

# A Community Profile of the Great Rivers Region

## Introduction

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Residents of the Great Rivers Region are fortunate to live in a region with abundant natural resources including lakes, rivers, wetlands, forests and scenic bluffs. The region also offers fertile farmlands, bustling towns, quaint villages, galleries and museums, a growing urban city, and many activities for the outdoor enthusiast including miles of hiking, biking, hunting, fishing, and snowmobile trails. However beyond the physical aspects of an area, residents also benefit from a strong sense of community. Cohesiveness, a sense of belonging and shared ideals and beliefs build a spirit of community that enhances society as a whole.

This section of the COMPASS NOW report offers a snapshot of the Great Rivers Region through the discussion of several factors related to community, the environment and quality of life. The purpose of this profile is to highlight key indicators and present community perception on a variety of issues facing our communities, including the quality of the natural and built environment, public safety, care for the vulnerable populations, and opportunities for cultural and leisure activities.

## How do people rate their community as a place to live?

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In the COMPASS NOW random household survey, residents of each county were asked to rate their community as a place to live (see **Figure 1**). Overall, 92% of the survey respondents rated their community as excellent or good. La Crosse and Houston County residents rated their community higher than Monroe, Trempealeau and Vernon County residents. Many factors or community traits can affect how residents rate the overall quality of their community. The quality of the environment, services available to protect or assist citizens in their daily life, feeling safe, having opportunities to be entertained, having a sense of belonging, knowing that people care for you, can all contribute to a higher sense of a quality community.

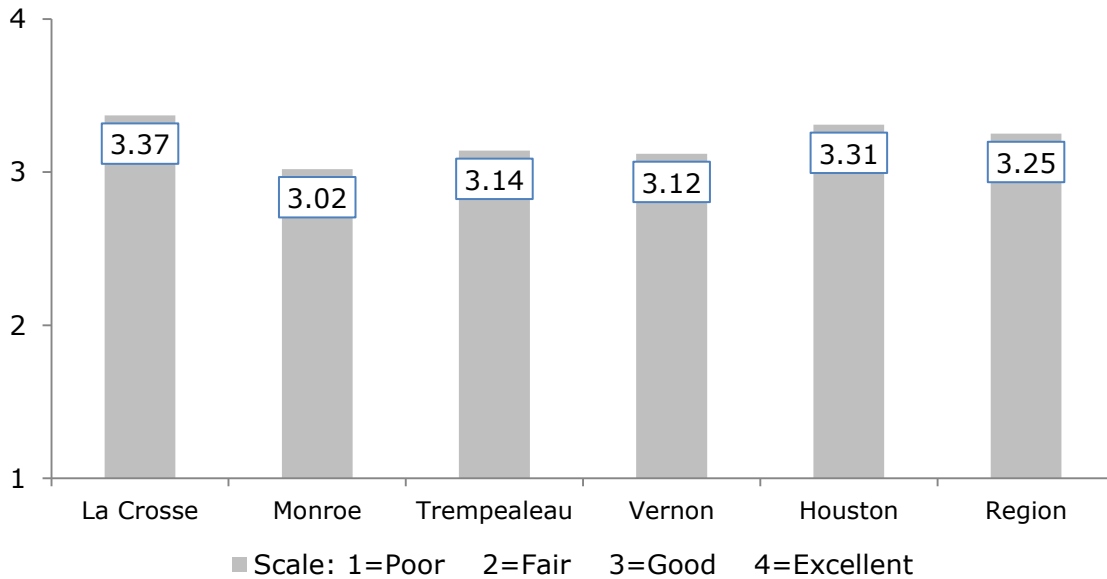
### In their own words

"This area is a great place to live and raise a family."

"I think this is an excellent area to live in and I am grateful for all the services that are available to me..."

COMPASS NOW 2012  
Random Household  
Survey Comments

**Figure 1: Rating their community as a place to live**

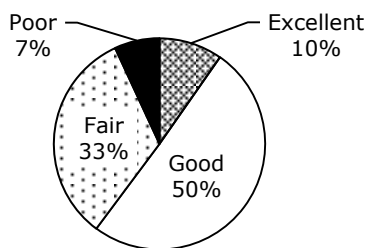


Source: COMPASS NOW 2012, Random Household Survey

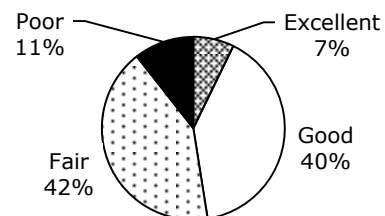
Nearly 40% of respondents rated their community as either fair or poor with regards to being a place where all people are treated respectfully, regardless of their race, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, income level, disability or age (see **Figure 2**). 53% of respondents rated their community as fair or poor with regards to being a place where people of different cultural, racial or ethnic backgrounds were included in decision making. This suggests a need to further address issues of diversity and equality in our communities.

**Figure 2: Rating the community as place that respects diversity**

**People are treated respectfully, regardless of differences**



**People of different backgrounds are included in decision-making**



Source: COMPASS NOW 2012, Random Household Survey

**Summary:** Residents of the Great Rivers Region highly rate their communities as a place to live. As diversity in our communities increases, communities should concern themselves with embracing this diversity and ensuring equal opportunities for people with different backgrounds (race, language, religion, sexual preferences, etc.).

## **Quality of the environment**

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**Clean air** is essential to our health and well-being, and the air we breathe impacts our quality of life. Air quality standards determined by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the States of Minnesota and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) help protect the public from high concentrations of air pollutants that can impact human health. Ozone, particulate matter, and sulfur dioxide contaminants are all well-within standards in all five counties, and rate as some of the highest quality numbers in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

**Water pollution** degrades surface waters making them unsafe for drinking, fishing, swimming, and other activities. Water pollution is monitored and controlled by regulating sources that discharge pollutants into waters of the United States. The EPA sets the discharge limits but also delegates regulatory authority to states that can then issue their own permits and set discharge limits that are at least as stringent as the EPAs. Many municipalities in the region are attempting to improve their storm water runoff quality by implementing best management practices. A majority of treatment operations in the Great Rivers Region are compliant year-round and resolve any compliance issues in a timely manner. Based on the previous numbers, there are a total of 73 permitted wastewater discharge entities in the Great Rivers Region. As of March, 2011, none of the presently issued permits in the 5 counties were on public notice for renewal or revocation.

The quality of the region's **rivers, lakes and streams** can impact the health, recreational interests, tourism, economy, and overall quality of life of its residents. States are responsible for listing waters that are impaired, not meeting their designated uses (fishing, swimming) due to pollutants, and submitting the lists to the EPA for review and approval. **Table 1** lists the rivers, ponds, creeks, and lakes in the Great Rivers Region which are on the 2010 Impaired Waters Lists. Not all segments of the listed rivers and creeks were impaired. In the Great Rivers Region, five water bodies were removed from this list since 2008, and two were added.

**Table 1: Impaired Waters List Bodies of Water  
in the Great Rivers Region, 2010**

County	Body of water	Contaminant
La Crosse	Mississippi River	Mercury, PCB
	Neshonoc Lake	Mercury, PCB, STSS
	Black River	PCB
	Adams Valley Creek, Fleming Creek, Gills Coulee Creek, Halfway Creek, Johnson Coulee Creek, Long Coulee Creek	STSS
Monroe	Black River	PCB
	Tomah Lake	P
	Angelo Pond, North Flowage, Ranch Creek	Mercury
	Clear Creek	Elevated Water Temperature
	Creek 23-13b, Printz Creek, Stillwell Creek	STSS
	South Fork Lemonweir River	BOD, P
Trempealeau	Black River	PCB
	Trempealeau River	Mercury
	Marinuka Lake	Mercury, P
	Hardies Creek, Irvin Creek, Newcomb Valley Creek, North Creek, Tappen Coulee Creek, Welch Coulee Creek	STSS
	Trump Coulee Creek	STSS, P
Vernon	Mississippi River	Mercury, PCB
	Baraboo River (West Branch)	BOD, P, STSS
	Jug Creek	STSS
Houston	Mississippi River	Mercury, PCB
	Money Creek	Fecal Coliform, Turbidity
	Root River	Mercury, Fecal Coliform, Turbidity
	Root River South	Mercury

Source: <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/water/wm/wqs/303d/>

BOD=Biological Oxygen Demand, STSS= Sediment/Total Suspended Solids,  
PCB=Polychlorinated Biphenyls, P= Total Phosphorus

All **municipal water systems** in the Great Rivers Region use groundwater as their source. Each municipality provides some level of treatment to the water before it reaches the public for use. Each community must test their drinking water periodically for various parameters including inorganic minerals, man-made organic compounds, and bacteriological contaminants. Each of these water supply systems must meet EPA and Wisconsin or Minnesota DNR water quality standards. Within the Great Rivers Region there are 47 municipal water systems that provide drinking water to residents. All 47 municipal water systems use chlorine to keep the water biologically

safe throughout the distribution system. Other chemical treatments vary by county or municipality.

