Washington County – Synopsis

Demographics. Washington County, with a population of 241,538, forms the southwest corner of the Lower St. Croix Valley, which also includes Chisago County in Minnesota and Pierce, Polk, and St. Croix Counties in Wisconsin. Washington County grew by 11% between 2005 and 2012, adding more than 24,000 residents. As Figure 1 indicates, the population of Washington County has grown at more than twice the Minnesota state average. The proportion of non-White residents in Washington County (12.1%) is slightly lower than the Minnesota state average (14.3%), as is the proportion foreign-born residents in Washington County (5.9% in Washington County versus 7.3% in Minnesota).

Income and Poverty. By most measures of economic well-being, Washington County is better off than Minnesota as a whole. As shown in Figure 2, the median household income in 2012 in Washington County was $80,537, which is significantly higher than the average for the state of Minnesota ($58,434). Figure 3 indicates that the recent recession reduced the median household incomes in Washington County somewhat more sharply than for the state of Minnesota as a whole, but the county median household income has rebounded more quickly. The unemployment rate in Washington County (4.8% in 2013) is slightly below the Minnesota average (5.1%). Although measures of poverty increased in Washington County since 2007, the percentage of Washington County individuals in poverty (5.8%) is only about half that of the Minnesota average (11.7%). Statewide, 7.6% of families are living below the poverty line, compared to 4.4% in Washington County.

Community Engagement. Residents of Washington County are active participants in elections, with more than 78% of eligible voters casting a ballot in 2012. The comparable figure for Minnesota was just below 72%. On the other hand, a relatively high percentage of Washington County workers (39.0%) commuted 30 minutes or more to work, much higher than the state average (30.3%). Long commutes may make civic engagement more challenging.
**Housing.** Compared to the Minnesota state average, Washington County has a relatively high proportion of owner-occupied homes. Nearly 81% of Washington County households reported that they own their home, which is 9% higher than the state average. In addition, fewer households in Washington County are “cost burdened” compared to the state average; 28% of Washington County households spend more than 30% of their household income on housing, which is slightly lower than for Minnesota as a whole (32%). The percent of cost-burdened households has decreased as the economy has recovered from the recession.

**Health.** Access to health care in Washington County, as measured by the proportion of the population with health insurance, is better than the Minnesota state average. As shown in Figure 4, in 2012, 6.4% of Washington County residents lacked health insurance, which is 2.8% lower than the Minnesota state average. On a less optimistic note, Figure 5 shows that the obesity rates in Washington County have been consistently higher than the state average. Further, the overall Minnesota rate has declined since 2006 while there is no discernible trend in Washington County’s data.

**Food Security.** One measure of food insecurity is the percentage of school children eligible for free/reduced price school lunches. Figure 6 shows the percentage of Washington County children qualifying for school lunch assistance is only about half of the Minnesota state average and is likely related to the relatively high median household income in Washington County compared to the state. Eligibility for free/reduced school lunches has increased since 2005 in Washington County and Minnesota. Although the percentage of Washington County households receiving SNAP benefits (food stamps) has increased by 2.2% since 2007, the 2012 rate (4.4%) is well below the state rate (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.” Consistent with earlier findings about the relative economic well-being in Washington County, the County’s percentage of food insecure households is less than the Minnesota state average. Feeding America estimates that 7.6% of the Washington County population were food insecure in 2011, which was 3.8% less than the Minnesota average.

**Education.** Measures of education indicate that Washington County fares well when compared to Minnesota state averages. The high school graduation rate in Washington County (88%) is above the Minnesota average (80%), and third grade reading proficiency (64%) is 7% above the state average (Note: reading proficiency scales were changed in 2013). Continuing this positive educational trend, Washington County has a higher proportion of adults with a 4-year college degree or better (41%) than the Minnesota average (33%) (Figure 7). In addition, the percentage of Washington County adults with low literacy is less than the state average.

**Summary.** The population of Washington County is increasing at a fast pace compared to the State of Minnesota. Many measures of economic well-being indicate that Washington County benefits from its proximity and accessibility to the Twin Cities’ employment centers. Median household incomes are higher than the state average, while measures of poverty and food insecurity are better than the state average. The workforce is more highly educated and third grade reading proficiency and high school graduation rates are above the state average. The percentage of “cost-burdened” households is below the state average. A lower percentage of Washington County residents are without health insurance than the Minnesota average.