Major Minnesota Trends: What They Mean and Why They Matter

Through interviews with researchers, community leaders, and service providers, Wilder Research Executive Director Paul Mattessich examines pressing issues facing our communities today to offer insight beyond the numbers.

This episode of Talking Through the Numbers is available online at https://www.wilder.org/featured-media/major-minnesota-trends

Transcript

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Paul Mattessich:	Welcome to Talking Through the Numbers, a podcast produced by Wilder Research. Our goal is to provide insight on significant issues. We combine sound information with expert knowledge to try to enrich all of our understanding about things that affect our communities and our world. I'm Paul Mattessich, Executive Director of Wilder Research.
	Social trends, what's happened, what does it all mean, what's going to happen, how should we prepare for it? Those are questions that all of us ask from time to time, and today in the studio we have two guests, two expert guests, for a conversation. Jen Reedy is the President of the Bush Foundation and has served in leadership roles such as chief of staff and vice president of strategy for the St. Paul, Minnesota Community Foundations. There she led the creation of GiveMN.org, Give to the Max Day, and the Minnesota Idea Open. Jen was also a consultant with McKinsey and Company for nine years and was the first director of the Itasca Project, a CEO-led regional civic initiative in the Twin Cities.
	Allison Liuzzi is Project Director of Minnesota Compass. She works with a team of researchers to describe and measure progress on topics related to our shared quality of life in Minnesota. She has particular interest in demographic trends, employment and workforce development, and immigration. Welcome.
Jen Reedy:	Thank you.
Allison Liuzzi:	Thank you.
Paul:	First some questions about key trends. Given today's topic, which is major social trends important for the future of our communities, Jen, what's a trend that you would mention, and what important implications does it have?

Jen:	I would definitely mention changing demographics in Minnesota. Our demographics are changing in a lot of ways. I would particularly call out changes related to racial difference and cultural difference within Minnesota. We've had since 2010 a 20% growth in residents of color, which means that now 19% of our total state population identifies as people of color.
Paul:	19% in the state of Minnesota, people of color?
Jen:	In the state of Minnesota, and of course that varies pretty dramatically by community, and the amount of change varies pretty dramatically by community. In terms of why it matters, I think it matters in a whole lot of ways, large and small. I think the increase in people of color has exposed some long-standing issues we've had in how well our institutions actually work for everyone. I think for me, working for the Bush Foundation, which focuses particularly on leadership, I think about this as a leadership challenge for the state, and thinking how are we as leaders in Minnesota going to be better at working across difference and better at making institutions work well for everyone? We need every institution in our state to be asking pretty fundamental questions about how well programs and policies are working for people of all cultural backgrounds and experiences, and that requires a skill set and a mindset that we need to cultivate in a whole lot more leaders in Minnesota.
Paul:	And by "institutions", you mean what?
Jen:	I mean everything. I mean, it's really, if you are the owner of a gas station to if you are the president of a college.
Paul:	So it's for-profit, small businesses, large businesses, private, public?
Jen:	It's everybody, because it's saying we have norms, we have expectations, we have ways of working that have been established in part by who we've been comfortable and familiar with, interacting. When our customers are changing, when our neighbors are changing, when our students are changing, with anyone that we're interacting with is changing, we need to do some self-examination of our own assumptions and our own practices, to understand are we really working as effectively as we can with people who are different than we are?
Paul:	Thank you. Allison, what would you mention? What key trend? What implications does it have?
Allison:	I would piggyback on what Jen already said about the ways that our communities are changing, in terms of race and ethnicity, but I'd also focus in specifically on immigration and the ways that our communities are changing, because of the ways that our immigrants are changing. Of course, immigration has long influenced the history of Minnesota and what our communities look like, but where our immigrants come from has changed dramatically over time. Back in the early 1900s, as many as 30%, upwards of 30% of our residents were foreign-born. Today we're at about 8%.
	But numerically, we're reaching another peak, in terms of the number of foreign-born residents who live in Minnesota. Back in the early 1900s, we were above 500,000 foreign-born residents. Today we're at about 450,000 foreign-born residents, and that's expected to continue to grow. It's affecting or influencing the ways our communities are

