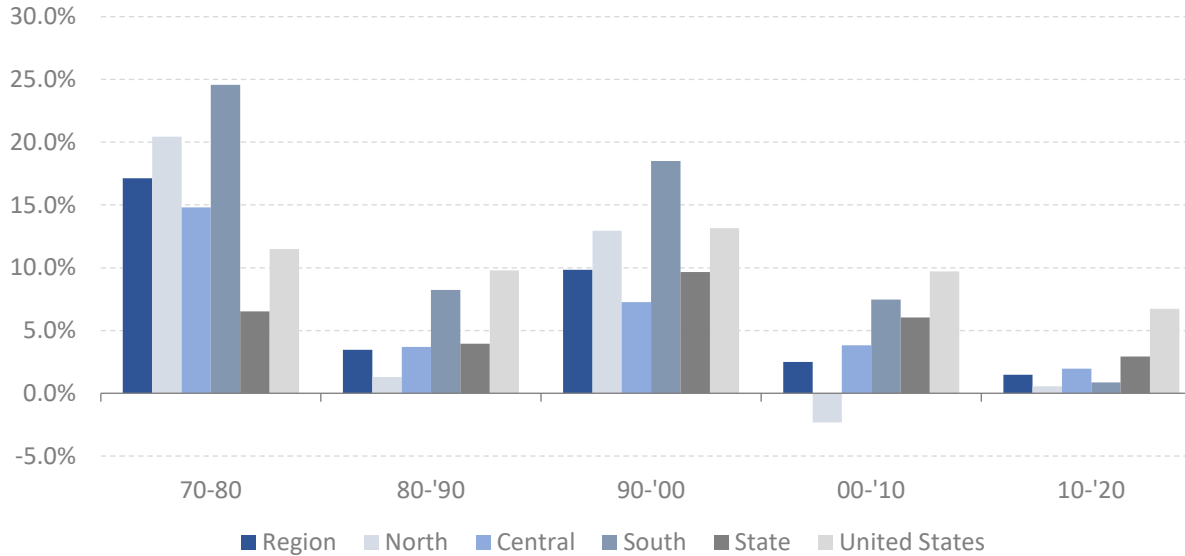
Population

In 2020, an estimated 448,322 people resided within the ten-county North Central Wisconsin Region. Among the Region’s ten counties, population is highest within Marathon County with an estimated population of 137,237, accounting for nearly a third of the Region’s population. Forest County had the lowest population within the Region with an estimated population of 9,183, accounting for about two percent of the Region’s population. The Region’s population has increased its median age to 44.3 over the past decade. As the Region’s population grows older, the Region will need to plan for an influx of newly available jobs and prepare for an increase in elderly residents.

Regional Population, 2020		
County	Population	Percentage of Regional Population
Adams	20,701	4.6%
Forest	9,183	2.0%
Juneau	27,250	6.1%
Langlade	20,063	4.5%
Lincoln	28,800	6.4%
Marathon	137,237	30.6%
Oneida	36,268	8.1%
Portage	71,670	16.0%
Vilas	21,769	4.9%
Wood	75,381	16.8%
Regional Population = 448,322		

Source: Wisconsin Department of Administration Population Estimates

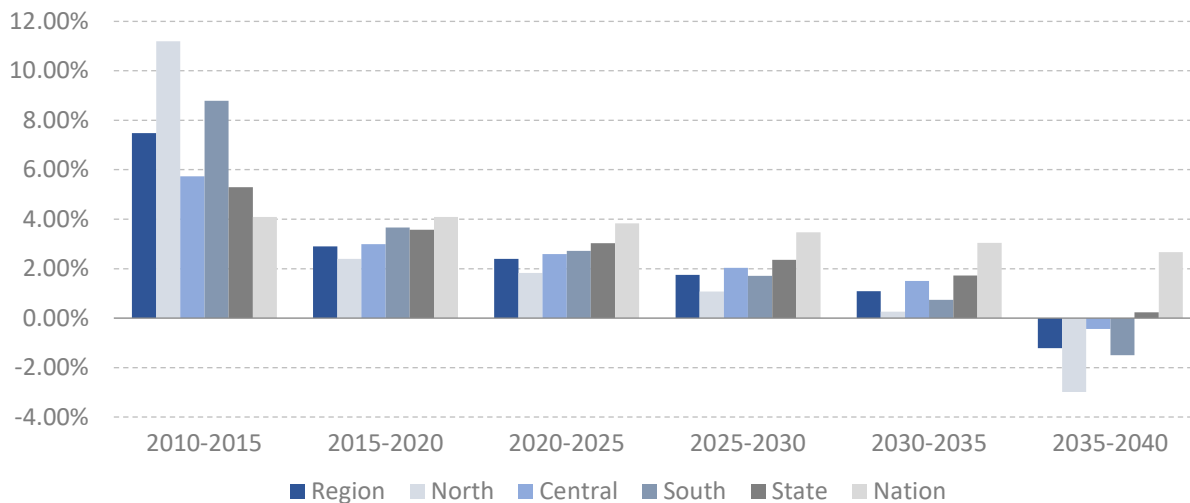
Historic Growth Rates 1970-2020



Historical Population Growth

Over the past several decades, the Region has consistently lagged behind both the state of Wisconsin and the United States in population growth rate. Additionally, population growth within the Region has been steadily declining since 1990. Population estimates for 2020 estimate that the Region's population grew by 1.5 percent between 2010 and 2020, slower than the growth rates of 2.9 percent in Wisconsin and 6.7 percent within the nation during this time.

Projected Population Growth 2010-2040



Projected Population Growth

Over the next two decades, the Region is projected to experience a 3.6 percent growth in population, significantly slower than the state's projected population growth of 8.1 percent during this time. Population growth within the Region is expected to be fastest in the South sub-region consisting of Adams and Juneau Counties, and slowest in the Central sub-region consisting of Marathon, Portage, and Wood Counties.

Workforce

The regional labor force consists of residents age 16 or older who are either employed or are actively seeking employment. Persons sixteen and older who are students, homemakers, retired, institutionalized, or unable/unwilling to seek employment are not considered part of the labor force. Research by UW Madison indicates that a strong correlation occurs between population growth and job growth. As population in an area increases, job growth increases at a similar pace. Based on this research, the counties with the highest population growth will also experience the highest creation of jobs and employment in the Region. In 2020, there were 360,090 residents over the age of 16 within the Region, and the regional labor force was 224,830, indicating a labor force participation rate of 62 percent within the Region. Overall, the Regional labor force participation rate of 62.4 percent is lower than the State's labor force participation rate of 66.4 percent, indicating that less people on average over the age of 16 within the Region are currently employed or actively seeking employment than in the state as a whole.

Regional Labor Force Indicators – December 2020



The North Central Wisconsin Region's future economic prosperity depends on having a skilled workforce. The availability of skilled labor will be a crucial factor for the growth and expansion of the Region's businesses, attracting new businesses and private investment, retaining businesses, increased production, and creating high-wage jobs within the Region. With expected trends such as innovations in the manufacturing industry, an expected increase in jobs within the Region, emerging and declining industries, and expected changes in the labor market, North Central Wisconsin's economy is expected to undergo rapid changes in the coming years. These expected changes will require the Region's workforce to develop a diverse set of new skills and knowledge in order to meet the needs of employers and adequately fill the opportunities created within the Region's emerging industries.

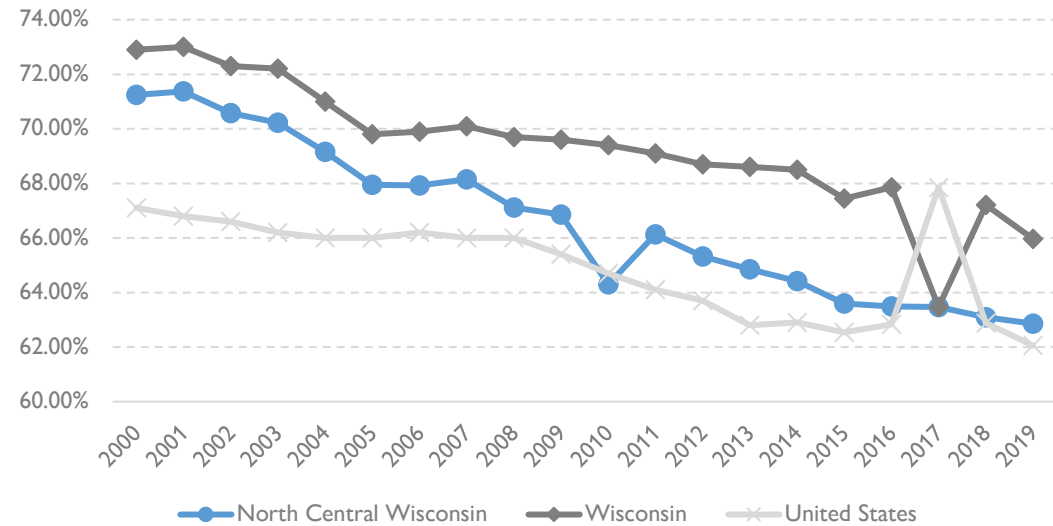
Labor Force Participation

Over the past twenty years, labor force participation rates within North Central Wisconsin, the state, and the nation have been steadily decreasing. In 2000, the Region's labor force participation rate was about 71 percent, slightly lower than the 73 percent participation rate in Wisconsin and higher than the nation's labor force participation rate of 67 percent. By 2019, the Regional labor force participation rate had dropped to about 63 percent, compared to a drop to about 66 percent in Wisconsin and about 62 percent in the nation.

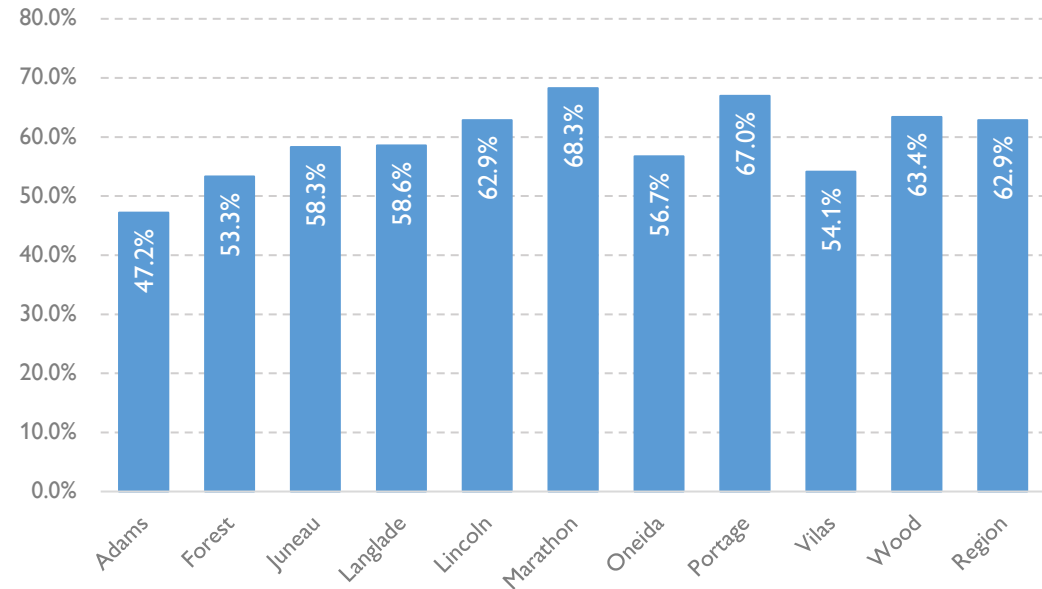
This decline has been due to a variety of factors, such as lingering effects of the Great Recession and the subsequently high unemployment rates that came with it, and the increase in retirements within the Region due to the Region's aging population. Although unemployment levels have declined, labor force participation has remained lower as people retired early or did not continue looking for work. According to U.S. Census LEHD data, approximately 26 percent of the workers who live in North Central Wisconsin are 55 or older, indicating that there will be a large increase in retirements within the Region in the next ten to fifteen years.

In general, the three counties within the Central sub-region have the highest labor force participation rates. Adams County has the lowest participation rate (47.2%) within the Region and the highest unemployment rate at 5.2 percent. Only two counties, Marathon and Portage, exceeded the state's labor force participation rate of 66 percent in 2019.

Labor Force Participation Rate Trends 2000-2019



Labor Force Participation Rate - 2019



Skills and Labor Gaps

Skill and labor gaps are a major threat currently facing the North Central Wisconsin Region. Many employers within the region, particularly within the manufacturing, health care, and information technology industries, face challenges in finding qualified workers to fill available jobs, ranging from entry-level jobs to high-skilled jobs. At the same time unemployment levels in parts of the North Central Region are significantly higher than the state average. Additionally, future population projections show a significant decline in the labor force over the next 25 years as baby boomers retire. The **North Central Wisconsin Regional Livability Plan** projects a 16,000-person labor shortage by the year 2025 if current population trends and commuting patterns continue.

The Region's population has increased its median age over the past decade to 44.3, indicating that the Region has a workforce that is quickly aging, with a large portion of the workforce quickly entering and nearing retirement. As the region's workforce grows older, many skilled positions will become available due to retiring employees. However, the Region currently has a low supply of younger workers that are ready to backfill these newly available jobs, helping to create labor shortages for many businesses. From 2010 to 2019, the Region's 17 and under population decreased to 20 percent, and projections show the Region's youth population decreasing by 1.2 percent over the next 20 years, compared to a 3.2 percent increase in the state over the next 20 years. Additionally, the Region's 25-34 population, a common measure of an area's attractiveness to young adults, has decreased to 10.9 percent (compared to the 12.6 percent in the state) during this time. The Region has also experienced a negative net migration of individuals between the ages of 20 and 34, indicating that the Region faces challenges in attracting and retaining young adults. An aging workforce and low supply of younger workers creates challenges for businesses within the Region to grow and expand, while simultaneously presenting challenges for the Region to attract new businesses.

The Region is currently facing challenges in attracting and retaining a highly educated and trained workforce. A highly educated, skilled, and knowledgeable workforce is key in the retention and attraction of business and is vital for the continued economic prosperity of the Region. With about 24 percent of residents over the age of 25 within the Region earning bachelor's degrees, educational attainment within the Region lags behind both the state and national averages (30 percent and 32 percent respectively). Additionally, only one of the Region's ten counties (Portage County) has a higher percentage of residents age 25 or older earning bachelor's degrees than the state average of 30 percent.

There are a variety of factors that have helped lead to a low supply of young workers within the Region, including lower wages and less benefits for workers, lack of broadband access, lack of childcare, and a lack of adequate and affordable housing. For the Region to enjoy a prosperous long-term recovery, it is crucial for the Region to develop strategies to attract a younger workforce to help address labor shortages.

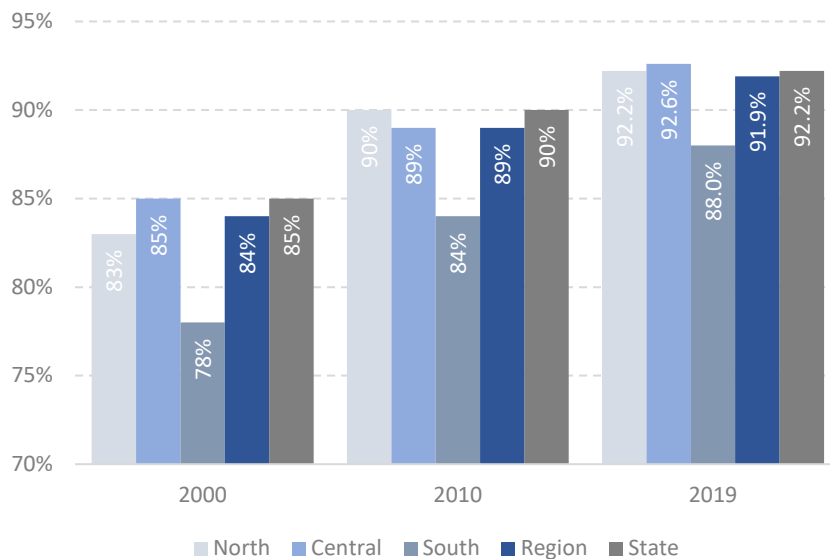
Knowledge based jobs requiring specific education are instrumental in growing the Region's economy. These opportunities create long term employment at high wages which increase the median household and per capita incomes and support the service industry positions stimulating the local economy. Businesses and education must work together to identify the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to satisfy the demand of businesses. Creating an environment with highly educated people will attract outside companies and attract other highly educated professionals to the Region helping address our current trend of an aging population.

Educational Attainment

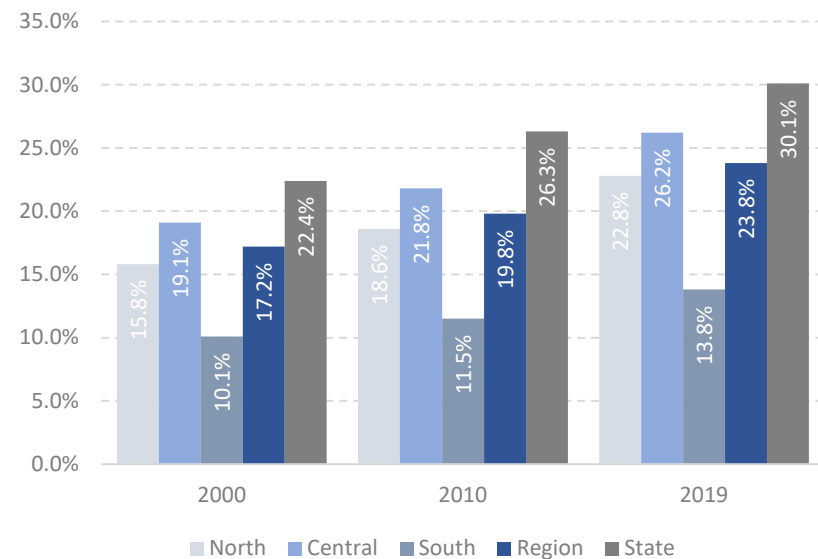
Education is a vital resource for helping to produce and harbor a highly skilled and productive workforce. Education helps potential workers develop the skills and knowledge necessary to fill high skill jobs and increases workforce participation. Education is also vital for aligning the skillset and knowledge base of a region's workforce with the needs of the region's employers. Communities that can provide a highly skilled and educated workforce also fare better in attracting and retaining future investments from both potential and current employers. Educational attainment is also linked to wage levels, wage growth, and unemployment rates, as well-educated individuals have higher wages, experience higher wage growth, and experience lower unemployment rates than workers with lower levels of educational attainment.

