



# Reports of Wisconsin's Brain Drain Are Greatly Exaggerated\*

The State's Real Talent Problem Is Who Doesn't Come

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*\*The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Center for Research on the Wisconsin Economy, the Department of Economics, or the University of Wisconsin – Madison.*

## Executive Summary

Wisconsin's college-educated residents do not leave at unusually high rates. The deeper weakness is on the other side of the ledger: relatively few educated newcomers arrive, especially from far away and among people born in other states. At the median state's arrival rate, Wisconsin would receive about 7,600 more college-educated arrivals a year. Most of that gap reflects Wisconsin's generally low rate of interstate circulation. Given its low departure rate, the national relationship predicts only about 1,500 more arrivals a year than Wisconsin actually receives.

The widely cited recent "brain drain" ranking measures something different. Among adults aged 31 to 40, 59.8 percent of Wisconsin-born people living elsewhere hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 45.2 percent of people born in other states who live here, a 14.6-point gap that ranks second among the 50 states. Among the same birthplace-defined groups, Wisconsin has more college-educated natives living in other states than college-educated adults born in other states living here, as do most states. Counting those people puts Wisconsin 31st of 50. The second-place ranking is a comparison of educational composition, not a ranking of current net migration.

Recent migration flows are much less dramatic. From 2021 to 2024, Wisconsin's net migration rate for college-educated adults aged 25 to 44 was essentially zero, ranking 25th among the 50 states. Its arrival rate was the 10th lowest in the country; its departure rate was the fifth lowest. Wisconsin did lose college graduates on net through much of the 2010s, roughly 3,700 to 4,200 a year at mid-decade, but recent flows are approximately balanced.

The more distinctive finding is who comes. From 2021 to 2024, Wisconsin attracted college graduates from beyond 500 miles at about 62 percent of the rate implied by its share of the college-educated population, compared with 86 percent for the median state. Of those long-distance arrivals, 29.5 percent were Wisconsin-born, compared with 16.2 percent in the median state. Excluding returnees, Wisconsin's long-distance attraction index falls to 0.52, compared with 0.83 in the median state. The same pattern appears in the 1980, 1990 and 2000 censuses. Wisconsin is better at attachment than attraction, and so is much of the upper Midwest.

Milwaukee is one place to look, though it does not establish why: employment in four knowledge-based sectors fell 2.9 percent there from 2010 to 2024 while rising 29.1 percent nationally. A useful test for any talent policy is whether it could change the decision of someone with little reason to choose the state.

## 1 The weakness is entry

CROWE's July 2026 analysis, *Developing and Retaining a Skilled Workforce in Wisconsin*, examined how Wisconsin develops, retains and attracts skilled workers. This report studies who comes, who leaves, how far newcomers move, and how often arrivals were born in Wisconsin.

The phrase *brain drain* naturally suggests a flow of educated people leaving faster than they arrive. The widely cited Wisconsin ranking measures something else. It compares two groups of United States-born adults aged 31 to 40. Among Wisconsin-born people now living elsewhere, 59.8 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. Among people born in other states who now live in Wisconsin, 45.2 percent do. The 14.6-point difference ranks second among the 50 states.

We reproduce the published statistic and ranking exactly. The statistic captures a difference in educational composition, rather than current migration. It compares the educational composition of two groups defined by birthplace and current residence; no migration interval enters the calculation. A second-place rank on that statistic does not mean Wisconsin has the nation's second-worst current loss of college graduates.

Among the same birthplace-defined groups, there are more college-educated Wisconsin-born adults living in other states than college-educated adults born in other states living in Wisconsin, as there are in most states: 29 of the 50 states have a negative balance on that count. Counting those people rather than comparing their education shares puts Wisconsin 31st of 50, not second. That stock balance accumulated over lifetimes; it does not tell us when those people moved. A Wisconsin-born 35-year-old living in Minneapolis is included whether she moved last year, after college, or with her parents as a child.

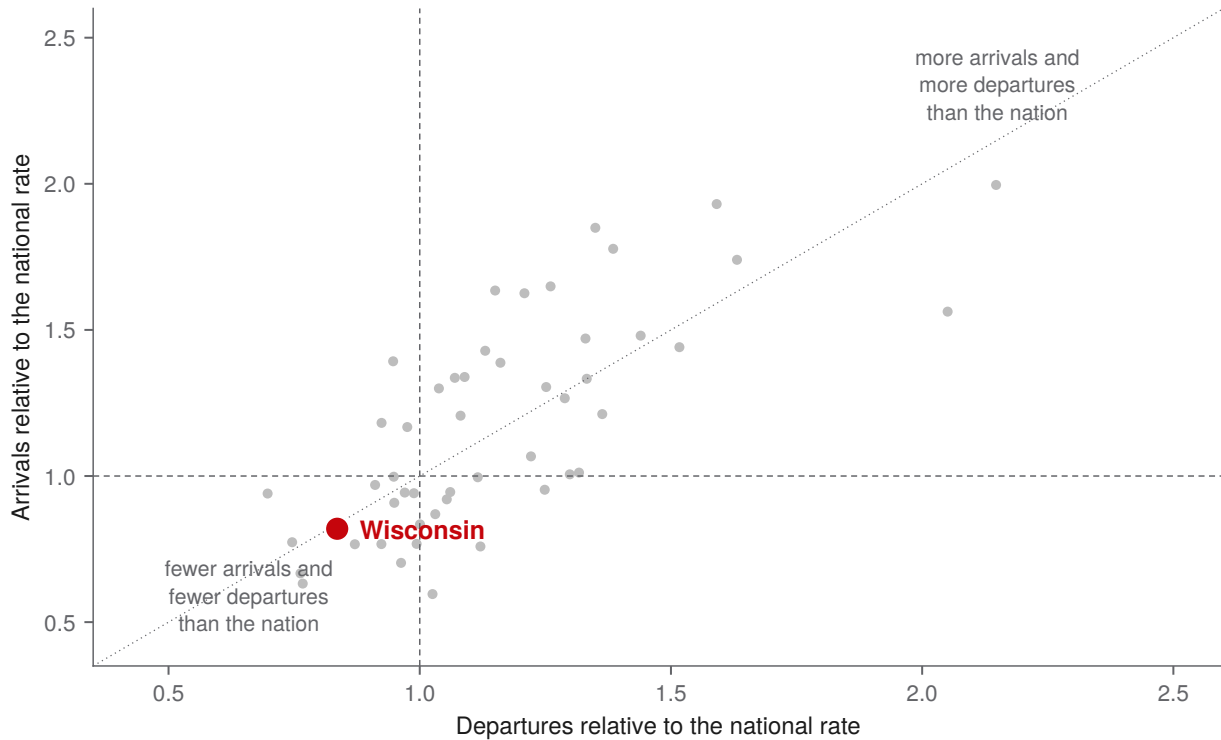
**Table 1: One state, four different measures**

| Measure                                    | What it measures                                                                                                                                            | Wisconsin                                              | Interpretation                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Birthplace education gap</b>            | Difference in BA+ shares between Wisconsin-born adults living in other states and adults born in other states living in Wisconsin, ages 31 to 40            | <b>14.6 points; 2nd largest of 50</b>                  | A <b>stock-composition</b> measure. It does not measure when people moved or current net migration.                                                    |
| <b>College-educated birthplace balance</b> | Balance between college-educated Wisconsin-born adults living elsewhere and college-educated adults born in other states living in Wisconsin, ages 31 to 40 | <b>31st highest of 50</b>                              | A <b>stock balance accumulated over lifetimes</b> . Most states have a negative balance on this count.                                                 |
| <b>2021 to 2024 net migration</b>          | College-educated interstate arrivals minus departures, ages 25 to 44, using where people lived one year earlier                                             | <b>minus 0.07 per 100 per year; 25th highest of 50</b> | A <b>current flow measure</b> . Wisconsin is approximately in the middle of the states, and the estimate is statistically indistinguishable from zero. |
| <b>Arrival / departure rates</b>           | Each flow relative to the national interstate-migration rate for college-educated adults ages 25 to 44                                                      | <b>Arrivals: 10th lowest; departures: 5th lowest</b>   | Wisconsin has <b>weak entry but unusually low exit</b> .                                                                                               |

Note. The first two measures use birthplace and current residence and therefore describe accumulated stocks. The last two use reported interstate moves during the previous year and measure flows. Ranks are stated so their direction is explicit. For net migration, rank 1 is the largest net gain. Composition gap as published by the Wisconsin Policy Forum, August 2026, and reproduced here.

