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VOTING WITH THEIR FEET

Economic Freedom and Migration in Wisconsin

ADAM HOFFER, PHD | MATT STYLE | WILL FLANDERS, PHD

WILL
WISCONSIN INSTITUTE
FOR LAW & LIBERTY

WISCONSIN INSTITUTE FOR LAW & LIBERTY

ADAM HOFFER, PHD

RESEARCH FELLOW

ahoffer@uwlax.edu

MATT STYLE

RESEARCH FELLOW

WILL FLANDERS, PHD

RESEARCH DIRECTOR

Flanders@will-law.org

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Executive Summary

The tight labor market in the United States has been a topic of increasing concern as the nation emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly in states like Wisconsin, which lag in population growth, finding workers has become increasingly difficult in careers from restaurant employees to executive accountants. While the need to encourage more migration to the state is clear, what factors would drive people to do so are less so.

Using existing data from the Economic Freedom Index (EFI), combined with data on the movement of Wisconsinites between Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), this paper examines the role that the level of economic freedom plays in the state's migration. Among the key findings of this research:

- **Wisconsin loses residents to popular cities with higher economic freedom.** Cities like Phoenix and major Texas cities that feature higher EFI rankings are among the cities Wisconsin loses to the most nationally.
- **Wisconsin gains residents from its less free neighbors.** Wisconsin is a net beneficiary of migrants from nearby cities like Chicago and Rockford, IL, which have lower EFI rankings than most Wisconsin cities.
- **Milwaukee Metro Area Drives Wisconsin's Net Loss of Migrants.** While most other MSAs in the state experience modest population growth, the losses in Milwaukee fully account for the state experiencing a net loss of migrants.
- **Appleton, Racine and Madison drive migrant growth in the state.** Combined, these areas saw a net positive of more than 1,500 MSA-to-MSA migrants per year from 2010-2015.
- **To increase migration, Wisconsin should implement policies that increase economic freedom.** This includes further tax cuts, expansion of educational freedom through a more open school choice program, and occupational licensing reform.
- **Between 2015 and 2019, Wisconsin gained nearly 65,000 residents from states that have lower Economic Freedom Index scores.**
- **Between 2015 and 2019, Wisconsin lost nearly 38,000 residents to states with higher Economic Freedom Index Scores.**

Wisconsin's movement toward greater economic freedom in the last decade, via greater fiscal accountability and the removal of various antiquated labor market restrictions has been a positive force for growth. The state holds a relatively competitive position with its nearest neighbors, but it is important to recognize that the labor market is increasingly a national, rather than regional, competition. Further steps to reduce income tax burden and facilitate labor market freedoms can only help to increase the viability of the state for prospective migrants in the future.

Introduction

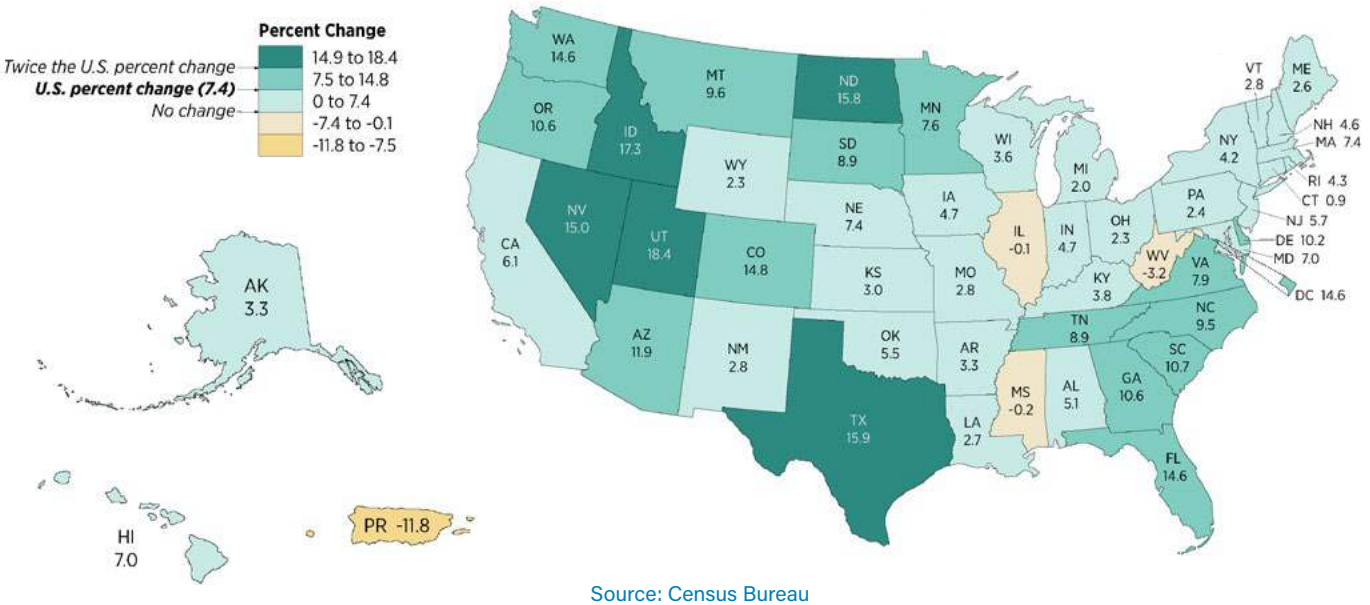
America's governance structure facilitates state and local government experimentation with public policy. In theory, poor public policies have consequences that are clear, and those policies eventually die, having created only localized harm. Good public policy will result in improved well-being and economic growth, leading to widespread adoption of better policies.