Because of the rural nature of the counties located in the Great Rivers Region, many residents rely on **private wells** to provide water for household use. The only way to determine the safety of the water for human or livestock consumption is to have the water tested by the well user and sent to a certified laboratory in the region for analysis. There are a number of different reasons why private wells may become contaminated or observe changes in water quality. Some are due to natural causes, but many are caused by human activity. Because groundwater is actually precipitation that has infiltrated into the soil and rock, what we do on the land surface can often have a large effect on the quality of our groundwater resource and private wells. There were 660 active wells in Houston County, 2,846 in Vernon, 4,825 in La Crosse, 4,738 in Monroe, and 3,245 in Trempealeau as of 2010. A majority of wells in the region were drilled in the last 25 years. Common groundwater contaminants in the region include coliform bacteria, nitrate, iron, and pesticides. Despite county health department recommendations for annual testing of private wells, only a small percentage of private wells are tested in the Great Rivers Region. The majority of private well testing is done as part of real estate transfers. In 2010, approximately 50% of private well tests at the main laboratory servicing La Crosse, Vernon and Houston counties came back positive for coliform bacteria.<sup>1</sup>

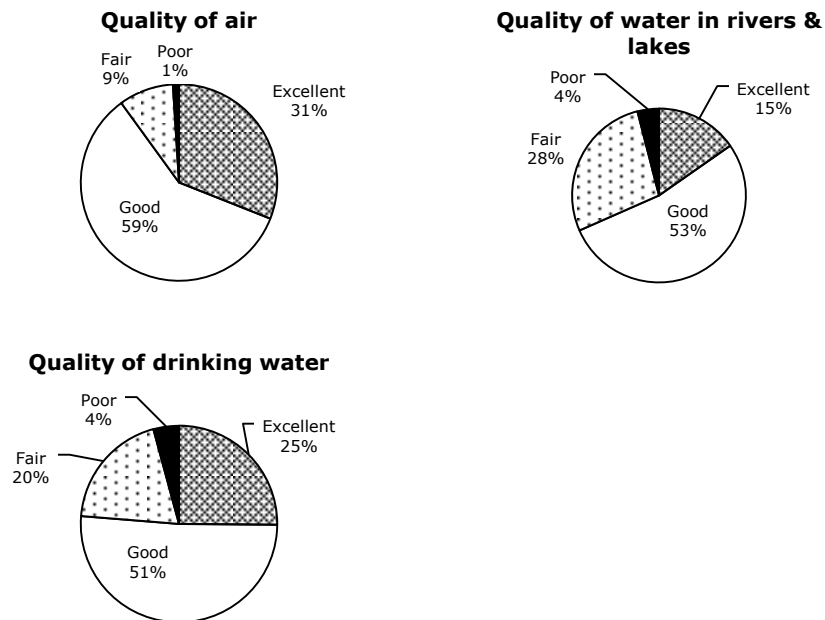
The amount of **waste** a community produces can have a huge impact on the natural environment and the quality of life. Medication disposal is an emerging and complex issue. County health departments in conjunction with county sheriffs and waste management departments organize drug round-up days to assist in the collection of unused and expired over-the-counter and prescription drugs. Regulations imposed by the Drug Enforcement Agency limits the collection of controlled substances such as Vicodin, Oxycontin, Ritalin, and Valium which are often the most dangerous to have in the home. Today's modern landfills are designed with environmental controls, and must meet the DNR requirements. La Crosse County has both a waste-to-energy plant and a sanitary landfill. Most waste is taken to Xcel Energy's waste-to-energy plant, where it is burned to create energy. The plant processes more than 100,000 tons of waste per year. Large items are taken to the landfill, which spans 25 acres and can hold 1.8 million cubic yards of refuse. Houston County and part of Trempealeau County also use the waste-to-energy plant and the La Crosse County Landfill. La Crosse County has a Household Hazardous Waste Facility where residents and businesses can take their paints, batteries, chemicals, and electronic waste. La Crosse County's landfill receives more waste than any other county in the region, largely because of the industries

located in the county and the greater population. The Wisconsin DNR estimates that the La Crosse County landfill has 24 years of useful life remaining as is, Vernon County’s has 10 years left, and Monroe County’s has 14 years left.

**How do people rate the quality of the environment?**

Respondents of the COMPASS NOW random household survey were asked to rate the overall quality of the air, water in our rivers and lakes, and the overall drinking water. The results are shown in **Figure 3**. Overall; residents felt the quality of our air was excellent or good. Only 10% indicated it was fair or poor. Fewer residents felt that our natural water or drinking water was excellent or good. Overall; 32% felt the quality of water in our rivers and lakes was fair or poor; and 24% felt the drinking water was fair or poor. Respondents from each county rated these similarly, although the elderly tended to report the overall quality of the water (natural & drinking) better than younger respondents as did those with higher incomes.

**Figure 3: Rating the quality of our natural environment**



Source: COMPASS NOW 2012, Random Household Survey

## Efforts to protect the environment

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Landfilling waste is an inefficient use of resources, and since there is no national law that mandates recycling, state and local governments often introduce **recycling** requirements. Problematic recyclable materials include appliances, tires, batteries (lead acid), used oil, oil filters, fluorescent and HID lamps, and antifreeze. Non-problematic recyclable materials include textiles, cardboard, paper, aluminum, glass, plastic, carpet, pallets, latex paint, and organics. From 2007 to 2009, the recycling rate for non-problematic materials in Houston County was 40.6% of the waste a person generated per day and 36% in Wisconsin counties. Each person in Wisconsin Counties also generated nearly 100 pounds of yard waste annually, and approximately one-half pound of electronic waste. Recycling rates have increased slightly each year from 2007 to 2009. The vast majority of the municipalities in the Great Rivers Region fund their solid waste and recycling program services via their general funds rather than user fees. Four municipalities in La Crosse County have user fees – three through bag sales and one via their water bill. Grant funding from the DNR covers about 1/3 of the cost of operating a recycling facility in the Great Rivers Region.

Finding **alternative sources of energy** is an emerging trend in the Great Rivers Region. Alternative, sustainable, or renewable energy is defined as generating energy in ways that does not use up natural resources or harm the environment.<sup>2</sup> The most common forms of alternative energy development in our region are solar energy, wind energy, and biogas digestion (the conversion of methane gas into energy). It is unclear if these strategies are emerging in an attempt to protect the environment, or to cut expenses for municipalities and businesses by becoming less dependent on electricity, or for both reasons. Regardless, the State of Wisconsin has registered and partially funded over 2,200 projects since 2002 in the areas of biogas, biomass, solar electric, solar hot water, and wind projects.<sup>3</sup>

**Wind turbines** or farms are emerging in the Great Rivers Region. Wind passing over a turbine creates rotary motion that turns an electric generator and creates electricity. While wind energy is clean, non-polluting, and non-depletable, the location of turbines requires careful consideration, requiring high open land where the winds are unimpeded by trees and buildings. Zoning and noise are other issues that require consideration. Despite this, in 2010 there were 104 business and residential wind energy projects listed on the Wisconsin's *Focus on Energy* website including projects in Monroe and Vernon counties.

**Solar energy** is the conversion of light from the sun to electricity using photovoltaic (PV) cells. As light strikes the PV cell, it creates an electrical potential that generates a current of electricity. Even though there are many cloudy days in the upper Midwest, solar energy can still be a viable source of electricity. Wisconsin's *Focus on Energy* website identified over 1,000 solar electric, and 970 solar hot water projects funded in the state over the past 8 years. Businesses across the Great Rivers Region but particularly in La Crosse and Vernon counties are adding solar panels to building projects to assist in heating water, building or converting the energy into electricity.

Gundersen Lutheran began a project in 2009 that is converting **waste biogas** from the La Crosse City Brewery into electricity. In addition, the health system is partnering with La Crosse County Landfill on a project that will convert waste biogas created from the landfill and turn it into electricity and heat. The gas will turn a generator that produces clean electricity that will be sent to the power grid. The engine will also create heat, which will be used to heat buildings and water on the Onalaska campus.

Communities and businesses in the Great Rivers Region are also focused on **energy efficiency**. This would include using the least amount of energy, for example updating to Energy Star appliances, or ensuring that energy is not wasted by poor or outdated construction. Many new buildings in the Great Rivers Region are receiving LEED certification. LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is an internationally-recognized green building certification system. "LEED promotes sustainable building and development practices through a suite of rating systems that recognize projects that implement strategies for better environmental and health performance."<sup>4</sup>

### **How do people rate the efforts to protect our environment?**

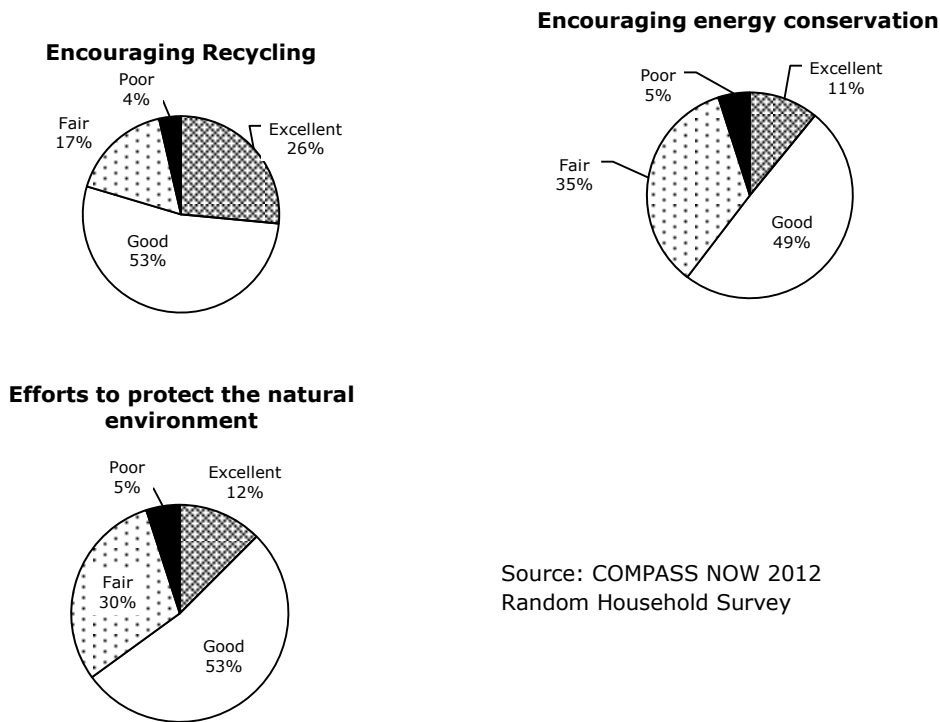
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Respondents of the COMPASS NOW random household survey were asked to rate the efforts in our community to encourage recycling, conserve energy, and protect the environment. The results are shown in **Figure 4**. Overall; residents felt our community is doing a better job of encouraging recycling than protecting the environment or conserving energy: 79% of respondents rated their community as excellent or good at encouraging recycling; 60% rated their community as excellent or good at encouraging energy conservation, and 65% stated efforts to protect the natural environment were excellent or good. Over 90% of Houston County respondents rated their community as excellent or good as a place where recycling is encouraged, much higher than other counties' respondents.



