

**Rural Wisconsin Through the Lens
of the Community Capitals Framework**

Paul M. Van Auken

December 10, 2024



Whitburn Center for
Governance and Policy Research

800 Algoma Blvd., Oshkosh, WI 54901

(920) 424-1580

uwosh.edu/whitburn-center/

This research was supported through a grant from the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership.

Table of Contents

Introduction	.....	p. 3
Natural Capital	.....	p. 8
Cultural Capital	.....	p. 16
Human Capital	.....	p. 24
Social Capital	.....	p. 34
Political Capital	.....	p. 44
Financial Capital	.....	p. 58
Built Capital	.....	p. 69
Conclusion	.....	p. 75
Acknowledgements	.....	p. 77
References	.....	p. 78

Introduction

This report began as an effort to provide context for “[A Municipal Driven Approach to Nonprofit Collective Impact Initiatives](#)”, an article produced by the Whitburn Center at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. To better understand how a collective impact model – where nonprofit organizations work together to produce positive social change in an area – can be most effectively harnessed in rural Wisconsin, we set out to better understand life in the non-metropolitan parts of the state and the unique opportunities they contain and challenges they face as we near the end of the first quarter of the 21st century.

What is “rural” Wisconsin?

We should first establish what exactly we mean by “rural” in this context. As a practicing rural sociologist, it behooves me to note that there is not one, clear-cut rural Wisconsin. According to a Bell (2007), there are at least two primary realms of rurality, starting with the material “first rural” comprised of people, occupations, and landscapes that can be measured and mapped, and which are seen as separate from and relative to urban places. This is the realm of the rural that is typically referenced and utilized for formal purposes, such as public administration. There is also an ideal, “second rural”, which stems from representations of rurality, from positive ideas about what rurality provides (such as access to nature, fresh air, “freedom”, “community”, etc.) to simplistic or even negative stereotypes. Such associations have tangible consequences, such as when urbanites seek access to “rural” amenities through tourism or building second homes, or when rural policies are equated with farm policies.

Aspects of the second rural are implicated throughout this report and it is important to stress that the interests and fates of rural, suburban, and urban Wisconsinites are intertwined in many ways; for simplicity’s sake, we will stick largely to the realm of the so-called first rural here.

There are variety of first rural definitions of rurality but most demographic statistics and federal funding streams targeting rural places rely upon the U.S. Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) designation of counties as metropolitan (“urban”) or non-metropolitan (“rural”). While counties considered metropolitan may have areas within them that appear to have rural characteristics – low population density, extensive farmland and open space, etc.) – a county’s overall designation is what matters to the OMB. Though it is an imperfect definition, the OMB’s county-based designation is appropriate here because, as the United States Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (Sanders & Cromartie, 2024) puts it, studies “designed to track and explain economic and social changes often choose to use the metro-nonmetro classification, because it reflects a regional, labor-market concept and allows the use of widely available county-level data” (para. 14).

The OMB considers counties to be metropolitan if they have a city of with a population of 50,000 or more or are adjacent to a metropolitan county and are socially and economically tied to it through commuting patterns. Those outside of the boundaries of metropolitan areas are considered non-metropolitan, which applies to 62% of the nation’s counties. About 14% of the U.S. population resides in non-metropolitan counties, but they contain 72% of all the nation’s land mass (ibid.). Though we generally use the OMB definition here, the U.S. Census Bureau’s

definition of rural areas as “open country” and settlements that have less than 2,000 housing units and 5,000 residents is also useful, particularly when applied to land use (ibid.)

Wisconsin contains all or some of fifteen metropolitan statistical areas (MSA): Appleton, Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, Duluth, Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, Green Bay, Janesville-Beloit, La Crosse-Onalaska, Madison, Milwaukee-Waukesha, Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, Oshkosh-Neenah, Racine, Sheboygan, and Wausau-Weston (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2023). These MSAs incorporate a total of 26 counties, while the other 46 are considered non-metropolitan (ibid.), as shown in Figure 1, in which they are shaded blue and listed below the map.

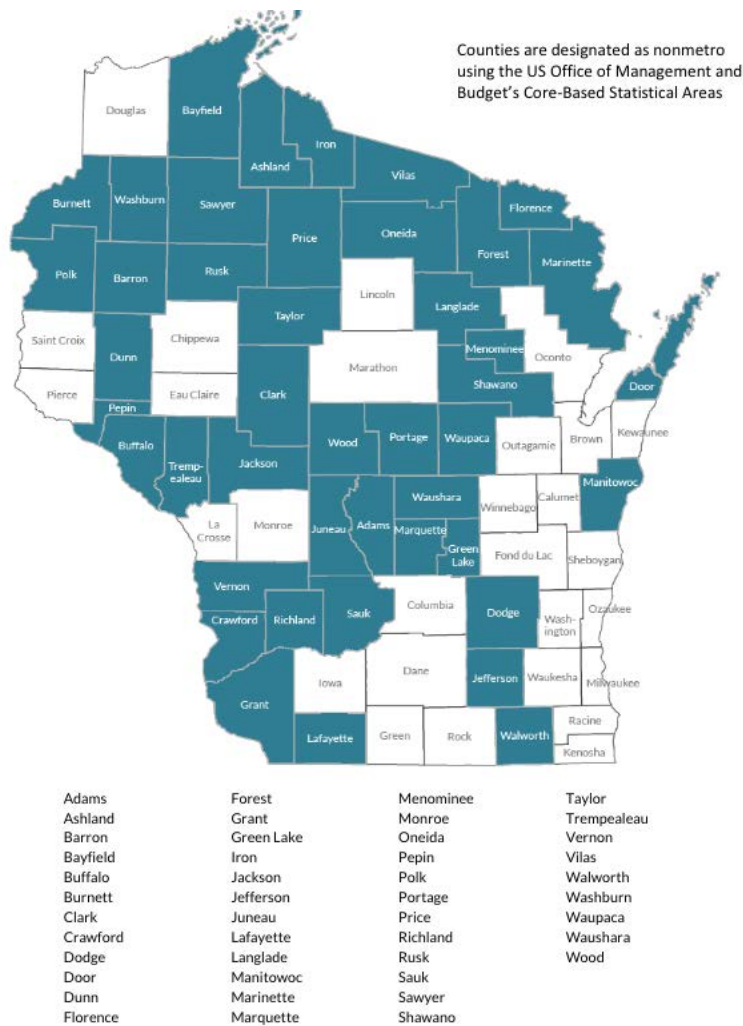


Figure 1. Non-metropolitan Wisconsin counties (source: Wisconsin Office of Rural Health)

The Community Capitals Framework

We use rural sociologists Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer’s (FFG) (2016) concept of community capitals to frame our picture of rural Wisconsin at this point in our history. They argue that no matter how remote or disinvested, all places have resources. This is consistent with an asset-based community development approach that sees building upon such resources through existing

capabilities in place as more fruitful than fixating on local problems or asking outside experts to save the day (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993; Garoutte, 2018). Further, analysis of possibilities and challenges, and potential action to address them can be better understood by examining the extent and vitality of seven different types of community “capital”—various assets that can be invested to produce additional, place-based community assets.

The community capitals framework (CCF) distinguishes between natural, human, cultural, social, political, financial, and built capital, which are briefly defined, according to them, below.

Natural Capital includes air, water, soil, wildlife, vegetation, landscape, and weather that surround us and provide both possibilities for and limits to community sustainability. Natural capital influences and is influenced by human activities. It forms the basis for all the other capitals.

Cultural Capital determines a group’s worldview, how it sees the world, how the seen is connected to the unseen, what is taken for granted, what is valued, and what things a group thinks are possible to change. Cultural hegemony allows one group to impose its worldview, symbols, and reward system on other groups.

Human Capital is the capabilities and potential of individuals determined by the intersection of nature (genetics) and nurture (social interactions and the environment). Human capital includes education, skills, health, and self-esteem.

Social Capital involves mutual trust, reciprocity, groups, collective identity, working together, and a sense of a shared future. Bonding social capital consists of interactions within a specific group or community, and bridging social capital consists of interactions among social groups.

Political Capital relates to a group’s ability to transform local norms and standards into rules and policies governing the distribution of resources. It is expressed through the voice afforded to those groups and hinges on their level of power to influence the local agenda and access to valuable goods and services.

Financial Capital includes savings, income generation, fees, loans, and credit, gifts and philanthropy, taxes, and tax exemptions. Financial capital is much more mobile than other capitals and tends to be privileged because it is easy to measure. Community financial capital can be assessed by changes in poverty, firm efficiency, diversity of firms, and local people’s increased assets.

Built Capital is human-constructed infrastructure. Although new built capital is often equated with community development, it is effective only when it contributes to the other capitals. Built capital can cause deterioration of the other capitals when it is deployed without regard for its consequences. Built capital includes information technologies, chemicals, bridges, railroads, oil pipelines, factories, day care centers, and wind farms. (FFG, 2016, pp. 15-16).

It also should be noted that there is significant overlap between community capitals when used in analysis. FFG further argue that when investments in each capital are equitable and provide an overall balance, communities will be sustainable, as characterized by *healthy ecosystems* (marked by clean air and water, as well as access to the outdoors), *economic security* (based on

consideration of equity and not solely growth, which tends to heighten inequality), and *social inclusion* (all residents can use their voice in safe environments).

Local sustainability is also shaped by institutional actors from three primary spheres of the social and economic world: *markets* (“the many firms and institutions that exchange goods and services at a profit”), *the state* (governments from the global to local scales, which among other things make markets possible), and *civil society* (voluntary, non-profit groups that come together outside of markets and the state around interests or values and help establish the “common good”) (ibid., pp. 19-20). Civil society also can help fill voids left by markets and the state, along with providing checks to their power. In contemporary society, while some of the key actors in these realms are local, many of those which impact rural places are not.

The Community Concept

Finally, the concept of *community* is important here and its meaning should not be taken for granted, given that it is used in myriad ways, even within the social sciences. As FFG note, the three most common elements of various sociological uses of the word community – geographical “location, social system, and community identity – are increasingly separate” (p. 14). They therefore consider both communities of place and communities of interest. Elsewhere I have argued, however, for retaining the original meaning of the community concept in the Greek word for fellowship and, starting at the dawn of the field of sociology in the late 19th century, in place-based social interactions around issues of common concern to people living in proximity, while proposing that landscapes in which these activities take place – with natural capital as a key component – be given a more prominent role (Van Auken, 2020; Van Auken, 2023). The landscape interactional field extension (LIFE) considers community to be “an inclusive web of interconnected, action-oriented relationships that develops in particular places and times through a process of repeated social interaction (around issues of common interest) in local society¹, which is shaped by (and shapes) the landscape it inhabits” (Van Auken, 2023, pp. 9-10). As presented in Table 1, the preceding definition concerns how it forms (the material dimension), while it is argued that community can produce a variety of positive feelings (the ideal) and outcomes (the practical).

¹ *Local society* “refers to the institutions and organizations, as well as values and norms that they establish and perpetuate, which structure local social life, including through creating the conditions for social interactions to occur” (Van Auken, 2023, p. 6). It includes actors from the market, state, and civil society—bars and restaurants, shops, factories, local government offices, schools, the post office, fraternal organizations, voluntary associations, and more, where most of the community capitals should overlap.

MATERIAL Ingredients of LIFE community	IDEAL Feelings and sentiments among participants	PRACTICAL Outcomes of community development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Social Interaction</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Repeated ○ Open, without barriers ○ At the convergence of various social fields around common interests <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creating the <i>Community Field</i> ● <i>Local Society</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relations structured by local norms and institutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Market ○ State ○ Civil Society ● <i>Landscape</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Product of three elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Land ○ Meaning ○ Practices ○ Experienced as places and common ground (e.g. social infrastructure and third places) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Place attachment ● Pro-environmental attitudes ● Community identity and attachment among members ● <i>Gemeinschaft</i>, local solidarity ● Mutual respect and trust among members ● Social cohesion ● Collective efficacy ● Sense of community ● Deep equality ● Belonging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communion (the celebration of community) ● Open communication ● Common purpose ● Community action to address local problems and manage and distribute resources, leading to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Increased health ○ Reduced crime ○ Enhanced social capital of three possible types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bonding (strong ties) ○ Bridging (weak ties) ○ Linking ○ Distributive justice ○ Environmental protection, enhanced sustainability, resilience, adaptive capacity

Table 1. Elements of the LIFE framework of community.

Further, the LIFE framework is based upon the notion that the full expression of community as delineated here is elusive in actual cases, where “communities” of place and interest will generally have characteristics that would place them somewhere along a continuum from shallow community (marked by some elements but lacking key attributes) to deep community (closer to the full expression). Relating empirical data to the framework, however, should help practitioners better understand local situations and possibilities, including for community development. Given the centrality of social interaction to community, development of it implies that “the quality of interactions of the people living in a locality improves over time”, thereby enhancing their collective efficacy/agency—ability to solve problems together (FFG, 2016, p. 433). Putting the two formulations together, collective impact processes consistent with Kania and Kramer’s (2011) blueprint for success should both stem from and strengthen community for future collaborative action.

We now discuss aspects of each form of community capital in turn as experienced in the rural U.S., but with a strong focus on Wisconsin, based upon key indicators in this regard, along with some reflections about how markets, the state, and civil society, and the concept of community are implicated. Particularly given that the rural U.S., including in Wisconsin, is far more diverse and complex than is often assumed (FFG, 2016, Rowlands & Love, 2021), this is meant to a high-level look at opportunities and issues that may impact strategies for rural collective impact to improve local quality of life in the state. While we cover a wide variety of topics, we do not claim to discuss everything important to rural Wisconsin and some may disagree with the issues upon which we focus and how we discuss them. Regardless, we hope that local leaders, residents, and other stakeholders in rural Wisconsin will find this report interesting and useful.

Natural Capital

We start with natural capital because, as FFG argue, it is the foundation for all of the other capitals. From the perspective of the LIFE framework, natural capital (the *land community* or simply, *land*, from the tradition of conservation icon Aldo Leopold) is the base of the *landscape* in which community can form, and collective impact can take place (Van Auken, 2020).

The landscape people inhabit, however, is not solely the land itself, but rather the product of the land, the *practices* in which people engage within it (e.g., farming, logging, road construction, home building, etc., which among other things produce financial and built capital while impacting natural capital), and the *meanings* they ascribe to the land (e.g., as resources to be converted into financial capital or intrinsically valuable in its own right and worthy of protection).

Landscape also forms based upon how these elements interact with one another. It then shapes the possibilities for community development and collective action, which likewise influences landscape in an ongoing feedback loop or dialogue (ibid., Bell & Ashwood, 2016). As people engage in collective impact efforts, they should consider the land, practices, and meanings associated with it, how this landscape influences their work, and how their work will impact that landscape going forward.

Land Acknowledgment

As noted, 72% of the land mass of the U.S. and majority of Wisconsin's territory is in non-metropolitan counties. This means that rural people are the most direct stewards of a great deal of natural capital, from water sources to agricultural land to forests and mineral resources to sites of ecosystem services, natural beauty, and recreation. It should be noted that representatives of the Indigenous stewards of this land remain in place, primarily in the rural parts of the state. The oral histories of both the Menominee and Ho-Chunk nations begin thousands of years ago in Wisconsin. In addition to these original inhabitants, the state is home to nine other federally recognized tribes: Bad River, Lac Courte Oreilles, Lac du Flambeau, and Red Cliff bands of Lake Superior Chippewa; Oneida Nation; Forest County Potawatomi; St. Croix Chippewa; Sokaogon Chippewa (Mole Lake); and Stockbridge-Munsee, along with other, non-federally recognized tribes.

Minerals and Mining

Wisconsin's mineral resources were foundational to Wisconsin's settlement and growth in the 19th century as mining operations sought to exploit this form of natural capital. While sand has been mined for a century for various purposes, most mining today is for frac sand, primarily in the rural West Central part of the state, as this area's sandstone deposits are ideal for use in the petroleum industry's frac mining process. This has caused controversy for a decade due to environmental concerns.² Iron ore deposits have also led to mining in Wisconsin, though there

² See [here](#) for a series of investigative journalism pieces in this regard.

are no mines currently in operation, as the potential for damage to natural capital make it difficult, due to relatively strict regulations in this regard.³

Interest in exploiting remaining ore reserves persists, though, as revealed in the battle around a proposed open pit mine in the Penokee Hills and over the Bad River watershed.⁴ The Bad River Band is also currently fighting for the removal of Line 5, a portion of a Canadian oil pipeline owned by Enbridge that crosses 645 miles of the Great Lakes region, including 12 miles of Bad River land, despite the fact that the tribal council did not renew the line's easement more than a decade ago. Line 5 still traverses its land and threatens the ecosystem health of the watershed, which it considers not only a pristine environmental resource but also central to its cultural capital and very way of life.⁵

According to Bad River Tribal Chairman Robert Blanchard, the river and watershed are very important to his community for subsistence hunting, fishing, and wild rice harvesting, as well as plants gathered for traditional medicine and healing.⁶ Indeed, a recent article argues,

The [Kakagon Sloughs](#) hold everything that the Bad River Band holds dear – food, medicines, teachings. And nearly half of all the wetlands on Lake Superior are in the Sloughs, making it an ecological powerhouse that helps keep Lake Superior clean.⁷

Bad River stakeholders see all of this as in jeopardy due to Enbridge's Line 5, however, which has implications for the natural capital of the entire region. Enbridge was previously ordered to shut down and remove this section of the line, but this is under appeal. Blanchard recently wrote to Enbridge to ask them to cooperate with the tribe to address an erosion problem that is making the river more vulnerable to damage from potential oil spills and is hopeful that the company will collaborate on this mitigation effort. He recently gave testimony in opposition to Enbridge's proposed re-routing of Line 5 because it would still be located within the Bad River watershed, though, and favors complete removal. He also expressed his support for tribal sovereignty and a new EPA rule requiring states to consult with tribes on projects that may impact natural capital, such as water quality.

Forests and Logging

Like mining, logging's history overlaps with that of the settlement of Wisconsin. While the vast majority of Wisconsin's "Northwoods" were clear cut during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, 48% of Wisconsin's landscape is forested, according to the first *Governor's Task Force on Climate Change Report (GTFCCR)* (2020).⁸ A few scattered, old growth forests remain –

³ <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/Mines/Ferrous.html>

⁴ <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/50-solutions/2016/12/20/wisconsin-tribe-halts-15-billion-open-pit-mine>

⁵ <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2024/03/15/documentary-shows-bad-river-bands-resilience-as-line-5-battle-continues/>

⁶ <https://www.wpr.org/shows/wisconsin-today-2/protecting-tribal-lands-a-preview-of-the-republican-convention-a-local-newspaper-success-story>

⁷ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/wisconsin/2024/08/28/as-clock-ticks-line-5-continues-to-pit-tribal-culture-against-big-oil/74157590007/>

⁸ The report is found [here](#). Among other things, it presents recommendations for action across nine sectors and three policy pathways.

such as the Menominee Forest in Menominee County, Germaine Hemlocks in Oneida County, and Cathedral Pines in Oconto county – which together comprise less than one percent of the 17 million acres of forestlands in the state.⁹

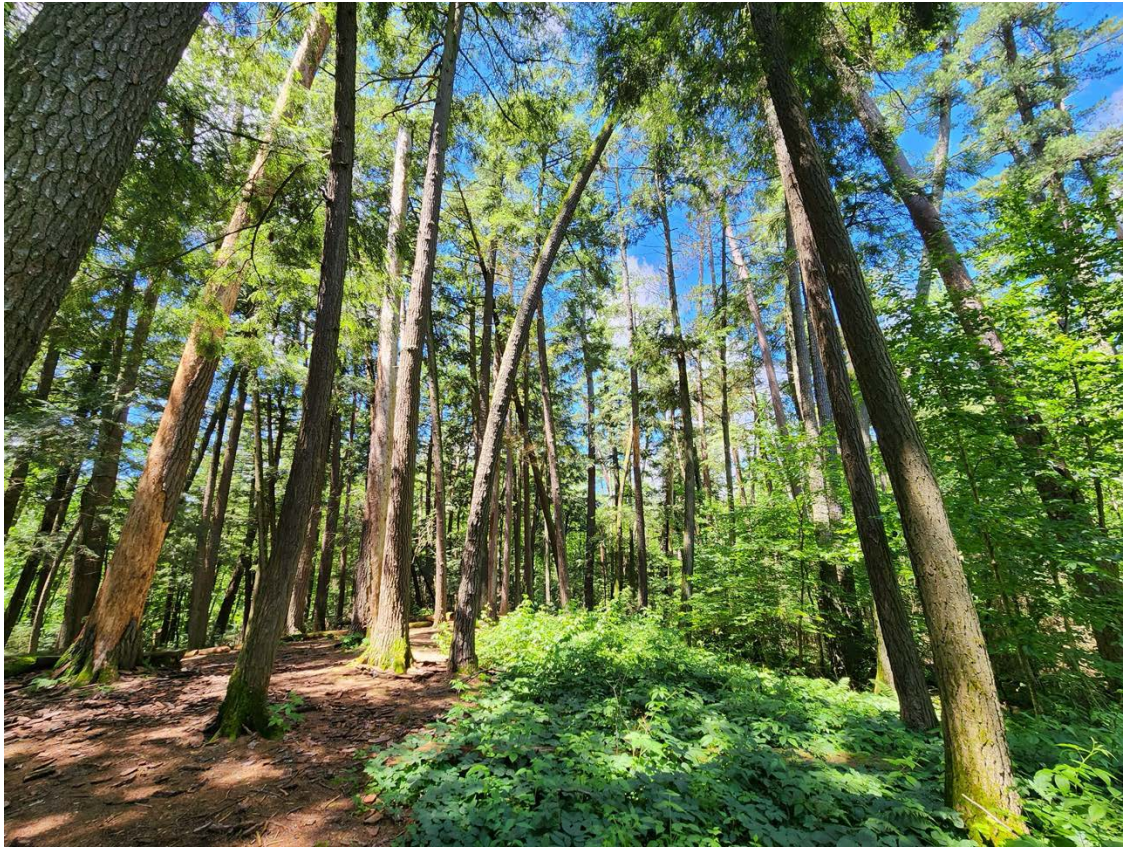


Figure 2. Cathedral Pines, Oconto County. (source: Paul Van Auken)

Logging on remaining timber stands continues, however, and is a \$37 billion industry that ranks 12th in the state for jobs but second for industry output.¹⁰ Controversy about deforestation and its impacts upon climate change and biodiversity is relatively common, as highlighted by the recent petition from 29 environmental groups to halt the Fourmile project that would log 12,000 acres, clear cut 1,000 acres and build new logging roads in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in Northeastern Wisconsin, which also cited the impact upon the cultural capital of area Ojibwe tribes as a concern.¹¹

Further, in addition to documenting some of the impacts on natural capital of climate change that are already being felt, the *GTFCCR* laments the loss of forestlands, and the carbon sequestration they provide as a buffer to exacerbating climate change, which decreased by 25% between 2005 and 2017 due to intensification of agriculture and cropland being converted to sub(urban) development. It also notes that Black, Indigenous, and other people of color tend to experience

⁹ <https://www.wpr.org/economy/groups-petition-forest-service-suspend-logging-project-climate-change>

¹⁰ <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/forestbusinesses/factsheets>

¹¹ <https://www.wpr.org/economy/groups-petition-forest-service-suspend-logging-project-climate-change>

the effects upon of climate change (on their human and built capital) earlier and disproportionately, making it a key social justice issue.

At the same time, the Menominee Nation’s logging and processing operations is now an internationally recognized model of sustainable forestry, though a labor shortage is threatening the viability of the tribe’s sawmill and thereby the health of his managed forests, a key element of its cultural capital.¹² Among other things, the *GTFCCR* recommends several action and policy steps to prioritize conservation – “keeping forests as forests” – and reforestation in rural Wisconsin.

Soil and Agriculture

Rich in fertile soil and other forms of capital that have emerged from this element of natural capital over many decades, farming remains vitally important to the economy and culture of “America’s Dairyland”, which explains our greater attention to it here. There are over 13 million acres of farmland in Wisconsin, according to the *GTFCCR*, and agriculture is a roughly \$105 billion industry, the largest in the state, which is the top producer of cheese, cranberries, and ginseng in the U.S. and ranks highly in several other categories as well, its diversity of products being a key strength. Agriculture accounts for about 12% of the state’s jobs through on-farm production and off-site processing.¹³ There are fewer farms and people living on farms every year, though, and less than 1% of Wisconsin’s jobs are now on-farm. Farms that remain are larger and increasingly industrial. There are now about 58,500 farms in operation with an average size of 236 acres. Table 2 presents the ten counties with the most farms in Wisconsin; interestingly, only one of these counties (Vernon) is considered farming-dependent by the USDA ERS, and half are metropolitan, which sets the stage for land-use conflict between advocates of retaining farmland and open space and those favoring housing and commercial/industrial development.

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/22/climate/menominee-forest-sustainable-earth-day.html>

¹³ <https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/Publications/WIAgStatistics.aspx>

Top Counties or Equivalent	2022
Dane	2,284
Grant	2,264
Marathon	2,059
Vernon	1,810
Clark	1,785
Iowa	1,534
Dodge	1,489
Sauk	1,408
Monroe	1,375
Rock	1,350

Table 2. Counties with the most farms in WI (Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection - DATCP¹⁴)

The total number of farms in Wisconsin in 2022 was 25% smaller than the 78,436 farms in 2007, when the average size was 194 acres. Of the total, roughly 5,500 were dairy farms, still the most in the nation, according to the Wisconsin DATCP, but a number that had plummeted by 30% since 2017, according to the USDA.¹⁵ This number also represents a 63% decrease since 2002, about the same as the national decline in dairy farms over this period. According to the executive director of the Wisconsin Farmer’s Union,

(F)ewer farms on the landscape is a concern to her organization even though agricultural productivity stayed high. The loss of farms and farmers makes it harder for rural communities to survive, she said, making it crucial for policymakers to help small and medium-sized farms stay viable.¹⁶

This attrition implicates various community capitals, including the potential of fewer people on the land to help safeguard it, cultural capital built up over generations declining, bonding social capital diminishing, and such farmers needing political and linking social capital with representatives of the state while larger operations increasingly gain power in markets, etc.

While the number of dairy farms in Wisconsin has declined drastically in recent years, the number of dairy cows has remained relatively steady, dropping less than 2% between 2017 and 2022. Since 2002, the average Wisconsin dairy herd size has grown from 74 to 203 cows, a nearly threefold increase, according to DATCP. Filling the void have been larger dairy farms, and particularly confined animal feeding operations (CAFO). CAFOs are defined by the Wisconsin

¹⁴ <https://datcp.wi.gov/Documents2/2022CensusAgriculturePublicBriefing.pdf>

¹⁵ https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Wisconsin/

¹⁶ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2024/02/15/latest-census-of-agriculture-finds-wisconsin-farms-still-declining/72570807007/>

Department of Natural Resources as operations with 1,000 or more animal units (about 715 milking cows) in one location, when then must secure a permit and are subject to regulation related to water quality protection due to the amount of manure they produce. As of 2023 Wisconsin had 335 CAFO permits, the vast majority of which are in the dairy industry.¹⁷ This represents substantial growth, given that there were less than 20 total CAFOs in 1990 and 188 in 2010. Wisconsin’s CAFO’s milk an average of around 2,000 cows, while an additional 550-600 farms milking about 500 cows on average, and these larger producers are now responsible for about 80% of Wisconsin’s milk (Ibarra et al., 2023).

