Barron County

2025 WORKFORCE PROFILE

STATE OF WISCONSIN
DWD
Department of Workforce Development

WisConomy

DETI-17957-BRN-P (R. 05/2025)

State Narrative for County Profiles

Wisconsin's labor market experienced a strong year in 2024. Employment reached record levels, inflation appeared on the wane, and interest rates are accommodating a largely reconstrued supply chain. In addition, real wages turned positive, and consumer spending was robust.

The primary challenge still facing the future economic construct is the labor quantity challenge and its broader economic impacts.

Wisconsin Jobs

The 2024 employment picture was favorable for Wisconsin, reaching new records in December at 3,076,500. The state's low unemployment rates were also noteworthy registering 3.0% or below the entire year. Although setting new records is always a good sign, new highs in employment would be expected through new expansionary economic periods.

Total non-farm employment also reached new highs, climbing through the year to peak in August at a seasonally adjusted basis of 3,048,000 and consolidating high levels through the remainder of the year, ending in December at 3,042,100. That marks a 1.6% increase over the pre-pandemic highs set in December 2019.

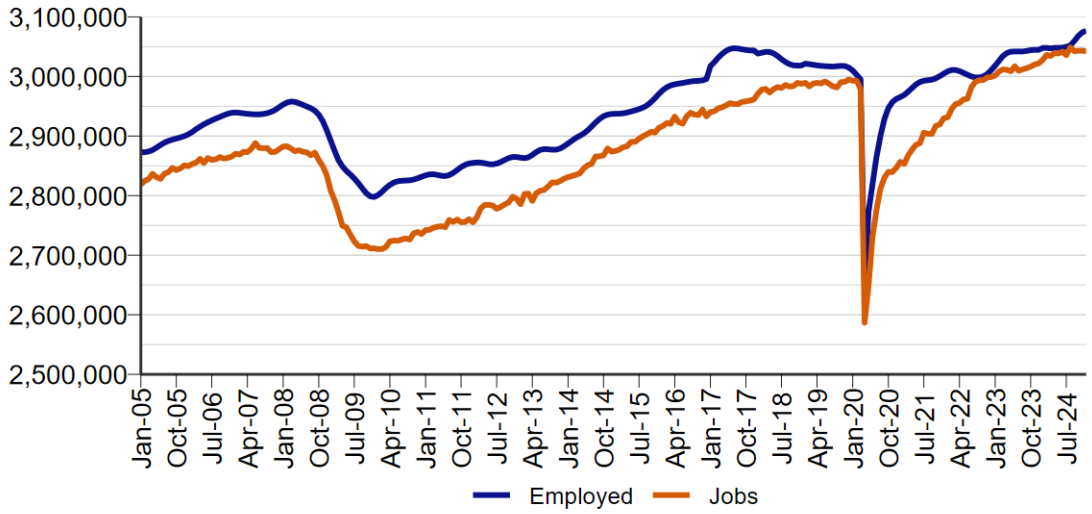


Figure 1: Wisconsin employment and jobs.

Economy

Wisconsin Gross Domestic Product (WGDP) reached new highs in nominal and real dollar terms in 2024[1], at $456 billion or $357 billion in real 2017 dollars. After a slower recovery coming out of the COVID-19 recession, Wisconsin's GDP growth rate has mimicked that of the country.

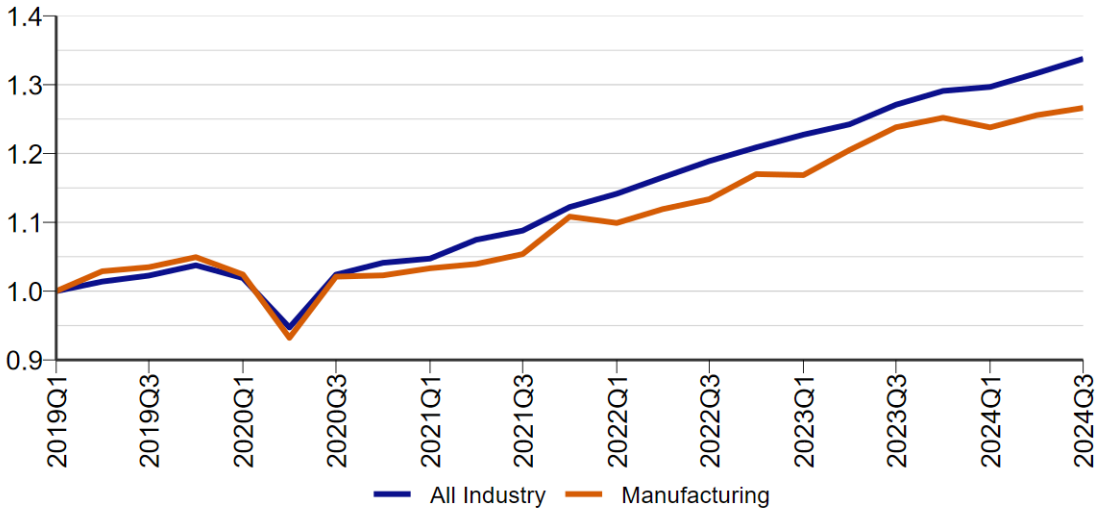


Figure 2: GDP growth index (2019Q1 = 100).

Many industry sectors were vibrant. Construction industry jobs hit new records, surpassing 140,000. Healthcare jobs also set new highs at 324,200. The leisure and hospitality sector recovered almost all the nearly 50% loss of jobs experienced during the COVID-19 recession, finishing with 285,200 jobs. Manufacturing jobs rose above 2023 levels to 481,200, but have not yet returned to pre-Covid19 levels.

Wisconsin ranks first in the number of manufacturing jobs per government job and second in manufacturing jobs share of total jobs. However, state-level manufacturing output was relatively weak against overall economic output. Two of the state's primary manufacturing industries, fabricated metal and machinery manufacturing, lost jobs through 2024. Fabricated metal manufacturing jobs peaked in July 2019, before the COVID-19 recession at 79,400 jobs, and ended 2024 with 74,300. Machinery manufacturing peaked in early 2023 with 68,800 jobs and finished 2024 with 67,200.

[1]Third quarter 2024 is latest data available.