Ensuring that policy choices are directed towards growth is vitally important in states like Wisconsin, which suffer from relatively stagnant population growth in comparison to the rest of the country, illustrated in Figure 1.

Wisconsin ranks 35th in population growth overall, and trails some of our immediate Midwestern neighbors like Indiana, Minnesota, and Iowa.[1] Wisconsin added only about 140,000 people from 2010 to 2020. Almost the entirely of that population growth came from Wisconsin residents having more births than deaths. Wisconsin lost more than 8,000 net migrants to other cities in the U.S. over that time span. What accounts for this slow growth, and what policies could potentially improve it?

Research in economics has long emphasized that people can "vote with their feet", moving from one jurisdiction to another as a way to communicate their satisfaction with their local governance. State and local governments that follow Adam Smith's simple suggestion of implementing peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice will draw businesses and workers.* States and local governments who fail to do so will experience an exodus.

Figure 1. Population Change, 2010-2020 (Census Bureau)



Source: Census Bureau

* Ashby, N. and Sobel, R. (2006) Income inequality and economic freedom in the U.S. states. Public Choice, 134(3), 329–346.; Arif, I., Hoffer, A., Stansel, D. and Lacombe, D. (2020) Economic freedom and migration: A metro area-level analysis. Southern Economic Journal, 87(1), 170–190.

In this study, we explore rates of inter-state migration for Wisconsin cities to measure Wisconsin's ability to attract and retain workers. We use IRS tax migration data to measure the number of workers who move from one city to another across the entirety of the United States to discover any consistent trends regarding the performance of Wisconsin MSAs in overall country movement. We find that Wisconsin does relatively well relative to its nearest neighbors, but work remains to be done to make the state competitive on a national scale.

The Academic Research on Migration and Government Activity

One of the best ways to measure the quality of the policies governments implement is to use an index of economic freedom. The Economic Freedom of North America (EFNA) index, most recently published the Fraser Institute,[2] attempts to convert the policies adopted by individual states and municipalities into a quantifiable ranking from one (least freedom) to ten (most freedom). The authors combine ten measures that aggregate into three areas, (i) Government Spending, (ii) Taxes, and (iii) Labor Market Regulation (the national index of economic freedom includes additional aggregate measures of Legal Systems and Sound Money).* Each component of the index is weighted equally to avoid subjective determinations of importance by the authors, meaning that a state's tax policy—an important area of reform for Wisconsin policymakers—is 1/3 of the overall score.

The use of economic freedom to quantify government institutional quality is commonplace in the academic literature. Of the studies who explore subnational economic freedom, about two-thirds of the studies found EF to be associated with positive economic outcomes. Economic freedom is positively connected with economic growth,[3] entrepreneurial activity,[4] and less economic inequality.[5]

For example, it has been found that greater levels of economic freedom are associated with lower levels of income inequality in the U.S. states.[6] Studies have shown that economic freedom positively correlates with employment growth and also find that economic freedom is positively associated with entrepreneurial activity across U.S. states.[7]

The migration literature is quite large in its own regard. One study has provided a detailed summary of the research with a focus on productivity gains through emigration.[8] Regarding the effect policy plays on migration, the broad findings from the migration literature can be summarized as migrants being attracted to areas with lower living costs, better income prospects, lower taxes, and a warmer climate.[9]

Utilizing a similar data set to that which is being used in this study, others have found that there is a positive relationship between economic freedom and migration across all U.S. MSAs.[10] According to this research, if you were to increase the freedom score of the destination city by 10% compared to their home city, the destination city will see an increase of 27.3% net-migration from the home city each year. Given the positive relationship between economic freedom and migration, this study explore how Wisconsin migration is affected by its policies.