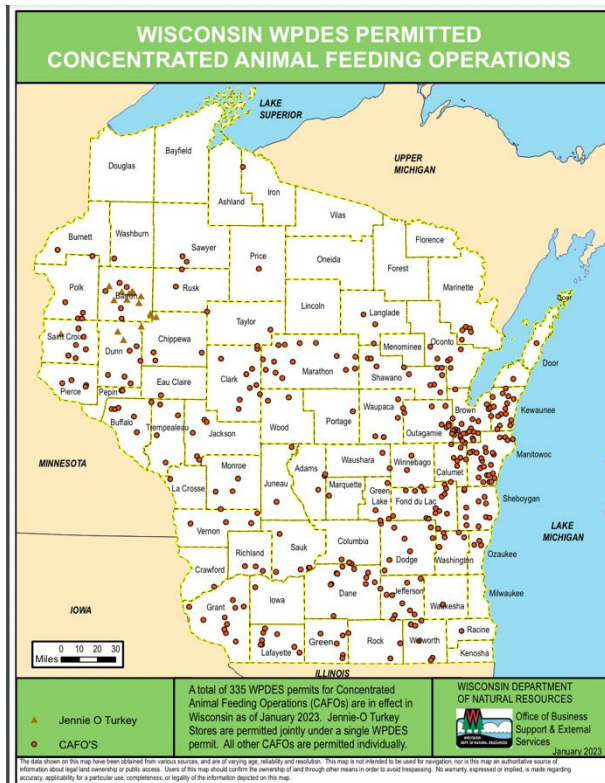


Figure 3. CAFOs in Wisconsin (source: WI DNR).

As Figure 3 shows, there is a strong concentration of CAFOs in Northeastern Wisconsin, which features landforms that make it particularly susceptible to groundwater pollution and has caused a good deal of controversy in recent years. CAFO owners point to the greater efficiency of their operations and argue that the nutrient management plans required by the DNR make them better stewards of the land than smaller farms, but opponents “include back-to-the-landers, who view such farms as inhumane to animals. Others fear the health impacts of the millions of gallons of manure facilities generate annually, to be spread on farm fields.” (Goldstein, 2023, paras. 13,14).

According to the DNR, roughly 90% of all nitrate groundwater pollution in Wisconsin comes from the application of fertilizer and manure (ibid.), which is not exclusive to CAFOs, of course, but their larger scale and greater potential for major spills is worrisome to many, as are the high capacity wells used for such operations – necessary since dairy cows drink about a bathtub full of water each day – which have helped drawn down and diminish the quality of drinking water

¹⁷ https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/sites/default/files/topic/CAFO/CAFO_Statewide_Map_2023.pdf

supplies in some parts of the state. A 2021 Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling did affirm the DNR’s right to regulate CAFOs and the granting of high capacity well permits.¹⁸ Its authority is circumscribed, however, and staffing shortages have produced a large permit application backlog and limited enforcement, while local jurisdictions continue to have limited power to control what type of agriculture is practiced in their backyards (Goldstein, 2023). CAFOs have also been in the news recently due to a report from environmentalists which asserts that they are increasing air pollution through use of manure digesters that produce biogas.¹⁹

Stewardship of Natural Capital

There are examples of civil society groups in Wisconsin advocating for the protection of natural and human capital by the state in the face of market-oriented agricultural practices. Coalitions with some similarities to the collective impact model presented earlier have emerged at various places and times in defense of the common good. This includes the protracted but successful effort on the part of tribal, environmental, and sportfishing groups to thwart a proposed Exxon metallic sulfide mine near rural Crandon, Wisconsin, in the early 2000s over concerns about cultural and natural capital, and particularly local water supplies.²⁰

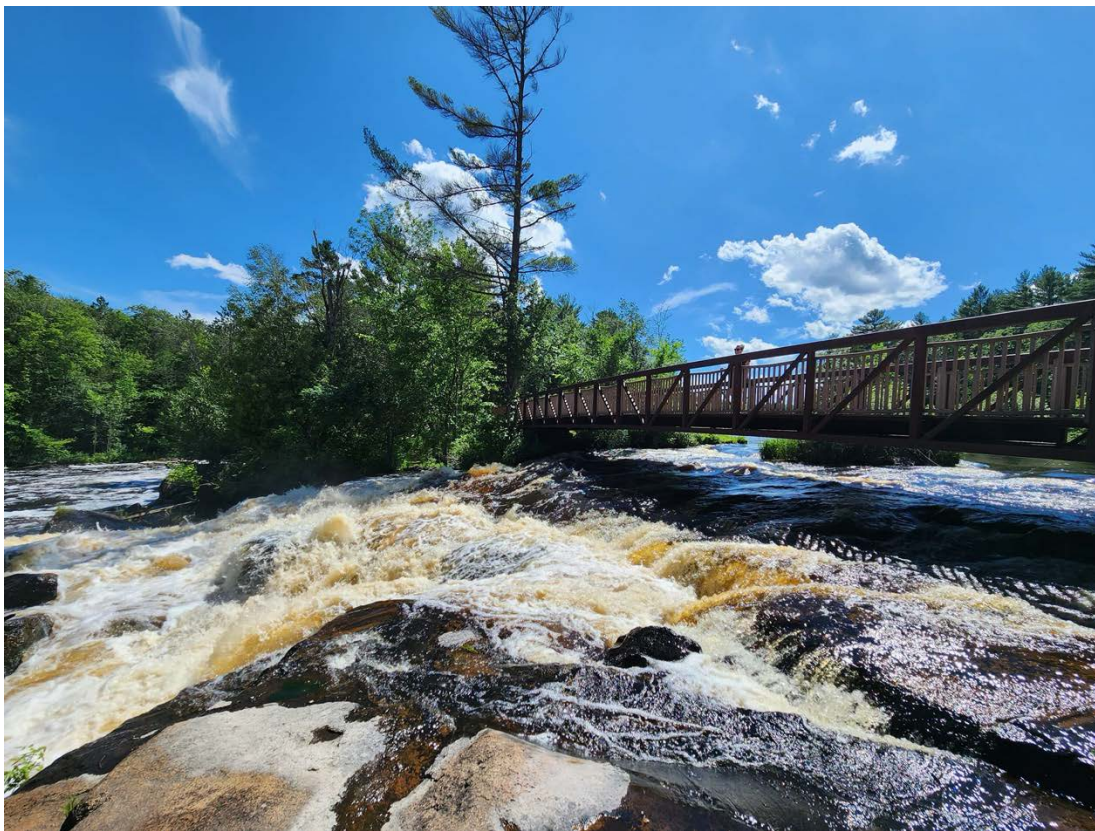


Figure 4. Big Smokey Falls, Menominee Nation. (source: Paul Van Auken)

¹⁸ <https://www.wpr.org/agriculture/wisconsin-supreme-court-affirms-dnr-authority-restrict-deny-farm-permits-protect-water>

¹⁹ <https://www.wpr.org/news/manure-digesters-pollution-kewaunee-county-climate>

²⁰ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/opinion/2023/10/26/environment-clean-water-indian-tribes-stop-dangerous-exxon-bhp-billiton-crandon-mine/71294898007/>

Wisconsin is certainly rich in water resources. Its natural capital includes over 15,000 lakes and 12,600 rivers and streams that traverse 84,000 miles of diverse landscapes, including almost 1,600 “outstanding” stream and river miles recognized as the highest quality water resources in the state.²¹ Recently, concerns over PFAS, or “forever chemical” pollution in surface and drinking water supplies, which threaten not only natural but human capital through health impacts, have come to the fore.²² In 2023, the Wisconsin DNR added 51 bodies of water to the state’s impaired list due to issues with PFAS, phosphorus, harmful algal blooms, e.Coli, and other issues (Redman, 2023). Eighty percent of the waters assessed by the DNR did meet its standards, however, while 20 bodies of water were labeled as “in restoration” and another 22 were slated to be removed from the impaired list because of improvement (ibid.). For the 20% of water bodies considered polluted, one-third of cases stemmed from phosphorous farm run-off (ibid.), the most famous impact being the seasonal dead zones and pollution-fueled toxic algal blooms found in Lake Michigan’s Green Bay.²³

As discussed, industrial and chemical-dependent farming practices are, of course, not the only threat to rural Wisconsin’s water, air, and other forms of natural capital. As farmers have pointed out in their own defense, practices like salting highways, driving cars, and running factories negatively impact natural capital (Goldstein, 2023). Indeed, the *GTFCCR* reports that 33% of Wisconsin’s greenhouse gas emissions come from electricity use, with 24% from transportation, while agriculture does come in third highest, at 15 percent.

The 2022 U.S. Census of Agriculture does provide some encouraging data about the health of Wisconsin’s rural ecosystems, as compared to 2017 its farmers had increased the amount of land that is not tilled and planted in cover crops, practices that help maintain soil health, reduce run-off, and improve resiliency in the face of climate change. Wisconsin farms also showed a significant increase in use of renewable energy, though the state lags behind most other states, ranking 35th in this regard in United Health Foundation’s America’s Health Rankings (AHR) for 2023.²⁴ Wisconsin also has a long history and strong inventory of organic farmers – the second-most in the U.S., though they are challenged by concerns about financial and built capital²⁵ – and is home to Organic Valley and over 700 other cooperatives, including 40 grocery stores (including a highly successful example in Viroqua, a small town in non-metro Vernon County) that tend to support organic practices, encouraging healthy ecosystems and sustainability.²⁶ Among other things, the *GTFCCR* (2020) recommends increasing funding and support for local food systems and farmer-led watershed groups focused on conservation, and “community solar/renewable energy sponsored by local communities and Tribes to help them meet their clean energy goals” (p. 40), all of which could be managed through a collective impact model.

²¹<https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/Rivers/FactsResources.html#:~:text=Wisconsin%20has%20more%20than%2012%2C600,and%20other%20high%20water%20times>.

²² <https://www.wuwm.com/2023-08-16/town-in-northern-wisconsin-coping-with-highest-pfas-contamination-levels-in-state>

²³ <https://www.jsonline.com/in-depth/archives/2021/09/02/dead-zones-haunt-green-bay-manure-fuels-algae-blooms/8100840002/>

²⁴ The State of Wisconsin [Clean Energy Plan Progress Report](#) provides additional details.

²⁵ <https://www.wpr.org/agriculture/wisconsin-leader-organic-dairy-industry-infrastructure-could-be-impacting-growth>

²⁶ <https://uwcc.wisc.edu/wisconsin-co-op-directory-2/>

Environmental stewardship and sustainable practices suggest that people find meaning in the land that goes beyond financial capital. As discussed further in other sections below, valuing natural capital for the amenities it provides in terms of beauty, relaxation, and recreation has only increased over the past century, which certainly provides financial capital in terms of tourism dollars but also influences population dynamics and impacts various other capitals. Though FFG emphasize environmental stewardship, it should be noted that one criticism of their CCF is that it may encourage one of the very things that Aldo Leopold and Indigenous scholars like Robin Wall Kimmerer fight against, which is that in the U.S. and Western world overall, we tend to view people and nature as separate and to not see the land holistically and intrinsically valuable as it is, but rather through a human-centered lens as simply resources that can produce other forms of capital.

The LIFE framework is an attempt to help us move beyond this gulf by integrating the land into the community concept alongside people, and groups working on place-based collective impact projects would be well-served to consider the interests of the land-community for its own sake when engaging in their work. Further, projects that protect and restore local land health will also benefit the health and resiliency of human populations through their ongoing dialogue. With the effects of climate change already intensifying in Wisconsin, it is important to remember that natural capital is the foundation for all the other capitals, which is why we have given particular attention to the assets and challenges related to it here. While major human problems like this are increasingly rooted in macro-level issues and global in nature, “the future may pivot largely on the interrelationships between people and natural environments at the meso²⁷ level, where the potential for interactional community” and “meaningful positive change” lie (Van Auken, 2023, pp. 5,6).

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital develops over time as one generation teaches the next what to do within their place in society and how to think about it, including what is good and valuable. It serves as a “filter through which people regard the world around them, defining what is problematic and, therefore, can be changed” (FFG, 2016, p. 103). In a nutshell, it is the ways of life of groups of people, comprised of its prevailing values, social norms of behavior, attitudes, core beliefs, and traditions and related practices that they yield.

As people engage in collective impact efforts, they should consider how local cultural capital, including cultural *hegemony* (ideas from the dominant group that exert particular influence), shapes what is seen and unseen, how things are discussed, who is at the table and who is not, whether homogeneity (of thought, values, backgrounds, stemming from age, religion, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) is the expected norm or diversity is welcomed, and what alternatives are viewed as desirable or even possible.

Agriculture

²⁷ The landscape level, in between the smallest scale of one-on-one human interactions and the largest, macro level of societies.

We have discussed above some significant impacts of changes in Wisconsin agriculture upon the cultural capital of certain groups. While the number of farms, and the ways of life that go with them, have been in significant decline in recent decades, the 2022 Census of Agriculture revealed a 16% increase in “new or beginning farmers”, a quarter of the total farmers in the state, with most of them being under 44 years old. It also showed that farming continues to be practiced almost exclusively by white people, who comprised 99% of Wisconsin’s farmers, while other racial groups did see small increases, including Black producers, farmers who identified as more than one race, and Native American farmers.²⁸

Farm producers who are women were half as likely to leave the industry between 2017 and 2022, but comprise only 35% of Wisconsin’s farmers, slightly lower than the national average, according to DATCP. All will face challenges to survive in agriculture but those that do will carry on the legacy of an important aspect of rural Wisconsin’s cultural capital.

Indigenous Cultural Capital

We previously alluded to the continued vitality of Indigenous cultures and the cultural capital they have created over their centuries and even many millennia in Wisconsin. Among other things, the cultural capital of Wisconsin’s tribes regarding environmental stewardship have begun to be more broadly recognized. A recent feature in the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* highlights how the Forest County Potawatomi has converted its cultural capital into political capital by gaining a seat at the table with the state when firms propose projects that could impact their natural capital. After determining that their land was being tainted with mercury pollution from a nearby coal power plant, they began to take action to protect their health and culture. “The clean air efforts of the tribe go back to the tribal elders,” said Jeff Crawford, the attorney general for the Forest County Potawatomi. “They are the protectors of our cultural beliefs” (as quoted in Vaisvilas & Heim, 2023, para. 7). The article continues,

The ‘Seven Generations’ belief system of the Potawatomi, and many of the more than 500 tribal nations in the U.S., is that stewardship of the environment is essential so that the ecosystem will still be healthy at least seven generations from now. (ibid., Para. 8)

This includes air quality, which like flowing water does not follow political boundaries, making it challenging to manage. Perhaps because this element of their cultural capital is so important, however, the Potawatomi and other tribes have effectively organized and kept at it until they obtained Class I status with the Environmental Protection Agency under the Clean Air Act, which allows them to weigh in on proposed developments. The importance of clean air to the financial capital of the tribe and Northern Wisconsin overall, where tourism and recreation are key drivers, was also emphasized.

²⁸ Borrowing from Ibarra et al. (2023), a cautionary note on labels; labels related to social statuses like race/ethnicity and gender, “Are social constructions. Are used to categorize, group, and count people. There is no single experience that defines the immigrant or second generation and beyond (person’s) experience. Often obscure rather than clarify the varied social, political, and economic experiences of individuals or groups. Identity constantly changes through internal and external challenges. Labels lag behind new or evolving identities. Labels have power, so we must question who has the power to define people” (p. 2). As elaborated on in the section on cultural capital, all of the preceding stems from *hegemony*, but most clearly the last statement.

The above story followed the *GTFCCR*, which among other things begins with a land acknowledgment noting that Wisconsin is a state sitting on land stolen from Indigenous nations and honoring their wisdom and knowledge about this land. It also argues, “Indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable to climate change’s environmental impacts, as they heavily rely on natural resources for food, health, and cultural and spiritual identity” (p. 22). The report also highlights the work of the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC), a 40-year-old organization that represents Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan’s 11 Ojibwe tribal nations and includes other Indigenous groups like the Menominee Nation as well. Among other things, the report discusses GLIFWC’s *A Tribal Climate Adaptation Menu*, “an extensive collection of adaptation methods that provides the framework to incorporate Indigenous and traditional knowledge, culture, language, and history into climate work” (p. 25).²⁹ People in rural Wisconsin engaged in efforts to protect natural capital and expand cultural capital in their area of the state would be well-advised to consult the menu and connect with GLIFWC for potential collaboration.

As discussed in the previous section, the persistence of Indigenous cultural capital has led to growing recognition of its contribution to sustainable practices, such as in sustained-yield forestry. Climate change and reckless boating threaten other cultural capitals, such as wild rice harvesting, though innovations and adaptations are taking place, including the Oneida Nation converting farmland back to wetlands and reseeded the wetlands with wild rice.³⁰ Further, a partnership between the Great Lakes Intertribal Food Coalition and UW-Madison was recently awarded a \$10 million grant from the USDA’s Sustainable Agricultural Systems program to build recent efforts to revitalize traditional foodways. A UW-Madison staff person involved with the project alluded to Indigenous cultural capital in describing the effort:

There’s a lot of knowledge that is already held by the tribes... We’re looking at taking that traditional ecological knowledge and that cultural knowledge and bringing it together with the research and expertise that we’ve been engaging with here at the university.³¹

The project will focus upon expanding the successful Tribal Elder Food Box initiative that was started by three tribes during the pandemic to distribute cultural foods to elders in need while helping Indigenous farmers scale up their production.

Culture of Environmental Stewardship

Wisconsin has had strong cultural capital when it comes to environmental stewardship for well over a century, from being the boyhood home of John Muir;³² to the early 20th century creation of a state parks system; to the reforms of the progressive era linked to “The Wisconsin Idea” and the “Sewer Socialism” and outstanding public parks in Milwaukee; to being the adult home of Aldo Leopold, who helped found the Wilderness Society and whose book *A Sand County*

²⁹ The menu is found [here](#).

³⁰ From Frank Vaisvilas’s First Newsletter (through Gannett Wisconsin) for September 11, 2024, entitled “It’s ricing season, but climate change is causing a damper”.

³¹ <https://www.wpr.org/news/uw-madison-tribal-partnership-ag-research-indigenous-food>

³² Now controversial due to his racist ideas, Muir was nonetheless a highly influential figure in helping establish the National Parks System, founding the Sierra Club, and more.

Almanac (based upon his years spent in rural Wisconsin) became a bible of the modern environmental movement in the U.S.; to governor and later senator Gaylord Nelson growing up in rural Northwestern Wisconsin and later leading the charge to establishing Earth Day in 1970; to the Menominee Nation providing a model of sustainable forestry.

The work to build upon this cultural legacy of environmental stewardship in rural Wisconsin continues through the efforts of its Indigenous people, land purchases through the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program³³ and various other state initiatives, and numerous civil society organizations, such as Clean Wisconsin, River Alliance of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Farmers Union and its environmental work, and the state's 41 nonprofit land trusts that collectively protect nearly a million acres of land, the vast majority of which is publicly accessible.³⁴

Race/Ethnicity and Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is complex and multidimensional. Indeed, much has been written about other aspects of rural Wisconsin culture, including the strong influence of German and Scandinavian settlers and history of various ethnic groups and economic specialization in different corners of the state, the importance of Catholic and Lutheran religious traditions, supper clubs and Friday fish fries, beermaking and tavern life. The implications of some of these threads are discussed in subsequent sections, as is the fact that rural Wisconsin is still largely synonymous with the cultures of white people. This is no surprise, given that they comprise 93.5% of its population, compared to 82.7% of its urban population and 87% overall, according to the 2020 U.S. Census.

This is very relevant to cultural capital because of the concept of hegemony. As alluded to, this is the idea that dominant groups maintain power and control not solely through their greater numbers or force, but by being able to set the terms and conditions of local social life, including what values are favored, who and what is considered acceptable and normal based on labels created/used by the dominant group, and the like, creating conditions that are comfortable for the dominant group and helping create and reinforce social hierarchies, in ways that can be obvious or more subtle.

The first rural U.S. is more racially diverse than common stereotypes would suggest, however, and Wisconsin is no different. Typically, racial/ethnic diversification of places is due to pull factors (demand for labor, desire to unify families) but push factors (conflict and oppression, lack of economic opportunity) also play a role, and migrations are often a combination of the two. This tends to be true in Wisconsin as well.

Barron (pop. 3,733, according to the 2020 U.S. Census) is the namesake county seat of non-metro Barron County in Northwestern Wisconsin. It might be tempting to stop after reading that the ancestry of its population is 25% German and 20% Norwegian and conclude that Barron is a typical rural Wisconsin town. Keep going, however, and a different story emerges, as the next-

³³ This program recently scored a victory in the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which ruled that the legislature's Joint Finance Committee blocking of funding for conservation purchases is unconstitutional (Schulte & Beck, 2024 – article link: <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2024/07/05/wisconsin-supreme-court-sides-with-ever-on-executing-land-purchases/74291815007/>).

³⁴ <https://landtrustalliance.org/land-trusts/gaining-ground/wisconsin>

highest ancestry is Sub-Saharan African, at 12.1% and growing. As in the rest of rural Wisconsin, most of Barron's residents (72.8%) are white, but at a much lower proportion than for the rural parts of the state overall. It also has a significantly younger median age than the state overall. Barron's diversity stems primarily from Somali residents, many of whom originally came to the U.S. as refugees and, starting over 20 years ago, were drawn to Barron – only 90 miles from Minneapolis, which has the largest Somali population in the U.S. – by jobs at the Jenny-O Turkey Store production plant. One of the reasons Barron is noteworthy is that Black people comprise only 1% of Wisconsin's rural population, compared to 8.2% of its urban population.

Hmong people are by far the largest group that originally came to Wisconsin as refugees and the state is now home to the third-largest Hmong population in the U.S. Though they primarily live in metropolitan areas of the state (Wisconsin's rural population is only 0.9% Asian overall), Hmong people are nonetheless important stakeholders in rural Wisconsin through their cultural capital linked to outdoor activities, such as farming, fishing, and hunting, which has produced some well-publicized and tragic conflict over the past two decades (Van Auken, Barron, Xiong, & Persson, 2016).

Black Wisconsinites are also important stakeholders in rural Wisconsin's landscapes, despite their rural population being very low, which stems at least in part from a long history of exclusion from many areas of the state (Loewen, 2005) and Wisconsin's status as one of the worst in the nation for racial segregation.³⁵ A number of initiatives are underway to improve Black Wisconsinites' access to the outdoors, such as the Black Men Northwoods retreat.³⁶ Further, a Black woman made state and even national headlines for her solo hike, during a cold winter, of Wisconsin's unique Ice Age Trail³⁷ and the state recently had its first African American DNR Secretary.

At this time, however, it is more likely that racial/ethnic diversity found in rural Wisconsin stems from Indigenous populations – Wisconsin being one of a small number of U.S. states in which a significant portion of its rural counties (primarily in the Northwoods) have Indigenous people as their largest non-white group (Rowlands & Love, 2021) and where over twice as many Indigenous people live in rural areas compared to cities³⁸ – or relatively recent Hispanic³⁹ arrivals. In the rural U.S.,

(E)xpanding diversity is largely driven by growth in the rural Latino population. In fact, population gains in many rural areas were driven solely by increases in Latino

³⁵ <https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/states/WI>

³⁶ <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/wnmag/2020/Winter/everyone>

³⁷ <https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/hiking-and-backpacking/emily-ford-hiked-ice-age-trail-winter/>

³⁸ <https://worh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Rural-WI-Demographics-2022.pdf>

³⁹ The most appropriate term for Spanish speakers or those with Latin American heritage in the U.S. has been debated for decades and remains controversial. Currently, the U.S. Census Bureau does not consider Hispanic or Latino a race but a separate ethnic category. Though “Latinx” is a term that has recently been adopted in some circles as an alternative to “Hispanic” – which generally refers to Spanish speakers but has some critics due to its colonial legacy – and to denote a geographical identity for people whose ancestry stems from Latin America but bypasses the gendered language of Latino/a, a [recent survey from Pew Research](#) of U.S. residents who fall into this category indicated that 52% prefer the term Hispanic, compared to 29% for Latino, 15% for no preference, and 2% for Latinx and 1% for “Latine”. Based upon this and the need to make a choice, we generally use the term Hispanic here.

residents—many of whom immigrated to work in meatpacking plants, farms, or industries like construction, oil, and timber, or to start businesses...with Latinos providing a ‘demographic lifeline’ in some rural regions. (Rowlands & Love, 2021, Para. 13)

Arcadia, Wisconsin (pop. 3,737) appears to be a good example of such a place. Located in the West Central part of the state, it is the largest town in Trempealeau County, one of twelve rural counties in the state where the population grew by 10% or more between 2000 and 2020 (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2023). While it does feature significant natural amenities related to its picturesque bluffs and wooded river valleys in this so-called Driftless Region, unlike most of the growing non-metropolitan counties in Wisconsin, Trempealeau is not a recreation- and tourism-dominated or retirement-destination county but considered manufacturing-dependent by the USDA ERS. Though sandwiched between metro counties on the north and south, it is not knit to either through commuting patterns, and Arcadia is roughly an hour’s drive from both Eau Claire and La Crosse. Rather, it has grown due to immigration from Hispanic immigrants, and Arcadia now has the relatively unique distinction of being a non-metropolitan majority-minority city, the majority being Hispanic, in this case.