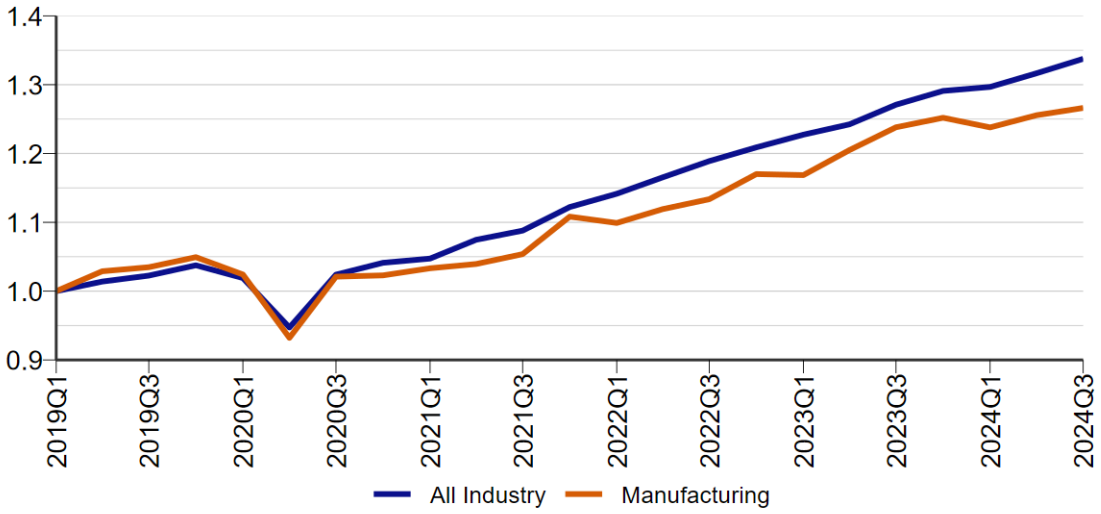


Figure 3: Wisconsin all industry v manufacturing growth (2019Q1 = 100).

While the durable goods manufacturing sector saw declines, non-durable goods manufacturing in Wisconsin has made headway. Jobs in the non-durables industries have increased since the pre-Covid high of 198,600 in July of 2019, to 201,000 in December 2024. Most of that has occurred in the food processing industry.

Labor Quantity Challenges

Employers continue to express challenges finding workers. This situation is being felt in all industries and most occupations – locally, regionally, and globally. Even China is experiencing population and workforce declines. Industries that are showing steady job growth, such as construction and healthcare, are limited by the number of workers available for positions.

As noted in studies dating back to 2000, there are not sufficient numbers of young workers to fill the jobs being vacated by the generation of baby boomers and the increased demand for workers associated with economic growth. The number of workers entering the labor market is essentially the same as the boomers exiting. A growing economy necessitates an increasing labor force or at least a more productive one. Wisconsin's labor force growth has remained close to zero.

The new high in Wisconsin's labor force reached in December 2024 of 3,170,300 is only 0.63% above the previous high in July 2017 and only 0.83% above the peak before that in June of 2009. That amounts to an annual average labor force growth rate of 0.08% per year, or about zero over 15 years.

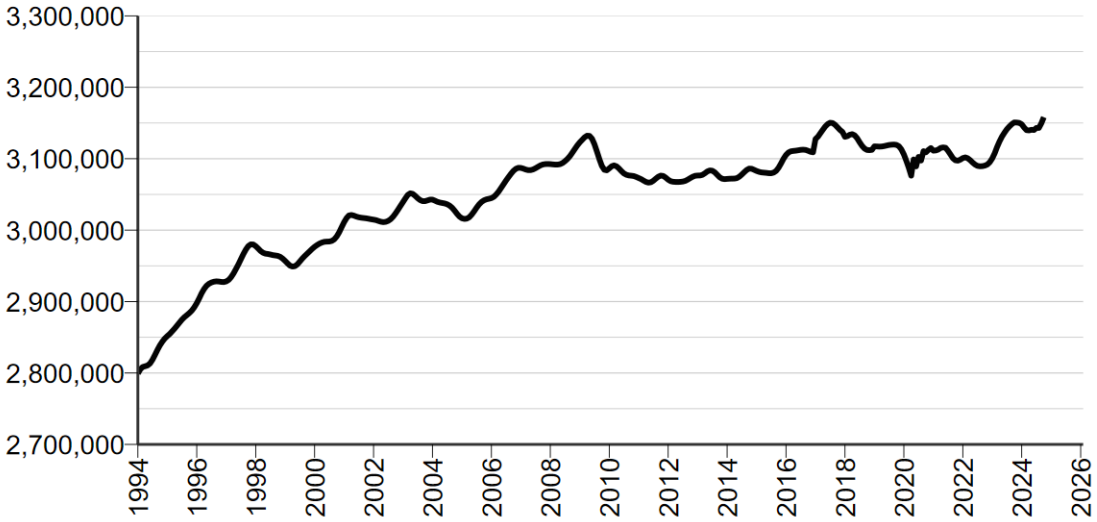


Figure 4: Wisconsin labor force.

This shift has long been anticipated and is well documented. The front edge of the baby boomers turned 63 years old in 2009. By 2024, the back edge of the boomers (those born in 1964) were 60 years old. And while the labor force participation rates of workers 65 and older has increased since the 1990s, the remaining tenure of the boomers is short.

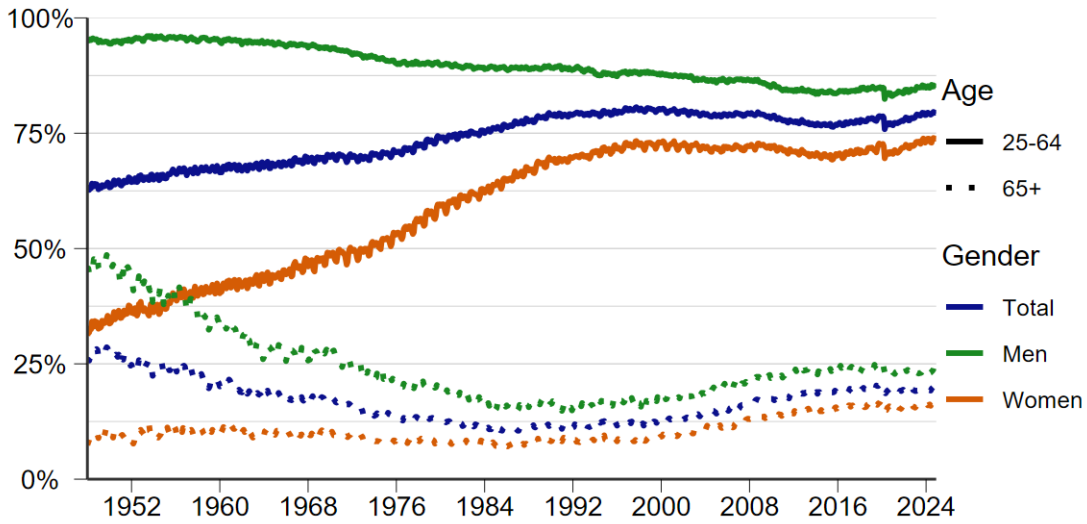


Figure 5: US labor force participation rate.