To identify which margin is unusual, we measure arrivals and departures directly. For college-educated adults aged 25 to 44, each state's arrival and departure rate is expressed relative to the national interstate migration rate for the same group, so that a value of 1.0 means the state is at the national rate. We scale flows by each state's college-educated population because the question is how quickly a state adds to and loses from its existing skilled-worker base. The American Community Survey asks where each person lived one year earlier, so these are flows of people who actually moved. Appendix A gives the details.

**Figure 1. Wisconsin has low arrivals and low departures**



College-educated adults 25 to 44 moving between states in the previous year, ACS 2021 to 2024 pooled, 50 states. Each axis is the state's rate divided by the national interstate migration rate for the same group, so 1.0 is the national rate. States above the dotted diagonal gain college graduates on net; Wisconsin is in red.

Wisconsin is low on both measures, and departures are the more revealing result. From 2021 to 2024, its arrival rate was 0.82 of the national rate and its departure rate 0.84, ranking 41st and 46th of 50 states, with standard errors of about 0.05 on each. The resulting net migration rate was minus 0.07 per 100 per year, with a standard error of 0.30, ranking 25th of 50 and statistically indistinguishable from zero. Wisconsin's college-educated adults are not leaving at an unusually high rate. They are leaving at an unusually low one. Restricting the flow calculation to the same age and nativity universe used in the widely cited ranking produces a slightly positive point estimate and a rank of 20th of 50; the estimate is statistically indistinguishable from zero. The contrast between second and 25th therefore does not arise from measuring a different age or nativity group. Table 3 in Appendix B collects the alternative universes.

Measured as a birthplace-composition gap, Wisconsin ranks second; measured by the recent net migration of college-educated adults, it ranks 25th. The difference is not unusually high exit: Wisconsin has the fifth-lowest departure rate in the country. Its weakness is entry.

The middle-of-the-pack result is recent. On the same baseline flow measure, Wisconsin ranked 35th in 2006 to 2010, 41st in 2011 to 2014 and 38th in 2015 to 2019, when its net losses were real.

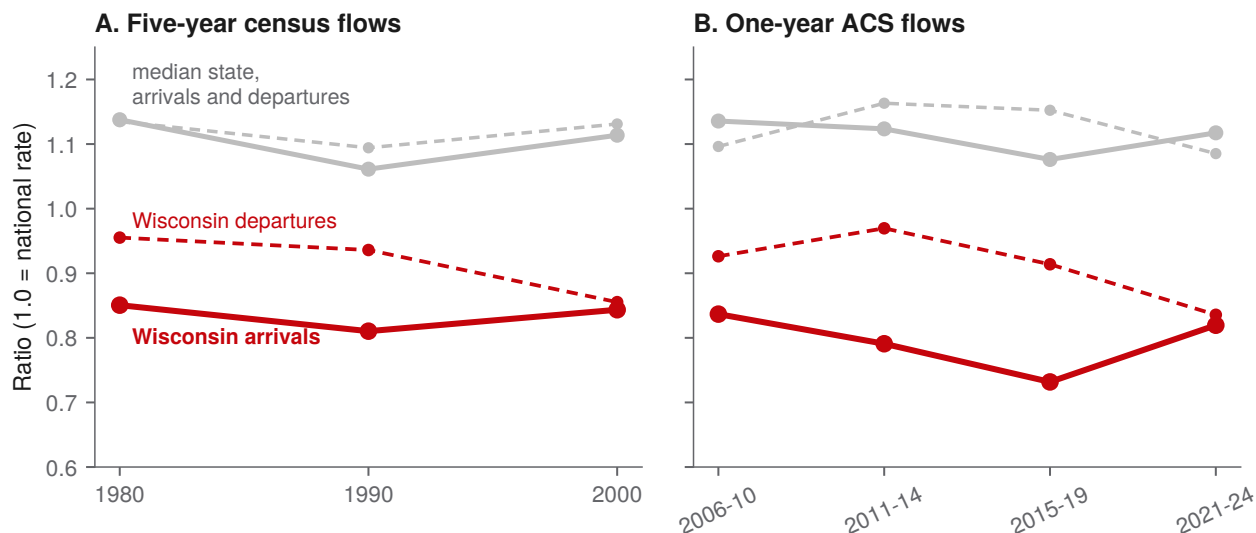
The ratios become more intuitive in people. Wisconsin received about 20,900 college-educated arrivals a year from 2021 to 2024, against a base of roughly 577,000 college-educated residents aged 25 to 44. At the median state's arrival rate, that same population would have generated about 28,600 arrivals a year, a gap of roughly 7,600. Most of that difference reflects low circulation rather than a Wisconsin-specific shortfall. States with low departures generally have low arrivals too. Given Wisconsin's departure rate, the national relationship would imply an arrival rate of about 0.88 rather than 0.82, or roughly 1,500 more arrivals a year. So 7,600 is the gap to the median state; about 1,500 is the shortfall relative to what Wisconsin's own departure rate predicts.

The same low-circulation pattern appears among people without bachelor's degrees, who move even less. Wisconsin-born residents are also relatively likely to stay: 58.8 percent of Wisconsin-born college graduates aged 25 to 44 still live in the state, ranking 13th of 50, while non-graduates are more rooted still. Figures A1 and A2 show the comparisons.

## **2 The pattern is decades old**

Weak inflow is not a recent development. The 1980, 1990 and 2000 censuses asked where people had lived five years earlier; the American Community Survey asks where they lived one year earlier. The levels therefore should not be spliced into a single series. Within each series, however, Wisconsin occupies the same position. Its five-year arrival rate was 0.851 of the national rate in 1975 to 1980, 0.810 in 1985 to 1990 and 0.843 in 1995 to 2000, placing it in the bottom fifth of states each time. Departure rates remained below the national rate. The modern one-year data show the same combination of low arrivals and low departures in every window since 2006. Figure 2 presents the two series separately.

