HIGH ROAD STRATEGY CENTER

The State of WORKING WISCONSIN



2026

Acknowledgments

The State of Working Wisconsin 2026 is written by Laura Dresser, Joel Rogers, and Leslie Vasquez.

The images for our Unions chapter and text boxes throughout the report are courtesy of SEIU Wisconsin, a union representing more than 7,000 healthcare, property services, and public sector workers across the state. SEIU Wisconsin advocates for better wages, safe working conditions and quality public services.

We would also like to thank the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) in Washington, D.C. for their support with data and analysis.

About the High Road Strategy Center

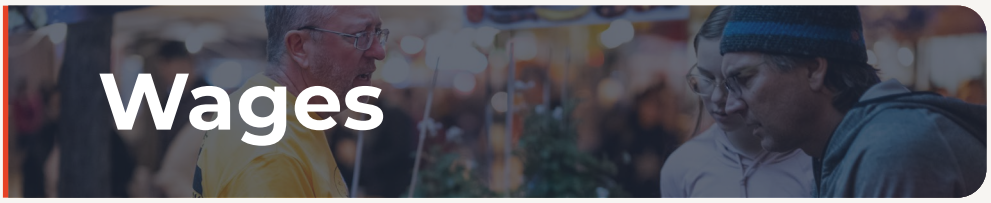
High Road Strategy Center is a nonprofit think-and-do tank, based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that promotes "high road" solutions to social problems. These treat shared growth and opportunity, environmental sustainability, and resilient democratic institutions as necessary and achievable complements in human development. Through our various projects, we work with communities around the country to promote innovation and the implementation of high road policy and practice. Our work is nonpartisan but values-based. We seek a world of equal opportunity and security for all.

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Key Facts

Wisconsin job growth grinds to a halt

Wisconsin had 3,042,900 jobs in July 2026, down from the record 3,051,000 jobs reached in November 2024. Since January 2025, the state has actually lost jobs while national job growth has continued, though slowly.

Wisconsin's unemployment slowly rises, while Black unemployment surges

In the first quarter of 2026, Wisconsin's Black unemployment rate was 7.2%, nearly three times the 2.3% white rate. Black-white unemployment disparity has risen sharply over the past year, and Wisconsin ranks among the worst in the nation.

Wisconsin median wage reaches a record high: $26.17

Over the past decade, accounting for inflation, Wisconsin's median hourly wage has risen from $22.10 to $26.17.

Strong wage growth for Wisconsin's lower-wage workers reduces wage inequality

From 2019 to 2025, wages for workers at the 20th percentile rose 16%, compared with 8% for workers at the 80th percentile.

Wisconsin's unionization falls three times faster than national

From 2011 to 2025, Wisconsin's unionization rate fell from 14% to 7.5%, while the national rate declined from 13% to 11%. Wisconsin's rate has fallen faster than every neighboring state.

Surging prices leave more and more working Wisconsinites unable to cover the basics

One in three working Wisconsin families face substantial financial hardship. Federal policies are exacerbating the affordability crisis.

The massive deportation campaign is costly and is reducing employment

Recent research finds that deportations reduce the employment of both immigrants and non-immigrants.

INTRODUCTION

30 YEARS OF WORKING WISCONSIN!

Since 1996, the High Road Strategy Center (formerly COWS), celebrating Labor Day and Wisconsin workers, has released *The State of Working Wisconsin*. **This is our 30th year!**

We've released this report in tight labor markets and very loose ones, through the tech boom of the late 1990s, the Great Recession of 2008, the following anemic decade-long recovery from it, and the COVID-19 pandemic collapse. In each report, we analyze the most recent data available on wages, jobs, and unions to provide a clear picture of how the working people of the state are doing. In doing so, we seek to make the impact of economic change on people's lives more clear and provide a set of facts that can be a starting point for improving the state of working Wisconsin.

In 1996, there were no state models to draw on and few resources to support the project of pulling together a report providing a workers' view on the economy. The *1996 State of Working Wisconsin* was the first, but over time economists and advocates in other states created their own state reports. With increasing support from EARN at the Economic Policy Institute, today more than 40 groups across the nation release reports on working people in their states.

For the state's workers, we find bad and good in the data this Labor Day. Job growth has stalled. Wisconsin has fewer jobs today than November of 2024 when the state reached a record high. Unemployment remains quite low but has been rising slowly overall and increasing the most for the state's Black workers. These are warning signs: the economy is cooling, and workers' bargaining power may be cooling with it. Still in 2025, wages reached a record high of $26.17 per hour. The steady wage growth of the last decade stands in contrast to declines and stagnation in much of the preceding 35 years. That is good news. But in 2026 inflation is outrunning wages, possibly bringing wages down next year. The low unemployment rate is good news, but the loss of jobs, increasing unemployment for Black workers, and surging inflation suggest this is a fragile moment in the economy.

The short-term picture is mixed, and as we've long documented, the long-term trends include deep problems of rising inequality and poor job quality for lower-wage workers. The state economy is riddled with inequalities by geography, race, education, and gender. Work doesn't guarantee access to decent pay, predictable schedules, health insurance, or a decent standard of living for families, especially for the state's lowest wage workers. These workers have gained ground in recent years. They still face impossible choices just to make ends meet. By building the collective voice of workers, unions improve wages and working conditions. However, Wisconsin state policies have undermined unions, and despite increasing interest in and support for them, the state's unionization has collapsed much more rapidly than in neighboring states.

Surging prices leave more and more working Wisconsinites unable to cover the basics. Even a relatively modest standard of living can be beyond the reach of two full-time workers and recent price increases for gas and utilities are increasing the stress. One in three of the state's working families face impossible decisions covering basic needs. Federal policy is exacerbating affordability problems as divestment from health care and food programs reduces support for families, even as tariffs and surging energy prices raise costs. While the question of affordability is generally framed as a problem of the **cost** of living, the problem is equally or even better understood as a problem of **suppressed pay**. Raising the minimum wage and making it easier to join a union would both increase paychecks.

Wisconsin's immigrant community makes enormous contributions to our state economy. More than 320,000 immigrants in the state contribute $23 billion to the state's economy each year. These workers have faced increasing fear and uncertainty as the federal government has pursued a massive deportation campaign. The campaign is enormously expensive, and recent research finds it drags employment down across the board. The average Wisconsin taxpayer is paying $1,728 for the federal deportation agenda – tax money that could be used to make health care, child care, and food more affordable. And for every 1000 arrests, negative employment effects spill over to immigrant workers and to non-immigrants as well.

For working people in Wisconsin, the Labor Day 2026 picture is mixed. While overall unemployment remains low, the state isn't adding jobs and Black unemployment is growing. While the median wage has reached an all-time high, surging inflation in 2026 means that wage growth is likely coming to an end. The stress of increasing prices has Wisconsinites focused on affordability, and federal policies are making many things less affordable. There are bright spots. But the clouds are gathering.

JOBS

Since late 2024, Wisconsin's job market has gone flat. From 2020 to 2024, Wisconsin's economy added jobs steadily and reached record highs. But since January 2025, the state has actually lost jobs. With 3,042,900 jobs in July, Wisconsin has fewer jobs than in November 2024 when we reached a record high of 3,051,000 jobs. Wisconsin's economy has grown slowly relative to the national economy for years, and now job growth has ground to a halt.

At just 3.3%, unemployment in the state remains low. Even so, it is drifting upward from the unprecedented 2.6% low in early 2023. More concerning, Black unemployment is growing much more rapidly than unemployment for other groups. In 2023, when the unemployment rate was at its low and the labor market was strong, the gap between Black and white unemployment shrank. But as the overall rate has drifted up, the Black rate has grown much more swiftly. The gap between Black and white unemployment rates in Wisconsin – where Black residents are 2.9 times more likely to be unemployed – marks Wisconsin's return to having one of the largest racial disparities in the nation.