Below is a graph of Wisconsin's population and labor force projected out to 2040 based on the latest information from the Wisconsin Department of Administration Demographic Services. On a decennial basis, Wisconsin's population has already peaked. This suggests that the workforce will not experience substantial growth moving forward.

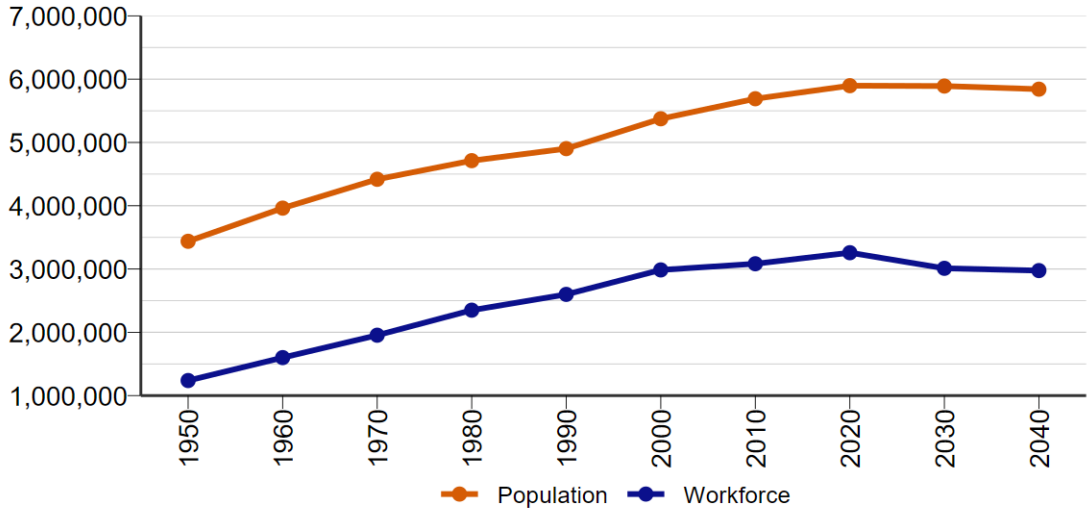


Figure 6: Wisconsin population and workforce projections.

While the overall situation has been realized for some time, the actual quantity of the shortfall has been undetermined until now. Staff at the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development's Office of Economic Advisors estimate that by 2031, the state could face a labor shortage exceeding 241,000 workers. (See Labor Supply Projections for Wisconsin 2020 – 2040, Winters, Kaur, and Otis, Labor Supply Projections for Wisconsin).

New Construct

Human resource constraints affect the entire economic construct. As one of the three primary components of economic inputs – along with natural resources and capital – a compromise in the abundance of labor permeates the economy. Having never encountered a labor constraint before, it needs to be noted – old models and old policies do not apply.

Moreover, the labor quantity challenge is a macroeconomic phenomenon. It cannot be remedied with microeconomic solutions. Microeconomic attraction and retention incentives of higher wages, better benefits, early exposure, and more are, at best, short-term and limited symptom remedies.

Jobs will go unfilled. Macroeconomic solutions to the challenge include:

1. A workable immigration policy
2. Reducing barriers to employment (see 2023 Wisconsin County Profiles)
3. Expanding trade
4. Technology infusion

Altering a fundamental input of the macroeconomic construct will impact all sectors. The limited and shifting human resource segment will alter income streams, change demand for goods and services, and affect the provision of public goods and services.

Wisconsin's economic health and vigor has been illustrated in the employment and jobs data. However, record low unemployment rates signify two usually unassociated yet coupled performance indicators. On the one hand, low unemployment rates indicate an engaged labor force – a relatively large numerator. On the other hand, in today's environment, low unemployment rates indicate a scarce labor force – a relatively small denominator.

This is an unprecedented situation – and it is not likely to resolve itself quickly.

Yet to be explored are how the limited labor pool and aging population effects other critical economic drivers, such as personal income, as a significant portion of the population (Baby Boomers) shifts to transfer payments that are fixed in real dollar terms, housing stock, dependency ratios, and fiscal balances.

One major unknown on the horizon are the effects that Artificial Intelligence (AI) will have on the future of economic and workforce development. The Governor's Task Force on Workforce and Artificial Intelligence Advisory Action Plan (dwd.wisconsin.gov/ai-taskforce/pdf/ai-advisory-action-plan.pdf) outlines some of the expected effects of AI. For example, the chart below sheds some light on the extent that occupations may be affected by AI.