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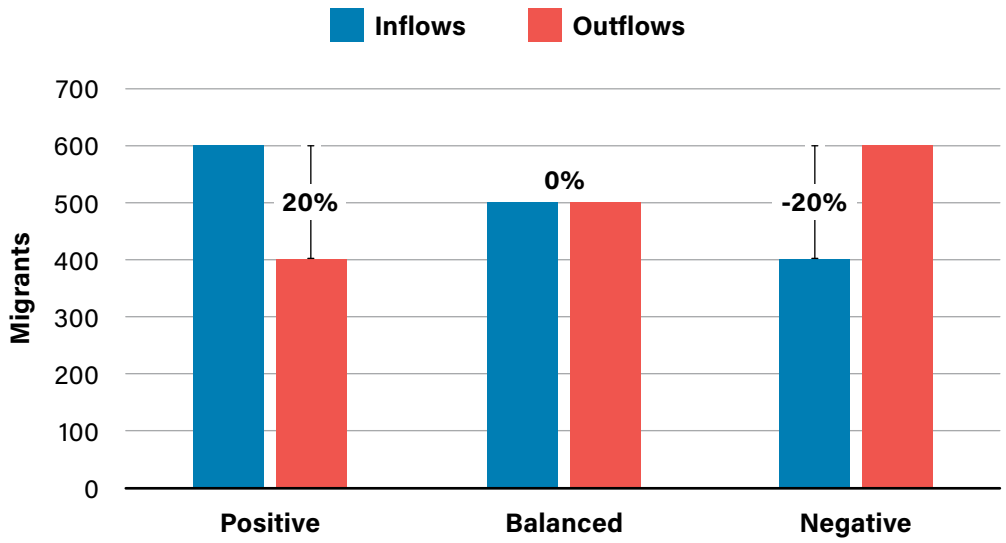
* The full EFNA Report and all data used are publicly available to download from the Fraser Institute website, *https://www.fraserinstitute.org/studies/economic-freedom-of-north-america-2021*.

Data Methodology

For this paper, we conduct two different analyses. The first examines migration to and from Wisconsin overall using census data and the most recent data on state EFI rankings. The second conducts the same analysis at the MSA level using data from the MSA Economic Freedom study.[11] Unfortunately, MSA-level EFI data is somewhat dated at this point, having been most recently made available in 2015. Nonetheless, the results can still provide evidence on the role of economic freedom in moving decisions. In the MSA section, we study 382 metropolitan statistical areas around the United States as defined in the official 2015 definitions. An MSA is what we generally would refer to as a metropolitan area—an interconnected region where many people may commute to a central city. For example, Milwaukee's MSA includes Milwaukee, Washington, Ozaukee and Waukesha counties.

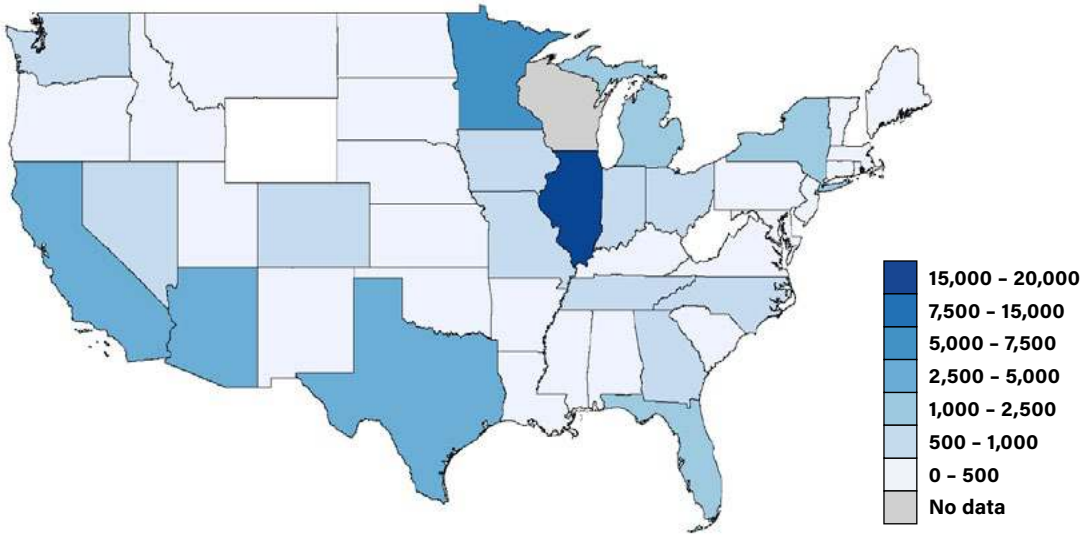
We create a multi-year dataset of MSA-to-MSA migration following the approach of the MSA Economic Freedom study using the county-to-county data on migrants from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).[12] Each year, the IRS compiles a single file (the Individual Master File), which contains administrative data collected for every Form 1040, 1040A, and 1040EZ that they process. The IRS estimates these data include 95 to 98% of the individual income tax filing population. Individuals are counted in the state where they maintain their residence—so "snowbirds" who spend part of the year in different states are not captured. We then aggregate the migration data from the county level to the MSA level.*

Figure 2. Migration Balance Example



* To do this, we use the National Bureau of Economic Research County-to-MSA Crosswalk.

Figure 3. Wisconsin Total Migration Flows to the Contiguous U.S. States



Lastly, we create migration pairs that identify the number of people moving from one MSA (home) to another (destination). For example, through these pairings, we can establish the number of people who move from the Dallas, TX MSA to the Milwaukee, WI MSA and vice versa.

After creating the pairs, we take a 5-year average centering on the available years of MSA economic freedom (1997, 2002, 2007, and 2012) to link cross-MSA migration with the MSA economic freedom data.[13] For example, data for the year 2012 would be a 5-year average of [2010-2014] centered around 2012.

For this paper we will use a few different measures to examine migration trends between MSAs. Most notably we will use migration balances. Migration balances measure are the percentage of total migration, whether that area experiences more positive inward migration (positive percentage points) or more negative outward migration (negative percentage points).