Respondents from Monroe and Trempealeau counties were much more likely to rate efforts to protect the natural environment as fair or poor (over 40%) compared to residents from other counties (near 30%).

**Figure 4: Rating of efforts to protect the environment**



Source: COMPASS NOW 2012  
Random Household Survey

### The “built environment”

The term built environment refers to “the human-made surroundings that provide the setting for human activity, ranging in scale from personal shelter and buildings to neighborhoods and cities that can often include their supporting infrastructure, such as water supply or energy networks.”<sup>5</sup> It is typically those community assets that planning commissions and zoning authorities have concerned themselves with for many years. However, more recent attention is being paid to the built environment, as research has shown that it plays a huge role in the overall health and quality of life of the population. Components of the built environment can include the transportation system, neighborhood and housing developments, roads and bike paths, and availability of healthy food.

**Transportation** planning is assessed and coordinated by Regional Planning Commissions (RPC) and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO). Short and long-range Metropolitan Transportation Plans have been developed for areas of the Great Rivers Region.<sup>6</sup> The La Crosse

Area Planning Committee (LAPC) has been designated by the governors of Wisconsin and Minnesota as the MPO to perform transportation planning activities for most of La Crosse and Houston counties.

**In their own words:**

“Public transportation is needed for those in rural areas.”

COMPASS NOW 2012  
Random Household Survey  
Comments

In 2008, the Mississippi River RPC developed a “Regional Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan.”<sup>7</sup> This plan summarized transportation for La Crosse, Monroe, Trempealeau and Vernon counties. Overall, the Great Rivers Region is served by many forms of transportation. The region for the most part, is very rural and providing transportation services to a rural community is challenging and expensive. In the region, few existing services are coordinated across county boundaries or regionally. Some informal cooperation between agencies has taken place but with minimal success. The MRRPC transportation plan summarized the largest transportation issues that are needed in the future to meet the increasing transportation needs of the region’s population. They identified the following challenges:

- The homeless population is growing and lacks access to transportation services.
- There is a lack of appropriate reimbursement for transportation to individuals who are on Medical Assistance.
- There is a negative impact of rising fuel costs on taxis and other forms of transportation, which become inaccessible for many residents due to the cost.
- There is a need for more wheelchair spaces on mini-buses.
- A more coordinated effort of informing people about transportation services available is needed.
- There are spatial mismatches. Many people need transportation to and from work during hours when there may be limited services available.
- There is a lack of awareness by the general public and employers of the transportation needs for low income individuals.
- Literacy is a problem for some populations that need transportation services.

**In Focus**

Many participants expressed a deep concern for the challenges the elderly face with regard to their need for transportation. Participants explained that taxi services are limited or non-existent and that as a result the elderly have a difficult time getting to appointments. The lack of transportation increases the isolation of the elderly and makes it more difficult for them to live independently.

COMPASS NOW 2012  
Focus Group Report

There are 10 general transportation fixed route services connecting areas of La Crosse, La Crescent and Onalaska. The Onalaska/Holmen/West Salem Public Transit (OHWSPT) is a demand-response, door-to-door public transportation system serving the citizens of the city of Onalaska and the villages of Holmen and West Salem. In 2009, the La Crosse County Aging Unit contracted with a third party to provide shared-ride taxi service to any resident in the town of Holland, the village of Bangor, and the village of Rockland. Find-A-Ride is a grant-funded transportation referral service

administered by the La Crosse County Aging Unit. The service currently helps travelers connect to transportation services in La Crosse County, but plans are being made to do the same in Monroe, Trempealeau, and Vernon counties in Wisconsin as well as in the southeast portion of Minnesota and the northeast portion of Iowa. Additional public transit services available in the planning area include Semcac and the "33 Express." The Aging Unit provides transportation services to the elderly (60 years and older) and to adults with disabilities throughout La Crosse County through the La Crosse County Minibus and through the Volunteer Driver Program (VDP). Several not-for-profit organizations and churches also provide some transportation services for their customers/clients.

According to data from the US Census, the main method of commuting to work is driving a car alone (see **Table 2**). With increasing fuel prices and increased unemployment and poverty, transportation can provide a significant financial challenge. Active Living La Crescent conducted a survey in the spring of 2009 of La Crescent residents to measure knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to active living and community design.<sup>8</sup> The survey revealed that 39% of the respondents walked or biked for functional purposes and 3% walked or biked to work. More than half of the respondents stated they would be more active if bike facilities were available.

**Table 2: Means of transportation to work (2000)**

	<b>La Crosse</b>	<b>Monroe</b>	<b>Tremp.</b>	<b>Vernon</b>	<b>Houston</b>
Drove a car alone	81%	76%	75%	71%	76%
Carpooled	9%	12%	12%	11%	10%
Bus	1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Bicycle	1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Walked	5%	4%	5%	5%	5%

Source: US Census. <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/transpor.html>  
accessed 11/14/11

**Complete streets** is a policy that divides transportation dollars so that alternative transportation options are represented in any design, reconstruction or improving of roadways. This policy enables access and safety measures for all ages and abilities for all modes of transportation including auto, bicyclists, pedestrians, mass transit, and rail. The movement is an attempt to diversify the dependence of a single-use transportation system. The benefits of a complete streets policy include: improved safety, encouragement of walking and bicycling for people of all ages, increased transportation capacity, and improved air quality.<sup>9</sup> A complete streets policy was passed in La Crosse County and several municipalities within the county in 2011.

The Department of Transportation is in the process of translating this policy into processes for future roadwork.

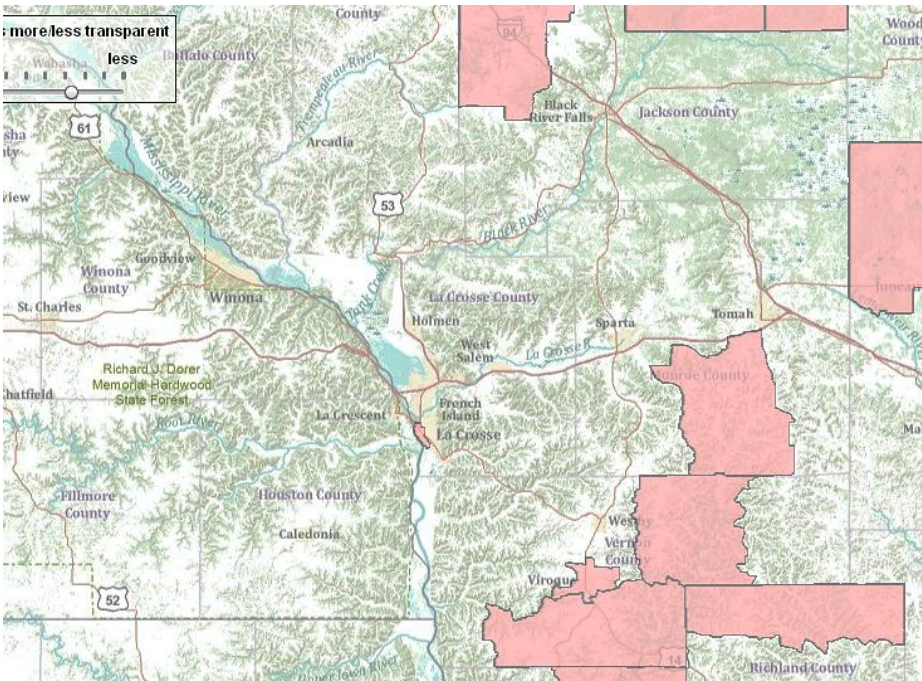
A component of the built environment that is gaining significant attention is that of **availability of healthy foods**. Restaurant and grocery store availability by county is shown in **Table 3**. Farmer’s markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) are informal sources of fresh foods that are growing in availability. The inability to pay for these foods using food stamps, make these new sources of food not an accessible option for low income families.

**Table 3: Food environment statistics, 2005  
(Rate per 10,000 population)**

	<b>La Crosse</b>	<b>Monroe</b>	<b>Tremp</b>	<b>Vernon</b>	<b>Houston</b>	<b>WI</b>	<b>MN</b>
Number of grocery stores	1.52	1.86	2.16	1.38	2.56	1.86	1.83
Number of supercenters and club stores	0.18	0.23	0	0.35	0	0.11	0.13
Number of convenience stores (with gas)	3.50	4.88	5.04	1.38	5.13	0.38	3.90
Number of full-service restaurants	7.53	7.44	8.64	7.25	11.28	4.12	6.98

Source: US Census: <http://www.census.gov/econ/industry/ec07/a722110.htm> accessed 11/14/11

Relatively new research has shown that health is significantly poorer in areas where residents have poor-to-little access to healthy food. **Food deserts** are defined by the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) Working Group as a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, to qualify as a food desert tract, at least 33 percent of the tract's population or a minimum of 500 people in the tract must have low access to a supermarket or large grocery store. Low access to a healthy food retail outlet is defined as more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store in urban areas and as more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store in rural areas. Data from the US Department of Agriculture’s website shows food deserts exist in much of Vernon and Monroe counties, and in a small area in the city of La Crosse (see **Figure 5**).

