

Profile of Pennsylvania Rural College Towns

According to an analysis by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, there are 29 college towns in rural Pennsylvania. These “towns”¹ are defined as municipalities within a rural county that have a postsecondary institution that offers a bachelor’s degree or higher and has a fall enrollment of 500 or more students.

In total, these “anchor institutions” enrolled more than 145,500 students in 2022. Over the last decade, these four-year schools have experienced a 9 percent decline in enrollment. The college towns where these schools are located have experienced a 2 percent population decline. To better understand the impact of the enrollment shift on these towns, the Center analyzed enrollment and town data from 2013 to 2022 and found that:

- Enrollment decline among rural colleges and universities is not a new trend; every year since 2013, enrollment has decreased.
- Rural public colleges and universities have experienced a steeper enrollment decline (11 percent decline) than independent nonprofit colleges and universities (2 percent decline).
- In rural college towns, nearly one-half of the occupied housing units are rentals.
- Rural college towns have become more racially and ethnically diverse. In addition, a large percentage of their population (41 percent) is between the ages of 18 and 34 years old.
- From 2013 to 2022, rural college towns experienced a decrease in poverty and an increase in household income.
- The change in student enrollment appears to only have had a marginal impact on college town budgets.
- Rural colleges and universities throughout the United States have also experienced enrollment declines since 2013.

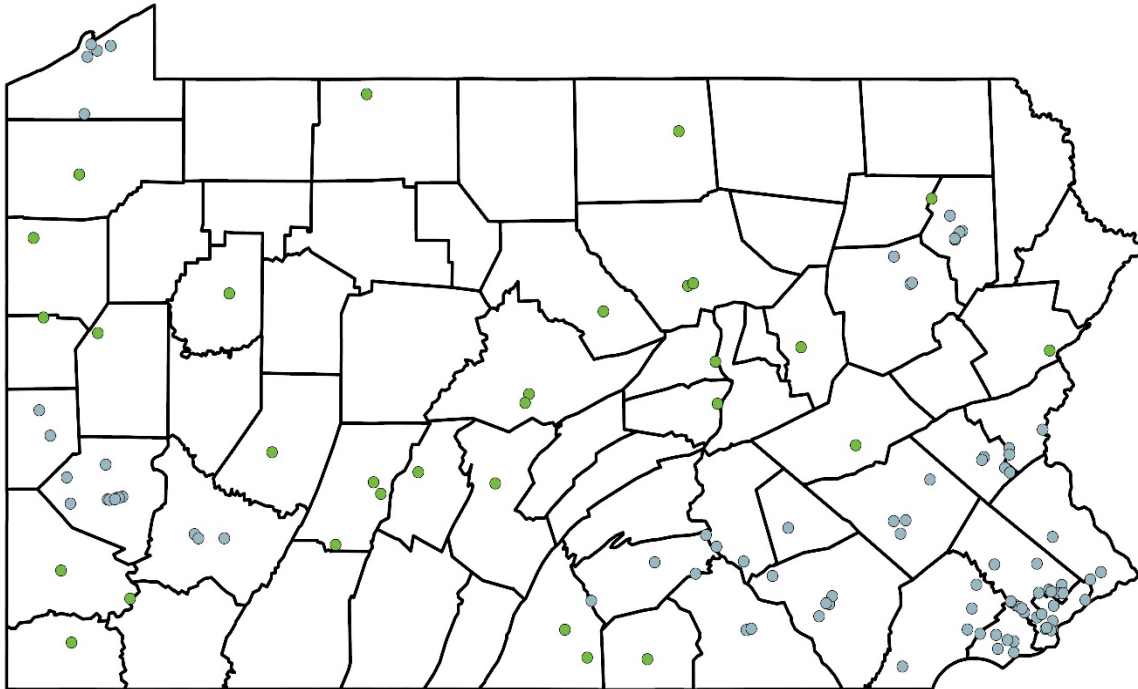
Pennsylvania Colleges and Universities

As Figure 1 shows, in Pennsylvania, there were 120 colleges and universities that offered a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2022. The Center limited its analysis to those public and independent for-profit and nonprofit institutions offering four-year programs and enrolling 500 or more students. Thirty of these institutions are in rural areas, and 90 are in urban areas. Pennsylvania ranked third in the nation for its number of colleges and

¹ Strictly speaking, there is only one college town in Pennsylvania: the Town of Bloomsburg, Columbia County. In this fact sheet, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania used a more relaxed definition of the word “town” to refer to any municipality located in a rural county that has a four-year public or independent postsecondary institution that offers a bachelor’s degree or higher and has a fall enrollment of 500 or more students.

universities of this type. California had the most (166), followed by New York (155). The states with the fewest number of colleges and universities were Alaska (5), Wyoming (5), and Delaware (5).

