



A Closer Look.

*Jobs and the Economy
Demographic Transition
Youth and the Future Workforce
Deepening Inequality
Assets and Infrastructure*

—
The Berkshire Taconic Region Today

Introduction

In the fall of 2016, Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation launched a process to learn more about the pressing issues facing our region. As a foundation with a 30-year history of helping to build stronger communities, we are privileged to partner with donors, nonprofits and leaders in three states as they work to enrich lives and meet urgent needs every day.

Looking toward our future, we wanted to gather a set of data and have a series of deliberate discussions to hear directly from a diverse range of residents. We wanted to know from their perspectives what is most important for improving lives, what challenges they face and what is keeping them in—or causing them to consider leaving—this extraordinary region.

Process

We brought in a research partner, Mt. Auburn Associates, to review a set of reliable and consistently reported data, and to scan existing reports and studies on a wide range of topics. Working closely with an ad hoc committee of board members and staff, they gathered statistics on population, incomes and poverty, the economy and schools, while exploring broader subjects such as land use, arts and culture, and housing.

Next, Mt. Auburn facilitated a series of lively conversations with residents. From North Adams to New York City and in towns such as Ghent, Pine Plains and Salisbury, we held a total of 12 focus groups on the issues that matter most in our communities. We talked to community college students, business and civic leaders, and nonprofit professionals, as well as donors and volunteers who serve on our grant-making committees. Online surveys provided a way to gain additional points of view. In all, we heard from close to 2,300 people from September to December.

Result

In the end, a group of themes emerged: **jobs and the economy, demographic transition, youth and the future workforce, deepening inequality, and assets and infrastructure.** These themes are broad in scope, and they are interrelated. Most will be familiar. We put them forward in the following pages, with a mix of key facts and resident perspectives, to help document where we are as a region today and to spark further conversation.

This initial report results from our process, which was an important learning opportunity for us. A summary such as this cannot capture all the voices we heard, and ideas and insights that surfaced. In the months ahead, we intend to keep these conversations going as we begin to share what we have learned so far and think anew about how philanthropy can make a difference.



Overview

Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation serves a region centered at the meeting point of the state borders of Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York. Berkshire Taconic specifically focuses on a geographic area that includes all of Berkshire County, Massachusetts; the northwest part of Litchfield County, Connecticut; the northeast portion of Dutchess County, New York; and all of Columbia County, New York. Though three states and four counties converge to form the Berkshire Taconic region, it has a shared way of life and a powerful sense of community. Residents regularly cross state and county borders to access jobs, services and recreational opportunities.

The area's natural beauty and small-town character are among its primary attractions, drawing full-time and part-time residents and growing numbers of visitors. Preserving the landscape and heritage of our historic towns remains a high priority, and well-established organizations benefit from strong support for this work. A long and rich agricultural history is reflected today in increasing economic opportunities in sustainable agriculture and food production. Unemployment is relatively low, household income is

higher than the national average, and tourism and creative industries are helping to boost local economies. Graduation rates are rising and the population of professionals with a post-graduate degree is greater here than in the nation overall.

But these strengths are tempered by growing challenges. The region is experiencing an overall decline in population, with school enrollments shrinking as the share of seniors increases. Attracting large employers offering professional jobs is a persistent problem. Wages have not kept up with inflation, affordable housing is a major concern and poverty is on the rise. The opioid crisis that has gripped the nation is affecting many families here. The spread-out population leads to fragmented services reaching small numbers of people, at higher costs per person. Attracting private infrastructure investments in broadband, transportation and other essential services remains a significant challenge.

Jobs & The Economy

Most agree that recovery from the Great Recession has been a slow slog around the region. Still, the area has long been known as a center for creativity and innovation, with world-class cultural, natural and agricultural resources. As the economic base continues to shift, the need for high-quality jobs that pay a living wage remains a primary concern for residents of all ages, incomes and education levels. College students, parents and many others say a lack of job opportunities is causing young people and working-age families to leave. But sectors that are currently showing potential for growth, such as creative industries, entrepreneurship, and food- and agriculture-related industries, may hold promise for attracting and sustaining vibrant local communities.

Surveyed Resident Perspectives

More than

1/3

of residents who would consider moving cited the **lack of available jobs**

60%

of residents reported **challenges accessing job opportunities** for themselves or a family member

Mixed News on Jobs and Unemployment

While job growth in the region since 2010 has been positive at 3.3%, it has been weaker than the U.S. average of 9%. Even Columbia County, with the highest growth at just under 7%, still lags the nation. And overall job growth has not fully offset job losses from the recession or previous decades of substantial economic restructuring. The unemployment rate ranged from 1.1% to 14.9% in the region's towns and cities between 2011 and 2015. About a third had rates higher than the national rate of 8.3%. The measure that shows the active portion of an economy's workforce, the labor force participation rate, ranged from 50% to as high as 75%. But nearly half of towns fell below the national rate of 64%.