The Hispanic population is the fastest growing in the state, helping it to recently become the largest category of people of color in Wisconsin, surpassing African American/Black according to the 2020 U.S. Census. While the Hispanic/Latino category is itself quite diverse, those with Mexican heritage comprise by far the largest share of the population in Wisconsin (Ibarra et al., 2023). In Arcadia, Hispanic people make up 64% of the population and 12% of the county’s overall, according to the 2020 U.S. Census, and 75% of Arcadia’s K-12 students (ibid.). They have been pulled to Arcadia by its employment opportunities at Ashley Furniture, poultry processor Pilgrim's Pride, and by the four large dairy CAFOs located in the area, helping the city grow by 55% over the past two decades and transforming local cultural capital (ibid.). It is now home to four Hispanic grocery stores and numerous restaurants, barbershops, clothing stores, and more, totaling around twenty Hispanic-owned businesses (Emerson, 2021). While brick-and-mortar businesses would fall under built capital, the culturally specific products, the languages utilized, and the inter-ethnic interactions they encourage (as elements of the *local society* referred to in the LIFE framework of community) reverberate in cultural and other capitals as well. A recent article about the transformation of places like Arcadia is explicit in crediting the Hispanic influx as a demographic lifeline:

Without the influx of Latino students, Arcadia School District enrollment would be only a quarter of its current figure. At a time when many small cities across Wisconsin are struggling to attract and retain people, Arcadia is growing and adding to its community. ‘Downtown Arcadia would be a ghost town without the 20 or so businesses that cater to immigrants,’ Rosenow (area dairy farmer with Hispanic workers) said of the area’s newer residents. ‘This community wouldn’t be what it is without Latinos.’ (Emerson, 2021, Paras. 20-21)

Hispanic residents have begun to make their mark as local leaders as well, including one who opened a Hispanic grocery store in 2004 and by 2017 had become a member of the board of

directors for the local chamber of commerce.⁴⁰ Increased diversity does not neatly translate into increased integration or belonging, however. In fact, increased diversity can produce social conflict due to cultural hegemony, as newcomers challenge the established local order, and may in some cases conceal exploitation. Hispanic workers have been involved in Wisconsin's rural economy for decades, for much of the time as seasonal workers, but this has evolved over time, following "employment trails to urban and rural areas where they work in agriculture, service and manufacturing industries. They have settled in urban cities like Milwaukee, Green Bay, and Racine and rural towns" (Ibarra et al., 2023, p. 7). In places like Arcadia and Darlington, in rural Lafayette County, "they have established co-ethnic barrios that are becoming vibrant working-class communities which grow daily with new arrivals" but where Hispanic people can also face "racial and cultural barriers rooted in xenophobic attitudes and policies" (ibid.).

The ascendance of CAFOs in the dairy industry over the past two decades has been a catalyst for the development of a more permanent workforce and growth in year-round Hispanic populations in rural Wisconsin. Led by immigrants with previous experience in Mexico's dairy industry, Hispanic workers now account for a large majority of workers in Wisconsin's dairy industry, and particularly in its CAFOs. Over a decade ago, a study conducted by UW-Madison rural sociologists found that more than 40% of all hired dairy workers were recent migrants (and mostly from Mexico), a proportion that was higher the larger operation (Harrison & Lloyd, 2011). It also found that most of those workers were married and had put down roots in Wisconsin but were disproportionately stuck in entry-level jobs, paid less on average than native-born workers, and lacked opportunities for advancement (ibid.).

A recent article noted that by some estimates "80% of the labor on Wisconsin dairy farms is now performed by immigrants. Most of them are undocumented, since there is no visa program for year-round low-skilled agricultural jobs" (Conniff, 2022, para. 2). Because they are now living within a culture that tends to fixate on "legality" and during an extended period of heightened focus on limiting immigration, for Hispanic workers the "border is everywhere", even in rural Wisconsin (Harrison & Lloyd, 2011). These conditions create a workforce that is particularly vulnerable to exploitation, even for its members who are authorized, as the fear of being a target of racist comments or police profiling, or about their family members potentially being deported encourages them to "work hard and keep their mouths shut" and stay out of the public eye (ibid.). In some ways, this can make such people the ideal workers, but it also creates instability for the dairy operations and their local societies in the long run, which is why a coalition of dairy farmers and advocacy groups have called for the creation of a new visa program for immigrant workers, though some fear that it could function to trap some workers in exploitative situations (Conniff, 2022).

The implications of demographic shifts like these for cultural capital are clear, because as "the Latino population continues to grow and become a larger presence in civil society, it will redefine social priorities and Wisconsin's identity" (Ibarra et al., 2023, p. 7). Groups pursuing collective impact processes would be wise to pay keen attention to who has access to local cultural capital and how it shapes the involvement of certain groups of people.

⁴⁰ <https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/madison365-wisconsin-latinos-2017-5>

Local people could feel welcome or not, that they have a seat at the table for co-creation and belonging or not, based upon their race/ethnicity, social class, religion, gender, sexual orientation and more. Perhaps there has been a history of exclusionary “sundown town” practices as in many other towns and cities throughout Wisconsin (Loewen, 2005). Hate crimes have also occurred in Wisconsin in recent years, including in rural places – such as multiple violent and even attacks on Hmong people on public and private hunting lands, and anti-Muslim harassment experienced by people canoeing on the Kickapoo River – and “sexual orientation, gender identity, race, and national origin often overlap to create particularly dangerous situations for many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals”.⁴¹ Further, immigration was arguably the most discussed issue in the fall 2024 elections. Histories of exclusion, harassment, and violence based upon certain social positions not meeting the standards for respect and inclusion established by dominant groups (through accrual of cultural capital and the hegemony that accompanies it) over time can discourage marginalized people from participating in local affairs.

Community developers should also assess the extent to which local cultural capital has produced a social climate attractive to potential in-migrants and whether strategies for broader inclusion and belonging could help spur community revitalization even while they pursue other specific aims. National data have suggested that rural areas have work to do in this regard. For example, a 2018 study from Pew Research showed that while people from rural areas reported life satisfaction at a higher level than urban areas, it was 5% lower than for suburban residents. Further, the gap between satisfaction for white people and people of color in rural areas was much bigger, 30% to 16%, compared to 25% to 21% in urban and 35% to 24% in suburban areas, respectively (Parker et al., 2018).

Rural/Urban Cultural Divide

Finally, when one considers the concept of rural culture in the U.S. in the present era, the phrase “rural/urban divide” may surface. We have alluded to elements of such a divide above and will present further data related to important objective differences related to human (e.g., educational attainment, health) and financial (income, poverty) between rural and urban places in Wisconsin below. Differences related to cultural capital are a bit harder to measure, however. Cramer (2016) made waves with her book, *The Politics of Resentment*, in which she uses Wisconsin as a case study to argue that our hyper-polarized politics and the rise of politicians like Scott Walker and Donald Trump demonstrate that there is indeed a rural-urban divide rooted in identity and resentment of “urban elites” on the part of rural people. This argument is essentially about differences in cultural capital, as she divides “are not just about politics but about who we are as people” (p. 2). Cramer (2016) goes on to argue that, based upon her study, many rural Wisconsin residents have what she calls a *rural consciousness*, which explains as,

an identity as a rural person that includes much more than an attachment to place. It includes a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources, as well as a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values, and work ethic. Rural consciousness signals an identification with rural people and rural places and denotes a multifaceted resentment against cities. (P. 6)

⁴¹ <https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/docs/08-17-Wisconsin-hate-crimes.pdf>

Cramer provides evidence suggesting that at least some rural resentment is rooted in the reality that public policies generally do not reflect the preferences of typical working people and that there are objective differences in key measures of quality of life between urban and rural places. In a recent piece, a long-time Wisconsin dairy farmer blamed the loss of small farms and rural businesses, because as “the economics of consolidation hollowed out small towns, rural folks began to feel some of the same resentment and sense of abandonment that was so widespread in the Rust Belt”.⁴²

Whether “rural folks are fundamentally different” in their cultural capitals is tougher to pin down, though. For example, the Pew study showed that while people from rural areas were significantly more likely than their suburban (almost evenly split between Democrats and Republicans) and urban (heavily Democratic) to identify as Republican in the U.S. and reported “family ties” as being somewhat more important, they were also somewhat more likely to report that residents of other types of places (cities, suburbs) misunderstood and looked down upon them (Parker et al., 2018). This is consistent with Cramer’s (2016) argument while underscoring the idea that a gulf between rural and urban people is likely as much about social construction and perceptions as reality.

In fact, despite common stereotypes and the many measurable differences in attitudes, perspectives, and markers of well-being reported across urban, suburban, and rural areas of the U.S., the Pew study concludes that across such places, people “share many aspects of community life” and there “is little variation among those living in different types of communities in the share reporting they have social support, feel optimistic about their lives or feel lonely” (Parker et al, 2018, paras. 1,40). Further, the idea that city life is more hectic than rural life was not supported (ibid.)

An important product of cultural capital is the shared *assumptions* about the world that help create the reality experienced by groups of people. As they design and engage in collective impact projects, participants should question those assumptions, try to understand where people from diverse groups are coming from, ask whether they are missing important angles and ideas that could help build upon local assets and solve wicked problems, and together attempt to co-create social spaces where all potential stakeholders feel like they belong (powell & Toppin, 2021) and can contribute to the work.

Human Capital

Human capital is what makes individual people assets to their communities, when they apply their knowledge and skills. Collective human capital can largely be measured through demographic data that tells us how many of what kind of people are where. In Wisconsin, a significantly higher percentage of residents (25%) live in non-metropolitan areas than in the U.S. overall (14%) and only slightly less than in 1980 (USDA ERS, 2024). Further, while some non-metropolitan counties contain “micropolitan” labor markets around core urban areas that have between 10,000 and 49,999 residents, most of Wisconsin’s land is considered rural according to the Census definition (see Figure 5).

⁴² <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2020/10/30/how-rural-wisconsin-became-so-divided/>

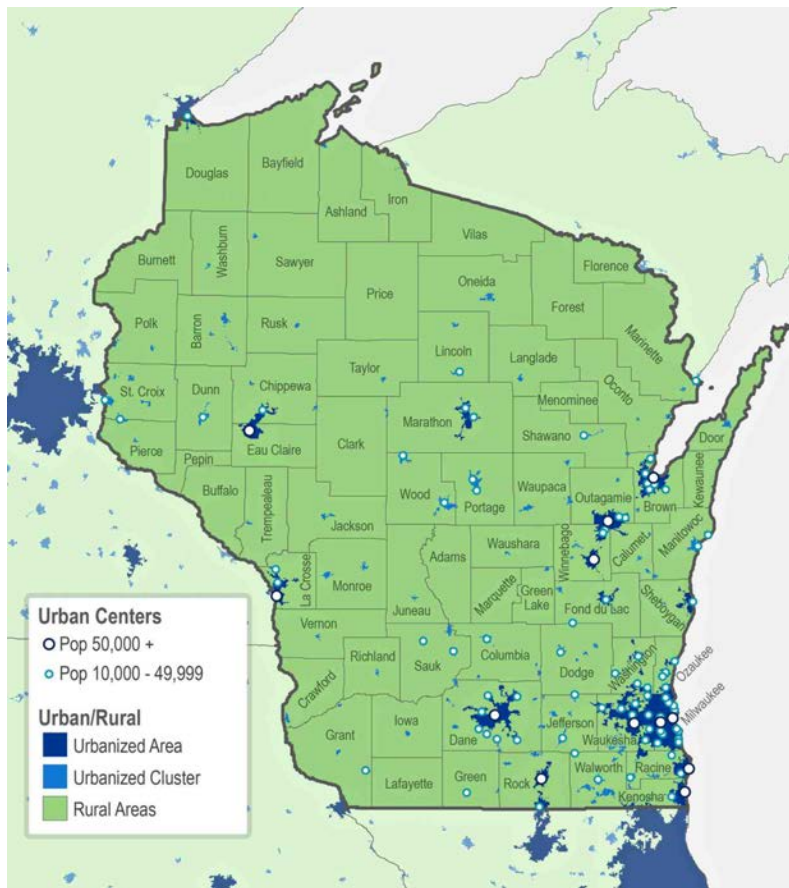


Figure 5. Urban and rural places in Wisconsin. (source: Gordon, 2017⁴³)

The relative isolation of people and places and the population levels and dynamics that prevail help shape the possibilities for community development and collective action. They also help determine their access to quality education, training, and jobs. As alluded to, people living in rural Wisconsin do face opportunity gaps and inequality in key elements of human capital compared to their urban and suburban counterparts.

Demographic Trends

Prior to examining some of these outcome data, however, we present some highlights of recent demographic trends in rural Wisconsin, as total population levels, growth and immigration trends, fertility rates, and age structure form the context for many of the other items of interest concerning human capital. The non-partisan Wisconsin Policy Forum (2023) summarizes the perhaps surprisingly good news about the state’s rural population levels as follows:

Wisconsin ranks near the top among Midwestern states for rural population growth in recent decades, as many of its peers have experienced a decline. Yet its rural population growth remains modest, has slowed over time, and did not accelerate during the

⁴³ <https://wiscontext.org/searching-rural-urban-divide-wisconsin>

pandemic like some other Midwestern states. Rural Wisconsin counties that have seen the most recent growth are tourism and recreation hubs in the state's Northwoods. (Para. 1).

Its population growth of 5.1% between 2000 and 2022 represents a tiny rate of annual growth, but one that was higher than all its Midwestern peers aside from North Dakota (ibid.). While it has not escaped the challenges that face the rural Midwest, overall, the data about rural Wisconsin reveal rural strengths that can help counter common laments about rural decline (ibid.).

Rural counties are both some of the fastest-growing and fastest-declining counties in Wisconsin. Seven counties lost population at a rate of 2% or more since 2010, and six of them are rural counties, listed by order of greatest decrease: Richland, Rusk, Crawford, Taylor, Shawano, and Langlade (ibid.). These counties have a mix of characteristics. Some rely more on agriculture than other Wisconsin counties. While most feature significant natural beauty, several have fewer elements of natural capital, such as lakes and other amenities that draw visitors and new residents (ibid.).

As alluded to, the fastest-growing counties in rural Wisconsin are top destinations for tourism, recreation, and retirement. The five counties in the state with the greatest in-migration rates – Florence, Vilas, Adams, Burnett, and Sawyer – are among the 17 non-metro counties classified as recreation-dependent by the USDA ERS (ibid.). Those with the highest rates of migration in the 55-74 age range were Vilas, Burnett, Sawyer, Adams, and Door, all recreation counties (ibid.). As discussed further below, rural Wisconsin has an older population than the rest of the state, which will provide healthcare and labor market challenges – both key elements of the collective human capital of places – going forward.

The previous discussion of migration serving as a potential “demographic lifeline” alludes to challenges of a growing population of older people, low birth rates, and “brain drain” (younger people leaving to pursue education, employment, and/or urban amenities) facing much of the U.S., but particularly its rural areas, especially those that are relatively isolated and/or lacking in natural amenities that draw tourists and retirees and the opportunities that tend to accompany it. Like the U.S. overall, Wisconsin has experienced sharp declines in births in recent decades, with its birthrate dropping by 57% between 1950 and 2020 (UW System, 2023). Combined with an aging population, this means that positive net migration becomes more important for population growth.

Wisconsin Pop Ages 0-17 by Metro and Non-Metro Counties, 2000 - 2020

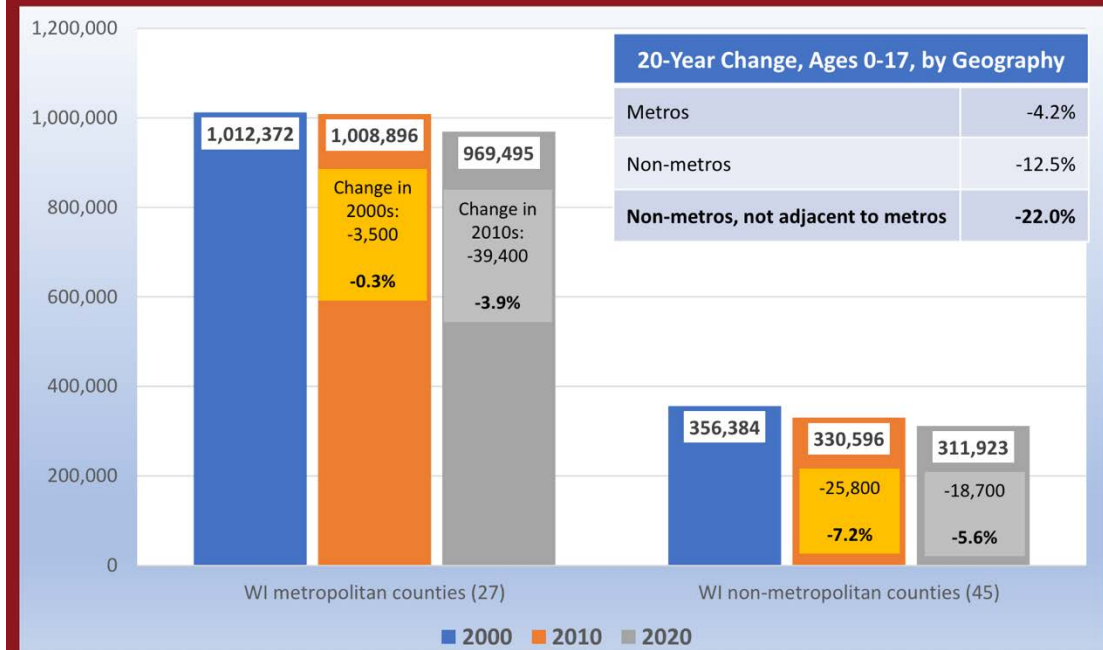


Figure 6. The falling proportion of young people in Wisconsin (source: Applied Population Lab, 2023⁴⁴)

Figure 6 shows the effects of a low birth rate and aging population on Wisconsin’s demographics, based upon the 2020 U.S. Census. The youth population has declined overall in the last two decades, including in the metropolitan areas, but the decline has been three times as large in non-metro counties, with those no-metro counties not situated next to metro areas faring much worse than even non-metro Wisconsin overall, with 20-year drop in population of people aged 0-17 being nearly five times as high. Fewer young people mean fewer high school graduates, which creates systemic ripple effects for key institutions, like labor markets and colleges/universities that need new workers or enrollees. Adding further complication, projections based upon the most recent U.S. Census data indicate that Wisconsin will have net out-migration in the coming years, helping reduce the working age population in the state by roughly 130,000 people by 2030 (UW System, 2023).

At the same time, Wisconsin’s elderly population had increased as a proportion of the total population by 4% since 1990, after growing steadily over the past three decades, including by a drastic 32% in the 2010s (ibid.). The share of Wisconsin’s population that is age 65 and above is higher than the national share and all its neighbors other than Michigan (ibid.). Overall, 20% of Wisconsin’s rural population was 65 and older compared to 15.3% in state’s urban areas and 17.5% for the state as of the 2020 Census.

Wisconsin’s aging population stems not only from this birth dearth but also from the large baby boom cohort aging and moving from the prime working and reproductive ages in 1990 to

⁴⁴ https://cdn.apl.wisc.edu/publications/DemoTrends_LWVWI_2023Jan.pdf

approaching or at retirement ages by 2020. These data portend a near future in which Wisconsin will struggle to care for its elderly population and fill the state's jobs. This is true at the national level, too, but the U.S. has experienced more positive net migration overall and new immigrants from the top sending countries (Mexico/Latin America consistently being the top sending areas over recent decades) tend to have higher birth rates as well, adding momentum to the demographic lifeline concept discussed above (ibid.).

Health

Further, the healthier a population is, the greater its ability to support local labor markets and institutions, and to foster community and economic development. The 2023 AHR placed Wisconsin 22nd in the nation for its overall health. Among other strengths, it lists high prevalence of high school completion and high voter participation, elements of human capital that are correlated with health. Also positively figuring into the ranking were Wisconsin's relatively low levels of income inequality and economic hardship and low overall climate risks.

Key challenges and areas of negatives impact included high prevalence of excessive drinking, high prevalence of obesity, low per capita public health funding, and several measures of racial disparity. The AHR also noted an increase in homicides and air pollution compared to the previous year. Wisconsin fared relatively well for exercise and physical activity (15th), but relatively poorly for fruit and vegetable consumption (35%), despite its rich natural capital in the form of productive agricultural land.

A recent article in the *Wisconsin Medical Journal* argues,

Significant health disparities exist between rural and urban populations. Rural populations have higher poverty rates, lower access to high speed internet, and more tobacco use in rural youth. Infant mortality rates are 25% higher in rural areas than in urban areas, likely due in part to lack of access to medical care. More than half of motor vehicle crash fatalities happen on rural roads, resulting from a combination of delay in the arrival of emergency personnel, high speeds on roads, or decreased visibility...Rural youth are twice as likely to commit suicide. Rural populations have high medical needs, and are at increasing risk of opioid use disorder, which is epidemic. (Schrager, 2019, P. 192).

According to the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health (2022), rural residents under 65 also had a higher disability rate (9.2%) than urban residents (7.7%) and the state overall (8.0%) and more of rural Wisconsinites lacked insurance coverage (8.0% compared to 6.5% and 6.8% overall).

Researchers argue that a key reason for rural people having poorer health outcomes is the relative lack of health providers found there, which can mean needing to drive long distances for care, when not all people even have access to a car. A recent article notes,

The same aspects of rural life that are attractive to many Wisconsinites — solitude, space, smaller communities — can often make getting the health care they need a challenge that ranges from mere inconvenience to life-threatening. Long distances between medical

facilities and the people they serve, as well as struggles to attract and retain healthcare professionals in rural areas, are stark manifestations of this quandary.⁴⁵

This general spatial mismatch has been mapped for all counties in the U.S. (Nguyen & Kim, 2021). “Healthcare deserts” are areas in which people do not have sufficient access to six important healthcare services: pharmacies, primary care providers, hospitals, hospital beds, trauma centers, and low-cost health centers (ibid.). Research has shown that over 80% of U.S. are lacking access to at least some of these key services. In rural Wisconsin, most counties have at least one such desert. Both Bayfield and Florence, relatively remote Northwoods counties, are deserts on five of the six dimensions; in both cases, they have adequate access to primary care providers but not the other key services. Other counties with more than one healthcare deserts that are highlighted elsewhere in this report include Trempealeau (4 deserts), Adams (4), Forest (3), Iron (3), Barron (2), and Menominee (2) (ibid.).

Barriers like these impact numerous elements of rural human capital in Wisconsin, such as mental health. A recent study found that 55 of 72 Wisconsin counties have a “significant shortage” of psychiatrists. Further, 20 counties have no practicing psychiatrists and 10 more only have one, and almost all of these are rural (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2018). This is particularly problematic because Wisconsin had some of the highest rates of farm bankruptcies in the state in recent years (ibid.) This coverage crisis, “along with the high prevalence of mental illness and substance abuse in the state, likely contribute to a gap in which more than half of Wisconsin adults in need of services for a mental health disorder go without care” (ibid., para.1).

As alluded to, substance use in Wisconsin is a serious issue related human capital. Perhaps owing at least in part to its long brewing history and drinking culture, the state consistently has some of the highest binge drinking rates in the nation. A 2024 study from the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute found that Wisconsin leads the nation in self-reported excessive drinking among adults, at 25% (down 1% since the previous report), and that all its counties had rates of 20% or higher.⁴⁶

While the 2023 AHR reported Wisconsin’s low prevalence of non-medical drug use as a strength, rural Wisconsin is facing serious challenges related to opioids and other illicit drug use (Schrager, 2019) – meth, heroin, and various drugs laced with deadly fentanyl – and related impacts. A recent op-ed in the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* argues, “The rural drug crisis often seems shrouded in the fog that descends on the rolling Wisconsin countryside, hidden with no clear solutions, and fundamentally different from suburban or urban areas—with no end on the horizon” (Reisinger, 2023a, para. 6). Behind the frequent stories about drug seizures and arrests for possession and related crimes are people with substance use disorder, mental health issues, economic insecurity and other reasons for despair (ibid.).

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services provides extensive data about the state’s challenges with substance use and addiction. While they share the number of overdose deaths from all drugs, including meth and cocaine, nearly 80% of all overdose deaths between 2015-

⁴⁵ <https://wiscontext.org/what-obstacles-complicate-health-care-rural-wisconsinites>

⁴⁶ https://thehill.com/homenews/nexstar_media_wire/4555106-maps-these-states-counties-are-home-to-the-most-excessive-drinkers-study-finds/

2022 were from opioids, so their website includes an opioid-deaths-by-county dashboard.⁴⁷ Most recent overdoses are from synthetic opioids, with fentanyl being a driving force. In most years from 2014-2022, Native Americans and African Americans have been disproportionately affected by opioid overdose deaths compared to white residents, though Hispanic and especially Asian residents of Wisconsin have generally faced lower rates.

Because much of the data for several non-metro Wisconsin counties is unavailable, it is difficult to generalize, but we can see from some examples the impact the drug crisis is having. In 2022, there were 24.8 opioid overdose deaths per 100,000 residents in Wisconsin overall, the highest since 2014, when the rate was 10.6. Based upon those counties with data available, non-metro Vilas (29.5 opioid deaths per 100,000) and Jackson (28.8) counties were in the top 5 in the state. In addition, while for all opioids, heroin, and cocaine, overdose death rates from 2015-2022 were clearly higher in the southern third of the state, for meth, the overdose death rates were markedly higher in the northern third – and mostly non-metro – portion of the state.

Regardless of whether rural Wisconsin has higher rates of overdose deaths, health challenges tend to hit non-metro Wisconsin harder than its metro areas due to relative isolation and lack of resources. The retirement of physicians and Wisconsin's aging population is projected to produce a primary doctor shortage by 2035, something already impacting the rural areas of the state, as discussed above. A Wisconsin program has found success in addressing this issue, an emerging strength that can be built upon throughout the state, as when such initiatives are successful, they tend to expand in rapid fashion (Orozco Rodriguez, 2023). The Wisconsin Collaborative for Rural Graduate Medical Education, part of the Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, was started in 2012, when there were on 25 rural medical residency training positions in the state. In 2022, however, this initiative supported 51 positions, more than twice as many as a decade earlier. Further, 65% of residents have remained in rural medical practice, higher than the national average for rural areas (ibid.).

Education

Educational attainment is another key element of human capital, which is correlated with health and tied to the prosperity of rural people and places. Previous research has found that educational attainment has a positive relationship with regional economies and that counties with lower educational levels have worse economic outcomes (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018). Further, since schools are typically key rural institutions their quality is often linked with the quality of local leadership and vision. While local context and place knowledge, traditional skills and perspectives are all important to the vibrancy and resilience of rural locales, higher education provides information and “outcomes such as critical thinking and problem solving...needed to make informed decisions regarding complex issues facing the world today” (ibid., p.1). Collective impact efforts to improve quality of life, therefore, will likely be more successful if they include a mix of people from various backgrounds, including those with college degrees (Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer, 2016).

In addition, while there are certainly viable employment options in traditional rural sectors like manufacturing and those discussed above, there are other concrete reasons for local societies in

⁴⁷ <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/opioids/deaths-county.htm>

rural Wisconsin to encourage their young people and adult learners to attend college. Despite current crises in higher education caused by demographic shifts, underfunding of universities, and growing questions about the value of higher education, numerous studies continue to confirm that there is a significant college education premium. For example, a 2024 report from the Association of Public & Land Grant Universities⁴⁸ shows that college graduates are half as likely to be unemployed and have average earnings that are 86% higher than peers with high school completion as their highest attainment, are 20% more likely to report financial well-being, and on average make \$1.2 million more over their lifetimes than people with lower levels of attainment. Extensive national research demonstrates that people with college degrees are also more likely to be homeowners, to be civically engaged, and live longer and healthier lives (Meyerhofer, 2024). Those with college degrees in rural areas reported life satisfaction at 34%, compared to 29% with some college, but only 22% with only a high school degree (Parker et al., 2018). Further, by “2031, good jobs that are accessible to those with only a high school education will represent just 6 percent of all jobs, while 70 percent of jobs will require postsecondary education” (Jenness, et al., 2024, p. 4). Closer to home, a recent study of projected job openings in Wisconsin through 2030 showed that two-thirds of the jobs that pay \$50,000 or higher require a college degree, and demand for workers to fill them will continue to grow (Meyerhofer, 2024).

