

STATE OF THE COUNTY UPDATE

2023

This 2023 update builds on the Berkshire Benchmarks State of the County Report published in May 2022. This overview highlights notable changes in regional indicators. Berkshire Benchmarks updated all indicators on the website with the latest data as of March 2023. Readers are encouraged to visit the site to see the changes. www.berkshirebenchmarks.org

INDICATORS

Since the 2022 State of the County report, most indicators have shown relatively little change. However, those indicators that have shown noteworthy changes are discussed below.

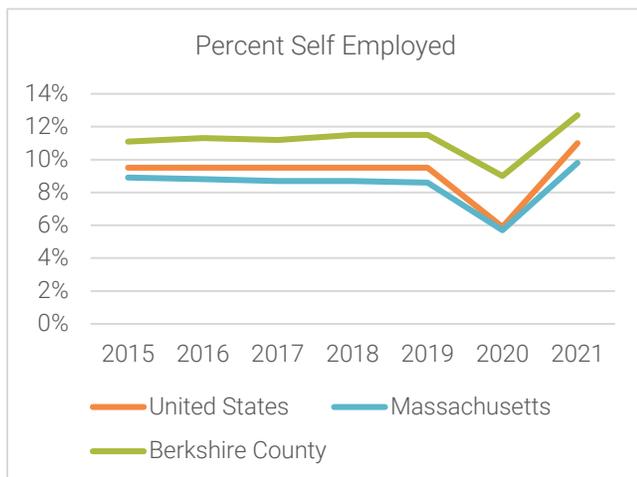
ECONOMY

Income Inequality (2021)

Income Inequality has increased in Berkshire County, bringing it closer to the state and national rates. The change is significant because the region had experienced ten years of decline, bringing it significantly below the state and nation. An increase of the magnitude shown is likely due to COVID and an influx of wealthier families moving to the region.

Self-Employed (2021)

After a significant setback in 2020, the percentage of self-employed individuals increased to an all-time high in the region. Similar increases in the state and nation



also occurred but continue to be lower than in the Berkshires. This two-year change is likely due to a contraction when COVID hit in 2020, followed by an expansion as people started their own businesses in 2021.

Unemployment (2022)

Unemployment in the county has continued to decrease since the pandemic peak in 2020. The annual average is not yet at the 2019 level but is getting closer.

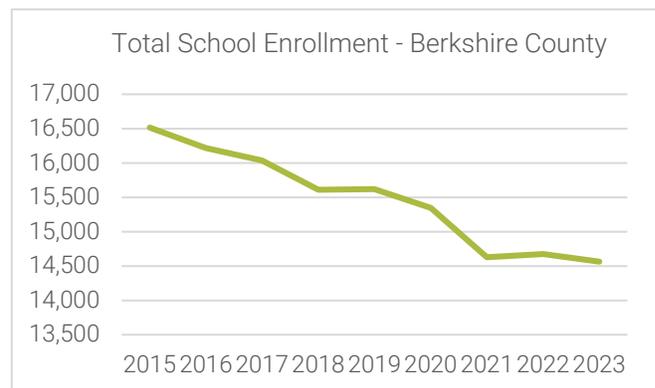
Employment by Sector (2021)

In addition, employment by sector has shown that most sectors have seen increased employment. However, it may not be to pre-pandemic levels. Industries that saw significant declines include finance and insurance, healthcare and social assistance, information, manufacturing, and public administration.

EDUCATION

Total School Enrollment (2023)

Total public school enrollment held steady during the pandemic for the first time in years; however, enrollment began declining again in 2023.



Public School Pre-K Enrollment (2023) and Early Education Enrollment (2021)

Public school pre-K enrollment has returned to pre-pandemic levels after several years of lower enrollment; however, total early education enrollment (public and



private) has decreased since the pandemic began, indicating that the number of private providers has decreased.

Per Pupil Funding (2023)

Per pupil funding typically shows a steady increase yearly; however, in 2021, the increase was significantly higher than historical trends. Even with a steady enrollment in 2021, school districts increased their funding significantly. This increase is likely attributed to emergency relief funding districts received due to COVID, which will soon expire.

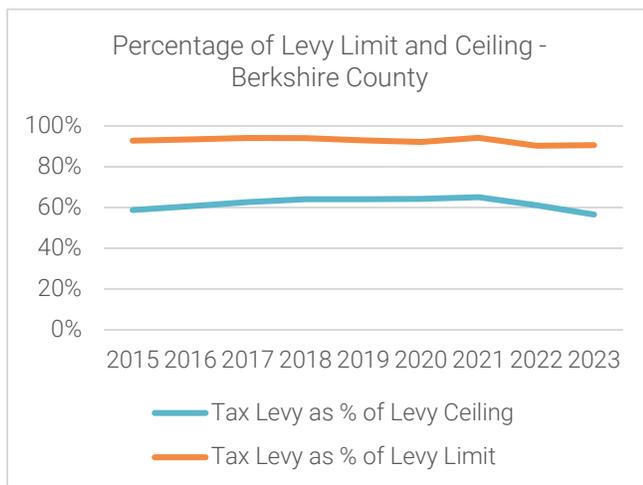
GOVERNMENT

Average Single-Family Tax Bill (2023)

The average single-family tax bill increased over the last year faster than it has historically. This increase is likely due to inflation.