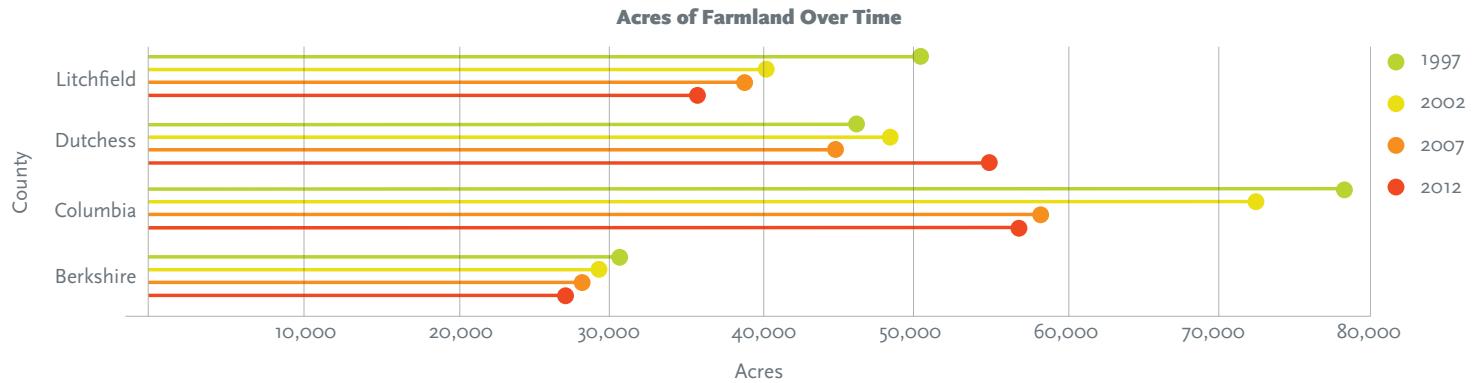
From Producing Goods to Providing Services

Long dominated by manufacturing and agriculture, the economy today is driven by jobs in health care and social assistance (15% of jobs), government (12%), retail trade

(11%), and accommodation and food services (8%). Industries that saw the most job growth between 2010 and 2015 include wholesale trade, accommodation and food services, and health care and social assistance, along with manufacturing and construction. Looked at against the nation as a whole, industries with higher than average concentrations of employment here include arts, entertainment and recreation; educational services; crop and animal production; health care and social assistance; construction; retail trade; and accommodation and food services. The region also has high levels of self-employment. The highest average annual earnings for industries with at least 1,000 jobs were in finance, insurance and manufacturing (\$70,000 and above), and government (from \$55,000 to the low \$60s).

Tourism on the Rise

In 2013, tourists spent a total of more than \$1.3 billion in the



region's four counties, and data suggest that tourism dollars are growing. While tourism directly supports at least 20,000 jobs within the four counties and there is some diversity of opportunities in the sector, many tourism jobs pay lower wages in an area where the cost of living is a concern for many. The increase in housing units devoted to seasonal or recreational use in part reflects the growing influence of tourism in the region.

A Thriving Creative Industry

The abundant cultural activities and organizations in the region are a major draw for tourists and residents alike. They also play a crucial role in the economy. The number of arts- and culture-focused nonprofits of all sizes—some 200 in total by one estimate—is remarkable considering the relatively small population. Along with nonprofits, the mix of arts-related businesses and self-employed workers form a powerful engine for the creative economy. Employment

in this sector—creating goods or services with artistic and cultural content and value in the marketplace—accounts for 6.2% of total jobs, or about 9,000 jobs. That is substantially higher than the national average of 3.9%.

Decreasing Farmland, Expanding Food-Related Jobs

Well over 1,000 farms dot the landscape, covering over 200,000 acres of farmland. They range in size from less than 10 to more than 1,000 acres. But even as farming contributes to local economies and shapes regional identity, the amount of land dedicated to agriculture has declined—by an estimated 15% between 1997 to 2012. At the same time, the number of jobs in food industries—production, processing, distribution, restaurants and retail—rose to 17,500, or 12.3% of all jobs, as of 2015. Employment in this area has grown by 7.8% since 2010, more than twice overall job growth.

- IN 2013, TOURISTS SPENT \$1.3 BILLION IN THE REGION'S FOUR COUNTIES •
- THERE ARE OVER 200 ARTS AND CULTURE NONPROFITS IN THE REGION •

Berkshire Taconic Region Economic Snapshot (2010 – 2015)



Size of circle
represents number
of jobs in industry.

Source: EMSI 2015

Note: This graphic does not include industry sectors with less than 1,000 jobs in the region. This includes mining, quarrying, oil and gas extraction, utilities, management of companies and enterprises, and unclassified industry.

Number of jobs ranges from 1,802 (Information) to 21,563 (Health Care and Social Assistance).

“

One area [of strength] is the arts ...
If that is a strength we already have,
can we build on it?

”

“

I love living in the Berkshires. My husband grew up here, and I moved here in 2009. However, after almost a year of searching for a higher paying career for my husband, **we have decided it might be time to leave the area.** There are plenty of jobs for people who are okay with making \$25,000 – \$35,000 a year, but who wants to live paycheck to paycheck? Not us.”