Figure 1: Location of Pennsylvania’s Rural and Urban Colleges and Universities, 2022



Statewide Total Colleges and Universities = 120

- College/University Located in an Urban County (n=90)
- College/University Located in a Rural County (n=30)

*Note: Data includes only four-year institutions that have a full enrollment of 500 or more students.
Data source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, National Center for Education Statistics (Hereafter, IPEDS).*

Pennsylvania Rural and Urban Enrollment Trends

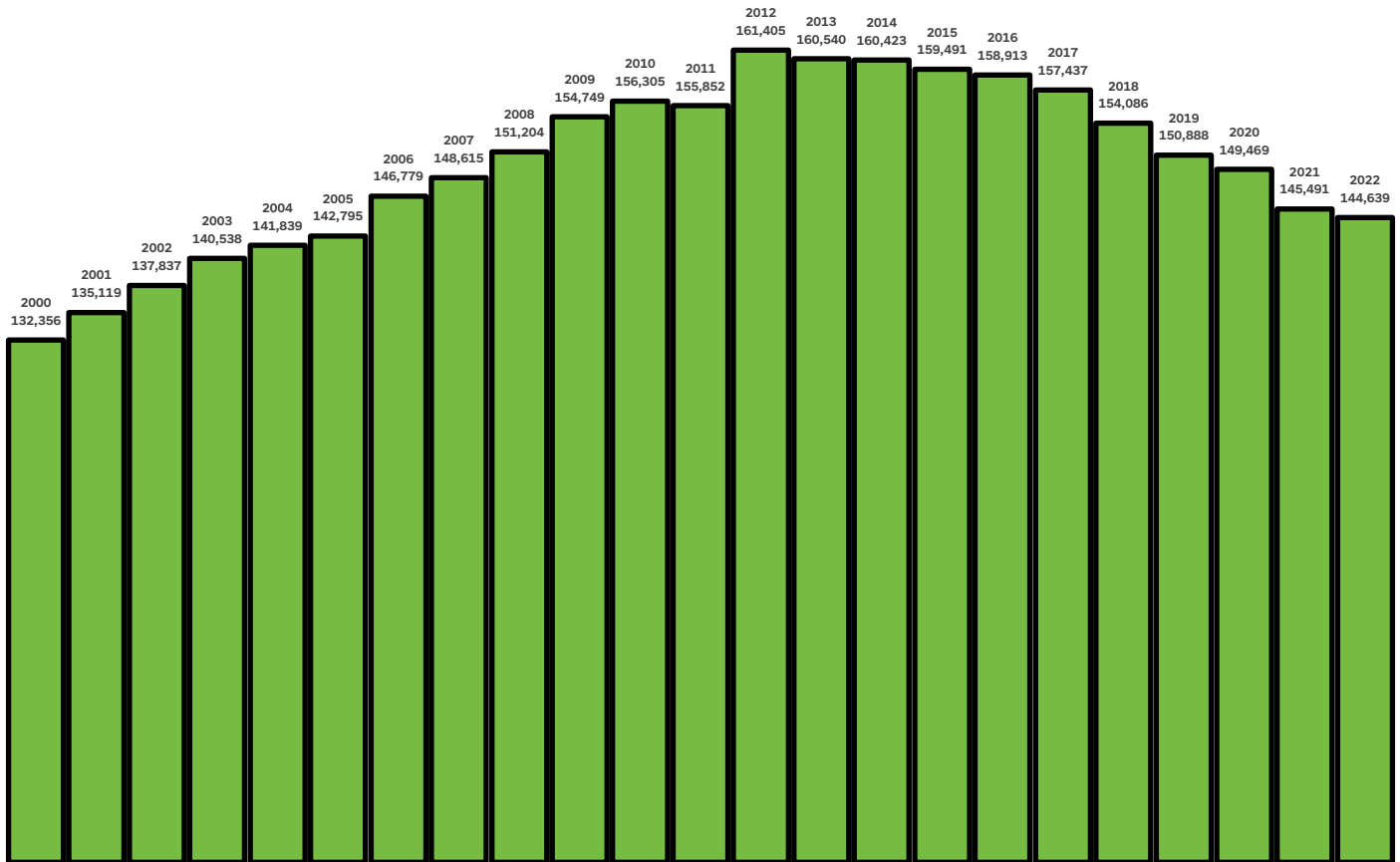
As Figure 2 shows, enrollment in rural Pennsylvania colleges and universities peaked in 2012 with 161,405 students. This peak can generally be attributed to two factors:

1. The lingering effects of the “Great Recession,” which caused many unemployed adults to return to college and learn new skills.
2. A boom in the number of high school graduates in preceding years.²

During the period of analysis (2013 to 2022), enrollment in rural Pennsylvania colleges and universities declined 9 percent.