Another study reported that after growing for several decades the college wage premium has flattened out in recent years, but this reflects an increase pay for high school graduates rather than a decrease for college grads, a pattern most notable among students of color (Bengali et al., 2023⁴⁹). The latter highlights the importance of access to higher education and that differences in outcomes are often reflective of *opportunity* gaps rather than differences in “achievement” among different groups. Of people in the U.S. living in “higher education deserts”, where it is a 30-minute or longer drive to a college or university, 82% are from rural areas (Jenness et al., 2024). A recent article in the *Wisconsin State Journal* was titled, “In Wisconsin, College Dreams Grow Dimmer for Rural Students” (Wethal, 2024). It points to the UW System’s closure of five branch campuses over the past 18 months – most of which served primarily rural students – as one of several reasons that the state’s rural students are finding it harder and harder to access a college education, which is borne out by the data (ibid.).

⁴⁸ <https://www.aplu.org/our-work/4-policy-and-advocacy/publicvalues/employment-earnings/#:~:text=Typical%20earnings%20for%20bachelor's%20degree,is%20a%20high%20school%20diploma.&text=College%20graduates%20on%20average%20make%20%241.2%20million%20more%20over%20their%20lifetim>

⁴⁹ <https://www.frbsf.org/research-and-insights/publications/economic-letter/2023/08/falling-college-wage-premiums-by-race-and-ethnicity/>

Education (Persons 25 and older)	Rural	Urban	Total
Not completing high school			
1990	25.6%	19.8%	21.4%
2000	17.1	14.1	14.9
2008-2012	10.9	9.4	9.8
2017-2021	7.9	6.8	7.1
Completing high school only			
1990	41.3	35.5	37.1
2000	40.7	32.2	34.6
2008-2012	39.8	30.6	33.1
2017-2021	36.6	27.6	30.0
Completing some college			
1990	20.7	24.9	23.8
2000	26.6	28.7	28.1
2008-2012	30.6	30.6	30.6
2017-2021	33.0	30.8	31.4
Completing college			
1990	12.4	19.8	17.7
2000	15.6	25.0	22.4
2008-2012	18.7	29.3	26.4
2017-2021	22.5	34.8	31.5

Table 3. Educational attainment in Wisconsin. (source: USDA ERS Stat Fact Sheets, 2024)

Table 3 reveals strong and consistent improvement in educational outcomes in rural and urban Wisconsin since 1990, but also disparity. There are additional concerns on horizon. In addition to the demographic concerns outlined earlier, the percentage of high school graduates who go straight to college in the state overall has dropped from about 62% in 2016 down to 52% in 2022 (Meyerhofer, 2024). This appears to be due to a combination of strong labor markets and rising concern about the cost and time needed to complete college (ibid.). Previous research demonstrated that rural high school graduates in the U.S. were already more likely to delay college enrollment and less likely to stay continuously enrolled than those from urban or suburban areas (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018). The data from Table 3 show that most Wisconsinites now complete high school, but the percent who do not remains higher in rural Wisconsin. Further, the percentage of people in rural Wisconsin whose highest educational attainment is high school (37%) is substantially higher than in urban parts of the state (28%) and Wisconsin overall (30%). College completion rates are substantially lower in rural areas (22.5%) than in urban Wisconsin (34.8%) and this gap has widened over time. Indeed, while college participation rates have dropped by 14% in Wisconsin since 2019, “over the past 20 years, the share of rural college students at UW system campuses has shrunk in ways that population shifts don’t explain” (Wethal, 2024, para. 19).

Rural students in Wisconsin clearly face obstacles to continuing their education, and educational disparities limit their ability advance, which impacts their home communities as well, since their populations have a harder time reaching their full potential, at least while they remain there. Given the erosion of access to higher education in rural Wisconsin, this disparity is not surprising

but, unfortunately, has likely gotten larger and will continue in this direction if UW System campus closures and other issues persist.

The quality of local school system and its partnerships with local employers are obviously important factors in providing opportunities for rural students. Previous research has shown that while rural areas face challenges in this regard, they often also have strengths and advantages that may be overlooked, which we discuss further below (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018). Local cultural capital comes back into play by helping establish the expectations for students living in rural places. If students receive the message, through their interactions with adults – parents and representatives of local institutions like schools themselves, key *agents of socialization*, which transmit cultural capital to the next generation, including the extent to which education is valued – that education is important and they are expected to do well and pursue higher education, they will be more likely avail themselves of opportunities in this regard (ibid., Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer, 2016).

Some rural local societies may appear to send counter messages for various reasons, including strong histories of employment in traditional fields not requiring higher education, rural consciousness, or other cultural factors; the latter includes concerns about educational systems “teaching young people to leave” in some Indigenous communities, which is understandable given the high value place on kinship ties and keeping alive traditional cultural practices, which often clash in important ways with those of the dominant culture. In this vein, others have argued that the realities faced by rural students of various backgrounds are misunderstood or ignored by urban-centric perspectives that see rural educational achievement gaps through a deficit model (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018). Through such a lens, to blame are a supposed lack of preparedness from rural schools, “undermatching” (where students attend post-secondary schools that are less selective than their ability demonstrates), or students’ reluctance to leave home (ibid.). In the U.S. overall, over half of students at four-year colleges and 80% of those at two-year schools attend college within 25 miles of home, but in Wisconsin half the state (mostly rural) has only one technical college campus nearby or zero post-secondary options within their residents’ “commuting zone”, creating difficult choices (Wethal, 2024). Further, both local educators and education researchers may be guilty of overlooking rural assets compared to urban and suburban settings when it comes to education, including stronger support, unique experiences and rural identity, and legitimate commitments and obligations to rural places, ways of life, and people (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018).

Another overlooked asset in Wisconsin human capital is the number of adults who have some post-secondary education but have not completed a four-year degree. This “some college, no degree” population in Wisconsin overall was estimated at 721,678 in 2020 (UW System, 2023), and the USDA ERS data show that rural residents of the state are much more likely to have some college (33%, more than in urban areas) than a 4-year degree (22.5%). This population represents an opportunity for Wisconsin colleges and universities to add students despite the state’s demographic challenges (UW System, 2023). At the local level, helping such students earn their degrees, including through creative options like partnerships between employers, school systems, and colleges/universities, can not only increase the human capital of rural areas but also help

address skills gaps that exist in some sectors of the state economy, such as healthcare, teaching, computer science, and engineering (ibid.).⁵⁰

In any case, assessing and addressing youth development, educational infrastructure, local expectations, alternative educational delivery models and opportunities for adult learners is ripe for collaborative efforts using a collective impact model.

Social Capital

Social capital is related to the associational life of people, as embodied in relationships, social networks, and local civil society. Considering the role of social capital in collective impact initiatives can help collaborators understand how norms and relationships develop in particular settings and how this impacts social inequality and the possibilities for effective action.

The precise meaning of social capital can be a bit fuzzy to pin down, as there are various definitions and applications of the idea, relating to individuals and to collectives, something that is productive or simply an aggregate of relationships, and to some extent, conflation with broader concepts like civil society and community. Some of the most important social concepts, however, are the most imprecise (Lyon & Driskell, 2012). Understanding that there is no consensus in this regard, we move forward here based upon our perspective on social capital, which is built upon common ideas in this regard from other scholars and practitioners.

Perhaps the most well-known definition is from Putnam (1995), who defines social capital as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 67). Social capital has been divided into three types. As we have written elsewhere, *bonding capital*

is common amongst homogeneous groups and helps them survive challenging circumstances, such as migration to and social marginalization in a new place. It stems from the development of strong ties at the micro level, amongst people who are similar and interact regularly. It can be ‘cashed in’ during times of need (e.g., when people are low on food or need help with babysitting) (Van Auken et al., 2016, P. 3)

In other words, bonding capital comes from the ties linking you to people like yourself. *Bridging capital*, on the other hand, develops through interactions across social differences. Bridging capital

stems from weak ties at the meso level. It is an inclusive solidarity produced through less frequent, but strategic interaction between people from groups that are heterogeneous, particularly along race/ethnicity and social class lines, traversing such gaps through collaboration around issues of common interest in a locale. (ibid.)

In simpler terms, bridging capital results from ties with people that are categorically different from you: of a different generation, social class, race or ethnicity, gender, religion, political persuasion and so forth. As discussed further below, bonding capital is important to all of us

⁵⁰ For examples and ideas, see *The Chronicle of Higher Education*’s rural higher education resource center [here](#).

because it comes from relationships with people that know us personally and care about us, the people who “will bring us chicken soup when we’re sick” (Robert Putnam, quoted in Garcia-Navarro, 2024, para.5⁵¹). Yet, some forms of bonding capital can be negative and even highly dangerous for community and nation, as “in a diverse society like ours, we need a lot of bridging social capital” (ibid.), but it is a lot more difficult to build.

The third form of social capital, according to some scholars, is *linking capital*. It “emerges from more macro-level connections and ‘enables greater access to powerful actors, such as law enforcement officers, social workers, health care providers, NGO officials, politicians, and the public administration in general’” (Van Auken et al., 2016). It helps produce political capital, giving people a seat at the table along with actors from powerful institutions of the market, state, and civil society.

Social Capital and the Community Concept

Social capital exists solely through relationships with other people. It is, therefore, the capital that tends to be most directly linked with the concept of community. As we presented earlier in our introduction of the LIFE framework, however, we see it as a potential outcome of community development not community itself. When people bond over common circumstances – including the access to societal rewards that their relative privilege affords⁵² – or helping each other out, this may certainly *feel* like community. Indeed, this feeling has a place in the ideal element of the LIFE framework. This is similar to the Social Capital Project’s (SCP) (2018) discussion of *trust*, which is typically considered elemental to social capital. They ask, is “trust an element of social capital—a characteristic intrinsic to relationships that is productive—or is it the consequence of a community having productive social capital (something that social capital produces)” (p. 6)?

As with all potential aspects of community in the LIFE framework, such questions should be interrogated by the researcher or practitioner if they are important to the application at hand. It is also worth noting that there is reason to be critical of social capital because it implies that relationships are valuable solely for instrumental reasons (to get something out of them) – what Ferdinand Tönnies, often called the father of the community concept in sociology called *gesellschaft* – or because it is sometimes assumed to be entirely positive, similar to how Tönnies’s concept of *gemeinschaft* is often interpreted. With those caveats in mind, we agree with FFG and others that social capital is a useful concept for community developers to consider.

Bridging capital emerges at the meso level, just as community does from this perspective. The community field, where community forms in LIFE, develops when local “social fields” (interest groups) transcend particular interests and coalesce to address issues of common concern to people living in an area, whether they have previous relationships or not. Bridging capital, built as it is through weak ties among people that are sociologically different, such as from different racial or ethnic groups or social classes, clearly resonates with aspects of community in the LIFE framework, but it does not have the locally grounded action-orientation that sets community

⁵¹ Putnam was discussing his latest book, *The Upswing*. There is also a documentary, *Join or Die*, that is largely about Putnam’s life, work, and these key concepts and findings.

⁵² Wilkinson (1991) cautioned us to watch out for social stratification masquerading as community.

apart from other concepts. It can certainly be an outcome of community development and potentially an ingredient in its formation, however; as with the example of trust discussed above, teasing out the relationships between elements of concepts like these, which may have different causes and effects, requires examination of specific cases and in any case may be difficult to ascertain precisely (Putnam, in Garcia-Navarro, 2024). Further, in the LIFE framework, the material, ideal, and practical aspects will likely overlap and operate in dialogue on the ground; for example, a sense of community and the celebration of it may build social capitals that help produce widespread participation in community-building events in the future, and the extent to which local social capitals are “productive” in helping community members achieve their specific goals can be interrogated in analyses.

Similarly, linking capital plays an important role in community development outcomes but for rural areas is likely to be most relevant for the *extra-local* connections and interactions it involves, helping local actors connect to helpful leaders in market-, state-, and civil society-based organizations from outside the area. Again, we argue that community itself is a web of interconnected relationships formed in pursuit of common concerns in particular places, with the landscape itself – comprised in part of the physical layout of cities, towns, and rural areas – playing an active role.

We have elsewhere argued that in “the highly segregated U.S., bridging and linking social capitals are much less common than bonding capital, and differential access to them (disadvantaging women and minorities, in particular) leads to reproduction of social inequality over generations” (Van Auken et al., 2016, p. 4). Similarly, FFG suggest that bridging capital is “particularly important for breaking down inequalities of power and access” (p. 166). They do not include linking capital as a form of social capital, perhaps because it overlaps substantially with political capital in the community capitals framework. It can be fruitful to exploring how bonding and bridging capitals interact in places, though, as these capitals can reinforce or operate in tension with each other (ibid.; SCP, 2018). Places with vibrant associational life may have higher, more, or more productive social capital, while those lacking in this regard may have low, less, or less productive social capital (SCP, 2018).

Social Capitals Typology

FFG flesh this out in a typology based upon the notion that social capital is built through networks that operate laterally (learning from each other, both within and between communities) and vertically (links through various local actors to regional, state, and national organizations and resources – producing what others call linking social capital). They also argue that networks should be flexible (there is a finite timeline and various forms of participation around a larger vision) and have permeable boundaries (they expand as more collaborators come on board).

FFG’s typology equates low bonding and low bridging with the absence of social capital and extreme individualism, where the “wealthy invest for themselves” and “poor are excluded from access to community capitals” (ibid., p. 167). This can be dangerous for societies, local and national, as the bonding capital of angry young men has helped fuel the rise of violent extremist groups throughout history (Putnam, in Garcia-Navarro, 2024), for example. Low bonding but high bridging produces “clientelism” based upon the strong influence of external actors from

market, state, or civil society that work through local elites, building their power in the process. High bonding combined with low bridging, in this typology, yields strong boundaries, where decisions are made through local factionalism (“if your kin are in office, you get the potholes fixed”) and there is little trust or communication with outside entities (ibid., p. 167).

Finally, the ideal situation from their point of view is bonding and bridging capital both being high, which will produce progressive participation where local people are poised for action, ready to engage the community field, and make decisions together based upon what they deem the common good (ibid.). This can then create what FFG call *entrepreneurial social infrastructure* (ESI), a parallel to physical infrastructure that is comprised of the “collective outputs and outcomes” of community development (ibid., p. 171), very similar to what we refer to as the practical elements of the LIFE framework. FFG argue that ESI is easier to change and less abstract than social capital. It links social capital to *agency* (the ability to effect change), which is why entrepreneurial is part of the name along with social infrastructure, the collection of physical places and organizations that shape how people interact in a locale (Klinenberg, 2018). Along with the examples provided in FFG (2016), Safford (2009) provides a comparison of two Rust Belt cities facing similar externally driven conditions, but which dealt with them very differently, with one suffering serious decline while the other adapted much better. While he focuses on social networks of local elites, the author attributes the diverging outcomes of these places to differences in how social capital was utilized and essentially points to a form of ESI developed by the latter as the key to its success (ibid.).

Measuring Social Capital

While it can be difficult to measure or change the level of collective trust in a place, the number of meeting sites, the number of community-oriented associations, and their collaboration on issues of local concern may be more readily measured. ESI is also characterized by the fostering of widespread resource mobilization and outcomes that embrace diversity and inclusion, as demonstrated through a collective action group’s “willingness to consider and accept alternatives” (FFG, 2016, pp. 171-2). The latter connects back to our previous discussion of cultural capital and what people and ideas not only have seats at the table but also voices that help co-create new systems, as well as the example of Arcadia, Wisconsin. Though more information would be needed to determine the extent of inclusion and co-creation and level of ESI that seems to be in place, the twenty or more Hispanic-owned businesses and involvement of at least some of these entrepreneurs in local civil life in Arcadia is promising.

As alluded to, social capital is more difficult to measure than human capital or some of the other capitals, as it hinges on particular types of social interaction and is simply more nuanced. As the SCP (2018) notes, we tend to make sense out of what is happening in the world based upon understandings of certain phenomena – issues or problems, their causes and consequences – that can be readily measured, such as economic variables like gross domestic product. Less attention is paid to social, cultural, and psychological factors that are harder to measure, such as social capital. They argue, however, that “if we neglect the health of our associational life, we will misdiagnose the causes of many problems and tend to focus on economic priorities over social ones” (ibid., p.5).

The Pew study discussed earlier explored several questions related to but not explicitly about social capital. Their data show that most adult Americans felt at least somewhat attached to their communities (they do not define the term but use it to refer to places where people live), but only 16% said they feel very attached. Further, 41% of respondents indicated that they “are not too or are not at all” attached (Parker et al., 2018). Despite common stereotypes, urban, suburban, and rural residents did not differ substantially in this regard, though rural residents actually reported the lowest level of attachment. Not surprisingly, length of residency was correlated with higher reported levels of community attachment. Another element of social capital the Pew study explored was social connections. Those who said they knew all or most of their neighbors were more than twice as likely to report being very or somewhat attached than those who said they didn’t know any of their neighbors (ibid.). Even amongst those who had lived there for a decade or more, those who indicated they knew all or most of the neighbors were much more likely to feel attached to their communities. Notably, rural residents were much more likely to know their neighbors but did not report interacting with them more frequently than their urban or suburban peers (ibid.). Most Americans said they had at least one neighbor they would trust with their keys, but people of color were much less likely to report having one.

Rural residents were also significantly more rooted in their communities, based on living there for a decade or longer, than their urban or suburban peers. Rural places also had higher percentages of older adults and, interestingly, a higher percentage of residents with bachelor’s degrees indicating they lived in or near the community where they grew up. Across all three place types, family ties were the most important reason for “staying put” (ibid.). While this rootedness may or may not be voluntary, it is self-evident that those engaged in community development should attempt to build upon it while working to increase social connectivity and attachment, which should encourage participation in efforts to improve local quality of life.

Scholars and practitioners have developed direct measures of social capital, starting with the state index of social capital included in Robert Putnam’s (2000) seminal book, *Bowling Alone*, and a more recent version with county-level data from a group of Penn State researchers. Chetty et al. (2022) used data from Facebook to create their Social Capital Atlas.⁵³ It is based upon extensive research summarized in their article in *Nature*, which presents the following key findings that support and elaborate on previous research about social capital as presented earlier:

1. Social networks are highly segregated by income.
2. Children who grow up in communities with more cross-class interaction are much more likely to rise out of poverty.
3. Economic connectedness (share of high-income friends among low-income people) is strongly associated with upward mobility, but other measures of social capital are not.
4. Differences in economic connectedness can explain why racially segregated communities and areas with high poverty rates have lower rates of upward mobility.
5. The social disconnection by class is due in equal part to segregation by income across social settings and friending bias (high-income people are more likely to form friendships with high-income peers) within settings.
6. Both exposure (the share of high-income people in the groups in which people participate) and friending bias are shaped by the structure of institutions and policies. (Chetty et al., 2022, PP. 2-6).

⁵³ Learn more and explore the data, including at the county level in Wisconsin, [here](#).

Among other things, Chetty et al. (2022) argue that kids who grow up in places rich in bridging social capital are much more likely to escape poverty.

In the more traditional vein of Putnam and the Penn State project, the SCP (2018) also created a social capital index. It should be noted that the SCP places a particular emphasis on factors related to families, which may reflect the political basis of the project. The family is a basic social unit in society, but other conceptions of social capital emphasize relationships formed outside of the home; that stated, FFG do include kinship ties as a source of bonding social capital and the data appears to be legitimate and useful. The SCP index is also based upon data that is now becoming a bit dated. While it is not perfect, we present some of the data from the SCP index here to help us understand the health of our social capital in Wisconsin.

Levels of Social Capital in Wisconsin

Starting with the state-level, the SCP Social Capital Index ranked Wisconsin very highly. Overall, it placed the state 3rd out of the 50 U.S. states plus D.C., a perhaps-overlooked strength upon which to build. On the surface, this makes sense, given that Wisconsin is known for its vibrant tavern culture, array of rural supper clubs, history of progressivism, and other markers of associational life. The index ranked Wisconsin very highly on several of the sub-indexes that together yield the overall score, which includes a 2nd place ranking for Institutional Health (voting behavior, participation in census, confidence in local schools, media, etc.). We have alluded to the importance of effective external communication for community development, and access to trustworthy media is a key factor, particularly in an information age in a constant state of flux due to the rise of social media and heightened political polarization where political partisans have increasing difficulty in agreeing on basic facts. SCP includes a measure in this regard here, which is consistent with FFG's (2016) assertion that local news sources are important to the progressive participation and the development of ESI. Among other things, they argue that "(c)ommunities in which controversy is openly aired and accessible factual information drives out rumors are best able to process information from a variety of sources and make choices that have the potential to enhance community well-being" (p. 173). The health of local media also concerns political and built capital, so this is discussed in later sections as well.

SCP's index also ranked Wisconsin 3rd for Social Support (average number of close friends, trust in neighbors, receiving emotional support), and 3rd for Philanthropic Health (percentage that made a donation of \$25 or more in the past year to a charitable or religious organization). It is also ranked in the top ten for Community Health (7th; based upon percent of residents that volunteered, attended community meetings, worked with neighbors to fix or improve something, number of membership and nonprofit organizations, etc.) and Family Interaction (9th; kids' time on devices, watching TV, time spent reading to kids), while it ranked 16th a bit lower for Family Unity (measures of marriage and single-family households) and 21st for Collective Efficacy (violent crimes per 100,000 residents, the idea being that places with strong social capital will be more effective in conducting informal policing and promoting pro-social norms).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ See map with rankings for states and places within Wisconsin, as well as the details about variables included in each subindex [here](#).

At the county level, the SCP is lacking data for 12 Wisconsin counties, all which are non-metro counties in the Northwoods. Consistent with the high statewide ranking, most Wisconsin counties ranked in the top 20% nationally. There were a few non-metro exceptions, but even they were close. Crawford and Jackson counties ranked just below the top 20% and both were brought down by the family unity sub-index. Adams County ranked 57th out of the 60 counties with data in Wisconsin, with a strong ranking for Institutional Health (86th percentile) but rankings below the 60th percentile for Family Unity (44th), Collective Efficacy (52nd), and Community Health (58th). According to the Social Capital Atlas, Adams County exhibits average cohesiveness rates and average civic engagement, but high economic connectedness, which suggests that despite other challenges low-income children in the county may have a clearer path out of poverty than peers living in other places, such as Menominee County, which exhibits low economic connectedness. This may be offset to some degree, though, by Menominee County's high levels of cohesiveness and civic engagement.

Social Capital and Health

Let's briefly revisit the relationship with between health and social capital from the previous section. The federal Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) has a Healthy People 2030 initiative.⁵⁵ It is built upon encouraging the prevention of health problems by addressing the following key social determinants of health:

1. [Economic Stability](#)
2. [Education Access and Quality](#)
3. [Health Care Access and Quality](#)
4. [Neighborhood and Built Environment](#)
5. [Social and Community Context](#)

The final determinant includes civic participation and social cohesion. In its summary of the literature the initiative notes:

One way civic participation improves health is by building social capital...For example, a study found that members of civic groups were more likely to be physically active. Belonging to civic groups expanded participants' social networks, which made them more aware of opportunities to be physically active in their community. Engaging in meaningful civic activities can also help individuals develop a sense of purpose, which may promote continued civic participation. (ODPHP, n.d., Para.4)

This sense of purpose, so long as it is pro-social and directed towards bettering local quality of life, may bolster the sense of obligation towards the welfare of others that Putnam sees as vital to community and societal renewal. The Healthy People 2030 literature review continues:

Simply belonging to groups can improve health as well. Membership in formal groups (e.g., Girl Scouts, Kiwanis, Rotary, PTA) or informal groups (e.g., book clubs, bird watching clubs) has been shown to increase social capital and decrease social isolation

⁵⁵ <https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/civic-participation#cit4>

among members. As a result, these groups may indirectly improve the physical and mental health of their members. (ODPHP, n.d., Paras.7)

As discussed, the opioid epidemic is another key factor in rural health. Because at its root the rural drug crisis is about the isolation, despair, and addiction disorders faced by individual people, bonding social capital is clearly lacking for some groups and needs to be encouraged, along with medical interventions. The fact that it is experienced by so many means it is clearly a social problem, stemming from social issues (such as economic dislocation, untreated mental health concerns, generational cycles of substance use) that affect large numbers of people. Social problems cannot be solved by individual approaches.

Solving such a crisis will require extensive bridging and linking social capital that will bring together new ideas and resources, as well as “the kind of radical understanding that can withstand the ugly moments” (Reisinger, 2023a, para.39). In a recent op-ed about addressing the rural drug crisis, Reisinger (2023b) argues that four key steps should be taken, and social capital is intertwined in them. First, education and awareness of the problem and potential solution needs to be increased, including bringing partners and resources together, which would likely involve both lateral and vertical connections and bridging and linking capital. Second, there needs to be support for people struggling with addiction, including through peer specialists that provide bonding support and help make vertical connections. Third, there needs to be more triage and treatment resources, including additional facilities (as touched upon in the section on built capital). Finally, there needs to be collaboration and coordination of services; as one provider said, “it’s everybody working together, and that’s a really hard thing to do” (ibid., para. 8).

Brief Case Study: Collective Impact on Substance Use

This leads us directly to the concept of collective impact and resonates with an effort local to us. While Winnebago is a metro county, it certainly features areas that are rural by other measures, and in any case provides an interesting example. In 2023, it reached a disturbing milestone: a new record of 47 overdose deaths, mostly of men aged 18-44, nearly all of them white, and mostly due to fentanyl. Further, in previous years OFR has reported that overdose victims have generally died alone, and in 2023, “many victims felt isolated and that they had little or no support” (OFR, 2024, p. 4). There was also an increase in suicide overdoses, part of the national spike over the past decade in “deaths of despair”, which also include unintentional overdoses and alcohol-related deaths. Consistent with this, Winnebago County fared poorly on the SCP Social Capital Index compared to the rest of the state, ranking 49th out of the 60 counties with data, though it landed in the 81st percentile of counties nationally. Its ranking was negatively impacted by relatively low marks for Family Unity (56%), Community Health (61st percentile), and Collective Efficacy (63%), which could point to relatively low bonding and low bridging capital. Similarly, the Social Capital Atlas ranks the county low on cohesiveness, which alludes to social isolation and could be tied to a history of parochialism in this part of the state (neighboring Fond du Lac, Outagamie, and Waushara counties all rank low on cohesiveness as well). This is counteracted, however, by Winnebago County’s high rankings for economic connectedness and civic engagement.