**Figure 5: Food deserts in the Great Rivers Region**

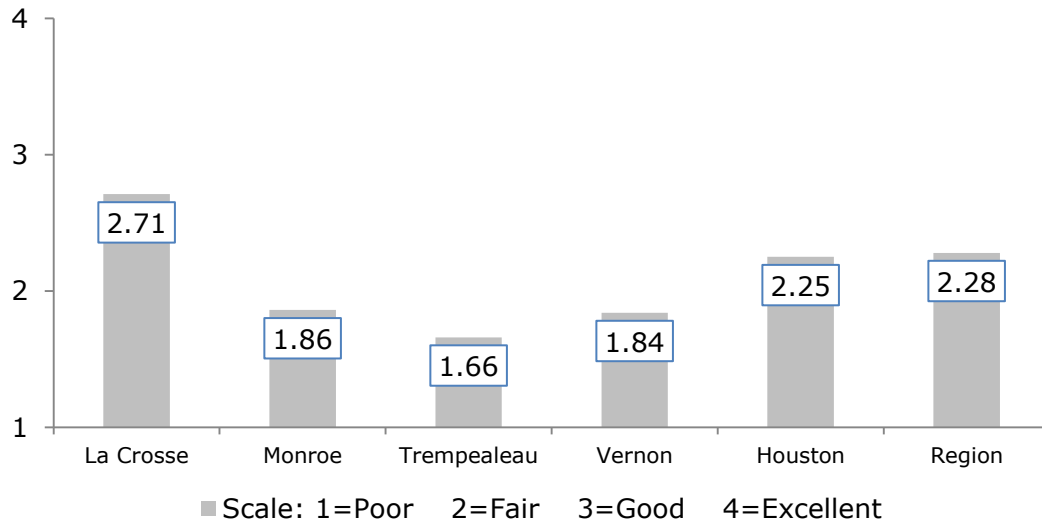
Source: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert/fooddesert.html>

Note: shaded areas represent food deserts

### **How do people rate the built environment?**

Respondents of the COMPASS NOW random household survey were asked to rate the quality of components of the built environment in their community. Overall; residents rated the affordability and access of public transportation the poorest, with an average rating of 2.28 out of 4. The results are shown in **Figure 6**. Transportation was rated the poorest by Monroe, Trempealeau and Vernon County residents, and La Crosse County respondents rated it the highest. While lower income respondents rated availability of personal transportation as significantly worse, there was no significant difference in the rating of public transportation by income of the respondent. Transportation was cited as an issue, especially for older adults, at several focus groups throughout the Great River's Region.

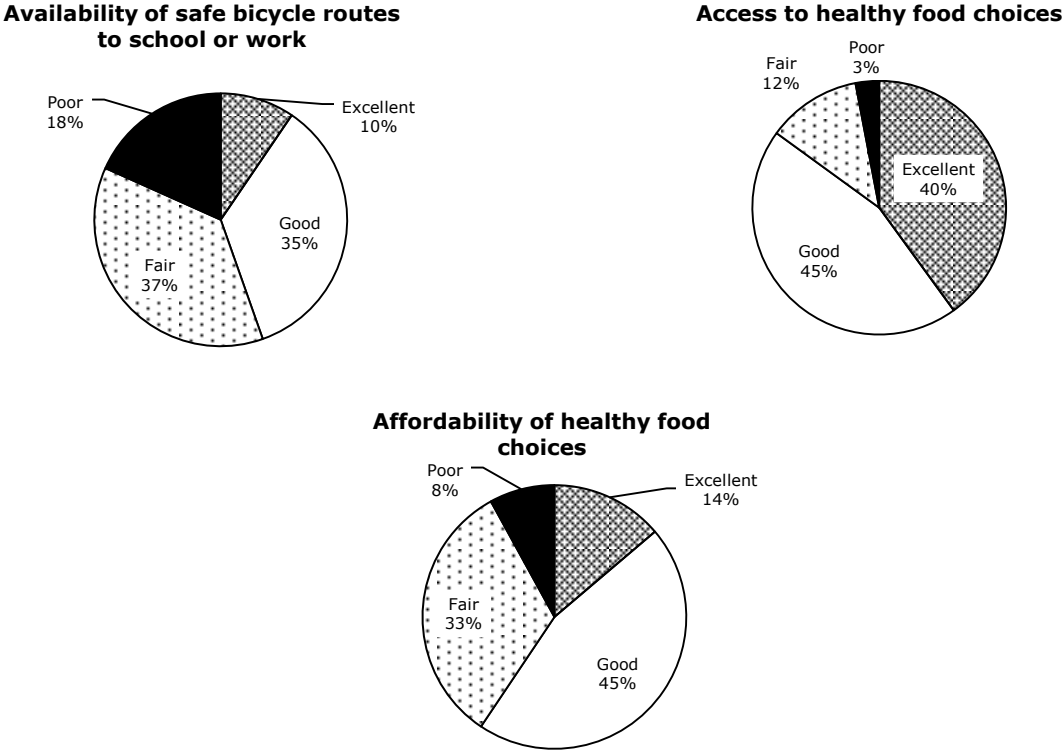
**Figure 6: Rating the affordability and accessibility of public transportation**



Source: COMPASS NOW 2012, Random Household Survey

Other components of the built environment, the availability of safe bicycle routes to school and work, and availability and affordability of healthy food choices were rated by survey respondents and the results are shown in **Figure 7**. Access was rated higher than affordability for healthy food choices. Overall, 55% of respondents rated the availability of safe routes to school or work as fair or poor. Older adults rated both access to and affordability of healthy food choices higher than younger adults. However, there were no differences by income. Residents from Trempealeau County rated their access to healthy foods lower than respondents from all other counties.

**Figure 7: Rating the quality of the built environment**



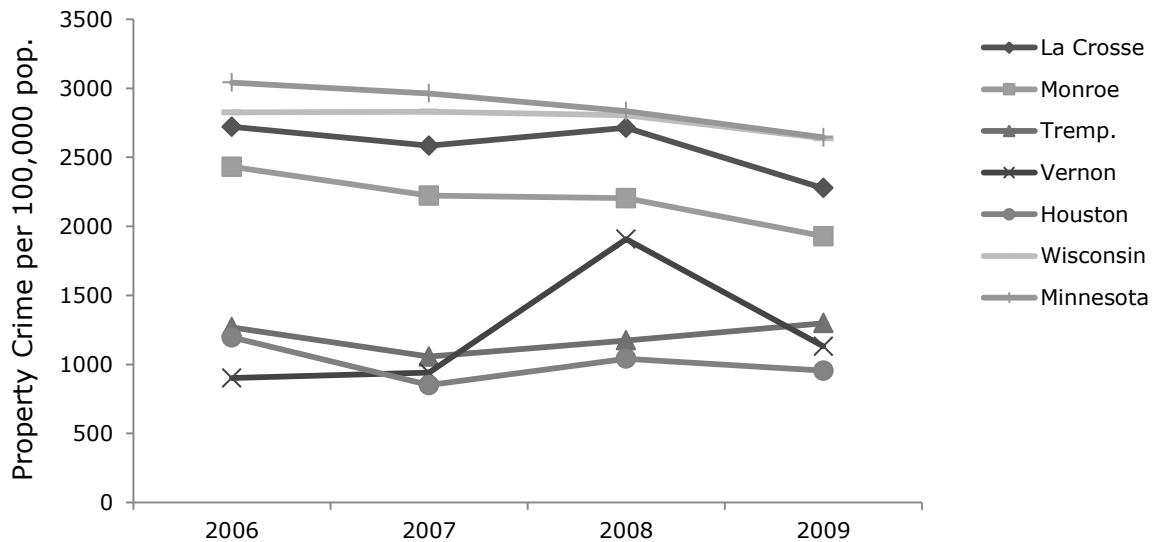
Source: COMPASS NOW 2012, Random Household Survey

**Summary:** Overall, the natural environment of the Great Rivers Region is one of the greatest assets. The natural beauty of the environment is one of the biggest attractors to the region. Communities, government, businesses, and residents are making great strides in protecting the environment and finding ways to lead the nation in energy conservation and creating a healthy built environment. Access to food, especially healthy food, is a significant and emerging concern for many areas in the Great Rivers Region.

**The safety of our communities**

There are several ways to examine the safety of our communities. We can examine the property crime rates, or person-to-person crime rates. Deterrence to crime based on law enforcement presence is also critical. How safe we feel our community is and how much we trust one another to watch out for each other are also important when considering public safety. **Property crimes**, or property offenses, include burglary, theft, arson, motor vehicle theft, and criminal damage to property. These types of crimes do not involve face-to-face confrontation between a perpetrator and a victim. Crime rate levels are dependent upon the willingness of victims to report crimes and are generally higher in more populated areas. Overall, the property crime rate appears to be declining slightly in the Great Rivers Region. Vernon County’s property crime rate was very different in 2008 than in other years. La Crosse County’s property crime rate is the highest of the counties in the Great River’s Region and is similar to Wisconsin and Minnesota’s rate on average (see **Figure 8**).

**Figure 8: Property Crime Rates 2006-2009**



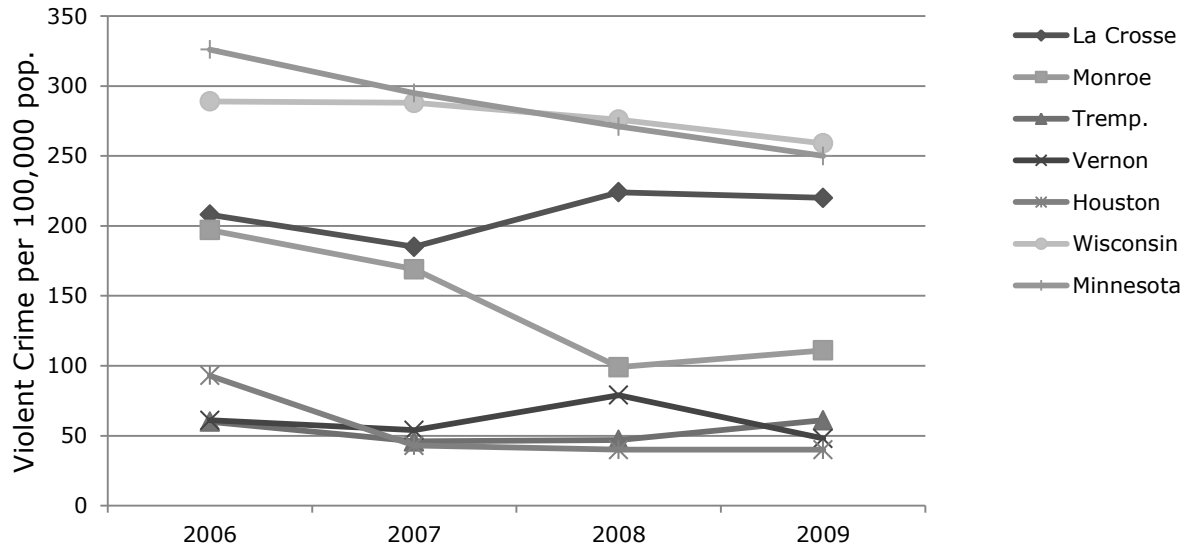
Source: Office of Justice Assistance-Crime Statistics; <http://oja.state.wi.us/>, Wisconsin Epidemiological Profile on Alcohol and Other Drug Use, Bureau of Criminal Apprehension Minnesota, Justice Information Services, 2006-2009 Uniform Crime Report

**Violent crimes** involve face-to-face confrontations between a victim and a perpetrator. Violent crime offenses include murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Violent crimes can be committed with or without the use of a weapon. Similar to property crime, violent crimes are more common in more heavily populated areas (see **Figure 9**). The violent crime rate is



highest in La Crosse County each year. Monroe County's violent crime rate has declined significantly over the past 4 years.

