

Wisconsin Policy Forum: Built to Last? The state of metro Milwaukee's construction workforce

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Amid a brisk pace of development activity in metro Milwaukee, the region's construction labor market is as tight as it has been in at least 20 years, according to a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report.

The outlook is not all alarming, as the report finds the region's pipeline of new workers is strong overall. Still, more apprentices may be needed in some trades, and the report suggests that ongoing efforts to diversify the construction workforce may need to be modified or expanded.

The report examines the supply of and demand for construction workers in the four-county Milwaukee metro area and the strength of the pipeline of new workers entering the field. It also looks at the demographics of the construction workforce and extent to which they have been changing over time. Data from federal, state, and local sources is complemented with information from a survey of local construction labor unions and interviews with construction contractors and industry leaders.

Meeting demand

While metro Milwaukee's pace of development is producing jobs and boosting overall economic activity, it also has raised questions about whether the region has enough construction workers to meet demand.

Our report finds construction employment in metro Milwaukee remained stable and even ticked upward during the pandemic. Unemployment in construction is near a

historic low, and job openings in the sector are at a more than 20-year high.

Meanwhile, there are mixed signals about the region's pipeline of new construction workers. After increasing for many years, the current pool of apprentices is as large as it has been since at least 2000, and most unions expect their apprenticeship classes to grow in the coming years.

Still, five area unions have seen their apprenticeship numbers decline significantly. And three report not having enough workers ready to begin apprenticeships to replace those expected to retire in the next few years.

Additional findings from the report include:

- Active union construction workers are being stretched to work more hours on average than they were a decade ago, local pension fund data show. Meanwhile, half of the unions that responded to our survey reported having fewer available workers (those not already employed) than before the pandemic. Taken together, these data show that the regional construction sector is experiencing a particularly challenging labor market.
- While survey data suggest there is a relatively strong pipeline of young workers in construction overall, some unions report their members are aging. Four of the unions surveyed said at least 25% of their active members are in their 50s, and two of these, plus two additional unions, said more than 10% of their workers are over 60.
- Improvements to the city of Milwaukee's Residents Preference Program (RPP) appear to be needed. The program is designed to ensure that a portion of jobs produced by city-supported construction projects are filled by qualifying city residents. While the program has been modified several times since it was created more than three decades ago, more changes may be needed to better understand the supply and demand for RPP-certified workers and to strengthen connections between area contractors and the workforce development system.
- Efforts to strengthen gender and racial diversity in the construction workforce may need to be modified or expanded. Despite the growing diversity of metro Milwaukee's population, limited progress has been made in diversifying the construction workforce. Hispanic representation among area apprentices has increased considerably, but Black and female workers remain highly underrepresented and more than half of Black workers cancel their apprenticeships

before completion.

Looking long term, the level of demand for construction workers becomes difficult to predict. But demographic trends, including the ongoing retirement of baby boomers and declining birth rates, suggest the need for expanded recruitment efforts. Industry leaders said those should include increased technical education opportunities in schools and new approaches to recruiting and retaining young workers.

As development and infrastructure projects continue to transform downtown Milwaukee and the broader metro area, we hope this analysis assists leaders across sectors who are working to cultivate and fortify the region's construction workforce.

The Forum wishes to thank Gilbane Building Company for commissioning this research and Bader Philanthropies for its generous support of our economic and workforce development research portfolio, which helped make this report possible.

[Click here to read the full report: "Built to Last? The State of Metro Milwaukee's Construction Workforce."](#)