Chisago County – Synopsis

Demographics. Chisago County, with a population of 53,697, is the northwestern-most county in the Lower St. Croix Valley, which also includes Washington County in Minnesota and Pierce, Polk, and St. Croix Counties in Wisconsin. **Chisago County grew by 10.5% between 2005 and 2012**, adding more than 5,000 residents. The population of Chisago County has grown more than twice as fast as the state of Minnesota (Figure 1). Chisago County has relatively few foreign-born residents (1.8%) and a relatively small non-White population (4.4%) compared to the Minnesota average (7.3% foreign-born and 14% non-White).

Income and Poverty. Median household income in 2012 in Chisago County was $56,922, which is significantly higher than the average for the state of Minnesota ($58,434). Median household income in Chisago County has risen after the recession (Figure 2). **Poverty rates in Chisago County are below the state average.** As shown in Figure 3, the percentage of Chisago County families in poverty (4.9% in 2012) is below the Minnesota average (7.6%). After increasing during the recession, the poverty rate has decreased slightly in recent years.

Housing. Chisago County has a relatively high proportion of owner-occupied homes. Nearly 85% of Chisago County households reported that they own their home, which is more than 11% higher than the state average. However, **38% of Chisago County households spend more than 30% of their household income on housing and are considered “cost-burdened”** (Figure 4). The comparable figure for Minnesota as a whole is 32%.
Health. Access to health care in Chisago County, as measured by the proportion of the population without health insurance, is better than the Minnesota average (9.2% of Chisago County residents lacked health insurance, compared to 10.3% statewide in 2007). More than a quarter of Chisago County residents (27.0% in 2011) are considered to be obese, a rate 2.7% above the state average (24.3%). (Figure 5.)

Community Engagement. Over half of Chisago County employed residents (54%) commute more than 30 minutes each way compared to the Minnesota average of 30%. These long commutes leave less time available for community engagement.

Economy. The unemployment rate in Chisago County (7.4% in 2013) is more than 2% above the Minnesota average (5.1%).

Food Security. One measure of food insecurity is the percentage of school children eligible for free/reduced price school lunches. The percentage of school children eligible for free/reduced price school lunches in Chisago County (28% in 2012) was 10% below the Minnesota average but has increased since 2005 in both Chisago County and Minnesota (Figure 6). The percentage of Chisago County households receiving SNAP benefits (food stamps) has increased slightly from 5.2% in 2008 to 5.8% in 2012, while the Minnesota averaged increased over the same time period from 5.2% to 8.5%. USDA defines food secure households as those who have “access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.” Feeding America estimates that the percentage of food insecure individuals in Chisago County has decreased from 11.9% in 2009 to 8.4% in 2011, while the Minnesota average has increased slightly from 10.5% to 11.4%.

Education. Educational data for Chisago County show mixed results. The high school graduation rate in Chisago County (84%) is 4% higher than the Minnesota average, and third grade reading proficiency (64%) is more than 6% better than the state average based on the revised 2013 proficiency standards. However, the percentage of Chisago County adults with a college degree (20.4%) is well below the Minnesota average (32.6%). The gap between Chisago County and the overall Minnesota average in terms of the percent of adults with at least a bachelor’s degree had been increasing but has narrowed slightly in recent years. This relatively low education level may explain the relatively high unemployment rate in Chisago County given that the recent recession was more severe for those without a college degree.

Summary. The population of Chisago County has been increasing rapidly. Most measures of economic well-being in Chisago County are better than the comparable Minnesota averages. Median household income is higher and poverty rates are lower than comparable figures for the state. However, the unemployment rate is higher than the state average. Compared to the state average, Chisago County workers travel longer to their workplaces. A relatively high percentage of Chisago County households are “cost-burdened” compared to the state average. Educational indicators are mixed. The high school graduation rate and third-grade reading proficiency scores are above the state average, but the percentage of adults with a college degree is well below the state average.