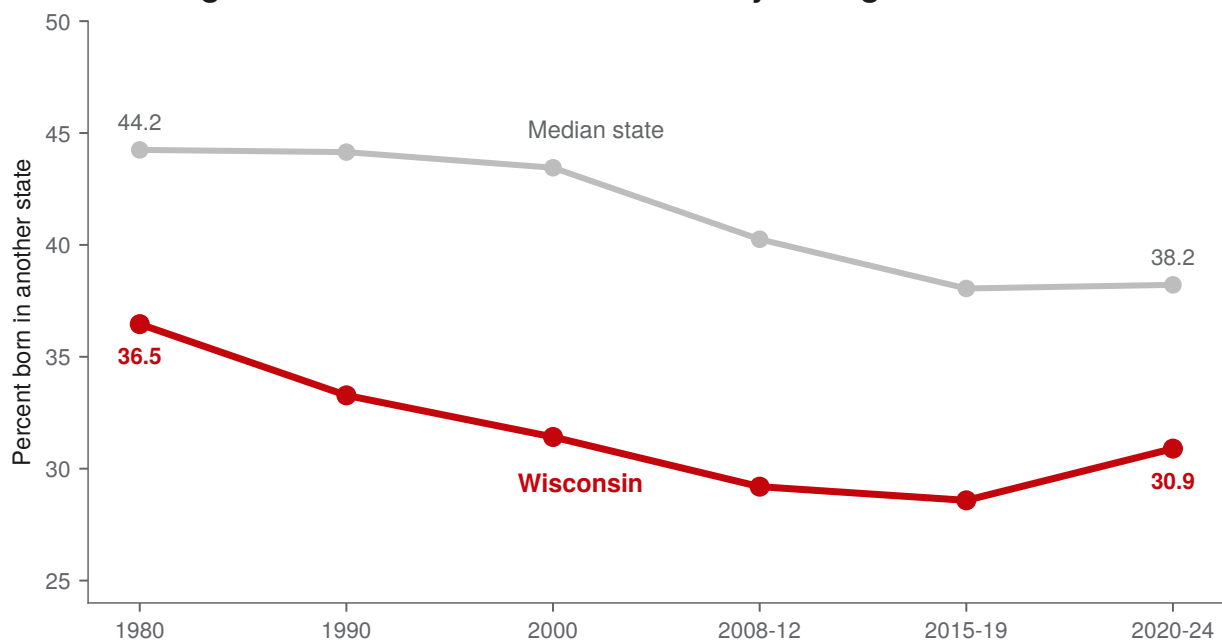
**Figure 2. Below-average arrivals and below-average departures in every window**



College-educated adults 25 to 44. The two panels use different measures and are not comparable in level: the censuses of 1980, 1990 and 2000 asked where people lived five years earlier, the American Community Survey asks about one year earlier. The 1980 point uses years of college rather than degrees.

Birthplace provides a longer and more intuitive view. Instead of asking where someone lived one or five years earlier, it asks what share of a state's college-educated residents were born somewhere else. That stock reflects decades of accumulated movement.

**Figure 3. Wisconsin has been unusually homegrown for decades**



College-educated residents aged 25 to 44, by whether they were born in a different state. 1980, 1990 and 2000 censuses; American Community Survey five-year files thereafter. The 1980 point uses years of college rather than degrees. Wisconsin has been in the bottom quarter of states at every observation.

In 1980, 36.5 percent of Wisconsin's college-educated adults aged 25 to 44 had been born in another state, compared with 44.2 percent in the median state, a rank of 41st

of 50. By 2020 to 2024, the figures were 30.9 and 38.2 percent, a rank of 39th. At every observation Wisconsin sits roughly 7 to 12 percentage points below the median and remains in the bottom quarter of states. Interstate mobility declined nationally over this period, and Wisconsin declined with it. The gap persisted rather than suddenly opening.

That makes recent explanations of Wisconsin's broad attraction deficit incomplete by construction. Taxes, labor-market conditions and public policy can affect today's margin, but they inherited a pattern already visible more than forty years ago. Section 3 shows that the specific composition of that deficit, its concentration at long range and among people coming home, is just as old.

### 3 Who does not come

Low circulation explains why Wisconsin has both few arrivals and few departures. It does not tell us who makes up the arrivals Wisconsin does receive. Two measures do: distance and birthplace.

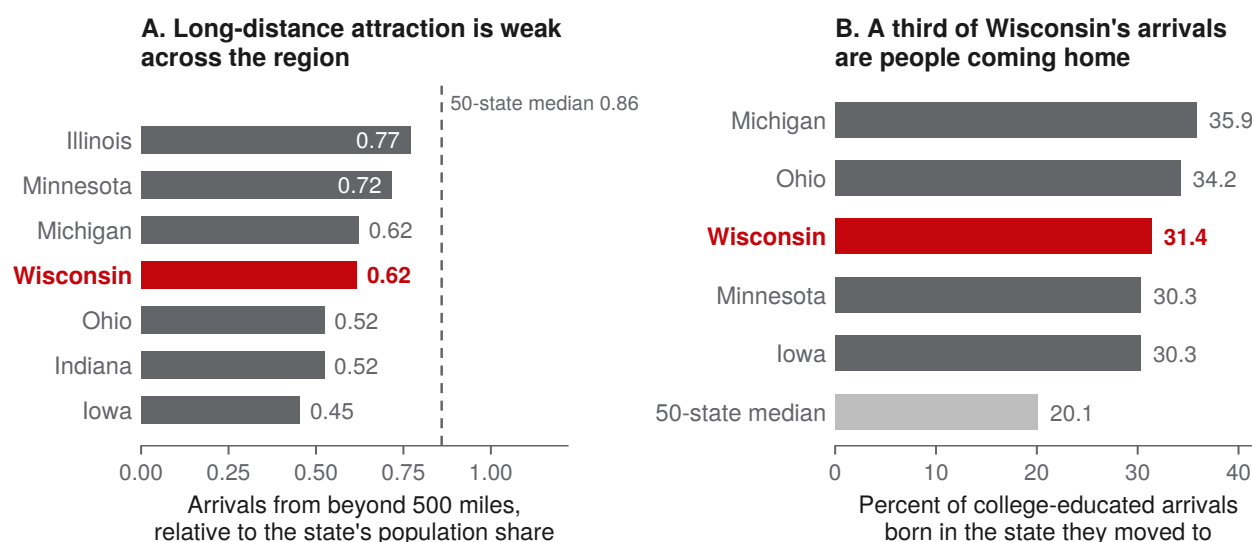
First, distance. Using the 2021 to 2024 flows, we ask whether each state receives its population share of college-educated movers coming from more than 500 miles away. An index of 1.0 means it does. Wisconsin's index is 0.617, with a standard error of 0.050, compared with 0.859 for the median state. Because states differ mechanically in how much of the country lies more than 500 miles away, we also calculate an exposure-adjusted index that allocates each origin's long-distance movers only across destinations that are actually more than 500 miles from that origin. About 80 percent of the national college-educated population aged 25 to 44 lives more than 500 miles from Wisconsin, which is almost exactly the median state's exposure. The adjustment lowers Wisconsin's long-distance index to 0.589 and moves its rank from 41st to 46th. Geography does not explain the Wisconsin result; correcting for it makes the result slightly worse.

The result is not sensitive to the precise cutoff. Moving the line to 400 or 600 miles, excluding Illinois as an origin, or excluding every move under 250 miles leaves Wisconsin between 39th and 41st of 50. Nearby attraction looks much less unusual: for moves under 500 miles, Wisconsin's index is 1.208 against a median of 1.274, and that result weakens sharply when Illinois or the shortest moves are removed, falling to 0.78 and 0.47 respectively. The same contrast appears in net flows rather than indices: only Wisconsin's deficit with non-adjacent states is clearly negative in both recent windows, as Figure A3 shows. Across these alternatives the same conclusion holds: **Wisconsin's attraction deficit is concentrated at long range; nearby attraction is ordinary at best.**

Second, birthplace. Among college-educated adults aged 25 to 44 who moved into Wisconsin from another state in 2021 to 2024, 31.4 percent were born in Wisconsin, with a standard error of 2.8 percentage points. The median state's share was 20.1 percent and

the national share 19.3 percent. The pattern also appears in the earlier window: returning natives accounted for 27.2 percent of educated arrivals in 2015 to 2019.

**Figure 4. Attachment is stronger than attraction**



College-educated adults 25 to 44 arriving from other states, ACS 2021 to 2024 pooled. Panel A compares arrivals from beyond 500 miles with the number a state would receive if such moves were allocated in proportion to its college-educated population; distance is measured between state population centers. Panel B counts arrivals born in the state they moved to.