**Figure 9: Violent Crime Rates 2006-2009**

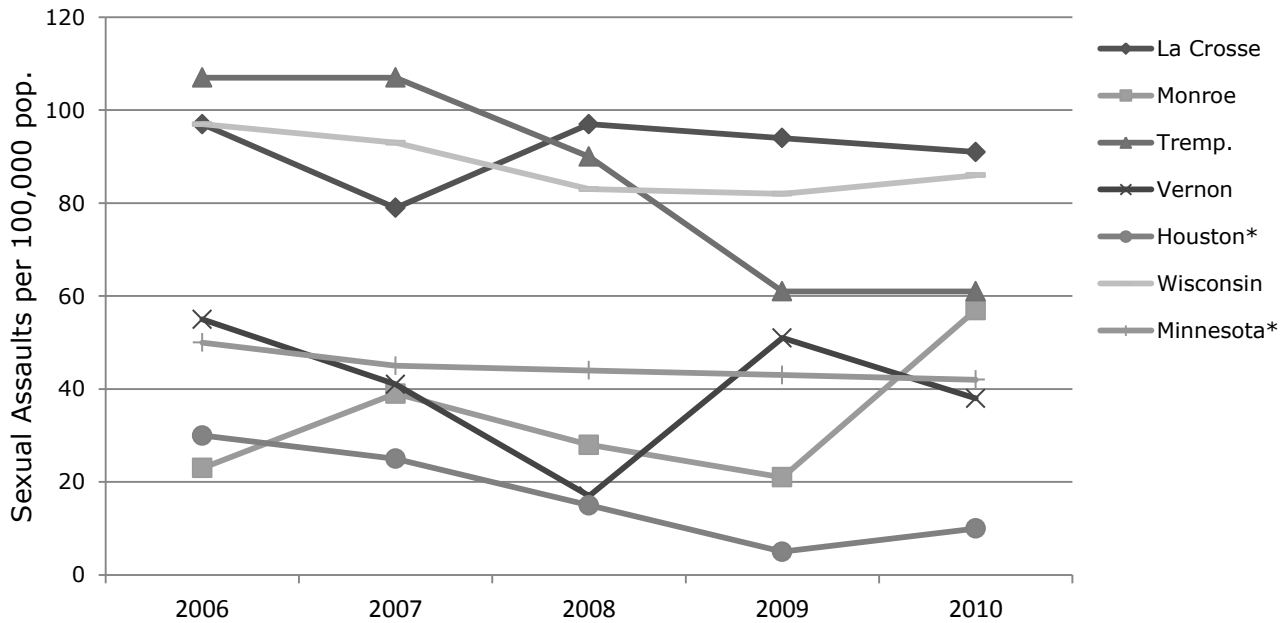


Source: Office of Justice Assistance-Crime Statistics; <http://oja.state.wi.us/>, Bureau of Criminal Apprehension Minnesota, Justice Information Services, 2006-2009 Uniform Crime Report

**Sexual assault** takes on many forms including attacks such as rape or attempted rape, as well as any unwanted sexual contact or threats. Some types of sexual acts which fall under the category of sexual assault include forced sexual intercourse (rape), sodomy (oral or anal sexual acts), child molestation, incest, fondling and attempted rape. Sexual assault in any form is often a devastating crime. Assailants can be strangers, acquaintances, friends, or family members. Sexual assault is the most underreported crime in America. Many factors contribute to under-reporting including shame and embarrassment, self-blame, fear of media exposure, fear of further injury or retaliation, and fear of a legal system that often puts the victim's behavior and history on trial (see **Figure 10**). Sexual assault rates have declined significantly in Trempealeau County since 2007. Vernon County sexual assault rates were low in 2008 (although their property crime rate was high that year). Monroe County had a significant increase in sexual assault rates from 2009 to 2010. In 2010, there were 159 sexual assaults reported in the Great Rivers region. The sexual assault rates for La Crosse County were higher than Wisconsin's rate overall.

**Note:** The difference in the rates between Minnesota and Houston County and Wisconsin and Wisconsin counties is partially explained by a difference in how the rates are reported.

**Figure 10: Sexual Assault Rates 2006-2010**



Source: Office of Justice Assistance-Crime Statistics; <http://oja.state.wi.us/>, Bureau of Criminal Apprehension Minnesota, Justice Information Services, 2006-2009 Uniform Crime Report. \*Houston County and MN state data includes forcible rape and attempted rape only. Statutory rape and other sex offenses are excluded.

**Domestic abuse** is legally defined at the state level and state law establishes procedures for restraining orders. Accurate domestic abuse statistics are difficult to obtain because abuses are largely underreported. Intimate partner violence includes physical violence, sexual violence, threats, and emotional abuse. A recently released national survey on intimate partner and sexual violence provides insight into the prevalence and characteristics of sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence across the country, and at the state level. Significant findings for Wisconsin and Minnesota in the report include: 17.7% of women in Wisconsin and 22.2% in Minnesota have been raped in their lifetime; 41.3% of women in Wisconsin and 48.4% in Minnesota have experienced some form of sexual violence other than rape; 23.7% of men in Wisconsin and 22.4% in Minnesota have experienced some form of sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime.<sup>11</sup>

**Sex offenders** pose an ongoing risk of engaging in sex offenses even after being released from incarceration or commitment. By law, persons convicted of a sex offense have a reduced expectation of privacy because of the public's interest in safety. Sex offender registries publish the residential address of sex offenders under supervision and following the expiration of their sentence.<sup>12</sup> The

registries serve as a means of monitoring and tracking the whereabouts of sex offenders in the community. The Wisconsin and Minnesota Department of Corrections maintain sex offender registries. The state of Wisconsin ranks fifth in the country for the highest number of sex offenders per population while Minnesota has the least number of sex offenders of any state in the nation. However, it should be noted that sex offender registry guidelines are set by state law. The Wisconsin State sex offender registry includes all convicted persons of the registerable offenses included in statute (WI ss. 301.45) examples of registerable offenses in Wisconsin include rape, incest, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> degree sexual assault, possession of child pornography and child enticement. Minnesota statute 244.052 establishes guidelines for assigning a level of risk to convicted sex offenders based on the risk to the public for re-offense by the sex offender. Minnesota law sets guidelines for public notice and limits public access of sex offender registries to level 3 (highest level) sex offenders. **Table 4** shows the number of sex offenders residing in the Great Rivers Region and the rate of sex offenders per 10,000. It is important to note that while the number of sex offenders is greatest in La Crosse, the rate of sex offenders registered in the community in Vernon and Trempealeau counties is double that of La Crosse County. There are no Level 3 sex offenders in Houston County, the number shown in Table 4 includes Level 1 and 2 sex offenders.

**Table 4: Number and rate of sex offenders in the region**

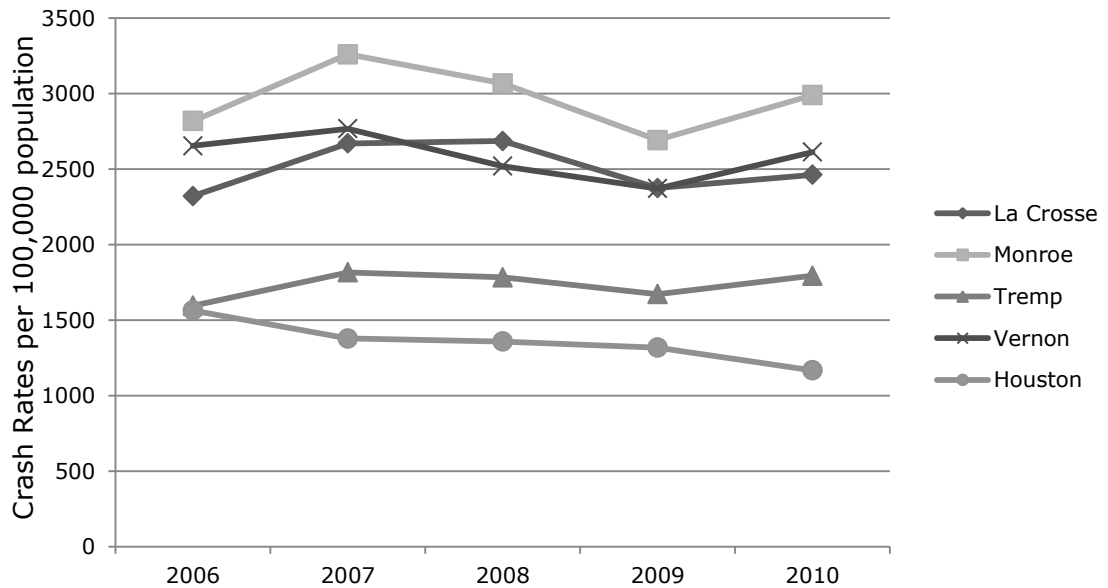
County	Number of registered sex offenders	Rate of sex offenders per 10,000
La Crosse	263	13.7
Monroe	122	21.3
Trempealeau	67	26.4
Vernon	66	27.2
Houston	16	8.2

Source: Personal communication, Paula Armentrout, State of Wisconsin Department of Corrections; Houston County Sheriff's Department.

