

INFRASTRUCTURE WORKFORCE FACT SHEET: WISCONSIN

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B | Brookings Metro

Additional data, findings, and recommendations are available in the main report, [Seizing the U.S. infrastructure opportunity: Investing in current and future workers](#).

This fact sheet explores major infrastructure workforce needs in Wisconsin, with an emphasis on the transportation and energy sectors—the two main employers for this workforce. To help leaders better understand the current landscape of actors and actions involved in these issues, the fact sheet briefly summarizes: levels of infrastructure employment; challenges in hiring, training, and retention; and opportunities for innovation that invest in current and future workforce development.

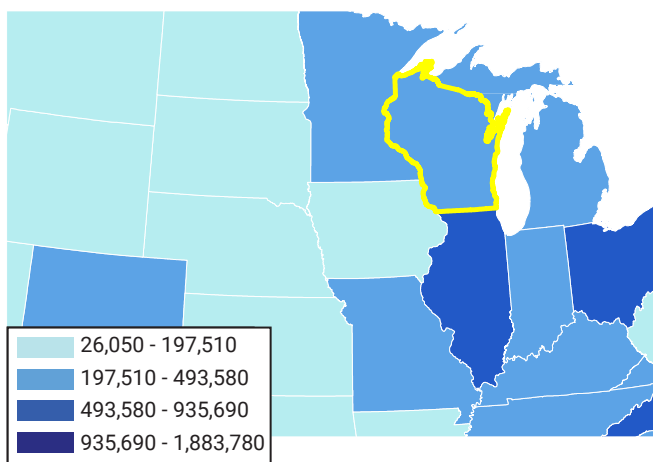
Ultimately, leaders involved in infrastructure construction, operation, and maintenance need to collaborate with those involved in workforce development (and vice versa). On the infrastructure side, these leaders include the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, the Division of Energy, Housing,

and Community Resources, and the Wisconsin Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy at the state level, as well as numerous local entities. On the workforce side, leaders include the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, the Wisconsin Workforce Development Association, and the Wisconsin Economic Development Association, as well as educational institutions, labor groups, community-based organizations, and others. Major employers include the Milwaukee County Transit System, Alliant Energy, We Energies, and WEC Energy Group, among others.

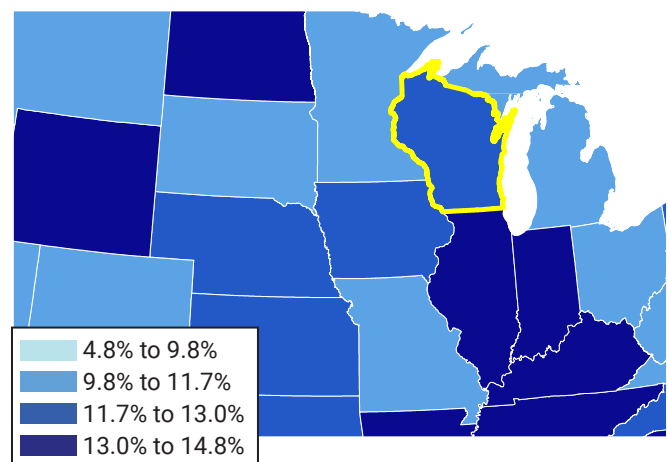
LEVELS OF INFRASTRUCTURE EMPLOYMENT

Wisconsin employs 330,000 infrastructure workers, representing 12% of its entire workforce. This total ranks 17th nationally, on par with Minnesota and Missouri and closely behind Michigan. This share of the workforce ranks 25th, in line with national averages and comparable to other Midwestern states such as Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas.

Total infrastructure employment, 2021



Infrastructure share of total employment, 2021



SOURCE: Brookings analysis of BLS Occupational Employment Statistics

Similar to most states, the largest infrastructure occupations include those involved in trade and logistics, such as material movers and truck drivers. Other sizable occupations include those involved in the skilled trades and other infrastructure design and operation activities, such as electricians and civil engineers. As the main report describes, this means that investments in on-the-job training and work-based learning opportunities are crucial to support this workforce.

CHALLENGES IN HIRING, TRAINING, AND RETENTION

Employers and workers in Wisconsin face a variety of challenges in filling these jobs:

- **Demographic changes**—including an aging population and more migration out of the state—have contributed to a shrinking labor pool. Broader declines in the working-age population are adding further stress to these challenges.
- These population shifts are especially pronounced in rural sections of the state, leading to **inequitable access to opportunity**. There also remain **persistent racial disparities** in accessing higher-paying careers in infrastructure and elsewhere; differences in income levels and unemployment rates are among the largest nationally when comparing white workers with Black workers and Latino or Hispanic workers in Wisconsin.
- Despite a historically robust manufacturing sector, Wisconsin is **still shedding workers** from many of these jobs, and when combined with **declining unionization rates**, there can be struggles to connect workers to positions in technical fields and the skilled trades. For instance, **in a survey of 266 employers prepared by the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce Foundation in 2021**, 86% of respondents said they faced challenges hiring enough workers.
- Few qualified engineers, qualified technical instructors, and students in infrastructure-related fields—in addition to a lack of awareness of clean energy careers—**limits the talent pipeline**.
- A **lack of funding for workforce development** and struggles around predictable, durable infrastructure funding (especially in **transit**) remain ongoing challenges

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION

Several ongoing or emerging efforts are advancing infrastructure workforce development and offer guidance for other potential actions in years to come:

- In response to the pandemic, state agencies and other educational and economic development partners have come together to accelerate training and career placement, including in infrastructure. For instance, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation and the Department of Workforce Development created the **Workforce Innovation Grant Program** to empower workers in “family-supporting careers.” This comes on top of other efforts, including the **Worker Advancement Initiative** and the **Worker Connection Program**.
- The Wisconsin Department of Transportation has pioneered several efforts aimed at community outreach, recruitment, and skill-building for more and different types of workers, including an **Equity and Inclusion Plan** and establishing the **Transportation Alliance for New Solutions (TrANS)**—a collaborative training program that has already placed over 600 workers.
- Additional transportation-related efforts are evident in the Department of Transportation’s **Connections 2030 report**, which calls for more durable workforce development investments.
- The **Wisconsin Clean Energy Plan**—prepared by the Wisconsin Department of Administration and Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy—promotes outreach, training, and industry partnerships in support of long-term careers. It also calls for greater union engagement and establishing flexible pathways, including innovative reentry programs for formerly incarcerated individuals.