Now combine the two measures. Among Wisconsin's college-educated arrivals from more than 500 miles away, 29.5 percent were born in Wisconsin, the third highest share in the country, against 16.2 percent in the median state. Once Wisconsin-born returnees are excluded, the long-distance attraction index falls from 0.617 to 0.523, compared with 0.830 for the median state, and the exposure-adjusted version is lower still at 0.503, ranking 48th of 50. Even among the people Wisconsin attracts from far away, an unusually large share were born in Wisconsin.

The result is not a graduation-age artifact. When ages 25 to 29 are excluded, returning natives make up 34.4 percent of Wisconsin's long-distance arrivals aged 30 to 44, the highest share of any state, against 17.3 percent in the median state, and the long-distance index excluding returnees falls to 0.435 against a median of 0.824. Restricting the sample to employed nonstudents leaves the conclusion essentially unchanged, at 0.489 against a median of 0.748. The same joint pattern appears in 2015 to 2019.

The same pattern appears without the distance restriction. Remove returning natives from both Wisconsin's arrivals and the national benchmark, and Wisconsin's overall arrival rate falls from 0.82 to 0.70 and its rank from 41st to 44th. In the earlier window, the same adjustment moves the rate from 0.73 to 0.65. Return migration is a genuine strength, not something to discount: people who come home add real skills and experience to Wisconsin. Excluding them here simply isolates the separate margin of attracting people born elsewhere.

This composition is as old as the arrival deficit itself. The 1980, 1990 and 2000 censuses carry both birthplace and the state a person lived in five years earlier, so the same decomposition can be run on each. In all three windows Wisconsin's long-distance attraction sits in the bottom fifth of states, the returning-native share of its long-distance arrivals is among the highest in the country, and the long-distance index excluding returnees is lower still.

**Table 2: Wisconsin's long-distance attraction and returning natives, 1975 to 2024**

| Period       | Long-distance index | Returning share, percent | Index excluding returnees |
|--------------|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1975 to 1980 | 0.544 (41)          | 28.0 (2)                 | 0.452 (44)                |
| 1985 to 1990 | 0.593 (44)          | 26.1 (6)                 | 0.507 (46)                |
| 1995 to 2000 | 0.628 (43)          | 24.6 (4)                 | 0.544 (44)                |
| 2021 to 2024 | 0.617 (41)          | 29.5 (3)                 | 0.523 (43)                |

Note. College-educated adults, aged 25 to 44 at the start of each window. The returning share is the percent of arrivals from beyond 500 miles who were born in the state they moved to; the third index removes those arrivals from both the state count and the national benchmark. Ranks of 50 states are in parentheses, counting from the highest value. The first three rows use the five-year migration question in the 1980, 1990 and 2000 censuses, the last the one-year question in the 2021 to 2024 American Community Survey; levels are not comparable across the two, while ranks and distances from the median within each window are. The decennial samples carry no replicate weights, so no standard errors are reported for the historical rows.

Birthplace is not a complete measure of attachment. Someone born in Wisconsin may have left as a child, while someone born in another state may have grown up, studied or previously lived here. The data therefore identify birthplace ties, not every prior connection a person might have to the state. Birthplace is a transparent measure of one form of prior connection, not a complete classification of who does and does not have ties to Wisconsin. Even with that limitation, Wisconsin's educated workforce is drawn from an unusually narrow geographic and relational pool. **It is better at attachment than attraction.**

The pattern is not uniquely Wisconsin's. Most neighboring states also perform weakly on long-distance attraction, although adjusting for geographic exposure improves the position of some interior states, especially Ohio and Indiana. Returning natives make up similarly large shares of arrivals in Michigan at 35.9 percent, Ohio at 34.2, Minnesota at 30.3 and Iowa at 30.3. Wisconsin has the highest overall arrival rate among the seven states only when returning natives are included; without them it falls to third, behind Illinois and Indiana. Much of the upper Midwest remains strongly connected to its own people while participating weakly in the national circulation of mobile college graduates. The regional clustering points away from explanations unique to Wisconsin and toward forces shared across the upper Midwest.

Recent national work reaches a related conclusion about the importance of attachment. A 2026 report from the Strada Institute and the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research finds that roughly two-thirds of college-educated workers live in the state where

they attended high school: 55 percent also attended college and now work there, while another 12 percent left for college and later returned. The share ranges from 36 percent in Colorado to 72 percent in Michigan. The authors conclude that most states face long odds in attracting talent from elsewhere, because homegrown talent remains the primary source of college-educated workers. Their measures use high-school and college location rather than birthplace, and they do not report a Wisconsin-specific estimate, so the numbers are not directly comparable. But the broader message is consistent: attachment matters almost everywhere.

## 4 Jobs are part of the pattern

A natural explanation is work. States whose jobs are concentrated in occupations with less mobile college graduates may attract fewer interstate workers even when wages are competitive.

A simple measure of how college-intensive a state's jobs are explains almost nothing: across states, the share of employment in highly college-intensive occupations correlates with arrivals at only 0.08, and Wisconsin ranks 29th of 50. A more informative measure weights each state's occupational mix by how mobile college graduates in those occupations are nationally. Wisconsin ranks 40th on that index, at 0.965 compared with a median of 0.979, and the index correlates 0.51 with arrivals. Occupational mix explains some of the cross-state variation, but the relationship runs both ways: who moves to a state also helps shape the jobs found there.

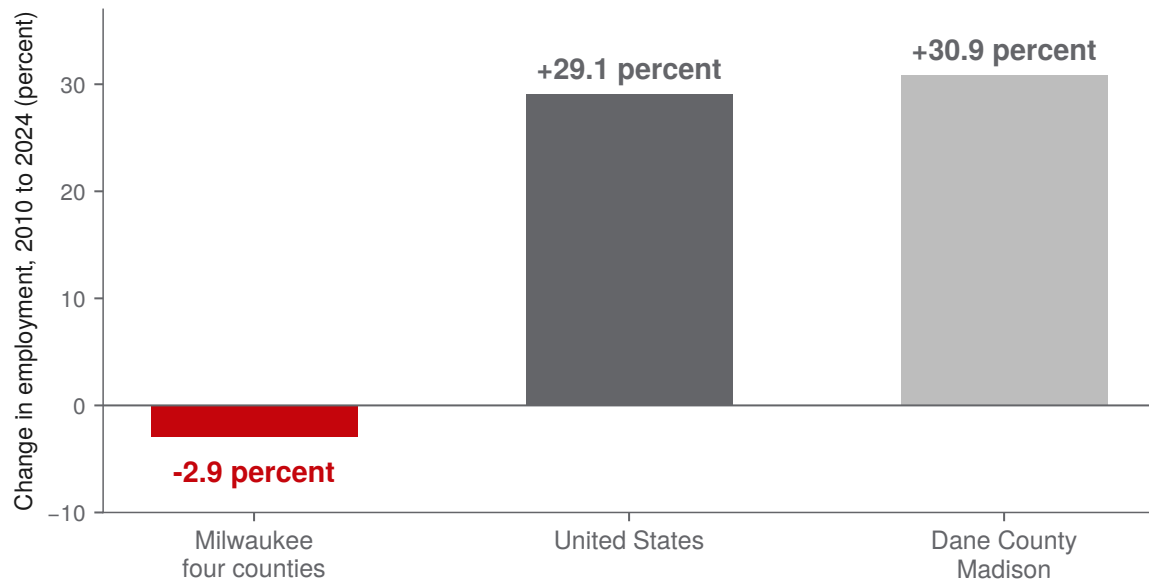
Even that measure does not account for the regional shortfall. Wisconsin's arrival rate is 0.24 below the value associated with its occupational mix, and every neighboring state lies below the same relationship. Wisconsin has the smallest shortfall of the seven (Figure A4). Nor does low pay offer a simple explanation: after adjusting for regional prices, Wisconsin's wage for college graduates is 98.9 with the nation at 100, ranking 18th of 50. Its college wage premium ranks lower, 36th, largely because wages for workers without degrees are relatively high. **Occupational mix does not explain why the upper Midwest as a whole attracts so few mobile graduates.**

The distinction between attraction and departure matters for interpreting the labor market. If Wisconsin's distinctive problem were that educated residents had to leave for larger labor markets as their careers advanced, departure rates should be unusually high, especially after age 30. They are not. That does not rule out career depth as an attraction problem. A thin market for high-end jobs may deter outsiders from coming in the first place even if it does not produce unusually high exit among people already rooted here.