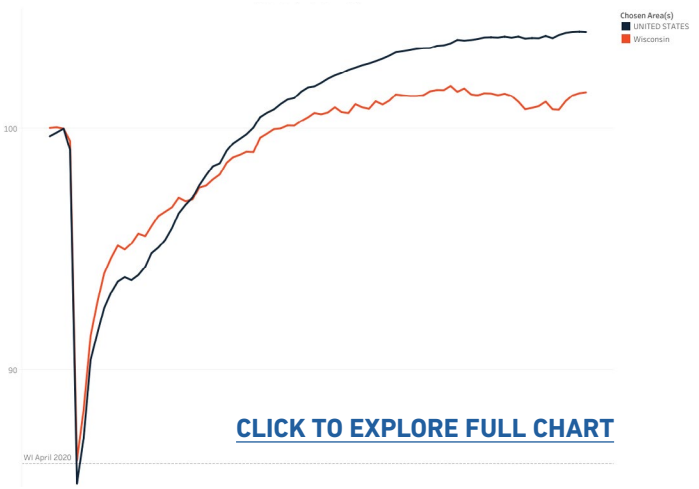
Relatively low unemployment rates are good news for workers, providing workers with higher bargaining power. Workers can leave their jobs for better opportunities, or they can use the credible threat of leaving to secure improvements in the jobs they hold. Over the last year, both the decline in jobs and increasing racial disparity in unemployment suggest the labor market is cooling, and the bargaining power of workers is declining.

Wisconsin continues to have a relatively high labor force participation rate – 64.3% of working-age people in Wisconsin are in the labor market compared to the national rate of 62.4%. Wisconsin's engagement with work is above national levels for both women and men. Wisconsin's high engagement with work is a strength, but our relative advantage has declined over the past decade.

National job growth has been sluggish, and Wisconsin has lost jobs. Prices also continue to rise with inflation at 2.5% in July. The strength of the economy over the post-COVID-19 lockdown period is waning. Continuing uncertainty in economic policy, divestment by the federal government, and disruptions in energy markets are reducing the options and power of working people.

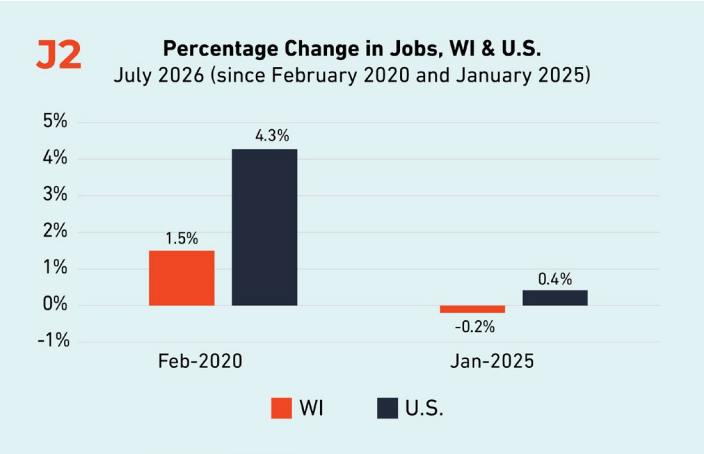
STAGNATION IN WISCONSIN JOBS

J1 shows a stalled job market.



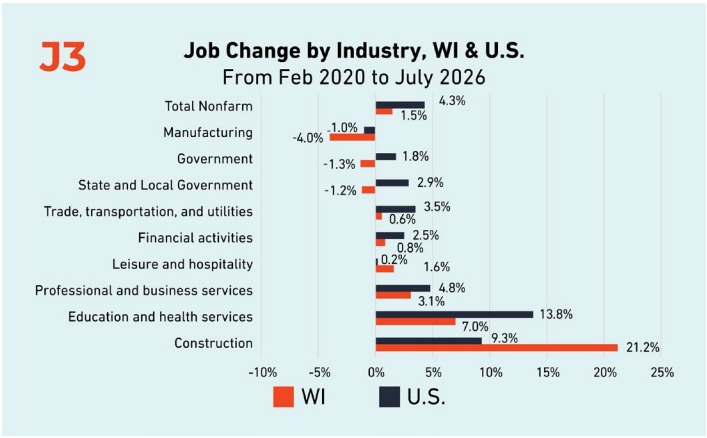
Wisconsin had 3,042,900 jobs in July 2026, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This is fewer jobs than in November 2024 when the Wisconsin job market reached its all-time high. Job growth has sputtered ever since, drifting below the 2024 peak.

J1 shows the trajectory of job recovery for Wisconsin and the nation. Wisconsin's job growth has lagged the national rate since September 2021. The national economy reached the pre-pandemic jobs threshold before Wisconsin did and continues to grow more rapidly. In July 2026, the nation had 4% more jobs than it did before the pandemic shutdowns (in February 2020). Wisconsin added just under 2% to the labor market during the same period.



Weakness in Wisconsin's labor market is clear in J2. Considering the period from February of 2020 to July of 2026, Wisconsin's job market grew by just 1.5%. Nationally, jobs grew 4.3%—nearly three times Wisconsin's pace. Overall national stagnation and Wisconsin's relative disadvantage in jobs are clear in the second period on J2. Nationally, since January of 2025, the labor market has just barely grown. In Wisconsin, the job market has slightly contracted.

Wisconsin's strong construction growth and relative weakness in nearly all other sectors are evident in J3.



Wisconsin's strongest industries stand out in J3. Only Wisconsin's construction and leisure and hospitality industries have grown faster than the national rate. Wisconsin's construction sector is especially strong. Since February 2020, the construction industry has grown by over 20%, adding jobs at twice the national rate. Over the same period, our leisure and hospitality industry grew slightly (an increase in jobs of 1.6%, while the national industry barely grew at all).

In all other sectors, Wisconsin's growth rates lag the national rates. Weak Wisconsin job growth is especially clear in education and health services where Wisconsin added just 7% while jobs in that sector grew by 14% nationally, twice as fast. The national pace of growth is stronger across three other important industries: trade, transportation, and utilities (Wisconsin up just 0.6% compared to 3.5% growth nationally); financial activities (Wisconsin up 0.8% compared to jobs up 2.5% nationally), and professional and business services (Wisconsin up 3.1% compared to national 4.8%). In government and state and local government, Wisconsin is losing jobs, while those sectors are growing nationally.

The trend in Wisconsin's manufacturing sector is especially disturbing. In July 2026, Wisconsin had 4% fewer manufacturing jobs than it did before the pandemic shutdowns (February 2020). U.S. manufacturing lost 1% of its jobs over the same period. Wisconsin is losing manufacturing jobs and losing them much more rapidly than the national decline.

On "Liberation Day" in April 2025, tariffs were announced with the intent to revitalize the nation's manufacturing sector. The trends in manufacturing since then provide no evidence of a manufacturing renaissance. In part, the tariffs have been volatile and unpredictable due to shifting administrative policy priorities and court cases against various tariffs. The federal tariff policy has changed more than 50 times. This unpredictability dampens economic growth as businesses struggle to determine what future prices and market access will look like.

The U.S. Supreme Court struck down sweeping tariffs imposed by the Trump administration in February. U.S. retailers reported receiving more than $5 billion in refunds from those tariffs. As recently reported in Forbes: "despite studies showing that consumers bore the brunt of the initial tariff costs, companies are still largely keeping the windfalls for themselves." The tariff policy has raised prices for consumers with little discernible impact on manufacturing jobs.

We remain skeptical of the longer-term prospects of tariffs rebuilding Wisconsin's manufacturing base. The Economic Policy Institute takes on the question below.

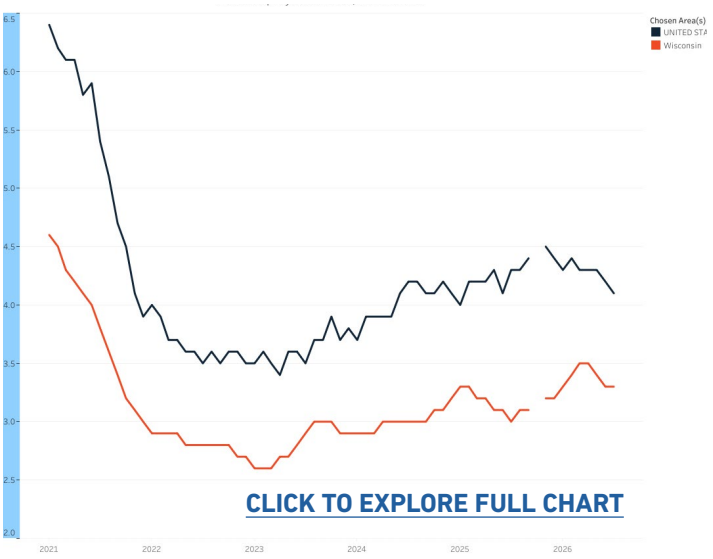
Can high and broad-based tariffs fix the U.S. trade deficit or rebuild manufacturing employment?