People are indeed volunteering around issues like overdose deaths, building social capital as they try to turn the tide. Started in 2018, the Winnebago County Overdose Fatality Review (OFR) brings together 47 interdisciplinary partners from 35 agencies, including representatives from municipalities in the county, police departments, school districts, hospitals, nonprofits that provide recovery services, churches, other coalitions, and state agencies. This mix of partners creates the potential for bonding, bridging, and linking

capitals to be built. The group holds monthly meetings to attempt to understand the circumstances behind every overdose death and engages in a variety of prevention and advocacy efforts, including a focus on providing support to children impacted by their parents' substance use, encouraging the development of bonding capital and peer support networks among people struggling with substance use or in recovery, and "elevating to the state" level policy recommendations related to care for mental health and substance use issues.⁵⁶ While, sadly, overdose deaths continue to happen, a recent activity designed to document the changes produced by OFR over its history yielded the identification of 132 ripple effects in the areas of programmatic effects and changes, better knowledge and understanding, and people talking and feeling differently, as it puts "everyone together in the same room at the same time...(with) lots of agencies coming together, making a big impact" (OFR, 2024, p. 5).

Jennifer Skolaski is OFR's project manager. She indicates that OFR follows a collective impact (CI) model quite intentionally (Jennifer Skolaski, email communication, July 16, 2024). As to the common agenda aspect of the CI model, OFR has "a defined process for how case reviews go and all agencies have signed an interagency MOU so that they can share data" and "every review has the same agenda" and their agreed-upon common purpose "is to prevent overdose deaths" (ibid.). Regarding continuous communication, OFR meets monthly for case reviews and has regular committee meetings, with "lots of emails from me about updates, resources, work happening" in between, and "partners regularly evaluate the process through discussion, surveys, and one-on-ones" (ibid.). OFR also engages in mutually reinforcing activities, "we have partner expectations that are explicitly shared during their orientation, annually, and more briefly at every case review" and a committee closely tracks their recommendations and actions (ibid.). Skolaski serves as the backbone of OFR as a neutral, independent contractor, while the county health department is the fiscal agent. They practice shared measurement by logging all data and recommendations in a shared database, work with a county epidemiologist on analysis, and coordination with the state Department of Justice to stay in tune with local and state trends (ibid.). In addition to following the CI model, Skolaski offered some tips for success for others interested in pursuing similar work. From her perspective, developing trust through bonding and bridging capital is key. Skolaski continued,

- *Even if you have a cookie cutter process or approach, you need to make it work for your community. Connect with stakeholders to understand what your community needs to make it a success (I did 30 cups of coffee with partners to get to know them and what they needed to make their time worthwhile and the project successful)*
- *Change moves at the speed of trust. This work is hard and can take time. That's okay! It is worth it in the long run!*
- *Having a neutral party lead the project is helpful. It gets rid of agendas, biases, and can help with politics. Before I started, I had no background with these partners which helped me move things forward.*
- *The biggest requirement for success is relationships. Take time to get to know people, what their expertise is, what they struggle with, what they need, and my favorite...who they are. I spend a lot of time sending flowers when a parent has died, baby gifts for a new child, a cup of coffee when I know they're struggling. I have gotten to know most of my partners and consider this a team of people who cares, because it matters to all of them. This is key if you want a collective impact model or any community project to work. (ibid.)*

⁵⁶ <https://www.winnebagocountywi.gov/sites/default/files/uploaded-files/2023-24-OFR-Annual-Report.pdf>

Social Capital Amidst Industrial Decline

Non-metropolitan Iron County, Wisconsin provides another interesting application of the concept of social capital. One of the northernmost counties in Wisconsin, which borders Lake Superior and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and overlaps with parts of the Bad River and Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe reservations, Iron County's history was, unsurprisingly, dominated by iron ore mining. Exploiting this form of natural capital, including in the world's deepest iron ore mine, provided employment for many residents through the 1960s (Iron County Economic Development, 2024⁵⁷). According to the U.S. Census, the county's population boomed with the development of the mining industry, growing by 49% between 1900 and 1920. As the industry phased out, however, the population dropped by 40% between 1940 and 1970, with further declines in the 1980s and 2000s, before experiencing modest growth in the 2010s to its current population of 6,317, according to the 2020 census.

Iron County now has the highest median age in the state, at 56.1 years, compared to 40.4 years for Wisconsin overall. It also generally has had one of the highest rates of unemployment in the state, typically behind that of Menominee County, another economically challenged rural county in the Northwoods, which also has the distinction of being essentially coterminous with the boundaries of the Menominee Nation's reservation. As of May 2024, Menominee County had an unemployment rate of 5.7%, followed by 4.4% in Iron County, compared to the statewide rate of 3.0%, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. All the other counties in the top five for high unemployment were non-metro as well, including Adams (3rd highest, at 4.2%) and Forest (5th highest, at 3.9%). Yet, while the SPC did not have data for Iron County, the Social Capital Atlas rates it highly on all three of its measures of social capital: economic connectedness, cohesiveness, and civic engagement. Social connectedness and the capital it can produce may help buffer a rural place that is challenged by economic decline and related issues.

This is discussed in a book entitled *Who We Are Is Where We are: Making Home in the American Rust Belt* by sociologist Amanda McMillan Lequieu, who received her Ph.D. in sociology at UW-Madison. The book focuses on how places have dealt with the deindustrialization of the previous century and features a case study on Iron County. The author's interest was piqued by the proposed GTAC mine, which ended up not being built there (Cox, 2024⁵⁸). Some company towns turn into ghost towns, but while Montreal (pop. 801), which was home to that world's deepest mine, lost more than half the population is boasted during the peak of its early 20th century mining boom, the town did not disappear with the company. It did have to band together to figure out how to provide the social and physical infrastructure the company used to provide, however, and according to McMillan Lequieu, circumstances like these helped to build social capital that has helped keep the county afloat into the present, despite ongoing challenges. When asked by a Wisconsin Public Radio interviewer why people have stayed in Iron County, she replied,

⁵⁷ <https://ironcountywi.com/recreation/wisconsin-heritage-area/iron-county-history-historical-sites/#:~:text=The%20birth%20of%20Iron%20County,%E2%80%93%20iron%2C%20timber%2C%20people.&text=transformation%20of%20the%20area.&text=Mining%20a%20mile%20down%2C%20in,many%20residents%20until%20the%201960's>.

⁵⁸ <https://www.wpr.org/news/home-iron-county-mining-industrys-exit-amanda-mcmillan-lequieu>

I found again and again people really emphasized the parts of their community that weren't tied up in iron industry life. They value their industrial past for sure, but they also really value their kinship networks, their relationships with friends and neighbors, relationships that wouldn't exist if they move elsewhere. You can rely on your neighbors if you have decades of trust between you and your neighbors, but if you move to a new city to find a new job, suddenly you lose out on those social resources. And for many of my interviewees, those social resources were just invaluable. They were too important to lose. (Cox, 2024, Paras.11,12)

Social Capital and Rural Education

Similarly, such elements of social capital may be an overlooked asset for rural communities when it comes to their education systems. Schmitt-Wilson et al. (2018) argue that previous research has used an urban-centric lens to examine rural-centric educational outcomes. They cite other studies which suggest that strengths related to rural identity, strong ties, and unique experiences “give rural students higher degrees of social capital in the form of close-knit communities and social networks...and that connections to place, family, and community are important factors in rural students’ career and educational expectations and the consequent postsecondary decisions” (p. 2). Their own research supports such assertions, as using longitudinal data they found that the contextual nuances of rural areas and their education systems matters to students’ expectations and their eventual outcomes, and that one-size-fits-all approaches from urban-centric perspectives about educational attainment and policy will not be very effective. They found that most rural youth do complete post-secondary education, but for various reasons, including strong connections to place and social networks, two-year community or technical colleges tend to play a particularly important role, though this does not meet the widely accepted definition of completion of a four-year degree as the marker of higher educational attainment. Regional differences in educational attainment should be understood as a “a delicate balance between economic and personal values”, between making a living and making a life (ibid., p. 10). Local and state leaders would be wise to invest in initiatives that serve rural students in ways that build upon what works and what strengths they bring to the table, including strong social capital rooted in place.

Political Capital

We now shift to political capital, the “organization, connections, voice, and power as citizens turn shared norms and values into standards that are codified into rules, regulations, and resource distributions that are enforced” (FFG, 2016, p. 184). While there is significant overlap between cultural, social, and political capitals in regards to the broader concept of social inclusion, the latter certainly has an important place in this section given that people from marginalized groups generally do not seek to simply be given space at the table but rather yearn to be incorporated such that their voices are heard and they are able to co-create new realities along with people from more powerful groups.

Ethnic Diversity and Political Capital

This typically takes time, as social systems built upon hegemonic ideas about whose voices matter and proper participation in community life looks like are difficult to change. Chavez (2005) presents a case study from rural California that demonstrates the complexity involved as rural areas address the opportunities presented by increasing racial and ethnic diversity and the challenges that can result from histories of exclusion and local power dynamics. Among other things, he argues that when we engage with such issues in rural places, we should try to include the work and “voices” of all residents as we consider what community means and how we can develop it. When he did so, he found that his data supported scholarship in rural sociology emphasizing the importance of place and interaction to community, but also that previous research had failed to adequately account for the role of ethnicity and social class in determining what community means to people depending upon their social position in local society. He found various fields of social interaction that did not overlap, causing conflict and misunderstanding.

In Chavez’s (2005) study, the dominant white majority defined community participation in a traditional way based upon its local agrarian history, and long-time Mexican⁵⁹ residents found acceptance by engaging in those expected community practices alongside their white neighbors. Recent migrants who lived on the outskirts of town in worker housing, however, were generally seen as uncaring and uninvolved by the other two primary groups because they did not come to the traditional meetings and events and therefore were not practicing community in the way it was framed according to the local hegemonic ideals. Because it had this inherently exclusionary element, a common assertion about the concept of community, this traditional practice was producing some limited bridging capital but not LIFE community in its fullest expression. Meanwhile, the newcomers constructed “their own sense of belonging by forming communities of need that provide the same social, emotional, and political support found lacking in mainstream society” (ibid., p. 332). They seemed to develop strong bonding social capital around their common ethnicity and social class position, creating a strong sense of community amongst themselves. Even so, their practices caused many white residents to claim that they were causing the disintegration of local community. Some long-time Mexican residents continued to engage in traditional community activities while fighting for representation in a setting in which many white residents spoke poorly about all members of their ethnic group.

Of course, change can be difficult. But dominant groups have been lamenting “community lost” since time immemorial (Van Auken, 2023). Bell (2007) argues that the politics stemming from the “first rural” conception of rural places as static and rooted in traditional cultural practices and production-based economic activities (e.g., farming, logging, mining, etc.) are defensive and focused on maintaining boundaries and not allowing outsiders (urbanites, other in-migrants) to encroach on the spaces of those deemed to belong there. Remembering Cramer’s (2016) concept of rural consciousness, this is understanding to some extent. To Bell, however, the politics of the “second rural” are based upon discourse and critiques of such narrow perspectives and politics, and what is needed a politics of the “rural plural” that is built upon an appreciation of what various dimensions of rurality provide for metro and non-metro residents alike and seeks policies that reflect a sense of interdependence, mutual obligation, and common good (ibid.).

⁵⁹ As the author explains, this is how local residents of Mexican descent self-identified.

What we're concerned about here is who has access to political capital and the ability to use their voices in safe settings, helping co-create local social conditions that produce belonging. In Chavez's (2005) study, there were intersections of social class and ethnicity contributing to conflicts over political capital, which certainly is the case in some places in rural Wisconsin, though it still may be more likely to hinge on class. In any case, people engaged in collective impact efforts should consider how such dynamics function to include or exclude certain groups, including those of different social classes or ethnicities than the dominant ones, because in "politics as in much of life, identity is a powerful currency, creating bonds of belonging or sending unmistakable signals of exclusion".⁶⁰

While based upon a study of nation-states that were grappling with ethnic or religious minorities becoming the majority, Gest (2022) offers some important insights that would seem to apply to the local level as well. With significant demographic change happening in places comes the opportunity for people to ask, "Who are we?" Some pushback against such shifts is likely unavoidable, but rather than hardening social lines and suffering through long-term tensions, communities can take a different route and attempt to redefine local identity in ways that will lead to peaceful coexistence and perhaps even renewed community vitality and prosperity (ibid.). People may assume and contend, from an individualistic perspective, that attitudes related to people of different races, ethnicities, classes, religions, and other social categories are so hard to change because people are inherently averse to change, racist, and xenophobic.

A key point for practitioners to recognize, however, is that identities are socially constructed and shaped by what people in power say and do (there's cultural hegemony again), so in important ways social relations are governed by leaders (ibid.). As Robert Putnam, the political scientist famous for his book *Bowling Alone*, being on a first-name basis with multiple U.S. presidents, and decades of research on social capital and community, recently put it, "The reason people feel the way they do, that they don't want to hang out with people who differ from them, is because those are the messages they're getting from their political leaders" (Garcia-Navarro, 2024, para.23). On the other hand, leaders can work to expand the collective sense of who "we" are (Gest, 2022), including at the local level, which may be an important result of any collective impact effort, regardless of the goals at hand, if done well.

While such processes are complicated and theories abound as to how local jurisdictions can best reduce animosity and encourage cooperation (Shah, 2017), meaningful contact across social groups – through collective community work, local celebrations, and other activities that build bridging and linking capital – would seem to be a prerequisite, as voices tend to be heard and taken seriously once relationships have been formed. From our experience, when there is local inequality and polarization the onus is on leaders from dominant groups to not simply invite people from marginalized social fields to attend meetings and events, but to go where they are and attempt to get to know them, which may help shape those activities in ways that will appeal to those very groups and encourage their attendance in an authentic way.

We previously shared some hopeful examples from rural Wisconsin. Previous research has found a significant time lag (10, 15, 20 years or longer) in terms of when minoritized people are elected to local office after population diversification occurs, even in cases of majority-minority cities

⁶⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/27/opinion/kamala-harris-campaign-skeptic.html>

(Shah, 2017). Barron, Wisconsin's population features a quite significant proportion of Black residents stemming from Somali immigration to the small, rural city starting in the late 1990s. A historic local election was held in 2019, when two of the three candidates for an open city council seat were Somalis, the first time anyone from this group had run for office after having a presence there for 20 years (Kremer, 2019). Isaak Mohamed, who like many Somalis came to the U.S. as a refugee from a long civil war, arrived in Barron in 2013 to work at the Jennie-O plant. At the time of the election, though, he was working as a liaison for the school district and had recently become a U.S. citizen. His victory was a noteworthy step in a place that had experienced tensions in the early years of Somali immigration, and an exciting development for people like city administrator Bob Kazmierski. He said the city had been busy doing outreach to ensure Somali residents were fully counted in the upcoming census. About the council race he indicated, "the Somali community has a large presence in Barron and it's exciting to see them taking step to become city leaders", which can "only bode well" for the city going forward (ibid., paras.6,7).

Somalis had opened businesses, begun to work in different sectors, and become more integrated into local life. Mohamed said of the election, "We need representation for this community. This community has lived in Barron for 20 years," but stressed, "I will represent anyone no matter who you are, no matter where you are from, I will represent people of Barron" (ibid., para.13). His election was important for another Somali resident interviewed for the article who lamented the lack of available housing in Barron and said, "We are a part of this community right now but we need to be part of the government so we can have a say" (ibid., para.20). This resident seemed to be expressing that Somali residents to that point had achieved inclusion but were lacking political capital and the ability to express their voice in ways that help them obtain the resources they need and co-create a future where they fully belong.

Arcadia offers another interesting example. When asked whether there had been any Hispanic representation in the local government to this point, the mayor (at the time of this writing) replied, "We are a great community with people of varied backgrounds. I would characterize us as a community full of hardworking families who give of ourselves to make our Arcadia a better place to live and call home" (John Kimmel, email communication, July 13, 2024). He did not answer our questions about political representation for Hispanic people in the city nor specifically about social relations between the Hispanic majority and long-time white population. Further research revealed that there have been various public conflicts in Arcadia in the past, including in 2006 when the same mayor, newly in office, had proposed a crackdown on undocumented residents, which angered and confused local Hispanic residents.⁶¹ He was also recalled as mayor in 2015 due to claims about him not listening to constituents in a controversy over local frac sand mining and "ongoing discontent" over his tenure,⁶² but was once again elected as mayor in 2024.⁶³

There have been a number of news stories in recent years about Arcadia celebrating its diversity as well. Conniff (2019), though, discusses a series of ICE raids that "terrorized" local immigrants, as well as a controversy over the proposed elimination of school busing within two

⁶¹ https://lacrossetribune.com/article_55fd8931-70fb-545f-b522-bea6644932b5.html

⁶² https://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/arcadia-mayor-ousted-in-special-election/article_2040c529-9e9e-540d-bc83-48d58e1c5a85.html

⁶³ <https://www.trempecountytimes.com/news/kimmel-thatcher-win-mayoral-races>

miles of the schools that had some overlapping concerns, as petitioners argued that if parents without documentation or driver's licenses were staying home out of fear, their children may not have a safe way to get to school, which would create an equity issue. The Arcadia case shows how complex changing demographics and struggles over voice and political power can be. Because its population of voting age people with limited English proficiency reached a threshold established by the federal government via the Voting Rights Act, Arcadia was required to run a bi-lingual election for the first time in 2017.⁶⁴ Yet, in a community meeting about the busing issue two years later, which was hosted by the school board and attended by many local Hispanic residents, the lack of a Spanish translator was decried. A representative of a regional, nonprofit advocacy organization attended the meeting to support the petitioners, demonstrating vertical connection and linking social capital that served to enhance the political capital of local petitioners due to the experience and resources they brought to bear, which among other things meant being willing and able to speak up in a tense environment.

The more she watched Latino parents whom she felt were being ignored and intimidated, the more upset Sigala says she felt. After watching the soccer coach, who was not fluent in English, struggle to express himself, she decided to speak up. 'Shame on you,' she told the all-white board, for holding the meeting without an interpreter. (Conniff, 2019, Paras.34,35)

After a member suggested they simply had not thought of it, Sigala, the advocate, said she agreed that the board was not deliberately targeting Hispanic residents. Instead, she alluded to cultural hegemony, arguing, "You're looking at it from your point of view; if you have a steady job, a stable apartment, you're not viewing it from the perspective of 70% of the kids", referencing the Hispanic proportion of enrollment in the local school district. She continued, "You have no idea what it is to live that fear on a daily basis. There's just such a disconnect between the board and its population" (ibid., paras.38,39). It may indeed not have been intentional, but defining community issues primarily through the lenses of relatively privileged people and doing things the way they've always been done are subtle but effective ways that dominant groups retain their political capital and power (FFG, 2016). At the meeting Sigala also addressed the Hispanic residents in attendance, urging them to consider the composition of the panel of school board members at the front of the room and in the next election to "run for a seat, because your concerns are not being heard and you're not being represented" (Conniff, 2019, para.40).

The school district vowed to develop an alternative transportation plan, and its school board president asserted, "We're not bad people here. We're not monsters. We're all neighbors trying to work together" (ibid., para.43). It is important to stress that, from the perspective of the LIFE framework, building community is not easy. In fact, it's often messy. Previous research shows that things get particularly messy in places that have reached majority-minority status, at least in the early stages (Shah, 2017). But from tension and conflict, community can emerge, so long as social fields overlap around issues of common concern to create inclusive access to the community field. A recent look at the composition of Arcadia's school board revealed progress,

⁶⁴ https://www.winonapost.com/news/arcadias-first-ever-bilingual-election/article_5aae3ec5-ea23-5000-9ee9-6e30addbf5b8.html

as it showed Vicente Moreno as member.⁶⁵ An assembly line worker at Ashley Furniture, Moreno ran for a seat due to concerns about insufficient state funding and to encourage “more Latino involvement in the community”.⁶⁶ While the city clerk stated that there have not been any Hispanic mayors or city council members to date, she added, hopefully, “I feel that we will have Latino representation on the council in years to come” (Angela Berg, email communication, July 14, 2024).

Political Capital and Land Stewardship

Social inclusion with co-creation produces the conditions for not only having a say and building political capital, but experiencing belonging (powell & Toppin, 2021). It also moves communities towards sustainability, as it is a

key but often overlooked consideration in the discourses surrounding sustainability, conservation, and ecosystem management. Exclusion of the voices and perspectives of racial and ethnic minorities often results in incomplete understanding of socio-spatial landscapes (land + practices + meanings) and missed opportunities to address threats to water quality and discover new vectors for environmental stewardship. (Van Auken et al., 2016, P. 1)

Representation matters, and it can help yield insights that help protect natural capital. In our case study of Hmong people and their relationship with the Fox River watershed, we found that many Hmong people were connected to the natural capital of this area in deep and interesting ways – particularly via fishing (see Figure 7) and intensive, small-scale farming – and have insights that should be useful to managers of that capital.



Figure 7. Hmong people fishing the Fox River, Northeastern Wisconsin. (source: Van Auken et al., 2016)

⁶⁵ <https://www.arcadia.k12.wi.us/about-us/school-board>

⁶⁶ <https://www.trempecountytimes.com/news/four-vie-three-seats-arcadia-school-board>

However, we found that they while their outdoor activities served to strengthen their often already strong bonding capital with other Hmong people, they seemed to be lacking bridging capital with non-Hmong stakeholders in the watershed and particularly linking capital that could help them better understand state regulations and also help representatives of the state and civil society better understand their cultural capital – their values and norms, including practices that involve catching and consuming fish –, their questions and perspectives, and their ideas for better land stewardship. Along these lines, several respondents mentioned that additional signage around outdoor recreation areas in the Hmong language would be helpful. The study participant who took the photo in Figure 8 explained, “That’s actually underneath a bridge on Hwy 10 by (rural) New London...What I like is that they translated it into Hmong and people can understand.” He continued, echoing some of the sentiments of long-time Mexican residents in Chavez’s (2005) case, “The reason that I don’t like it is that that part of the river a lot of Hmong people fish. They do litter a lot. What I tell myself, from any minority perspective, is that it just takes one person to ruin it for the rest of the people. If you see one Hmong person littering, every Hmong person gets the label of littering.” He saw the signs as a good thing, though, noting,

I like the way that they’re using these signs and translating them to Hmong. They acknowledge us as a minority group. We do like to go fishing out in the state of Wisconsin. We like to get out there and interact, and I see the sign as a positive thing. With the Department of Natural Resources, it’s a positive thing.



Figure 8. Sign translated into Hmong along Wolf River, Northeastern Wisconsin (source: Van Auken et al., 2016)

When another participant was asked if additional signage like this would be beneficial even to Hmong people with proficient English, she replied,

Yeah, I think it would. They would recognize it is Hmong. If they know the written language, they’ll be able to read it, but I still think it is the feeling of being included or just knowing that they do recognize that we use the river, too, and we’re part of it.

Some also expressed their desire to work for the Wisconsin DNR and advocated for additional Hmong representation in such agencies, such that their involvement in the landscape would produce stronger political capital for Hmong people and help them shift up to the level of co-creation – of policies, of a more inclusive outdoor culture in the region and state – where they truly belong.

We also previously discussed how the seeming increase in appreciation of Indigenous traditional practices and incorporation of Indigenous voices into the management of Wisconsin’s natural capital are steps in the right direction. The latter is squarely an issue of political capital. In the Governor’s Task Force on Climate Change Report (2020) one of the climate solutions it proposes is to improve “the state consultation process with Native Nations”, which would involve piloting a DNR program for Tribal officials to share concerns, implementing a DNR training program around Native culture and land stewardship, and create a process for both high-level decision makers and technical staff to consult with representatives of Indigenous groups (p. 24). In essence, the stated goals are designed to build political capital for Indigenous groups while improving the state’s cultural capital to be more inclusive and produce better stewardship of its natural capital. While it is not clear from the limited information provided in the report that enhanced belonging would also result from a process oriented around “consultation,” the section does conclude,

These proactive efforts will not only help ensure that sovereignty and treaty rights are upheld, but can also help protect and preserve Tribal and ceded land where citizens of the Native Nation live, hunt, fish, gather, and practice their culture—all important aspects that contribute to their health and well-being. (GTFCCR, 2020, P. 24).

We previously highlighted the Forest County Potawatomi’s (FCP) various efforts to protect its natural capital, given that “the health and integrity of the land and all its components cannot be separated from the health and continued existence of the Potawatomi people”, according to the Land & Natural Resources page of its website.⁶⁷ This includes using its official voice in the review of development projects that may affect its people through its Class I status with the U.S. EPA. The extent to which these changes produce tangible benefits will be revealed in the coming years.

Class and Political Capital

Race and ethnicity are obviously not the only aspects of social inclusion that matter to communities and their political capital. As discussed earlier, working-class people in the U.S. have relatively lower levels of political capital than middle and particularly upper-class people and are less likely to have seats at the tables of the power in the market, state, and civil society at the local level (FFG, 2016). National policies also tend to be consistent with the interests of the upper-class elites and not their own (Cramer, 2016).

Historically, unions have been an important element of civil society with influence in both markets and the state in the U.S. and Wisconsin, settings where bridging and linking capitals can

⁶⁷ <https://lnr.fcpotawatomi.com/>

be built and the voices of working-class people can be amplified. While unions remain politically influential and recently there has been a highly publicized wave of unionization among Amazon, Starbucks, and even auto workers in the South, union membership has plummeted in recent decades, during a period of wage stagnation and growing social inequality in the U.S., which unions had helped counter for many years (Desmond, 2023).

In 2023, union membership in the U.S. fell to 10% of wage and salary workers, half the rate in place in 1983.⁶⁸ The union membership rate for public workers (32.5%) kept with recent trends of being more than five times the rate of private-sector workers (6.0%). Wisconsin's union membership rate, which peaked at 20.9% in 1989, has been below the national average since 2015 and was at 7.4% overall in 2023.⁶⁹ The union membership rate for public workers in the state plummeted from about 50% before Act 10 to about 20% now, despite overwhelming approval of unions by the American public.⁷⁰ Experts pointed to the anti-union labor laws in Wisconsin from the past decade to explain the gap between support for and membership in unions. These data are important here because public workers comprise an important segment of the workforce in many places in rural Wisconsin, which is also a manufacturing stronghold, and many working-class residents are employed in this sector. Further, unions have been an important source of political capital for Wisconsin workers for many decades, but with membership in decline, political capital may be as well.

Participation in Local Society

Further, for rural places to govern themselves effectively, residents must be willing and able to serve in roles provided by the state and in civil society to help ensure that resources are equitably distributed, taxes are collected and well spent, the lights are kept on, services are provided, and more. Because of the aging population and political divide found in rural Wisconsin, however, fewer people are willing and able to participate in local government. In 2023, about half of all elections in Wisconsin were uncontested, a problem that is magnified in rural areas of the state, where there are fewer people to begin with and an even higher percentage of the population is elderly than in the state's urban and suburban areas (Voigt, 2024). According to David Helpap, a political science professor at UW-Green Bay, there has been widespread concern in rural Wisconsin "from those who are currently in office that once they retire or move on from public service, that there really isn't going to be the next sort of cohort of individuals to take their place" (quoted in Freyberg, 2024, para.4).

