State of the Valley – Summary

Community Engagement

In his influential book Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam presented evidence that Americans are decreasing their participation in groups (civic, youth, recreational, etc.). From the early days of European settlement in America, visitors like Alexis de Tocqueville identified this sort of community engagement as one of the defining characteristics of the country.

There are few measures of civic engagement that are collected systematically at the county level. One direct measure of community engagement (voter participation rates), indicates that residents of the St. Croix Valley tend to vote at similar or slightly higher percentages than do citizens in their respective states (Figure 1).

Factors that may inhibit community engagement include long commute times (workers in all 5 counties have longer average commutes), lack of English language skills (all 5 counties have lower percentages of non-English-speaking households than their state averages), and recently moving into a county. Pierce (where college student mobility is a key factor), St. Croix, and Chisago have higher rates for this variable than their respective states, while Washington is about the same as Minnesota, and Polk is less than Wisconsin.

Demographic

Compared to other developed countries (Western Europe, Japan), the United States has a relatively young and still growing population. Figure 2 indicates that relative to the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, the populations in all of the counties in the St. Croix Valley, except Polk County, are increasing more rapidly.

Much of the population growth in the U.S. in recent years has been in our ethnic communities, particularly among Hispanic groups. According to the 2010-2012 American Community Survey, about 74% of the total population in the U.S. is white. Wisconsin (87%) and Minnesota (86%) have considerably less ethnic diversity than average for the United States. The Minnesota and Wisconsin counties in the St. Croix Valley have even less ethnic diversity than the states in which they are located. With the exception of Polk County, this area also tends to have larger families than the average for Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Economy

The United States’ economy has been slowly recovering from a deep and prolonged recession that began in 2008. Further, the structure of the U.S. economy has been shifting. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, between January of 2001 and January of 2014 employment in manufacturing declined by about 30% (from 17.1 million to 12.1 million) while service sector jobs expanded by 9.8% (from 108.1 million to 118.7 million jobs). Minnesota and Wisconsin have lost manufacturing jobs somewhat more slowly (each is down about 25% over the January 2001 – January 2014 period) and gained service sector jobs at rates slightly below the national average (MN 9.5%, WI 7.7%).
The economies of counties in the St. Croix Valley were adversely affected by the “Great Recession.” However, unemployment in the region has declined after peaking in 2009 (Figure 3) and tends to be lower than the national average. Counties (Chisago and Polk) further from the Twin Cities experienced a sharper economic downturn than those closer to the metro area.

**Education**

Historically, the high level of the productivity of the American workforce has been a key driver of the country’s prosperity. Productivity is tightly linked to educational attainment. Through programs like the GI Bill, Pell Grants, and the subsidized student loan program, the U.S. greatly expanded access to a college education. At the close of World War II, the Census indicates that only about 5% of the adult population in the United States had attained a bachelor’s degree. By 2012, the Census reports that 28.6% of all adults have completed an undergraduate degree; comparable figures for Minnesota and Wisconsin are 32.6% and 26.7% respectively.

By most educational attainment measures, the counties in the St. Croix Valley exceed those of the state in which they are located. These counties have lower percentages of their populations who have limited literacy (with the exception of Polk County), the reading proficiency of their elementary students are higher, and more of their students complete high school. Counties more distant from the Twin Cities have lower proportions of their population with a college degree (Figure 4).

**Poverty**

The U.S. government defines poverty in relative terms - goods and services that are commonly taken for granted by most people in the country but are unaffordable to those in poverty. In 2011, the poverty threshold in the U.S. for a family of four is $22,050. Minnesota and Wisconsin are relatively well-off states. In 2012, for example, 11.6% of all U.S. families fell below the poverty level, but only 7.6% of those in Minnesota and 9.0% in Wisconsin.

The Minnesota and Wisconsin counties in the St. Croix Valley form a relatively prosperous part of these relatively prosperous states. For most indicators of poverty included in this section of the website, the St. Croix Valley Counties have somewhat lower indicators of poverty than their respective states (Figure 5).

**Food Insecurity**

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.” During the recent recession the USDA reported a 38% increase in the proportion of US households classified as “food insecure” between 2006 and 2009. Subsequent annual national data from USDA show that household food insecurity rates have remained essentially unchanged since 2008.

Systematic county-level estimates of food insecurity among individuals became available in 2009 through Feeding America. It is not surprising that the incidence of food insecurity in the relatively prosperous counties in the St. Croix Valley is generally lower than in their respective states (Figure 6).

Consistent with national and state trends, eligibility for free or reduced price school lunches and participation in the supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly food stamps) have increased in all counties in the St. Croix Valley but rates remain lower than their respective state averages.

**Health**

There are few issues of greater importance in the public policy arena than those dealing with health care. According to the Kaiser Foundation, the United States spent nearly $2.6 trillion on health care in 2010, more than 3.5 times the $714 billion spent in 1990 and health expenditures exceed 16% of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP); this is among the highest of all industrialized countries.

The data indicate a mixed bag in terms of the health status of the counties in the St Croix Valley. All but Polk County have lower percentages of their populations who have no health insurance than is true for their respective states (Figure 7). On the other hand, all the counties have slightly higher rates of adult obesity than their respective states.
Housing

Housing is a major expense for most American households. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development classifies households that spend more than 30% of their monthly household income on housing as “cost-burdened” households. When households spend more than 30% of their monthly income on housing they are likely to find it challenging to have sufficient income to meet other basic needs (food, clothing, medical care, education, retirement savings, etc.). Homeownership, while now a somewhat tarnished goal, has long been a part of the “American Dream.” Owning a home is often the largest investment a family has and a high level of homeownership is believed to contribute to building stable communities and engaged citizens. There is both good and bad news about housing in the St. Croix Valley. On the one hand, home ownership tends to be higher in these counties than in their respective states. On the other, at least 30% of renters and homeowners in four of the these five counties area are classified as “cost-burdened.” (Figure 8).

Transportation

Commuting to work is a daily fact of life for millions of American workers. According to the American Community Survey, more than three-fourths of American workers drive to their workplace alone in a car, truck or van. Ten percent carpool, while five percent use public transit. The mean one-way travel time is 25 minutes. Mean commute lengths in Minnesota and Wisconsin are a few minutes less than the national average.

St. Croix Valley workers have commuting patterns that are similar to the national average. Most workers drive alone in a car, truck or van, and the one-way length of their commute is slightly above the national average. Due to the number of workers who drive to workplaces in the Twin Cities, the average commute time for St. Croix Valley workers is longer than the Minnesota and Wisconsin state averages (Figure 9).

Youth

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the US teen pregnancy rate has been on a steady decline. For example, in 2011 the US rate was 31 per 1,000 live births compared to 40/1,000 in 2006 and 62/1,000 in 1991. The 2011 Minnesota and Wisconsin averages are nearly the same as the national averages and have shown nearly identical decreases between 2006 and 2011. Overall, teen pregnancy rates in St. Croix Valley counties are below their respective state averages and have decreased since 2006 (Figure 10). However, yearly rates at the county level are volatile due to the relatively small count of teen pregnancies, and data for Pierce County has been suppressed since 2007 since there were fewer than 20 pregnancies per year. Minnesota does not report data for individual years; Figure 10 shows the three year moving average for those jurisdictions.