"**No**, mostly because high and broad-based tariffs will also reduce exports along with imports, and this will leave the balance of trade mostly unchanged. Exports fall when tariffs are introduced for a number of reasons. The first is that many U.S. exports use imports as intermediate inputs to final goods produced in the United States. Making these inputs more expensive with tariffs will boost the price of these U.S. exports and make them less competitive in global markets. Second, trading partners are highly likely to retaliate to U.S. tariffs with tariffs of their own, making exports more expensive in international markets—which we've seen on "Made in America" goods from Boeing airplanes to Kentucky bourbon. And finally, tariffs will put upward pressure on the value of the U.S. dollar in global markets, which will make our exports more expensive and will increase the attractiveness of imports to U.S. customers—primary causes of U.S. trade deficits and manufacturing job losses."

From EPI, *Tariffs: Everything You Need to Know but Were Afraid to Ask*

UNEMPLOYMENT IS DRIFTING UPWARD

J4 Unemployment Rate, Wisconsin and the United States, January 2021 – July 2026



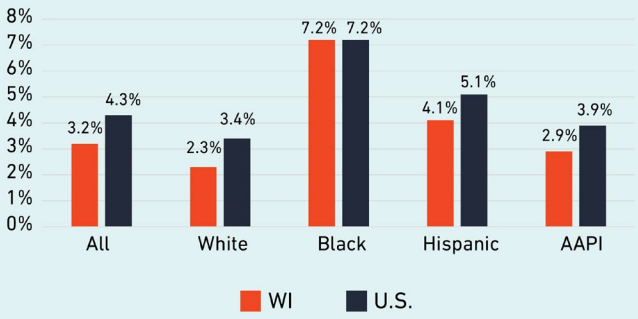
Wisconsin's 3.3% unemployment rate is low but has been drifting upward slowly since 2023. With the state losing jobs, it is likely that the rate will continue to rise.

If unemployment climbs further, workers will lose leverage. Workers feel more secure seeking better pay and working conditions when they know opportunity is abundant. As unemployment rises slowly, workers may begin to feel less secure as they seek better pay, schedules, and benefits.

DISPARITY IN UNEMPLOYMENT BY RACE AND GEOGRAPHY

Racial disparities in Wisconsin's unemployment are substantial, with Black and Brown workers much more likely to be unemployed than white workers in the state. The disparity between Black and white workers has been extreme, and we have documented the high level of disparity, especially in unemployment, in previous editions of The State of Working Wisconsin. (See *Race in the Heartland* for a summary of Wisconsin's extreme racial disparity.)

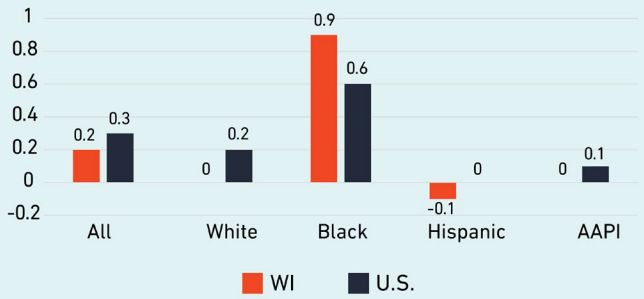
J5 Unemployment by Race and Ethnicity, WI & U.S.
Q1 2026



Disparity in unemployment is evident in J5, which provides estimates of unemployment rates for racial and ethnic categories in the first three months of 2026 (Q1 2026). In Wisconsin, the white unemployment rate of 2.3% is the lowest, while the Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders rate (2.9%) is slightly higher. Black unemployment – 7.2% – is nearly three times the white rate. For Hispanics, the unemployment rate of 4.1% is also substantially higher than the white rate.

The Black-white disparity has risen dramatically over the last year and now puts us among the highest disparities in the nation. With very low unemployment in 2023, the disparity shrank in the state. It is disturbing to see this resurgence in Black-white disparity in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin disparity in Q1 2026 was the highest Black-white disparity in the nation.

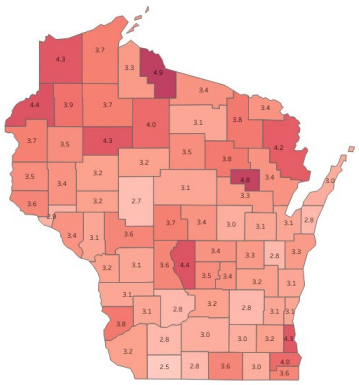
J6 Change in Unemployment by Race and Ethnicity, WI & U.S.
Percentage point change from 2024-2025



The increasing Black-white unemployment gap is apparent in J6. The white unemployment rate did not rise from 2024 to 2025 in Wisconsin. Rates for Hispanics and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were roughly steady as well. Even as rates of unemployment were steady for other groups, Black unemployment surged over that period, rising from 5.9% to 6.8%.

J7 Unemployment Rate by County in Wisconsin
(in %, as of June 2026)

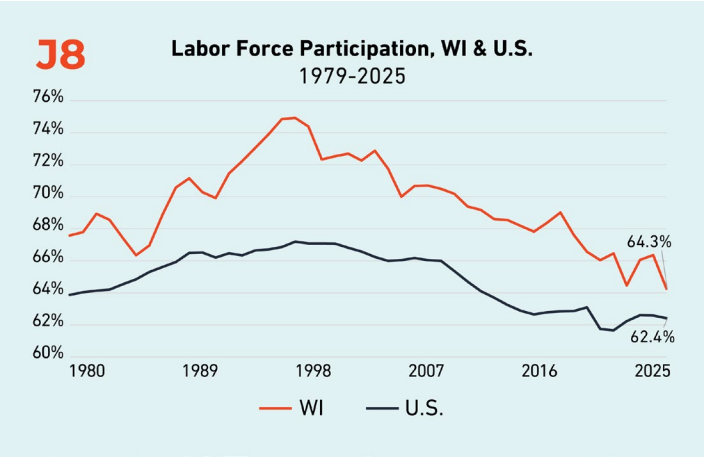
CLICK TO EXPLORE FULL CHART



In Wisconsin, geography shapes opportunity, and county unemployment rates show it plainly. In June 2026, unemployment in the state ranged from a low in Lafayette County of 2.5% to a high in Iron County of 4.9%. Forty-four of Wisconsin's 72 counties had extremely low unemployment below 3%. Iron County's unemployment rate is more than twice that of Lafayette County, which is a substantial disparity. Unemployment rates in all counties are near their historic lows and drifting upwards. Sustained low unemployment appears to be decreasing the geographic disparities in unemployment rates.

WISCONSINITES ARE COMMITTED TO WORK

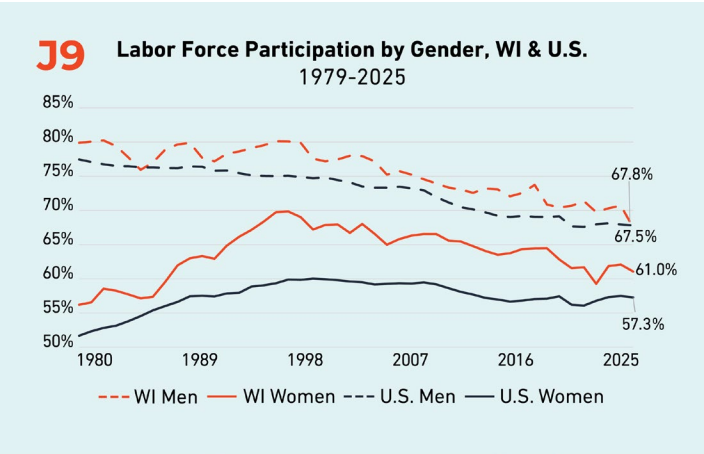
Wisconsin's labor force participation rate is consistently and substantially higher than the national level.



Wisconsin's commitment to work is evident in the share of working-age people in the labor force, the "labor force participation rate." J8 compares labor force participation in the U.S. and Wisconsin from 1979 to 2025. Wisconsinites have consistently shown a stronger attachment to work, with the state's 2025 labor force participation rate at 64.3% compared to the national rate of 62.4%.

Women in Wisconsin Are Especially Committed to Work.

Over the last 40 years, men's labor force participation has been declining while women's participation rose substantially from 1979-1999 and then drifted down in recent years.



J9 shows that while Wisconsin reflects those national trends, workers in the state – both men and women – have historically shown a greater connection to work. In 2025, 68% of Wisconsin men participated in the labor force (which matched the national 68% rate).

Wisconsin women's labor force participation is consistently above national rates of participation: 61% of Wisconsin women worked in 2025, compared to 57% of women nationally. While Wisconsinites are committed to work, our advantage relative to national rates of work has been shrinking.