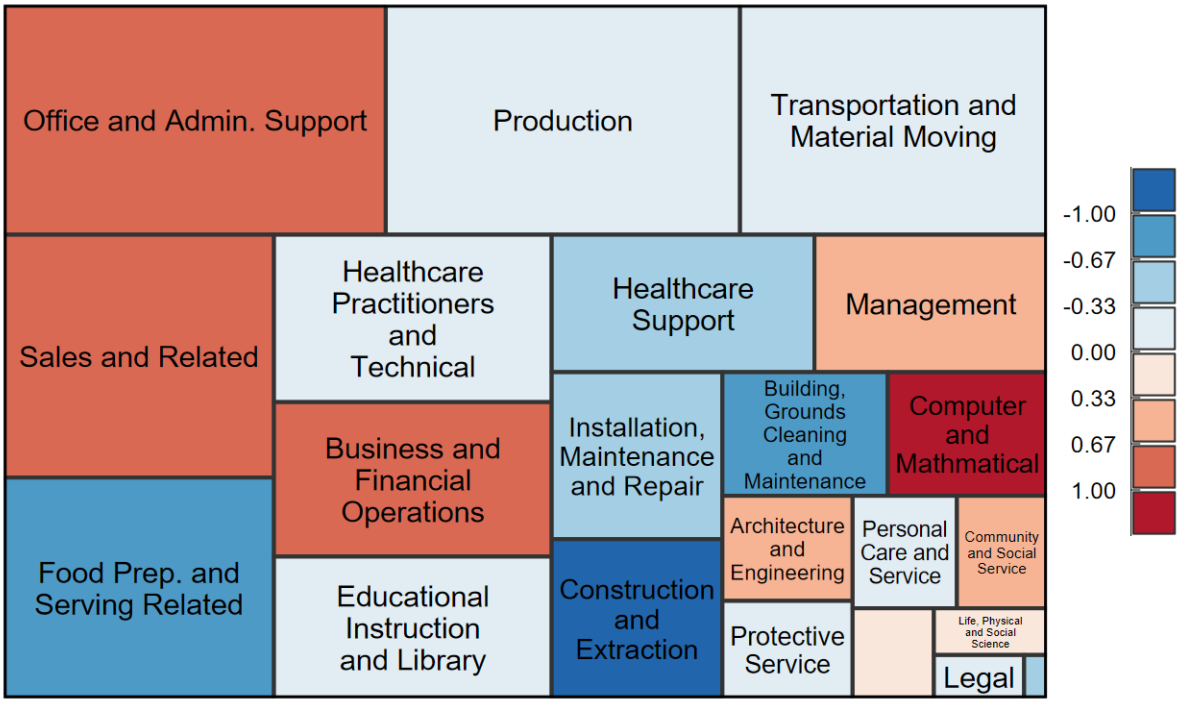


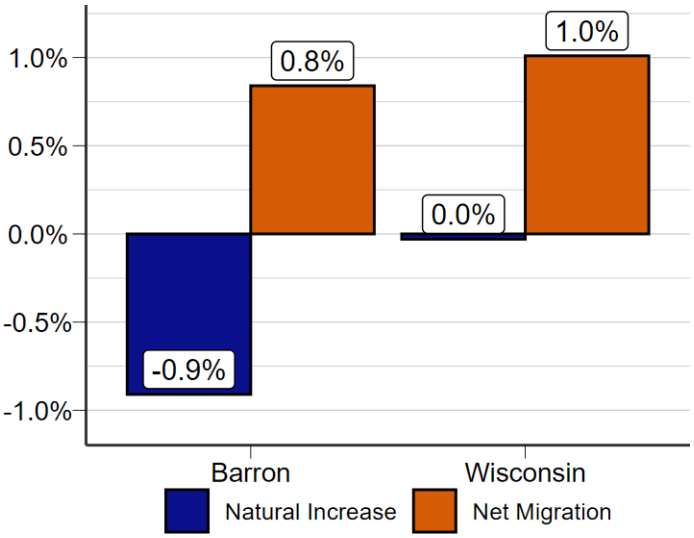
Figure 7: AI exposure per occupation group by number employed.

Fundamental changes are in store for Wisconsin's economy due primarily to two new influencers: workforce constraints and artificial intelligence technology. The degree to how each will affect the other and the whole is yet to be determined.

Population and Demographics

	2020 Census	2023 Final Estimate	Numeric Change	Percent Change
Rice Lake, City	9,040	9,010	-30	-0.3%
Barron, City	3,733	3,661	-72	-1.9%
Rice Lake, Town	2,813	2,826	13	0.5%
Stanley, Town	2,570	2,552	-18	-0.7%
Cumberland, City	2,274	2,243	-31	-1.4%
Chetek, City	2,172	2,172	0	0.0%
Cameron, Village	1,872	1,857	-15	-0.8%
Chetek, Town	1,726	1,748	22	1.3%
Prairie Lake, Town	1,648	1,672	24	1.5%
Cedar Lake, Town	1,076	1,097	21	2.0%
Barron, County	46,711	46,676	-35	-0.1%
Wisconsin, State	5,893,718	5,951,400	57,682	1.0%

Barron County is the 30th most populous county in Wisconsin, with 46,676 residents. It is also the 42nd fastest-growing county in the state. From 2020 to 2023, the population declined slightly, decreasing by 35 residents (-0.1%). In contrast, the state's population grew by 1.0% over the same period.



Components of Population Change

Population change is driven by natural increase and migration. Natural population increase occurs when there are more births than deaths, while migration increases when more people move into the county than leave. Natural increase is primarily influenced by the population's age structure, while migration has a more immediate and actionable impact on the county labor force.

Figure 8: Source: WI Department of Administration.

Rice Lake, the county's largest city, had an estimated population of 9,010 in 2023. Barron, the second largest city and the county seat, experienced the largest population decline in the county, losing an estimated 72 residents between 2020 and 2023. Like many areas in northern Wisconsin, population growth in Barron County is concentrated around popular lakes, as shown by increases in the towns of Chetek, Prairie Lake, and Cedar Lake. Other growing communities benefit from their proximity to Rice Lake and US-53, a major north-south highway that runs through Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Barron County's natural population growth rate was -0.9%, ranking 48th in the state, while its net migration rate was 0.8%, ranking 41st. The county gained 392 residents through net migration, a sign that people are choosing to move to the area. However, this was offset by negative natural population growth, primarily due to Barron County's aging population.

Population Projections

	2020	2030	2040	2050	2020-2050 Population Change
Barron	46,711	45,710	44,675	43,630	-6.6%
Wisconsin	5,893,718	5,890,915	5,841,620	5,710,120	-3.1%

Source: Demographic Services Center, Wisconsin Department of Administration.

Barron County is projected to experience a population decline from 2020 to 2050, decreasing from 46,711 residents in 2020 to 43,630 in 2050. The county's demographic makeup skews older than the state overall, contributing to this anticipated decline. While Barron County's aging population is unlikely to shift significantly in the near future, trends in net migration are more flexible.

Continued efforts to retain current residents and attract new ones could help reverse this trajectory. Strategies may include expanding family-supporting job opportunities and, more broadly, making the county a more desirable place to live.

Although net migration is often viewed as a short-term measure, it can also support long-term, sustainable population growth. If net migration improves among younger residents, natural population growth may follow.