² According to data from the National Center for Education statistics, in 2000-01, there were 122,048 12th graders in Pennsylvania. A decade later, in 2010-11, there were 141,710 12th graders. This was the peak year. By 2021-22, the number of 12th graders in Pennsylvania had declined 5 percent to 134,196.

Figure 2: Fall Enrollment in Pennsylvania’s Rural Colleges and Universities, 2000 to 2022



Note: Data includes only four-year institutions that have a fall enrollment of 500 or more students. Data sources: IPEDS and The Pennsylvania State University Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research.

Enrollment by Type of College and University

The majority of students attending a rural college or university in 2022 attended a public institution (83 percent). These institutions include The Pennsylvania State University, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, and the Regional Campuses of the University of Pittsburgh. From 2013 to 2022, enrollment in these institutions decreased 11 percent. The 14 rural independent nonprofit colleges and universities experienced a 2-percent decrease in enrollment during this period. As Figure 3 shows, urban public and nonprofit colleges and universities also had a decrease in enrollment.

Figure 3: Fall Enrollment in Pennsylvania’s Rural and Urban Counties by Type of College or University, 2013 and 2022

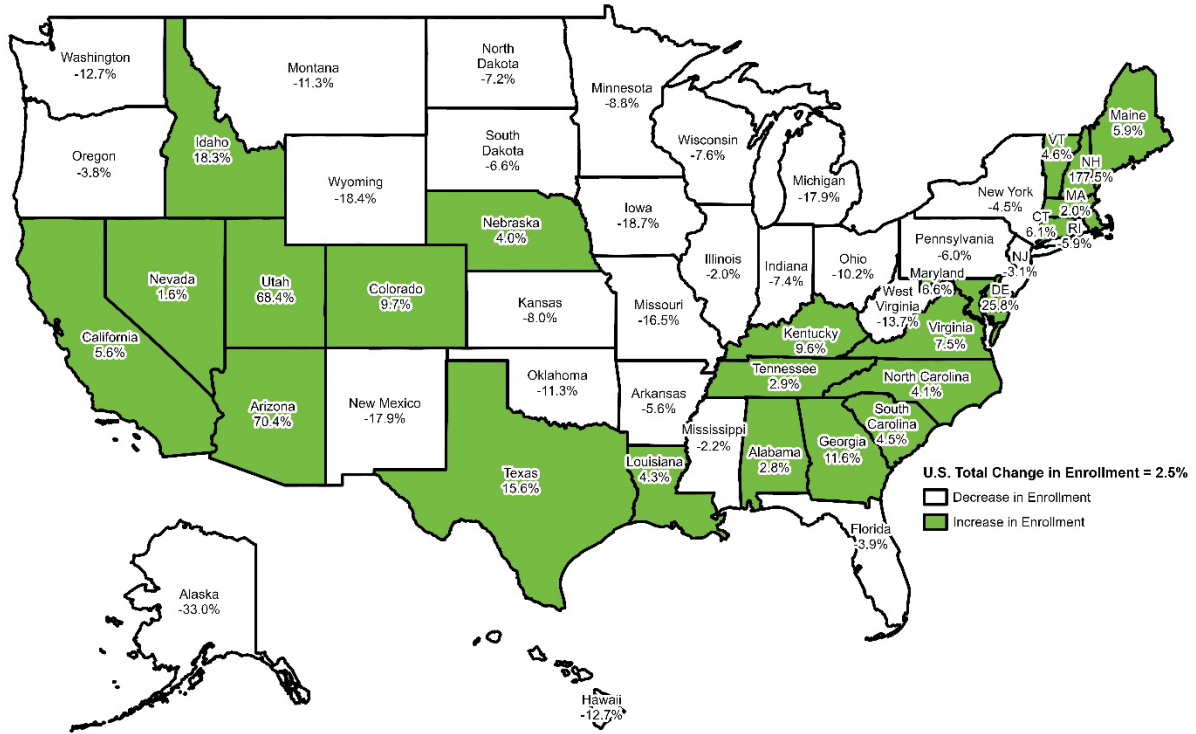
	Enrollment Fall 2013		Enrollment Fall 2022		% Change Enrollment, 2013 to 2022
	Enrollment	% of Total	Enrollment	% of Total	
Rural					
Public (n=16)	134,696	84%	120,301	83%	-11%
Independent Nonprofit (n=14)	25,844	16%	25,231	17%	-2%
Independent For-Profit (n=0)	0	0%	0	0%	0%
Rural Total (n=30)	160,540	100%	145,532	100%	-9%
Urban					
Public (n=19)	139,453	35%	128,755	34%	-8%
Independent Nonprofit (n=69)	253,848	64%	247,300	65%	-3%
Independent For-Profit (n=2)	3,626	1%	2,317	1%	-36%
Urban Total (n=90)	396,927	100%	378,372	100%	-5%