Figure 2 provides an example of what these balances would look like if there were a total of 1,000 migrants going between two cities. In the case of a positive balance, we see that 20% more migrants between the cities are immigrating inward, creating a positive flow, on-net.

Empirical Findings

STATE LEVEL ANALYSIS

For our EFI variable, we use the most recent MSA-level data and the state-level data aligned timewise with our migration data. For the state-level analysis, this covers the years 2015-19. For the MSA-level analysis, this covers the years 2010-15. Figure 3 shows out-migration from Wisconsin to all U.S. States from 2015- 2019. Note the numbers here are not the net of in- and out-migration, but simply where people from Wisconsin move most often. Migration flows are obviously concentrated around Wisconsin's neighboring states of Illinois and Minnesota. Similarly, Wisconsin experiences relatively large migration flows with the largest U.S. States – California, Texas, Florida, and New York.

Table 1. Net State-to-State Migration (2015-19)

* Wisconsin's EFI Ranking – 19th

State	Net Migration	EFI Ranking
Illinois	67,010	34
Michigan	4,411	33
Minnesota	3,312	41
New Mexico	2,982	45
Louisiana	2,386	26

State	Net Migration	EFI Ranking
Florida	-12,999	2
Arizona	-11,917	20
Georgia	-8,773	6
Colorado	-7,186	13
Utah	-6,397	5

Table 1 shows the top 5 states for greatest and least net migration for Wisconsin, along with the Economic Freedom Index ranking for those states. Similar to the MSA pairings, Wisconsin gains substantially from states ranked lower in economic freedom across the country.

The states with which Wisconsin has the greatest net gains are Illinois and Michigan. Both Illinois and Michigan ranked well below Wisconsin (19) in economic freedom. Illinois is far-and-away the state which Wisconsin gains the most from.

At the other end of the spectrum, Wisconsin lost the most residents to two states that are often seen as retirement destinations--Florida and Arizona. Arizona is the only state in the top five that was ranked below Wisconsin in economic freedom. However, it should be noted that the state was on an upward trajectory, and had passed Wisconsin by the 2021 rankings. Overall, Wisconsin loses a net of 37,855 to states with higher EFI scores, and gains about 64,194 from states with worse scores.

MIGRATION INTO AND OUT OF WISCONSIN MSAS

Figure 4 shows the annual net migration balance by Counties from 2010 to 2015, shaded to represent each MSA. The Appleton, Racine, and Madison MSAs were the largest recipients of net migration, each adding more than 450 migrants. The loss of migrants from Milwaukee overshadowed net migration of all the other MSAs combined, with Milwaukee losing more than 1,500 residents.

Table 2 provides additional summary statistics on the in- and out- migration of Wisconsin MSAs. Appleton, Racine, Madison, Janesville, Green Bay,