WAGES

WAGES MATTER

For Wisconsin's 3 million workers, wages are the most important measure of job quality.

Wages are our clearest measure of job quality. We track wages over time to show how the quality and inequality of work are changing. The data provide some very good news – the state's median wage, $26.17 per hour, reached a record high in inflation-adjusted wages. Wages have grown steadily in recent years, up from $24 in 2022 to $26 in 2025 (again, this corrects for inflation). Wisconsin's 2026 wage data is not yet available, but the signs there are troubling. Inflation has risen, and wage gains have been weaker. As it did in 2022, inflation could wipe out the wage gains of 2026. The median wage provides an aggregate picture but cannot illuminate deep and shifting gaps by race, gender, ethnicity, and education, which we explore throughout this chapter as well.

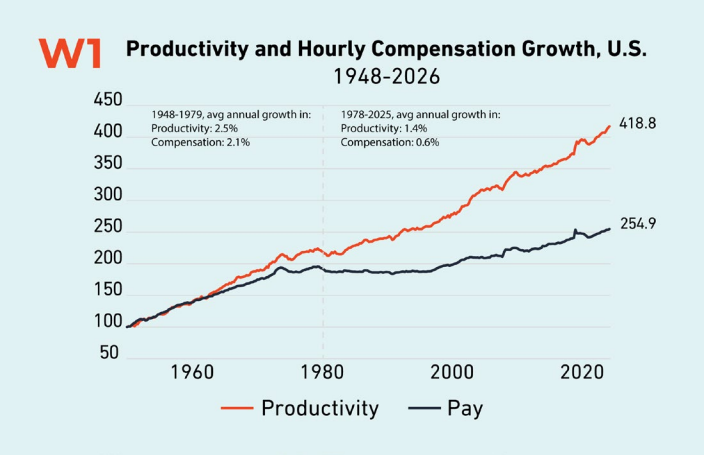
This section draws on the most recent data available from the U.S. Current Population Survey, providing median hourly wages through 2025. Throughout the chapter, we take inflation into account by reporting all values in 2025 dollars. This inflation adjustment provides a view of wages in terms of consistent purchasing power. Our data cover all workers in the state, those who are paid hourly wages and those who earn salaries. For salary earners, hourly wages are calculated by dividing earnings by hours of work. Throughout, we offer analysis of median hourly wages (the

wage for the worker at the middle of the wage distribution) to provide the perspective from the center of Wisconsin's labor market.

We start with the long view. Since the 1970s, economic growth and worker well-being have diverged. Though productivity is growing rapidly, workers' wages have grown much more slowly. This long-term picture provides a foundation for considering the current wage and long-term trends in wages for all workers and key demographic groups. We close by focusing on wage trends from 2019-2025.

THE DIVERGENCE BETWEEN ECONOMIC GROWTH AND WAGES

W1 shows that despite substantial productivity and education advances over the last four decades, median wages have only slightly increased for workers.



In *The State of Working Wisconsin*, we have long documented concerning long-term trends in workers' wages and growing inequality in the state. The underlying problem is shown in W1: despite substantial productivity and education advances over the last four decades, compensation growth has been slow. Workers do not experience enough of the rewards of economic growth.

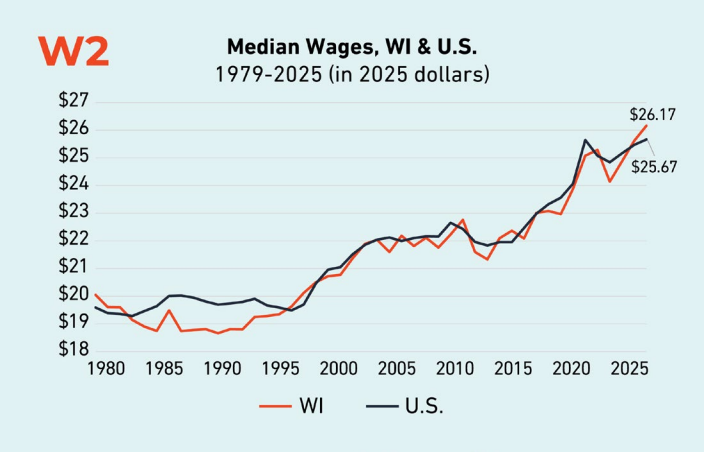
These last four decades contrast starkly with the period from the end of World War II to the 1970s. During that time, median wages were closely linked to economic growth. As the economy grew and productivity increased, workers' wages grew at roughly the same rate. This was an era of "shared prosperity" when progress paid off for working people.

By the late 1970s, productivity and wage growth diverged. Since 1979, productivity is up nearly 93% while workers' hourly pay has increased by just 34%. Productivity has grown 2.8 times as fast as pay. Despite strong wage growth over nearly half a century, economic growth has not translated into widely shared prosperity, and working people have been left behind.

MEDIAN WAGES REACH NEW HIGH: $26 PER HOUR

W2 displays median hourly wages for Wisconsin and the United States from 1979 to 2025. Wages have reached a new high.

(By adjusting for inflation and expressing all values in 2025 dollars, we can compare the actual purchasing power of wages over time.)



In 2025, Wisconsin's median wage – $26.17 per hour – reached a new high (see W2). Workers in the state have experienced three years of solid wage growth that have more than made up for the damage to wages inflicted by the very high inflation of 2022. From 2022 to 2025, the inflation-adjusted value of wages grew by $2.00 per hour. Further, the current wage is $4.00 higher than the 2015 median. This advance in wages is unprecedented in the data we have. Real wage growth in the past decade is stronger than in any period back to 1979. The 2025 Wisconsin median wage slightly exceeds the national median (which is unusual but not unprecedented).

The long-term view provided by W2 shows how remarkable the last decade of wage growth has been. Wisconsin workers actually lost ground in the 1980s with wages falling to well below the national median. Wisconsin began to make up the wage loss and finally got ahead of the 1979 median wage toward the end of the growth of the 1990s.

In the early 2000s, wages were stagnant, and the Great Recession brought wages to the 21st century's low point in 2012. Wages grew slowly from 2012 until 2018 during the sluggish recovery from the Great Recession.

Since 2018, however, wage growth has been strong. While high inflation in 2022 brought wages down, wages grew in 2023, 2024, and 2025, and in each of the last two years, Wisconsin has reached a record high.

2025 WAGE DISPARITY IN WORKING WISCONSIN

The median wage for all workers fails to capture the whole story of working people's wages in Wisconsin. Women workers, Black workers, and Hispanic workers all face considerable wage disadvantages.

W3 shows the gender gap between men's and women's wages. In 2025, men's median wage – $28.25 – exceeded women's median of $24.24 by $4 per hour. In Wisconsin, men's wages are 14% higher than women's wages.



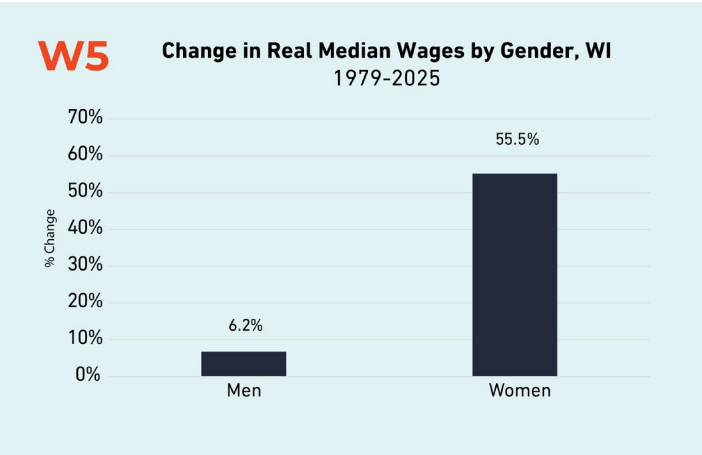
W4 illustrates the stark difference in wages based on race, ethnicity, and gender in Wisconsin and the United States.