Rates of **traffic crashes** for residents from 2006-2010 are shown in **Figure 11**. A traffic crash involves at least one motor vehicle and results in an injury or death to any person or damage to any property. Road-traffic crashes are responsible for more harm than all other forms of transportation combined. Traffic crashes are generally placed into categories such as fatal, injury, and property damage. Traffic crashes are caused by many things, including driver fatigue, driver intoxication, bad weather events, failure of brake or steering systems, slow driver reaction-time, and roadway obstructions. While La Crosse

County had the highest number of crashes, the rate per 100,000 was highest for Monroe County residents. Due to the rural nature of many of the roads and highways in the Great Rivers Region, many traffic crashes result in fatalities or serious injury.

**Figure 11: Traffic Crash Rates 2006-2010**

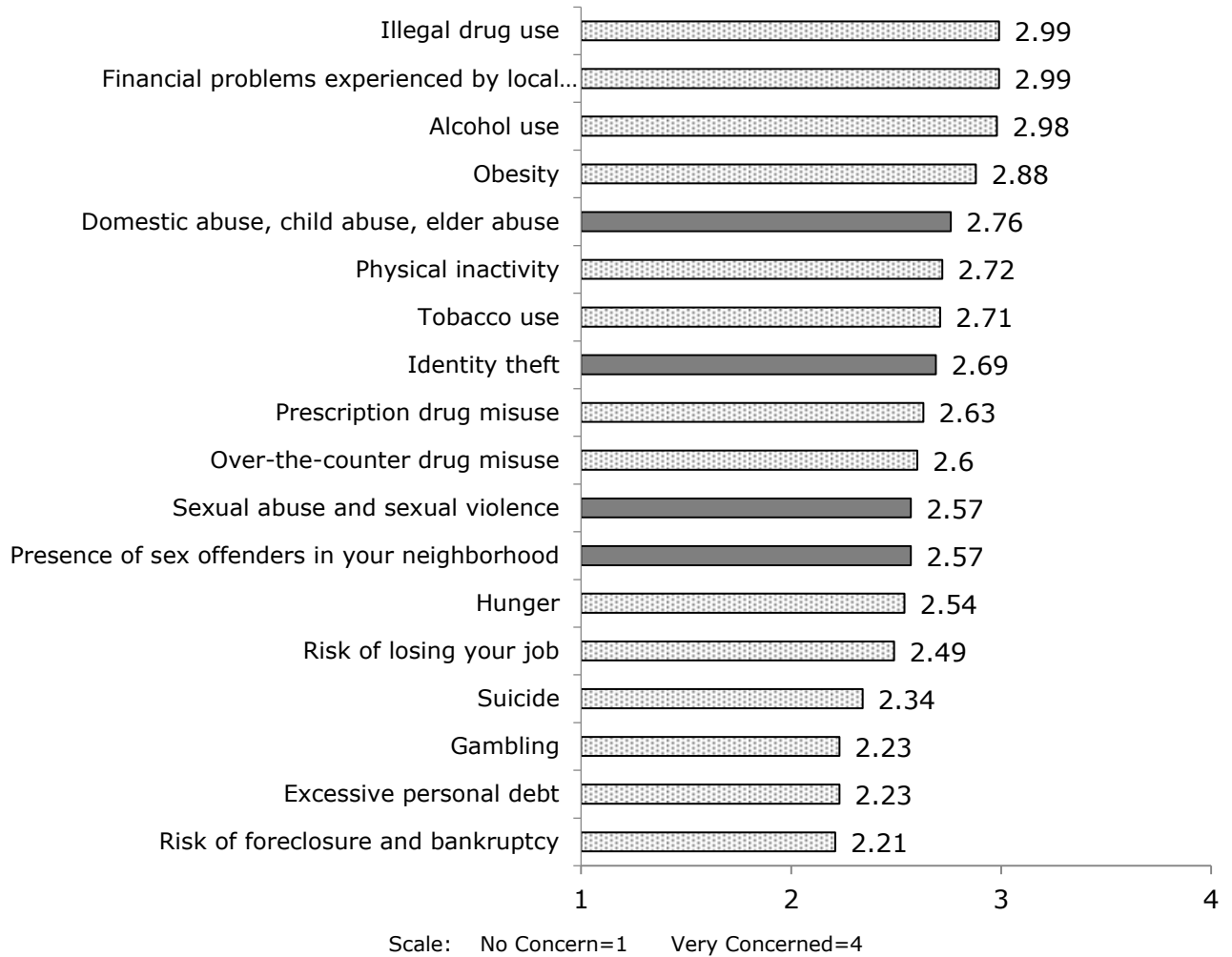


Source: Wisconsin Department of Transportation; <http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/safety/motorist/crashfacts/docs/archive>  
 Minnesota Department of Public Safety; [www.dps.state.mn.us](http://www.dps.state.mn.us)

**How concerned are residents about safety?**

In the COMPASS NOW random household survey, residents were asked to rate a series of 18 concerns in the community. These results are shown in **Figure 12**. Of the concerns related to issues within this community section, abuse (domestic, child and elder abuse) and identity theft were rated in the top half. Sexual abuse and presence of sex offenders were ranked 11<sup>th</sup> overall as a concern. A comparison of issues by county is also shown in **Table 5**. There was little difference in ranking these concerns by county residents.

**Figure 12: Rating of Community Concerns about Safety**



Source: COMPASS NOW 2012, Random Household Survey

**Table 5: Ranking of Community Concerns by County Out of 18 Topics**

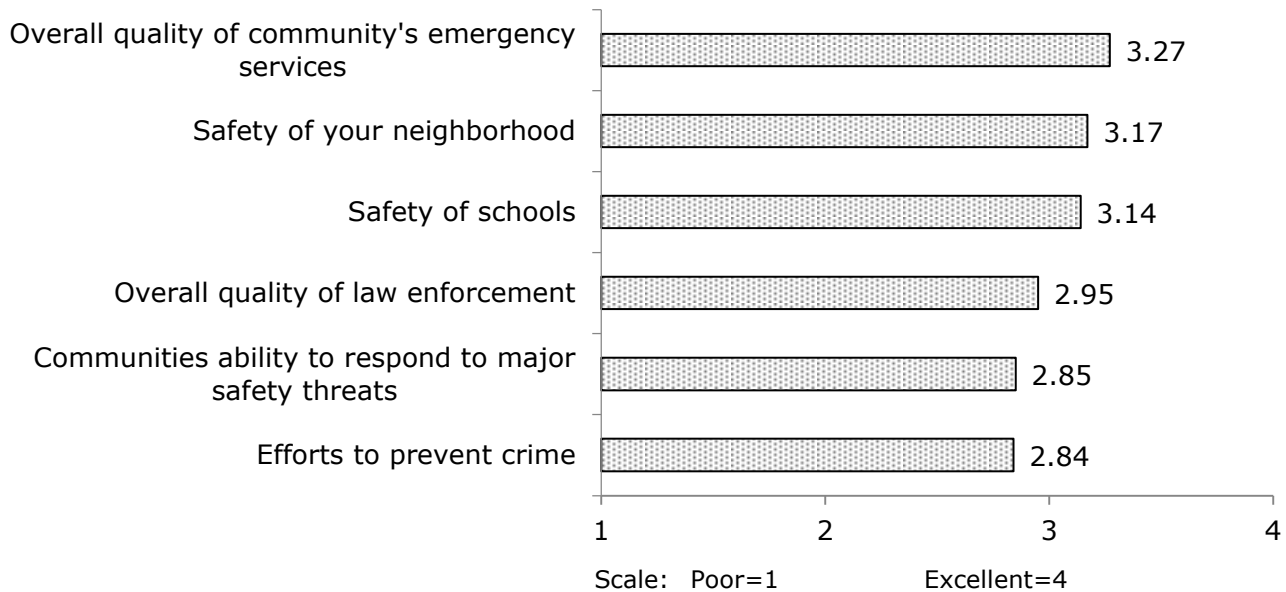
Risk Factor:	Region	La Crosse	Monroe	Tremp.	Vernon	Houston
Domestic abuse, child abuse, elder abuse	5	5	8	7	7	7
Identity theft	8	7	9	5	8	8
Sexual abuse, sexual violence	11	11	12	12	9	9
Presence of sexual offenders in your neighborhood	11	13	11	10	12	12

Source: COMPASS NOW 2012, Random Household Survey

**How people rate the safety of the community**

Respondents of the COMPASS random household survey were asked to rate the safety of their community including such things as the emergency and law enforcement services, safety of the school and neighborhood, the community’s ability to respond to safety threats, and overall efforts to prevent crime. Overall; residents rated the quality of the emergency services the best and efforts to prevent crime as the worst. The results are shown in **Figure 13**. Residents from all counties rated the safety of schools similarly. Houston, Trempealeau and Vernon County residents rated the safety of their neighborhoods better than La Crosse County residents; although La Crosse County residents rated the quality of law enforcement better. The quality of the community’s emergency services were rated the highest in La Crosse and Houston counties.

**Figure 13: Rating of quality of public safety in the community**



Source: COMPASS NOW 2012 Random Household Survey

**Summary:** Property crimes rates and violent crime rates are highest in La Crosse County. The sexual assault rate for La Crosse County is higher than the state average. Monroe County has a high rate of traffic crashes.

## Care for vulnerable populations

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The young and the elderly can be considered vulnerable populations. A community can be evaluated on how it cares for these vulnerable populations. All people need a place to live and to call home, no matter what their age. A good quality of life depends on a housing supply that meets the demands of an increasing aging population. There are a variety of options for **senior living**. These can include senior apartments, a family household, living alone, and assisted living facilities. Independent living or senior apartments are designed specifically for independent senior adults who want to enjoy a lifestyle filled with recreational, educational, and social activities with other seniors. These facilities are designed for people who can live on their own but want the security and/or convenience of community living. Public Housing Authorities manage housing options for the elderly as well for the disabled and low-income families. Limited options for a growing population often lead to housing projects losing their intended purpose. Assisted living facilities can be a free-standing part of a continuing care community that provides independent, assisted and nursing care affiliated with a nursing home. Assisted living facilities are often specialized services brought into independent retirement communities. It is difficult to gauge adequacy of housing opportunities in our communities since the occupancy rates can vary daily for some types of facility.