Figure 4. Migration Balance by MSA Counties

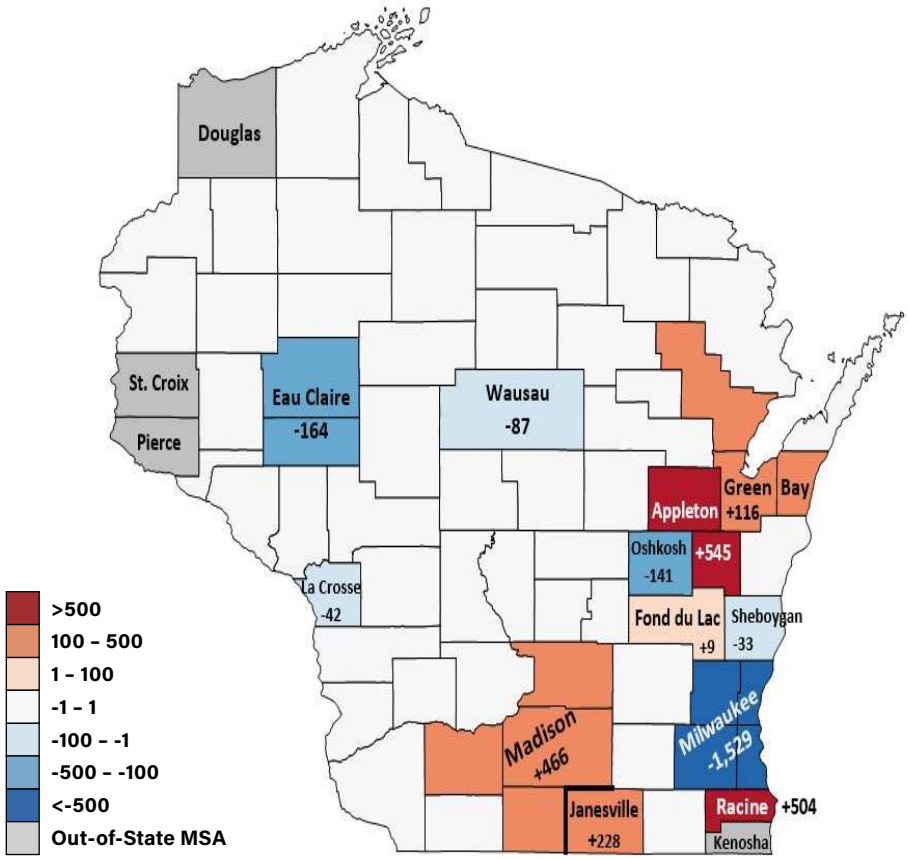
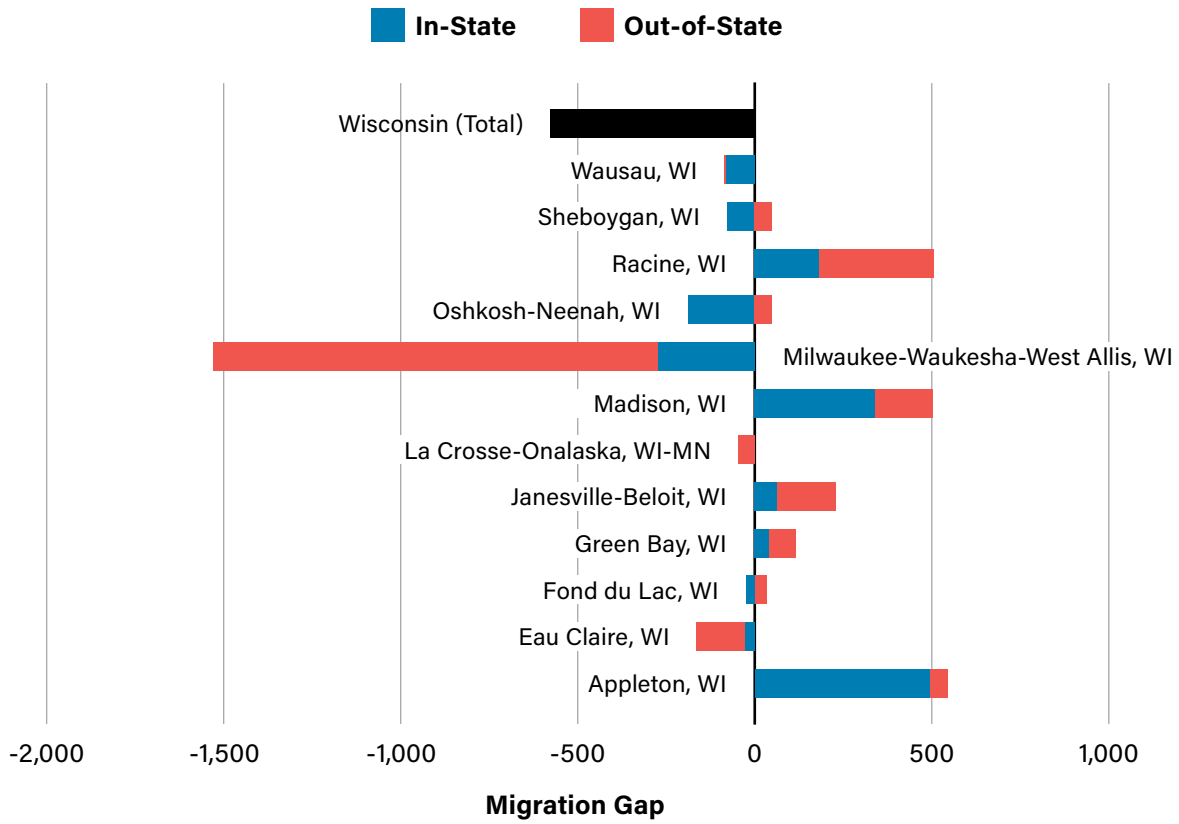


Table 2. 2010-2015 Annual Average of All Migration Flows to WI MSAs

MSA Name	Inward Migration	Outward Migration	Migration Balance (Net-Migration Share)
Appleton, WI	5598	5053	**+545 (5.12%)**
Racine, WI	4486	3982	**+504 (5.95%)**
Madison, WI	10899	10433	**+466 (2.18%)**
Janesville-Beloit, WI	2714	2486	**+228 (4.38%)**
Green Bay, WI	3428	3312	**+116 (1.72%)**
Fond du Lac, WI	1601	1592	**+9 (0.28%)**
Sheboygan, WI	1646	1679	**-33 (-0.99%)**
La Crosse-Onalaska, WI-MN	973	1015	**-42 (-2.11%)**
Wausau, WI	4876	4963	**-87 (-4.60%)**
Oshkosh-Neenah, WI	4474	4615	**-141 (- 1.55%)**
Eau Claire, WI	1081	1245	**-164 (-7.05%)**
Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis, WI	17888	19417	**-1529 (-4.10%)**

Figure 5. Migration Gap: In-State Vs. Out-of-State



and Fond du Lac lead the state in net migration. Sheboygan, La Crosse, Wausau, Oshkosh, Eau Claire, and Milwaukee all lost more migrants than they attracted.

The two largest gainers, Appleton and Racine, both see a meaningful increase in their net migration of more than 500 residents, a positive migration balance of more than 5%. In percentage terms, the largest percentage losses came from Eau Claire, Wausau, and Milwaukee, at -7.05%, -4.50%, and -4.10% respectively.