Note: There is more than one college or university in some college towns. For example, Williamsport City in Lycoming County has two colleges: Lycoming College and Pennsylvania College of Technology. Data includes only four-year institutions that have a fall enrollment of 500 or more students. Data source: IPEDS.

Enrollment Trends in Rural and Urban Colleges Across the United States

In 2022, there were 453 colleges and universities in rural areas of the United States. These institutions had a total enrollment of 2.0 million students. From 2013 to 2022, these institutions had a 3-percent decrease in enrollment. In areas classified as urban in the United States, there were 1,366 colleges and universities. These institutions had a total enrollment of 11.1 million students. From 2013 to 2022, these institutions experienced a 5-percent increase in enrollment. As Figure 4 shows, when aggregated to the state level, 27 states, including Pennsylvania, had a decrease in enrollment from 2013 to 2022.

Figure 4: Percent Change in College and University Enrollment, 2013 to 2023



Note: Data includes enrollment at four-year institutions that have a fall enrollment of 500 or more students.
Data source: IPEDS.

Demographic Overview: Pennsylvania Rural College Towns

There are 29 rural college towns in Pennsylvania. According to Census data, in 2022, these towns had an average population of 10,571. As Figure 5 shows, students in these towns comprised 47 percent of the total town population. From 2013 to 2022, these towns had a 2-percent decrease in population. Figure 6 compares demographic changes in these towns from 2013 to 2022.

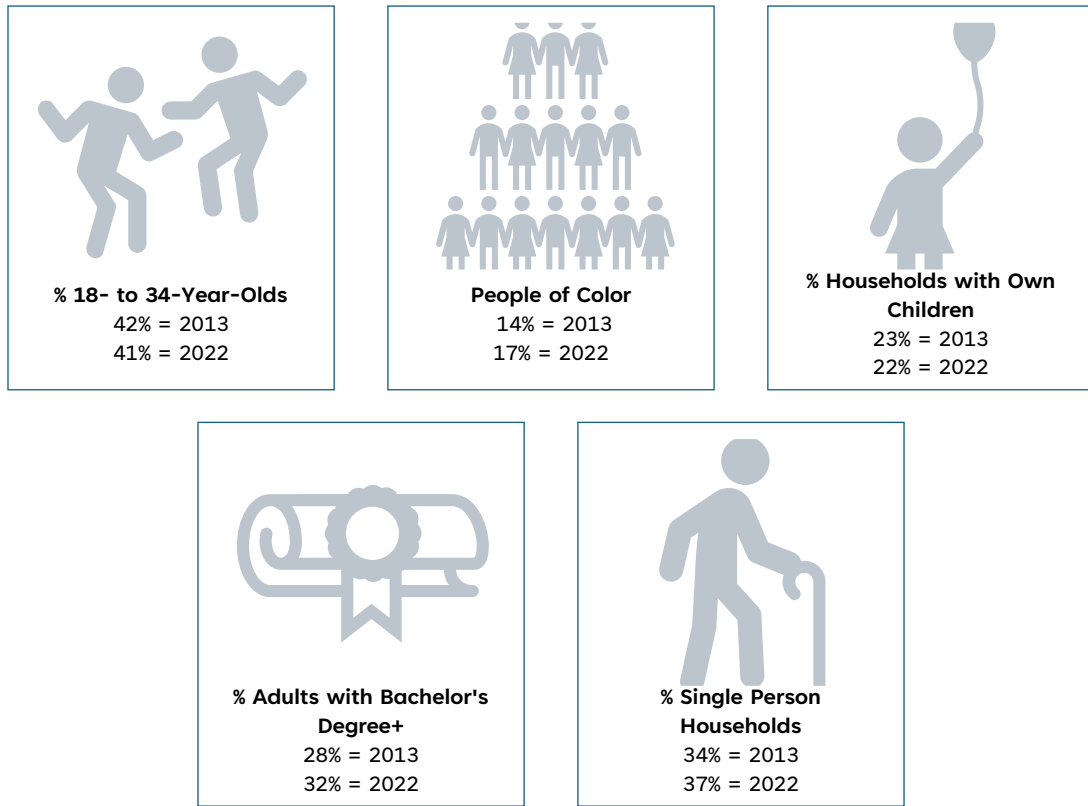
Figure 5: Change in Municipal Population and Fall Student Enrollment for Rural College Towns, 2013 to 2022