	changing all throughout the state. The county with the highest percent of foreign-born residents in Minnesota is actually in Southwest Minnesota, Nobles County. One in five residents are foreign-born.
Paul:	Most people probably wouldn't have guessed that.
Allison:	Right, and so the ways that we see immigration influencing our local communities are playing out in very different ways, depending on what those dynamics look like at a local level.
Paul:	Okay. You also said something about the different origins of immigrants, depending on the years they came to Minnesota?
Allison:	Yes. If we look back in the early 1900s, most of our foreign-born residents were primarily originally born in Germany, Sweden, Norway. Today we're looking at countries of origin that include India, Mexico, Somalia, so very different composition over the last 100 years, in terms of who our foreign-born residents are.
Paul:	Okay. So diversification, immigration. Jen, what would be another big trend that has importance for us right now?
Jen:	I would choose health care costs, and I choose health care costs because they're increasing a lot. If you look at the federal level, our federal spending on health care has gone from 7% of our federal budget in 1976 to 28% now. I think sometimes even at the state level, you can see these pie charts that show our public spending on health care, and they look like little Pac-Mans, with the healthcare slice getting bigger and bigger and bigger, like it's going to eat everything else. That's to me why it's so important.
Paul:	You're clearly talking about cost. You didn't say health or disease or illness are trends, you're saying costs?
Jen:	Which is not to say that those aren't important, but I think there's a particular concern around health care costs that is important for us all to be mindful of, to a degree that I'm not sure we're processing, because health care costs affect our ability to address any other issue. If your issue that you care most about is education, if your issue that you care most about is homelessness, whatever it is, if health care costs continue to escalate in the way they have been, our ability as a country, as a state to really invest in those other areas is directly related to how we manage health care costs. I think it's also true at an organizational level, I think it's also true at a family level, that health care cost as a share of expenses continues to grow up and is part of what is creating family-level insecurity and also what is creating budget challenges for a lot of organizations.
Paul:	So health care cost is almost a cancer in a sense, to use that metaphor?
Jen:	Well, that's a dramatic metaphor, but it is growing, and sometimes I think we tend to, or have in recent years focused more on the "who should pay" question which is a super-important question, so I don't want to minimize that. But there's also a how do we define it, and how much does anybody pay and what's sustainable for us as communities?
Paul:	Allison, you have a third you'd want to add?

Allison:	Yeah. Slightly related to health care costs in some ways, our populations are getting older, so we have the baby boomer generation who just started turning age 65 in 2011 and will continue to turn age 65 for the next two decades, a huge portion of our population. Today we're at about 15% or our residents are older adults, people age 65+. We're heading for about 21% by 2030. That percentage jump doesn't sound like that much, 15 to about 21. That's 6 percentage point difference, but it's hundreds of thousands of additional older adults that we're expecting to see statewide over the next two decades, and that has implications for health care.
	How are we going to provide services to this huge portion of our populations? How are we going to fill the job openings that we expect to see from retirements? How do we expect to generate the tax base that we need to support our communities? How are we going to make sure that older adults continue to work for as long as they want to, volunteer the ways they want to, age in place? And so we have lots of questions about this older adult population that will only continue to grow for two decades.
Paul:	21%, one in five, and that's over age 65, in Minnesota.
Allison:	Yes. In Minnesota statewide.
Paul:	And all those implications for work, for health, for family life, for communities, for volunteerism and so on.
Allison:	Everything, yes.
Paul:	Okay. Jen, you and I are getting older too, I suppose. Did you have another trend you wanted to add?
Jen:	I would call this less a trend and more a measure that I want to make a pitch for. I think the supplemental poverty rate is a really important measure for us to attend to, and we talk a lot about the poverty rate. You get a lot of coverage in the media about how the poverty rate changes. What supplemental poverty rate is, is a rate that also takes into account who would be in poverty if not for government programs, and it's something that Census Bureau will put out and analyze. But I think it's really important, because it's showing whether we are making a difference on poverty in all the ways as a community, as our government as the expression of us, is trying to address poverty.
	So for example, because of Social Security, 26.1 million people are not in poverty. Or because of refundable tax credits, another 8.1 million are not in poverty. I think it's important, one, to actually see that we're getting results and celebrate the impact that we're having for those programs that we are funding. We are all contributing to those programs. So saying, are we making a difference, and can we be glad for the difference we are making in people's lives? But I think also, looking at that measure allows us to ask deeper questions about whether we're having the impact we should with the dollars that we're spending, and to hold ourselves accountable for saying are we doing the best we can to make a difference in the lives of people who are in poverty?
Paul:	So we might be more accountable, we might be more effective, our policies might be wiser if we had that measurement and we focused on it?

Jen: I think so, and I think there's something related there. I mean, that's a particular government point, but I think there's a general point about anyone who is a user of data around describing problems, which is finding those metrics that also show what impact existing efforts are having. I think that's important to celebrate success and to show what's working and what difference efforts are making, in part to keep people energized and committed to trying to make the world better. You know, if you always get a sense of, things are bad, things are still bad, things are still bad. It's not to say that they aren't and there aren't real problems, but to have this sense of saying you know what, the problem is this big, and we're managing this part of it, and then there's this part that remains. That gives you a sense of possibility, I think, and both a grounding for and motivation for trying to act and do more.