Educational attainment levels have increased substantially in the Region from 2000 to 2019. In 2000, only 84 percent of the population 25 and over had completed four years of high school or more. By 2019, that rate increased to 91.9 percent. However, the Region still has a slightly lower percentage of persons who have earned a high school degree or more than the state's rate of 92.2 percent. The rate of persons with a bachelor's degree or better within the Region is also increasing, with 23.8 percent of the Region's age 25 and older population earning a bachelor's degree or higher. However, the percentage of persons within the Region with a bachelor's degree or higher is still significantly lower than the state, where 30.1 percent of residents age 25 or older have earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

Percent of Residents 25 and Over that Graduated High School



Percent of Residents 25 and Over with a Bachelor's Degree



Taken together these two education indicators show a Region that is improving its education attainment levels, but with a significant gap in higher education. An increase in high school graduates point to a skilled workforce able to support the kind of manufacturing industry which has been the backbone of the Regional economy for many years. If the Region is to adjust to the requirements of the developing, knowledge-based economy, it will be necessary to increase the number of the college educated persons in the Region.

Vocational and Technical Education

Worker productivity has often been cited as one important reason for the strength of Wisconsin’s economy. As many industries, including manufacturing and agriculture, become increasingly technical and automated, technical educations are becoming increasingly necessary to obtain even entry level positions in many fields. A high school education is no longer sufficient to obtain a living wage in most cases. As a result, education and training are critical to maintaining productivity, as well as keeping our Region competitive. The vocational-technical education system and the training available within the Region are of particular importance for developing and maintaining a productive regional workforce. As business and industry continues to grow and change, the demand for highly trained and skilled labor grows. The state provides a variety of initiatives to develop the workforce through education, training, and cooperative ventures with business and industry. Worker training programs are very important as the location mismatch between worker skills and available jobs continues to widen.

In 2019, roughly 12 percent of the Region’s population had completed an associate’s degree at a local institution as their highest level of education, compared to about 11 percent within the state. During the 2018-2019 school year, the Region’s four technical college systems combined for a total enrollment of 46,180 students. Regional enrollment within the Region’s technical colleges has drastically declined, as regional enrollment has dropped by over 10,000 students since the 2009-2010 school year when there was a regional enrollment of 56,219 students amongst the Region’s technical colleges.

The Region’s technical colleges often direct their programs to the training needs of local workers and businesses and have developed two outreach centers: Wisconsin Learning Center (Stevens Point) and Northwest Wisconsin Manufacturing Outreach Center (UW-Stout campus). The Region also contains the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, a four-year university that offers two-year degrees at their satellite campuses in Wausau and Marshfield. The four technical colleges that have a presence within the Region and their campus locations are listed below.

<p>North Central Technical College Campus Locations:</p> <p>Wausau</p> <p>Antigo</p> <p>Spencer</p>	<p>Midstate Technical College Campus Locations:</p> <p>Wisconsin Rapids</p> <p>Adams</p> <p>Stevens Point</p> <p>Marshfield</p>	<p>Nicolet Technical College Campus Locations:</p> <p>Rhineland</p> <p>Minocqua</p>	<p>Western WI Technical College Campus Locations:</p> <p>Mauston</p>
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Employment

Employment within North Central Wisconsin has struggled to fully recover from the impacts of the Great Recession between 2008 and 2010, as employment within the Region is hovering near the pre-recession employment total. A significant contributing factor for the Region's slow recovery since the recession has been the decline of several of the manufacturing and natural resource industries and sectors that the Region's counties and communities have historically relied on, such as the agricultural industry and paper mill products sector. Due to the Region's status as a major producer of paper mill products, the Region has historically relied on the paper mill sector to provide jobs and GDP. The decline for demand of these products over the last few decades has led to several paper mills within the Region closing. Recent closures such as the Verso Paper Mill in Wisconsin Rapids in 2020 have led to widespread job loss within the Region and have had a devastating impact on many families and communities within the region, with impacts felt at the county and state levels as well. The decline of these industries that the Region has historically relied on signal a need for the Region to transform and diversify their economies to help economic recovery efforts and improve economic resiliency throughout the Region.

As stated above, employment within the Region has struggled to recover from the pre-recession employment levels of 203,282 in 2000. The Region lost over 7,500 jobs between 2000 and 2010, with significant job losses occurring between 2008 and 2010 as a result of the Great Recession. After the Great Recession concluded in 2010, the Region has struggled to increase jobs, as the national recession impacted several key industries in the Region. After a decade of negative job growth, the Region has experienced a gradual increase in employment, increasing by 4.2 percent between 2010 and 2019, a significantly slower job growth rate than Wisconsin's job growth rate of 9.7 percent.

In 2019, there were 203,925 jobs within the Region. Five of the Region's counties saw an increase in jobs between 2000 and 2019, with Adams County seeing the largest job growth at 15.9 percent. The Region's other five counties each saw a decrease in jobs during this time, with Wood County seeing the fastest decline in jobs at 11.5 percent.





















Employment Trends, 2000-2019						
	2000	2010	2000-2010 % Change	2019	2000-2019 % Change	2010-2019 % Change
Adams	3,788	4,605	21.6%	4,391	15.9%	-4.6%
Forest	3,272	3,193	-2.4%	3,217	-1.7%	0.8%
Juneau	8,754	8,717	-0.4%	9,409	7.5%	7.9%
Langlade	7,970	7,595	-4.7%	7,406	-7.1%	-2.5%
Lincoln	12,051	10,225	-15.2%	10,905	-9.5%	6.7%
Marathon	66,447	64,558	-2.8%	71,757	8.0%	11.2%
Oneida	17,764	16,109	-9.3%	16,165	-9.0%	0.3%
Portage	31,379	31,600	0.7%	33,838	7.8%	7.1%
Vilas	8,111	7,371	-9.1%	8,139	0.3%	10.4%
Wood	43,746	41,742	-4.6%	38,698	-11.5%	-7.3%
Region	203,282	195,715	-3.7%	203,925	0.3%	4.2%
State	2,737,382	2,630,246	-3.9%	2,884,312	5.4%	9.7%

Source: Wisconsin DWD, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

Employment by Sector

Employment statistics here are provided by EMSI, and only include QCEW employees. The QCEW does not account for certain types of employment, such as railroad and military workers, and does not capture self-employed individuals. EMSI provides estimates for the number of non-QCEW jobs and self-employment, which adds approximately 25,000 employees in our region in 2020, most of which fall under the construction and crop and animal production industries, but many other industries have a noticeable proportion of estimated workers that are not covered under the QCEW.

Between 2015 and 2020, 12 out of 20 of the Region’s industry sectors gained jobs, indicating that a majority of the Region’s employment sectors experienced increases in jobs during this time. Regional employment increased to 227,348 in 2020, a 0.7 percent increase over 2015 employment.

Employment by Industry - 2020				
NAICS Code	Industry	2020 Jobs	Percentage of Regional Employment	
11	Crop and Animal Production	8,759		3.9%
21	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	201		0.1%
22	Utilities	634		0.3%
23	Construction	10,916		4.8%
31	Manufacturing	37,944		16.7%
42	Wholesale Trade	7,233		3.2%
44	Retail Trade	24,141		10.6%
48	Transportation and Warehousing	11,589		5.1%
51	Information	2,548		1.1%
52	Finance and Insurance	13,122		5.8%
53	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	1,751		0.8%
54	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	5,651		2.5%
55	Management of Companies and Enterprises	3,000		1.3%
56	Administrative and Support and Waste Management	6,777		3.0%
61	Educational Services	12,508		5.5%
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	30,617		13.5%
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	3,051		1.3%
72	Accommodation and Food Services	17,819		7.8%
81	Other Services (except Public Administration)	9,784		4.3%
90	Government	19,303		8.5%
Total Regional Employment = 227,348				

Source: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages – EMSI 2020.4 Class of Worker

Top Employment Sectors

The three sectors with the highest employment within the region in 2020 were manufacturing, healthcare and social assistance, and retail trade, with each sector providing over 20,000 jobs. Together, these three industries combined to provide 92,702 jobs within the Region in 2020, representing over 40 percent of total employment within the Region.

Manufacturing

Manufacturing has continued to add jobs since the end of the recession and is the top employer within the region. As the region's largest exporter of goods and services, this industry is crucial to the economic health of the region. During the past five years, 2015 to 2020, jobs in this industry have increased from 34,878 to 37,944. However, in 2005, this industry employed 39,538 people. The average wage of \$65,572 within the manufacturing sector is significantly higher than the Region's average wage of \$56,082 across all sectors. While this industry is going through several major transitions in this region, it is expected to continue to grow during the next ten years. Nonetheless, this industry faces the challenges of an aging workforce, foreign competition, and changing consumer preferences. Top manufacturing industries within the Region include Paper (except newsprint) Mills; Cheese Manufacturing; Wood, Window, and Door Manufacturing; and Industrial and Commercial Fan and Blower and Air Purification Equipment Manufacturing.

Health Care and Social Assistance

The Health Care and Social Assistance continues to be the second highest employer industry, as it has been for the last 20 years. The Health Care and Social Assistance industry increased in employment by three percent from 2015 to 2020, accounting for 30,617 jobs in 2020. However, this is still a lower number of jobs within the Health Care and Social Assistance industry than in 2010, when there were 31,699 jobs within the sector. This indicates that employment within the industry decreased between 2010 and 2015. Prior to the decrease between 2010 and 2015, the Health Care and Social Assistance sector had been the fastest growing industry during the first decade of the new millennium. Similar to the manufacturing sector, the average earnings in this sector (\$67,755) are significantly higher than the regional average, but the industry only produces a fraction of the sales in exports that the manufacturing industry does. While rural regions have had a difficult time attracting health care professionals, over the past several years there has been a concentrated effort by local leaders to train and retain medical practitioners in the area.

Retail Trade

The Retail Trade sector is the Region's third largest employment sector, accounting for 24,141 jobs within the region. The Retail Trade sector experienced a twelve percent decline in employment from 2015 to 2020, losing 3,212 jobs. Unlike both the manufacturing and health care sectors, this sector provides average wages (\$34,707) that are significantly lower than the regional average wage.

Unemployment

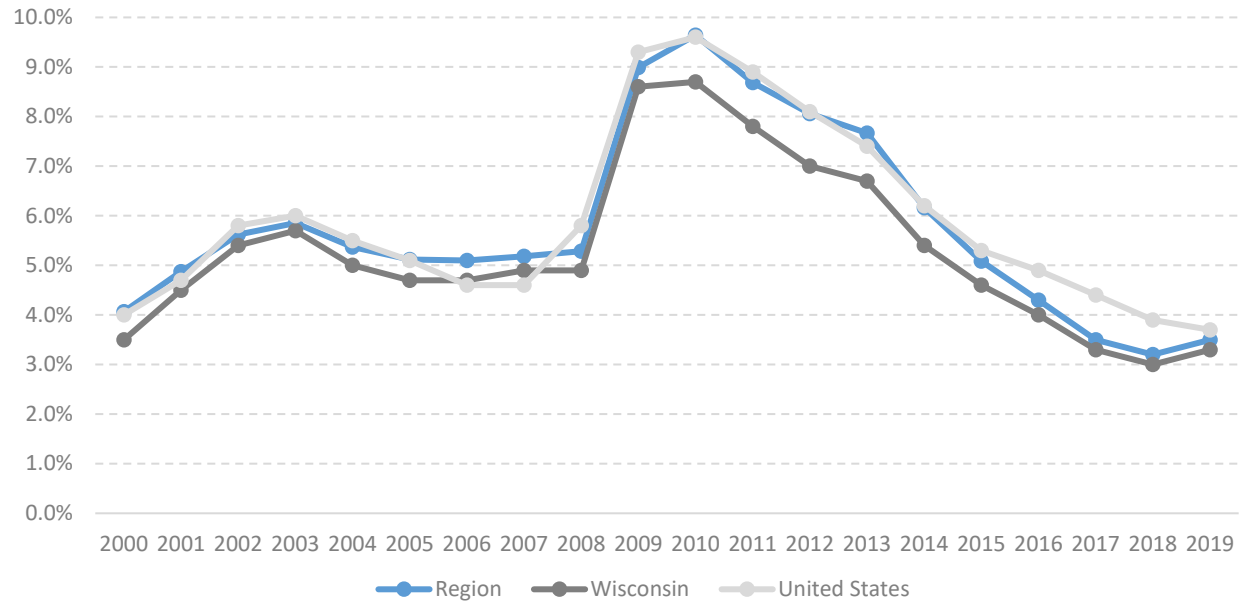
The Regional unemployment rate has been slightly greater than the state unemployment for the past 19 years, but mirrors both state and national trends. Unemployment was at its highest in 2010, at 9.6 percent and the lowest in 2018, at 3.2 percent. Historically, the Regional unemployment rate has generally been higher than the state rate but lower than the national rate.

In 2019, the Regional annual unemployment rate was 3.5 percent, slightly higher than the state rate of 3.3 percent and slightly lower than the national rate of 3.7 percent.

Historically, the unemployment rate is generally lowest within the Region's Central sub-region, as this sub-region contains the Region's three largest and most economically diverse counties (Marathon, Portage, and Wood). Unemployment was lowest in Marathon County at 2.9 percent and highest in Adams and Forest Counties at 5.2 percent. Marathon County was the only county within the Region to have a lower unemployment rate than the state in 2019, while Juneau and Portage Counties matched the state rate.

However, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the unemployment rate experienced a rapid increase in unemployment, rising to a record high of 13.6 percent within the Region and throughout the State in April of 2020. The unemployment rates within the Region, state, and nation gradually began declining after May of 2020, and ended 2020 with unemployment rates slightly higher than the pre-pandemic unemployment rates.

Regional, State and United States Annual Unemployment Rate, 2000-2019



2019 County Unemployment Rates	
County	Unemployment Rate
Adams	5.2%
Forest	5.2%
Juneau	3.3%
Langlade	4.2%
Lincoln	3.7%
Marathon	2.9%
Oneida	4.3%
Portage	3.3%
Vilas	4.3%
Wood	3.8%
Region	3.5%
Wisconsin	3.3%
Nation	3.7%

Source: Wisconsin DWD, Local Area Unemployment Statistics

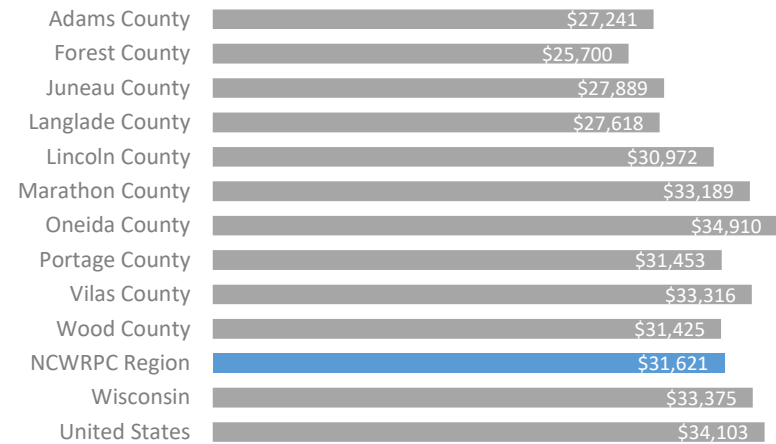
Income

There are two measures of income: per capita income and median household income. Per capita income provides a measure of relative earning power on a per person level while median household income provides an indication of the economic ability of the typical family or household unit. Both per capita and median household incomes have risen over the last thirty years, by 62 and 36 percent, respectively. The region's per capita income has grown faster than the state and national growth rates for the same time period, while regional median household income has grown at a slower rate than the state and nation. However, when adjusted for inflation these growth rates become significantly slower, with median household incomes even declining.

Per Capita Income

Per capita income provides a measure of relative earning power on a per person level. According to the American Community Survey, the regional per capita income in 2019 was \$31,621, as shown on the right. Per capita income within the Region ranged from \$25,700 in Forest County to \$34,910 in Oneida County. Overall, Oneida County was the Region's only county to have a higher per capita income than the state and was also the only county within the Region to have a higher per capita income than the national average. When adjusted for inflation, regional per capita income has increased 6.4 percent since 2000, a faster rate than both the state and nation.

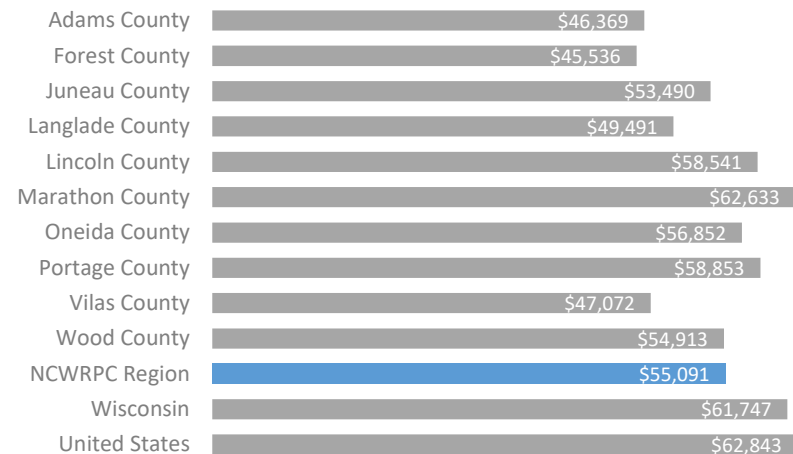
Per Capita Income, 2019



Median Household Income

Median household income in 2019 for the Region, each of the Region's ten counties and Wisconsin is displayed to the right. The Region had a median household income of \$55,091 in 2019. The Region's median household income in 2019 was lower than both the state's median household income of \$61,747 and the nation's median household income of \$62,843. Median household income within the Region ranged from \$45,536 in Forest County to \$62,633 in Marathon County. Marathon County was the only county within the Region that had a higher median household income than the state. When adjusted for inflation, the regional median household income has decreased 10.7 percent since 2000, a faster rate of decrease than both the state and nation.