Younger residents may not be interested due to the time commitments involved, for little or no pay, and the scrutiny and potential conflict that can result, particularly in a highly divided political environment where someone might find themselves embroiled in national controversies about immigration, book bans, or transgender bathrooms, and the vitriol that can accompany them, when they become local issues as well (ibid., Voigt, 2024). It is also possible that while incumbents bring extensive experience, institutional knowledge, and commitment to public service to their positions, they also may have unwittingly helped to create a climate that is unwelcoming to potential newcomers, as discussed above. Helpap conjures up Robert Putnam in

⁶⁸ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>

⁶⁹ https://www.bls.gov/regions/midwest/news-release/unionmembership_wisconsin.htm

⁷⁰ <https://www.wpr.org/news/wisconsin-union-membership-rebounded-2023>

pointing to the overall decline in social connection experienced and sense of community felt by people in the U.S. in recent decades (Freyberg, 2024). It could be that the older generations of rural Wisconsin civil servants learned social norms and got involved in local public life in a period when doing so was highly encouraged and even expected.

Indeed, Putnam argues that a primary reason for Americans' lack of civic engagement and involvement in clubs and other social fields – which help democracy by building trust among people who then produce trustworthy governments – in recent decades is not a question of busyness or time spent on social media, but one of morality: what has been lost is “a sense that we're all in this together and that we have obligations to other people” (Garcia-Navarro, 2024, para.8). Whatever the precise reasons for this shift, a lack of candidates for offices in rural Wisconsin means a lack of voice for voters in determining who represents them. It also means that places may miss out new ideas from diverse people that could help revitalize local life and institutions. As Putnam laments, this bigger shift has no simple solution (ibid.).

It does seem ripe for approaches using the collective impact model, however. Helpap argues that while many rural governments do not have the resources or capacity to adequately address the increasingly complex issues they face – from delivering quality basic services, to providing affordable housing and high-speed internet, to dealing with substance use crises – together with county governments and regional nonprofits they may have more success (Freyberg, 2024). He concludes, alluding to the incorporation of actors from the market, state, and civil society,

I think there is this growing recognition that in order to solve a lot of the problems, big societal problems we have, regardless of if you're in an urban area or a rural area, that some of that cross-sector collaboration is needed. That you need to bring in multiple different levels of government, non-profit organizations, private businesses to really sort of move ahead with social welfare issues, infrastructure issues. It is valuable to have those types of partners. (ibid., Para.14)

This allusion to the collective impact model is also similar to FFG's (2016) explanation of the concept of *governance*:

Governance involves the mobilization of civil society, participatory forms of engagement, public-private partnerships, and nested administrative structures. It entails a shift away from state bureaucracies and formal institutions as the locus of coordination and decision making, and its emergence raises important questions about the performance of alternative organizational configurations compared to government-centered local development. Governance is more than government, although governments at all levels play a vital role in making and implementing decisions. It can provide flexible structures by which community members participate in local decisions, find innovative ways to provide services and community facilities, and link local resources to local needs. (p. 423).

Recognizing that evolution along these lines is necessary, our research suggests that, nonetheless, rural municipalities often may be best positioned to serve as the backbone organization of collaborative efforts aligned with the collective impact model, given the relatively high levels of

experience, capacity, and resources they likely have in areas challenged by small populations and geographical isolation. Further, while governance is more than government and political capital is clearly more than politics, the latter still impact what happens to life in rural Wisconsin.

Partisan Politics

Local people also need to have their voices heard at the state level. Wisconsin, however, has been a so-called “democracy desert” for some time, due to its highly gerrymandered voting maps that were created in secret in 2011 (Kaufman, 2023). Since then, Republicans have captured at least 60 of the 99 state Assembly seats in every election even though Democrats have often won statewide elections (such as for governor and attorney general in the last two) and more overall votes for the Assembly (ibid.). This means that many Wisconsin voters have not had their interests represented in the statehouse. It also supports the idea that it is political leaders sowing division, as opposed to individuals pushing hyper-partisanship from below. This assertion was echoed by a delegate to the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee in July 2024, a rural, female former dairy farmer turned business owner who in an interview with Wisconsin Public Radio argued that Wisconsinites have more in common and are not as divided as is often portrayed.⁷¹

In any case, the Electoral Integrity Project at Harvard has studied elections around the world since 2012 and grades the U.S. on a biannual basis, assigning a score from 1 to 100, with the higher the score indicating more free and fair elections. In its report about the 2020 election, it gave Wisconsin a 23, the worst score of any U.S. state and about the same as Bahrain (one of Gest’s case studies of nations handling their new majority-minority status, which was unsuccessful, as the government responded in repressive fashion) and the Congo (Daley & Goldstein, 2021), a war-torn nation that has been one of the top countries of origin for refugees resettled in Wisconsin over the past two decades. This erosion of democracy is dangerous for rural Wisconsin because it can lead to bad policies and even life-threatening decisions affecting local life, as has happened in other places in the U.S. (ibid.). It also feeds itself, as fewer competitive districts give fewer candidates the incentive to run and give winners less reason to pay attention to the interests of their constituents (ibid.), reinforcing the representation problem illuminated by Cramer (2016).

Hyper-partisanship at the state level is both a contributor to (e.g., Act 10 became a national model) and product of the political polarization that has gripped the national in recent decades, with Wisconsin arguably going from

being a widely admired ‘laboratory of democracy’ to a testing ground for national conservatives bent on remaking American politics. Its century-old progressive legacy has been dismantled in virtually every area: labor rights, environmental protection, voting rights, government transparency.⁷²

But Wisconsin also simply reflects what has been happening at the societal level. The Wisconsin redistricting of 2011 was part of a national Republican “redmap” effort led by strategist Karl

⁷¹ *Wisconsin Today* on Wisconsin Public Radio, July 16, 2024.

⁷² <https://progressive.org/magazine/the-undoing-of-progressive-wisconsin/>

Rove (Kaufman, 2023). Cramer (2016) wrote a popular book to try to explain the national divide, using Wisconsin as the case study. Though it revealed more commonality than might be assumed, the Pew study cited earlier found distinct differences among residents of rural and urban areas on their feelings about Donald Trump and key social issues (Parker et al., 2018), which many additional studies have confirmed and elaborated upon in Wisconsin and beyond. A recent article focuses on the Driftless Region and its mostly rural counties in parts of four states (Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, including Trempealeau, home to Arcadia), nearly all of which voted Democratic in the 2008 presidential election, but where nearly all flipped to voting Republican in 2020.⁷³ While Biden narrowly won Wisconsin in the 2020 race, Trump was decisively victorious in 2024, an election that nonetheless marked a turning point in the state. After a back-and-forth legal battle, in which a federal court declared the highly gerrymandered maps unconstitutional only to have the U.S. Supreme Court overturn this decision (ibid.), redistricting was ordered by the Wisconsin Supreme Court in late 2023, and new maps were recently approved in bipartisan fashion. The new voting districts should produce more contested seats and allow for a more bipartisan state legislature after over a decade of domination by one party. Indeed, Democrats were hopeful that in the fall 2024 election, “the maps would enable them to seize control of the state Assembly for the first time in 13 years.” While that did not materialize, Democrats did make substantial gains, “which still stood out given that Republican [President-elect Donald Trump](#) carried Wisconsin”.⁷⁴

Over this period, hyper partisanship and inflammatory rhetoric has ramped up, including in parts of rural Wisconsin. Whether they embrace or reject these divisive politics, it has been so pervasive that it cannot help but affect how people feel about their neighbors and whether and how they participate local civic life. According to Putnam (quoted in Garcia-Navarro, 2024),

Which comes first, the elite polarizing us or the mass public polarizing? And there’s two sides, there are debates about that, but there’s a strong argument in my view that this is top-down. The reason people feel the way they do, that they don’t want to hang out with people who differ from them, is because those are the messages they’re getting from their political leaders. There are people who want to join clubs, and they really are happy in those groups and they’re not talking about politics. Most people in America don’t care about politics. (Para.24)

Putnam argues that his ideas about social connection and community have been well-received by both Democrats and Republicans over his career, but as a political scientist sees something different in Trump and the MAGA movement, which brings social capital and its relationship to political capital back into focus. Putnam asserts that this movement is different because it “doesn’t do bridging capital.” Instead, it focuses on building bonding capital amongst people who are politically like-minded and excluding people who are not. He continues, “And not only exclude the other but vilify the other and glorify the fact that it is bonding social capital. I mean, that captures the essence of the Trump movement” (quoted in Garcia-Navarro, 2024, para.12,13).

⁷³ <https://www.startribune.com/from-blue-to-red-in-a-generation-upper-midwests-of-ignored-driftless-area-flexes-political-heft/600380087/>

⁷⁴ <https://apnews.com/article/wisconsin-legislature-election-redistricting-democrat-gains-9dbedf910ab5a057f459033c2d36608b>

The point here is not about for whom rural Wisconsinites should be voting. Rather, those engaged in community-building and collective impact efforts should consider these aspects of a complicated and thorny political environment, how it may impact their work together, and how their work might help to lesson such divides and build bridging and linking capital despite likely resistance, particularly if some of their neighbors and even they have perspectives similar to Putnam’s diagnosis from the preceding paragraph.

Media

This polarization is fed by the decline of traditional news sources and increase in the extent to which people obtain their information from social media and other sources of information tailored to the interests, social views, and political preferences of the consumer, not objectivity or facts (Copelovitch & Wagner, 2024). This is important not only for elections but also community life and whether rural places develop the entrepreneurial social infrastructure (FFG, 2016) that is vital to good governance and resilience in the face of social and environmental change. In the U.S., more than half of all counties have limited or no access to local news (Parker, 2024). At the same time, social media has become an increasingly popular source of news, with 50% of all adults indicating in late 2023 that social media is part of their “news diets,” Facebook being the most popular (ibid.). A study at the University of Virginia found that the so-called echo chamber effect is pronounced on Facebook, particularly among conservatives (ibid.). Echo chambers develop when people consume mostly information consistent with their current beliefs and studies demonstrate that they encourage the diffusion of misinformation and exacerbation of political polarization.

Recent research by scholars from UW-Madison explored the relationship between the information we consume and our views of the economy. In a study using surveys and experimental methods, Copelovitch and Wagner (2024) found that there was a major gap between perception and reality among Americans. Even a decade earlier, a study from Pew Research showed that people from advanced economies were much less optimistic about the future than those from emerging and developing countries.⁷⁵ Now, after the massive transformation of our information ecosystem, the collective sentiment of U.S. residents about the health of the economy is worse than ever, even though we have actually been doing better than most other advanced economies over past decade and particularly the past two years (Copelovitch & Wagner, 2024). It turns out that the more one-sided one’s “information diet”, the more entrenched one’s views become, and the less likely one is to think people from other political persuasions are even appropriate to interact with at all. Their data support what many have likely suspected, which is that the rise of one-sided echo chambers has led to more polarizing and extreme sentiments becoming common, along with increased certainty that they are accurate, even if they are totally off-base (ibid.).

For example, starting in 2021 continuing through 2023, there were many stories across all information outlets – from traditional news like the *Wall Street Journal* to the more one-sided new media sources – about a looming recession that never came. There were countless stories about inflation, but few about the fastest economic recovery since World War II; what took a full

⁷⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/10/09/emerging-and-developing-economies-much-more-optimistic-than-rich-countries-about-the-future/>

decade after the Great Recession took only a couple years after the Covid pandemic. Nevertheless, people on both the right and left report negative sentiments that do not match the economic reality. Copelovitch and Wagner (2024) found that people's personal economic circumstances mattered to how they feel about the economy, but not as much as the information they receive. They were surprised to find that this was true across education and income levels, races/ethnicities, etc., though their findings showed that people linked to right-wing information ecosystems were farther from reality in their thinking than those on the left at this point (ibid.). Such sentiments gaps exist on other key issues as well. For example, despite the fact that crime rates have plunged over the last three decades in the U.S., most people believe they are increasing. As a recent Pew Research report put it,

Americans tend to believe crime is up, even when official data shows it is down. In 23 of 27 Gallup surveys conducted since 1993, at least 60% of U.S. adults have said there is more crime nationally than there was the year before, despite the downward trend in crime rates during most of that period.⁷⁶

As with sentiments about the economy, this is true across the political spectrum, but highest among those on the right, as 92% of Republicans, 78% of independents and 58% of Democrats indicated that crime was rising, the according to the most recent Gallup survey (Dilanian, 2023). A criminologist who analyzed these results came to the same conclusions as Copelovitch and Wagner (2023), arguing, “I think we’ve been conditioned, and we have no way of countering the idea that crime is rising. It’s just an overwhelming number of news media stories and viral videos—I have to believe that social media is playing a role” (ibid., para.6). Similar distortions apply common claims about immigrants, that they steal jobs from other Americans, which many including Desmond (2023) have shown to be inaccurate, or they are likely to commit crimes in the U.S. Social science research over several decades has consistently shown that the opposite is true: immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native-born U.S. residents⁷⁷ and the proportion of immigrants in neighborhoods tends to be correlated with lower crime rates, not higher (Han & Piquero, 2022).

The key to reducing such gaps is providing more context around information that is conveyed. The experimental features of Copelovitch and Wagner’s study provided evidence in this regard. They provided global context surrounding issues related to inflation in the U.S. to some respondents and not others, and on subsequent questions reported more positive feelings about the economy than those who were not presented with this additional information (ibid.). Comparing the situation in Germany to that in the U.S., the authors found that while similar shifts were taking place in this European context, it had retained more of its traditional information economy and residents were more likely to consume television news and read well-established regional and national newspapers, and there likewise appeared to be a smaller gap between sentiments and reality when it came to the economy. According to a center-right economist Michael Strain in a recent article, sentiments about the economy matter because while the economics of grievance and unwarranted negativity that are emphasized in the right-wing media ecosystem are “ineffective, counterproductive and corrosive, eroding the foundations of

⁷⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/24/what-the-data-says-about-crime-in-the-us/#:~:text=Americans%20tend%20to%20believe%20crime,during%20most%20of%20that%20period.>

⁷⁷ <https://siepr.stanford.edu/news/mythical-tie-between-immigration-and-crime>

prosperity...,) promoting an optimistic vision of economic life can increase risk tolerance, ambition, effort and dynamism”.⁷⁸

Many rural Wisconsin areas are considered “news deserts”, which make them ripe not for thoughtful discussion and understanding of the bigger picture, but rather distortions of reality and the growth of such gaps between how people feel about current events and what is actually happening on the ground. News deserts are “geographical areas or socioeconomic groups that are parched of fresh, important local news, whether it’s a result of the shuttering of neighborhood newspapers, downsizing and the limited resources of news outlets or a lack of coverage of particular topics” (Sato, 2017, para.4). Disproportionately located in rural areas, they can also stem from not having access news to the people it is supposed to serve or limits to the type of people it features (ibid.). As of 2019, Wisconsin had lost 28% of its newspapers since 2004 and only had 33 daily papers left (Abernathy, 2019). Wisconsin has one county (Menominee) with no newspapers serving it and 22 others that have only one, most of which are weekly, and that list includes Forest, Iron, and Florence counties (ibid.).

A recent article focused on the latter, a Northwoods county and the second smallest in Wisconsin by population. Its *Florence Mining News* had over 2,000 subscribers a couple decades ago but despite a growing county population is now down to less than 900 physical paper subscribers and 200 online subscribers (Parker, 2024). In 2020, 73% of Florence County’s votes went to Donald Trump, which the newspaper publisher ascribed partly to the local Republican party’s strong level of organization, in marked contrast to the local Democrats’ (ibid.). According to her, while the Republican Facebook group has over 1,000 members – more than the subscribers to her paper – the Democratic Facebook group had only 28 members (ibid.). In other counties we have previously highlighted, their relatively healthy number of newspapers may be an asset upon which to build, including Barron (5 newspapers) and Trempealeau (3 newspapers) (Abernathy, 2019). Given the importance of accurate, locally relevant information to the emergence of ESI (FFG, 2016), community developers should consider strategies for helping to retain existing trusted, independent news sources and encouraging the creation of more of them.

Financial Capital

We now turn to financial capital, perhaps the most straightforward of the seven community capitals of Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer’s (2016) framework and the one that generally receives the most attention in a capitalist system where economic growth and material well-being are prioritized.

When people hear the word “capital” they are likely to think of money, a key aspect of financial capital, though financial capital is not solely money. FFG (2016) provide in-depth discussion of the various elements of financial capital and their impacts upon other capital, such as financialization, accounting and accountability, mergers and acquisitions, and mobility of financial capital. Here, though, we will focus on providing an overview of important measures financial health for people and places in rural Wisconsin.

⁷⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/18/opinion/maga-trump-vance-democrats.html>

Let's start with a refresher on the concept of capital and what is meant by financial capital. According to FFG (2016), capital is “any resources capable of producing other resources” (p. 220). Financial capital is “resources that are translated into monetary instruments that make them highly liquid—that is, able to be easily converted into other assets” (ibid.). It is important to distinguish between income – money from wages or investments that comes in during a particular period – and wealth, which is total assets held minus debts owed by a family or individual.

FFG distinguish between private and public financial capital. Private capital stems from individuals or groups investing their own resources in land, buildings, equipment, their own education, and more. Public capital is resources invested collectively by people in a municipality or state. This includes tax dollars being used to fund built capital of various kinds – roads, sewer lines, parks, schools, libraries, administrative buildings, etc. – that serve the common good of people of the jurisdiction and are generally accessible to everyone.

Private Capital and Social Inequality

As is a key thread throughout this report, inequality when it comes to this form of community capital is a key concern. At the national level, several coinciding factors such as deregulation, increased mobility of capital, tax cuts favoring corporations and higher earners, and economic consolidation are seen as key contributors (FFG, 2016). Social scientists also point to the decline in union membership as a significant factor in explaining why income inequality has reached such a high level, not seen since the Great Depression. Sociologist Matthew Desmond is one of them, noting from the 1940s to the late 1970s, the U.S. economy expanded, and prosperity was relatively widely shared (Desmond, 2023)⁷⁹. During the booming 1950s and 1960s, almost one-in-three workers were union members, but as discussed earlier, this number has now plummeted to one-in-ten in the U.S. (ibid.) and even a bit lower in Wisconsin, which has arguably “seen a greater decline in the scope and influence of labor unions” than any other state since 2000 (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2022, para.20). Desmond argues,

As workers lost power, their jobs got worse. Unions had kept caps on profits by raising workers' wages and compensation. But as labor power faded, those caps were lifted with predictable consequences. Since 1979, the bottom 90 percent of income earners...saw annual earnings gains of only 24 percent, while the wages for the top 1 percent of earners more than doubled. (Desmond, 2023, P. 50)

While this collapse in rates of union membership may be celebrated by those on the right because it is perceived to be positive for business growth and their political goals, it is decried on the left for increasing inequality, among other things. Indeed, among the results is that the U.S. now has the most top-heavy income distribution of any advanced democratic nation, ranking 27th for income equality in 2022, just ahead of China and Bahrain.⁸⁰ A study by Pew Research in 2020 showed that Democrats (at 78%) were far more likely than Republicans (41%) to believe that there is too much inequality in the U.S. (Schaeffer, 2020). It also demonstrated that income

⁷⁹ Desmond goes into detail about how prosperity was not equally felt during this period, as unions were typically racially segregated and full civil rights – including access to quality jobs – were not extended to all Americans.

⁸⁰ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/rankings/income-equality>

inequality steadily increased in the U.S. between 1968 and 2018, while the Black-white income gap has remained stubbornly wide, with white workers making \$33,000 more than Black workers annually, based upon data from the study data (ibid.). According to PolicyLink's National Equity Atlas,⁸¹ total GDP in the U.S. would have been \$2.9 trillion higher if there were racial equity in income.

Wisconsin is consistently ranked by some sources as one of the worst states in the U.S. for racial integration, and for 2024 it ranked 50th overall (only ahead of D.C.), 51st for social and civic engagement, and 48th for both health and education, with all measures based upon how Black people fared compared to white people.⁸² Using different metrics for inclusion and prosperity, the National Equity Atlas ranks Wisconsin much higher overall, at 14th. It provides further data about Wisconsin's ongoing diversification, where people of color increased from 6% of the population in 1980 to over 21% in 2020. Overall, though, pay for the bottom 20% of full-time workers in Wisconsin dropped 8% between 1979 and 2020. At the same time, pay increased by 10% for the top 90% of workers, which was actually significantly better than the national rates, though devastating to income equality nonetheless (ibid.).

Further, while 31.5% of the total Wisconsin workforce was employed in relatively well-paying private manufacturing and construction jobs in 1983, employment in these fields decreased to 24.2% by 2020, with union membership declining along with it (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2022). Not surprisingly, real wages (adjusted for inflation) for hourly workers in the state *decreased* during roughly the same 40-year period and a \$2/hour gap between Black and white workers increased to a \$5 gap (\$24/hour for white workers compared to \$19/hour for Black workers), according to the National Equity Atlas. It suggests that removing educational barriers for people of color and addressing income gaps like this would substantially boost the state's economy overall, based upon economic multiplier effects and the axiom that "rising tide lifts all boats".

The U.S. also has the highest wealth inequality of any advanced democratic nation, significantly higher than its neighbor Canada and all its Western European peers and exceeding that of Russia and China as well.

The top 1% of earners in Europe take only 12% of the total income and the bottom 50% of earners take 22% of income. For comparison, in the United States, which has more billionaires than any other country, the top 1% of earners take 20% of income and the bottom 50% of earners take 10%.⁸³

The Pew study revealed that the wealth gap between the richest and poorest Americans more than doubled from 1989 to 2016 (Schaeffer, 2020). Further, "In 1989, the richest 5% of families had 114 times as much wealth as families in the second quintile (one tier above the lowest), at the median \$2.3 million compared with \$20,300" (ibid., para.13). But by the year 2016, "the top 5% held 248 times as much wealth at the median" and the median wealth for the poorest 20% was either zero or negative in most of the years they examined (ibid., para.13).

⁸¹ <https://nationalequityatlas.org/>

⁸² <https://wallethub.com/edu/states-with-the-most-and-least-racial-progress/18428>

⁸³ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/wealth-inequality-by-country>

One might ask whether this matters to the daily life of people in the U.S. We have already demonstrated that these data matter a great deal to people of color in Wisconsin. Taking a broader look once again, the Social Progress Index measures quality of life in countries throughout the world based upon 57 social and environment outcomes in three broad categories of basic needs, foundations of well-being, and opportunity. It labeled the U.S. a Tier 2 country in 2023, ranking it 29th overall, which was 10 spots lower than its ranking in 2011, the first year the index was applied.⁸⁴

Tying these data back to our previous discussion of social capital and political polarization, it is clear that things were not always like this in the U.S. In fact, the U.S. was more economically equal than Sweden – which ranked 2nd in the world for income equality in 2022 and consistently at the very top in recent decades – in the mid-1960s (Putnam, in Garcia-Navarro, 2024). Putnam’s research shows that the U.S. has experienced an upside-down U curve for social connectedness (the extent of trust, involvement, loneliness) since around 1900, which was correlated directly with levels of economic equality and political depolarization. Early in the 20th century, the U.S. was marked by high income inequality, low social connectedness, and high political polarization, but this flipped in the middle of the century until roughly 1965 when our collective social capital peaked, only to plummet back down to current levels (ibid.). He argues that connectedness, equality, and polarization are entangled and need to be tackled together.

Again, to Putnam, it must start with revitalizing our sense that we’re all in this together and we have an obligation to care for other people, which “stands upstream of all these other trends” (Putnam, quoted in Garcia-Navarro, 2024, para.8). Despite being a renowned expert, however, Putnam lamented that he does not know how to accomplish such a task. Given this, what can community developers in rural Wisconsin possibly do? Putnam argues that trust builds through simple involvement in local activities with neighbors, then builds upwards to yield trustworthy institutions. If, indeed, the foundation is trust, community developers can focus upon encouraging meaningful, inclusive social interaction through various activities that cause people to bond and, more importantly, lead to bridging and eventually linking social capital and more broadly shared political capital.

This is a complex backdrop for the social and economic life of rural Wisconsinites. Adding to the challenge is that the rural U.S. has pockets of the poorest people in the nation, and the overall poverty rate for rural areas has generally been higher than for urban areas since it was first measured in the 1960s. The vast majority of counties with child poverty rates of 40% or more and where they have persistently high overall poverty rates are also located in the rural U.S., though most counties falling into either category are located in the South.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ <https://www.socialprogress.org/2024-social-progress-index/>

⁸⁵ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/>

Income	Rural	Urban	Total
<i>Per-capita income</i>			
2020	49,700	58,131	55,941
2021	52,732	62,055	59,626
Percent change	6.1	6.7	6.6
<i>Earnings per job</i>			
2020	51,433	64,728	61,667
2021	52,765	67,023	63,739
Percent change	2.6	3.5	3.4
<i>Poverty rate (percent)</i>			
1979	10.3	8.1	8.7
1989	11.5	10.4	10.7
1999	8.6	8.7	8.7
2021	10.8	10.8	10.8

Table 4. Income inequality between rural and urban places in Wisconsin. (Source: USDA ERS State Fact Sheet)

Table 4 reveals that in rural Wisconsin, poverty rates between rural and urban areas have roughly evened out in recent years, which is good news. These data are also consistent with national data showing that the difference in poverty rates between rural and urban areas is significantly higher in the South and West than in the Northwest and Midwest. Per capita income and earnings per job in rural Wisconsin lag substantially behind those of urban earners, though, as they were 15% and 21% lower, respectively, according to the latest USDA ERS data. It certainly does not help that Wisconsin’s minimum hourly wage remains stuck at \$7.25, which went into effect in 2009, while neighboring states have increased theirs, including Illinois (\$14.00), Minnesota (\$10.85), and Michigan (\$10.33).⁸⁶

Of the 10 Wisconsin counties with the highest family poverty rates, based on a five-year average between 2018-2022, 8 were non-metro. This included Menominee County, which had the state’s highest rate at 16.3% of residents in poverty, compared to 8.8% in the U.S. and 6.6% for Wisconsin overall. Also in the top ten was Forest County, at 8.5%, while Adams (8.0%) and Barron (7.6%) had rates that were significantly higher than the state average, but still lower than the national rate. Other non-metro counties highlighted elsewhere in this report had rates below the state average – including Florence (6.4%), Iron (6.0%), and Trempealeau (3.7%) – helping illustrate that while poverty is a concern in Wisconsin, relatively low rates overall are a strength to build upon (ibid.).⁸⁷

As with many of these issues, though, averages obscure disparities among people based upon factors like race and ethnicity. For example, examining the poverty rate for Black families in Wisconsin is revealing. First, the overall poverty rate for this group is 25.5%, roughly four times

⁸⁶ https://www.epi.org/minimum-wage-tracker/?gclid=CjwKCAjwh4ObBhAzEiwAHzZYUzFUBC2bpEb6vq6Nn8ESJVNdO8gkMRXOIDKQEOjx7feNxx8-EACSDRoCrF8QAvD_BwE#/min_wage/Michigan

⁸⁷ HDPulse: An Ecosystem of Minority Health and Health Disparities Resources. National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. Created 7/18/2024. Available from <https://hdpulse.nimhd.nih.gov>

higher than the overall state average, and much higher than the U.S. rate for Black families. Second, most counties in the state have no data to report or report zero Black families in poverty, illustrating the extent of racial segregation in the state. There is a similar issue with data for American Indian families in rural Wisconsin (though not to the same extent), who also faced a high poverty rate of 20.5%, also higher than the national average. Finally, Hispanic/Latino families also experience poverty in Wisconsin (16.6%) at rate higher than the national average for this group (14.7%) and, consistent with the recent growth of this group in the state, all but 9 counties reported at least some poverty among this group. In Trempealeau County, home to Arcadia, the poverty rate for Hispanic/Latino families of 6.4% was actually lower than for the state's families overall during this period, demonstrating the economic opportunity that drew immigrants to this area and the vitality they have helped to produce (ibid.).