Demographic Transition

We heard from people everywhere about demographic changes in their communities, and a review of key data reflects this important theme. Our region faces an ongoing trend of population loss, concentrated among young adults and working-age families. At the same time, the share of older adults is rising, as is the number of minority and foreign-born residents. Over time, population loss has serious ramifications for the tax base, workforce and viability of schools—challenges we heard about frequently. The growing number of seniors bring complex health and service needs, with potentially fewer young people to help meet them. We heard people express encouragement that diverse new residents are a source of entrepreneurial energy who are helping to curb population loss by putting down roots. We also heard that social and structural barriers may prevent communities from fully supporting and integrating them.

Surveyed Resident Perspectives

44% of residents under age 46 answered “yes” or “maybe” when asked if they are **considering moving in the next three years**

Overall Population Decline

The residents of the Berkshire Taconic region are among its greatest assets. They are the current and future workforce, and by learning, working, growing, and making connections with one another, they strengthen our communities. But large swaths of rural America continue to struggle with declining populations. Recent estimates by the American Community Survey show that our region lost 2.5 people for every one person it gained from 2010 – 2014. Between 2000 and 2010 – 2014, Berkshire County saw a population loss of nearly 5,000 people, or 3.6%. Columbia County and the towns in Litchfield County had more modest population

losses, at 0.9% and 0.2% respectively, with the only gain, of 2.65%, in our Dutchess County towns. The story is mixed on a town-by-town basis, with about half of towns gaining and half losing population between 2000 and 2010 – 2014. By way of comparison, the U.S. population increased 11.6% during that time.

Gaining Seniors, Losing Youth

At 19% of the population, the concentration of people over 65 between 2010 – 2014 was higher in the region than in each of our three states (14.1% in New York, 14.4% in Massachusetts and 14.8% in Connecticut) or the U.S. overall

- THE REGION LOST 2.5 PEOPLE FOR EVERY ONE PERSON IT GAINED BETWEEN 2010 AND 2010 – 2014 •
- ONE IN FIVE RESIDENTS IS OVER AGE 65 •



23% said that **limited opportunities for their children** is a reason to consider moving

Just **10%** of people over 65 reported **challenges accessing senior services**

(13.7%). In fact, 59 of 68 towns saw an increasing share of seniors, while the number of children grew in just five places. The share of families without children, at 62%, was much higher than the national average of 43%.

Slowly Increasing Diversity

The region overall remains predominantly white and non-Hispanic, with individual towns ranging between 85% and 100% white in 2010 – 2014. But that is slowly changing. Between 2000 and 2010 – 2014, nearly two-thirds of towns and cities saw a decline in the number of white residents and an increase in the number of non-white residents.

In nearly one-third of the region, the non-white population at least doubled during that time. A clear trend in this increasing diversity is a rising Hispanic population, which as a whole more than doubled from 2000 to 2010 – 2014, from 2% to more than 4%. The number of Hispanics tripled in the Dutchess County towns, where they make up nearly 10% of the population as of 2010 – 2014. Finally, the number of foreign-born residents has increased substantially over the past 15 years, from about 10,000 residents in 2000 to about 15,000 in 2010 – 2014.

- JUST FIVE TOWNS SAW INCREASES IN THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN BETWEEN 2010 AND 2010 – 2014 •
- THE HISPANIC POPULATION IN THE REGION HAS DOUBLED FROM 2% TO MORE THAN 4% •



“

The aging population ... is going to
be a huge need in the county ... but
they're also an asset.

”



“

[Immigrants are] the only growing segment of the workforce right now in Berkshire County. So, I really feel like we need to be better about welcoming them and connecting them.”



“

I see very little opportunity here and have, sadly, seen my own children (25 and 21) and their friends look elsewhere to build their futures.”

Youth & The Future Workforce

Vital to the region's future, young people and the workforce are crucially intertwined. While community colleges and vocational schools in particular are building skills and career pathways for local students, we heard young people say they see limited employment and recreation opportunities to keep them here—perceptions that some of them also connected to the growing opioid crisis. This lack of opportunity is driving youth to leave the region as they become adults. With a shortage of skilled workers on many minds, supporting younger residents—in order to sustain the workforce, schools, services and overall population—emerged as an urgent priority.

Surveyed Resident Perspectives

60% of respondents reported that **addressing workforce skills** needs is extremely important

More than **1/3** of people without a college degree reported **difficulty accessing job opportunities** for themselves or a family member