Median Household Income, 2019



Household incomes within the Region are generally lower than household incomes throughout the state as a whole. The Region had more households earn less than \$25,000 in 2019 than the state average, with about 19 percent of regional households earning less than \$25,000, compared to the state average of about 18 percent. The Region also had a lower percentage of households earn more than \$100,000 in 2019, as 21.5 percent of the region’s households earned more than \$100,000 in 2019, compared to the state average of 26.4 percent, indicating that earnings are slightly lower within the Region than in the state.

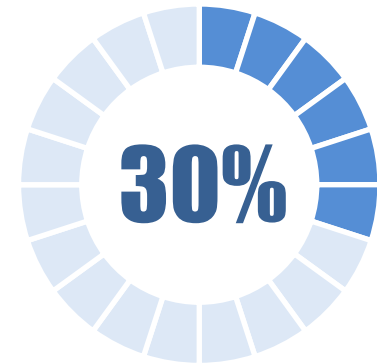
Household Income Ranges, 2019		
Household Income Range	Households	Percentage
<\$15,000	17,425	9.3%
\$15,000-\$24,999	18,467	9.9%
\$25,000-\$34,999	20,070	10.7%
\$35,000-\$49,999	27,316	14.6%
\$50,000-\$74,999	36,905	19.8%
\$75,000-\$99,999	27,382	14.7%
\$100,000-\$149,999	25,849	13.8%
\$150,000-\$199,999	7,497	4.0%
\$200,000+	5,788	3.1%
Total Households = 186,699		

Source: American Community Survey 2015-2019

Affordability

Household incomes can also be used to measure affordability within an area. The National Low Income Housing Coalition assembles a yearly list of estimates of the income required to afford housing using this “cost-burden” standard for localities across the country. This report focuses on rental housing but can be broadly applied to owner-occupied housing as well. The report calculates that for the state of Wisconsin as a whole in 2019, the average household would need to have an average household income of \$35,913 to be able to afford living in a two-bedroom apartment. Rent and mortgage payments, maintenance expenses, lot sizes, and required or desired amenities are a few factors which influence housing affordability. Available housing options are further refined by household size and income. Affordability is particularly an issue for the elderly, disabled, and low-income residents of a community.

Approximately 30 percent of households within the Region have a household income below the \$35,913 affordability threshold for a two-bedroom apartment. This indicates that about 30 percent of households within the Region would be cost-burdened living in a two-bedroom apartment. In comparison, only about 25.5 percent of Wisconsin households would be cost-burdened living in a two-bedroom apartment.



The percentage of households within North Central Wisconsin that would be cost burdened living in a two-bedroom apartment.

Wages

Average annual wages within North Central Wisconsin are below the state and national averages. In 2020, the average annual earnings within the North Central Wisconsin Region were \$46,176, compared to \$49,254 in Wisconsin and \$53,851 in the nation, indicating that wages within North Central Wisconsin are 6.2 percent below the state average and 14.3 percent below national average. Four occupations within the region had a higher average annual wage than the state average in 2020 including the Production; Transportation and Material Moving; Healthcare Support; and the Farm, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations. In 2020, the Legal Occupations, Management Occupations, and Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations had the highest average wages within the region, with average wages in each of these occupations exceeding \$80,000.

Occupational Wages, 2020				
Occupation	Total Employment	Mean Hourly Wage	Mean Annual Wage	
Office and Administrative Support Occupations	26,748	\$18.05	\$37,544	
Production Occupations	26,517	\$19.52	\$40,602	
Transportation and Material Moving Occupations	21,213	\$19.24	\$40,019	
Sales and Related Occupations	19,646	\$18.48	\$38,438	
Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations	16,314	\$11.05	\$22,984	
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	14,174	\$39.13	\$81,390	
Management Occupations	12,844	\$40.70	\$84,656	
Educational Instruction and Library Occupations	11,184	\$22.82	\$47,466	
Business and Financial Operations Occupations	9,919	\$30.43	\$63,294	
Healthcare Support Occupations	9,901	\$14.81	\$30,805	
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations	9,900	\$22.31	\$46,405	
Construction and Extraction Occupations	9,646	\$23.97	\$49,858	
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Occupations	6,952	\$14.37	\$29,890	
Personal Care and Service Occupations	4,814	\$13.82	\$28,746	
Computer and Mathematical Occupations	3,968	\$34.45	\$71,656	
Farm, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations	3,768	\$17.05	\$35,464	
Protective Services Occupations	3,549	\$21.53	\$44,782	
Community and Social Service Occupations	3,459	\$22.55	\$46,904	
Architecture and Engineering Occupations	3,031	\$33.93	\$70,574	
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports and Media Occupations	2,487	\$21.59	\$44,907	
Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations	1,335	\$29.10	\$60,528	
Legal Occupations	936	\$42.68	\$88,774	
Military-only Occupations	587	\$25.00	\$52,000	
Regional Average Hourly Wage = \$22.20		Regional Average Annual Wage = \$46,176		

Source: Occupational Employment Statistics and Wages – EMSI 2020.4 Class of Worker

Gross Regional Product

The total Gross Regional Product (GRP) in 2019 was over \$20.7 billion throughout the region. By industry, Manufacturing was the highest grossing industry, producing nearly \$4.4 billion, or 21.2 percent of the area's GRP. The Paper (except Newsprint) Mills produced roughly 16 percent of the Manufacturing industry's GRP. The Finance and Insurance industry produced the second most GDP within the Region, producing roughly \$2.6 billion, or 12.6 percent of the GRP. Half of this amount was created in the Direct Property and Casualty Insurance Carriers subindustry. This was followed by the Health Care and Social Assistance industry which generated \$2.5 billion and the Health Care and Social Assistance industry which generated roughly \$2.1 billion in revenues.

Regional Exports

In 2019, the Region produced 28.8 billion dollars in annual sales to industries and consumers outside of the region. The Manufacturing industry was the largest exporter in the region, with \$12.0 billion in export sales, which was roughly 87.3 percent of its total annual sales. The Leather and Allied Product Manufacturing, Machinery Manufacturing, Paper Manufacturing, and Printing and Related Support Activities manufacturing subindustries all exported over 95 percent of their annual sales. Public Administration was the second largest exporter with \$4.4 billion followed by Finance and Insurance with 3.1 billion dollars. The Health Care and Social Assistance Industry exported \$1.8 million in sales. Crop and Animal Production Industry exported 1.9 billion dollars in sales which was 60.5 percent of its annual sales.

Among 6-digit subindustries, the Direct Properties and Casualty subindustry had the most export sales within the Region with over \$2.3 billion in exports in 2020. The Paper (except Newsprint) Mills subindustry had the second most export sales in 2020 with \$1.85 billion in export sales, followed by Cheese Manufacturing with \$1.7 billion in export sales. In all, there were six subindustries at the 6-digit NAICS level that produced over \$1 billion in exports in 2020.

Regional Subindustries with Gross Revenue Product Exceeding \$500M in 2020

Subindustry (6-digit NAICS)	2020 GRP
Direct Property and Casualty Insurance Carriers	\$1,220,644,454
Local Government, Excluding Education and Hospitals	\$785,353,885
Paper (except Newsprint) Mills	\$728,951,009
Elementary and Secondary Schools (Local Government)	\$664,538,284
HMO Medical Centers	\$657,843,595
Offices of Physicians (except Mental Health Specialists)	\$549,716,356
General Medical and Surgical Hospitals	\$521,953,280

Source: EMSI 2020.4 Class of Worker

Top Regional Exports - 2020

Subindustry (6-digit NAICS)	2020 Export Sales
Direct Property and Casualty Insurance Carriers	\$2,303,783,389
Paper (except Newsprint) Mills	\$1,849,832,266
Cheese Manufacturing	\$1,729,932,963
State Government, Excluding Education and Hospitals	\$1,533,622,519
Federal Government, Civilian, Excluding Postal Service	\$1,445,970,346
Local Government, Excluding Education and Hospitals	\$1,034,756,742

Source: EMSI 2020.4 Class of Worker

Chapter 3: The Disruption

COVID-19 Pandemic

In early 2020, the world was flipped upside-down as the rapid spread of the coronavirus resulted in the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced that the rapid spread of the coronavirus met pandemic conditions. Shortly after, Governor Tony Evers declared a public health emergency throughout Wisconsin on March 12, 2020. The next day (March 13, 2020) President Trump declared that the COVID-19 outbreak constitutes a national emergency, with the emergency retroactively beginning on March 1st.¹

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been far-reaching, as the pandemic has had severe health, social, economic, and business impacts across the globe, and both Wisconsin and the North Central Wisconsin Region have been no exception. The pandemic has led to widespread human suffering, as the state has had over one million confirmed positive coronavirus cases since the onset of the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, widespread demand for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), which includes face masks, hand sanitizer, face shields, disinfectant spray/wipes, and gloves, led to temporary shortages in PPE, due to low stockpiles of PPE. These shortages led to an urgent need for manufacturers, breweries, and other production businesses to temporarily shift their operations towards producing PPE to meet the worldwide demand for PPE. There was also the very real threat of overwhelming hospitals and their space and resources (beds, ventilators, PPE, etc.) around the globe, a threat that did not exclude Wisconsin.

The pandemic also devastated local and regional economies across the state. Wisconsin lost over 359,000 jobs alone in March of 2020, representing an unprecedented 339% increase in unemployment rate in the span of one month, leading to a record high number of unemployment claims in an extremely short timeframe, quickly overwhelming the state's outdated unemployment benefits system. At the end of 2020, Wisconsin still had yet to reach pre-pandemic levels of employment as the state had about 2,000 fewer jobs at the end of December 2020 than at the beginning of March 2020.

The pandemic also exacerbated many issues facing local communities across the nation. Adequate broadband infrastructure and access quickly became an essential need and lifeline for many businesses, employees, school students, and families, as the threat of the virus suddenly required quick adaptations and a shift to remote learning, remote work, and virtual commerce across the nation. The substantial increases in internet reliance and traffic have further cemented adequate broadband access as an essential commodity for the function of economies and societies across the globe. Unfortunately, many areas of globe currently lack adequate broadband access, and Wisconsin and the North Central Wisconsin Region are no exception.

The pandemic also led to the closure of in-person schooling and an estimated 40% of all childcare facilities within Wisconsin. These closures have highlighted how essential the provision of childcare is for not just children themselves, but also for many families and communities. Over 70 percent of Wisconsin's households with children have all available adults working, with many of these families depending on childcare or school to provide care for their children during the workday. Due to the pandemic however, many families were faced with the dilemma of making a

difficult decision to choose between leaving their jobs in order to watch their children during the day or finding the right balance between providing around-the-clock-care for their children while simultaneously maintaining their jobs. This often impacted their ability to work as well as the current and future well-being of children.

The pandemic had a major impact on housing as well. With the number of unemployed residents dramatically decreasing at the start of the pandemic, and with unemployment benefits being delayed for many newly unemployed residents, the number of households who have fallen behind on rent and mortgage payments significantly increased. In order to avoid widespread evictions and foreclosures throughout the state, Wisconsin implemented an eviction and foreclosure moratorium preventing landlords and banks from evicting renters or foreclosing homes, a moratorium that has been increased several times during the pandemic.

The pandemic has also impacted local governments of all sizes worldwide. The pandemic has pushed local government to the forefront in the ongoing efforts to address the negative impacts of pandemic. As the world continues to try to navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic, local governments throughout the world are tasked with guiding economic stabilization and recovery efforts, providing support and assistance to their community's businesses and residents, and continuing to provide their essential services, all while dealing with constrained budgets that are a result of the pandemic.

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the world's largest economic shock since the Great Depression in the late 1920's and has further exacerbated many of the already-existing threats and weaknesses throughout the ten-county region and state, in addition to revealing new threats and weaknesses. The Safer-at-Home Order issued by Governor Evers throughout the state was necessary to help save lives and protect the state's healthcare systems from being overloaded with patients. However, this meant the closure of non-essential businesses throughout the state, a critical situation that many of the state's small businesses were not financially nor technologically prepared for. The sudden onset of the pandemic and the resulting fallout of the pandemic has had severe implications for many businesses and their employees. Even after the expiration of the Safer-at-Home Order, many businesses continue to be impacted by the coronavirus, as there has been dramatic decreases in in-person activity at many businesses, especially those in the service, hospitality, restaurant, and small retail industries, leading to dramatic decreases in revenue and employment.

As it has for the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the Region's economy, businesses, and job market. Many small businesses, particularly retail and service businesses, had to temporarily or permanently close during the pandemic, leading to thousands of job layoffs and newly unemployed workers within the Region. After the coronavirus pandemic officially reached pandemic levels in mid-March of 2020, employment within the Region dropped by nearly 13 percent, representing a loss of over 27,000 jobs within the Region, and an unprecedented 258 percent increase in the Region's unemployment rate. As time passed and businesses adapted and received much needed funding from various local, state, federal sources, employment began to steadily increase within the Region. However, employment within the

Region has yet to fully recover since the economy was essentially shut down in mid-March, as employment within the Region is still below pre-pandemic employment levels, with the Region containing about 2,800 fewer jobs at the end of 2020 than at the start of March 2020.

Additionally, many businesses were not sufficiently prepared to offer their employees the option of working from home, due to a variety of factors such as lack of broadband access and a lack of a business continuity plan, while the nature of some businesses made the option of working from home impossible, leading to historic levels of unemployment throughout the region and state. This led to 8.8 million unemployment claims statewide between the start of the pandemic in March and the end of 2020, representing previously unprecedented levels of unemployment claims within the state. The state was not ready for the unprecedented rise in unemployment claims in such a short time frame, which led to lengthy delays in the distribution of unemployment benefits for many individuals, causing additional economic and emotional stress for thousands of newly unemployed individuals and families.

COVID-19 Health Impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic posed potentially significant health risks to every resident around the globe. By the end of 2020, the State of Wisconsin had over 520,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with over 5,000 of these cases resulting in a death. The pandemic has also exacerbated existing drug and alcohol problems throughout Wisconsin, with levels of alcohol consumption and drug overdoses dramatically increasing throughout the state. Mental health issues also increased during the pandemic, as individuals were exposed to increased stress levels from factors such as risk of contracting the virus, health of loved ones, and a worsening financial status resulting from the pandemic. Many individuals and families also had to quarantine for a period of time, which puts those at risk of the negative impacts associated with long-term loneliness. Health insurance also became an issue for many residents, as the unprecedented spike in unemployment caused by the pandemic suddenly left thousands of individuals and families without access to health care.

At-Risk Population within North Central Wisconsin

It is important to consider at-risk populations to properly understand how health and economic disruptions, like the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, can impact the greater population and region as a whole. At-risk populations include persons over the age of 65, persons who have disabilities, residents living in poverty, residents with no health insurance, households without a vehicle, and households receiving Food Stamps or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.



88,363

Residents Age
65 and Older



59,604

Residents with a
documented Disability



45,856

Residents Living in
Poverty



23,136

Residents with no
Health Insurance



9,105

Households with
No Vehicle



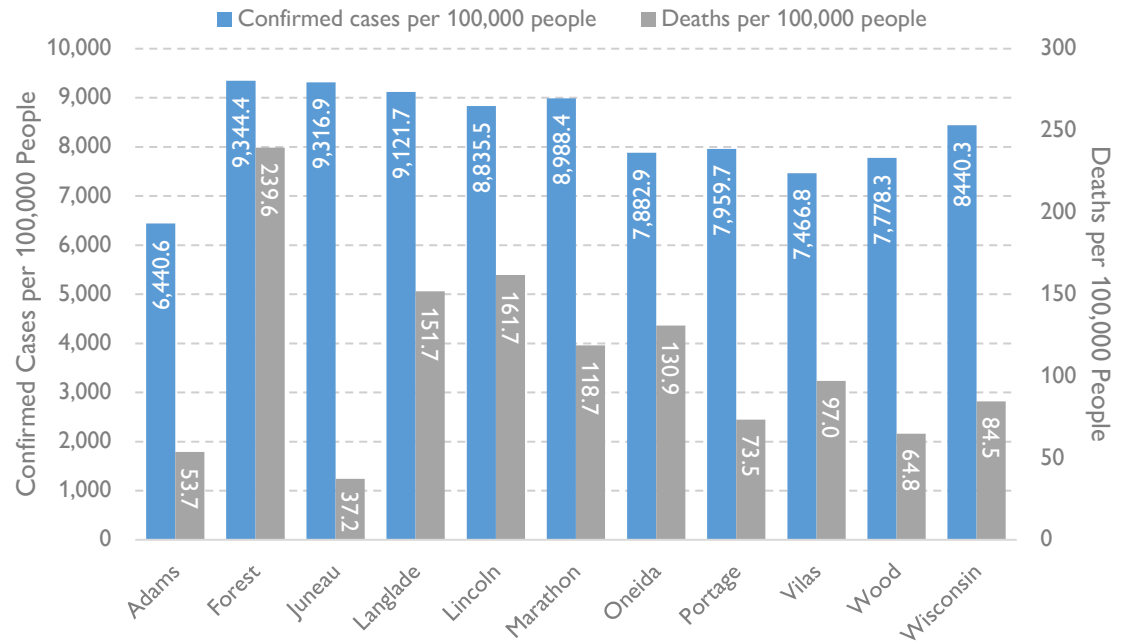
19,402

Households receiving
Food Stamps/SNAP

Regional Status of COVID-19

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services has been collecting and reporting a myriad of COVID-19 data at the census tract, county, and state level. The data ranges from 7-day percent positives, to cases and deaths by gender, race, and ethnicity. They also report data on labs and testing, hospitals, and wastewater monitoring. The chart to the right details number of confirmed positive COVID-19 cases and deaths per 100,000 by county and state, as of January 4, 2021. In the State of Wisconsin there were 8,440.3 confirmed positive COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people as of January 4. Forest, Juneau, Langlade, Lincoln, and Marathon had more cases per 100,000 than the state average. All other regional counties had fewer cases than the state average.