Figure 5 shows whether the net migration described above is primarily from in-state or out-of-state moves. Orange represents net changes resulting from out-of-state migration, while blue represent net changes resulting from in-state moves. We find that the three largest gainers, Appleton, Racine, and Madison, all see a positive gap in both their in-state and out-of-state migration. Appleton and Madison are predominantly gaining from in-state migration, while Racine is mainly gaining from out-of-state. The majority of Racine's positive margin is due to a large gain of migrants from the Chicago area, while a majority of Appleton's comes from its southern neighbor Oshkosh. Madison gains from all Wisconsin MSA's except for Janesville.

Milwaukee and Eau Claire are losing migrants to both in-state and out-of-state MSAs. As a whole, Wisconsin faces a negative external U.S. migration gap, and large net losers like Milwaukee are a big part of the reason why. If Milwaukee were to increase economic freedom, the state may become a net-gainer.

WISCONSIN MIGRATION BETWEEN REGIONAL AND NATIONAL MSAS

Wisconsin experiences negative overall net migration. But where are these people going?

Table 3 depicts the top 10 cities for Wisconsin migrants. The first two columns depict the MSAs from which Wisconsin gains the most residents on net ("Winners"), while the latter two columns show the cities to which we lose the most residents

Table 3. Top Migration Cities for Wisconsin in 2012

"WINNERS"			"LOSERS"		
City	**Net-Migration** (Total Migration)	**Economic Freedom** (out of 382)	**City**	**Net-Migration (Total Migration)**	**Economic Freedom** (out of 382)
Chicago, IL	**1,656** (15,032)	277	Minneapolis, MN	**-634** (4,824)	207
Rockford, IL	**267** (1,955)	301	Phoenix, AZ	**-576** (2,470)	94
Peoria, IL	**80** (122)	216	Austin, TX	**-368** (656)	28
Detroit, MI	**75** (605)	260	Dallas, TX	**-287** (1,107)	19
New York, NY	**57** (959)	353	Houston, TX	**-224** (686)	8
Rochester, MN	**45** (429)	233	Seattle, WA	**-150** (732)	188
New Haven, CT	**39** (73)	240	Atlanta, GA	**-118** (834)	73
Iowa City, IA	**36** (158)	105	Denver, CO	**-111** (491)	90
Champaign, IL	**29** (131)	270	Tampa, FL	**-104** (620)	14
Bloomington, IL	**28** (64)	254	San Francisco, CA	**-104** (518)	211

Regional **National**

("Losers"). In parentheses under the net migration is the total number of moves into and out of Wisconsin from that city.

Wisconsin is primarily dominated by regional migration with respect to cities closer to the state's border. With total migration in 2012 equating to 15,032 taxpayers, the city which sees the largest total inflow to Wisconsin, by a very large margin, is Chicago, IL. This makes Wisconsin a net-gainer of 1,656, the largest margin of migration relationships.

There does appear to be a pattern of moves from low EFI cities and to high EFI cities. Four of the top five cities for net migration losses rank in the top 100 of EFI. The one exception to this rule, the Minneapolis MSA, is obviously located very close to the Wisconsin border, bringing other considerations into play. This stands in stark contrast to the MSAs from which Wisconsin gains the most, of which none rank in the top 100.

Wisconsin sees a majority of its regional migration (determined as bordering states) coming from Chicago, IL; Minneapolis, MN; Rockford, IL; Detroit, MI; and Rochester, MN. Table 4 shows the number of total number of migrants, migration gap, and Economic Freedom ranking of the five non-Wisconsin MSAs that had the most migrants move between that MSA and any Wisconsin MSA.

At the regional level, Wisconsin is a net-gainer due in great part to positive migration from Chicago and Rockford, IL, into southern Wisconsin. The poor economic freedom scores of the MSAs from which Wisconsin sees it largest in-migration suggest that economic freedom may be a significant factor in migration decisions.

Most of the long-distance migration (or moves greater than one state away) involve the most populous cities in the state, Milwaukee and Madison. Not surprisingly, most of the long-distance migration for Wisconsin involves the more populous cities in other states. Table 5 shows that Wisconsin is gaining from cities such as Los Angeles and New York City, which all rank poorly in the Economic Freedom Index.

MSAs where Wisconsin is losing the most residents are with cities such as Phoenix, Austin, and Dallas, who rank highly in economic freedom. Table 6 shows the top 5 MSAs where Wisconsin sees the most net outmigration. These findings support those from studies which have concluded that economic freedom had a strong relationship with migration decisions across the US.[14]

Figure 6 plots the relationship of each MSA's city's economic freedom score and its migration balance, fitting a linear line to show the relationship between the five-year average Migration Balance and Economic Freedom in 2012. The data show a positive relationship between a migration balance and Economic Freedom.

Next, we explore long distance migration trends for Wisconsin (moves outside of the upper Midwest). Here we measure Wisconsin's aggregate migration balance with each MSA. For example, if 1,000 total people migrated between all of Wisconsin and the Dallas, TX MSA, with 400 immigrating to Wisconsin and 600 emigrating to Dallas, the balance would be -0.2. We suspect that Wisconsin migrants will follow national trends, resulting in greater migration balances (higher on the y-axis) for MSAs that are less popular nationally (further left on the x-axis) and negative migration balances (lower on the y-axis) for MSAs that are pulling in migrants from across the country (farther right on the x-axis).

