Polk County – Synopsis

Demographics. Polk County, with a 2012 population of 43,920, is the northeastern-most county in the Lower St. Croix Valley, which also includes Pierce and St. Croix Counties in Wisconsin and Washington and Chisago Counties in Minnesota. While the overall population of Wisconsin has increased by 3% since 2005, the population of Polk County remained stable (Figure 1). Polk County also has a relatively low working age (20 – 64) population per dependent (those under 20 or 65 and older); 1.38 workers per dependent in Polk compared to 1.5 workers per dependent in Wisconsin. The proportion of Polk County residents receiving social security income (33%) is 4% higher than for Wisconsin in 2012.

Income and Poverty. The average Polk County worker has a longer commute (41% of Polk County workers commute 30+ minutes each way, compared to only 26% for Wisconsin as a whole) and face more uncertain job prospects. The County’s unemployment rate has consistently exceeded the state average over the past decade. As Figure 2 indicates, median household income in Polk County ($47,860) is lower than the average for the state of Wisconsin ($51,340). Figure 3 indicates that the recession has hit Polk County hard in terms of household income; as of 2012 there has been a slight increase, but the median household income in Polk County is still below pre-recession levels. The individual poverty rate (11.7%) is less than the state average (13%). Similarly the family poverty rate (8%) is below the state average (9%).

Housing. Though it has declined slightly over time, Polk County has a very high rate of home ownership (Figure 4). 77% of Polk County residences are owner-occupied, which is 9% above the state average. The high home ownership rate is likely related to the older

Figure 1: Population Change, 2005-2012

Figure 2: Median Household Income, 2012

Figure 3: Recent Income Trends

Figure 4: Rate of Homeownership
average age of Polk County residents. However, many homeowners in Polk County are “cost burdened;” 36% of Polk County homeowners spend more than 30% of their household income on housing (Figure 5). The comparable figure for Wisconsin as a whole is under 34%. These results are consistent with the relatively low household incomes discussed above (Figures 1 and 2).

Health. Access to health care in Polk County, as measured by the proportion of the population with health insurance, is relatively poor. In 2012, 11.2% of Polk County residents lacked health insurance, which is higher than Wisconsin as a whole. Moreover, health outcomes in Polk County are not so positive. More than one-quarter of Polk County residents are considered to be obese, a rate 3% higher than the state average. The proportion of obese adults had been falling but increased substantially in 2009 (Figure 6). On the other hand, over the 2007-2010 time period the average infant mortality rate in Polk County (5.4/1,000 births) has been better than the state average (6.3/1000).

Food Security. 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 10.5% of the Polk County population were food insecure in 2011, 2.5% less than in Wisconsin as a whole. Figure 8 shows another dimension of food insecurity, the percentage of school children eligible for reduced price school lunches. Polk County (39%) is similar to the state (Figure 7).

Education. The education profile of Polk County is a study in contrasts. On the one hand, Polk County has an enviable record with respect to high school graduation rates. Polk County’s graduation rate (95%) is nearly 7% better than the Wisconsin state average. Though it has risen during the past 20 years, Polk County has a relatively low proportion of adults with a 4-year college degree or better (Figure 8). Given the premium placed on education in a modern economy, this variable educational profile is problematic for Polk County.

Summary. Polk County has a stable population but one that is aging relatively rapidly. It has a number of positive features: high rates of high school graduation, high rates of home ownership, and poverty rates below the state average. On the other hand, incomes are relatively low and dropped even further during the recent recession than incomes in the state of Wisconsin as a whole. The longer than average commute times and higher unemployment rates in Polk County suggests residents have to go further afield to find employment. Compared to Wisconsin as a whole, a lower percentage of Polk County residents have health insurance and obesity is higher. The relatively low proportion of the population with a bachelor’s degree may pose increasing challenges for the County in the global, knowledge-based economy that is emerging.