COVID-19 Cases and Deaths per 100,000 People (as of 1/4/21)



The COVID-19 pandemic has also helped identify a major opportunity for improving health within the region. During the pandemic, many places saw more people out bicycling and walking, whether as a means of transportation, for exercise, or to simply get out of the house. Many of the people who started walking and bicycling more during the pandemic will continue to do so post-pandemic, which has positive impacts on their health and on the environment due to reduced carbon emissions.

Economic Impacts of the Pandemic

The economic impacts that originated from the COVID-19 pandemic have been swift and severe. Unemployment levels throughout the nation rapidly increased, with unemployment levels reaching record highs in most parts of the country, as fear of catching and spreading the virus forced many businesses throughout most of the nation to temporarily close their doors until best practices for ensuring the safety of workers and customers could be identified and implemented.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had varying levels of economic impact. For example, some industries such as the service, hospitality, restaurant, and small retail industries have been hit especially hard, as many businesses in these industries were required to stay closed for longer periods of time, since it is harder to enforce safety practices such as social distancing and facemasks in these types of industries.

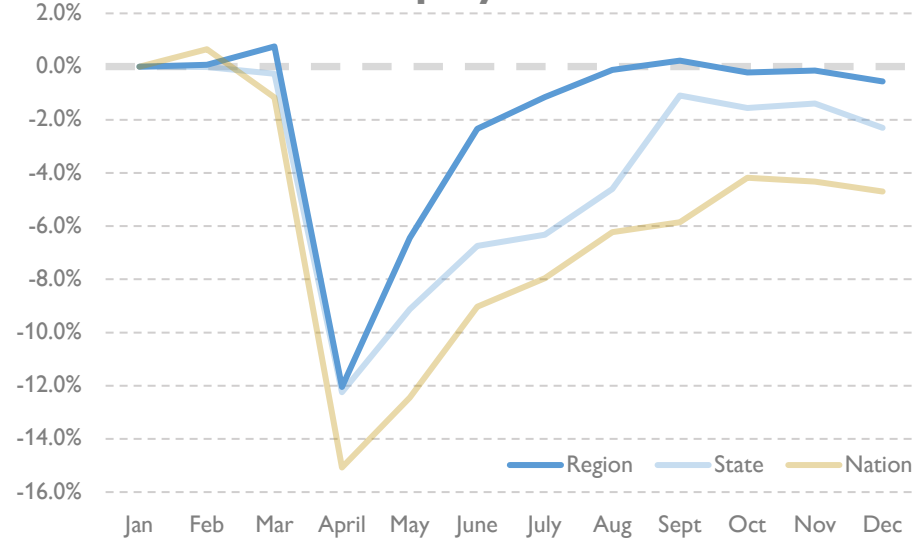
COVID-19 Impact on Employment

During the first three months of 2020, employment within North Central Wisconsin experienced a slight increase, increasing with employment reaching 214,873 in March. However, the spread of the virus and several safety measures such as the closure of schools and temporary closure of non-essential businesses in mid-March led to a severe drop in employment, as Regional employment fell to 187,569 in April, representing a 12 percent decline and a loss of 25,691 jobs from Regional employment in January. After the severe decline in employment in April, employment within the Region began to steadily increase as the world learned more about the virus and it became safer for employees to return to work due to enhanced safety measures and increased knowledge of the virus.

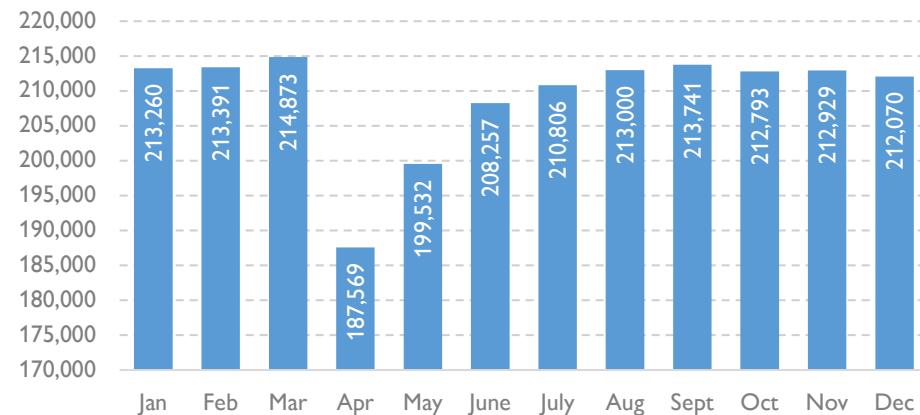
The Region's drop in employment at the onset of the pandemic was not as severe as the declines that the state and nation experienced. Between March and April, North Central Wisconsin's decrease in employment of 12.0 percent below the Regional employment in January represented a slightly slower decrease than the decrease experienced in Wisconsin, which saw employment in April drop 12.2 percent below the state's January employment levels, and significantly slower than the decrease experienced in the nation as a whole, when national employment dropped 15.1 percent below January employment.

As the world continues to try to move on from the early portion of the pandemic, employment within North Central Wisconsin has experienced a faster recovery than both the state and nation. Employment within North Central Wisconsin has experienced a nearly complete recovery, with employment reaching pre-pandemic levels in September before falling back below pre-pandemic employment in October. By the end of 2020, Regional employment was only 0.6 percent lower in December than it was in January, while December employment levels for the state and nation were 2.3 percent and 4.7 percent lower than January employment, respectively.

Tracking COVID-19's Impact on Employment



Employment within North Central WI - 2020



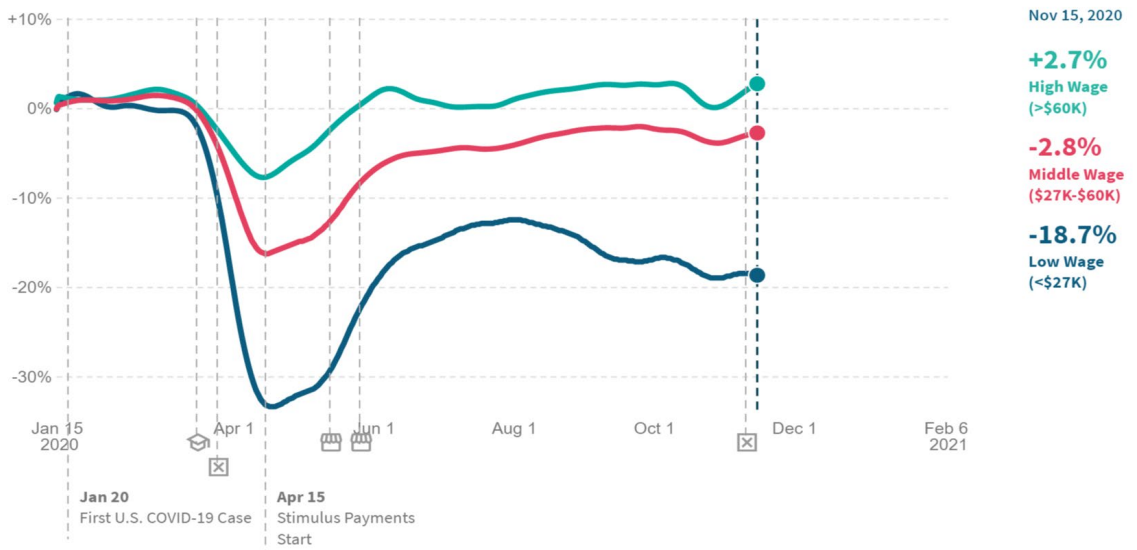
COVID-19 Impact on Employment by Wage Level

The closure of the economy during the pandemic has hit low-wage industries such as service, hospitality, restaurant, and small retail especially hard, as these industries often require their workers to work on-site in an indoor setting rather than being able to have their workers work remotely like many businesses in other industries were able to do during the pandemic. This forced many of these businesses to temporarily close their operations, while many businesses who could offer their employees the ability to work from home were able to conduct their operations remotely. These industries have also struggled to generate revenue and remain open even after being able to open, as retail spending has decreased dramatically, and in-person commercial activity is limited by the continued threat of the coronavirus.

The impacts of the pandemic have not been the same across all industries, especially when considering the average wage of jobs. According to data provided by Track the Recovery, the employment rate among workers for low-wage jobs (jobs with an annual average wage below \$27,000 per year) in Wisconsin was 18.7 percent lower on November 15th than they were in January of 2020. This 18.7 percent decrease in employment rate for low-wage workers compares to a 2.8 percent decrease in the employment rate for mid-wage (jobs with an annual average wage between \$27,000 and \$60,000 per year) from the January employment rate, and a 2.7 percent increase in the employment rate for high-wage jobs (jobs with an average annual wage above \$60,000 per year) from the January employment rate.

Percent Change in Employment*

In Wisconsin, as of November 15, 2020, employment rates among workers in the bottom wage quartile decreased by 18.7% compared to January 2020 (not seasonally adjusted).



*Change in employment rates (not seasonally adjusted), indexed to January 4-31, 2020. This series is based on payroll data from Paychex and Intuit, worker-level data on employment and earnings from Earnin, and timesheet data from Kronos. The dotted line in the low-wage series is a prediction of employment rates based on Kronos data.

last updated: February 01, 2021 next update expected: February 10, 2021

Source: <https://tracktherecovery.org>

The nature of the pandemic has forced many industries and businesses to adapt to stay afloat and recover. Businesses that were able to adapt by limiting in-person contact by offering services such as online shopping, drive-through service, or delivery and curbside pick-up services have been able to better attract commercial activity than those who were not able to do so. Businesses and industries that were able to implement safety measures such as facemasks, social distancing, and occupational limits, have also been able to recover stronger than those who have not been able to do so by increasing safety for both their workers and their customer base.

Monthly Unemployment Rate

During the first three months of 2020, the Regional unemployment rate hovered near 4 percent, with the regional unemployment rate reaching a low point of 3.8 percent in March. Like the Region, the unemployment rate in Wisconsin experienced a slight decrease between January and March, reaching a low point of 3.1 percent in March. Nationally, the unemployment rate experienced a slight increase at the beginning of the year, increasing to 4.5 percent in March from 4.0 percent in January. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March, and the need to limit the spread of the virus, brought forth an unprecedented increase in unemployment rates across the nation.

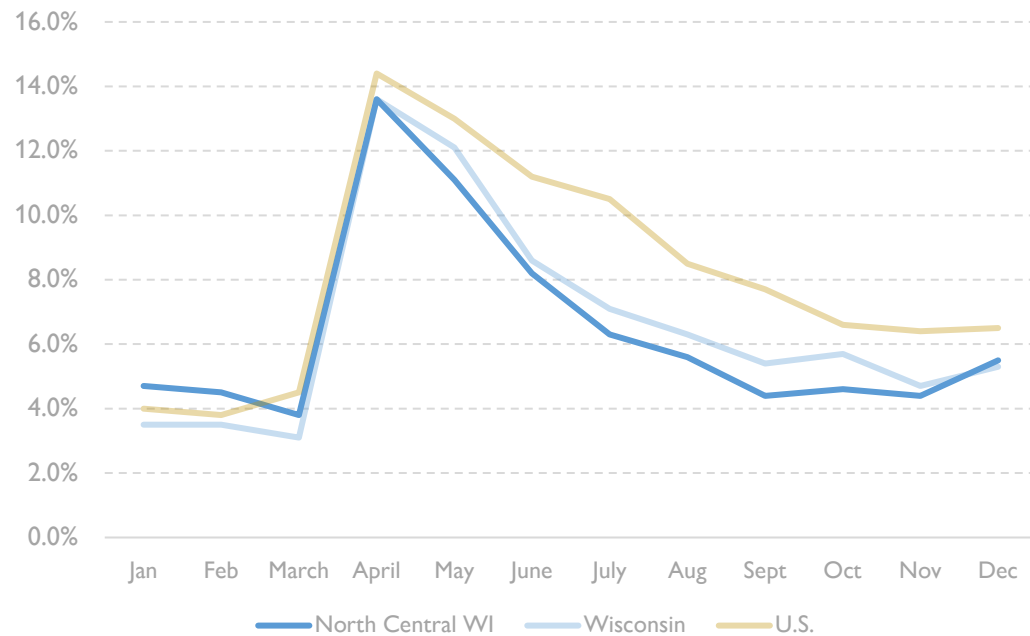
The onset of the pandemic in mid-March had an immediate impact on the economy and led to an unprecedented 234% percent increase in the nation's unemployment rate, as the national unemployment rate spiked from 4.4 percent in March of 2020 to 14.7 percent in April of 2020.

In Wisconsin, the unemployment rate increased by 339% after the onset of the pandemic, as the state's unemployment rate climbed to a record high of 13.6 percent in April 2020, up from the unemployment rate of 3.1 percent during the previous month of March 2020.²

Similarly, the unemployment rate within the ten-county North Central Wisconsin Region increased by 258% during this time, as the region's unemployment rate climbed from 3.8 percent in March 2020 to 13.6 percent in April 2020.

While severe, the rapid increase in unemployment rate for the North Central Wisconsin Region was not as dramatic as the increases that the state and nation experienced. Additionally, the unemployment rate in North Central Wisconsin has fallen back towards the Region's pre-pandemic unemployment rate faster than it has in the state and has fallen at a similar pace as the nation. At the end of 2020, the Regional unemployment rate was 5.5 percent, which is about 45 percent higher than the unemployment rate in March. In comparison, the unemployment rate in December for the state was 71 percent higher than the state's unemployment rate in March, while the nation had an unemployment rate in December that was about 44 percent higher than the national rate in March.

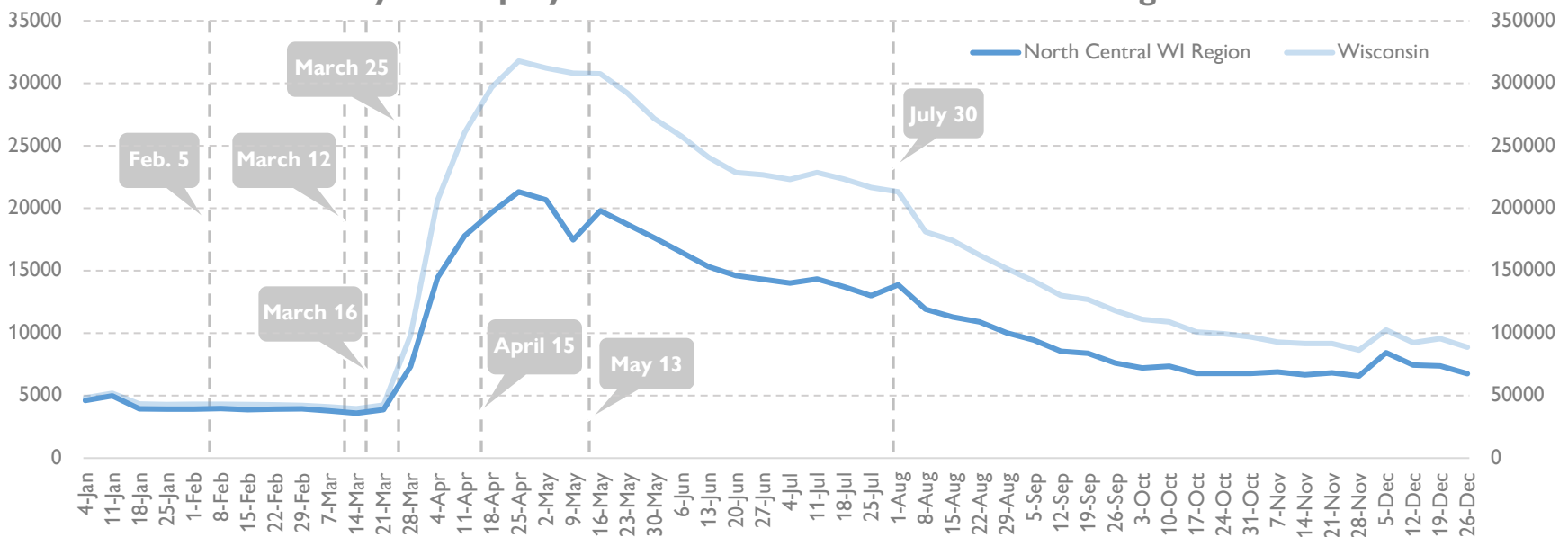
Monthly Unemployment Rate - 2020



Unemployment Claims

During the first 12 weeks of 2020 (through the week ending on March 21), there were an average of 4,028 unemployment claims per week within the North Central Region. During the following week ending on March 28th, the number of unemployment claims within the Region spiked 88.5 percent, up to 7,321 unemployment claims. Over the next month, the number of weekly unemployment claims within the region steadily increased before reaching a peak of 21,308 unemployment claims during the week ending on April 25th. The Region's peak of 21,308 weekly unemployment claims is 429 percent higher than the Region's average of 4,028 weekly claims filed during the first 12 weeks of 2020. While the Region experienced a severe spike in unemployment claims as a result of the pandemic, the rise in unemployment claims per week within the Region was not as severe as the rise that the state as a whole experienced, as the state had an initial spike of 132% in weekly unemployment claims, compared to an initial spike of 88.5% within the Region. Additionally, the state's peak in weekly claims was more severe than the Region's peak, as the State's peak was 628% higher than the state's 12-week average before the pandemic, compared to the Region's peak which was 429% higher. As state and federal funding began reaching businesses and businesses began to adapt by implementing safety measures, employment within the Region increased and weekly unemployment claims began to decrease. However, with 6,763 weekly unemployment claims at the end of 2020, the number of weekly claims within the Region were still above pre-pandemic levels when the region averaged 4,028 claims per week before the pandemic began.

Weekly Unemployment Claims - North Central WI Region 2020



Key Dates:

February 5 - Wisconsin's first documented COVID-19 Case
 March 12 - Public Health Emergency Declared in Wisconsin
 March 16 - Wisconsin Schools Close
 March 25 - Wisconsin Issues Stay at Home Order

April 15 - Citizens Begin Receiving Stimulus Payments
 May 13 - Wisconsin's Statewide Stay at Home Order Ends
 July 30 - Wisconsin Issues Statewide Face Mask Order

Impact of COVID-19 on Small Businesses

The pandemic has highlighted an urgent need to improve the support systems in place for small businesses. Small businesses throughout the nation were unprepared to deal with the sudden implications of the pandemic, and as a result, many small businesses have struggled to stay afloat during the pandemic due to factors such as temporary business closures, decreases in demand for products and in-person shopping activity, a lack of an online business presence, a lack of adequate broadband access, and a lack of and/or access to resources available for small businesses. Many businesses required outside funding from grant and loan programs such as the Paycheck Protection Program, Wisconsin's We're All In Small Business Grant, and other programs just to stay afloat during the pandemic.