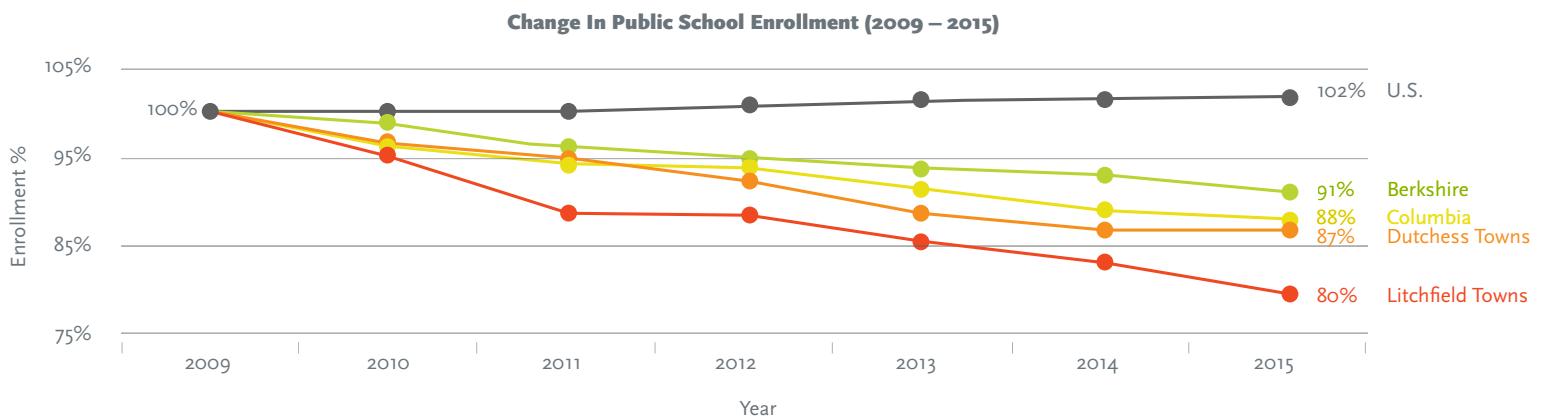
Fewer Students, Higher Graduation Rates

Declining enrollment has long been a trend in rural schools around the U.S. Here in the region's public school districts—currently totaling 42—the story is no different. Overall, public school enrollment decreased 12% between 2009 and 2015, compared to a 2% rise nationally. In fact, all but three districts had fewer students in 2015 than in 2009. With limited financial resources, schools are also scrambling to meet the needs of a growing portion of students for whom English is not a first language—particularly in Dutchess County, where 3% of the towns' student populations in 2014–2015 were English language learners. A positive trend is increasing high school graduation rates. The majority (71%) of districts that report graduation rates saw increases between 2009 and 2015, with an average rate of 87% in 2015, above the national average of 82%.

Large Professional and Working Classes

A well-educated workforce can boost prosperity, and the region has a somewhat higher than average share of highly educated professionals (those with a post-graduate degree), at 14% compared to 11% nationally. It also has a larger working-class population. Thirty-one percent of residents hold a high school diploma only, compared to 27% nationally. To round out the picture, there is a somewhat lower than average share of adults with an associate's or bachelor's degree, or with less than a high school education. This mix of education levels has implications for current and future employers.

- PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT IN THE REGION DECREASED BY 12% BETWEEN 2009 AND 2015 •
- 14% OF RESIDENTS HAVE A POST-GRADUATE DEGREE •



An Emerging Skills Mismatch

Skills to thrive in the local economy are another essential competitive element for residents and employers. Along with weaker job growth and a lack of higher paying jobs, there is evidence that a shortage of skilled workers has employers struggling to fill openings. The relatively low educational attainment among current residents and the number of high school students who are opting out of college and have limited career readiness may be contributing factors. Demographic shifts, including the aging of the workforce and out-migration of youth, are shrinking the pool of working age adults. Meanwhile, attracting skilled workers—through successful schools, affordable housing and livable communities—poses an ongoing challenge.

Climbing Deaths from Drug Overdoses

A national epidemic and public health crisis, opioid addiction is especially devastating in the Northeast. Drug overdose deaths have increased substantially since 2000 in each of the region's four counties. Measured by deaths from drug and opioid overdose per 100,000 residents, available rates range from 8.1-12.0 deaths per 100,000 residents in Columbia and Dutchess counties to as high as 16.1-20.0 deaths per 100,000 residents in Berkshire County. Age-adjusted rates—which help make fairer comparisons between communities with varying combinations of age groups—for our three states are slightly higher than in BCTCF's four focus areas. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported rates of 11.1-13.5 in New York, 16.1-18.5 in Connecticut and 18.6-21.0 in Massachusetts in 2014. The overall U.S. rate was 14.7%.

- ONE-THIRD OF RESIDENTS HAVE A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA ONLY •
- BETWEEN 2010 AND 2015, 108 PEOPLE IN BERKSHIRE COUNTY DIED FROM OPIOID OVERDOSES •

Surveyed Resident Perspectives cont.

Nearly

70%

of all residents said that **improving K-12 education** and **addressing substance abuse** are extremely important to improving lives

Advancement of careers was the

#2

reason why people of all ages would **consider moving**

“

**We need to focus on youth and
lay tracks of opportunity.**

They don't feel connected.
Their worlds aren't open ...

The solution lies in having more
conversations like this and
bringing together our resources.

”



“

The heroin epidemic is ... a big issue here. You see it with the kids, especially the young adults of people who are underemployed. People are falling off the cliff.”



“

We have failing schools and we're not talking about it ... You're not going to get an influx of population if you don't have a school to support new families.”

Deepening Inequality

A defining challenge of our time is more and more evident right here in our communities: the deepening divide among rich and poor. Poverty is rising at the same time that the number of affluent part-time residents is increasing. The region is losing working-class and middle-class families, who are leaving in search of higher paying job opportunities elsewhere. We heard people express concern that as income inequality increases, tensions among residents may also grow. Some worry that the interests and needs among different groups do not always intersect, and that building community cohesion can be more difficult as a result.