Employment	Rural	Urban	Total
<i>Employment change (percent)</i>			
2019-2020	-4	-3.8	-3.8
2020-2021	2.8	2.9	2.9
2021-2022	-0.7	0.7	0.4
<i>Unemployment rate (percent)</i>			
2021	3.9	3.8	3.8
2022	3.1	2.9	2.9

Table 5. Employment in rural and urban Wisconsin. (Source: USDA ERS, 2024)

Table 5 shows that rural Wisconsin has fared relatively worse than urban Wisconsin when it comes to employment in recent years, though the differences are not stark. Overall, though, the relatively lower incomes, earnings, and employment rates and relatively higher unemployment rates experienced by rural Wisconsinites are especially concerning given recent periods of inflation and the fact that housing prices have increased at among the highest rates in the country in recent years and much faster than incomes in Wisconsin since 2017 (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2024). The spike in home prices has been pronounced in Dane County and several Northwoods counties with concentrations of vacation homes (Door, Vilas, Sawyer, and Burnett), where the ratio of home prices to incomes was at least 4.5, compared to the exceeded the statewide ratio 3.7. While Menominee County had the highest ratio (7.6), this was based upon a small number of homes sales. Other counties highlighted in this report that also had ratios of above 4.0 were Barron, Iron, and Florence (ibid.).

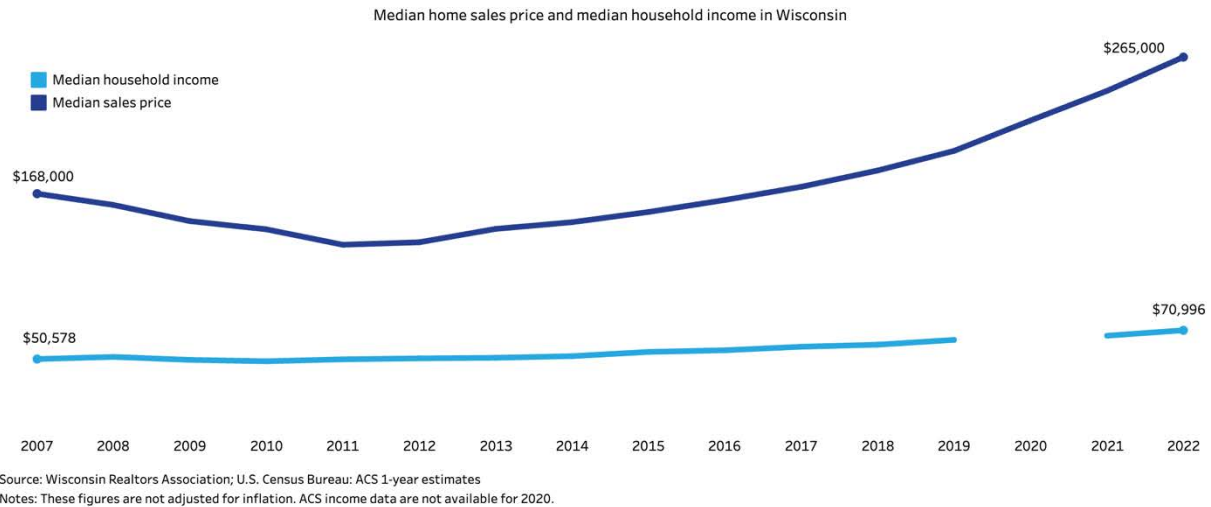


Figure 9. Home prices compared to household income in Wisconsin. (source: Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2024)

The spike in home prices combined with high inflation in recent years has made housing affordability, often assumed to be solely an urban problem, a key issue in rural Wisconsin. Overall, Wisconsin ranks 36th for housing affordability by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC). In a state where one-third of households are renters, an individual worker would have to work 97 hours a week at minimum wage to afford an apartment at the average fair market rent. An individual worker would have to make \$21.71/week to afford a market-rate, two-bedroom apartment.⁸⁸ Homelessness has become an important issue in some rural Wisconsin counties. According to a recent article,

Taylor County, a rural area west of Wausau with a population of around 20,000, had zero homeless shelters until last year—but one is proving to be not that much better. The 17-bed Taylor House, which opened last spring in Medford, is often full. (Lorey, 2023, Para.1)

It is more difficult to quantify the extent of the problem than in urban areas because estimates are based upon point-in-time counts of unhoused people located where they commonly congregate, because of rural landscapes and isolation (ibid.). Rural Waupaca County has two shelters, but they only operate for part of the year (Traidler, 2022). According to one shelter director “In rural Wisconsin, transportation is such a hindrance that if someone is stuck out in a rural community, there’s really nothing they can do or nowhere they can go” (ibid., para.19). Another service provider recently estimated that 58% of the unhoused people in Wisconsin are found in rural areas.⁸⁹

There are numerous other ways to examine financial capital and individual well-being, or the lack thereof. One is the Neighborhood Atlas,⁹⁰ which was developed by researchers at UW-

⁸⁸ <https://nlihc.org/oor/state/wi>

⁸⁹ https://www.osceolasun.com/news/rural-homelessness-is-a-growing-unseen-crisis/article_4418bb88-e5fc-11ee-834a-438f4960e474.html

⁹⁰ The mapping tool is found [here](#) and is based upon the ADI for 2022.

Madison.⁹¹ It provides a mapping tool based upon the Area Deprivation Index (ADI), a decades-old metric based upon income, education, employment, and housing quality to explore neighborhood-level socioeconomic disadvantage, using data from the U.S. Census block group level (Kind & Buckingham, 2018). Compared to all such units in the U.S. and using data from 2022, Wisconsin's 4,692 block groups have an average ADI score that puts them in the 60th percentile, with 1 being the lowest level of disadvantage and 100 being the highest. Within the state, block groups are placed into deciles, with 1 being the lowest level of disadvantage and 10 being the highest.

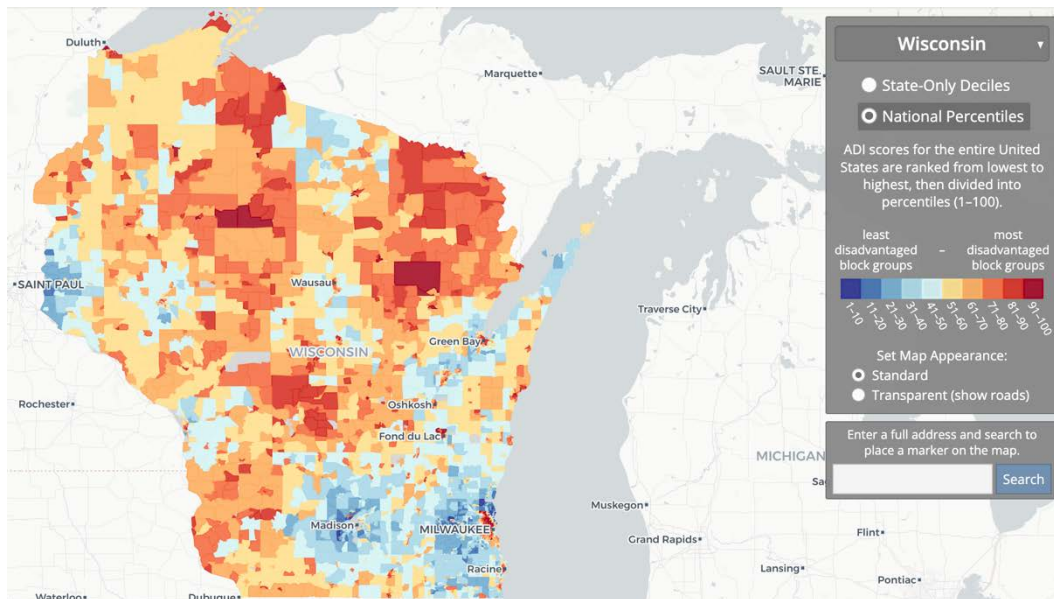


Figure 10. Neighborhood disadvantage in Wisconsin. (Source: Neighborhood Atlas, 2022 data)

While counties are not labeled in the map, from Figure 10 we can see that the bulk of disadvantaged neighborhoods (color-coded from light orange to dark red), geographically-speaking, are in non-metro counties. Some specific examples help to illustrate this. There are pockets of dark red in some of Wisconsin's urban centers, such as Milwaukee, which clearly has the highest concentration of disadvantaged neighborhoods in the state, as the bulk of the city's north side and a sizable portion of its south side have ADI scores of 10. On the other hand, there is a ring of dark blue, indicating ADI scores of 1, around the outer metro area, consistent with the city's status as one of the most segregated in the nation. Other cities like Racine, Appleton, Green Bay, and La Crosse have similar patterns, though the extremes between the inner and outer portions of each metro area are much less stark, and Madison has no block groups ranked as high as 10.

In rural parts of the state we see large swaths with high or the highest level of deprivation, with a concentration in the northern third of the state, including much or at least a portion of Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Florence, Iron, Langlade, Lincoln, Marinette, Menominee, Oneida, Price, Rusk, Sawyer, Shawano, Washburn, and Waupaca counties with ADI scores of 10, and a number of others in this region with scores of 8 or 9. Other rural block groups with high ADI scores are scattered throughout the state, including multiple units in Adams County with 10 scores. Like

⁹¹ Another interesting tool with a mapping feature and data at the local level is [The Opportunity Atlas](#).

many of the counties, Barron and Trempealeau are a mixed bag when it comes to ADI, features scores ranging from 3-9 and 4-9, respectively, with the small cities of Barron and Arcadia each featuring a neighborhood with a score of 9 (ibid.).

Private economic strains like those discussed above, and the stress that accompanies them, no doubt contribute to the lack of involvement in local affairs experienced in many places in Wisconsin and increase the difficulty in providing services to rural residents. Over decades of research, “most studies have found that those who have more income, who have advanced education, and who own a home are more likely to be politically...and socially engaged via volunteering, associational participation, and group membership” (McBride et al., 2006, p.152).

A recent study found that neighborhood deprivation was associated with lower levels of civic obligation, lowering their probability of getting involved (Bezzo & Jeannet, 2023). Since people with lower levels of income and education are less likely to participate in voluntary associations and the like in the first place, living in disadvantaged neighborhoods adds external barriers to their participation, aside from political activism, which the study found was encouraged by deprivation (ibid.). The authors argue that since associational activity has many economic and social benefits, “collective deprivation can produce an additive pattern of economic disadvantage which is reinforced through a lack of social participation” (ibid., pp.137-8). It is important to understand that people facing financial strain may be civically engaged to some extent and may wish to be more involved, but the limited resources of their households and neighborhoods limit their ability to do so (McBride et al., 2006).

Understanding the relationship between economic deprivation and engagement, and how this can produce a mutually reinforcing cycle (Bezzo & Jeannet, 2023), should encourage actors from the business, public, and nonprofit sectors to focus on spurring involvement in local affairs by lower and working class people as a strategy designed not only to increase their political capital and the collective diversity of perspectives and ideas at the table, but also help them build their financial capital in an upward spiral rather than letting that “additive pattern of economic disadvantage” continue unabated.

Public Capital and Rural Strain

Private and public financial capitals are often intertwined in places, when the U.S. Forest Services leases land to private logging companies, streets are replaced based special assessments on private property, public/private partnerships collaborate to achieve economic or community goals, and even when individuals pay tuition at public schools, a proportion that has steadily increased over the years due to declining state support for higher education, a major issue in Wisconsin where per student investment in the UW System is now half of what it was fifty years ago and in 2023 ranked 43rd in the nation,⁹² despite a record state budget surplus. As alluded to and discussed further below, political contentiousness and a rightward shift in the U.S., with tax cuts as a fundamental tenet, has reduced public capital and increased the strain on local governments and individuals in recent decades. As FFG (2016) succinctly put it, as “taxes decline so does support for these public investments in resources that increase quality of life for all” (p. 227).

⁹² <https://www.wpr.org/education/report-public-funding-state-universities-ranks-43rd-nation>

In recent decades, federal and state governments have shifted the burden of providing many key services to local governments, forcing them to rely increasingly on property taxes to fund their built capital and services. Property taxes have become increasingly unpopular with residents, though, local governments find it increasingly difficult to raise funding through other sources, creating a bit of a perfect storm (FFG, 2016). The result is that rural governments face numerous challenges in accumulating public capital, including “a lack of staff and leadership to adopt and administer creative financing, the relatively low incomes in some rural areas, shrinking retail sectors in smaller communities, and state government restrictions on non-property-tax sources” (ibid., p. 413).

This can create a cycle where people oppose taxes and then observe a corresponding decline in local infrastructure and services, making them even more opposed to being taxed and to favor tilting the scale even further towards private and away from public capital. This is consistent with the result of low bonding and low bridging social capital, which is wealthy people investing in themselves and poor people being excluded from community capitals (FFG, 2016), or what Desmond (2023) calls, “private opulence and public squalor”.

Access to banking services is another important factor, important for the financial capital individuals and businesses, as it helps determine their ability to secure home mortgages and business loans, both of which have consequences for public capital based upon their implications for property taxes. Another useful tool for data collection is the Prosperity Now Scorecard (PNS),⁹³ which allows users to gather data and utilize a map to compare states and counties on a variety of measures related not only to financial capital (e.g., income, savings, banking, homeownership) but also to human capital (education and health). Overall, Wisconsin has a homeownership rate that is slightly above the national average and does well in comparison to the U.S. in terms of percentage of unbanked households and consumer debt but has a lower business ownership rate. While Menominee County exceeds the state rate for homeownership, it also has higher rates of unbanked and underbanked households, according to the PNS. Similarly, Forest County has a very high homeownership rate (80%) but also high unbanked and underbanked rates. The same pattern is seen in both Barron and Trempealeau counties. In terms of commercial banking institutions, like the rest of the U.S, Wisconsin has lost a tremendous number in recent decades. From having 601 total banks in 1984, by 2020 it had only 156 (St. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (FRED)).⁹⁴

⁹³ The scorecard is found [here](#).

⁹⁴ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/WINUM>

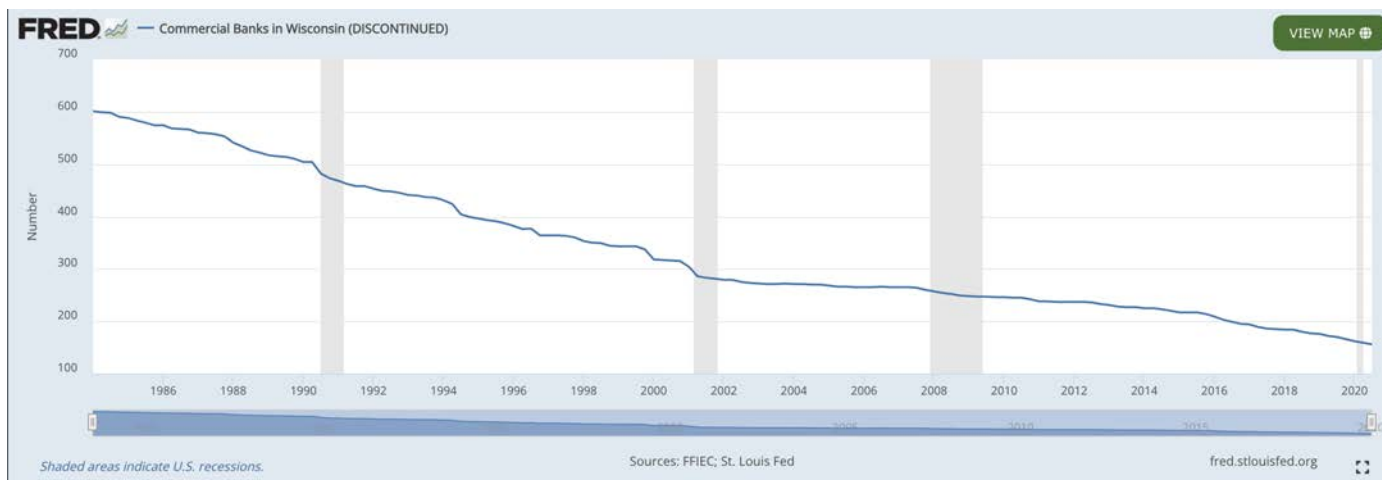


Figure 11. Number of commercial banks in Wisconsin, 1984-2020. (Source: FRED)

Part of what lies behind the trends shown in Figure 11 are the consolidation of banks by larger entities and loss of small, locally owned community banks, which are particularly important to non-metro areas that are less likely to be served by national banks and larger, regional institutions. As argued in a recent op-ed in Madison’s *The Capital Times*,

It's important to preserve the health and viability of community banks, and it's for the same reason it pays for folks to buy local. Like the local hardware store, the restaurant, the gift shop and the furniture store, local banks benefit the hometown. As part of the community, they buy and spend locally, and they support local projects and events.⁹⁵

Research conducted by the FRED showed that counties with a greater density of community banks had less severe declines in employment during the Great Recession than counties with fewer community banks.⁹⁶ While Wisconsin has lost many community banks in the past 40 years, based upon data from Independent Community Bankers of America (ICBA), community banks still hold 14.9% of all banking assets in the state and they are responsible for 44.2% of its small business loans,⁹⁷ making them vital to local development and economic vibrancy. Working to retain and expand the existing inventory of community banks in rural Wisconsin should be an important element of CCF-based development strategies.

Financial capital is clearly under heavy strain in rural Wisconsin. Political scientist Helpap shared that in his study of local governments in non-metro parts of the state,

There was a lot of concern about the resources that the state was providing. So, revenue limitations and just a lack of shared revenue in general. Now, some movement was made in the most recent budget to address that, but it isn't necessarily gonna be a silver bullet for all of these communities. So, getting I think more state support would help address

⁹⁵ https://captimes.com/opinion/dave-zweifel/opinion-local-banks-a-different-breed-than-the-too-big-to-fail/article_b0e78627-c3c7-55be-aadc-05a8c5ebcbd3.html

⁹⁶ Cull, R., Liang, J. N., & Smith, G. (2018). Community bank presence and household financial health. *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review*, 100(2), 139-152.

⁹⁷ Independent Community Bankers of America. (2021). Wisconsin: Fast facts. Retrieved from <https://www.icba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02>

one of the biggest concerns. I think 98% of communities said that they could use more resources. (quoted in Freyberg, 2024, Para.12)

A recent episode of *Wisconsin Today* on Wisconsin Public Radio⁹⁸ featured multiple stories about the difficulties faced by rural municipalities in this context. In Forest County, a non-metro county in the Northwoods, the county budget is “tenuous at best” going forward, said the chair of the board of supervisors, after a referendum to increase the tax levy failed. The county features 350,000 acres of federal forest land, two Indigenous reservations, agricultural land, and a federal wilderness area, all of which enhance various community capitals in their own right, but together mean that only 17% of the county’s land base is taxable. This heightens the county’s challenges in providing need services to its roughly 9,000 residents from its seat in Crandon, the center of the multi-decade battle over a proposed Exxon mine discussed earlier. The challenges created by limited funding for public capital are discussed further in the next section on built capital.

As discussed by FFG (2016), community developers should remember that community development is about improving quality of social interactions over time, rather than shorthand for *economic* development and a focus on economic growth, industrial development and brick-and-mortar projects, and even “smokestack chasing”, as has often been the case in the rural U.S. This is not surprising given the capitalistic nature of our society and its emphasis on financial gain and material acquisition. Developing community should be prioritized as much as developing the economy, if not more, due to the strong links between social connectivity and numerous markers of quality of life (FFG, 2016). The pursuit of economic development to increase private and public capital for the common good can certainly be an important elements of holistic development strategies, though.

Relating back to our discussion of social inclusion and “demographic lifelines”, the case of Arcadia, Wisconsin, suggests that, given the emphasis on financial capital in this society, business success on the part of immigrants to rural communities can lead more rapid integration into civic life. Business development and immigration tend to go together, based upon the demand for new goods and services that new residents bring with them. According to a white dairy farmer, who counts his ten Hispanic employees (half of all his workers) as critical to his operation, “Downtown Arcadia would be a ghost town without the 20 or so businesses that cater to immigrants. This community wouldn’t be what it is without Latinos” (quoted in Emerson, 2021, para.21). As noted earlier, Hispanic residents of Arcadia joined and attained leadership positions in the local chamber of commerce many years before their first representative joined the school board, and the future may see the city elect its first Hispanic members of city council or the mayor’s office.

Built Capital

Built capital is one of the most visible forms of community capital. It also likely one of the most taken for granted elements of local quality of life in the U.S., including rural Wisconsin.

Infrastructure in the U.S.

⁹⁸ <https://www.wpr.org/shows/wisconsin-today/tuesday-july-9-2024>

Compared to other countries, while it falls short in elements like public transit infrastructure and the reliability/vulnerability of its electrical grid, the U.S. is generally rated as having some of the world's best infrastructure. According to a 2022 ranking, the U.S. in came at 7th, and its approach to infrastructure was summarized in this way:

The focus in the United States is on the infrastructure that supports transportation, although the country is also committed to job-creation strategies in its planning. At the same time, the policy is married with multiple goals. So, you will see infrastructure budgets here that target the jobless, climate change, and ways to get to work in the same policy. The United States loses a decimal point on occasion because its focus on progress often results in a lack of management in some roads or buildings. However, it has the best postal system and the infrastructure to support it in the world.⁹⁹

Yet, as is common throughout the world, many in the U.S. may feel dissatisfied with the quality of the instructor. The most recent Global Infrastructure Index (GII), evaluating the U.S. and 30 other countries in the world, “finds a continued sense that infrastructure provides a ‘double dividend’, boosting the economy and combating climate change. However, citizens are largely dissatisfied with delivery, and cool about raising taxes or borrowing to fund investment” (Marshall, 2023, para.1). This resonates with our previous discussion of the anti-taxation sentiment and cycle of declining infrastructure heightening this inclination in the U.S., which can produce situations marked by private opulence in the midst of public squalor (Desmond, 2023) as people emphasize private capital and lower their support for public capital.

The survey used for the GII also showed that “57% think their country is not doing enough to meet its infrastructure needs and, on average, 44% rate ten infrastructure sectors as being fairly or very poor” Marshall, 2023, para.4). It found that satisfaction in the U.S. is higher than the global average but fell over the previous year. Overall, based on the survey people prioritize solar energy, water supply and sewerage, flood defense, and new housing the most, while the U.S. was one of the nations where local roads were in the top three (ibid.). The percentage of survey respondents (57%) who expressed doubt that infrastructure in their country had been adequately adapted for future changes in the climate was lower than the global average, perhaps not surprising given the level of skepticism about the threat of climate change in the U.S. compared to other countries (ibid.).

Consistent with the above, an internal evaluation of infrastructure in the U.S. paints a more negative picture than many international rankings. Every four years, the American Society of Civil Engineers' (ASCE) Report Card for America's Infrastructure (RCAI) assesses the quality of U.S. infrastructure in a report card format, assigning grades based on the state of the physical infrastructure and investments necessary to improve it.¹⁰⁰ Its most recent full RCAI report for the U.S. was released in 2021 and in it the U.S. received a C-, based upon factors such as issues with water mains leading to the loss of 6 billion gallons of water lost each day, wear and tear of U.S. roadways leading 43% of them to be considered in poor or mediocre condition, and the fact that there are levees in the U.S. whose location and condition are not known, a key concern when a

⁹⁹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/infrastructure-by-country>

¹⁰⁰ <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/infrastructure-categories/>

changing climate is already producing more extreme weather and flooding (ibid.). Included in the RCAI was the U.S. being assigned a C for bridges, C- for drinking water and for energy, D+ for schools and for public parks, D for dams, and D- for transit, with a consistent theme was infrastructure aging and being underfunded.

Infrastructure in Wisconsin

In fall 2024, the Wisconsin Section of ASCE released the *2024 Report Card for Wisconsin's Infrastructure*.¹⁰¹ It assigned the infrastructure of the state an overall grade of C+, one step higher than it received in 2020. The 2020 overview started with an ABCD-oriented approach by highlighting the growth of Wisconsin's tourism industry, which hinges in part on quality infrastructure. It stresses the importance of the latter for positive economic growth and a high quality of life and concludes that,

Much of Wisconsin's infrastructure requires capacity or maintenance upgrades or is reaching the end of its expected lifespan. You will see this reflected in Wisconsin's grades. The energy grid, transportation systems, sewers and drinking water systems of decades ago need upgrading to better prepare for security threats, larger storm events, increased use of renewable fuels and a changing population.¹⁰²

The 2024 report notes that,

Wisconsin is the first ASCE State Report Card to include a graded broadband chapter, which received a 'C-' grade. Due to its increasing importance, broadband has been deemed 'the fourth utility,' following roads, water, and energy. Broadband access and the electric grid that supports it remain a significant equity issue for Wisconsin families as our society transitions into more online-centered work and schooling environments. Wisconsin has a goal of universal broadband access by the year 2030. However, current funding for that project is more than \$1 billion lower than the projected cost to finish that project.

This is notable given that, again, this past year has seen Wisconsin's state government experience its largest budget surplus (at over \$7 billion at the start of the year) in history.

Otherwise, for 2024 Wisconsin was graded the best (B grade) for hazardous waste, rail, and solid waste, and worst (D grade) public parks, "in part due to the neglect of infrastructure in state and local parks stemming from reductions in government funding at all levels". While roads improved to a C grade, after a significant injection of state funding, while transit remained graded at D+. Bridges were again graded at C+. The report also noted that contamination from "'forever chemicals' or PFAS in drinking water sources has created a challenge regarding water supply and wastewater concerns at state parks, and additional revenue is needed to address such issues."