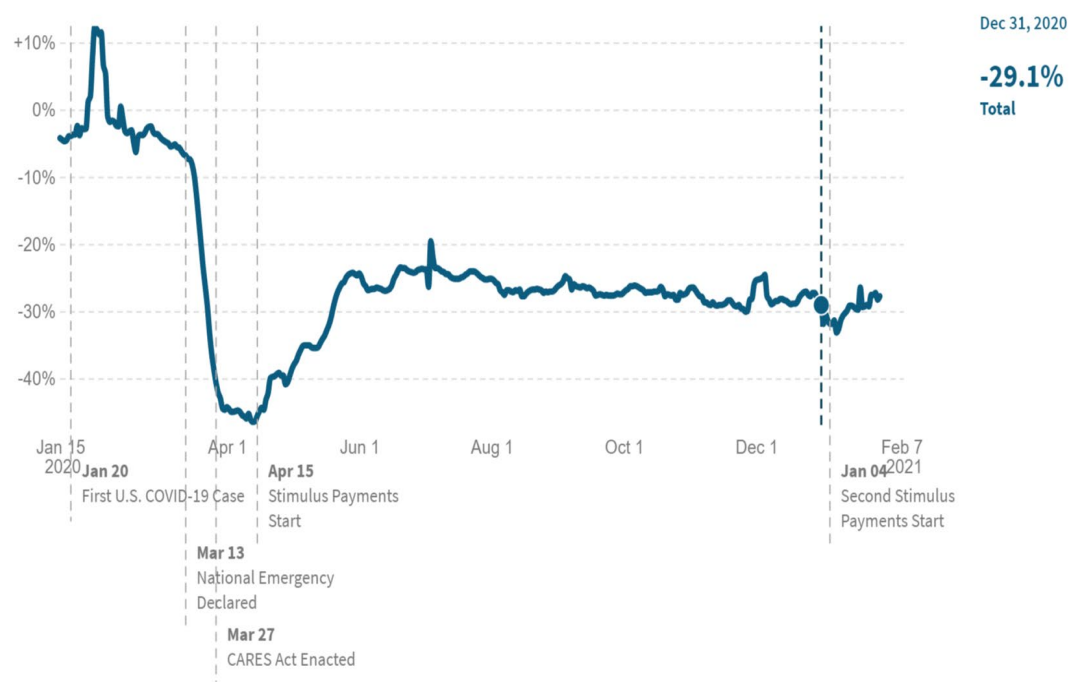
Small Business Closures

The health threats posed by the coronavirus throughout the pandemic have had a severe impact on business' ability to stay open throughout Wisconsin. During the beginning stages of the pandemic in late March and early April, the number of small businesses within the state that were able to stay open experienced a decrease of over 45 percent. Factors such as a lack of awareness of best practices to combat the virus, public health fears, temporary safety measures such as the stay-at-home order, and a lack of available funds contributed to this dramatic decrease in the number of small businesses open.

As time passed, best health practices for limiting the spread of the virus were identified, and state and federal funding started reaching businesses, leading to an increase in the percentage of small businesses open within the state. By the end of 2020, the number of small businesses open within the state represented a 29 percent decrease in small businesses open from the percentage of small businesses that were open in January.

Percent Change in Number of Small Businesses Open*

In **Wisconsin**, as of **December 31 2020**, the number of small businesses open **decreased** by **29.1%** compared to January 2020.



*Change in small businesses open (defined as having financial transaction activity), indexed to January 4-31 2020 and seasonally adjusted. This series is based on data from Womply.

last updated: February 05, 2021 next update expected: February 12, 2021

Source: <https://tracktherecovery.org>

With the decline of the economy mainly being a result of the fear of catching and spreading the virus, businesses that have been able to adapt to the challenges of the pandemic by providing services that limit human contact such as take-out, online ordering, delivery, and curbside pickup were able to better position themselves to stay afloat and in business during the pandemic than businesses that could not. Additionally, businesses that were able to implement and enforce safety measures such as face masks and social distancing helped to create an image of a safer environment than businesses that did not implement and enforce these safety measures, and thus have been able to better attract consumers during the course of the pandemic. Over the course of the pandemic, it has become clear the ability to adapt to new challenges is a major component of a business environment able to withstand the economic hardships brought forth by the pandemic, similar to how the ability to adapt is key to a vibrant business environment.⁶

COVID-19 Fiscal Impact on Local Government

The economic crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic figures to have a sizable impact on the fiscal situation for local governments across the state. Most counties and municipalities within Wisconsin rely more on their primary two sources of revenue – property taxes and state aid – than the national average. While this high reliance on two sources of revenue typically has been a challenge for most Wisconsin counties and municipalities in the past, it has helped to minimize the potential harmful impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, as these two sources of income are generally stable and not as likely to be impacted by reductions in activity as other sources of tax revenue are.

While the reliance on property taxes as the primary source of tax revenue collected by Wisconsin local governments will help to limit the impact on local governments, local governments still faced impacts from sharp temporary declines in sales tax revenues, which account for an average of about 8 percent of tax revenues for counties throughout the state. Municipalities also experienced declines in other forms of revenue such as fee, fine, and permit collections as well.

Another factor that could impact the fiscal situation for municipalities is the level of dependence that municipality has on revenues collected from tourism and recreational activities. Municipalities that are particularly dependent on tourism and recreational activities are likely to suffer prolonged decreases in revenue, as the threat of the virus significantly limits the tourism industry. This poses a significant challenge within the Region, as most counties within the Region are highly dependent on tourism for sales tax revenue.

As a result of the pandemic, local governments also had to increase spending, as many municipalities were forced to provide additional, and in many cases, ongoing spending in areas such as emergency medical services; personal protection equipment such as facemasks, disinfecting wipes, and hand sanitizer; technology to allow employees to work remotely; and investments in health care equipment and facilities. Increasing spending early on in the pandemic, at a time when many municipalities and counties were experiencing losses in revenue, posed an additional challenge for counties and municipalities: maintaining normal and emergency operations with a shortened budget.

Impact on Sales Tax Revenues

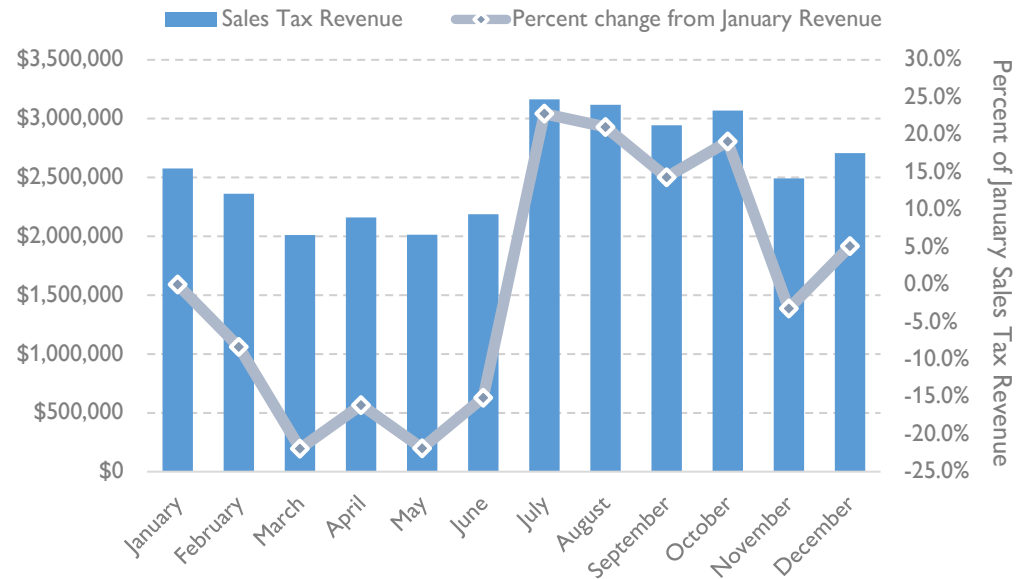
All ten counties within the North Central Wisconsin Region collect sales taxes. For counties, sales tax revenues are expected to be the source of revenue impacted the most by the ramifications of the pandemic, such as consumer fear of the virus, the temporary closure of businesses, and decreased retail spending, due to widespread loss of income brought forth by the drastic increase in unemployment.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an immediate impact during the early stages of the pandemic, as monthly sales tax revenues within the Region experienced a dramatic decline, as regional sales tax revenue during the month of March fell 22 percent below the regional sales tax revenue in January. Through June, monthly sales tax revenues within the Region stayed at levels that were at least 15 percent below the sales tax revenue collected within the Region in January.

Starting in July however, sales tax revenues within the Region experienced a strong recovery, with the regional sales tax revenue in July climbing to 23 percent above the January sales tax revenue. Monthly sales tax revenues remained near 15 percent above January's sales tax revenue through October, before experiencing a slight decline in November.

Overall, sales tax revenues within the Region were about six percent higher in 2020 than in 2019. All ten counties within the Region received more sales tax revenue in 2020 than in 2019, with only Adams and Portage Counties experiencing an increase in sales tax revenue of less than five percent in 2020. The strong recovery in sales tax revenues helped to recover from the financial hits incurred early in the pandemic, and to reduce the impacts of the pandemic on county budgets.

Monthly Sales Tax Revenue - North Central WI 2020



County Sales Tax Revenues, 2019-2020			
	2019	2020	Percent Change
Adams	\$1,755,581.85	\$1,787,335.59	+1.8%
Forest	\$586,602.35	\$647,369.33	+10.4%
Juneau	\$1,904,312.96	\$2,051,200.67	+7.7%
Langlade	\$1,801,462.47	\$1,957,326.43	+8.7%
Lincoln	\$2,212,180.75	\$2,336,568.22	+5.6%
Marathon	\$13,164,932.02	\$13,883,465.97	+5.5%
Oneida	\$4,820,469.09	\$5,293,262.52	+9.8%
Portage	\$6,979,849.30	\$7,032,629.47	+0.8%
Vilas	\$2,792,545.82	\$3,051,564.26	+9.3%
Wood	\$6,227,869.32	\$6,647,410.11	+6.7%
Region	\$42,245,805.93	\$44,688,132.57	+5.8%

Source: WI Department of Revenue

Chapter 4: Analysis of Foundational Pillars

As part of the Regional Recovery Plan planning process, five Assessment Reports were prepared covering the five foundational pillars identified by the Advisory Committee as being critical for a strong economic recovery and increasing economic resilience within North Central Wisconsin: **Broadband**, **Childcare**, **Housing & Transportation**, **Workforce & Talent Attraction**, and **Tourism & Hospitality**.

Each of the five Assessment Reports contains six basic sections. The first section of each Assessment Report is the “**Introduction**” section where we introduce each foundational pillar and explain why each foundational pillar will play a critical role in shaping the future of North Central Wisconsin.

The second section of each Assessment Report is the “**Status**” section, where we collect, analyze, and examine data related to the foundational pillar. This section provides a pre-pandemic narrative on the status of each of the five pillars within North Central Wisconsin. A variety of tables, charts, and maps are included within this section for each of the five foundational pillars to help illustrate the status of each pillar within the Region.

The third section of each Assessment Report is the “**Issues**” section. This section identifies and describes the various issues facing each of the five foundational pillars within North Central Wisconsin. The “Issues” section also explains how each of the issues facing the foundational pillars are impacting the North Central Wisconsin Region.

The fourth section of each Assessment Report is the “**Impact of COVID-19**” section. This section examines the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on each of the five foundational pillars.

The fifth section of each Assessment Report is the “**Benefits of Improving the Status of Each Pillar**” section. This section describes the impacts that improving the status, accessibility, and/or quality of each of the five foundational pillars will have on North Central Wisconsin, and how these impacts will benefit the Region.

The final section of each Assessment Report is the “**Vision**” section. This section provides an overall vision for each of the five foundational pillars within North Central Wisconsin. Additionally, this section establishes the goals and what we hope to achieve for each foundational pillar within the Region moving forward, establishes the priorities for improving each foundational pillar within the Region, and establishes the strategies and recommendations to implement for creating the vision of each pillar within the Region.

This chapter of the Regional Recovery Plan builds off of the five foundational pillars and provides a general overview of each of the five foundational pillars. At the end of each foundational pillar overview, access to the respective pillar’s Assessment Report is provided.

Pillar A: Broadband

Broadband accessibility has become a requirement, and not just a luxury, for communities, businesses, workers, and residents in today's world. In fact, the benefits of access to broadband, and the drawbacks from a lack of access, are quickly making broadband an essential utility. Broadband accessibility is a vital resource for businesses to operate and to stay competitive in an increasingly digital economy. Broadband accessibility is also critical for residents, as those who lack access to high-speed internet have a harder time accessing jobs, education, job and skills training, and services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the significance of broadband access, as many families and businesses were forced to rapidly shift to remote work, schooling, and commerce. The quick shift to a virtual world posed significant challenges to communities across the nation, and quickly created significant disadvantages for businesses, workers, and residents alike located in areas that lack adequate broadband access.

Status of Broadband in North Central Wisconsin

Most of the North Central Wisconsin Regional area geographically remains unserved or underserved for broadband access, the exception being more urbanized areas. [Throughout the Region overall, only about 62 percent of households have broadband access.](#) Therefore, the most significant consideration is the establishment of needed infrastructure throughout the Region to allow residents to access broadband. It is also important to examine a multitude of factors that influence broadband adoption, including household income, educational attainment, age, and employment status. For example, [households with lower household income levels are less likely to have a broadband subscription at home,](#) while [households with lower levels of educational attainment are also significantly less likely to have a broadband subscription at home.](#) Additionally, [individuals who are unemployed or not actively participating in the labor force are significantly less likely to have a broadband subscription at home,](#) while [older individuals are also less likely to have a broadband subscription at home.](#) Other important considerations include the rural digital divide, cost, and digital literacy.

Issues Facing Broadband within North Central Wisconsin

There are several issues facing broadband within the North Central Wisconsin Region. Low levels of availability of adequate broadband within the Region and the rural digital divide – or the growing disparity between broadband accessibility between rural areas and urban areas – is one such issue. Another broadband issue within North Central Wisconsin are the high costs of broadband subscriptions and the deployment of broadband. High costs for both the deployment and adoption of broadband make it harder for the Region's businesses, residents, and communities to access broadband, especially in rural areas. Digital literacy – or the ability to use the internet to find, evaluate, or create and distribute information – is another issue facing broadband within the Region. Low levels of digital literacy make broadband adoption less likely and make those impacted less likely to reap the benefits of broadband. Finally, other factors such as low income and educational levels, old age, and low labor force participation rates are also issues.

- [Broadband Availability & the Rural Digital Divide](#)
- [Cost of Broadband](#)
- [Digital Literacy](#)
- [Factors that Impact Broadband Adoption](#)

Impact of COVID-19 on Broadband within North Central Wisconsin

Broadband, and the importance of the role that broadband plays in today's world, was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the necessity of social distancing, millions of people and businesses across the globe had to rely on broadband to help them in their daily activities. Access to high-speed internet soon became a requirement for many jobs, businesses, students, and residents alike, as economies and societies across the world shifted towards a digital format. The increased reliance on high-speed internet also exacerbated the already existing digital divide, as those who had access to high-speed internet were able to participate in their jobs, social circles, school, commerce, etc. while those who did not have access to high-speed internet struggled to participate.

- [COVID-19 Magnified the Importance of Broadband](#)
- [COVID-19 Created Greater Demand for Broadband](#)
- [COVID-19 Has Accelerated Emerging Trends](#)

Broadband Vision and Goals

Most of the North Central Wisconsin Regional area geographically remains unserved or underserved for broadband access, the exception being more urbanized areas. Throughout the Region overall, about 62 percent of households have broadband access. Therefore, the most significant consideration is the establishment of needed infrastructure throughout the Region to allow residents to access broadband. It is also important to examine a multitude of factors that influence broadband adoption, including household income, educational attainment, age, and employment status. Other important considerations include the rural digital divide, cost, and digital literacy.

Access to broadband and the ability to use broadband is essential both for individuals and for industry. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this even more evident. Individuals require efficient and accessible broadband to access better job opportunities, to improve their educational experiences, and to access health information and services. In addition, broadband access helps to close the gap for disadvantaged and marginalized populations.

Businesses and institutions require broadband to actively engage in e-commerce, market products and services, and attract and retain talent. Above all, broadband enables businesses to build in resiliency (needed elasticity) to contract and expand when market conditions, societal conditions, or public health conditions cause shifts in supply and demand.

The **following goals** have been identified to be most important to the vision of the broadband future of the Region. When setting the goals top considerations include successfully expanding broadband access to residences, businesses, and institutions throughout the Region, fostering quality broadband service that meets the needs of residences, businesses, and institutions throughout the region, and optimizing digital inclusion, digital literacy, and competitive costs.

- Create universal broadband infrastructure throughout the Region.
- Bring high performance broadband service throughout the Region.
- Make broadband affordable and competitive.
- Advance digital literacy and inclusion.

Broadband Assessment Report

The **Broadband Assessment Report** provides an in-depth look at broadband within North Central Wisconsin. The Broadband Assessment Report examines the **status** of broadband, the **issues** facing broadband, the **impact of COVID-19** has had on broadband, the **benefits** of improving broadband accessibility, and a **vision** for broadband within North Central Wisconsin. The Broadband Assessment Report can be accessed here: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Broadband-Assessment-Report.pdf>

Pillar B: Childcare

The impact of childcare is not just limited to childhood development, it also impacts families, businesses, education, and the workforce and economic development systems in place within communities. Providing childcare that is both high-quality and affordable to families with children of all ages is more important than ever, especially since having both parents in the workforce has become essential for economic survival for many families.

High-quality childcare programs allow children to develop, explore, and grow. High-quality childcare programs also help improve children's readiness for school and in language development, which helps improve academic performance, likelihood of graduation, likelihood of employment, and often increases the lifetime earnings of children who participate in a high-quality childcare program.