Surveyed Resident Perspectives

Over

1/2

of residents with household income from \$50,000 to \$124,000 per year answered “yes” or “maybe” when asked if they are **considering moving** in the next three years

Over

1 in 8

residents reported **challenges accessing fresh and healthy food**

Stagnating Incomes

While there is a wide range of median household income levels in the region’s towns and cities—from just under \$35,000 to over \$100,000—most (54 of 68) have median household incomes that exceed \$53,600, the U.S. median. However, incomes have not kept pace with inflation in over half the region, so many workers are earning less today than they did in 2000.

Growing Poverty Rates, and Concentrated Poverty

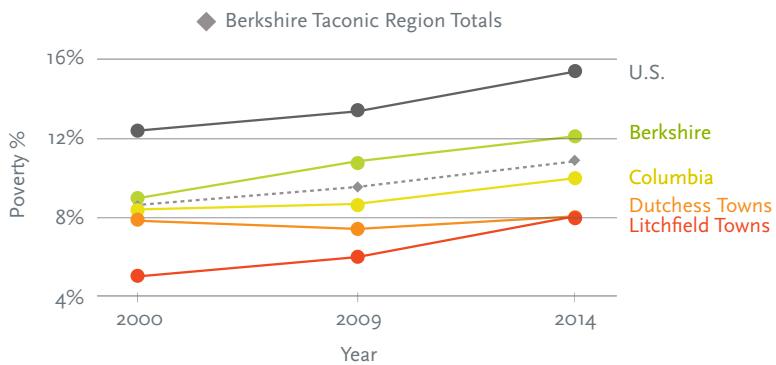
Overall, the region has a lower than average poverty rate, 11% in 2010 – 2014 compared to the national rate of 15%.

But poverty has increased in almost three-quarters of the region since 2000, and by a rate of 10% or more in a majority of towns and cities. In a handful of areas—the three cities as well as several small towns—as many as one in five residents is living in poverty. As of 2014, two census tracts, in Hudson and Pittsfield, were facing concentrated persistent poverty, meaning 20% or more of the population has lived in poverty for three decades.

More Vacation Homes, More Struggling Renters

The percentage of homeowners—70% of households compared to 63% nationally—is relatively high and increasing. At the same time, the number of properties

- NEARLY 4 OUT OF 5 TOWNS HAVE MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOMES ABOVE THE NATIONAL MEDIAN •
- POVERTY INCREASED IN $\frac{3}{4}$ OF THE REGION’S TOWNS AND CITIES BETWEEN 2000 AND 2010 – 2014 •

**Poverty Rate in BTCF Region Over Time****Housing Units Dedicated to Seasonal, Recreational or Occasional Use**

used as second homes or vacation homes grew by 28% from 2000 to 2010 – 2014. While not an issue for all towns, in over a quarter of the region, 30% or more of the housing stock was occupied part-time; the overall rate was 14%. Meanwhile, the affordability crisis for renters continues. In 2010 – 2014, 45% of renters were paying more than 30% of their income on rent and 22% were paying more than half.

One in Eight Families Facing Hunger

Here in a richly agricultural region, a significant portion of the population remains food insecure, a term defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a state in which “consistent access to adequate food is limited by a lack of

money and other resources at times during the year.” Across the country and here at home, households with children are more likely than others to be food insecure, and the number of food insecure seniors is expected to grow significantly in the next decade. One Berkshire County estimate showed that nearly 12% of the population faced food insecurity, on par with recent U.S. averages. In Columbia County, over 10% of residents are estimated to be food insecure. Data on the entire region shows that close to 12% of households receive support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, to help put food on the table. Another 6% not currently accessing SNAP are eligible for it.

- 12% OF HOUSEHOLDS RECEIVE HELP FROM THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE •
- THE NUMBER OF HOMES USED AS SECOND HOMES OR VACATION HOMES HAS GROWN BY 28% •

Surveyed Resident Perspectives cont.

Over

30% of residents said they or their families have had **challenges accessing affordable housing**

The

#3

reason why residents said they would consider moving is that **the region is too expensive**

“

I think **affordable housing is the number one priority.** It impacts so many other things. Young people need to be able to live here ... and businesses need access to a workforce.

”



“

The [Connecticut] towns that Berkshire Taconic serves ... easily 50 percent of their population isn't there on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.”



“

One of the Berkshires' most fundamental issues is balancing the needs of tourism and the local population.”

Assets & Infrastructure

The same qualities that distinguish this region can also constrain it, and the success of our communities depends in part on navigating that tension. Natural beauty and tight-knit towns create a strong sense of place, but with small and dispersed populations, infrastructure development is often challenging. Traditional services like transportation and essential technology for broadband and cell phones are significantly underdeveloped. These limitations can make daily life difficult for residents and businesses, and can slow in-migration and blunt growth. But we heard many express confidence that the region's deep-rooted sense of identity and connectedness, and its entrepreneurial spirit, can be leveraged to think creatively about the future.

