

BERKSHIRE COUNTY OVERVIEW

Berkshire County, as the westernmost region of Massachusetts, is bordered on the north by Vermont, on the west by New York, on the south by Connecticut, and on the east by the Massachusetts counties of Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden. The county represents a true region well-defined by physical features, geographic relationships, political boundaries, historic traditions and internal social and economic interdependence.

Berkshire County is comprised of two cities and thirty towns in an area of 605,437 acres or 946 square miles. Elevations range from 3,491 feet at Mount Greylock, the highest point in the state, to 594 feet in Williamstown on the Hoosic River. Two main rivers drain the county, the Hoosic in the north - which flows west eventually joining the Hudson - and the Housatonic in the south - which flows south through Connecticut to Long Island Sound. The nearby valley lands contain nearly all of the region's development. Rough terrain dominates the area, with the Taconic Mountains running down the western border and the Berkshire Hills lying along the eastern edge. The climate is generally cooler than neighboring regions to the east (Connecticut River Valley), west (Hudson River Valley), and south (CT.).

Approximately 8% of the county is developed, primarily for residential purposes with over 80% of that development in single family homes. The remaining low intensity land use is characterized by water bodies (2%), with public and recreational open space and farmland, forest, meadow and marsh lands comprising about 90% of regional land cover or use.

The 2000 United States Census recorded 134,953 persons, a decrease of 3.2% from 1990. The county's historical peak population of 149,402 was recorded by the 1970 Census. According to Census figures Berkshire County has continued on a consistent downward trend since the 1970 Census, losing almost 10% (-14,454) of its population. Nearly half of the regional population remains concentrated in its two cities, Pittsfield (45,793) and North Adams (14,681). About 95% of the county's population is white, with blacks and Asians comprising most of the balance. People of Hispanic origin (any race) comprise almost 2% (2,286) of the total population. The total minority (including Hispanic) population numbers approximately 8,000 (6%). According to Census 2000 about 3.7% of the population is foreign-born.

While much of the land area in the Berkshires is rural in character, the economic base is dominated by non-agricultural industries. The region's three largest employers are Berkshire Medical Center based in Pittsfield, employing close to 2,000 workers, and General Dynamics Defense Systems and Williams College, each employing over 1,000 workers. Estimated per capita personal income (BEA) for 2000 was \$30,054 ranking Berkshire County 10th of 14 counties at about 80% of the state average (\$37,704). The size of the regional labor force is approximately 63,000. The annual average unemployment rate for 2002 was 4.7%, a rate that has been rising in recent years.

Berkshire County is located about 2 1/2 hours from both Boston and New York City and about 1 hour from Albany, NY and the Springfield/Hartford metro area. The outstanding beauty of its natural resources has made this region famous as a vacation destination. A large seasonal population have second homes or stay in resorts and motels, camp at the numerous state parks, visit friends, or simply drive through the area. Pastoral amenities are complemented by major cultural facilities including MASS MoCA, the Norman Rockwell Museum, Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, and well-regarded theater venues, including Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, Berkshire Theater Festival in Stockbridge, Williamstown Theater Festival, and Barrington Stage Company in Sheffield.

The Massachusetts Turnpike provides prime highway access to the county, while other major routes (US Routes 7 & 20 and State Highways 2, 8, & 9) also transect the region. Several bus, rail lines, and two public airports (North Adams, Pittsfield) serve regional needs.