Tax Levy (2023)

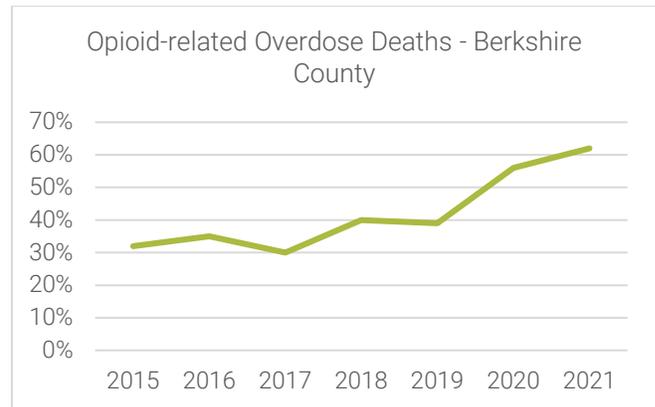
Regardless of the tax bills, the tax levy has remained steady as a percentage of the levy limit. In contrast, the percentage of the levy ceiling decreased due to increases in assessed values.



HEALTH

Substance Misuse (2021), Suicide (2022), and Mental Health

Opioid-related deaths have continued to rise in Berkshire County. Suicide rates have also increased, a potential indicator that mental health issues have worsened in the region.



Diabetes (2019)

Adults with diabetes have continued to increase in the region, which is the opposite trend of the state and nation.

Premature Deaths (2022)

Premature deaths have continued to increase, increasing the gap between the county and the state.

HOUSING

Housing and transportation costs as a percentage of income (2022)

Housing and transportation costs as a percentage of income rose, with a significant increase in the population paying at least 45% of their income to housing and transportation. The Berkshires continue to be one of the more expensive regions in the state when combining housing and transportation costs based on income levels.

Second Homes (2021)

The Berkshires have seen a significant increase in the number of second homes in the county. Many of these may be new homes, but many have been primary homes sold to second homeowners.

Foreclosures (2022)

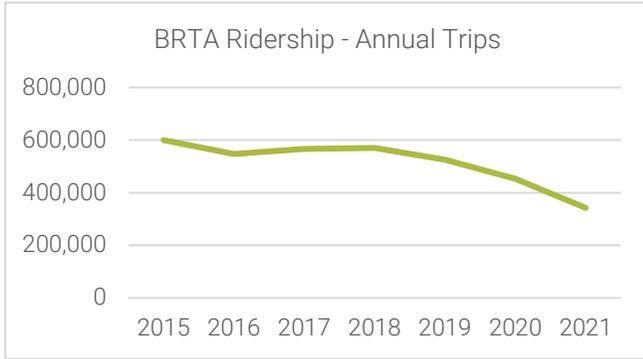
The number of foreclosures dropped significantly during the pandemic due to moratoriums; however, the moratoriums have now ended. The number of foreclosures has increased slightly from the pandemic. Still, it is significantly below the number occurring before the pandemic.



TRANSPORTATION

BRTA Ridership (2021)

The Berkshire Regional Transit Authority has continued to see a decline in ridership, primarily due to the pandemic. This data is only through 2021, but unofficial data reports that the ridership rebounded in 2022.



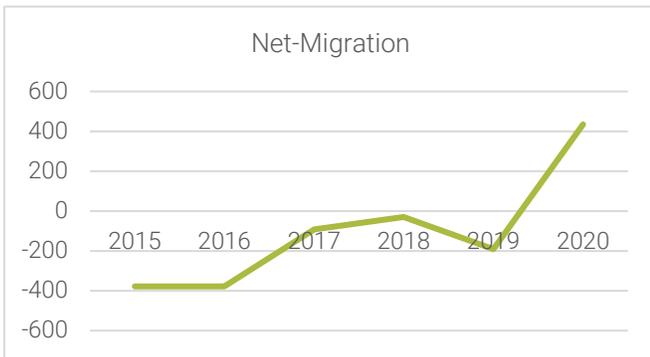
Off-road Bike Pathways (2022)

Over the last year, the Berkshires have seen an increase in the miles of off-road bike pathways, with three new pike paths coming online in Great Barrington, Pittsfield, and Williamstown.

GENERAL DEMOGRAPHICS

Net Migration (2020)

The Berkshires saw a net increase in migration for the first time in decades, according to the latest data (2020). This increase is due to the influx of people during the pandemic. Future years' data will show if the region can sustain this success or if it reverts to a net population loss due to outward migration.



THINGS TO WATCH

There are several indicators that the region, and Berkshire Benchmarks will continue to monitor to see how they impact the region and its data.

- *COVID-19:* Across many data points, the region has fully recovered from the pandemic; however, there are some areas where we have not yet fully recovered and some areas that we still lack information on the last few years.
- *Housing:* The pandemic caused a significant increase in housing prices. These prices seem to have stabilized; however, they continue to be higher than most working families can afford. With the rise in interest rates, these high prices have made the challenge for local families to buy a house even harder. In addition, many homes in the region have recently been converted to short-term rentals, further reducing the supply for residents.
- *Population change:* The pandemic brought many people to the region. They purchased new homes and converted second homes into primary ones. Whether these people stay in the Berkshires and how they impact our population trajectory remains a question.
- *Inflation:* Everything has become more expensive due to the increased inflation rate, and wages in the region have not kept up. The region will have to wait and see if future wages will increase or the poverty rate will increase due to inflation. How will the increase in inflation impact our economic diversification?
- *Climate change:* Many environmental indicators, as well as economic, housing, and transportation indicators, may be impacted by climate change. People may think of warmer days and more droughts as common impacts of climate change. But efforts to electrify more items, such as cars and household heat, will require updating the electric grid. Climate change impacts property insurance, which can impact home prices, which may benefit the Berkshires, which is at a lower risk than other areas. Will climate change cause a shift in our economic diversification?

Continuing to monitor these and other indicators can help everyone in our region understand how things are changing and if the work happening throughout the region is having the intended impact.