Inside Wisconsin, Milwaukee is where migration and employment line up most clearly. Its arrival rate is 0.679 compared with 0.907 among the nineteen metropolitan areas closest to

it in size. Its departure rate, 0.860, is almost exactly the peer rate of 0.844. Milwaukee does not lose college graduates unusually fast for a metropolitan area of its size. **It receives them unusually slowly.**

**Figure 5. Milwaukee's knowledge-based employment moved in the opposite direction**



Private employment in information, finance and insurance, professional and technical services, and management of companies (NAICS 51, 52, 54 and 55), Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages. Milwaukee underperformed the nation in all four sectors, so the comparison does not rest on any one of them.

From 2010 to 2024, employment in information, finance and insurance, professional and technical services, and management of companies fell 2.9 percent in the four-county Milwaukee area. Nationally it rose 29.1 percent; in Dane County it rose 30.9 percent. Milwaukee underperformed the nation in all four sectors, and their share of private employment in the region fell from 17.1 to 15.4 percent while the national share rose. Here migration and employment move together. Weak job growth may deter movers, weak inflow may itself slow job growth, or both may reflect other forces. The data cannot sort those channels. Milwaukee is where the relationship is most worth investigating.

Madison is not a simple counterexample. Among adults aged 25 to 44, its arrival rate of 1.114 is close to the 1.156 rate of similarly sized metropolitan areas, but its departure rate of 1.326 is well above their 1.138. Remove people in their twenties and Madison's arrival rate falls to 0.904, roughly a quarter below its size peers, while departures remain above theirs. Madison is better understood as a high-turnover college town whose attraction advantage is concentrated among younger adults.

The comparison Wisconsin readers naturally make is Minneapolis. Minneapolis does **not** outperform Milwaukee by attracting more college graduates. Its arrival rate, 0.627, is lower than Milwaukee's 0.679. Its advantage is retention: its departure rate is 0.619, compared with Milwaukee's 0.860. A similar inflow therefore produces a much better net position.

Metro size by itself does not resolve the puzzle. Across 103 large metropolitan areas, arrivals and departures both decline with population at almost the same rate, leaving net migration essentially unrelated to size. Figure A5 shows the comparison.

## **5 International entry is weak too**

Wisconsin also attracts relatively few immigrants. Since 2010, net international migration has added 22.4 people per 1,000 Wisconsin residents, compared with 34.7 in the median state, placing Wisconsin 42nd of 50. College-graduate inflow from abroad is 0.61 per 100 residents compared with a median of 0.97, ranking 45th. Among college-educated working-age residents, 8.4 percent are foreign-born compared with 11.1 percent in the median state.

The historical comparison is revealing. In 1980, 4.0 percent of Wisconsin's college-educated residents aged 25 to 44 had been born outside the 50 states, nearly identical to the median state's 4.5 percent. Today the figures are 9.2 and 12.1 percent. Wisconsin began close to the national norm on this margin and fell behind.

The importance of migration has also changed. Between April 2020 and July 2025, births exceeded deaths in Wisconsin by only 1,022 people. The state nevertheless grew by 78,464, with international migration accounting for 67,661 and domestic migration for 9,667. Population growth now depends heavily on migration, and most recent migration growth has been international. That channel is especially exposed to federal policy and national conditions. Census estimates show the volatility clearly: Wisconsin's annual net international migration fell from 19,395 in the year ending July 2024 to 7,260 in the year ending July 2025, while the national estimate fell from 2.73 million to 1.26 million.

Even so, Wisconsin's educated workforce has continued to grow. From 2010 to 2024, its college-educated population aged 25 to 64 grew 29.0 percent, close to the median state's 30.3 percent. Younger cohorts are more educated than the cohorts now retiring. The ratio of college-educated adults aged 25 to 34 to those aged 55 to 64 rose from 1.03 to 1.26 in Wisconsin, compared with 1.12 to 1.27 in the median state. Educational upgrading has so far offset demographic replacement. Figure A6 shows the arithmetic.

International and long-distance domestic migration arise from different processes. What they share is that both bring people with relatively weak prior ties to Wisconsin, and Wisconsin is comparatively weak on both margins.

## 6 What the diagnosis changes

Wisconsin should care about retention, but maximizing retention is the wrong objective. A student or worker who leaves for better training or a better job is not necessarily a loss to be prevented. Mobility is part of a healthy labor market. The more important question is whether Wisconsin participates fully in that circulation by attracting people from elsewhere too.

Wisconsin already performs relatively well on the margins it worries about most. Recent departure rates are among the lowest in the country. Wisconsin-born college graduates are relatively likely to stay, and returnees make up an unusually large share of educated arrivals. The harder problem is attracting people with many alternatives and little prior reason to choose Wisconsin.

Jobs are part of the answer. Wisconsin pays roughly the national real wage to college graduates, and occupational structure alone does not explain the regional shortfall. But Milwaukee's weak growth in knowledge-based sectors points toward the depth of economic opportunity: can workers build careers, change employers and start firms without leaving the region?

UW-Madison gives Wisconsin an unusual opening. It already brings thousands of talented people from elsewhere to the state. Many will appropriately leave again. But for several years they are already here, studying, working and building relationships. Whether more of them build careers in Wisconsin depends partly on what they find when they graduate.

A talent strategy cannot be separated from a growth strategy. CROWE's August 2026 report, *Wisconsin Cannot Tax What Leaves*, examined a state competing for mobile households, businesses and investment. Research on location choice gives some guidance. Skilled workers sort toward places with deeper labor markets. State taxes affect the location decisions of highly mobile workers and firms, and housing costs can constrain movement into successful places. For Wisconsin, the relevant ingredients are likely to include firms that invest and grow, deeper career ladders, opportunities to start businesses, housing that can accommodate newcomers, and competitive after-tax returns to working and investing.

The policy test is simple: would it plausibly change the decision of someone with little built-in reason to choose Wisconsin? Programs that retain current residents or bring former residents home may still be worthwhile. But Wisconsin already performs comparatively well on those margins. The harder task is attracting people who could choose many other places.

Wisconsin has spent years asking why its educated people leave. For nearly half a century, the more unusual fact has been how few educated people from elsewhere arrive.

## Appendix A. Data and methods

**Data.** All migration estimates come from the American Community Survey public-use microdata, accessed through the Census Bureau and IPUMS. Flow measures use the one-year samples from 2006 through 2024, pooled into four windows: 2006 to 2010, 2011 to 2014, 2015 to 2019 and 2021 to 2024. The 2020 sample is excluded throughout because of its experimental weighting. Birthplace stock measures use the 2020 to 2024 five-year file, and the long-run composition series adds the 2008 to 2012 and 2015 to 2019 five-year files. Historical five-year flows come from the 1980, 1990 and 2000 decennial samples; in 1980, migration was coded for half the sample, and weights are adjusted accordingly. Employment data are from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, wage adjustments use the Bureau of Economic Analysis regional price parities, and population components come from the Census Bureau's Vintage 2025 population estimates.