Surveyed Resident Perspectives

Protecting natural resources was the **#2** most important issue for improving lives in the region behind jobs

A Legacy of Conservation, Despite Continuous Threats

Interest in conservation and rural beautification are long-established traditions in the region. As a result, significant portions of the landscape are off limits to developers. A third of the land in Berkshire County, 20% of Northwest Connecticut and 14% of Columbia County are permanently protected. In Dutchess County, the land conservancy alone has nearly 40,000 acres under protection, much of it in the northeast corner. Despite state forests, parks and private conservation areas, much land that was historically forest or farmland was converted for residential development in the last half-century. Natural areas and agricultural lands face continuing threats, with large portions of the Housatonic and Hudson rivers seriously polluted by the dumping of toxic manufacturing waste in previous decades.

A Digital Divide

Rural areas around the country confront a broadband access gap, which hinders social interaction and economic development. Virtually all of the region lacks access to

broadband at the Federal Communications Commission's 2015 benchmark of 25 megabits per second. Dutchess County has near-universal access to service at 6 mbps, which is not suitable for high use by multiple users, while in Columbia County, the lack of connectivity at that speed is severe, at 74%. Physical infrastructure and lack of provider diversity are barriers in the Litchfield County towns, where just a single internet service provider uses traditional copper and dial-up telephone lines. In Berkshire County, network fiber optic cable reaches all towns and cities, but access is uneven. Twenty communities have either partial DSL and no cable, partial DSL and video cable only, or no service at all.

The Car is King

Berkshire County has the region's most developed transit system, with 14 routes among 12 communities, but it does not serve every town and there is no service on Sundays. Limited shuttle service connects Columbia County residents to shopping sites in Hudson, and three bus routes traverse the southern part of the county. Budget cuts to Dutchess

- ONE-THIRD OF THE LAND IN BERKSHIRE COUNTY IS PERMANENTLY PROTECTED •
- 20% OF THE LAND IN NORTHWEST CONNECTICUT IS PROTECTED OPEN SPACE •



Over

1/3

of residents said that focusing on **town center and downtown development** was extremely important

County's LOOP bus service have left the northernmost towns without public transportation. In the Litchfield County towns, only Dial-a-Ride services are available. While rail trail and bike path projects have momentum, efforts to expand public transit access appear to have stalled in each state, leaving gaps in transport for the elderly and disabled, and for employees and community college students who do not own cars. Planning efforts assume a high level of car dependency for the foreseeable future.

New Visions for Town Centers and Downtowns

In some downtowns, including Great Barrington, Hudson, Millerton, North Adams and Pittsfield, new vitality is fueled by arts and cultural activity, tourism and part-time residents, and, to some extent, a new group of immigrant entrepreneurs. Many individual towns have developed comprehensive master plans, long-term visions or economic development strategies that focus in part on revitalizing town centers or downtowns. Others have local economic development

entities and chambers of commerce with roadmaps for attracting and retaining small businesses in downtowns. In places like Hudson, Lenox, Millerton and Sharon, residents have established dedicated historic districts in their town centers, many with commissions that play an active role in town center development.

Compelling Histories and Heritage

Natural, cultural and historic resources abound here, and many bear national distinctions for their exceptional value to the country's heritage. Two of the nation's 49 National Heritage Areas are located within the region, the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area and the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area, which together produce an estimated \$770 million in annual economic benefits. In addition, the region is home to hundreds of sites listed on the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places, including at least 70 National Register Historic Districts and 17 National Historic Landmarks.

- VIRTUALLY ALL OF THE REGION LACKS ACCESS TO BROADBAND AT THE CURRENT FCC BENCHMARK SPEED •
- TWO OF THE NATION'S 49 NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS ARE LOCATED WITHIN THE REGION •

Surveyed Resident Perspectives cont.

Nearly
1 in 5

residents reported **challenges accessing transportation** to work or school for themselves or a family member

Over

50%

of residents said **increasing access to broadband** is extremely important

“
One of our greatest community
strengths is dedication to
preservation of heritage resources.

”



“
The lack of a comprehensive, coordinated countywide transportation system or plan prevents many people from getting where they need to go.”

”

The poor quality of broadband significantly affects me as a business owner. I depend on internet access and email.”

”

Working remotely is not even an option if you lack cell service or high-speed internet.”



Crosscutting Issues

In addition to the regional themes explored in previous pages, focus groups and surveys helped identify a number of crosscutting issues that merit consideration, especially as communities develop strategies to address stubborn challenges.

Social Capital

Focus group participants remarked that social capital—the vital social relationships and networks that create far-reaching, productive benefits for residents—may be on the decline in the region. Partly this may be an effect of ongoing demographic transition and increasing income inequality. Some called for more deliberate efforts to build community cohesion and commitment.

Large Number of Nonprofits With Overlapping Missions

The region has an impressive number of nonprofit organizations, which is a strength. At the same time, many organizations are engaged in similar activities, competing for the same limited pools of funding, volunteers and clients or participants.

Municipalities Focused on Local Issues

Across the region, a significant amount of policy is developed and implemented at the town and village level, where narrower local interests often outweigh considerations of broader benefits. Participants noted that this tendency can hamper progress on issues such as affordable housing or economic development.

Capacity Issues in Towns and Nonprofits

The cities and towns in the region are small, and many lack staff and resources to address their challenges and build on local opportunities. At the same time, a limited number of people take steps to hold political office or sit on boards in some communities. Many noted the need to expand resident engagement to add to municipal capacity.