High-quality childcare also provides parents with the peace of mind of knowing that their child is in a safe environment, allowing them to focus on work or school. Enrolling their children in high-quality childcare helps to increase labor force participation rates, especially among women, as childcare allows them to focus on their job. Increases in labor force participation rates lead to increases in the workforce, which benefits businesses and communities.

Areas that lack adequate childcare options are facing challenges in recruiting and retaining employees with families, which hampers the growth and production potential of the area's local businesses. The lack of childcare options in both local communities and at the regional level burdens employers with job turnover costs and reduces their possibilities for innovation and expansion.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, childcare and early education was in a state of flux. The costs of childcare have risen over time, to a point where it is now the largest expense for many families with children and is altogether unaffordable for many other families. The availability of childcare is also an issue within both the Region and the state. According to Wisconsin Policy Forum, the number of affordable childcare slots available has been decreasing over time, to a point where only about 15 percent of childcare slots within Wisconsin are considered affordable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on childcare. The pandemic exacerbated many of the existing issues that were already facing the childcare situation, such as affordability and availability. At the onset of the pandemic, about 40 percent of licensed childcare facilities within Wisconsin were forced to close, impacting over 57,000 children and over 12,000 childcare employees across the state. This came at a time when the demand for childcare significantly rose, as the closure of schools left many families looking for options to provide care for their children now that they were not able to attend school.

Improving the childcare situation in North Central Wisconsin will help to improve life outcomes for Region's children today and in the future and will help young families re-enter and remain in the workforce, improving the economic situations for many families. These factors prove that improving childcare will help to set the Region's workforce and economy up for more success now and into the future.

Status of Childcare within North Central Wisconsin

According to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, there are currently **316 licensed childcare providers** within the North Central Wisconsin Region. The 316 licensed childcare providers within the Region have the **capacity to provide a maximum of 10,737 childcare slots**.

Currently there are **26,484 residents within the Region below the age of six**, an age group that often requires full-time childcare services, as they are still too young to enter the K-12 education system. With only a maximum of 10,737 childcare slots available within the Region, the **Regional population under the age of six is more than double the number of slots available**, indicating that the Region has a severe gap between the number of children who require childcare and the number of slots available.

Childcare is considered to be affordable by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) if it costs no more than 7 percent of a family's income. Given that the average median household income within Wisconsin in 2019 was \$64,168, and that the average cost of childcare for infants is \$12,567 annually, the average cost of infant childcare would account for about 20 percent of the median family income in Wisconsin, while the \$10,197 annual cost of childcare for 4-year-olds would account for about 16 percent of the median family income in Wisconsin. **Simply put, the high costs of childcare within Wisconsin make childcare unaffordable for many families by any standard and make it especially difficult for low-income families to afford childcare.**

Issues Facing Childcare within North Central Wisconsin

In 2017, “**access to childcare**” was identified as the second largest obstacle Wisconsin employers face in keeping their businesses fully operational and growing. Access to childcare impacts families and their ability to work, the development of children, and the ability of businesses to retain and recruit the workers they need to operate and grow. Childcare shortages currently exist throughout the North Central Wisconsin Region, which threatens the Region's ability to retain and recruit families, the ability to support local business growth, and the ability to develop a highly skilled workforce that can meet the growing needs of employers.

- **Low Availability of Childcare**
- **High Costs of Childcare**
- **Low Wages for Childcare Workers**

Impact of COVID-19 on Childcare

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic the widespread closures of childcare facilities significantly disrupted the childcare industry. By mid-May, over 40 percent of licensed childcare providers within the North Central Wisconsin Region had closed, with half of the Region's ten counties experiencing childcare facility closure rates of 50 percent or higher. There were also significant declines in operation capacities for many childcare facilities during the pandemic. In Wisconsin, the state issued limitations for licensed childcare facilities that limited childcare facilities to 10 staff members and 50 children on site. Within the North Central Wisconsin Region, there were 68 childcare facilities impacted by these limitations, which temporarily impacted the availability of 3,223, or 31 percent of the childcare slots within the Region.

- Childcare Facility Closures
- Declines in Operational Capacity
- Decreased Availability of Childcare
- Increased Financial Burden on Facilities

Childcare Vision and Goals

Quality, affordable childcare and the ability to access that childcare impacts children, workers, employers, and communities. This is relevant to both the current and future economy. There is a lack of quality childcare available throughout the North Central Region. In addition, the childcare that is available continues to get more expensive. This is true even while low wages for childcare workers are not keeping pace with comparable industries. Quality and affordability are competing goals statewide, which indicates that the childcare model in place is not working. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified pre-existing problems and created new ones, with closures making childcare even more scarce.

The childcare network consists of both licensed and unlicensed facilities. To maintain high quality services, the entire network needs assistance to maintain quality services. This assistance could be in the form of technical assistance, business supports, joint purchasing for bulk buying, shared staff, and access to professional learning communities. The reality also exists that the wages for professional childcare workers are not competitive. It is possible to create a network of childcare centers that are both high quality and affordable.

The benefits of affordable, quality childcare are widespread. Children benefit with the development of foundational skills, school readiness, and language. Employees benefit when they can engage in trainings, seek and accept new jobs, and advance their career more readily. Employers benefit when they know that their employees aren't faced with the unpredictability of inconsistent childcare. Communities benefit with population gains and labor force retention. All of this in turn creates economic and community prosperity. The availability of affordable, quality healthcare throughout the North Central Region is crucial to creating a sustainable and resilient Region.

The **following goals** have been identified to be most important to the vision of the future of childcare within North Central Wisconsin. When setting the goals, top considerations include successfully expanding the number of childcare slots throughout the Region. These slots would be

within a reasonable driving distance, all while maintaining standards of quality and affordability. There is also a need to continue to support and maintain the many quality childcare centers that do exist.

- Expand childcare slots to allow parents a reasonable commute to their childcare center.
- Maintain high quality childcare throughout the Region.
- Make childcare affordable to the diverse workforce base throughout the Region.
- Recognize the entire Regional childcare network that includes licensed centers and more informal unlicensed childcare providers.
- Help the Regional childcare network to pool resources and leverage economies of scale.

Childcare Assessment Report

The **Childcare Assessment Report** provides an in-depth look at childcare within North Central Wisconsin. The Childcare Assessment Report examines the **status** of childcare, the **issues** facing childcare, the **impact of COVID-19** has had on childcare, the **benefits** of improving childcare accessibility, and a **vision** for childcare within North Central Wisconsin. The Childcare Assessment Report can be accessed here: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Childcare-Assessment-Report.pdf>

Pillar C: Housing & Transportation

Housing impacts regional and local prosperity. Communities that can offer a variety of housing types, such as single-family homes, townhouses, duplexes, and apartments, are significantly more capable of attracting and retaining residents at all life phases – from young families to retirees. The provision of affordable housing is also essential for the prosperity of both communities and their residents. Communities that can offer quality housing that is affordable are better suited to provide a prosperous environment for their residents, helping to attract and retain workers, families, and other residents of all ages.

Many communities throughout the region are experiencing increasing demand and rising costs for housing. This makes it harder for both working class and low-income families to find suitable housing within these communities, and often leads to the outmigration of a community’s workforce and the displacement of low-income families. There is also a lack of housing diversity within the region, as single-family housing makes up a significant portion (79%) of the region’s housing stock. This poses challenges to communities throughout the region in providing housing options, that can accommodate the different needs, of their residential base including senior housing, affordable housing, “missing middle” housing, workforce housing, and low-income housing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on housing within the region. The loss of jobs and closure of businesses that have resulted from the pandemic have posed significant challenges for impacted homeowners and renters to afford their mortgage and rent payments. The financial impacts of the pandemic pose a significant challenge to many residents and communities alike, the displacement of families who rent their homes. As part of their response to the pandemic and the unprecedented levels of unemployment that resulted, the State of Wisconsin temporarily banned rental evictions in an effort to avoid mass evictions throughout the state. While the temporary ban on evictions will help soften the blow for many impacted families, many families still have other expenses, which impacts their ability to keep up with future rent payments. Additionally, housing prices are declining in places that have experienced significant business closings and loss of jobs during the pandemic, making it difficult for many homeowners to sell their homes.

To help spur long-term economic recovery efforts and to improve resiliency, the region needs communities where everyone - including elderly, disabled, and low-income residents - has access to affordable housing and transportation options.

Status of Housing & Transportation in North Central Wisconsin

When comparing housing types to the state, it is clear that there is a lack of housing diversity within the Region. The Region’s lack of duplexes and multi-unit structures is concerning, as these types of units are important for providing residents with options as to how and where they would like to live. Additionally, the lack of multi-family units plays a major role in the affordability of housing within the Region for both low-income households and workforce households alike. The predominance of single-family housing within the Region indicates that the Region currently lacks the housing options, such as townhomes, duplexes, and apartments, that help to attract and retain residents at all life phases – from young families to retirees.

The costs of housing and transportation for households within the Region is also an important consideration, as the costs associated with housing and transportation are often times the two most expensive expenses that households have. According to data from the American Community Survey and the Center for Neighborhood Technology's H+T Affordability Index, [the average household within the North Central Wisconsin Region spends over half of their household income on housing and transportation costs combined in each of the Region's ten counties](#). This makes it difficult for households to afford other necessities such as food, healthcare, childcare, and schooling, while also making it difficult for households to accumulate wealth and spend money on consumer products. [Approximately 23 percent of all households within the Region are currently considered to be cost-burdened when it comes to how much they pay for housing, an issue that is significantly worse for households with lower incomes](#). The high levels of cost-burdened households within the Region also place many households at risk of homelessness, delay childhood development, and an increased risk of developing mental health issues that stem from housing insecurity.

Issues Facing Housing & Transportation in North Central Wisconsin

There are several issues facing housing and transportation within the North Central Wisconsin Region. The affordability of housing, especially among low-income and renter households, is a major issue that is holding back the Region's citizens, businesses, and communities. The lack of new housing that has been built within the Region over the past decade is another issue. The lack of new housing has led to increased competition for available homes for sale, which has helped lead to significant increases in home sales prices over the past several years, further exacerbating the housing affordability issue within the Region. The lack of housing diversity within the Region has made it difficult to attract and retain residents across all life stages, as the Region's single-family-housing-dominant housing stock makes it difficult to meet the needs and desires of all of its households. Finally, the Region's high dependence on personal vehicles negatively impacts the Region's citizens financial situations, environmental and physical health, and leads to the Region failing to maximize the benefits that providing multi-modal transportation can have for the Region's citizens and communities.

- [Affordability of Housing](#)
- [Housing Stress](#)
 - [Low-Income Households](#)
 - [Renters](#)
- [Lack of New Housing](#)
- [Lack of Housing Diversity](#)
- [Low Supply of Low-Income Housing](#)
- [High Proportion of Seasonal Housing](#)
- [Auto-Dependency of the Region](#)

Impact of COVID-19 on Housing & Transportation

Housing insecurity and the affordability of housing, as well as the housing market were all significantly impacted by the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the pandemic significantly increasing unemployment throughout the Region, many households lost their regular sources of income and fell behind on their regular housing payments or incurred large amounts of debt in order to make their payments as a result, placing them at heightened risk of losing their homes to foreclosure or eviction. Widespread unemployment also hindered the affordability of housing, as many households could no longer afford to make their payments after an extended period of time of being unemployed. After the pandemic temporarily halted housing sales across the Region at the onset of the pandemic, housing sales within the Region dramatically rose in the following months, leaving a low supply of available houses for sale and led to significant increases in housing prices.

- COVID-19 Pandemic Exacerbated Housing Insecurity Issues
- Significant Increases in Home Sales and Home Sales Prices During the Pandemic
 - Caused by a significant increase in demand for homes at a time when there is a low supply of homes available for sale

Housing & Transportation Vision and Goals

When considering housing and transportation, it is apparent that the North Central Wisconsin Regional lacks housing supply, housing diversity, and a variety of transportation alternatives. Much of this is due to the population distribution throughout the Region. Except for a few more densely populated municipalities, much of the Region consists of lower density population centers connected by a transportation network, which is primarily accessed through automobile travel. Over the past several decades, the desire for large single-family homes on large lots has become more prevalent. This shift has moved from what was previously a more diverse array of housing options including smaller homes and lot sizes, duplexes, and multi-family homes. To further complicate the situation, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the housing affordability issue with increased demand for homes and higher building costs.

An adequate supply of affordable, diverse housing options is essential to attracting a young and vibrant workforce, retaining that workforce, and accommodating residents throughout different ages and life stages. Additionally, a mix of transportation options for everyone including seniors and those with special needs ensures that residents have access to schools, jobs, shopping areas, and healthcare. Considering the interconnection between housing and transportation lowers the cost for residents and reduces impacts to the transportation network. The cost to municipalities is also minimized when the linkage between housing, industry, and the transportation network is integrated into the planning process.

Providing a more diverse array of housing choices and transportation options would create benefits for residents, as they would have a range of more affordable housing options. Businesses benefit from a more diverse workforce, and public entities benefit with lower costs and less impact to the transportation system.

The **following goals** have been identified to be most important to the vision of the housing and transportation future of the Region. When setting goals top considerations include the desire to offer a diverse array of affordable housing options throughout the Region for residents at various ages and stages. Ideally, residents would also have a quality transportation network and varied options for transportation.

- Create additional housing stock to match demand.
- Encourage development of a broad array of housing styles including high-density, multi-family, and missing-middle housing.
- Encourage housing that accommodates seniors, those with special needs, and those that are extremely low-income.
- Create a greater variety of transportation options.

Housing & Transportation Assessment Report

The **Housing & Transportation Assessment Report** provides an in-depth look at housing & transportation within North Central Wisconsin. The Housing & Transportation Assessment Report examines the **status** of housing & transportation, the **issues** facing housing & transportation, the **impact of COVID-19** has had on housing & transportation, the **benefits** of improving housing & transportation conditions, and a **vision** for housing & transportation within North Central Wisconsin. The Housing & Transportation Assessment Report can be accessed here: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Housing-Transportation-Assessment-Report.pdf>

Pillar D: Workforce & Talent Attraction

The prosperity of the Region's workforce and talent attraction efforts are critical to the Region's economic well-being. In a rapidly changing economic landscape, talent is quickly becoming recognized as the top resource for economies of all scales. Talent is needed to fill job openings and is essential for supporting business expansion and for spurring business growth within the Region. In North Central Wisconsin, there are currently several issues regarding talent. The Region currently has a shortage of talent, stemming from issues such as an aging workforce, a shortage of young residents to replace impending retirements, skill gaps to meet the requirements of changes in industries, and issues such as a lack of broadband and childcare access that act as barriers to employment for many individuals.

With an aging population, the Region is expected to have a substantial number of retirements over the next decade, as about 26 percent of the Region's current workforce is expected to reach the common retirement age of 65 over the next decade. With such a large proportion of the workforce expected to enter retirement in the next decade, filling these open positions will be a challenge. Additionally, issues such as a lack of childcare availability and a lack of broadband access make it difficult for many families and residents to participate in the labor force, leading to less workers available within the Region. With over a quarter of the Region's labor force expected to retire over the next decade, there will also be a substantial loss in skills and knowledge within the Region's workforce. With a shortage of workers, especially young workers, ready to fill these newly opened positions, the Region will have to deal with skill gaps. Skill gaps pose a major challenge for the Region, as shifts toward automation, digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and remote work will require new skills from the workforce. This makes addressing the barriers to labor force participation, addressing skill gaps, and attracting talent into the Region vital for the Region's continued economic prosperity.

Status of the Workforce & Talent Attraction in North Central Wisconsin

In 2020, there were 360,090 residents over the age of 16 within the Region, and the regional labor force was 224,830, indicating a labor force participation rate of 62 percent within the Region. Overall, the Region's labor force participation rate of 62.4 percent is lower than the State's labor force participation rate of 66.4 percent, indicating that less people on average over the age of 16 within the Region are currently employed or actively seeking employment than in the state as a whole. A majority of the region's workforce is in their prime working years, as about 59 percent of the region's workforce falls between the ages of 25 and 54. While a majority of the region's workforce is in their prime working years, the Region still has a relatively older workforce. Over a quarter (26%) of the Region's workforce is either nearing retirement or has reached the retirement age, while only about 15 percent of the Region's workforce falls between the ages of 16 and 24.

Average annual wages within North Central Wisconsin are below the state and national averages. In 2020, the average annual earnings within the North Central Wisconsin Region were \$46,176, compared to \$49,254 in Wisconsin and \$53,851 in the nation, [indicating that wages within North Central Wisconsin are 6.2 percent below the state average and 14.3 percent below national average.](#)

Educational attainment levels have increased substantially in the Region from 2000 to 2019. However, the Region still has a slightly lower percentage of persons who have earned a high school degree or more than the state. The rate of persons with a bachelor's degree or better within the Region is also increasing. However, the percentage of persons within the Region with a bachelor's degree or higher is still significantly

lower than the state. Taken together these two education indicators show a Region that is improving its education attainment levels, but with a significant gap in higher education when compared to the state. An increase in high school graduates point to a skilled workforce able to support the kind of manufacturing industry which has been the backbone of the Regional economy for many years. If the Region is to adjust to the requirements of the developing, knowledge-based economy, it will be necessary to increase the number of the college educated persons in the Region.

Issues Facing the Workforce & Talent Attraction in North Central Wisconsin

Many of the issues facing the workforce and talent attraction efforts within the Region focus on the availability of labor and the factors that impact the availability of labor. Another way to measure labor availability is to measure labor force participation rates, and the factors that impact participation. Factors such as an aging workforce, a lack of childcare, and a lack of broadband access all have negative impacts on labor force participation rates, as these factors impact the ability of the Region's residents to actively seek employment or remain employed. Skills gaps also impact the availability of labor; as a lack of skills, job training, and education among the workforce leads to less qualified workers available to fill jobs.

Other factors such as low wages and below average benefit packages, a declining supply of younger workers, the Region's negative net migration among younger individuals, and a lack of desirable and affordable housing & transportation options within the Region also impact the attractiveness of jobs and availability of labor within the Region, further exacerbating the labor shortage issue facing the Region.