	Municipal Population	Fall Student Enrollment	Fall Enrollment as % Municipal Population
2013	313,738	160,540	51%
2022	306,546	145,532	47%
% Change, 2013 to 2022	-2%	-9%	-4 Points*

Note: *Percentage point change.

Data sources: 2013 and 2022 Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau, and IPEDS.

Figure 6: Demographic Changes in Pennsylvania’s Rural College Towns, 2013 and 2022

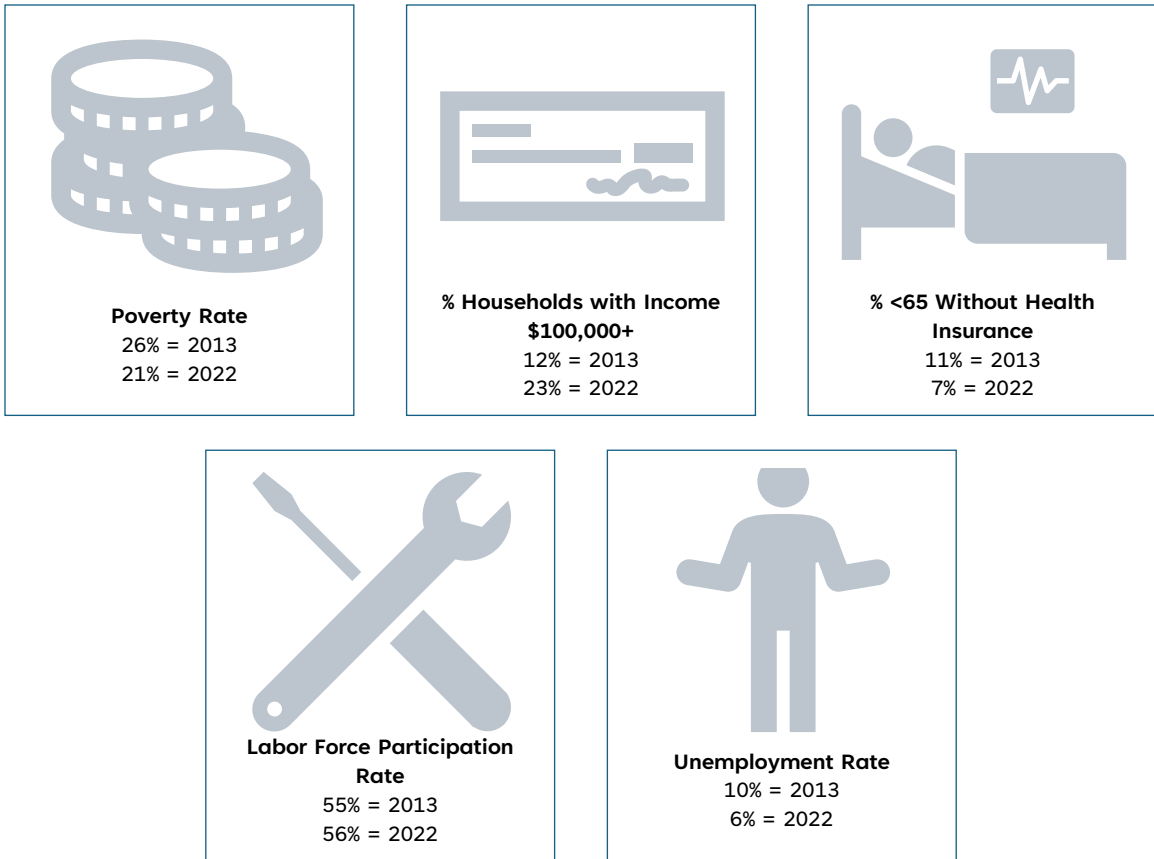


Data sources: 2013 and 2022 5-year Average American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau.