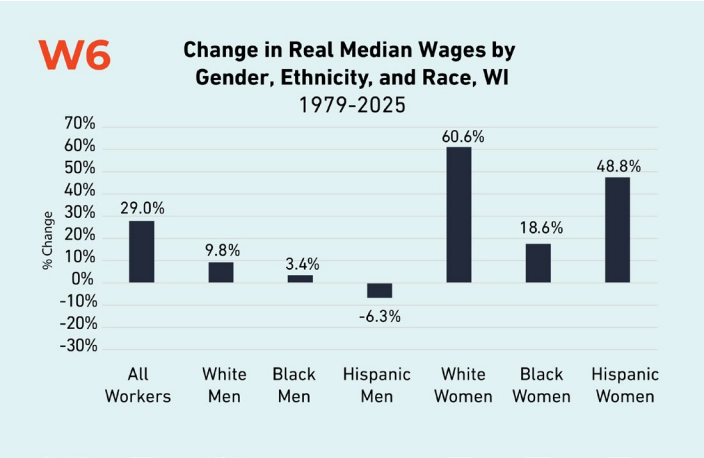
With a median wage of $29.37 per hour, white men have the highest wages. White women's median wage of $24.92 is 15% lower than white men's median. Black men's median wage of $24.04 lags white men's wages by 18%. Median wages for Black women ($20.67) and Hispanic men ($19.96) are roughly 30% lower than white men's wages. Hispanic women's wage of $18.99 is more than $10 per hour lower than white men's median wage, leaving Hispanic women 35% behind.

WISCONSIN'S WOMEN MAKE STRONG GAINS OVER 45 YEARS, RACIAL WAGE INEQUALITY GROWS

W5 and W6 demonstrate that since 1979, women's wages have grown rapidly while men's wages have only edged up.



There has been a remarkable closing in the gender wage gap. As shown in W5, from 1979 to 2025, women's wages grew by nearly 56%. Over the same period, men's wages grew by just 6%. The gender gap in wages is closing as women make gains.



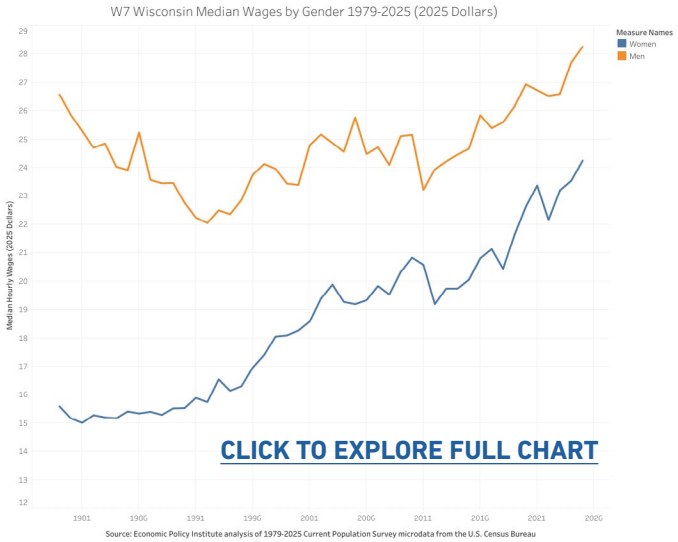
W6 makes it clear that within race and ethnicity groups, white women's growing wages are driving the positive picture for women. W6 shows that white women have experienced a nearly 61% wage growth. Black and Hispanic women have also made gains – wages up 19% for Black women and 49% for Hispanic women. These are positive trends but lag well behind white women's wage trend.

The race and ethnicity differences for men are stark as well. Men's wage trends over 1979-2025 are much less impressive. For white men, wages grew by 10%. This is lower than the increases posted by women, but still represents the most positive trend among men. Black men's wages grew only 3% while Hispanic men's fell by 6%.

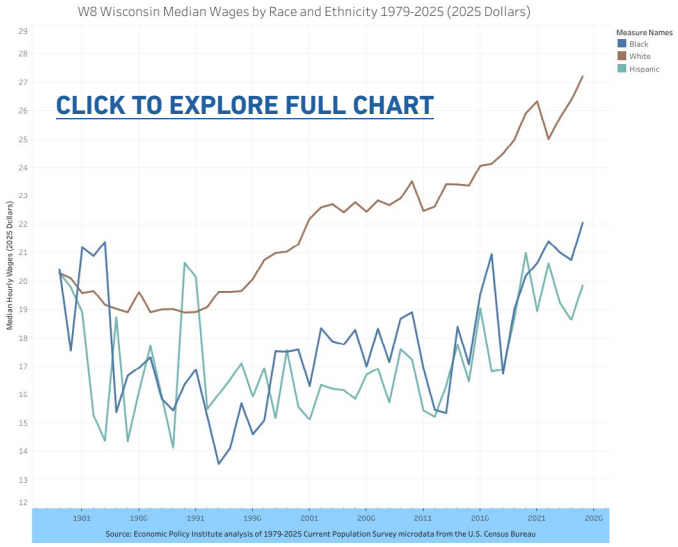
GENDER, RACIAL, AND ETHNIC WAGE DISPARITY – INTERACTIVE DATA

The figure to the right allows readers to dig into Wisconsin's median wage data for different groups. Given the strong positive wage trends for women, there is a remarkable shift in hierarchies in the Wisconsin labor market. In 1979, Wisconsin's labor market was marked by a clear gender disparity: men earned higher wages than women. This was true for race and ethnicity groups (i.e., white, Black, and Hispanic men's wages were substantially higher than white, Black, and Hispanic women's wages). By 2025, disparities by race and ethnicity were more pronounced: white men and white women had the highest median wages, followed by other race, ethnicity, and gender groups.

W7 shows how the gap in median wages between men and women has shrunk from 1979 to 2025.

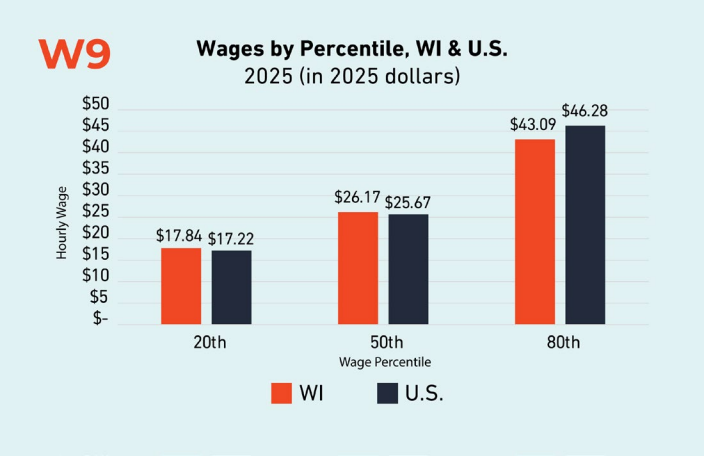


W7 and W8 provide different ways of looking at the data. The interactive presentation allows you to focus on the wages and trends of greatest interest.



INEQUALITY IN THE WAGE DISTRIBUTION

W9 provides a view of inequality displaying the disparity between lower-wage and higher-wage workers in Wisconsin and the United States.



The median wage provides information from the middle of the wage distribution, but offers no insight into the distance between higher and lower-wage earners. In Wisconsin, the 20th percentile worker (who earns more than just 20% of the workforce and less than 80%) earns $17.84 per hour. Near the top of the wage distribution, the 80th percentile worker earns $43.09, more than twice as much per hour as the 20th percentile worker.

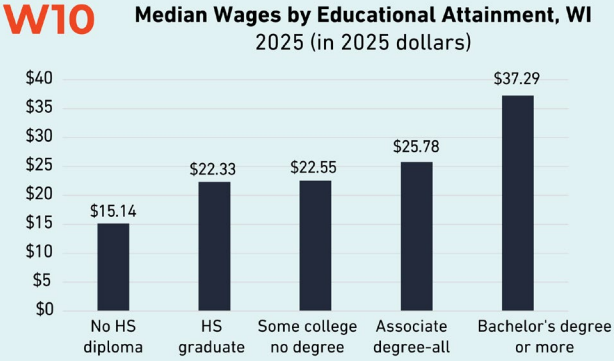
Both the 20th percentile wage and the 80th percentile wages have reached their highest levels.

Raising the Minimum Wage in Wisconsin Would Help Close the Racial and Gender Pay Gap

Since 2009, Wisconsin's minimum wage has been stuck at the federal level: $7.25 an hour. Raising the minimum wage to $20 per hour by 2030 would directly or indirectly raise the wages of more than one-in-four of Wisconsin workers. One-in-three women workers and half of Black and Hispanic workers would see wages go up with the minimum wage increase. In this way, raising the minimum wage can help reduce racial and gender disparities. Read more about the reach of a higher minimum wage in our report: *Can't Survive on $7.25: 2026 Update*.