Paul: Okay, thanks. You've both mentioned several trends. I'm sure you could go on with a few others of your top trends that you feel are important, but if we move on from identifying some individual trends and talk about some other topics, what about relationships among any of these? You already, I think, discussed some of them, for example, how aging cross cuts with other trends, and certainly the racial diversification, ethnic diversification of our state and our nation does. Anything else you want to mention in that regard that would be important for people who are trying to understand trends and see how these various forces interact with each other?

Allison: Yeah, I think one of the key places we see this playing out is in our economy and in employment. We're only expecting jobs to continue to grow for the next 10 years. We're also expecting lots of job openings, because of the aging of our population and due to these retirements among the baby boomers that we're expecting for the next couple of decades. But our growth in our workforce, our working age population age 18 to 64, is not keeping up with the pace of job growth, and so we really need to make sure that we're thinking about the ways that our communities are changing. How do we take advantage of all of the potential workers who already live here? How do we remain a desirable destination for new residents, both coming in from other states and coming in internationally, to meet the job needs that we have over the coming decade? And how do we continue to innovate and think about ways that we can address all the needs we have, in terms of jobs, with the people who live here?

Jen: I think that's right. I think there's a big question, really, about what degree of change do we need people in Minnesota, institutions in Minnesota to be considering and working toward? I mean, because these challenges are big, and they're interrelated, I think having a sense of "Well, that's how we do it," just isn't going to work on very many fronts going forward. So we need to be asking, "Well what could it be?"

Paul: Okay. And then potentially address several of these trends at the same time or address some of the ones that interact with one another, so that we can be as effective as possible?

Jen: Absolutely.

Paul: Jen, do you ever encounter any myths or misperceptions related to trends that you mentioned or that maybe Allison mentioned? Do we need to do things to correct those myths when we encounter them?

Jen:	I think certainly. I mean, the conversation we were having earlier around changes around race and culture, particularly as it relates to immigration, I think there are a lot of myths and misperceptions related to immigrants and refugees in Minnesota and elsewhere. I actually find really interesting and hopeful the stats you see about how attitudes towards immigrants are actually much more positive in places that have more immigrants, which suggests that actually a greater degree of familiarity and understanding with immigrants actually does change people's minds, which suggests there are some myths and misperceptions that are addressed when people are actually interacting and meeting each other and really helping to provide true real life context and experience that help people get over, potentially, ideas that they may have had out of fear or out of a lack of familiarity with people.
Paul:	But maybe it's actually behavior and interaction that's going to overcome the myths, not theorizing and talking about it?
Jen:	I think that's true in a lot of ways. I mean, I think there are ways to help people get exposure to new ideas that aren't necessarily always in person. We can think about those too, but I do think that it's hard to substitute for on any issue actually having direct interaction, real relationship with people who have a different experience than you do.
Paul:	Sure. Any myths ever come across your desk at Minnesota Compass, Allison?
Allison:	All the time. I think one of the biggest ones is that there's this idea that certain trends are only playing out in certain regions of the state. So when we talk about increasing racial and ethnic diversity, that's a metro area trend. When we're talking about the aging of the population, that's something that's happening more in greater Minnesota. And to a certain extent, we see some of these trends taking hold in different ways, or sooner or later, in different regions of the state. We've seen communities in greater Minnesota kind of tip the 20% mark on their older adult population a little sooner than in the metro area, but these are trends that we're expecting to play out in communities throughout the state at different paces and certainly in different ways.
	But some of the communities that we see that are most racially and ethnically diverse are in greater Minnesota. Some of the communities that we see that are oldest are located in the metro area. And so trying to debunk some of those myths around, that these trends only happen within certain communities within the state, yeah, there's nuance, but they are playing out everywhere.
Paul:	Both of you have connections to nonprofit and community-based organizations. Do you see offhand any ways that those organizations can use data to inspire progress, to improve and not just to paint a picture of need?
Jen:	I do, for sure. I mean, I think for any organization making a fundraising pitch, for example, there's a short-term return to saying things are terrible and getting worse. When all of us do that as organizations, I think it's overwhelming to people, and there's a sense of we can't make progress, and these issues are beyond us. So I think finding ways to make that pitch for the importance of the issue, while also saying these are the bright spots, and this is what should give us hope that things can work and things can change.