**Universe.** Every state-level comparison uses the 50 states, including the historical five-year panel. The District of Columbia is excluded from the report's rates, ranks and medians alike, because its behavior as a single city distorts all three: it is a large positive outlier on inflow, so including it raises the national migration rate against which every state is measured. The primary age range is 25 to 44, which covers the years in which most career moves are made and avoids the period in which degree completion drives movement; results for ages 30 to 44 are reported alongside wherever the distinction matters. College-educated means holding a bachelor's degree or higher. For the 1980 census, which recorded years of college rather than degrees, four or more years of college is used.

**Rates and ratios.** For the ACS, the arrival rate is the number of people who lived in another state one year earlier and now live in the state, divided by the group's population living in the state one year earlier, times 100; departures are defined symmetrically. The historical census estimates use the same construction over the five-year interval asked in those censuses. Net migration is arrivals minus departures. Each rate is divided by the corresponding 50-state migration rate for the same group and interval, so 1.0 is the national benchmark. This normalization removes the long national decline in mobility from comparisons across periods.

**Distance and birthplace.** The simple index, exposure-adjusted index and returning-native decomposition all come from the same extract of the 2015 to 2019 and 2021 to 2024 one-year files. Distance is the great-circle distance between the 2020 Census centers of population of the origin and destination states, and the split at 500 miles is a convention rather than a threshold with meaning of its own. A long-distance attraction index divides a state's share of national arrivals from beyond that distance by its share of the national college-educated population aged 25 to 44 in the same sample, so 1.0 means

the state receives its population share. A returning native is a person who moved to the state in which they were born. The exposure-adjusted index replaces the population-share denominator with the arrivals a state would receive if each origin's long-distance movers were allocated only among destinations more than 500 miles from that origin, in proportion to destination population; this removes the mechanical advantage a corner state holds over an interior one. The historical panel applies the same distance and birthplace definitions to the 1980, 1990 and 2000 samples, using the same 2020 population centers so that the geography is held fixed rather than drifting with population. It reproduces the arrival ratios reported in Section 2 before anything else is read.

**Uncertainty.** All estimates are weighted with the survey's person weights, and standard errors are computed from its 80 replicate weights, with every ratio formed separately within each replicate. No cell with fewer than 50 unweighted movers is reported. Wisconsin's long-distance cells rest on 263 unweighted arrivals from 2021 to 2024, of which 88 were returning natives and 175 were not, and on between 279 and 884 in each historical window. The decennial samples carry no replicate weights, so the historical panel is reported without standard errors. Estimates close to zero relative to their standard errors are left unsigned; this applies to the 2021 to 2024 net migration estimate and the bilateral balances with individual states.

**Interpretation.** The relationships between occupational structure, metropolitan size, employment growth and migration are descriptive. None identifies a causal effect.

## Appendix B. Supporting figures

**The relationship between arrivals and departures.** Across the 50 states in 2021 to 2024, the arrival ratio for college-educated adults aged 25 to 44 regressed on the departure ratio gives a correlation of 0.74 and a slope of 0.93. At Wisconsin's departure ratio the fitted arrival ratio is 0.879 against an actual 0.820, a residual of minus 0.059, which ranks 26th of 50 and sits close to the median residual of minus 0.046. Applied to Wisconsin's base, that residual is the roughly 1,500 arrivals a year. Wisconsin's arrival rate is therefore about what its own departure rate would predict. The main attraction results focus instead on distance and returning natives.

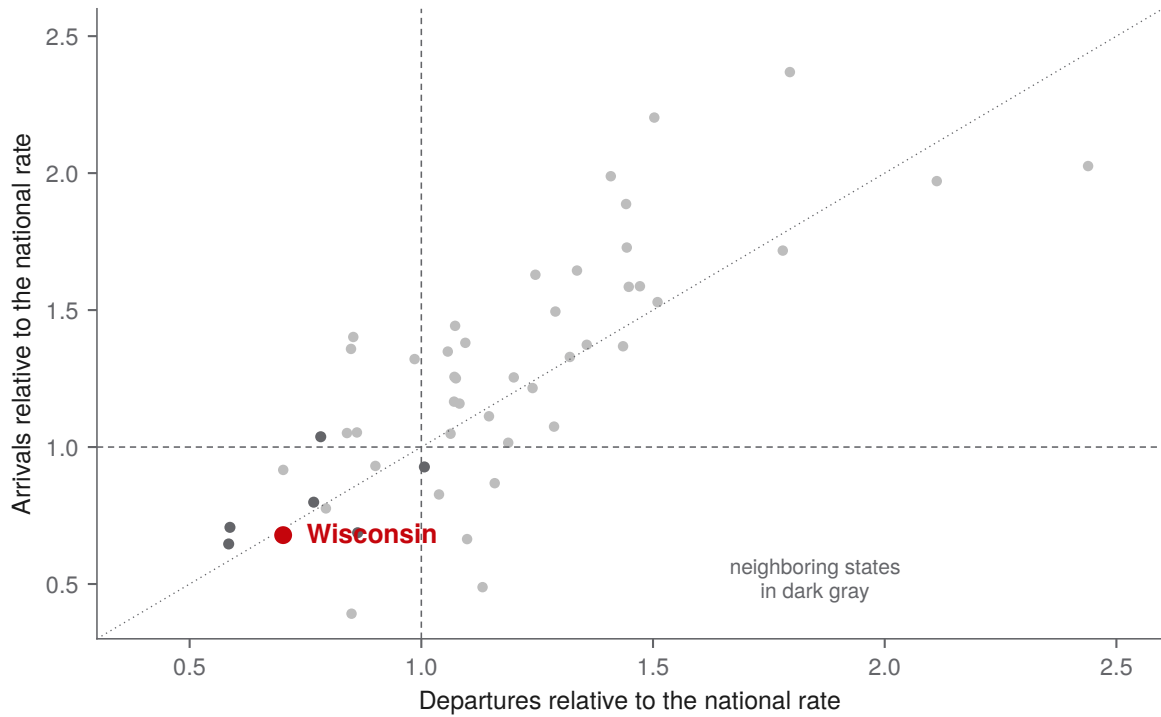
Because the current-flow rank is the number most likely to be quoted, the table below reports it under alternative definitions of the flow measure.

**Table 3: Wisconsin's rank on current net migration under alternative definitions, 2021 to 2024**

| Current-flow definition                             | Net rate per 100 per year | SE   | Rank of 50 |
|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------|------------|
| BA+, ages 25 to 44, all nativities                  | -0.07                     | 0.30 | 25         |
| BA+, ages 30 to 44                                  | +0.21                     | 0.28 | 22         |
| BA+, ages 31 to 40, all nativities                  | +0.30                     | 0.34 | 25         |
| BA+, ages 31 to 40, United States-born              | +0.47                     | 0.35 | 20         |
| BA+, ages 25 to 44, United States-born              | -0.02                     | 0.30 | 27         |
| BA+ net flow scaled by all residents, ages 25 to 44 | -0.03                     | 0.12 | 25         |
| Graduate degree or higher, ages 25 to 44            | -0.71                     | 0.62 | 34         |

