

NEWS

Incomes rise, poverty falls in Reading and Berks County, census data show



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Reading and Berks County have grown slowly over the past five years, but they have also grown more prosperous, at least according to new census data.

The 2019 American Community Survey one-year estimates, released Thursday, show the city and county have made progress in increasing wealth and decreasing poverty over the past five years.

The 2011 version of the survey showed that Reading's poverty rate was close to 40%, prompting *The New York Times* to declare it the poorest city in the country – even though, when accounting for the margin of error, 10 cities could have laid claim to that title.

By 2019, the city's poverty rate fell well below 30%, the sharpest decline after 2015.

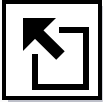
Correspondingly, median household income rose by double-digit percentage points in the city and the county.

Berks County's median household income in 2019 was about \$67,000. In 2015, it was about \$56,000.

Reading's median household income rose to \$40,000 from \$26,000 over the same period.

The survey also showed the Latino population is growing more in the rest of Berks than the city. In all of Berks, the Latino population grew by about 14,000 from 2015 to 2019, but in Reading by just 1,380.

In 2015, Latinos living outside Reading made up about 5% of the county's population. By 2019, they represented more than 8%.



There are more options available to families, Toledo said, to settle in the suburbs, if they want.

He noted that in the past, Latinos would move to the area drawn by family connections. Today, jobs are more likely a driving force, Toledo said.

Kevin Murphy, president of the Berks County Community Foundation, said the Latino community is following a familiar pattern that goes back decades: People move into the city, then they move to the suburbs.

“The Latino in-migration is acting like every other wave of in-migration that’s happened in the city,” he said.

Slow growth

Berks County’s overall population grew at nearly double the rate of Reading’s from 2015 through 2019, Thursday’s census data show. But the change was still modest.

The Community Survey one-year estimate shows the county population grew by nearly 6,000 to 421,164. Reading’s population, meanwhile, increased by 500 to 88,373.

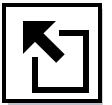
Most of the growth came from people moving to Berks from elsewhere.

The number of county residents who were born in Pennsylvania fell by about 2% over 2015-19. It fell by nearly 9% in Reading. In both the city and county, the biggest population influx came from Americans born in U.S. island areas: Guam, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, etc.

In 2015, there were about 18,000 Berks residents born in island areas, of whom 16,000 were born from Puerto Rico. By 2019, the number of residents born in island areas was 26,000, with more than 18,000 from Puerto Rico.

In both the city and county, the number of noncitizens fell by double-digit percentage points over the five years.

Changing demographics



In Reading, the white population fell by nearly 20%, while the Black population rose by almost one-third, to about 12,000. More than half the Black population in Berks lives outside the city, according to the survey.

The largest shift, both in the city and county, came from people who described themselves as “some other race,” a category that defies easy description. That group more than doubled in Berks and more than tripled in the city.

Trends on track

Michael Golembiewski, a transportation planner with the Berks County Planning Commission, was not surprised by the survey.

“Nothing’s changed,” he said. “It’s a continuation of the trends we saw last year.”

Golembiewski said other economic trends that have been reported in the past – job growth, falling unemployment, etc. – are reflected in the new census estimates. Reading and Berks County were on an economic upswing until the coronavirus pandemic hit, and the American Community Survey bears that out.

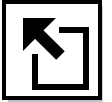
He pointed to one stat in particular that reflects Berks County’s tightening housing market: The number of people who lived in the same house a year ago fell by about 4,500 from nearly 364,000 in 2015 to more than 359,000 last year.

But the number of people who moved rose by double-digit percentage points.

Residents who moved and stayed in Berks rose from about 31,000 in 2015 to almost 35,000 in 2019. The number of people who moved from elsewhere in Pennsylvania also rose, as did the number of people who came to Berks from out of state.

Data shortcomings

The American Community Survey’s one-year release is an imperfect tool for



The margin of error is the number to add or subtract from an estimate to get the range of accuracy.

The Census Bureau has said it calculates its estimates with 90% confidence that the number lies within the margin of error.

So the city could have seen its poverty rate dip below 30% in 2018. But the 2019 poverty rate of 24.7%, with a margin of error of 4.4 points, shows that Reading definitely fell below 30% last year.

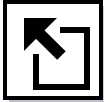
It's also important to remember that, unless noted, the Berks County numbers include those of Reading. This can mean that other municipalities changed, but they weren't studied in the survey, which looks at cities of 65,000 or more.

For example, Berks shows its number of people living in poverty fell by 10,000 from 2015 through 2019 but Reading's poverty level fell by 11,000. That means the poverty level likely increased for at least one other municipality of the county, but the survey doesn't provide such detail.

Another problem is the coronavirus.

The pandemic shut down most of the economy in early 2020 – including census counts – and give last year's numbers an almost historic feel.

The 2020 American Community Survey next year will almost certainly look drastically different from the numbers released Thursday.



No looking back

Still, the numbers bolster Murphy's confidence that Reading has some momentum for change.

Alvernia University is opening a downtown campus, and people are talking seriously about bringing rail service back to the city.

This time around, it's not just a nostalgia trip.

Visions of the future of downtown Reading no longer include reviving the past, he said.

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The city and county are on an upswing, he said, and the census data seems to bolster that perception.

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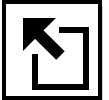


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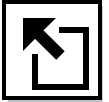


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