EDUCATION AND WAGES

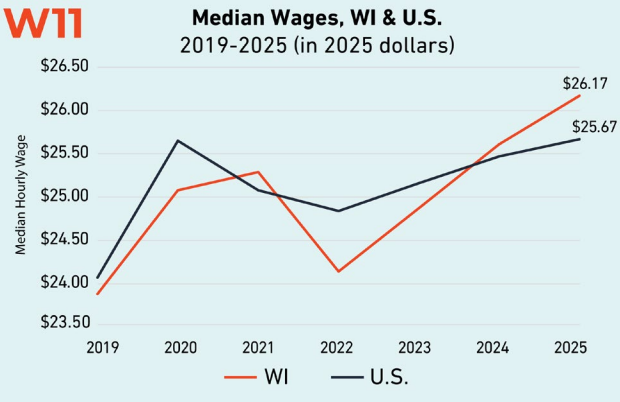
W10 demonstrates the impact of education on workers' wages in Wisconsin.



Workers with college degrees make more money. Working Wisconsinites with bachelor's degrees or more education earned $37.29 per hour, while those with associate's degrees earned $25.78. Completing a two- or four-year college degree is associated with stronger wages, but just attending college without completing the degree has almost no effect. The wages of Wisconsinites with some college but no degree, $22.55, are nearly the same as the wages of workers who ended their education with a high school degree (median wage $22.33). Workers without a high school diploma earned a median wage of $15 per hour.

2019-2025: WAGES HAVE GROWN AFTER PANDEMIC SHUTDOWNS

W11 focuses on recent changes in the median wage in Wisconsin and the United States from 2019 to 2025.



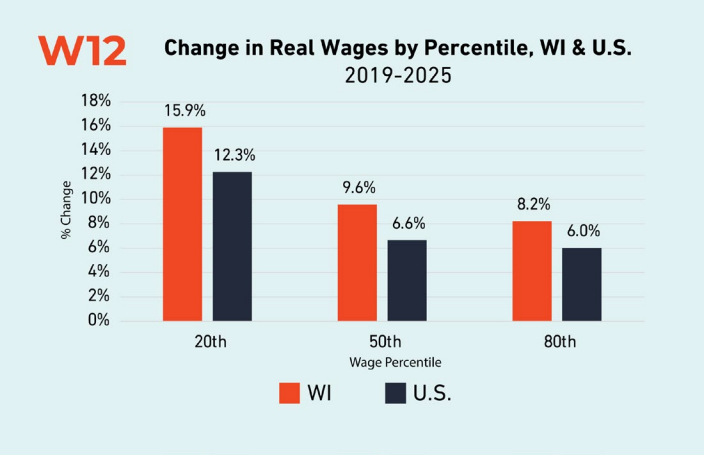
(All values are expressed in 2025 dollars, which allows us to compare the actual purchasing power of wages.)

From 2019 to 2025, median wages grew in the U.S. and Wisconsin. National median wages grew from $24.07 to $25.67 per hour. In Wisconsin, wages grew slightly faster from $23.88 to $26.17.

Wage growth was interrupted in 2022 when wages fell due to inflation, but strong economic growth and tight labor markets have supported wage increases across recent years. The current wage growth trajectory began about 10 years ago, with strong growth disrupted by the pandemic and inflation. Even taking the wage setback in 2022 into account, the wage trajectory since 2019 is the longest and strongest period of wage growth dating back to 1979.

2019-2025: WAGE GROWTH NARROWS WAGE INEQUALITY

W12 shows the wage gains for workers at the 20th, 50th, and 80th percentiles in both Wisconsin and the United States from 2019-2025. (Inflation is taken into account so these are changes in the purchasing power of wages.)



Especially in Wisconsin, lower-wage workers have secured the strongest wage gains from 2019 to 2025. This is a notable departure from wage trends which tended to increase wage inequality in previous decades.

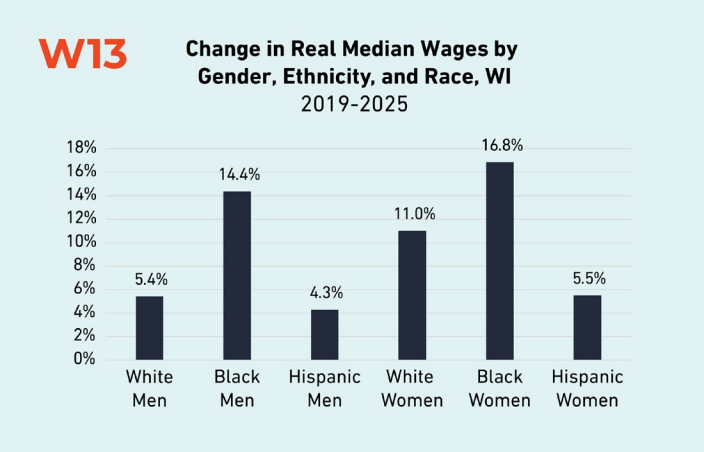
In Wisconsin, over 2019-2025, wages of higher-wage workers (workers who earn more than 80% of the workforce) rose to 8%. For lower-wage workers (at the 20th percentile in the wage distribution) wages grew twice as fast, surging to 16%. The wage growth for low-wage workers in the state is faster than the national pace of wage gains.

Lower-wage workers have seized the opportunity provided by tight labor markets and moved to higher-paying jobs and secured higher wages in their existing jobs. As a result, our wage distribution is more equal today than it was in 2019.

2019-2025 WAGE TRENDS FOR RACE AND GENDER GROUPS

W13 shows the recent change in median wages by gender, race, and ethnicity in Wisconsin.

Black women and Black men have made the strongest wage gains in the last six years, with wages up 17% and 14%, respectively. White women (wages up 11%) also secured strong wage gains in recent years. Wages are up much more modestly for Hispanic women (wages up 5.5%), white men (wages up 5.4%), and Hispanic men (wages up 4.3%).

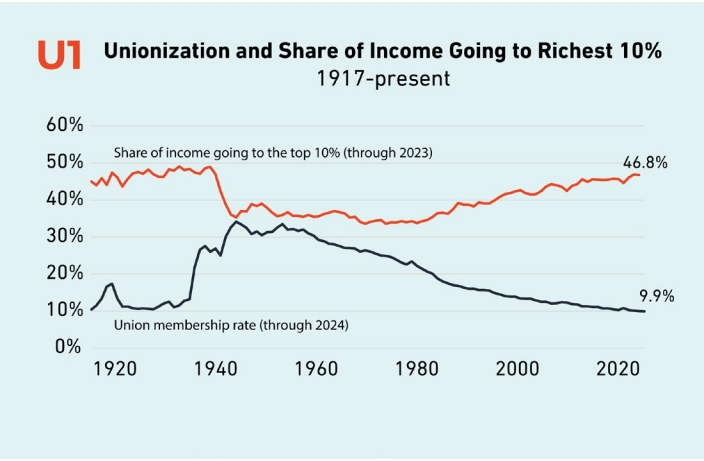


UNIONS

UNIONS, A FORCE FOR SHARED PROSPERITY, ARE UNDER ATTACK

Labor unions work to raise wages, secure better working conditions, and support policies to improve the lives of working people. Inside firms, workers join together to leverage their collective power through unions, securing higher pay and better working conditions. When unions represent a sufficient share of workers in an industry, they also raise job quality in that industry for all workers, even those who aren't unionized. Beyond their equalizing power in firms and industries, unions are active at the social level. Unions advocate for policies that improve the lives of working people – things like increasing access to health care, raising the minimum wage, and enforcing higher safety standards. By bringing workers together, unions are an important counterweight to the organized power of business in our economy and in political processes. Unions, made up of working people, help increase their power and standards of living. **Unions are popular with workers and have reached levels of support not seen in half a century. However, unions are facing sharp policy headwinds, especially in Wisconsin.**

U1 shows that as unions have declined, inequality has surged.



Unions represent a declining share of the workforce, and as unionization has fallen, inequality has surged. U1 shows the share of income going to the nation's richest 10% – a measure of inequality, which has risen dramatically since the 1980s. The chart shows U.S. inequality has reached levels not seen since the 1920s. In 2024, the richest 10% of Americans brought home almost half of all income, the same share of income the richest 10% earned in 1929.

U1 also charts the share of the workforce in unions. Unionization tripled from 10% to 30% in the 1930s and 1940s and remained steady through the 1960s. A slow decline began in the 1970s and then accelerated. Since the 1980s, union membership has fallen dramatically back to the level of the mid-1930s.