According to national data collected in 2010 by the US Census Bureau, 58.1% of two-parent families have both parents employed.<sup>13</sup> Although a variety of **childcare** options may exist, quality childcare that is affordable may be difficult to find. The cost of childcare varies depending on the type of childcare setting, age, and number of children, and whether the childcare provider is certified, licensed, or unregulated. State government subsidies for regulated childcare may be available for families with a gross income at or less than 185% of the poverty level. Childcare needs become more challenging and more costly for families with multiple children and during summer months. Part time childcare can sometimes be difficult to find. There is also no childcare option for sick children in the Great Rivers Region. The rate of available regulated (certified and licensed) childcare slots has decreased each year (see **Table 6**).

### In Focus

Housing and support services for the elderly were important issues raised in COMPASS Now focus groups. Participants emphasized the need for meal sites and senior centers and stressed an increasing need for assisted living facilities in the county. Participants in Hillsboro expressed a need for a nursing home in their area.

COMPASS NOW 2012  
Focus Group Report

**Table 6: Certified and Licensed Childcare Slots per 1,000 children ages 0-7 (2006-2009)**

	2006	2007	2008	2009
La Crosse	139.6	111.3	100.3	94.8
	434.2	372.0	364.3	361.9
Monroe	65.4	56.3	49	38.2
	154.5	138.7	124.1	127.4
Trempealeau	201	130.5	117.3	89
	254.6	209.4	225.3	221.0
Vernon	49.8	44	38.5	32.4
	138.5	112.2	122.6	106.0

Source: KIDSCOUNT Data Center, <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/>  
Note: Top number equals certified slot rate, bottom number equals licensed slot rate, Houston County data was not available

The average weekly cost for childcare varies by age (see **Table 7**). Wisconsin and Minnesota rank in the top 10 most expensive states for childcare according to a 2010 study by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies.<sup>14</sup> The report indicated that full-time care for an infant in the average Wisconsin child care center, was \$10,520 per year (ranking 10<sup>th</sup>), and \$13,650 per year, for care in a Minnesota childcare center (ranking 3<sup>rd</sup>). Additionally, the report found that Minnesota ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> and Wisconsin 4<sup>th</sup> most expensive when the cost of center-based care for a 4-year-old is considered. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that parents spend no more than 10% of their family income on child care.<sup>15</sup> The study reported that daycare was more expensive in larger, more urban communities compared to rural communities. It also concluded that the cost and quality of daycare was directly related to future academic achievement for children of all economic levels.

**Table 7: Average Weekly Cost for Licensed Center and Licensed Family Care**

	Infant (0-2)	Toddler (2-3)	Preschool (4-5)	School Age (6+)
La Crosse	\$152.80	\$132.78	\$132.78	\$132.78
Monroe	\$138.58	\$119.00	\$119.00	\$119.00
Trempealeau	\$128.50	\$112.75	\$112.75	\$112.75
Vernon	\$130.35	\$117.16	\$117.16	\$117.16
Houston	\$122.57	\$123.90	\$118.00	\$108.46

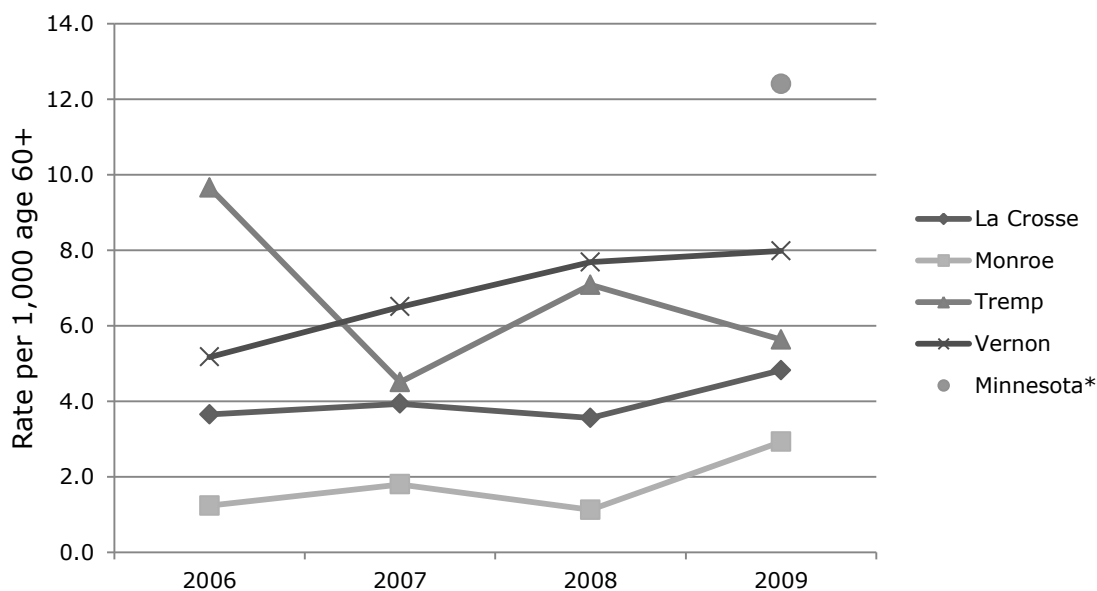
Source: [http://www.naccrra.org/docs/Cost\\_Report\\_073010-final.pdf](http://www.naccrra.org/docs/Cost_Report_073010-final.pdf), Minnesota Department of Human Services. Note: Average is based on 2010 rates.



## Abuse of Vulnerable Populations

Wisconsin law defines **elder abuse** as occurring when any person at or above the age of 60 has been subjected to any of the following four categories of abuse: physical abuse; material exploitation; neglect; and self-neglect. The National Center on Elder Abuse had expanded this to include sexual abuse, emotional abuse and abandonment. Reporting elder abuse is voluntary and not required by medical professionals or other service providers. If an elderly person is legally competent, he or she may refuse an investigation. Shame, fear and not knowing how to get help may result in an underreporting of elder abuse. Rates of elder abuse are shown in **Figure 14**. The rate of elder abuse was highest for Vernon County residents and lowest for Monroe County, although Trempealeau County had a high rate in 2006.

**Figure 14:** Elder Abuse Reports, 60+ years (Rate per 1,000)

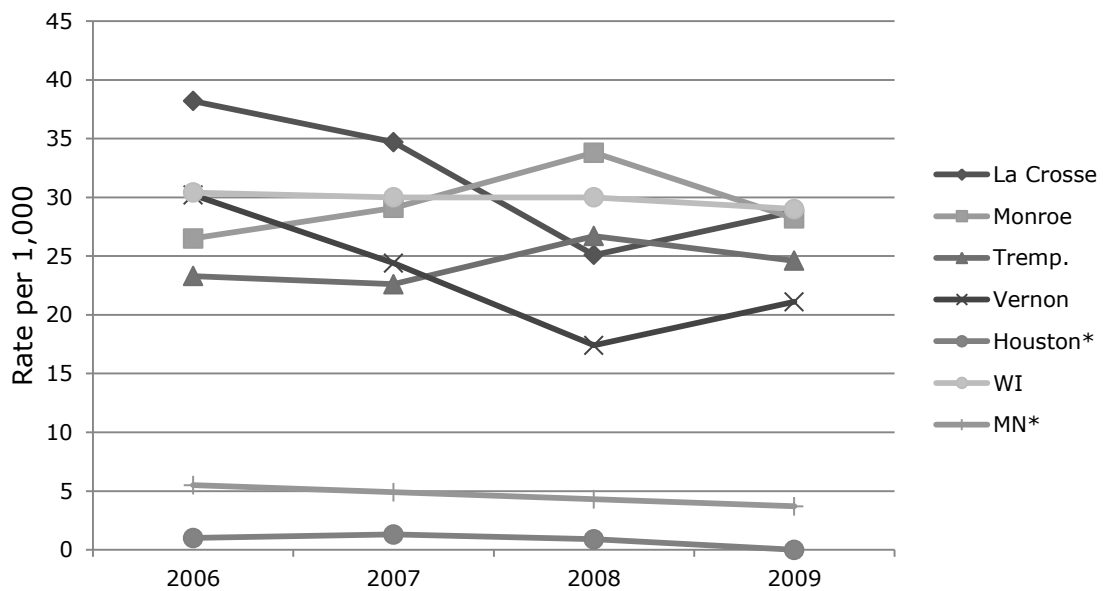


Source: Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources, Houston County data available, state rate is provided as a reference point. Data was only available for 2009.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) define child maltreatment as any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child.<sup>16</sup> Child abuse can occur in a child's home, or in the organizations, schools or communities the child interacts

with. There are four major categories of child abuse: neglect, physical abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, and child sexual abuse. According to the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, in 1997 neglect represented 54% of confirmed cases of child abuse, physical abuse 22%, sexual abuse 8%, emotional maltreatment 4%, and other forms of maltreatment 12%.<sup>17</sup> The rate of child abuse and neglect reports for areas in the Great Rivers Region is shown in **Figure 15**. The significant difference between Wisconsin and Minnesota data is due to how the data is reported. Wisconsin data reports alleged claims of abuse and neglect while Minnesota data only shows substantiated abuse. Substantiated abuse means that the county has conducted an assessment in response to a report and found that maltreatment occurred. The social problem of child abuse and neglect in our society presents many challenges. The effects of child abuse have long-term impact on the victim and on society.