Economic Overview: Pennsylvania Rural College Towns

In 2022, the average household income in Pennsylvania’s rural college towns was \$74,580, or a 14 percent increase from 2013, after adjusting for inflation. Figure 7 compares economic changes in 29 rural Pennsylvania college towns from 2013 to 2022.

Figure 7: Economic Changes in Pennsylvania’s Rural College Towns, 2013 and 2022



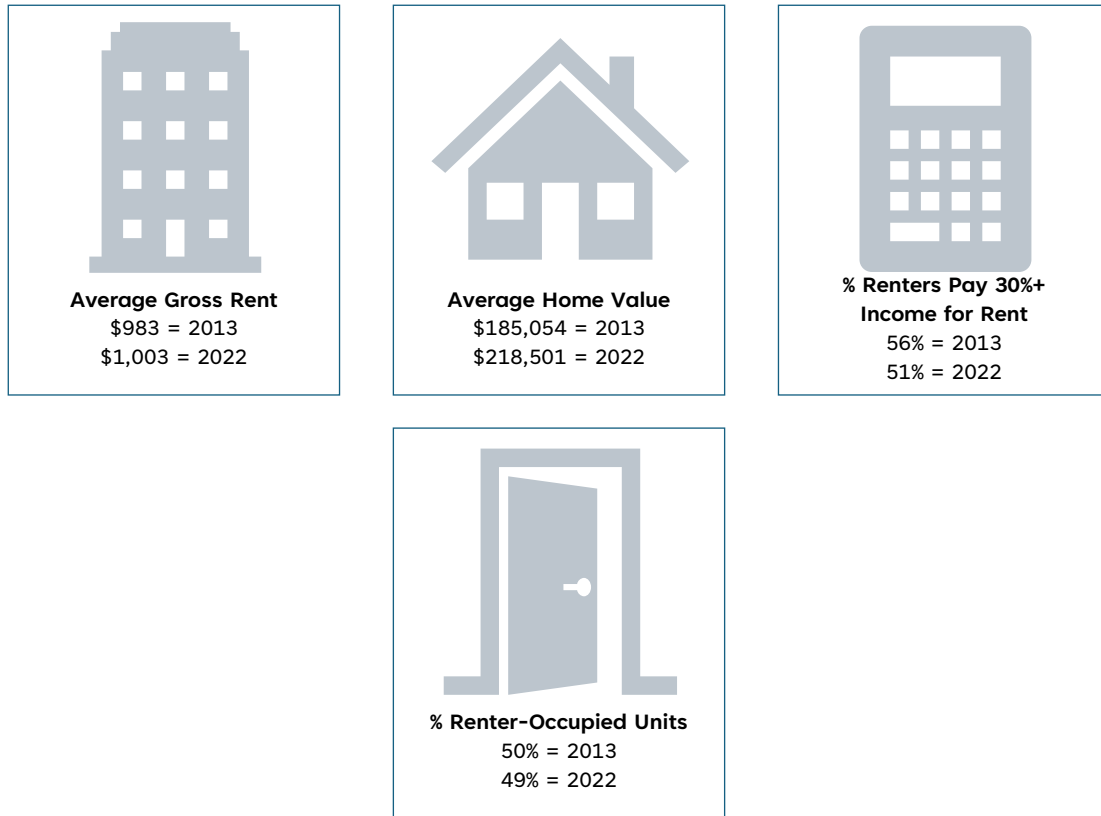
Note: Financial data adjusted for inflation (CPI-U=2022).

Data sources: 2013 and 2022 5-year Average American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau.

Housing Overview: Pennsylvania Rural College Towns

In 2022, there were 109,800 occupied housing units in rural Pennsylvania college towns. From 2013 to 2022, the number of occupied housing units decreased 3 percent. Figure 8 compares housing changes in 29 rural Pennsylvania college towns from 2013 to 2022.

Figure 8: Housing Changes in Pennsylvania’s Rural College Towns, 2013 and 2022



Note: Financial data adjusted for inflation (CPI-U=2022).