Employment by Industry

	2023 Avg Monthly Employment	5-year Change	5-year % Change	% of Total Employment
Total, All Industries	21,417	-996	-4.4%	100.0%
Manufacturing	5,308	-574	-9.8%	24.8%
Education and Health Services	4,676	118	2.6%	21.8%
Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	4,290	19	0.4%	20.0%
Leisure and Hospitality	2,349	-160	-6.4%	11.0%
Professional and Business Services	1,412	100	7.6%	6.6%
Public Administration	1,148	-48	-4.0%	5.4%
Construction	664	-46	-6.5%	3.1%
Financial Activities	584	17	3.0%	2.7%
Natural Resources and Mining	516	-274	-34.7%	2.4%
Other Services	310	-139	-31.0%	1.4%
Information	160	-9	-5.3%	0.7%

Source: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Between 2018 and 2023, Barron County lost 996 jobs, a decline of 4.4%, with average employment at 21,417 jobs in 2023. Despite these losses, some industries experienced growth. Professional and business services grew by 7.6% (+100 jobs), and education and health services increased by 2.6% (+118 jobs).

Looking at the five-year numeric change, Barron County has not yet returned to pre-pandemic employment levels. Manufacturing remained the county's largest industry, accounting for an average of 5,308 employees in 2023 – or 24.8% of total employment. However, it also saw the largest numeric decline over the period, losing 574 jobs (-9.8%).

Within manufacturing, the largest subsector – food manufacturing – saw a decrease of 343 jobs between 2018 and 2022 (data for 2023 was unavailable). In contrast, the fabricated metal product manufacturing subsector gained 205 jobs over the same period.

Unemployment

Barron County's average monthly unemployment rate in 2023 was 3.6%, higher than the statewide average of 3.0%, ranking 52nd among Wisconsin counties. Seasonal unemployment continues to have a notable impact, with higher rates typically observed between November and February. Industries such as construction, natural resources and mining, and leisure and hospitality are particularly affected during colder months. Additionally, education and health services experience employment declines during the summer.

Despite these seasonal fluctuations, Barron County's average unemployment rate has steadily declined since the pandemic, falling from 6.2% in 2020 to 3.6% in 2023. While a tight labor market – marked by more job openings than available workers – can benefit job seekers, it presents challenges for employers looking to maintain operations and support growth.

Unemployment Rate

The unemployment rate is the percentage of people who are not working but actively looking for work compared to the total number of people in the labor force.

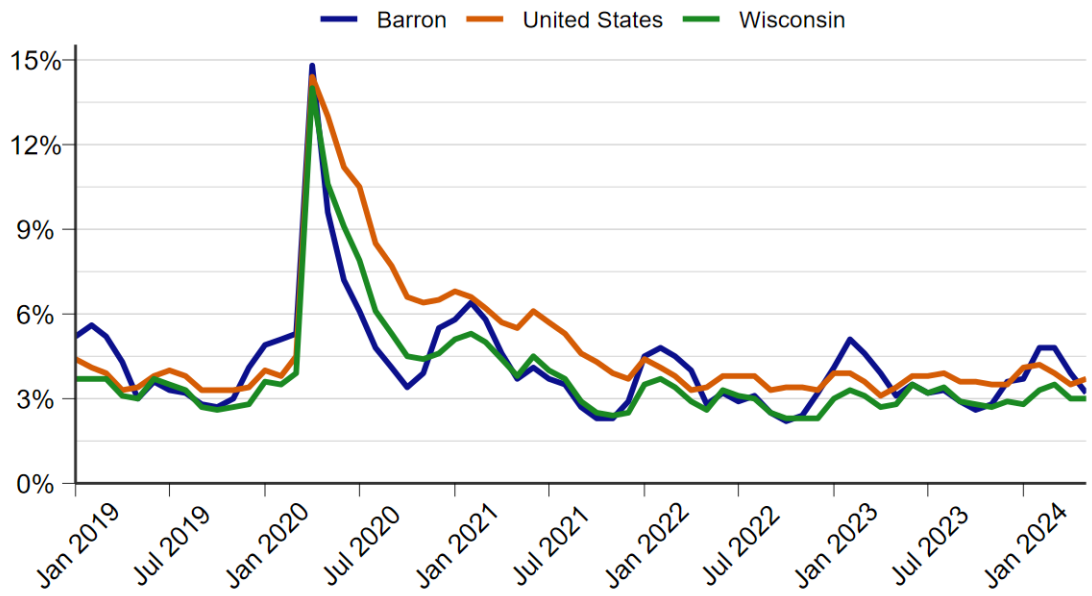


Figure 9: Source: Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS), Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Labor Force Participation

Barron County's labor force participation rate (LFPR) has declined in recent years, dropping from 67.3% in 2018 to 63.0% in 2023. This downward trend is not unique to Barron County, but reflects a broader pattern observed at the state and national levels. A primary driver of this decline is the aging population, as many individuals from the baby boomer generation exit the labor force and enter retirement.

Labor Force Participation Rate

The labor force participation rate (LFPR) looks at the relative labor resources available and is expressed as the percentage of the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years and older that is working or actively looking for work.

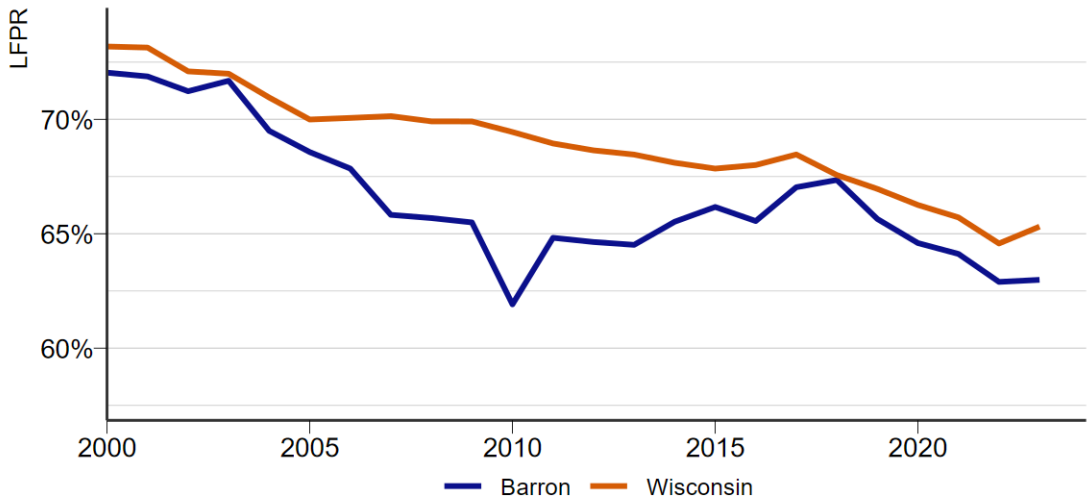


Figure 10: Source: WI Department of Workforce Development Office of Economic Advisors.