Addressing the issues that impact labor force participation among individuals and increasing the attractiveness of jobs within the Region and the attractiveness of the Region itself, will be paramount for cultivating a strong workforce within North Central Wisconsin. Addressing skill gaps by developing programs that can effectively educate, train, reskill, and upskill the Region's workers is also crucial for cultivating a strong workforce.

- Aging Regional Workforce
- Migration Patterns
 - Region has experienced negative net migration
- Struggles Attracting & Retaining Young Workers
- Shortage of Young Adults is Impacting the Ability of Region to Replace Retirees
- Worker Shortages
- Lack of Childcare Access
- Lack of Broadband Access
- Skill Gaps
- Low Wages and Benefit Packages

Impact of COVID-19 on the Workforce & Talent Attraction

Given that the COVID-19 pandemic created the world's largest economic shock since the Great Depression in the late 1920's, it is no surprise that the Region's workforce and the talent attraction efforts within the Region have been significantly impacted. As the COVID-19 pandemic shut down many aspects of the economy many businesses were forced to temporarily shut down, while many others were forced to layoff or furlough workers, leading to a significant rise in unemployment. Suddenly, a staggering number of workers within the Region had lost their jobs and were forced to rely on unemployment benefits as their source of income. Additionally, the health risks associated with the coronavirus also made it difficult for businesses to attract and retain employees, especially those that offer jobs with high-contact levels, as many residents chose to avoid these jobs in an effort to avoid contracting the virus.

Barriers to labor force participation, such as childcare and broadband availability were also significantly impacted by the pandemic. With schools shifting towards online during the pandemic and childcare facilities being forced to shut down or limit their capacities, childcare availability became a major issue for parents of young children, as they had to either find available childcare slots or provide care for their child themselves, which led to many parents being forced to leave the workforce. The availability of broadband also had major impact on the Region's workforce, as many jobs shifted to remote work, which meant that many workers had to have adequate access to the internet in order to remain employed during the pandemic.

- COVID-19 Led to a Significant Initial Decrease in Employment & Subsequent Rise in Unemployment
 - It took over a year for the Region to fully recover the number of jobs initially lost in the early stages of the pandemic
 - Tourism, Hospitality, Retail, and Food Services industries were the hardest hit and have experienced the slowest recovery of jobs in the wake of the pandemic
- COVID-19 Pandemic Led to a Surge in Weekly Unemployment Claims
- COVID-19 Pandemic Accelerated Many Trends Impacting Talent Attraction & the Workforce
 - Increased need for Soft Skills and Digital Skills from workers
 - Greater emphasis needed for Upskilling & Reskilling workers
 - Shift towards remote work will impact talent attraction & retention efforts

Workforce & Talent Attraction Vision and Goals

The stability and sustainability of the North Central Wisconsin Regional economy depends on attracting and retaining a talented workforce. The Region is known for an abundance of outdoor amenities, an affordable cost of living, and a high quality of life. In addition, it has a diverse array of resources, partners, and assets that support the Regional economy. However, the Region also faces a variety of complex issues including uneven population and housing growth, an increase in population age, lack of broadband, childcare shortages, and a constantly changing economic landscape of resulting in lower employment and lower incomes. COVID-19 has caused additional disruption regionally and worldwide, resulting in the largest global recession since the Great Depression.

When looking at talent attraction within the Regional economy, there are a few core issues. The first is the aging population. Typically, a high priority is to attract highly educated individuals in lower age categories. It is more likely that this group will expand their family unit, raise children, and contribute more broadly to the community and the economy. This goal undoubtedly should be integrated. However, taking the population landscape as it is and maximizing that should be equally emphasized. This can be done in multiple ways including reskilling, upskilling, promoting life-long learning, apprenticeships, internships, and returnships. There are several people at or nearing retirement age. This group offers a wealth of knowledge and experience, and retention (even on a flexible basis) should be a consideration.

It is also critical to develop an ecosystem for creating, attracting, expanding, and retaining businesses which will provide sources of employment and attract the necessary current and future skilled workforce. This can be done through identification of the top Regional industries and working with them by providing technical assistance, private-public partnerships, and support, to maintain and grow employment. When businesses and industries are supported, they are positioned to attract and retain talent.

Lastly, it is imperative that our communities provide infrastructure and amenities to allow current and future businesses and employees to continue to grow and thrive. This includes broadband, childcare, housing, transportation, and recreational amenities. When seeking to attract new talent, affordable starter homes, good schools, nearby parks, and reliable broadband are all critical. Similarly, when seeking to retain potential retirees, flexible schedules, small-scaled homes with nearby amenities, community and recreational options, and a range of transportation alternatives are essential.

The **following goals** have been identified to be most important to the vision of the workforce and talent attraction future of the Region. When setting the goals top considerations include attracting, expanding, and retaining a talented workforce within the Region, creating an ecosystem for creating, attracting, and retaining businesses to the area, and providing community amenities and necessary infrastructure.

- **Develop and maintain a talented and skilled workforce.**
- **Develop an ecosystem for creating, attracting, expanding, and retaining business to the Region.**
- **Create a sense of place and sense of community for the Region and support the individual communities within the Region to do the same.**

Workforce & Talent Attraction Assessment Report

The **Workforce & Talent Attraction Assessment Report** provides an in-depth look at the workforce & talent attraction within North Central Wisconsin. The Workforce & Talent Attraction Assessment Report examines the **status** of the workforce & talent attraction, the **issues** facing the workforce & talent attraction efforts, the **impact of COVID-19** has had on the workforce & talent attraction efforts, the **benefits** of improving the workforce & talent attraction efforts, and a **vision** for the workforce & talent attraction within North Central Wisconsin. The Workforce & Talent Attraction Assessment Report can be accessed here: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Workforce-Talent-Attraction-Assessment-Report.pdf>

Pillar E: Tourism & Hospitality

The tourism and hospitality industries are major components of the North Central Wisconsin Region's economy, as thousands of visitors travel to the Region to take advantage of the Region's bountiful supply of lakes, scenery, forest lands, other natural resources, and robust outdoor recreation systems. To help support the Region's Tourism industry, accommodations such as motels, resorts, campgrounds, and other lodging facilities help generate an influx of visitors and business to the Region, while providing places for visitors to stay, eat, recreate, and shop. In addition to visitors to the Region, there is also a robust supply of seasonal housing throughout the region, as seasonal housing comprises over one-fifth of the regional housing stock, and accounts for nearly half of the housing stock in Adams, Forest, Oneida, and Vilas Counties.

Tourism is a driver of the both the regional and state economies, as tourism creates and supports both businesses and jobs. Tourism impacts businesses across a wide spectrum of industries, especially those in the hospitality industry such as hotels, restaurants, and bars, as tourism helps to create demand for these types of businesses. According to the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, the billions spent by travelers in 2019 within the North Central Wisconsin Region directly or indirectly supported 17,590 jobs and generated over \$440 million in labor income for employees within the Tourism industry.

Status of Tourism & Hospitality in North Central Wisconsin

The tourism and hospitality industries are major assets for the North Central Wisconsin Region's economy. The Leisure and Hospitality industry employed nearly 21,000 workers in 2019, accounting for over 10 percent of all jobs within the Region. Additionally, the Leisure & Hospitality industry produced over \$700 million in GRP throughout the Region in 2019, serving as a major source of GRP production throughout the Region, and especially in Adams, Oneida, and Vilas Counties. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, tourism was at an all-time high within North Central Wisconsin. In 2019, direct visitor spending within the North Central Wisconsin Region totaled over 1.3 billion dollars, which represents an increase of over 8 percent since the direct visitor spending in 2016. Additionally, tourism accounted for over \$2 billion in sales within the North Central Wisconsin region in 2019, which accounted for about 4.5 percent of all sales within the Region. Tourism is also a major source of employment within North Central Wisconsin, as the tourism industry directly or indirectly supported 17,590 jobs within the North Central Wisconsin Region in 2019, accounting for about 8.6 percent of all jobs within the Region.

Issues Facing Tourism & Hospitality within North Central Wisconsin

While the Tourism and Hospitality industries have been on the rise over the past several years, the industries still face several issues that threaten the growth and overall well-being of the industries. Perhaps the greatest issue facing the Tourism and Hospitality industries is attracting and retaining employees. Factors such as low wages for workers in the Tourism and Hospitality industries that impact the attractiveness of jobs within these industries are also issues that must be addressed in order for the Tourism and Hospitality industries to continue to thrive in the future.

Difficulties in attracting and retaining employees hinder the ability of businesses within these industries to offer their full capacity of services to customers, ultimately hurting their bottom line and limiting their ability to grow as a business. Another issue that the Tourism and Hospitality industries face are the decreases in spending and activity in the tourism and hospitality industries during times of economic uncertainty, an issue that has occurred following recent economic downturns such as the Great Recession in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

- [Attracting & Retaining Employees](#)
- [Low Wages](#)

Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism & Hospitality

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the Tourism and Hospitality industries. These industries were among the hardest hit by the pandemic and are among the industries experiencing the slowest recoveries in the wake of the pandemic. With the widespread shutdowns leading to drastic decreases in the amount of people traveling and going out to eat and drink, demand for businesses within the Tourism and Hospitality industries plummeted. The drastic decreases in activity within the Tourism and Hospitality industries led to drastic drops in direct visitor spending, business sales, and employment in both industries. Within the Tourism industry, direct visitor spending was down about 21 percent in 2020 compared to 2019 within North Central Wisconsin. Additionally, the number of jobs within the Region that are directly or indirectly generated by the Tourism industry experienced an 18 percent decrease in 2020, with several counties within the Region experiencing even more dramatic decreases in Tourism employment as a result of the pandemic. For the Leisure & Hospitality industry, employment in 2020 was down by over 13 percent compared to 2019.

- [COVID-19 Pandemic Led to Dramatic Decreases in:](#)
 - [Direct Visitor Spending](#)
 - [Tourism and Hospitality Employment](#)
 - [Tourism Business Sales](#)
 - [Taxes Generated by Tourism](#)
- [COVID-19 Pandemic has led to Slow Overall Job Recovery within the Tourism and Hospitality Industries](#)

Tourism & Hospitality Vision and Goals

Tourism and hospitality are key components of the North Central Wisconsin Regional economy. In 2019, the Tourism industry accounted for over eight percent of jobs within the Region and the Leisure and Hospitality industry accounted for over ten percent of jobs within the Region. The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on these industries as widespread shutdowns lead to drastic decreases in people dining out, attending events, and participating in entertainment venues. Although these shutdowns likely saved numerous lives, protected the healthcare system, and enabled the Region to build a population level public response, contact tracing, testing, and vaccine infrastructure, they had a profound impact on the local economy. This was especially true in the areas of tourism and hospitality.

The Region's economy is comprised of a diverse mix of industries and the contribution of the Tourism and Hospitality sector is indisputable. This is especially true in our far northern and southern counties where outdoor recreation, travel, and tourist destinations abound. To sufficiently recover from the pandemic, we need to continue to shore up these industries and implement sustained support that will help to ensure that these segments of the economy continue to be resilient. These industries are already vulnerable due to poor wages and benefits, and operations that have significant seasonal swings. The COVID-19 pandemic added to these barriers with shutdowns, reduced capacities, and additional cleaning and health requirements.

The interconnection of all segments of our Regional economy is strongest when each individual sector is strong. No part of the economy been left unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, impact to the Tourism and Hospitality sectors have been especially severe. Bolstering the Tourism and Hospitality industries in their recovery creates a resilient Regional economy that will continue to thrive in the future.

The **following goals** have been identified to be most important to the vision of the Tourism and Hospitality future of the Region. When setting goals top considerations include the geographic breakdown of the Region, including the outdoor recreation, travel, and tourism focus of the northern and southern counties, the shutdowns and reduced capacity restrictions that severely impacted many businesses in this category, and the interconnected nature of all sectors of the Regional economy.

- Foster recovery within the Tourism and Hospitality sectors throughout the Region.
- Implement policies and practices that create sustainability in both the Tourism and Hospitality industries.
- Identify best practices with relation to the Tourism and Hospitality industries to create continued growth and interconnectedness with the greater Regional economy.

Tourism & Hospitality Assessment Report

The **Tourism & Hospitality Assessment Report** provides an in-depth look at tourism & hospitality within North Central Wisconsin. The Tourism & Hospitality Assessment Report examines the **status** of tourism & hospitality, the **issues** facing tourism & hospitality, the **impact of COVID-19** has had on tourism & hospitality, the **benefits** of improving tourism & hospitality, and a **vision** for tourism & hospitality within North Central Wisconsin. The Tourism & Hospitality Assessment Report can be accessed here: <http://ncwrpc.org/rrp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Tourism-Hospitality-Assessment-Report.pdf>

Chapter 5: Regional Recovery Strategy

The goal of the Regional Recovery Plan is to develop a set of strategies that will help the Region's local economies recover from and become more resilient to economic shocks by identifying best-practice strategies that help spur economic stabilization and recovery in the wake of economic shocks and that will help build local economic resilience. Helping local recovery and resiliency efforts will help the regional economy as a whole recover and grow back even stronger than before the disaster struck.

The Regional Recovery Plan will become the foundation of economic recovery and resilience planning within the Region as the Region seeks to move forward from the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goals and strategies that make up the Regional Recovery Strategy are intended to spur economic recovery and resilience within North Central Wisconsin, as well as to better position the North Central Wisconsin Region for success as we move into the future.

The Regional Recovery Plan, as well as each of the five Assessment Reports, is available online to all communities and the general public to aid local and regional economic recovery and resiliency planning efforts. Additionally, a Regional Recovery Dashboard has been developed to help track economic recovery and resiliency progress within the Region and is also available online to communities and the general public.

The strategies developed in this plan will have a particular emphasis on addressing the opportunities and challenges in five foundational pillars that are expected to have a major impact on the future prosperity of North Central Wisconsin. These foundational pillars include **Broadband, Childcare, Housing & Transportation, Workforce & Talent Attraction,** and **Tourism & Hospitality**; each of which are vital components of strong and resilient communities in both today's and the future economic landscape. Disaster scenarios such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic often highlight the need for adequate opportunities and/or access to each of these pillars, as communities and businesses that can provide suitable access to or opportunities for each pillar are often more resilient to disasters and are better positioned for economic recovery in the wake of a disaster. The current lack of options or opportunities available within each of these pillars within the Region produces barriers for economic growth and resilience in local communities, including struggles attracting and retaining residents, filling and creating jobs, attracting and retaining businesses, and struggles stimulating entrepreneurship and innovation within the region. Developing a set of best-practice strategies to guide local communities in addressing the challenges facing these five foundational pillars within their community will help spur economic recovery and help build economic resilience and sustainability within local communities throughout the region.

Regional Recovery Goals

Broadband

- Create universal broadband infrastructure throughout the Region.
- Bring high performance broadband service throughout the Region.
- Make broadband affordable and competitive.
- Advance digital literacy and inclusion.

Childcare

- Expand childcare slots to allow parents a reasonable commute to their childcare center.
- Maintain high quality childcare throughout the Region.
- Make childcare affordable to the diverse workforce base throughout the Region.
- Recognize the entire Regional childcare network that includes licensed centers and more informal unlicensed childcare providers.
- Help the Regional childcare network to pool resources and leverage economies of scale.

Housing & Transportation

- Create additional housing stock to match demand.
- Encourage development of a broad array of housing styles including high density, multi-family, and missing middle housing.
- Encourage housing that accommodates seniors, those with special needs, and those that are extremely low income.
- Create a greater variety of transportation options.

Workforce & Talent Attraction

- Develop and maintain a talented and skilled workforce.
- Develop an ecosystem for creating, attracting, expanding, and retaining business to the Region.
- Create a sense of place and sense of community for the Region and support to the individual communities within the Region to do the same.

Tourism & Hospitality

- Foster recovery within the Tourism and Hospitality sectors throughout the Region.
- Implement policies and practices that create sustainability in both the Tourism and Hospitality industries.
- Identify best practices with relation to the Tourism and Hospitality industries to create continued growth and interconnectedness with the greater Regional economy.

Broadband – Goals, Priorities, and Strategies & Recommendations

Goals

The following goals have been identified to be most important to the vision of the broadband future of the Region. When setting the goals top considerations include successfully expanding broadband access to residences, businesses, and institutions throughout the Region, fostering quality broadband service that meets the needs of residences, businesses, and institutions throughout the region, and optimizing digital inclusion, digital literacy, and competitive costs.

- **Create universal broadband infrastructure throughout the Region.**
- **Bring high performance broadband service throughout the Region.**
- **Make broadband affordable and competitive.**
- **Advance digital literacy and inclusion.**

Priorities

Broadband priorities for the Region were formulated to better meet the goals identified above. The main priorities in the Region include building infrastructure where there is none, enhancing infrastructure where the current standards are not met, fostering affordable and competitive service, and ensuring that residents can use this service. When considering priorities, the rural nature of the Region was considered in addition to the large amount of geographical area that remains in the unserved or underserved broadband category.

- Build broadband infrastructure in areas of the Region that currently do not have broadband.
- Upgrade service in areas now considered underserved and are therefore lacking high performance broadband service.
- Ensure that low-cost, competitive broadband service is available to residents, businesses, and institutions throughout the Region
- Promote digital literacy by providing educational opportunities and promoting accessibility.

Strategies and Recommendations

The goals and priorities established above identify the vision for the future of broadband in the Region. Strategies and recommendations have been identified to meet these goals and priorities and can be broadly organized into three main categories of emphasis:

- **Infrastructural**
- **Service Enhancements**
- **Accessibility**

Infrastructural Strategies and Recommendations

The first category is the broadband infrastructure that exists or does not exist throughout the Region. In terms of area, the North Central Wisconsin Region is largely unserved with broadband infrastructure. The first set of strategies and recommendations are targeted at meeting the goal of creating universal broadband infrastructure throughout the Region.

- Support state and federal broadband funding.
- Increase coordination and participation in the State of Wisconsin Broadband Expansion Grant Program funding, including providing a consolidated point of contact so that public entities, private entities, and private consumers know the status of grant applications state-wide.
- Explore public-private partnership models of broadband infrastructure development and ownership.
- Ensure that broadband coverage maps are accurate. This will help to ensure that state funded grant applications are being considered with the most relevant, accurate information.
- Increase permitting and construction coordination.
- Continue to explore creative ways to provide broadband infrastructure to rural communities, including satellite technology.
- Explore ways for local leaders to take broadband action on their own.
- Collaborate with broadband stakeholders throughout the Region and the state to share strategies that have proven effective for creating and expanding broadband services.