Reflections

Our conversations prompted participants to reflect on community strengths and major changes over the last few decades, to identify issues where there is visible leadership or a discernible lack of capacity. This is a small sample of the ideas we heard.

Bright Spots

| | |
|---|--|
| Young creatives moving up from New York City | World-class cultural institutions |
| Retirees active as volunteers | Community resilience |
| Community colleges serving diverse populations and adult learners | Natural beauty and abundant outdoor activities |
| Part-time residents bringing talent and professional networks | Active land trusts with secure philanthropic support |
| Artists repurposing vacant buildings | Broadband advocacy gaining momentum |

Barriers

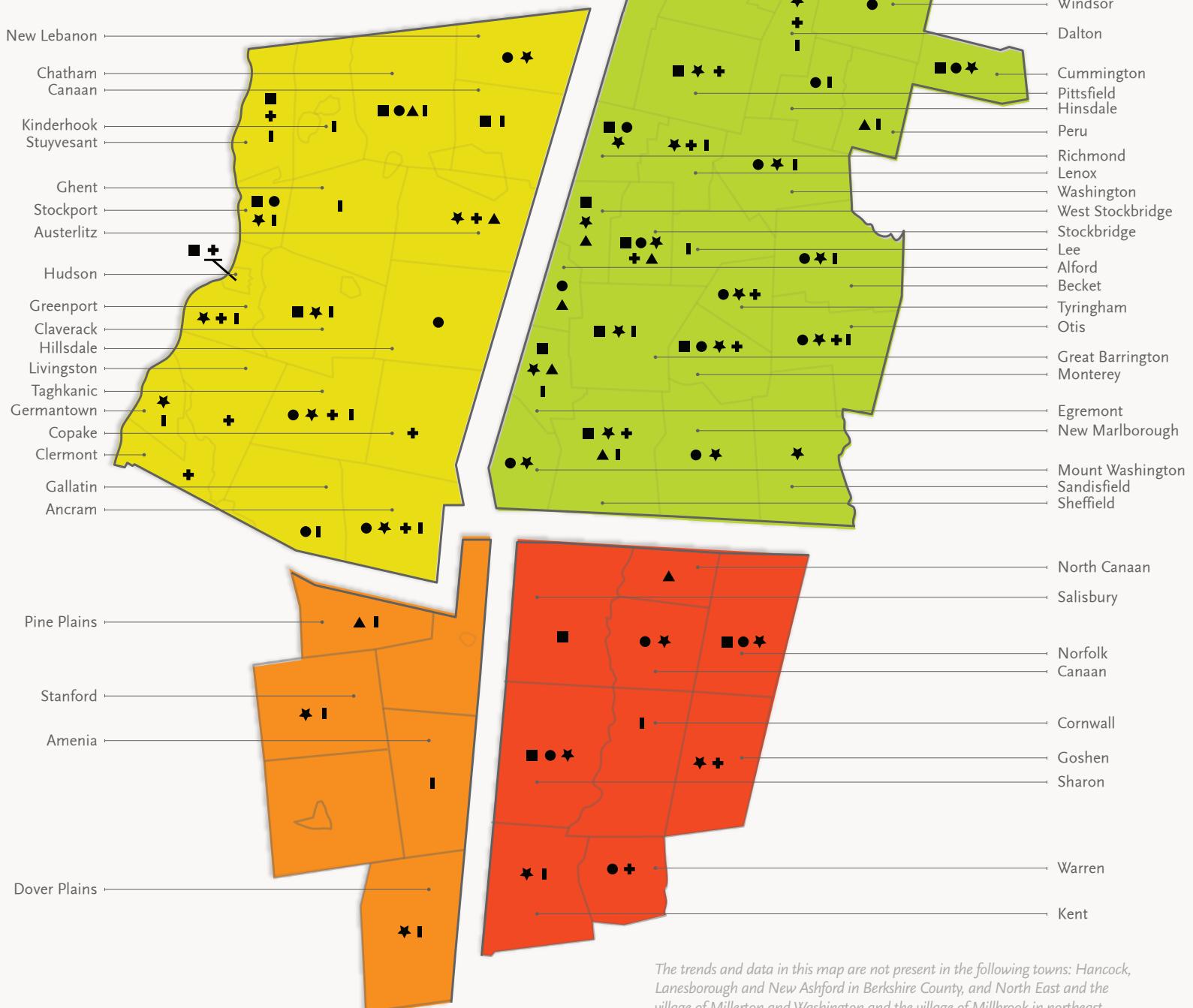
| | |
|---|--|
| Hidden poverty | A second home market pushing up prices |
| Low wages in a growing service economy | Limited funding for nonprofits |
| Employers struggling to fill low- and high-wage jobs | Town centers catering more to affluent visitors |
| Stigma attached to seeking help | Difficulty staffing volunteer emergency services |
| Drug addiction impacting the workforce and children of the addicted | Low capacity to serve immigrant communities |

Mapping Town-Level Data & Trends

- Population loss is over 3% or higher
- Percentage of seniors is up by one-third or more
- ★ Median incomes have not kept pace with inflation
- + At least 1 in 10 residents lives in poverty

- ▲ Almost one-third or more of renters pay half or more of their income on rent
- The percentage of people age 16+ who were unemployed grew by almost 100% or higher

Berkshire Northeast Dutchess
Columbia Northwest Litchfield



The trends and data in this map are not present in the following towns: Hancock, Lanesborough and New Ashford in Berkshire County, and North East and the village of Millerton and Washington and the village of Millbrook in northeast Dutchess County.