AI Impact

Occupation	Employment	% of Total Employment	AI Exposure Index
Cashiers	6,300	3.2%	0.89
Fast Food and Counter Workers	5,290	2.7%	-1.00
Retail Salespersons	4,930	2.5%	0.40
Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	4,640	2.3%	-0.78
Registered Nurses	4,310	2.2%	0.04
Stockers and Order Fillers	4,050	2.0%	-0.05
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	4,030	2.0%	-0.09
Customer Service Representatives	3,340	1.7%	0.75
Office Clerks, General	3,270	1.6%	1.00
Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	2,630	1.3%	-1.27

Source: Governor's Task Force on Workforce and Artificial Intelligence.

AI Exposure

AI exposure, as computed by the Governor's Task Force on Workforce and Artificial Intelligence, is the median value across four different research paper's measures of exposure after normalizing each paper's measure to the same mean and variance. A positive value of AI exposure indicates placement in the top 50% of occupations for AI exposure, with higher values indicating greater exposure to AI. Conversely, negative numbers indicate exposure in the bottom 50%. For more information about AI exposure, refer to The Governor's Task Force on Workforce and Artificial Intelligence Advisory Action Plan (dwd.wisconsin.gov/ai-taskforce/pdf/ai-advisory-action-plan.pdf)

In the West Central Workforce Development Area (WDA), which includes Barron, Chippewa, Clark, Dunn, Eau Claire, Pepin, Pierce, Polk, and St. Croix counties, the largest occupation is cashiers, accounting for 3.2% of the area's employment. This occupation has an artificial intelligence (AI) exposure index of 0.89. For comparison, the occupation with the highest potential AI exposure is bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing clerks, with an AI exposure index of 1.89.

Manual occupations – such as laborers and janitors – tend to have lower AI exposure indexes (-0.78 and -1.27, respectively), indicating a lower likelihood of being affected by AI tools. In contrast, office-based roles like office clerks and customer service representatives have higher exposure indexes, reflecting a greater potential for disruption due to AI adoption. While AI is still emerging and its adoption across industries is limited, the long-term effects on occupations and the broader economy remain uncertain.

Industry Employment Projections

	Industry	2022 Employment	2032 Projected Employment	Employment Change 2022-2032	% Change 2022-2032
Highest Percent Growth	Construction	8,800	10,035	1,235	14.03%
Lowest Percent Growth	Information	1,208	1,075	-133	-11.01%
Highest Number Employed	Education and Health Services	48,084	52,353	4,269	8.88%
Most Jobs Added	Education and Health Services	48,084	52,353	4,269	8.88%
Total	Total All Industries	221,430	242,223	20,793	9.39%

Source: WI Department of Workforce Development Office of Economic Advisors.

DWD produces employment projections for Wisconsin's 11 Workforce Development Areas (WDAs) every two years. Employment in the West Central WDA is projected to grow by 20,793 jobs (9.4%) between 2022 and 2032, slightly outpacing the statewide projected growth rate of 7.1%.

Industries are generally categorized as either goods-producing (e.g., manufacturing, construction, and natural resources and mining) or service-producing (e.g., trade, transportation, and utilities; education and health services; and leisure and hospitality). Goods-producing industries in the West Central WDA are expected to grow by 8.3% over the decade, while service-producing industries are projected to grow by 9.5%, reflecting continued demand for services.

During the pandemic, demand shifted sharply from services to goods, contributing to inflationary pressures. As the economy continues to recover, demand for services – and the industries that provide them – is expected to grow significantly.

For more information and detailed projection results for both occupations and industries, visit Wisconomy's projections page (jobcenterofwisconsin.com/wisconomy/pub/projections).

Occupation Employment Projections

	Occupation	2022 Employment	2032 Projected Employment	Employment Change 2022-2032	% Change 2022-2032
Lowest Percent Growth	Protective Service	3,352	3,381	29	0.9%
Highest Percent Growth	Personal Care and Service	5,561	6,447	886	15.9%
Highest Number Employed	Production	25,871	27,394	1,523	5.9%
Most Jobs Added	Transportation and Material Moving	21,814	24,472	2,658	12.2%
Total	Total, All	221,430	242,223	20,793	9.4%

Source: WI Department of Workforce Development Office of Economic Advisors.

In the West Central Workforce Development Area (WDA), employment is projected to grow by 20,793 jobs between 2022 and 2032 – an average annual increase of approximately 2,079 jobs. However, annual job growth represents just one part of total projected job openings. The other two major components are labor force exits (such as retirements) and occupational transfers (workers changing jobs or careers). The specific mix of these factors varies by occupation and influences the strategies needed to address workforce needs.

For instance, the occupation of heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers provides a useful example. This occupation is projected to have 473 annual openings in the West Central WDA, but only 41 of those are attributed to employment growth. The remaining 432 openings are expected to result from labor force exits and occupational transfers. Meeting these workforce needs may require more than just hiring new workers – it could also involve retention efforts or incentives to encourage experienced workers to stay in the occupation longer.

Aging Population

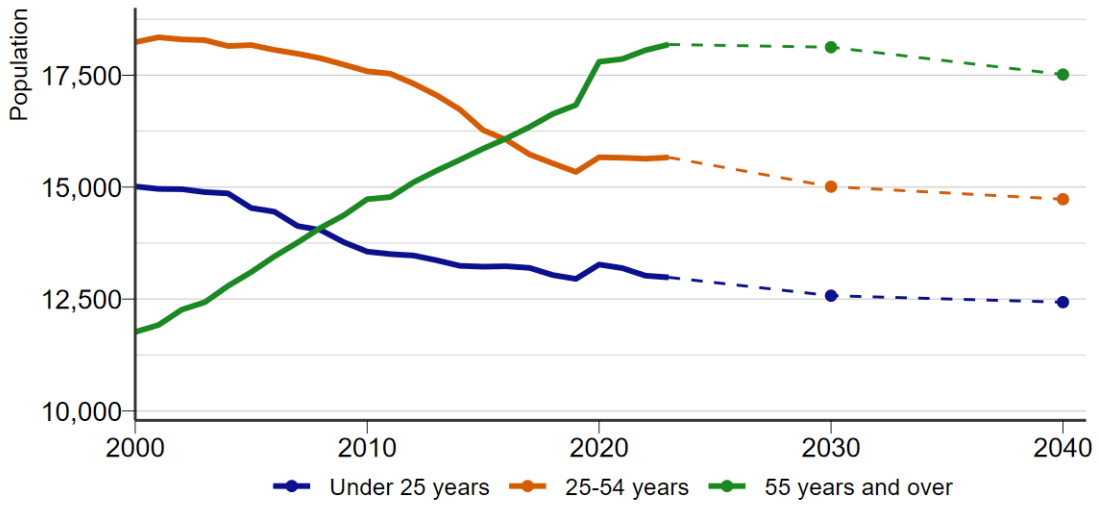


Figure 11: US Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program and
WI Department of Administration, Demographic Services Center.

