Pierce County – Synopsis

Demographics. Pierce County, with a 2012 population of 40,947, is the southeastern-most county in the Lower St. Croix Valley, which also includes St. Croix and Polk Counties in Wisconsin and Washington and Chisago Counties in Minnesota. Pierce County’s population grew one and a half times the rate of the state between 2005 and 2012, adding nearly 2,000 new residents (Figure 1). Pierce County has relatively few foreign-born residents (1.5%) and a relatively small non-White population (3.4%) compared to the Wisconsin average (4.7% foreign-born and 13% non-White). The age structure of the Pierce County population is younger than the Wisconsin average; median age in Pierce County is 34.8 years, compared to 38.7 years in the state. The difference is found in the percentage of the population between 15 to 24 years of age (21% in Pierce County compared to 14% in Wisconsin) and is a result of the students attending UW-River Falls.

Income and Poverty. Figure 2 indicates median household income in Pierce County is $57,586, which is significantly higher than the average for the state of Wisconsin ($51,340). The higher incomes that Pierce County has enjoyed relative to the state of Wisconsin has narrowed in recent years (Figure 3). The percentage of Pierce County families in poverty (6.5%) is well below the Wisconsin average (9.0%), but Pierce County’s individual poverty rate (13.2%) is the same as the Wisconsin average. One possible explanation for the larger poverty rate among individuals is the presences of UW-River Falls students living off campus in non-family groups. All measures of poverty in Pierce County have risen in recent years.

Economy. The unemployment rate in Pierce County (4.9%) is 1.8% below the Wisconsin average (6.7%). Public sector employment in Pierce County is 16.4%, which is nearly 4% above the Wisconsin average. Employment at UW-River Falls is a significant contributor to public sector jobs in Pierce County. Approximately 600 of the 3,700 public sector employees in Pierce County work on the UW-River Falls campus.
Housing. Pierce County has a relatively high proportion of owner-occupied homes. Nearly 73% of Pierce County households reported that they own their home, which is 5% higher than the state average. More than a third of households in both Pierce County and Wisconsin are classified as “cost burdened,” meaning they spend more than 30% of their household income on housing.

Community Engagement. As measured by the percentage of residents who lived in a different county or state in the previous year, Pierce County residents are more geographically mobile than the Wisconsin state average. Over 11% of Pierce County residents said they lived in a different county or state in the previous year, which is more than twice the Wisconsin average (5.3%). This is likely a result of the mobility among the student population on the UW-River Falls campus.

Health. Access to health care in Pierce County, as measured by the proportion of the population with health insurance, is slightly better than the Wisconsin state average (8.5% in Pierce County without health insurance versus 10.4% in Wisconsin. Figure 4). The infant mortality rate in Pierce County (4.7 per 1,000 live births in 2010) is significantly lower than the Wisconsin average and was also well below the state average in 2008 and 2009. As shown in Figure 5, more than a quarter of Pierce County residents are considered to be obese, a rate slightly above the state average. Obesity rates in the state and county have trended slightly downward in recent years.

Food Security. One measure of food insecurity is the percentage of school children eligible for free/reduced price school lunches. The percentage of Pierce County children qualifying for school lunch assistance is 16% below the Wisconsin state average but has increased in both Pierce County and Wisconsin in recent years (Figure 6). Although the percentage of Pierce County households receiving SNAP benefits (food stamps) has increased in recent years, the 2012 rate (8.9%) is well below the state rate (12.4%). 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 9.4% of the Pierce County population were food insecure in 2011, which is down from 11.2% in 2009. At the same time, the state average has increased from 11.4% to 13.0%.

Education. The high school graduation rate in Pierce County (97%) is 9% higher than the Wisconsin average (Figure 7). Third grade reading proficiency in Pierce County (41%) exceeds the Wisconsin average (35%) based on the revised 2013 reading proficiency standards. Among Pierce County adults, 27% have a 4-year college degree or better, which is the same as the Wisconsin average.

Summary. The population of Pierce County is increasing at a moderately fast pace. Most measures of economic well-being are better in Pierce County than the comparable Wisconsin averages. Median household income is higher, SNAP usage is lower, and unemployment rates are lower. While the family poverty rate is lower than the Wisconsin average, the poverty rate for individuals is the same as the state average. The influence of the UW-River Falls campus is seen in several indicators: a younger age structure, a higher percentage of public sector employment, a higher geographic mobility rate, and a higher individual poverty rate. Educational measures are also above their comparable state averages, including the high school graduation rate and third grade reading proficiency. The percentage of “cost-burdened” households is similar to the state average.