Unionization has been falling, but public support for unions has risen to the highest level in 60 years. Gallup found that 68% of Americans approve of labor unions — a level of public support that hasn't been reached since 1965. Workers have increased their mobilization in 2023, 2024, and 2025, and the number of work stoppages involving more than 1000 workers has hovered around 30. That's a level of mobilization that harks back to the late 1990s. For most of the first two decades of the 2000s, work stoppages were much more rare. National attention to contract campaigns of the United Auto Workers (UAW), Teamsters and Hollywood writers, and new organizing at Amazon and Starbucks have helped build a new image for unions' role in our economy.

Workers have been actively organizing in Wisconsin in 2026. There have been organizing campaigns, contract negotiations, strikes, and protests across our major sectors. The protests include a broad range of workers demanding higher wages, greater job security, and better working conditions. These actions build on increasing interest in the labor movement, especially among younger workers. However, renewed enthusiasm and action has not yet translated into gains in union membership.

For unions, unfortunately, the current moment is more defined by the aggressive hostility of the federal government than by the increasing interest of working people. In 2025, the federal government undertook "the largest single action of union-busting in American history," revoking the union rights of 1 million federal workers. The deunionization has been especially intense at the Veterans Administration where some 377,000 workers have lost their job security and contract protections. Federal worker contracts help protect the integrity of civil service work, research and data, and whistleblowers in federal agencies. Undermining federal unions not only denigrates federal work, it also makes our country less safe and our government less transparent.

Federal deunionization makes the U.S. less safe

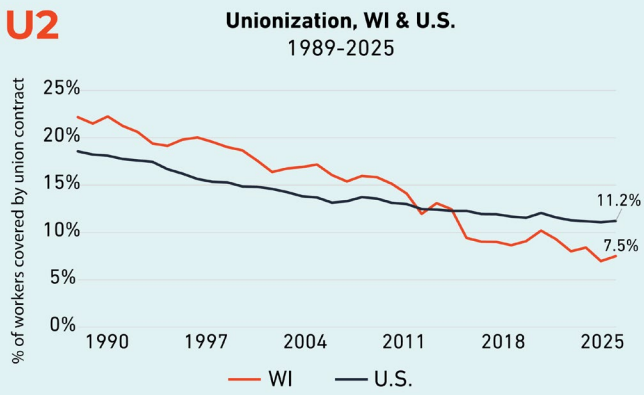
Unionized federal workers have negotiated important protections that preserve scientific integrity; compensate workers on recovery or investigation missions for American prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action; protect workers who report patient abuse at VA hospitals; safeguard worker safety for USDA food inspection workers; and reinforce whistleblower protections at federal agencies that protect the public, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency. At agencies where workers recently lost their bargaining rights, the administration allegedly forced federal regulators overseeing vaccine safety to resign and ordered the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission to stop doing its job of issuing new rules that keep nuclear power plants safe.

From The Center for American Progress:
The Trump Administration Ended Collective Bargaining for 1 Million Federal Workers

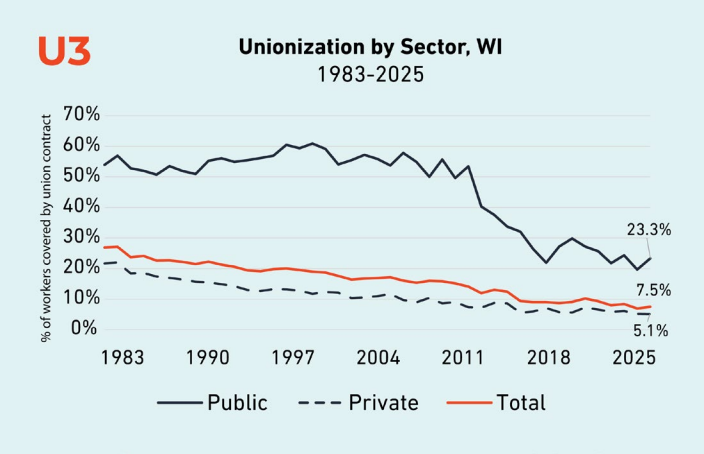
More ominous for unions is the administration's approach to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which is the federal agency that protects labor rights. The Trump administration nominated pro-management attorneys and staff, and effectively shut down the agency for months by firing one of its board members which left the agency without a quorum for making decisions. Given the administrative barriers, in 2025, the board oversaw 30% fewer elections. Workers are still organizing, but the slow and pro-management response from the NLRB limits their chances.
For more see:
NLRB Overseen Union Elections Fell in 2025.

WISCONSIN UNIONIZATION

Wisconsin's history of strong unions and their dramatic decline is clear in U2. In 1989, 22% of Wisconsin workers were in unions; a rate of unionization well above the national rate. For both the state and the nation, union representation has been falling ever since. Wisconsin's decline has been more pronounced. In 2012, Wisconsin's unionization rate fell below the national average and has stayed below it ever since. In 2025, just 7.5% of Wisconsin workers were in unions. The national rate of unionization is just above half what it was in 1988. In Wisconsin, the decline is much steeper: Wisconsin unionization is one-third of its 1988 level. Both nationally and in the state, unions increased membership rates just slightly. Future years will make clear if this is a blip or a trend.



U3 provides unionization trends in the public and private sectors and shows that Wisconsin's deunionization occurred especially in public-sector unions.



Across the early 2000s, more than half of public-sector workers in the state were union members. Since 2011, public-sector unionization has collapsed, with just 23% of Wisconsin public-sector workers unionized in 2025. This decline is the direct result of state policy which undermined the state's public-sector unions. (See next section for details on Act 10.)

While public-sector deunionization has been rapid, Wisconsin's private sector workers have also experienced a decline in union membership. The declines in private sector union rates are the direct result of Wisconsin's 2015 passage of "right to work" legislation which makes unionization in the private sector much harder. The chart makes clear that public-sector unionization has fallen much more dramatically, but as more workers are private sector workers, the ongoing slide in unionization to just 5% of the workforce is critical as well.

Workers Building Power In Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, despite anti-union policy, workers continue to work together to form unions and improve their jobs. In Milwaukee, workers in the Deer District secured an industry leading contract for their concessions, food service, and security jobs. Their union, MASH, continues to expand its reach and impact work, which we documented in *From Community Benefits, to Collective Bargaining, and Back: Building Worker Power in Milwaukee*.

WISCONSIN PUBLIC-SECTOR UNIONS: REDEFINED IN 2011

The collapse of Wisconsin's public-sector unionization is the direct result of state policy.

In 2011, despite an outpouring of support for public-sector bargaining rights, the state legislature passed Act 10 which restructured the terms of Wisconsin's public-sector unionization, reducing public unions' power, relevance, and membership.

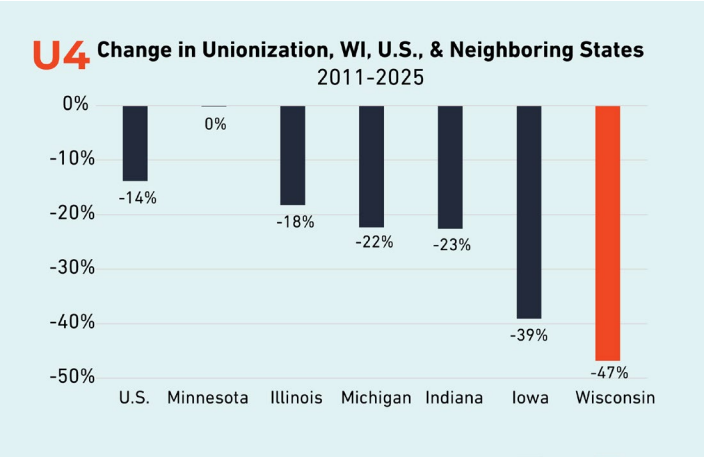
The structure of Act 10 does not actually prohibit the existence of public-sector unions. Rather, it restructures the rules around them, limiting their power and relevance and making it extremely difficult to operate. For example, Act 10 limits the bargaining of public-sector unions to only wage increases that cannot exceed the rate of inflation. This obviously undermines the relevance of wage negotiations and leaves some of the most important issues to workers — benefits, safety, and scheduling – off the table. Further, employers are not allowed to collect union dues in paychecks, even when workers demonstrate and document interest in such collection.

Additionally, Act 10 requires an annual vote to maintain their certification as a union. In that vote, the union must receive support of at least 51% of all members of the unit, regardless of how many members actually vote. Taken together, Act 10 has reduced the potential positive impact of public-sector unions while substantially increasing the burden of operating them. Public-sector unions have been devastated as a result.