¹⁰¹ <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/wisconsins-infrastructure-grade-improves-in-2024-report-card/>

¹⁰² <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/state-item/wisconsin/>

Given the demographic and funding challenges facing rural Wisconsin, built capital has suffered in many areas. Local governments and other public infrastructure managers are dealing with concerns around lack of affordable housing and infrastructure deficiencies like those discussed above – such as the recent failure of a dam in rural Manawa during a period of flooding throughout Northeastern Wisconsin¹⁰³ – while also facing fiscal challenges. Indeed, according to the Infrastructure Working Group (IWG) of the Wisconsin Initiative on Climate Change Impacts (WICCI) (2024), while “infrastructure is the backbone of any modern society” (para.1), aging infrastructure was the most important concern public infrastructure managers, elected officials, planners, and infrastructure consultants based upon a 2020 survey. Pavement deterioration was another top issue. They must balance investment in infrastructure with our needs while also dealing with insufficient funding for new built capital and inadequate income from local taxes to pay for operations and maintenance costs (ibid.). The IWG warns that the current system for funding infrastructure is not working and uncertainty about how climate change will affect Wisconsin infrastructure and the additional costs associated with its impacts in the future means that new strategies need to be developed.¹⁰⁴ They recommend conducting a [vulnerability assessment](#) as a first step in attempting to determine the risks from climate impacts for any type of public infrastructure (ibid.).

Built Capital, Health, and Equity

Built capital directly impacts human capital in many ways. We have previously discussed the lack of shelters for unhoused people and existence of healthcare deserts throughout in rural Wisconsin, much of which would be characterized as insufficient built capital. The same is true for treatment centers for people facing substance use disorder and facilities serving people in recovery.^{105,106} Some recent good news in this regard was a \$1 million in federal funds to help rural Wisconsin towns address high rates of overdose deaths (Holmes, 2023). About the funding an official noted, “Far too many rural families have faced the devastation of overdose, and these deaths are felt deeply across rural communities – where often everyone knows someone lost too soon” (ibid., para.4). Another key concern in this information-based economy is access to broadband wireless networks:

Nearly 22% of rural Wisconsinites lack adequate broadband services — a rate far above the rest of the state, according to a 2021 [Federal Communications Commission report](#). And [data](#) from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey show 38% of low-income households in Wisconsin lack an internet subscription. (Suzuki & Katzenberger, 2023, Para.21)

While Governor Tony Evers created a taskforce on broadband access, gaps remain. This creates issues for rural people in healthcare deserts because it also limits their ability to use telehealth appointments, as providers fight “spotty connections and miscommunication when providing

¹⁰³ <https://www.nbc26.com/news/local-news/gov-evers-declares-state-of-emergency-for-several-ne-wisconsin-counties-following-recent-flooding>

¹⁰⁴ The WICCI site offers a number of suggestions along with additional data.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.wpr.org/health/alcobol-treatment-remains-out-reach-many-rural-wisconsin-residents>

¹⁰⁶ Look KA, Kile M, Morgan K, Roberts A. Community pharmacies as access points for addiction treatment. Res Social Adm Pharm. 2019 Apr;15(4):404-409. doi: 10.1016/j.sapharm.2018.06.006. Epub 2018 Jun 12. PMID: 29909934; PMCID: PMC6433531.

virtual care” (ibid., para.1). For others, the lack of broadband access has raised concern about some groups being disenfranchised by not being fully enumerated in census counts, which have begun to shift online. The U.S. Census has undercounted Indigenous people throughout its history, including by 5% for the 2010 census, twice the rate of other people of color (Kaeding, 2021). Tribal officials are concerned that a lack of broadband access may exacerbate the undercount, due to low response rates on the part of people who are often already distrustful of the federal government, given the long history of broken treaties and oppression they have experienced (ibid.). This is important because the census helps determine federal funding allocations, including for built capital, and because accurate numbers help to ensure that Indigenous people are properly represented when voting districts are drawn (ibid.)

Recent months have seen Indigenous communities in the news for issues related to built capital. A recent article reports that, after more than a year of dispute easements through Lac du Flambeau tribal land in northern Wisconsin in which tribal officials blocked access to roads in January 2023, they may do so again. The tribe is “warning it may restrict access to four roads unless it receives payment from the town of Lac du Flambeau. The tribe is also demanding the town vacate and stop maintenance on parts of three more roads crossing Indian lands”.¹⁰⁷ Earlier in the fall, the tribe banned a local state senator from coming onto their land after she compared their efforts to obtain payment for these easements to “giving in to terrorism”.¹⁰⁸ On a positive note, in August the Forest County Potawatomi Community “became the first tribe in Wisconsin and the fourth tribe in the country to win autonomy in deciding its transportation needs”.¹⁰⁹

Regarding equity in education, rural Wisconsin’s schools and university’s buildings and infrastructure are aging (UW System, 2023) and funding their upkeep or replacement is difficult in a polarized, post Act-10 social climate in which not only are property taxes are unpopular, but so is public education, at least for some residents.¹¹⁰ The fact that the UW-System has closed five branch campuses during a period of state record budget surpluses underscores this fact.

Shifting to the impacts of climate change, in spite of the increasing frequency and intensity of climate impacts, such as hurricanes Helene and Milton slamming the Southeast in the fall of 2024, Wisconsinites may feel some comfort in being located far from the areas that are generally the hardest hit by such events.

But the message sent by this year's hurricane season rings true in Milwaukee and across the state, from the Driftless area to the Fox Valley to the Northwoods: Climate change is here, there are no havens, and it's deadly and expensive — responsible for huge sums of money spent here and heading to other parts of the country. ‘We are all affected by extreme weather of one kind or another,’ said Steve Vavrus, the Wisconsin state climatologist. And whether it’s the relief efforts, supply chain disruptions or the economic

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.wpr.org/news/lac-du-flambeau-tribe-threatens-road-closures-contests-access#:~:text=In%20January%202023%2C%20tribal%20officials,expired%20easements%20on%20those%20road>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.wpr.org/news/lac-du-flambeau-tribe-reservation-bans-gop-felzkowski>

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/wisconsin/2024/08/27/potawatomi-tribe-wins-self-governance-in-deciding-transportation-needs/74905825007/>

¹¹⁰ https://captimes.com/news/local/education/local_schools/act-10-budget-cuts-have-lasting-effect-10-years-after-controversial-legislation/article_f77988aa-459b-5951-a1d8-c0e3dc71e279.html

toll these weather events take, Vavrus said, climate change is showing just how interconnected everything is. ‘We need to care about what happens elsewhere,’ Vavrus said.¹¹¹

Further, Rural Wisconsin may also face health disadvantages in dealing with higher temperatures from climate change, with insufficient built capital being an important factor:

Some of America’s most heat-vulnerable populations are far from places like Phoenix...places that are traditionally less hot — like parts of Maine, Wisconsin and even North Dakota and Alaska — are considered among the nation’s most socially vulnerable to extreme heat exposure, according to research by the U.S. Census Bureau. That is partly because they are far less accustomed to — and less prepared for — extreme heat. The risk factors include poor quality of housing, few transportation options and significant financial hardship that, when piled on top of rising temperatures, put them at risk. (Searcey, 2024, Paras 7,8)

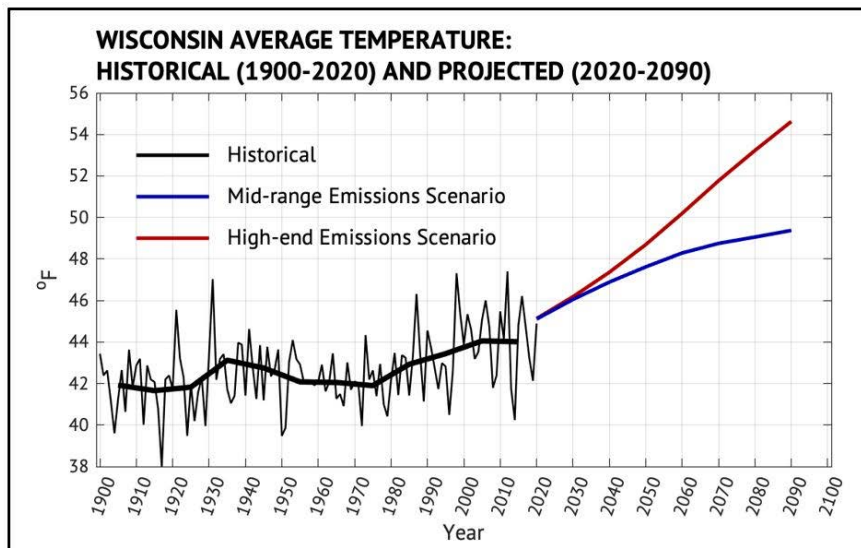


Figure 12. Wisconsin’s warming climate. (source: Kaeding, 2023)

Wisconsin’s changing climate is already producing “[more frequent and longer](#) heatwaves, as well as [more frequent and intense](#) storms, including destructive storms that lead to flooding or downed trees” (Kaeding, 2023, para.10). As noted, parts of the state also face concerns about drinking water and air quality. Again, though, Wisconsin appears to be in better shape than most other states (AHR, 2023), and “a state with a relatively cool climate and plentiful water resources could be protected from some of the changing climate’s worst effects” (Kaeding, 2023, para.10). Anecdotal evidence suggests that climate migration to Wisconsin has started to occur, including the rural Northwoods, though it is difficult to determine the extent of it. The Wisconsin Initiative on Climate Change Impacts and others have begun to study the issue and whether the state is prepared to handle a potential influx of climate migrants.

¹¹¹ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/2024/10/09/hurricanes-helene-and-milton-should-worry-us-in-wisconsin-heres-why/75556144007/>

Additional in-migration, particularly of working-age and young populations, could benefit Wisconsin, but substantial growth could also tax a state with aging infrastructure and a serious housing shortage. In fact, the state must “build at least [140,000 housing units](#) by the end of the decade just to meet current demand, [according to one recent report](#). If the state hopes to add to its workforce, then that number rises to 227,000 units” (Kaeding, 2023).

Further, added pressure on housing markets could exacerbate local inequality that already exists in amenity-rich locations like Bayfield County, where previous research revealed rural gentrification that pushed teachers to move to other towns and tribal members to move back to the reservation in search of affordable housing, while more affluent newcomers expressed opposition to funding challenged local schools or new infrastructure projects like water treatment plants (Van Auken, 2010).

While there is a lot of uncertainty about the future of climate migration in Wisconsin, experts in this regard recommend that communities should conduct long range strategic planning that includes consideration of jobs and housing to accommodate in-migrants, while making investments in built capital – affordable housing, parks, schools, public works, and more – that will benefit the people already living there (Kaeding, 2023).

Conclusion

The community capitals framework is built on a foundation of asset-based development. This report represents a snapshot of existing strengths to build upon that could then help to address key issues facing rural Wisconsin. It cannot possibly cover all collective assets or concerns, but our hope is that it fruitfully sheds light on important topics and potential ways forward.

Wisconsin clearly has a strong base of natural capital upon which the other six community capitals are grounded, though it faces a variety of threats stemming from or impacting the others. Aside from the land itself, social capital is perhaps the capital that is most inextricably bound to all of the other capitals, as evidenced by direct discussion or implications in this regard found throughout the report. Based upon national evaluations, Wisconsin rates highly for social capital, a key asset upon which to build.

As is the case throughout the U.S., though, bridging social capital is much harder to come by than bonding, and is reflected in the rural/urban divide that persists in the minds of many and reveals itself in stark differences in various outcomes – particularly in the realms of human capital, in terms of higher education and health, and financial capital, in terms of earnings – for people living in rural areas compared to their urban and suburban counterparts.

Echoing Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer (2016), the goal for Wisconsin settlements is inclusive community development based upon high levels of both bonding and bridging social capital, which together produce entrepreneurial social infrastructure, allowing people to collectively pursue new opportunities based upon existing strengths and to address key challenges together. These authors present several different approaches in this regard.

Returning to the genesis of this report, we encourage local leaders in rural Wisconsin to strive for collective impact, which can certainly work in concert with other approaches. There are argued to be five conditions necessary for a successful collective impact initiative:

1. *Agreement on a common agenda*: A common agenda means that organizations involved in the collective impact project have a shared vision for what needs to be accomplished, as well as a shared vision for the logic of the change they seek to create.
2. *Develop a shared measurement system*: The execution of a common agenda is impossible without an agreed upon method of measuring progress, success, and failure. If competing nonprofits are using different performance metrics they cannot hope to achieve agreed upon goals as there will be no common way of knowing how they are performing as a collective.
3. *Engage in mutually enforcing activities*: Once a common agenda has been set and a measurement system created, participating nonprofits must all understand their unique role in the effort. Mutually enforcing activities means, in practice, activities that are coordinated with others, that are not duplicative and are specialized. This step is challenging because it often means individual organizations must cede control over some of their activities for the good of the collective effort.
4. *Maintain open and continuous communication*: A collective impact effort can only be successful if organizations stay in regular communication with one another, are open and honest, and trust one another to prioritize the global effort over specific organizational concerns. This condition is where collective impact efforts often break down, as mutually enforcing activities are impossible if those charged with executing them are not in open and honest communication with one another.
5. *Formation of a backbone organization*: The final condition refers to the creation of an entity to staff and govern the collective impact project. Backbone organizations can come in the form of an existing organization like a community foundation or a local United Way, or in larger efforts can be formed with the support of a private donor or donors. Because large foundations often drive the formation of backbone organizations, rural communities with limited donor bases struggle to create backbone organizations, thus making collective impact efforts difficult if not impossible to create and manage. (Ford, Lewis, & Van Auken, 2024, p. 6)

Our hope is that the community capitals framework and data about assets and challenges shared in this report can be utilized fruitfully in efforts to achieve collective impact in Wisconsin in the future.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank to Lisa Lewis for providing copywriting assistance. This was very helpful to the successful completing of the report. Thanks much to the Whitburn Center, via funding from the Thompson Center, for supporting this important work. Finally, the author wishes to thank his fall 2024 semester Sociology/Environmental Studies 313 – Rural Sociology students at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh for reading and discussing drafts of each section of this report, helping both refine the writing and affirm its value.

References

- Abernathy, P.M. (2024). The Expanding News Desert. <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/states/wisconsin/>
- America's Health Rankings (AHR). (2023). Wisconsin. <https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/states/WI;>
- Bell, M.M. (2007). The two-ness of rural life and the ends of rural scholarship. *Journal of Rural Studies* 23(4), 402-415. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2007.03.003>.
- Bell, M.M. & Ashwood, L. (2016). An invitation to environmental sociology, 5th edition. Pine Forge Press.
- Bezzo, F.B. & Jeanett, A-M. (2023). Civic involvement in deprived communities: A longitudinal study of England. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 74(5), 837-857. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13024>
- Chavez, S. (2005). Community, ethnicity, and class in a changing rural California town. *Rural Sociology*, 70(3), 314–335.
- Chetty, R., et al. (2022). Social capital I: Measurement and associations with economic mobility. *Nature* 608, 108-121. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-04996-4>
- Conniff, R. (2019, October 15). ICE raids and a battle over Arcadia's school bus route. *Wisconsin Examiner*. <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2019/10/15/ice-raids-and-a-battle-over-arcadias-school-bus-route/>
- Conniff, R. (2022, October 7). Dairy farmers demand year-round visa for immigrant workers. *Wisconsin Examiner*. <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2022/10/07/dairy-farmers-demand-year-round-visa-for-immigrant-workers/>
- Copelovitch, M. Wagner, M. (2024, June 25). The information economy: Media usage, political talk networks, and public attitudes toward inflation, unemployment, and recession. Liableble at SSRN here: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4876787> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4876787>
- Cramer, K.J. (2016). *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. The University of Chicago Press
- Daley, D. & Goldstein, G. (2021, August 13). America is full of 'democracy deserts': Wisconsin rivals Congo on some metrics. *The Guardian*.
- Desmond, M. 2023. *Poverty, by America*. Crown. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/13/america-is-full-of-democracy-deserts-wisconsin-rivals-congo-on-some-metrics>

- Dilanian, K. (2023, December 16). Most people think the U.S. crime rate is rising. They're wrong. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/people-think-crime-rate-up-actually-down-rcna129585>
- Emerson, J. (2021, October 19). As Latino populations increase, communities are also seeing a growth in Latino-owned businesses. *Up North News*. <https://upnorthnews.com/2021/10/19/as-latino-populations-increase-communities-are-also-seeing-a-growth-in-latino-owned-businesses/>
- Flora, C.B., Flora, J., & Gasteyer, S. (2016). *Rural communities: Legacy + change*, 5th edition. Westview Press.
- Ford, M.R., Lewis, L. & Van Auken, P.M. (2024, August 30). A municipal driven approach to nonprofit collective impact initiatives. Report for the Whitburn Center for Policy & Governance at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. <https://www.uwosh.edu/whitburn-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/211/2024/08/CollectiveImpact8.30.24.pdf>
- Freyberg, F. (2024, April 12). David Helpap on serving in local government in rural areas. *Here & Now*. <https://pbswisconsin.org/news-item/david-helpap-on-serving-in-local-government-in-rural-areas/>
- Garcia-Navarro, L. (2024, July 13). The interview: Robert Putnam knows why you're lonely. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/13/magazine/robert-putnam-interview.html>
- Garoutte, L. (2018). The sociological imagination and community-based learning. *Teaching Sociology*, 46 (2), 148-159. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26589015>
- Gest, J. (2022, March 22). What happens when white people become a minority in America? Other majority-minority societies offer positive examples—and cautionary tales. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/22/us-white-majority-minority-nation-demographic-change/>
- Goldstein, B. (2023, July 6). Wisconsin towns brace for next fight on local control over large farms. *Wisconsin Watch*. <https://wisconsinwatch.org/2023/07/wisconsin-towns-big-farms-local-control-cafo-regulations/>
- Harrison, J.L. & Lloyd, S.E. (2012). Illegality at work: Deportability and the productive new era of immigration enforcement. *Antipode* 44(2), 365–385.
- Han, S., & Piquero, A. R. (2022). Is it dangerous to live in neighborhoods with more immigrants? Assessing the effects of immigrant concentration on crime patterns. *Crime & Delinquency*, 68(1), 52-79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287211007736>

- Holmes, I. (2023, August 31). Rural Wisconsin towns get \$1 million to combat overdose crisis. *Wisconsin Examiner*. <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/briefs/rural-wisconsin-towns-get-1-million-to-combat-overdose-crisis/>
- Ibarra, A., Kulwiec, A., Austin-Nichols, G., (2023, April). *Dairy workers study: Legal and community assessment*. UW-Madison School for Workers. <https://schoolforworkers.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/795/2023/06/Dairy-Workers-Study-Legal-and-Community-Needs-Assessment.pdf>
- Infrastructure Working Group of the Wisconsin Initiative on Climate Change Impacts. (2024). *Infrastructure issues in Wisconsin*. <https://wicci.wisc.edu/infrastructure-working-group/#:~:text=Infrastructure%20Issues%20in%20Wisconsin&text=Aging%20infrastructure%20tops%20the>
- Jeness, S., Cahill, C., Minty, D., & O'Connor, A. (2024, March). *Implementing college and career pathways in rural communities*. Jobs for the Future. https://www.jff.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/240312_EdP_RuralPathwaysReport_March2024Version.pdf
- Kaeding, D. (2021, August 25). Census has Struggled to Count American Indians: Some tribes fear COVID-19 made it worse. Wisconsin Public Radio. <https://www.wpr.org/diversity-and-inclusion/census-has-struggled-count-american-indians-some-tribes-fear-covid-19-made-it-worse>
- Kaeding, D. (2023, May 18). Could Wisconsin be a climate haven? Great Lakes region could be attractive, but some effects are unclear. Wisconsin Public Radio. <https://www.wpr.org/economy/could-wisconsin-be-climate-haven-great-lakes-region-could-be-attractive-some-effects-are-unclear>
- Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 1, 36–41.
- Kaufman, D. (2023, October 28). A high-stakes election in the Midwest’s “Democracy Desert”: The race for control of Wisconsin’s Supreme Court could change the course of the entire country. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-political-scene/a-high-stakes-election-in-the-midwests-democracy-desert>
- Kind, A.J.H., & Buckingham, W. (2018). Making neighborhood disadvantage metrics accessible: The Neighborhood Atlas. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 2018. 378: 2456-2458. DOI: 10.1056/NEJMp1802313. PMID: PMC6051533.
- Klinenberg, E. (2018). *Palaces for the people: How social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life*. Crown.
- Kremer, R. (2019, April 1). Barron city council election features first-ever Somali candidate. Wisconsin Public Radio. <https://www.wpr.org/politics/barron-city-council-election-features-first-ever-somali-candidate>

- Kretzman, J.P. & J.L. McKnight (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path towards finding and mobilizing community assets*. ACTA Publications.
- Loewen, J.W. (2005). *Sundown towns: A hidden dimension of American racism*. The New Press.
- Lorey, C. (2023, October 31). “Homelessness is becoming an increasingly rural problem in Wisconsin: What’s the fix?”
<https://upnorthnews.com/2023/10/31/homelessness-is-becoming-an-increasingly-rural-problem-in-wisconsin-whats-the-fix/>
- Lyon, L., & Driskell, R. (2012). *The community in urban society* (2nd ed.). Waveland Press.
- Marshall, B. (2023, October 9). 57% globally think their country is not doing enough to meet its infrastructure needs. Ipsos. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/57-percent-globally-think-their-country-not-doing-enough-meet-its-infrastructure-needs>
- McBride, A. M., Sherraden, M. S., & Pritzker, S. (2006). Civic engagement among low-income and low-wealth families: In their words. *Family Relations*, 55(2), 152–162.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40005326>
- Meyerhofer, K. (2024, June 27). A college degree is worth the investment: But Wisconsin high school grads increasingly seek other options. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.
<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2024/06/27/wisconsin-high-school-grads-going-directly-to-college-plummets/73334277007/>
- Nguyen, A., & Kim, S. (2021, September 9). *Mapping healthcare deserts: 80% of the country lacks adequate access to healthcare*. GoodRX Health.
<https://www.goodrx.com/healthcare-access/research/healthcare-deserts-80-percent-of-country-lacks-adequate-healthcare-access>
- Orozco Hernandez, J. (2023, April 11). Doctor shortages distress rural America, where few residency programs exist. *KFF Health News*.
<https://kffhealthnews.org/news/article/doctor-shortages-rural-residency-programs-elko-nevada/>.
- Parker, K., Horowitz, J.M., Brown, A., Friay, R., Cohn, D., & Igielnik, R. (2018). *What unites and divides urban, suburban and rural communities*. Pew Research.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/what-unites-and-divides-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/>
- Parker, S. (2024, May 14). A Florence County newspaper struggles in a news desert, but this editor is determined to report. *Daily Cardinal*.
<https://www.dailycardinal.com/article/2024/05/a-florence-county-newspaper-struggles-in-a-news-desert-but-this-editor-is-determined-to-report>

- powell, j. a. and Toppin (2021). Uprooting authoritarianism: Deconstructing the stories behind narrow identities and building a society of belonging. *Columbia Journal of Race and Law*, 11(1), 1–82. <https://doi.org/10.7916/cjrl.v11i1.8019>.
- Putnam, R.D. (1995). Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy* 6: 65-78.
- Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Redman, H. (2023, November 16). DNR adds 51 sites to Wisconsin list of impaired waters. *Wisconsin Examiner*.
<https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2023/11/16/dnr-adds-51-sites-to-wisconsin-list-of-impaired-waters/>
- Reisinger, B. (2023a., March 28). Seeing Wisconsin's rural drug addiction crisis through the eyes of a childhood friend in our hometown. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.
<https://www.jsonline.com/story/opinion/2023/03/23/wisconsin-rural-drug-problem-is-growing-and-is-tougher-to-fix-than-other-places/70033170007/>
- Reisinger, B. (2023b, March 23). 4 ways we can tackle the drug crisis in rural Wisconsin and beyond. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.
<https://www.jsonline.com/story/opinion/2023/03/23/raising-awareness-is-first-step-to-solve-rural-drug-abuse-in-wisconsin/70034697007/>
- Rowlands, D.W. & Love, H. (2021, September 28). *Mapping rural America’s diversity and demographic change*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/mapping-rural-americas-diversity-and-demographic-change/>
- Safford, S. (2009). *Why the garden club couldn't save Youngstown: The Transformation of the Rust Belt*. Harvard University Press.
- Sanders, A. and Cromartie, J. (2024, March 26). *What is rural?* United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural/#:~:text=OMB%20%22Nonmetro%22%20and%20Census%20%22,20%20percent%20of%20the%20population>
- Sato, M. (2017, March 22). Wisconsin’s ‘news deserts’ hurt our democracy — but you can help. *Wisconsin Watch*. <https://wisconsinwatch.org/2017/03/wisconsins-news-deserts-hurt-our-democracy-but-you-can-help/>
- Schaeffer, K. (2020). *6 facts about economic inequality in the U.S.* Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/02/07/6-facts-about-economic-inequality-in-the-u->

- Van Auken, Paul M. 2010. "Seeing, Not Participating: Viewscape Fetishism in American and Norwegian Amenity Areas." *Human Ecology* 38(4): 521-537
- Van Auken, P.M., Barron, E.S., Xiong, C. & Persson, C. (2016). 'Like a second home': Conceptualizing experiences within the Fox River watershed through a framework of emplacement. *Water* 8(8), 352; doi:[10.3390/w8080352](https://doi.org/10.3390/w8080352)
- Van Auken, P.M. (2020). Towards a fusion of two lines of thought: Creating convergence between Aldo Leopold and sociology through the community concept. *Socio-Ecological Practice Research* 2(1), 39-61. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42532-020-00042-7>.
- Van Auken, P.M. (2023). Aiming for clarity while embracing ambiguity: The LIFE framework of interactional community. *Local Development & Society*. DOI: [10.1080/26883597.2023.2242600](https://doi.org/10.1080/26883597.2023.2242600)
- Voigt, S. (2024, March 28). Political divides, declining population are causing fewer people to run in rural local elections. *Post Crescent*. <https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/03/28/rural-wisconsin-communities-struggle-to-attract-candidates-for-elections/73032197007/>
- Wethal, K. (2024, June 6). In Wisconsin, college dreams grow dimmer for rural students. *Wisconsin State Journal*. [URL](#)
- Wilkinson, K. P. (1991). *The community in rural America*. Rural Sociological Society.
- Wisconsin Policy Forum. (2018, October). *Rural counties face psychiatrist shortage*. <https://wispolicyforum.org/research/rural-counties-face-psychiatrist-shortage/>
- Wisconsin Policy Forum. (2022, February). *State drop in unions among nation's largest*. <https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-drop-in-unions-among-nations-largest/>
- Wisconsin Policy Forum. (2023, June). *Why is Wisconsin's rural population growth outpacing the Midwest?* <https://wispolicyforum.org/research/why-is-wisconsins-rural-population-growth-outpacing-the-midwest/>
- Wisconsin Policy Forum. (2024, March). *Home prices outpace incomes*. <https://wispolicyforum.org/research/home-prices-outpace-incomes/>