Snapshots

Key Facts for the Berkshire Taconic Region

| | Columbia County, NY | Berkshire County, MA | Dutchess County Towns, NY | Litchfield County Towns, CT |
|---|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Population 2010 – 2014 | 62,525 | 130,064 | 27,179 | 21,244 |
| Population change between 2000 and 2010 – 2014 | -569 | -4,889 | +701 | -35 |
| Minority race/ethnicity share of population 2010 – 2014 | 10% | 8% | 12% | 6% |
| Foreign-born residents 2010 – 2014 | 3,646 | 7,192 | 2,549 | 1,195 |
| Median household income 2011 – 2015 | \$59,105 | \$49,956 | N/A | N/A |
| Poverty rate 2010 – 2014 | 10% | 12% | 8% | 8% |
| Job growth from 2010 to 2015 | 7% | 2% | 2% | 3% |
| Homeownership rate 2011 – 2015 (U.S. rate: 63.9%) | 71.9% | 68.6% | 69.2%* | 78.2%* |
| Share of renters who are cost-burdened 2011 – 2015 (U.S. rate: 24.6%) | 43.1% | 47.3% | 40.6%* | 44.6%* |
| Number of housing units dedicated to seasonal or recreational use 2010 – 2014 | 5,016 | 8,003 | 1,420 | 2,942 |
| Increase in housing units for seasonal or recreational use since 2000 (U.S. rate: 35%) | 35% | 17% | 101% | 30% |
| Change in school enrollment from 2009 to 2015 (U.S. rate: 2%) | -12% | -9% | -17% | -20% |
| Share of ELL students in school-age population (U.S. rate: 9%) | 3% | 2% | 3% | 1% |
| Share of adults with high school diploma or less 2010 – 2014 (U.S. rate: 45%) | 43% | 41% | 43% | 32% |
| Share of adults with some college or more 2010 – 2014 (U.S. rate: 55%) | 57% | 59% | 57% | 68% |
| Death rate per 100,000 from drug overdoses 2014 (U.S. rate: 14.7) | 8.1 – 12 | 16.1 – 20 | 8.1 – 12** | 12.1 – 16** |
| Number of arts and culture nonprofits | 59 | 102 | 15 | 24 |
| Creative industry jobs as share of all jobs (U.S. rate: 3.9%) | 6.7% | 5.9% | 6.9% | 7.2% |
| Number of farms | 494 | 525 | 678** | 1,207** |
| Change in farmland acreage from 1997 to 2012 | -27% | -11% | +19%** | -29%** |
| Tourist spending 2013 | \$118M | \$403M | \$482M** | \$356M** |

*Calculated as the average of each BTCT town within the county.

**Reflects entire county rate.

Looking Ahead

Over the course of this project, many locally grown strategies that aim to have a positive impact on the trends described in this report were shared by participants or evident from research. We have gathered some of them at www.BerkshireTaconic.org/ACloserLook. We invite you to visit this site, where you can add your own ideas about the promising initiatives and projects underway in your communities.

We also received insights about the functions that Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation is seen to have played to date, or might play in the future.

Here are just a few:

| | |
|---|--|
| Facilitating connections for donors with regional priorities | Encouraging thinking and problem-solving at the regional level |
| Strengthening our leadership role through convenings | Fostering collaboration among smaller organizations |
| Continuing capacity-building for nonprofits to function effectively | Bringing promising solutions to scale |
| Creating peer learning opportunities and forums | |

This feedback is essential to inform new strategies at a pivot point—for us as a foundation and for the region. Taking steps to begin to address the concerns and crosscutting issues identified in this report will not be easy. How we choose to respond together must be distinctive to this place, since solutions will come from the many assets here, most notably our people.

The board and staff of Berkshire Taconic look forward to engaging with you and other vital partners to move toward a bold vision for the region—one that contributes to a vital economy, sustainable communities and a high quality of life for all residents.

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30
YEARS

This report was adapted from research materials by Mt. Auburn Associates: Beth Siegel and Alyssa Saunders, with support from Cassandra Benjamin, csb consulting; Sara Kimberlin; Judi Luciano, Anna Bromberg, Fay Vogel Strongin and Haley Jordahl.

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Chart sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture 1997, 2002, 2007 and 2012 Agriculture Census (page 5); U.S.: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014 & 2015 projected; Connecticut Data Collaborative, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, New York State Education Department (page 13); U.S. Census 2000 Decennial Census and 2010-2014 American Community Survey, U.S. Census 2000 Decennial Census and 2005-2009 and 2010-2014 American Community Survey (page 17).

Map sources: U.S. Census 2000 Decennial Census and U.S. Census 2010 – 2014 American Community Survey. A bibliography of all data sources can be found at: www.berkshiretaconic.org/ACloserLook.