In recent years, unions in the state have brought legal challenges to Act 10. A lower court ruled against Act 10, but nothing has changed as the decision is being appealed and is yet to be decided by the courts. More than a decade after it was passed, the status of Act 10 remains uncertain.

UNION TRENDS IN WISCONSIN VS. NEIGHBORING STATES

U4 Wisconsin union membership plummets.



From 2011 to 2025, Wisconsin's unionization rate fell by nearly half, from 14% to 7.5%. Over the same period, national unionization fell from 13% to 11%. Wisconsin's union rates are collapsing as national unionization rates and the rates in neighboring states have fallen less rapidly.

State trends in unionization reflect both state policy and industrial structure. With unionization holding steady at 16% over 2011-2025, Minnesota has avoided the union declines of the nation and other states in the region. Unionization in Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan fell faster than the national pace. Iowa and Wisconsin dramatically outstripped the national pace of decline.

UNIONS AND WAGES

Unions build worker power and shared prosperity.

Despite federal and state policies that have impeded unionization over the last half century, unions continue to provide workers with the means to unite to improve wages and working conditions in their jobs. When unions win strong contracts, as the UAW did, non-union worksites raise wages in response (as Toyota's U.S. facilities did just after the UAW contract was signed). Unions are also a social force, supporting policy that helps workers, families, and communities thrive. Unions have been essential partners in movements to raise the minimum wage, to defend access to health care, and to secure strong protections and support for all workers. Workers in Wisconsin continue to organize, pursue their collective interests, and improve their work and communities. State and federal policy changes could help support this work, but the work will go on in any policy environment, as long as workers see reason to join together in order to improve their jobs.

AFFORDABILITY

Affordability has become the central economic and political question of the moment. Surging inflation in 2022, higher housing costs, expensive food, rising fuel prices, and impossibly expensive child care leave working families in Wisconsin struggling to cover their bills each month.

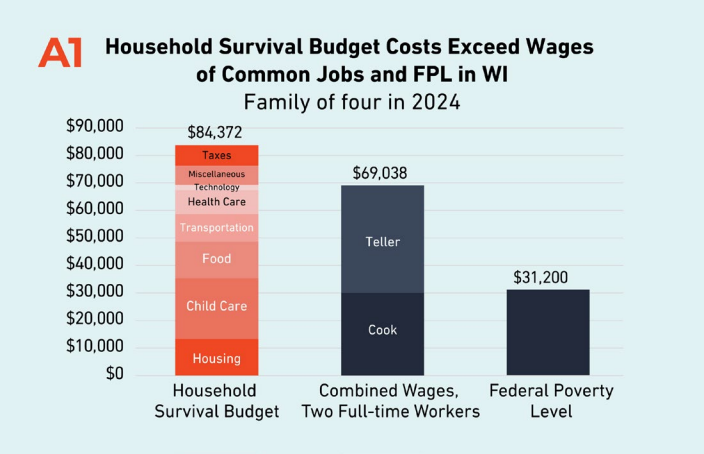
For Wisconsin's low-wage workers, the affordability squeeze is nothing new. For these workers – retail and food service workers, hotel housekeepers and janitors, home health, nursing home, and child care workers – grocery bills, housing costs, child care, and energy bills are always a struggle. Lower-wage jobs often offer low and volatile hours and very weak benefits. In lower-wage jobs, many workers rely on public health insurance and food benefits to make ends meet.

To provide a picture of issues around affordability, we draw on Wisconsin data from United for ALICE. This United Way project identifies the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) in each state. The ALICE Household Survival Budget includes only essential expenses, such as housing, food, transportation, child care, health care, technology, and taxes. The ALICE standard is more conservative than other basic budget standards. (See EPI's Family Budget Calculator and the MIT Living Wage Calculator for alternative models of the disconnect between wages and costs of living).

The ALICE standard shows that more than one-in-three households in Wisconsin (35% of households) faced financial hardship. Of these households, 11% were below the federal poverty line, another 24% of the state's households earned more than the poverty-level but still faced considerable financial hardship and did not earn enough to afford a minimal cost of living. This kind of struggle – working people who do not earn

enough to make ends meet – is a long-standing problem for working people in the state. Between 32-35% of Wisconsin families have faced financial hardship since 2010.

A1 below shows the costs that a family of four faces and makes clear why so many families struggle to make ends meet. If the adults in that family of four both hold jobs – one as a teller making roughly $40K per year, one as a cook earning $30K per year – they still fall short of the total survival budget for their family.



As energy, food, and housing prices rise, families feel increasingly squeezed. Recent analysis shows that utility bills are growing rapidly: Wisconsin households are paying 19% more today than they were in 2022. The federal approach to tariffs has increased costs for families by $1,100 per year according to the Budget Lab at Yale. The federal budget cuts for health insurance, Medicaid, and food assistance are making life more expensive for working families across Wisconsin. Many of the biggest cuts to Medicaid are yet to come.

While the question of affordability is generally framed as a problem of the cost of living, the problem is equally or even better understood as a problem of suppressed pay. The Economic Policy Institute finds that if workers' wages had kept pace with economic growth over the last 45 years, paychecks would be 40% larger today. But rather than strengthen labor standards, the federal government is consistently undermining workers' rights and standards, as demonstrated in this compendium of 47 ways that the Trump Administration is making life unaffordable.

More than one-third of the state's households are struggling to meet the rising cost of living. Policy solutions include those that make child care, higher education, health care, and transportation more affordable for working families. The federal government is moving away from these sorts of investments.

Equally, raising wages – through increasing the minimum wage and by making unionization more likely – could help with the affordability gap. As we documented in our recent update of *Can't Survive on $7.25*, Wisconsin is being left behind as neighboring states raise the minimum wage floor for workers. The affordability crisis will require sustained attention to rising wages and reducing costs for working families.

IMMIGRANTS

IMMIGRANTS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO WORKING WISCONSIN

Immigrants are indispensable to the Wisconsin economy. Some 320,000 immigrants call Wisconsin home, generating $23 billion in economic output each year. They are business owners, health care providers, educators, and skilled tradespeople, filling roles from software development to agriculture. Federal data shows that in 2023, immigrants made up 7% of the Wisconsin workforce, and according to Kids Forward, immigrants made up 11% of the state's Main Street business owners, 16% of physicians, 9% of construction workers, and more than 60% of manicurists and pedicurists in 2022. Immigrant workers are essential to our dairy industry and make up 12% of the state's agricultural workforce. In the tight labor markets, these workers sustain industries and services that keep Wisconsin thriving.

The federal mass deportation campaign has raised uncertainty and fear for immigrants and their families. The fear has negative economic impacts that spread throughout the economy according to research summarized by Immigration Research Initiative (IRI). In their report, IRI draws on results from the National Bureau of Economic Research that

"arresting and deporting immigrants results in a cascade of job loss. Immigrants who are arrested lose their jobs directly. Other immigrants, including many who have work authorization, experience a chilling effect and stay home or leave the country. And, as the consumer base shrinks and co-workers who support the daily operation of local businesses are arrested, U.S.-born workers also lose their jobs."

The report finds that for every 1,000 ICE arrests of immigrant men, employment among immigrant men considered most at risk fell by 2.5%, while employment among U.S.-born men fell by 0.54%. The study also found no increase in wages for U.S.-born men who remain employed. These effects reflect the broader economic disruption caused by mass arrests and deportations: consumer spending declines, businesses lose workers, and immigrant and U.S.-born workers often fill complementary rather than competing roles. Increased enforcement is also associated with more workplace accidents and minimum wage violations as workers become less willing to report unsafe conditions or labor violations. There are further impacts on all working families. Fear of immigration enforcement can push immigrant care workers out of regulated child care jobs, making it harder for other parents to work, while lost income can create financial instability for families.

For more on the economic effects of mass deportation, see the full report, ***Labor Market Impacts of ICE Activity in Trump 2.0***.

The Economic Policy Institute's Cost of Deportations Calculator offers another way to understand the scale of these costs, showing how much states and communities spend on deportation and what those resources could otherwise fund, including teachers, firefighters, nurses, Medicaid, child care, and other public investments. The state of Wisconsin's share of the federal investment in these mass deportation campaigns is a staggering $3.8 billion— $1,728 from every taxpayer in the state. Shifting that money from deportations to community needs could allow Medicaid to bring health insurance to 183,000 Wisconsinites, or hire more than 14,000 teachers to work in our schools.

HIGH ROAD
STRATEGY CENTER

Equity
Sustainability
Democracy

University of Wisconsin — Madison
608.263.3889 | info@highroad.wisc.edu
HIGHROAD.WISC.EDU