Paul:	Do you have an example of that? Could you advise somebody on some specific way they could do that or piece of data to use or topic area?
Jen:	You know, I saw one of the most inspiring presentations I've ever seen around poverty a couple months ago up with a guy who runs a community action partnership in Grand Rapids. His name was Isaac Meyer, and he was able to say, "These are the realities of poverty, and they're really tough," and also say, "Here's some examples of how it works, and these are some of the dynamics within poverty that should give us confidence that we can change that dynamic, or we can change that dynamic." You know, it's breaking down the problem in a way to say, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I can see how we could do that, and it could make a difference."
Paul:	Okay, breaking down the problem, giving concrete tangible solutions, and inspiring some hope. Speaking of making progress, Allison, what about the typical person, the resident of any community in Minnesota, the United States? If they said they wanted to improve their community, keeping these trends in mind, what would you suggest?
Allison:	The first thing I would suggest is know your community and be able to tell the story of your community. You have your lived experiences. You know what it's like to be in your neighborhood and to be in your organizations, to be in your workplace. Pair that with the data that exists on, this is what our whole community looks like, and there are a whole range of tools available for people to better know their community, and Minnesota Compass is one of those resources, to really dig in and get to know who are your neighbors and what do they look like, in terms of employment, and where they're living and some of the issues they're facing, challenges they're facing, like poverty, but also some of the strengths that you find within your community.
	And then along with that pitch to know your community would be fill out your census form. 2020 Census is coming up.
Paul:	2020, 2030, 2040.
Allison:	Yep. We need good data on the people who live in our communities, and the best way to do that is to fill out your census form when it comes in 2020. If you're asked to complete a survey by Census in between times, like the American Community Survey, fill out that census form. Those are the data sources we're using to talk about and tell the stories of our communities, and those stories are only as good as the data we have behind them.
Paul:	You mentioned data sources. I'm sure people can find some of those data sources on Compass. We're getting into the closing minutes, and I guess I'd like to hear both of your opinion on the contemporary debate about facts. A lot of debate today exists about facts. People wonder where they can go to obtain credible, objective information. So how can people know if a source of data is a good one? How can they access that information? What do both of you think about that?
Allison:	As I said, Minnesota Compass is a great resource, and clearly I'm biased as the project director, but mncompass.org is a great place for reliable nonpartisan information. But we're privileged in Minnesota to have a lot of state agencies who are collecting information and transparently sharing it. We have the State Demographic Center, has

great data and information. Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, Minnesota Department of Ed., the Office of Higher Education, all of these.

Paul: Generally speaking, we can trust government sources?

Allison: Generally speaking.

Paul: Okay.

Jen: I'd trust the government sources too. I'd also, a little less biased about Minnesota Compass, and I would also put in the same vote for Minnesota Compass. I was doing a lot of work recently, finding different studies to try and make sure that my assumptions about a couple issues were true, and in each case, when you're reading a study, it was finding who funded it and then going to those organizations' websites and understanding who funds them. It's trying to actually understand the motivation behind whatever information you're consuming. There's facts, and then there's how those facts are presented, and there are a lot of ways where you can very, very, very earnestly, with good intent, really be showing an opinion, not a fact. Then it's up to us as consumers of that information to be able to draw that distinction.

Paul: So you encourage people to go deep into the foundations of the source, to understand, to assure themselves that it's unbiased and as accurate as possible?

Jen: When you can. But that's when you're hunting for data, and the truth is, we have facts thrust upon us every day. If you're a consumer of social media, you have a bunch of facts that you're being bombarded with, and that's in quotes "facts." At that point, I think it's how do you follow to another source? Or if you don't know that source, how do you ask around of other people you trust to say, "Does this seem reputable?" I think all of us should be humbled by what we learned in the last election about the power to manipulate our beliefs and our behaviors through social media, and so I think if you haven't already been humbled in that way and are really looking harder at what information you see, then please do, because I think for me, for sure, and I think for a lot of folks, it was a wake-up call to say I'm maybe too casual a consumer of media and of facts.

Paul: Sure. Okay, thank you. We have to draw this to a close, so just one very, very quick final question. Allison, is there any good book or other source that you would recommend people read to get a perspective or opinion on trends?

Allison: Yeah, I would highly recommend A Good Time for the Truth. It's a collection of essays from Minnesotans of color on what it's like to live as a person of color in Minnesota. It really digs below a lot of the numbers that I talked about today, and I would highly encourage anybody to pick up that book and give it some time and thought.

Paul: Thanks. Jen?

Jen: I second that recommendation and would offer Factfulness by Hans Rosling, which is about, actually, how we consume data. He's showcasing all the ways that our minds play tricks on us when we're looking at data and how as a result we actually tend to have a more negative perception of the world than is actually true, that in a whole, whole, whole lot of ways the world is getting better.

Paul: Well, thank you. Thank you very much. Today we had Jen Reedy from the Bush Foundation and Allison Liuzzi from Minnesota Compass at Wilder Research. Please visit our website, www.wilderresearch.org, for more information on the topic of trends and many other topics. Also, to learn more about the Bush Foundation, you can go to www.bushfoundation.org. If you have suggestions for a future podcast, please let us know. I'm Paul Mattessich from Wilder Research, and I look forward to talking through the numbers with you on other topics.

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