**Figure 15: Child Abuse and Neglect Reports (rate per 1,000)**

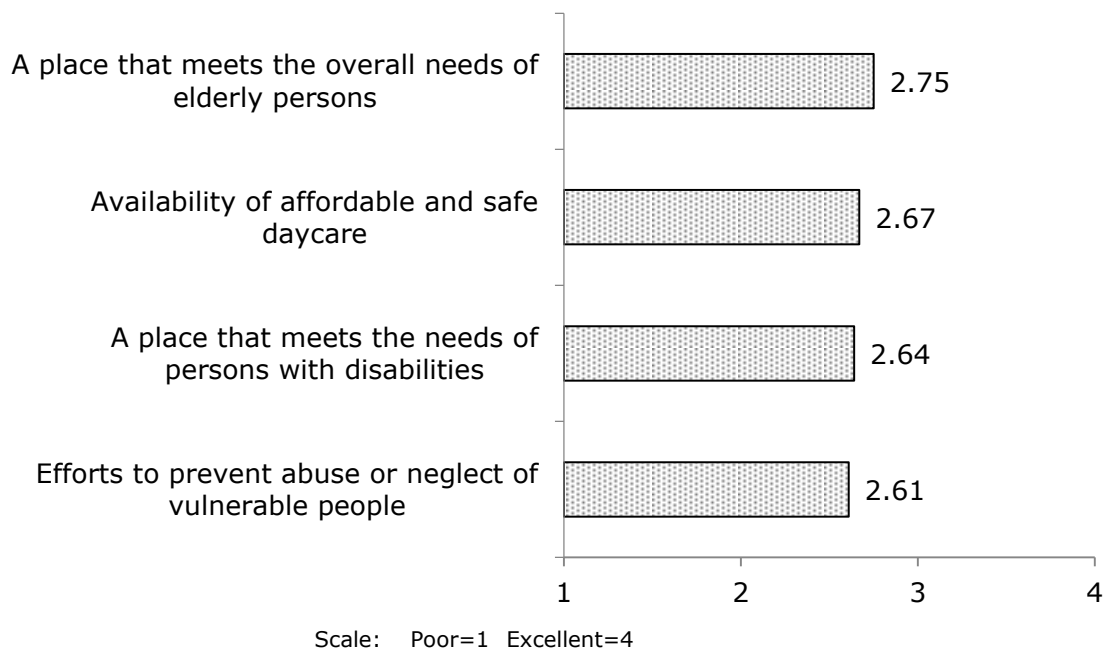


Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org), MN and Houston County Data only includes substantiated claims of abuse.

### How people rate the care for the vulnerable population

Respondents of the COMPASS NOW random household survey were asked to rate several items related to the community's care for vulnerable populations. These items included: a place that meets the needs of the elderly; a place that meets the needs of persons with disabilities; availability of affordable and safe daycare; and efforts to prevent abuse or neglect of vulnerable people. Overall residents rated these items fairly low. The rating for meeting the needs of the elderly was the highest and efforts to prevent abuse of vulnerable people was rated the lowest (see **Figure 16**). Residents in Houston and La Crosse counties rated daycare higher than did residents of Vernon County. Trempealeau County residents rated the community as a place that meets the needs of persons with disabilities lower than all other county residents. Overall, those respondents with children living in the household rated availability of affordable and safe daycare statistically lower than those respondents without children. Elderly rated their community better than younger respondents on meeting the needs of the elderly, as well as prevention abuse of vulnerable populations.

**Figure 16: Rating of care for the vulnerable population in the community**



Source: COMPASS NOW 2012, Random Household Survey

### In their own words:

"I live in Stoddard. We have a great community, a lot of caring people. We help one another out."

"I am retired and my neighborhood and friends watch out for me. I have never had any trouble when I needed help."

"I have always felt fortunate to have raised my family in such a wonderful community. Of course we have problems, but there have always been many caring, involved people willing to volunteer their services expertise and time wherever it is needed."

COMPASS NOW 2012  
Random Household Survey Comments

### In Focus

Another area of concern raised in COMPASS NOW focus groups was the lack of awareness in the community about the needs of the elderly. Several participants felt there was a disconnect in the general population about the issues facing the elderly and expressed concern over increasing elder abuse. The need for more education and rehabilitation opportunities for the aging was emphasized and ideas to promote senior involvement in schools to create rich inter-generational learning opportunities were also identified.

COMPASS NOW 2012  
Focus Group Report

**Summary:** Communities within the Great Rivers Region are generally viewed as "caring communities". Elder abuse and child abuse are underreported.

### Opportunities to enhance the culture/quality of life

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Many of the qualities discussed in this report have an impact on the quality of life for citizens. In order for the community to attract and keep citizen happy and thriving, it is important for the community to offer a variety of cultural opportunities that can enhance the quality of life.

Within the Great Rivers Region there are over 8 movie **theaters** and 9 live theater venues for music, arts, and theater performances. In addition, most school districts have at least one theater performance each year as well, increasing the number of fine arts available to its residents.

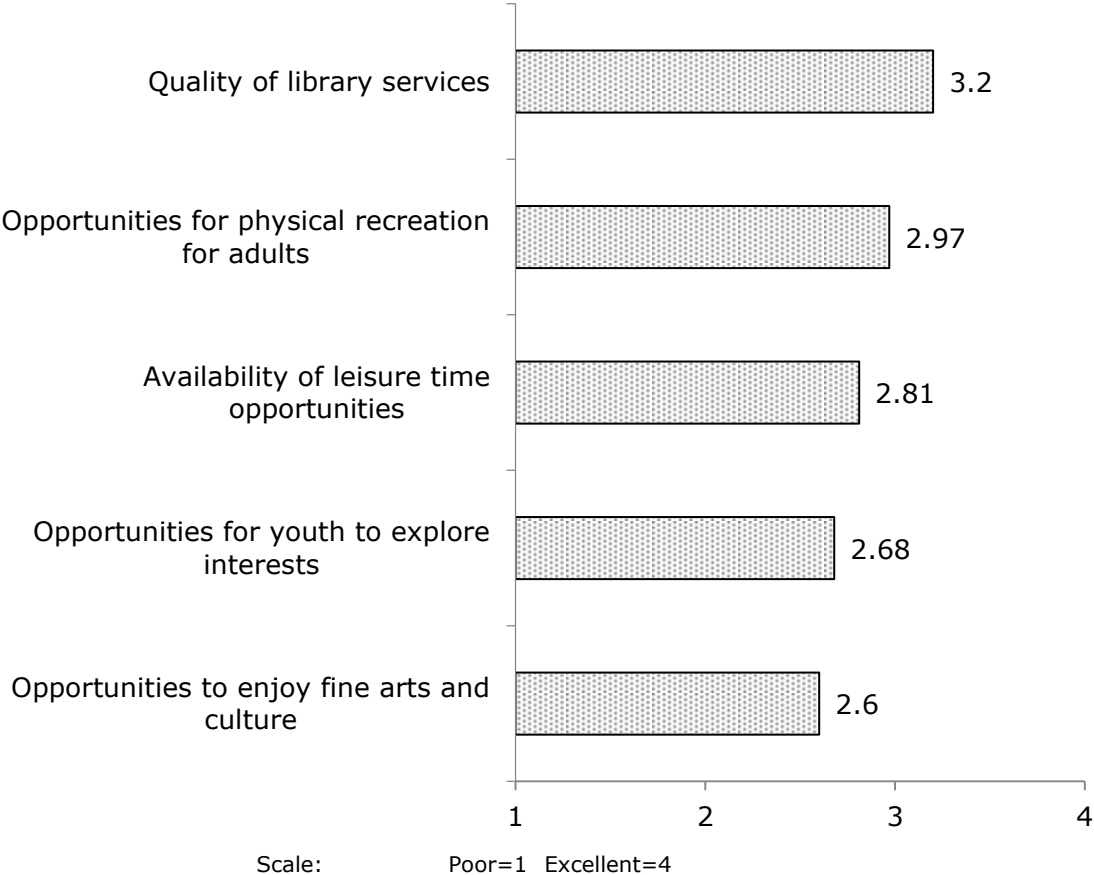
In a society where lifelong learning is valued, public **libraries** play an important fundamental role. Public libraries provide educational and cultural opportunities and experiences for people of all ages. Libraries provide a variety of activities and a range of reading materials to accommodate diverse learners and learning styles. Libraries play an important role in supporting childhood education through creative and fun summer reading programs for children and young people. Public libraries also offer guidance and training in information search.

Funding for public libraries comes mainly from local, county, state, and federal sources. Adequate funding for public libraries enhances the quality of life in a community and also allows the library to offer programs, services, and updated collections. In challenging economic times, public libraries offer important cost saving services such as free Internet and computer access, and traditional circulated items such as books, DVDs, videos, and audiocassettes. Library services are difficult to measure in part because their benefits are often intangible. The amount of library materials circulated is an indication of utilization but does not fully measure library service usage.

**How people rate the quality of leisure time opportunities**

Respondents of the COMPASS NOW random household survey were asked to rate several items related to the community’s perception of leisure time opportunities in the community (see **Figure 17**). The quality of library services rated the highest of items asked; opportunities to enjoy fine arts and culture rated the lowest. Residents from La Crosse County rated all of these items higher than all other county’s residents.

**Figure 17: Rating of quality of leisure time opportunities in the community**



Source: COMPASS NOW 2012 Random Household Survey

**Summary:** The Great Rivers Region is felt by many of its residents to be rich in cultural, arts, and educational opportunities.

## Key Issues to Address:

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### In their own words

"We intentionally moved to Viroqua almost 2 years ago because we liked the diversity and cultural aspects of the community. It has proved to be a wonderful place to raise a family.

"There is something for everyone here. I love this community."

"La Crosse has been a quality city to grow up in and raise a family of my own... Now as a senior citizen, I am availing myself of the many cultural events and I am proud to call La Crosse home."

"The theatrical life and its diversity should be widely known and celebrated. And the inter-library loan service is reason enough to live in Wisconsin."

COMPASS NOW 2012  
Random Household  
Survey Comments

Based on this COMPASS NOW Community Profile, results of the focus group and random household survey, and personal knowledge of the COMPASS Leadership Team, the following 9 issues were examined and scored to determine the issues of greatest concern:

- Child abuse
- Childcare
- Crime
- Cultural opportunities
- Elder abuse
- Food availability
- Natural environment
- Senior Housing
- Transportation

The Compass Now Leadership Team determined the following 3 issues to be the main key community issues for the Great Rivers Region (in alphabetic order):

- Childcare
- Food availability
- Transportation

Issues that were determined to be emerging or areas to watch included:

- Senior Housing

It is important to note that some of the issues above were important to individual counties, but did not rise to the top when all ratings were examined.

### In Focus

Issues related to quality of life were discussed by residents who participated in COMPASS Focus Groups. Common themes were related to the impact on quality of life due to cuts to Park and Recreation programs, reduced public safety measures, or to garbage pick-up.

COMPASS NOW 2012  
Focus Group Report

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