Table 4. Largest Migration Regional Pairs

	Total Migration	Migration Gap	Economic Freedom (out of 382)
Chicago, IL	15,032	1,656	277
Minneapolis, MN	4,824	-634	207
Rockford, IL	1,955	267	301
Detroit, MI	605	75	260
Rochester, MN	429	45	233
Total Regional	**24,737**	**+1,809**	

Table 5. Largest Migration Long Distance Pairs

	Total Migration	Migration Gap	Economic Freedom (out of 382)
Phoenix, AZ	2,470	-576	94
Los Angeles, CA	1,417	15	281
Dallas-FW, TX	1,107	-287	19
New York, NY	959	57	353
San Diego, CA	901	-41	241
Total Regional	**22,384**	**-2,388**	

Table 6. Wisconsin's Largest Net Outmigration MSAs

	Total Migration	Economic Freedom (out of 382)	Gap Gain Rank (out of 382)
Phoenix, AZ	-576	94	9
Austin, TX	-368	28	1
Dallas-FW, TX	-287	19	3
Houston, TX	-224	8	2
Seattle, WA	-150	188	12

Figure 6. Migration Balance and Economic Freedom

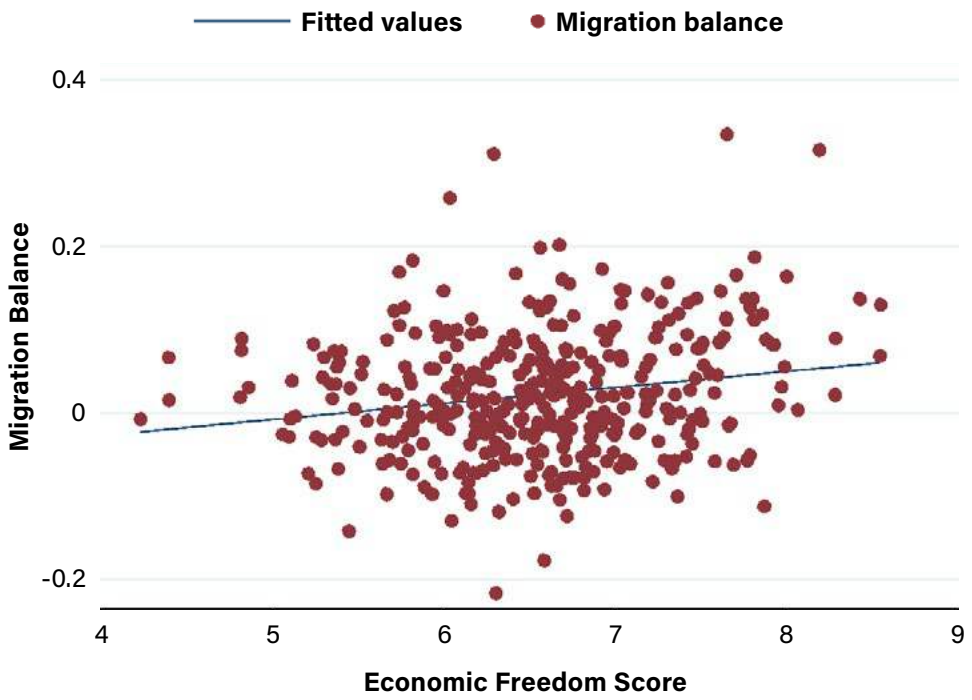


Figure 7. Wisconsin vs. City Popularity

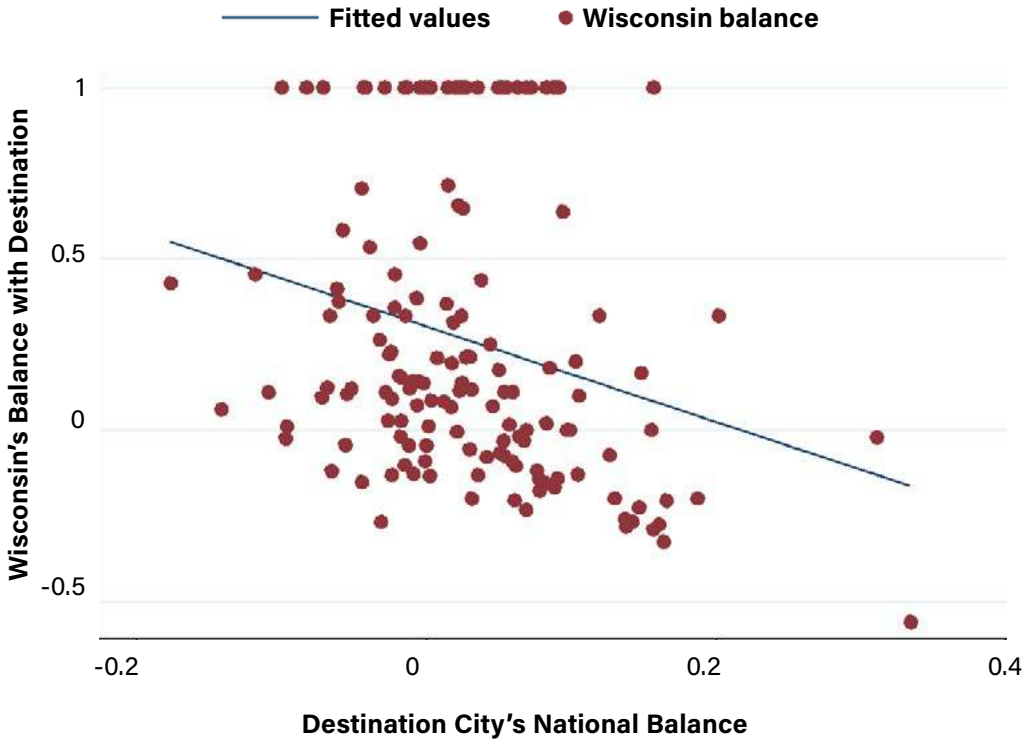


Figure 7 plots the relationship between Wisconsin's migration balance with other MSAs and the national migration balance of those MSAs. The negative slope on the fitted line supports that hypothesized relationship between national migration trends and those for Wisconsin migrants. In other words, migrants from Wisconsin are moving to similar places as are migrants from other parts of the country.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: MSAS THAT CROSS STATE LINES

In Wisconsin, several counties are part of MSAs that are centered across state borders. Kenosha County is part of the Chicago MSA, while both Pierce and St. Croix Counties are part of the Minneapolis MSA. Do we see evidence that individuals are moving to these counties for a friendlier economic environment relative to staying in the MSA's 'home' state? Table 7 presents the net migration to Wisconsin Counties that are part of the Chicago or Minneapolis MSAs.[15]

All three Wisconsin counties that were part of the Minneapolis or Chicago MSAs saw positive net migration from across the border. Kenosha County was the largest recipient of net migrants, with nearly 2,500 individuals crossing the border to Kenosha from Illinois. We would expect that aggregate migration numbers would be larger in these border counties that are part of larger MSAs, but the fact that all the counties have positive net migration from across the border suggests that migrants may be voting with their feet by choosing Wisconsin residency and Wisconsin policy over the neighboring options.

Table 7. 2015-2019 Net Migration to Wisconsin Counties that are Part of the Chicago or Minneapolis MSAs

County	Net Migration from IL or MN
Kenosha	+2,464
Pierce	+978
St. Croix	+61

Conclusion