The selected age groups – under 25, 25–54, and 55 and older – represent three broad life stages, each with distinct societal roles and needs. Individuals under 25 are typically focused on education or entering the workforce. The 25–54 group represents the prime working years, often marked by career development and family life. Those aged 55 and older are more likely to be transitioning out of the workforce and into retirement.

In 2023, individuals aged 55 and older made up 38.8% of Barron County's population, an increase from 33.6% in 2013. From 2017 to 2022, the median age in Barron County was 44.6, noticeably higher than Wisconsin's median age of 39.9, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. The number of residents aged 55 and older rose from 11,765 in 2000 to 18,186 in 2023, contributing to the county's declining labor force participation rate. At the same time, the population under age 55 – comprising the under 25 and 25–54 groups – has steadily declined.

Population projections indicate that the 55 and older age group in Barron County is expected to level off and begin decreasing between 2024 and 2030. If these projections hold, all three age groups are anticipated to decline over the next decade, signaling a broader demographic shift.

Personal Income

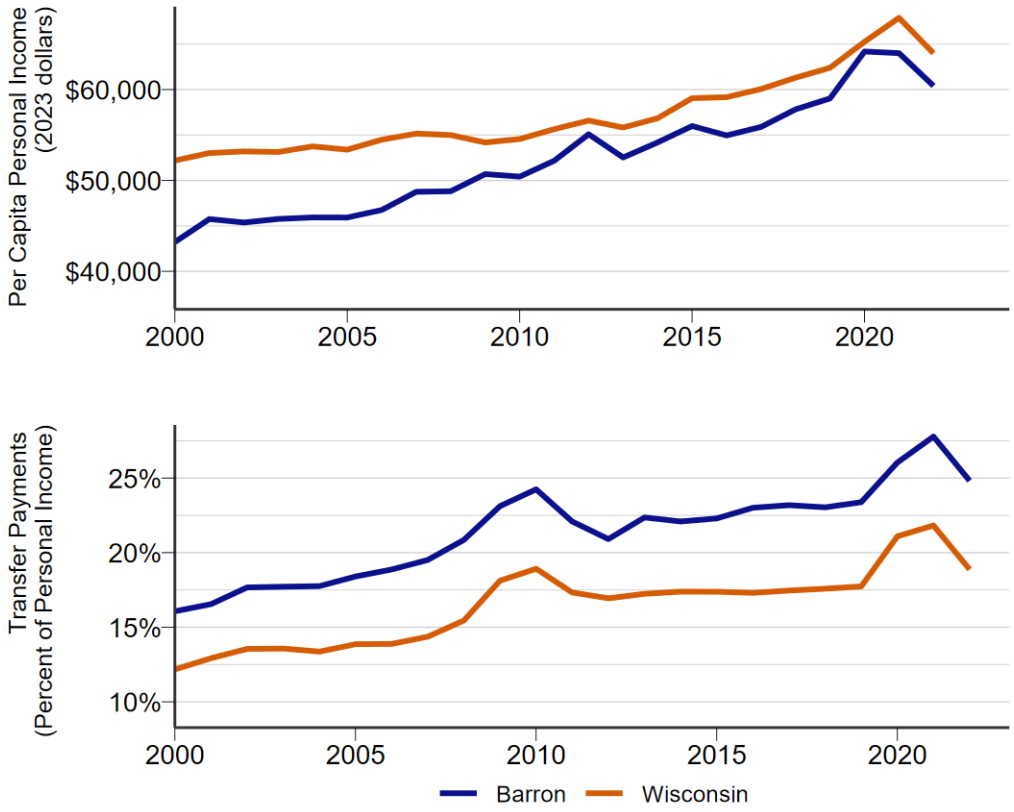


Figure 12: Source: United States Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Personal Income

Personal income includes income from all sources, such as wages, business income, rental income, investments, and government transfer payments. It excludes capital gains or losses, whether realized or unrealized. All dollar amounts are adjusted for inflation using 2023 dollars.

The per capita personal income (PCPI) in Barron County was $60,409 in 2022, compared to the statewide average of $63,996. While these figures are adjusted for inflation, they do not account for regional differences in cost of living. Counties with a higher proportion of residents who are either younger or older – meaning fewer people in their prime working years – tend to have a lower PCPI than the state average.

In 2022, 24.8% of Barron County's PCPI came from transfer payments rather than earned income. The steady rise in the share of income from transfer payments is likely tied to the county's aging population, as many residents become eligible for Social Security and other income support programs. Notable increases in transfer payments were also seen during the Great Recession

(2007–2009) and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when Unemployment Insurance and stimulus payments played key roles in stabilizing the economy.

Workforce Pipeline

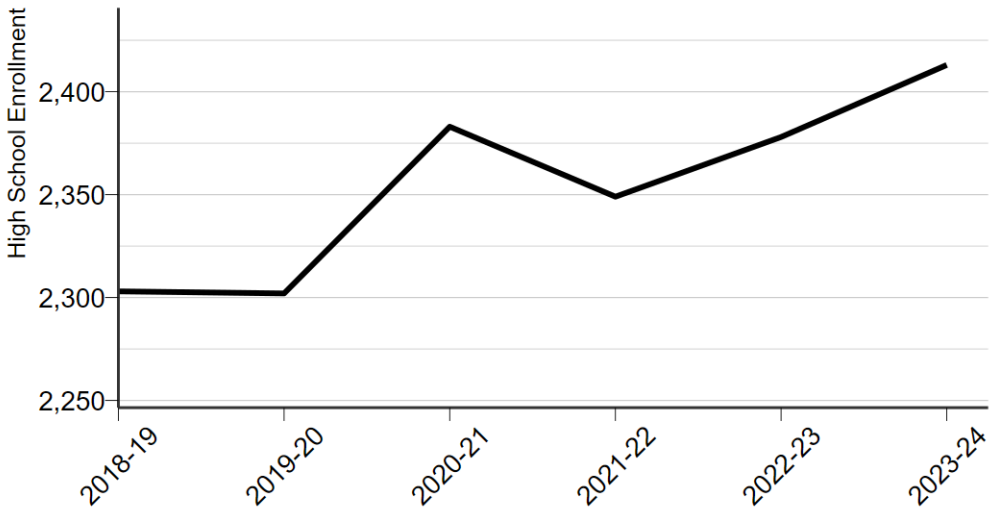


Figure 13: Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Education prepares the next generation of the labor force. As of the 2023–24 school year, 2,413 students were enrolled in grades 9–12 across public, private, and home-based schools in Barron County.