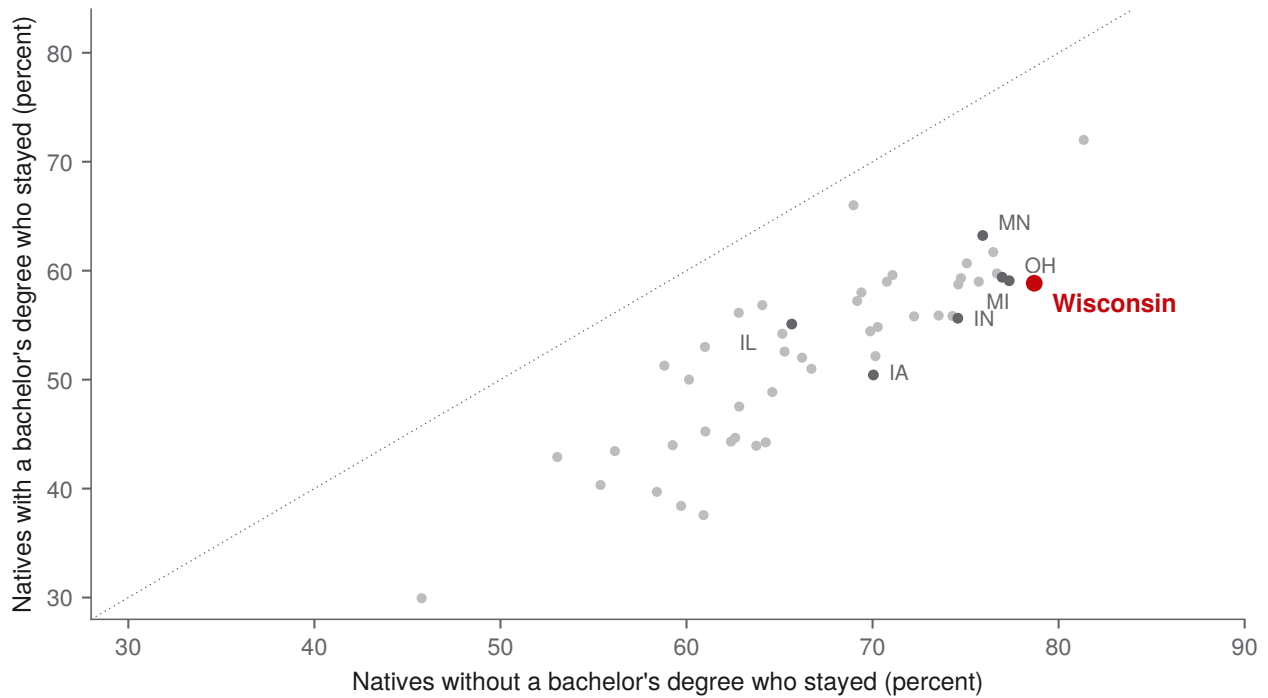
Note. All rows use pooled ACS one-year files for 2021 to 2024 and the 50-state universe. Rank 1 is the largest net gain. The baseline point-estimate rank is 25th; across the 80 replicate estimates, the 5th to 95th percentile range of the rank is 21st to 30th. The graduate-degree estimate is less favorable but imprecise and statistically indistinguishable from zero.

**Figure A1. Wisconsin is a low-mobility state at every education level**



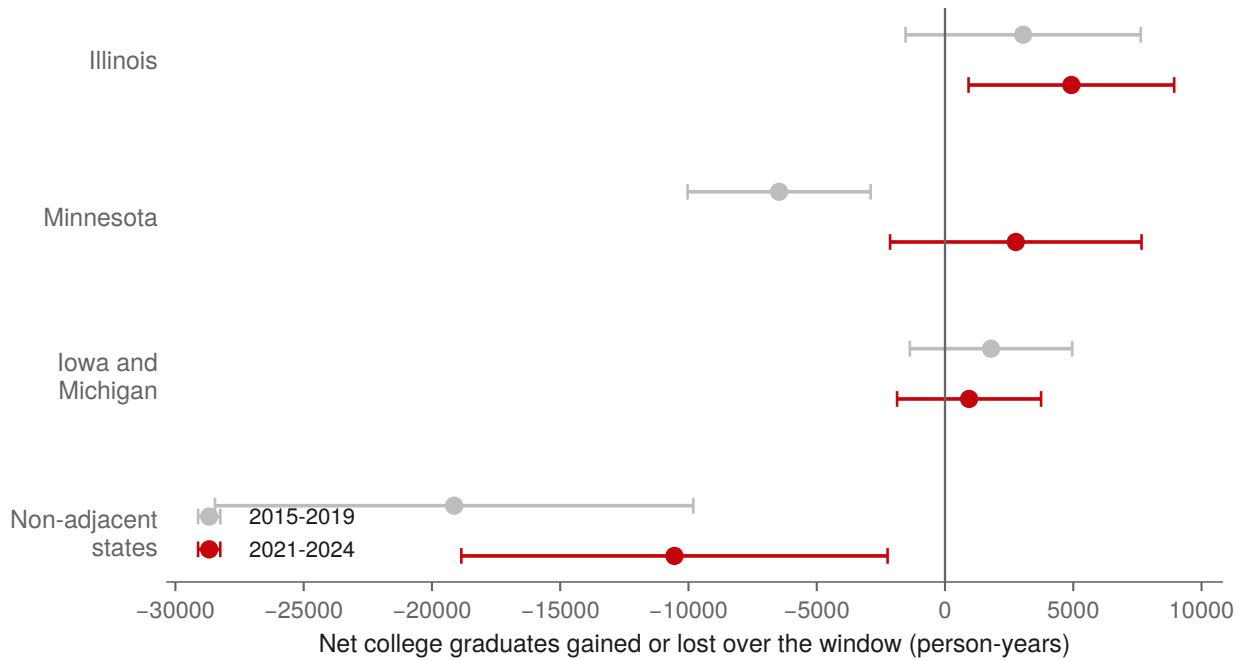
Adults 25 to 44 without a bachelor's degree, interstate moves in the previous year, ACS 2021 to 2024 pooled, 50 states. Wisconsin's ratios are 0.678 and 0.702, further below the national rate than its college-educated ratios.

**Figure A2. Wisconsin keeps its college-educated natives better than most states, and its other natives better still**



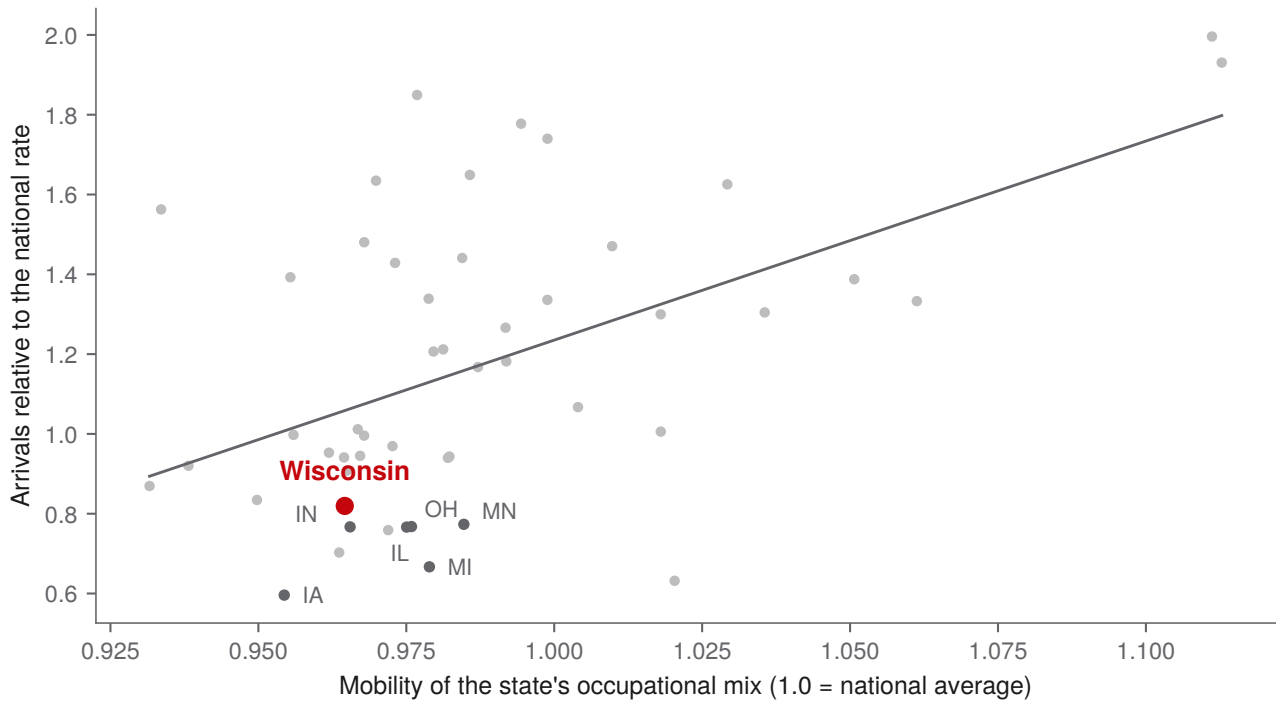
Adults 25 to 44 born in each state, by whether they still live there, ACS 2020 to 2024. Every state lies below the dotted line because graduates move more everywhere. Wisconsin: 58.8 percent and 78.7 percent, ranks 13 and 2 of 50.