America has always been a nation on the move, seeking opportunities wherever they may be. The data gathered in this paper shows that this has not changed in recent years—Americans still seek to live in places that offer them the greatest economic opportunity. In this study, we showed that population growth through migration is slow in Wisconsin. Wisconsin is a net beneficiary of regional migration within the upper Midwest. However, for larger moves outside the region, Wisconsin loses many more people than it attracts. Wisconsin's major net losses come from migrants moving to cities in Arizona and Texas.

States like Wisconsin doubtless face disadvantages when it comes to migration, particularly in the realm of climate. But that just means the state must be even more diligent in creating a policy environment conducive to growth. The policy solutions to increase migration of workers are not hard to identify.

Wisconsin should prioritize greater economic freedom in the form of a smaller tax burden, less government regulation, and less restrictive labor market policies. Important policies that could improve Wisconsin's economic freedom include improvements to the state's tax code—eliminating or flattening the state income tax being chief among them. Greater land-use freedom that allows property owners to utilize their property as they see fit. This approach allows for the sort of mixed-used development that is appealing to younger workers and increases housing supplies, thereby lowering costs. A third area for improvement is occupational licensing, where Wisconsin is also mid-pack. The state should be laser-focused on making it as easy as possible for new workers to move to the state, and onerous licensing requirements can serve as a barrier.

The data in this study suggest that if Wisconsin policymakers create policy reform that improves economic freedom, Wisconsin can realize real gains in migration. Outdoing Illinois is no longer enough, and the state must look to better compete against the entire nation.

Endnotes

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Appendix

Appendix Table A1. Freedom in the 50 States Rankings, 2021

State	Rank	State	Rank
New Hampshire	1	Louisiana	26
Florida	2	Washington	27
Tennessee	3	Iowa	28
Virginia	4	South Carolina	29
Texas	5	Montana	30
Georgia	6	New Jersey	31
South Dakota	7	Arkansas	32
Idaho	8	Michigan	33
Oklahoma	9	Illinois	34
Kansas	10	Alabama	35
Indiana	11	Maine	36
North Dakota	12	Ohio	37
Colorado	13	Rhode Island	38
North Carolina	14	Delaware	39
Nebraska	15	Hawaii	40
Missouri	16	Minnesota	41
Massachusetts	17	Mississippi	42
Maryland	18	Kentucky	43
Wisconsin	19	California	44
Arizona	20	New Mexico	45
Nevada	21	Oregon	46
Wyoming	22	Vermont	47
Utah	23	Alaska	48
Connecticut	24	West Virginia	49
Pennsylvania	25	New York	50


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330 East Kilbourn Ave.|Suite 725
Milwaukee, WI 53202

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414-727-9455

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