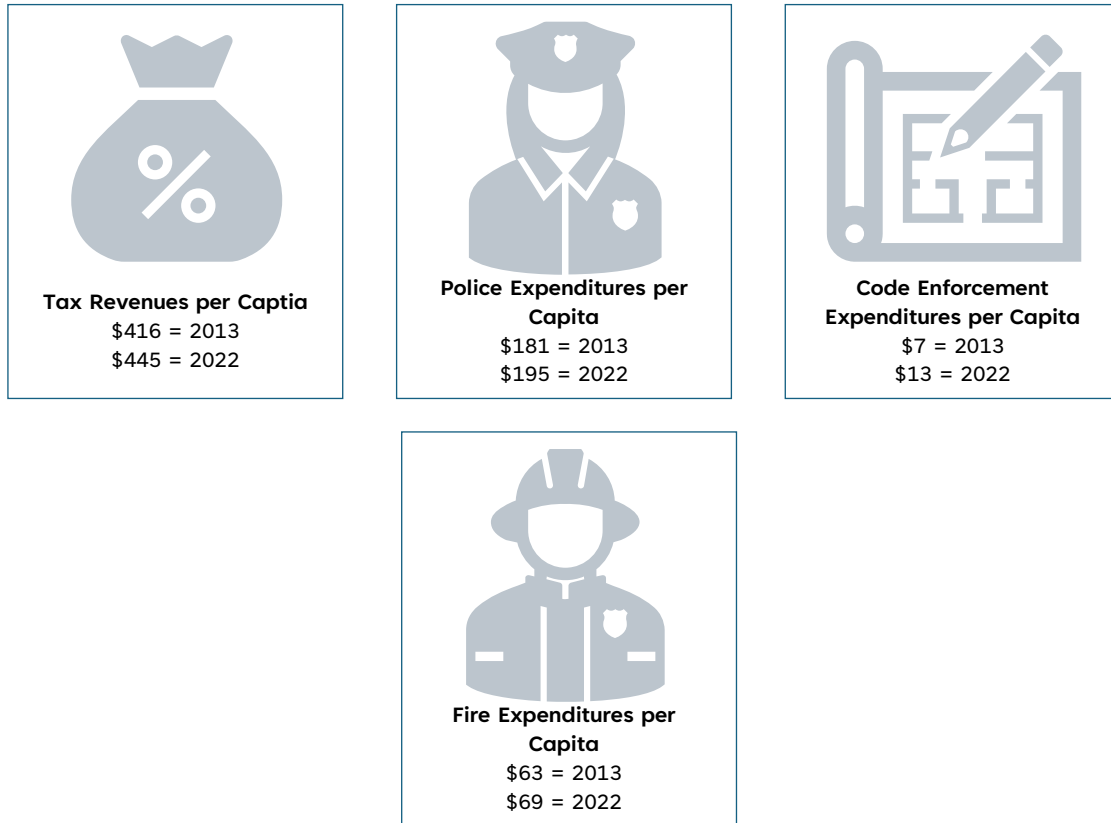
Data sources: 2013 and 2022 5-year Average American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau.

Municipal Government Overview: Pennsylvania Rural College Towns³

In 2022, the rural college towns had an average budget of \$15.4 million, or a 3-percent increase from 2013 after adjusting for inflation. Using a slightly different time period, in 2014, rural college towns had an average of 52.9 full-time employees. In 2024, these same towns had an average of 51.6 full-time employees. Figure 8 compares per capita revenues and expenditures for Pennsylvania rural college towns.

³ Data excludes Williamsport City because no municipal financial data was reported in 2022.

Figure 9: Municipal Financial Changes in Pennsylvania’s Rural College Towns, 2013 and 2022



Note: Financial data adjusted for inflation (CPI-U=2022).

Data source: Governor’s Center for Local Government Services, Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.

Conclusion

Based on the data above, the declining student enrollment appears to be having only a marginal impact on rural college towns. Two possible explanations for this are:

- Student enrollment has been on a slow and gradual long-term decline. Except for pandemic years, enrollment has declined incrementally each year. This slow change has given rural towns time to adapt and make necessary adjustments to their finances and services.
- Rural municipal population has also been on a slow and gradual long-term decline. Although not necessarily causal, rural Pennsylvania has also seen a slow and gradual decline in population. Fueled by low birth rates and low in-migration, rural Pennsylvania is projected to continue to have population losses for at least the next 30 years.