It is important to note that school district boundaries can extend across multiple counties, so county-level enrollment counts are based on the location of the district's main office and may not perfectly align with student residence or school attendance within the county.

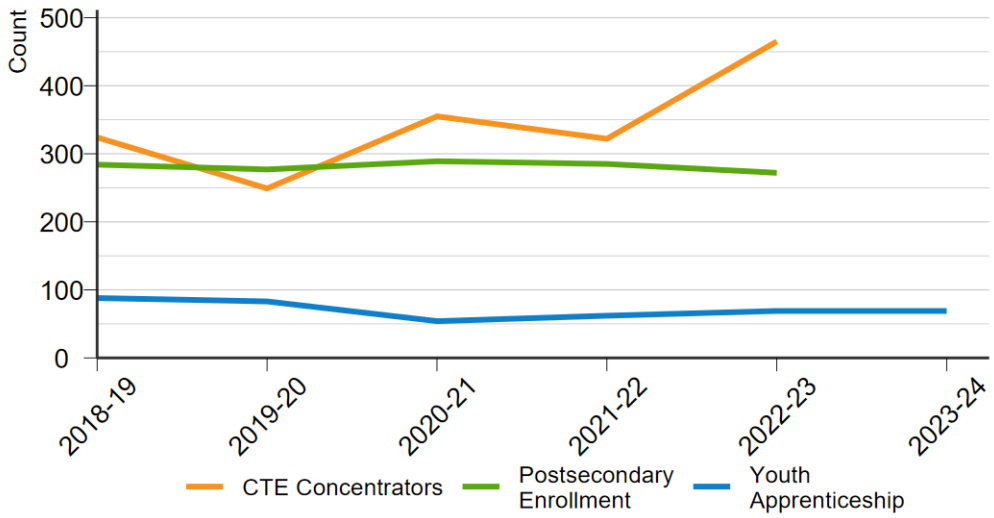


Figure 14: Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Department of Workforce Development.

Career and Technical Education

Among students in grades 11–12, 39.5% were enrolled as concentrators in career and technical education (CTE) during the 2022–23 school year, compared to 44.3% statewide. The most common career pathway in Barron County was agriculture, food, and natural resources, with 98 student concentrators. Hospitality and tourism was the second most popular pathway, with 90 students focusing in that area.

Career and Technical Education

Career and technical education (CTE) equips students for both the workforce and postsecondary education through work-based learning opportunities. CTE concentrators are 11th and 12th graders who have passed at least two CTE courses within a specific career pathway. Home-based students are not included in this data.

	CTE Concentrator	Percent of Grade 11 and 12
Barron	465	39.5%
Wisconsin	64,124	44.3%

School year 2022-23. Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

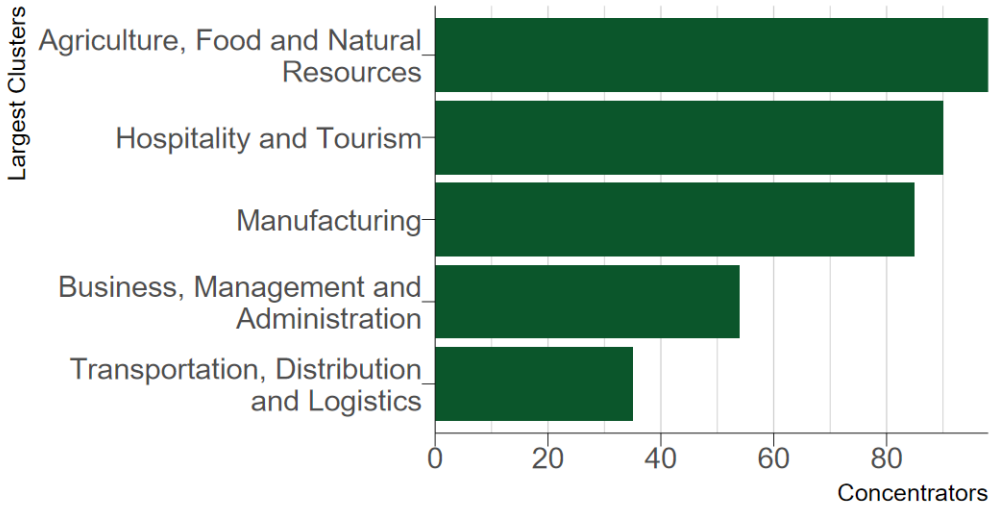


Figure 15: School year 2022-23. Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Postsecondary Enrollment

In Barron County, 47.9% of high school completers enrolled in a postsecondary institution during the 2022–23 school year. This rate is higher than the statewide average of 43.6%.

> **i** Postsecondary Enrollment
>
> Postsecondary enrollment tracks the percentage of high school graduates who attend a postsecondary school (public or private colleges, two- or four-year universities, technical colleges, or training programs) in the fall immediately following graduation. It is important to note that this data may slightly underrepresent actual enrollment due to limitations in how information is matched within the National Student Clearinghouse.

	Postsecondary Enrollment	Percent of Grade 12
Barron	272	47.9%
Wisconsin	31,893	43.6%

School year 2022-23. Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Youth Apprenticeship

Youth Apprenticeship is a program that allows participants to prepare for the workforce through direct, hands-on work experience. In the 2022–23 school year, there were 69 youth apprentices in Barron County.

> **i** Youth Apprenticeship
>
> Youth Apprenticeship (YA) Program is a school-supervised program that combines work and classroom learning to help high school students prepare for a career. Participants receive on-the-job training directly from the employer. The program helps students explore career paths and helps employers develop a qualified workforce.

	Youth Apprenticeship Participants	Percent of Grade 11 and 12
Barron	69	5.9%
Wisconsin	8,222	5.7%

School year 2022-23. Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.