**Figure A3. Only the long-distance balance is stable across windows**



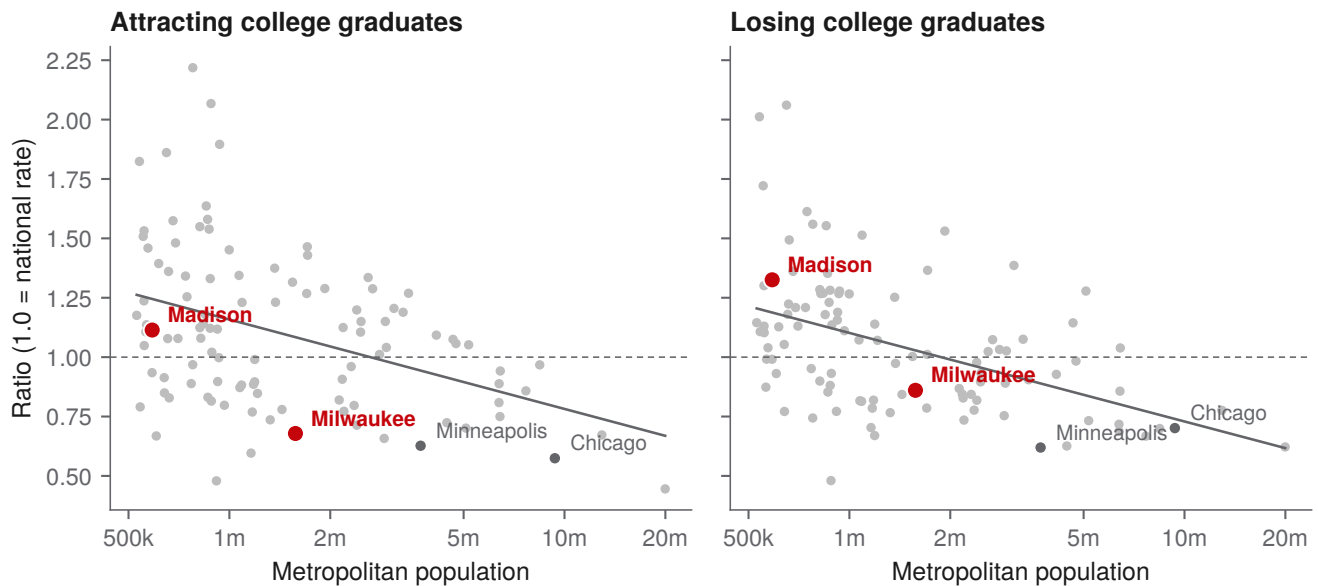
College-educated adults 25 to 44, ACS pooled windows, with 90 percent intervals from replicate weights. The balance with Minnesota changes sign between the two windows and the balance with Illinois is distinguishable from zero in only one of them, so individual state pairs are reported here as description rather than as findings.

**Figure A4. States with less mobile occupational mixes attract fewer graduates, and Wisconsin sits below the relationship**



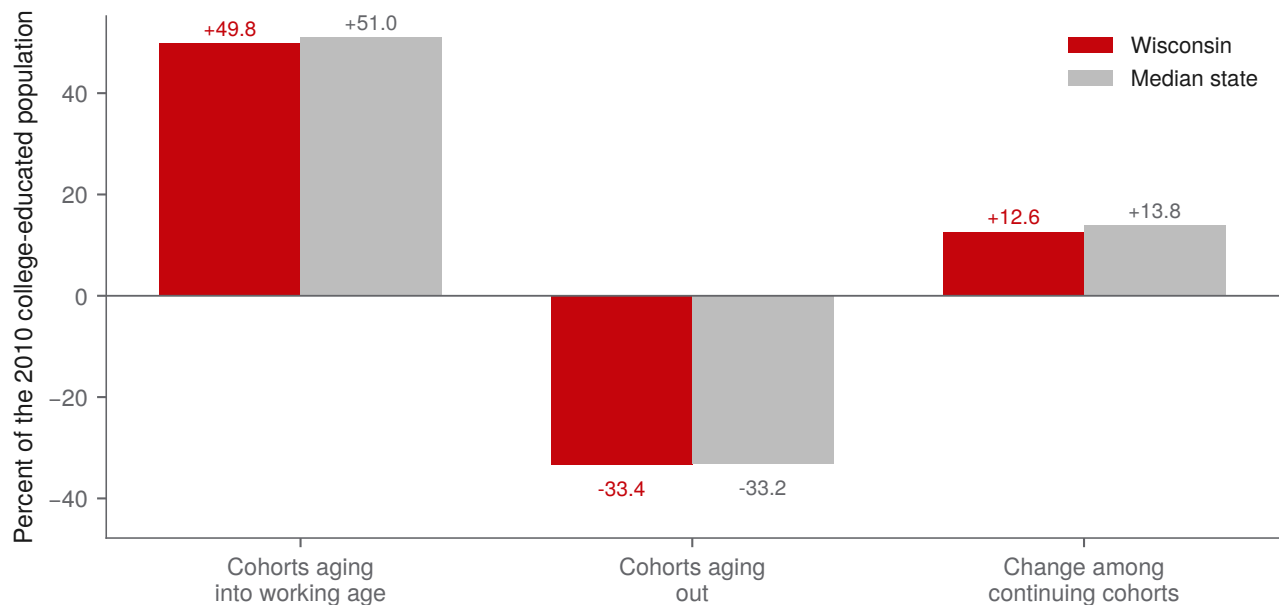
College-educated adults 25 to 44, ACS 2021 to 2024 pooled, 50 states. The horizontal axis weights each state's occupational mix by how often college graduates in those occupations move between states nationally. The line is a descriptive fit across states (correlation 0.51) and does not identify a cause; every neighboring state also lies below it.

**Figure A5. Larger metropolitan areas attract and lose graduates more slowly, so size leaves the net position alone**



College-educated adults 25 to 44 moving between metropolitan areas, ACS 2017 to 2019 and 2021 to 2024 pooled; 103 metropolitan areas above 500,000 whose PUMA geography matches the published area. Madison is measured as Dane County. Metropolitan ratios are not comparable in level with the interstate ratios in Figure 1.

**Figure A6. Wisconsin's college-educated workforce grew nearly as fast as the median state's**



College-educated adults 25 to 64, 2010 and 2024. For a single state the three terms sum to the change in the stock: Wisconsin's 49.8 minus 33.4 plus 12.6 gives the 29.0 percent by which its college-educated working-age population grew, against 30.3 percent in the median state. The median state's bars are medians taken term by term across the 50 states, so they do not themselves sum to that 30.3 percent. Wisconsin's working-age population fell 0.5 percent over the same period.

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Replication materials, including every table underlying the figures and a script that checks each printed number against them, are available from the authors.