It is impossible to say with any certainty that rural Pennsylvania colleges and universities are at enrollment tipping points, or a point at which enrollment declines will cause these

institutions to close. What is certain is that enrollment has declined and will likely continue. As an example, data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education show that the number of high school seniors is expected to decline 7 percent over the next 10 years. This decline will likely impact future college and university enrollment.

Student enrollment declines have yet to cause significant hardship to municipalities where these institutions are located. However, local officials should not be complacent about these changes. They should begin preparing for a likely future with fewer students shopping in downtowns, lower demand for rental units, and a potentially shrinking tax base. Colleges and universities are important anchor institutions for rural communities. According to data from the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, in the 4th quarter of 2023, these institutions are among the top 10 employers in 17 rural counties. Downsizing or closure of these anchor institutions may have catastrophic ripple effects on rural college town employment and wages. In addition, it will likely reduce or eliminate rural residents' access to cultural and educational services.

Method

Data sources:

- Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), National Center for Education Statistics.
- 2013 and 2022, 5-year average, American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau.
- 2013 and 2022, Municipal Financial Statistics, Governor's Center for Local Government Services, Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.
- 2013 and 2022, 1-year average, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample, U.S. Census Bureau.

Definitions:

Rural College Town: Any municipality within a rural county that has a public or independent for-profit or non-profit postsecondary institution that offers a bachelor's degree or higher and has a fall 2022 enrollment of 500 or more students.

Rural County: Any county with a 2020 population density below 291 persons per square mile.

Study Period: The period of study for this analysis was 2013 to 2022. This 10-year period was selected due to data availability and because it represented a period of high enrollment (2013) and low enrollment (2022).

Notes:

- In 2022, the data for the former state universities of Clarion, California, and Edinboro were reported as Pennsylvania Western University. Similarly, the former state universities of Mansfield, Lock Haven, and Bloomsburg were reported as Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania. Because these six schools are important rural institutions, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania reported each of these schools separately using their 2021 fall enrollment.

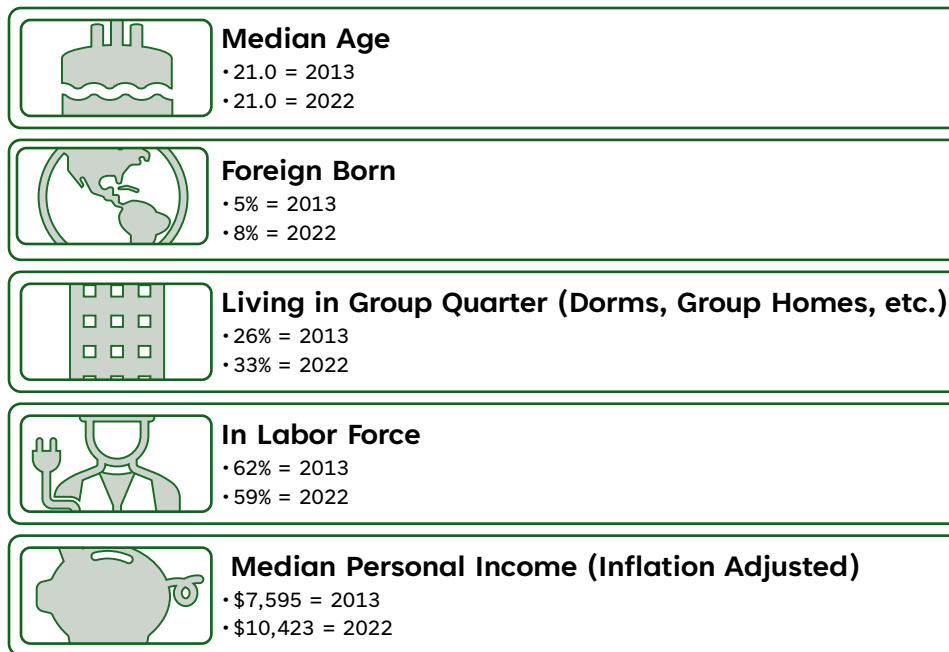
- All financial data is adjusted for inflation using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index with 2022 = 100.

Appendix:

Who are Rural Pennsylvania College Students?

According to Census data, there are a few subtle changes in students who attend a rural Pennsylvania college or university between 2013 and 2022.

Figure 10: Changes in Students Attending a Pennsylvania Rural College or University, 2013 to 2022



Note: Data includes persons who said they have attended undergraduate or graduate school within the last three months. Financial data adjusted for inflation (CPI-U=2022). Data source: 2013 and 2022, 1-year Average American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample, U.S. Census Bureau.

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