Service Enhancement Strategies and Recommendations

The second category is service enhancement. The Region compares favorably to the state in the percentage of rural population with access to broadband with download speeds now considered substandard. Increasing the quality of these existing services is one service enhancement strategy. It is also necessary to ensure that quality service is provided once the required infrastructure is built in unserved areas. The following recommendations would create service enhancement throughout the Region:

- Drive service enhancement in those areas that are now considered to have substandard service
- Hold providers accountable for the broadband service that they claim to provide, including in areas such as Connect American Fund Phase II (CAF II) where areas are ineligible because they have already been determined to have received funding for broadband service.
- Increase consumer protections and pricing transparency, especially in instances where providers have received grant funding so that consumers, private entities, and public entities know who has agreed to provide service, where they have agreed to provide service, and at what service level.

Accessibility Strategies and Recommendations

The third category is related to broadband accessibility. This includes issues of affordability, literacy, and inclusion. There is an issue of broadband affordability. The high cost of broadband creates a barrier for those that are low-income or marginalized, makes it difficult to expand the existing broadband network, and is especially problematic in rural areas. Digital literacy, or the ability to use broadband technology to find, evaluate, and create and communicate information, leads to increased accessibility. The following recommendations would increase broadband accessibility:

- Support the creation of a Wisconsin Internet Assistance Program to reduce the cost burden on consumers.
- Explore ways for communities to partner with governmental and non-profit entities that support digital inclusion and help to solve a wide range of adoption issues.
- Understand the reasons households do not adopt broadband and continue to reduce barriers.
- Encourage the repurposing of electronic devices through reputable channels.

Childcare – Goals, Priorities, and Strategies & Recommendations

Goals

The following goals have been identified to be most important to the vision of the childcare future of the Region. When setting the goals top considerations include successfully expanding the number of childcare slots throughout the Region. These slots would be within a reasonable driving distance, all while maintaining standards of quality and affordability. There is also a need to continue to support and maintain the many quality childcare centers that do exist.

- **Expand childcare slots to allow parents a reasonable commute to their childcare center.**
- **Maintain high quality childcare throughout the Region.**
- **Make childcare affordable to the diverse workforce base throughout the Region.**
- **Recognize the entire Regional childcare network that includes licensed centers and more informal unlicensed childcare providers.**
- **Help the Regional childcare network to pool resources and leverage economies of scale.**

Priorities

Childcare priorities for the Region were formulated to better meet the goals identified above. The main priorities in the Region include creating and maintaining quality and affordable childcare throughout the Region. When considering priorities, the rural nature of the Region was considered in addition to the high amount of geographic area throughout the Region that is in childcare deserts.

- Increase the availability of childcare spots to ensure that those who need childcare have options.
- Ensure that childcare is high quality.
- Reduce childcare costs.
- Support the entire childcare network.

Strategies and Recommendations

The goals and priorities established above identify the vision for the future of childcare in the Region. Strategies and recommendations have been identified to meet these goals and priorities and can be broadly organized into three main categories of emphasis:

- **Availability**
- **Quality**
- **Affordability**

Availability Strategies and Recommendations

The first category deals with the number of childcare centers, thereby slots, that exist or do not exist throughout the Region. Many areas within the North Central Wisconsin Region are in a childcare desert (more than three children under six per slot). The first set of strategies and recommendations are targeted at creating a childcare network that meets the needs of those within the Region.

- Support state funding for childcare.
- Foster the development of public/private partnerships to develop and maintain childcare infrastructure.
- Consider the use of underutilized, existing facilities such as churches and schools.
- Recognize the importance of the development of both informal family and group childcare programs particularly in rural areas.

Quality Strategies and Recommendations

The second category is childcare quality. Only about 42 percent of licensed childcare providers in the Region have been determined to be high quality. It is difficult to determine the level of quality in unlicensed facilities. There is a need to bring the quality of many existing facilities to a higher standard. In addition, it is important to ensure that new childcare centers maintain high quality standards. It is also critical that childcare facilities maintain these quality standards. The following recommendations would create higher quality childcare throughout the Region:

- Support public and non-profit organizations that advocate for quality early childhood education.
- Provide a central point of contact at the state level for childcare providers.
- Create a more streamlined system at the state level and better coordination.
- Further support the creation of additional childcare centers, which will in turn increase the quality of all by creating a more competitive economy.
- Explore ways to make wages for childcare professionals higher and more competitive.

Affordability Strategies and Recommendations

The third category is related to childcare affordability. Childcare for those with children under six years old is one of the most significant expenses in a household budget. The cost is over two times what the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) considers affordable in all counties within the Region except Forest County. There is a need to make childcare more affordable throughout the entire Region, while keeping the standards for quality high. This may be impossible with the present model for childcare that we have in the state. However, the following recommendations would help to move toward this goal:

- Support public and non-profit organizations that pool resources and leverage economies of scale.
- Support childcare development, mentoring, and information sharing.
- Explore models for joint purchasing and shared staff.
- Continue to explore resources, including community resources such as Childcaring, composed of community-based experts who connect families with childcare resources, professionals, and data; and home-school networks.

Housing & Transportation – Goals, Priorities, and Strategies & Recommendations

Goals

The following goals have been identified to be most important to the vision of the housing and transportation future of the Region. When setting goals top considerations include the desire to offer a diverse array of affordable housing options throughout the Region for residents at various ages and stages. Ideally, residents would also have a quality transportation network and varied options for transportation.

- **Create additional housing stock to match demand.**
- **Encourage development of a broad array of housing styles including high density, multi-family, and missing middle housing.**
- **Encourage housing that accommodates seniors, those with special needs, and those that are extremely low income.**
- **Create a greater variety of transportation options.**

Priorities

Housing and transportation priorities for the Region were formulated to better meet the goals identified above. The main priorities in the Region include building additional housing units to meet demand, ensuring that a diverse mix of housing types and styles are available, and considering the needs of all residents when developing housing policy and planning. When considering priorities, the desire to attract and maintain a stable workforce, the aging population, and rural nature of the Region were considered.

- Increase the number of housing units being built.
- Encourage a variety of housing types including high- and low-density single family, attached single family, and multi-family.
- Provide a range of housing styles and types for seniors, those with special needs and those with extremely low income.
- Promote a range of transportation choices including public transit, ride sharing, bicycle, and pedestrian access.

Strategies and Recommendations

The goals and priorities established above identify the vision for the future of housing and transportation in the Region. Strategies and recommendations have been identified to meet these goals and priorities and can be broadly organized into three main categories of emphasis:

- **Increase Housing Stock**
- **Broaden Housing Diversity**
- **Promote Transportation Opportunities**

Housing Stock Strategies and Recommendations

The first category is directly concerned with the lack of housing units throughout the Region. Only 3.5 percent of the Region's housing stock was built in the past decade. The first set of strategies and recommendations are targeted at meeting the goal of constructing housing units to meet demand throughout the Region, which will in turn foster affordability.

- Consider the creation of a Regional Housing Task Force that would create an opportunity for various stakeholders to shape a housing vision, identify and create strategies, and oversee housing development.
- Ensure that information about construction ready residential lots is available to developers and contractors.
- Better align zoning ordinances and subdivision ordinances with housing goals.
- Explore public-private partnership models for installing infrastructure including sewer, water, and roadway improvements.
- Prioritize the upkeep of existing units through Housing Rehabilitation Programs.

Housing Diversity Strategies and Recommendations

The second category is concerned with housing diversity. The Region is overwhelmingly comprised of detached single-family housing, making up 79 percent of the Region's housing stock. This housing style does not always accommodate those at various ages and income levels. This housing style also tends to be more expensive than higher density alternatives. When communities offer a range of housing alternatives, individuals, families, potential workers, seniors, and those with special needs are better accommodated. The next set of strategies and recommendations would increase housing diversity and foster affordability.

- Modify zoning codes and subdivision ordinances to allow for higher density housing and smaller lot sizes.
- Allow for alternative housing types to meet a greater variety of housing needs, including Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) and tiny homes.
- Explore public-private partnerships for the development of workforce housing.
- Utilize Opportunity Zones, Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC), Workforce Tax Increment Finance Districts (TID), land banks, and land trusts where appropriate.
- Provide education and information about First Time Homebuyer Programs (WHEDA and CDBG) and Habitat for Humanity programs.

Transportation Strategies and Recommendations

The third category aims to expand the range and variety of transportation options throughout the Region. Over 90 percent of the Region's workforce relies on cars for commuting to work, including about 8 percent that carpool. This is to be expected considering the rural nature of the Region. However, there are opportunities to expand the range of transportation options throughout the Region. The following recommendations would increase transportation options:

- Support and expand public transit systems throughout the Region including fixed-route bus systems in more urban areas, multi-county transit systems, and shared ride taxi services.
- Support and expand specialized transit services for those that are elderly or with disabilities at the county level.
- Explore ways for communities to partner with non-profit entities to broadly share a wider range of transportation options.
- Create a regional plan to outline electric vehicle charging infrastructure throughout the Region.
- Expand ride-share and car-pool programs and infrastructure.
- Continue to plan for, design, and implement bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure throughout the Region.

Workforce and Talent – Goals, Priorities, and Strategies & Recommendations

Goals

The following goals have been identified to be most important to the vision of the workforce and talent attraction future of the Region. When setting the goals top considerations include attracting, expanding, and retaining a talented workforce within the Region, creating an ecosystem for creating, attracting, and retaining businesses to the area, and providing community amenities and necessary infrastructure.

- **Develop and maintain a talented and skilled workforce.**
- **Develop an ecosystem for creating, attracting, expanding, and retaining business to the Region.**
- **Create a sense of place and sense of community for the Region and support to the individual communities within the Region to do the same.**

Priorities

Workforce and talent attraction priorities for the Region were formulated to better meet the goals identified above. The main priorities in the Region include attracting new talent more likely to begin families and contribute to the greater economy and community and retaining existing talent in a multitude of ways including upskilling, reskilling, and encouraging life-long learning. In addition, supporting and enhancing existing businesses by developing an ecosystem allowing them to thrive, which would also create an environment allowing new businesses to thrive. Making the Region somewhere that employees and employers want to be is also a high priority. This is necessary with infrastructure such as housing at a variety of price points, reliable broadband, and accessible childcare services. It is also necessary with recreational amenities such as trails and parks and with community amenities such as schools, libraries, and fitness centers.

- Attract highly skilled workers across a range of industries.
- Retain workers across a wide age spectrum and provide continued opportunity for skill acquisition.
- Participate in actions that develop an ecosystem for creating, attracting, expanding, and retaining businesses.
- Ensure that needed community infrastructure continues to be a priority.
- Create a sense of place and community identity that includes recreational amenities and community amenities.

Strategies and Recommendations

The goals and priorities established above identify the vision for the future of workforce and talent attraction in the Region. Strategies and recommendations have been identified to meet these goals and priorities and can be broadly organized into three main categories of emphasis:

- **Workforce**
- **Industry**
- **Community**

Workforce Strategies and Recommendations

The first category addresses the need to continue to expand the workforce throughout the Region. The workforce within the North Central Wisconsin Region is expected to decrease in upcoming years. The first set of strategies and recommendations are targeted at meeting the goal of developing and maintaining a talented and skilled workforce.

- Educate all (students, parents, teachers, administrators, etc.) to the opportunities of universities, vocational school, and direct entry into the workforce from high school, removing negative connotations to all pathways.
- Support opportunities for local businesses to partner with schools and students to educate them about career pathways, including large scale events such as career showcases and technical expos, such as the Heavy Metal Tour at North Central Technical College.
- Continue to provide a range of non-traditional education opportunities to high school students and recent graduates.
- Educate for the future, not just those jobs in existence today.
- Work to include those that have completed some college or technical school, but did not complete it, in all workforce initiatives.
- Promote life-long learning by offering work skills training to the existing workforce.
- Participate in a regional system of connecting workers and employers with programs, best practices, and networks.
- Work to engage the sector of the workforce that is not participating and seek to identify and eliminate the barriers.
- Actively develop and promote internships, returnships, and apprenticeships.

Industry Strategies and Recommendations

The second category addresses the need to support business and industry so that they can create an environment to attract the necessary existing and future skilled workforce. The Region's main contributing sectors are manufacturing, health care and social assistance, and retail trade. The Region lags both in educational attainment and wages. The following recommendations would create an ecosystem for creating, attracting, expanding, and retaining businesses throughout the Region:

- Recognize the top industries and top occupations in the Region and work with these industries and educational partners to maintain and grow employment.
- Recognize those industries with positive employment growth rates in the next ten years and work to promote these skills in the education of students and the existing workforce.
- Recognize the industries with negative employment growth rates in the next ten years and work to retrain these individuals to plug them into other employment growth industries throughout the Region.
- Organize and publicize local, state, and federal incentives and technical assistance for development, redevelopment, and workforce training.
- Recognize industries with wage gaps and determine the ability to get closer to the state and national averages.
- When possible, target certain demographics (e.g. stay-at-home parents, retirees, students, ex-offenders, etc.) with part-time or flexible schedules.
- Recognize that a sizeable portion of the labor market is looking to advance within their field and focus on retaining existing employees as well as attracting new employees.

Community Strategies and Recommendations

The third category involves quality of life or making the Region and individual communities places that a diverse array of people want to live, work, and play. This includes infrastructural amenities such as housing at a variety of price points for people at various ages and life stages, reliable and affordable broadband, and quality and affordable childcare options. In addition, recreation opportunities such as parks, trails, fitness centers, and third places (churches, cafes, clubs, libraries, and bookstores). The following recommendations would increase community quality of life:

- Support a variety of housing styles available at different price points to accommodate those at various life stages.
- Support an enhanced quality childcare infrastructure.
- Support a variety of transportation options.
- Continue to invest in expanded and enhanced broadband, roads, water, sewer, etc.) to ensure that all are ready to meet the needs of existing and future businesses and associated workforce.
- Encourage area chambers and associated entities to develop and expand sense of place.
- Recognize tourism and outdoor amenities as one of the region's economic generators.
- Continue to support recreational opportunities such as pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, hiking trails, water trails, and third spaces for an enhanced community experience.
- Expand public-private partnerships to ensure that businesses have a means to express the needs of current and future employees and that public entities can prioritize these needs.

Tourism & Hospitality – Goals, Priorities, and Strategies & Recommendations

Goals

The following goals have been identified to be most important to the vision of the Tourism and Hospitality future of the Region. When setting goals top considerations include the geographic breakdown of the Region, including the outdoor recreation, travel, and tourism focus of the northern and southern counties, the shutdowns and reduced capacity restrictions that severely impacted many businesses in this category, and the interconnected nature of all sectors of the Regional economy.

- **Foster recovery within the Tourism and Hospitality sectors throughout the Region.**
- **Implement policies and practices that create sustainability in both the Tourism and Hospitality industries.**
- **Identify best practices with relation to the Tourism and Hospitality industries to create continued growth and interconnectedness with the greater Regional economy.**

Priorities

Tourism and Hospitality priorities for the Region were formulated to better meet the goals identified above. The main priorities in the Region include the creation and continued prioritization of competitive and vibrant Tourism and Hospitality businesses throughout the North Central Wisconsin Region. When considering priorities, the outdoor recreational landscape of the Region was considered in addition to the policy barriers that have impacted these industries.

- Ensure that those within the Tourism and Hospitality industries have the opportunity to express their needs.
- Identify ways to streamline guidance for the Tourism and Hospitality industries.
- Create investment in the Travel and Hospitality industries.

Strategies and Recommendations

The goals and priorities established above identify the vision for the future the Tourism and Hospitality industries in the Region. Strategies and recommendations have been identified to meet these goals and priorities and can be broadly organized into three main categories of emphasis:

- **Stakeholder Engagement**
- **Policy**
- **Investment**

Stakeholder Engagement Strategies and Recommendations

The first category addresses the need to incorporate Tourism and Hospitality stakeholders into the policy and planning process. When guidelines are created and implemented it is important to solicit feedback from those operating or operating businesses or those that are directly impact by Tourism and Hospitality businesses. The first set of strategies and recommendations are targeted at seeking stakeholder input.

- When crafting recommendations related to business closures, capacity restrictions, hours restrictions, and the like, incorporate feedback from business owners to the greatest extent possible.
- Use surveys, town halls (virtual or in person), and one-on-one outreach to ask businesses owners about their immediate pain points.
- When seeking information find what is most beneficial in the near-, middle-, and long-term.

Policy Strategies and Recommendations

The second category relates to policy. Pandemic related policies generally resulted in shutdowns, capacity restrictions, and enhanced cleaning and sanitization practices. For tourism and hospitality businesses this translated to lost revenue and increased costs. There are policy enhancements that would help to offset these impacts. The following strategies and recommendations would better inform policy both when businesses are undergoing restriction and when businesses are recovering from the effects of restrictions:

- Allow flexibility with zoning and land use policies related to parking, carry-out services, outdoor dining, and alcohol to-go sales.
- Repurpose public outdoor space.
- Provide clear, concise communications.
- Rethink rules that restrict flexible/temporary uses.

Investment Strategies and Recommendations

The third category targets investment in the Tourism and Hospitality industries. There was significant lost revenue and increased operating expenses within these industries during the pandemic. Many businesses within these industries were disproportionately impacted due to the nature of their operations involving groups of people who come together to participate in an activity. The following recommendations would provide investment in these businesses which would help with short- and medium- term recovery and long-term sustainability:

- Provide information and advocacy of direct cash assistance such as low-interest loans, grants, microgrants, and microloans.
- Work to increase wage rates for those working in the areas of tourism and hospitality.
- Support federal and state programs including Paycheck Protection Program, Economic Injury Disaster Loans, and WEDC programs.
- Assist businesses in converting to virtual portals for online sales.
- Provide residents ways to discover open businesses and to learn about changes in operating hours.
- Streamline the dissemination of information about funding opportunities and technical assistance from economic development professionals.
- Continue to elevate the importance of the integration of tourism and economic development.

North Central Wisconsin

Regional Recovery Plan