

Center Releases New Study Examining Emergency Food Supply and Distribution

The emergency food network is complex, and there is a need to consider gaps in the network that can leave both people and places either unserved or underserved. Researchers Dr. Kristina Brant, Dr. Justine Lindemann, Hazel Velasco Palacios, Nicholas Demerly, and Jihyun Shin of The Pennsylvania State University, conducted this study to examine the strengths and challenges faced by the emergency food network in meeting the food needs of Pennsylvania residents, particularly those in rural areas.

Emergency food organizations are non-governmental, but they rely on support from both the federal and state governments. Two federally funded, state-administered programs—The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Senior Food Box Program—and two state-funded and run programs—the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) and the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS)—provide significant food and funding to food banks. These collaborations allow both the government and network to provide more comprehensive food assistance than either could provide alone.

Methods

This study aimed to: 1) conduct an inventory of food bank operations in Pennsylvania, and 2) identify gaps and barriers in emergency food distribution in rural Pennsylvania. The researchers employed a multi-level, multi-method research design, focusing on a sample of 22 food banks. For Goal 1, the researchers conducted



a survey and in-depth interview on operations, supply processes, and distribution processes with leadership at each food bank. For Goal 2, they chose four food banks to serve as case studies. Across these case studies, they interviewed 35 partner agencies and 65 service recipients about their experiences distributing and receiving food. The researchers also visited two agencies per case study to observe food distribution procedures. Following data collection, they conducted a thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and assess similarities and differences across the case studies.

Key Findings

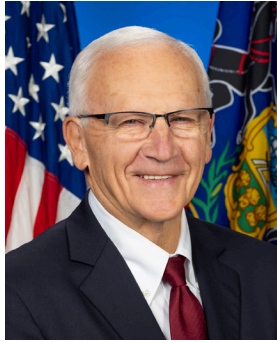
Food bank operations. Food banks’ overarching mission is to reduce food insecurity and hunger. To do this, food banks operate as warehouses for food sourced from government programs and corporate, wholesaler, retail, and individual donations. Food banks supply food to local partner agencies, who in turn distribute it to residents through a variety of distribution models. Some food banks also supply food directly to residents at their locations or through mobile distributions. Food banks and their partner agencies receive funding from government programs, foundation grants, and private donations, and they rely heavily on volunteer labor. Due to poor data on food insecurity, many food banks also conduct “hunger mapping” to track need in their service areas.

The report summary continues on page 3.

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Chairman's Message



As Chairman of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors, I am pleased to share that bipartisan legislation, which I co-authored with Vice Chairman Representative Eddie Day Pashinski, has been signed into law as Act 21 of 2024 by Governor Josh Shapiro in June. This legislation, establishing the Rural Population Revitalization Commission, marks a pivotal step towards addressing population decline and enhancing efforts to attract and retain residents in rural Pennsylvania. I am grateful for the support of Center Board members, including Representative Dan Moul and Senator Judy Schwank, who have been instrumental in advancing this initiative. More details about the Commission's objectives will be forthcoming in the following months.

Recently, the Center's Board of Directors convened in Centre County for our quarterly meeting. Hosted at the Windswept Farm, the meeting provided an excellent venue for discussions on a wide range of rural issues. We were also treated to an informative tour conducted by the farm staff, showcasing their regenerative farming practices. During the meeting, we also took the opportunity to express our gratitude and appreciation to Jonathan Johnson, the Center's longest-serving employee, upon his well-deserved retirement. In recognition of his dedication and contributions, Jonathan was presented with Senate and House citations, acknowledging his invaluable service to our organization.

Following the Board meeting, an additional stop was made in Bellefonte, where we were greeted by the Talleyrand Park Committee. We received an educational tour of the park, learning about its historical significance and its transformative impact on the surrounding rural communities. The insights shared by committee members highlight the vital role of public spaces in enhancing the quality of life in rural areas. This is an excellent example of collaboration between a community group and the municipal government. The Center's Board extends a sincere thank you to everyone in Centre County who hosted us during our visit.

This edition of our newsletter highlights the Center's recent research initiatives, including our latest report examining emergency food supply and distribution systems in rural Pennsylvania, shedding light on the critical issue of food insecurity. Additionally, we present our findings on population estimates and back-to-school facts.

We are also launching a community highlights section, inviting contributions from individuals and groups engaged in rural revitalization efforts across Pennsylvania. Your stories and initiatives are crucial to revitalizing our rural communities and informing the work of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your continued support and partnership as we work together to empower rural communities throughout the Commonwealth.

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Senator Yaw

Residents' positive experiences with food assistance. Service recipients overwhelmingly report positive experiences accessing emergency food. They explained that pantries serve as a consistent resource to reduce experiences of food insecurity. Many service recipients cannot afford high-cost, nutrient-dense items like produce and meats and especially rely on pantries for these foods. Service recipients also discussed receiving non-food benefits, like information about services such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and rent, utilities, and transportation assistance. These services help reduce financial vulnerability, further mitigating food insecurity. For service recipients, pantries are not only a source of food but also a locus of anti-poverty assistance.

Common challenges and barriers in rural Pennsylvania. Nonetheless, food banks and pantries face challenges meeting the needs of rural residents, and rural residents face barriers to accessing emergency food services. Top of the list of challenges is food banks and pantries' need for increased funding to purchase more food (quantity) and fresher, more nutritious food (quality). Relatedly, rural service recipients face barriers to obtaining the quality and quantity of food they need due to limits around when (time), where (place), and how (distribution model) they can receive emergency food. For food banks and pantries, reaching the most remote communities is a challenge, while for recipients, transportation remains a barrier to access. Some rural food banks and pantries also cannot acquire adequate space and refrigeration to support their operations.

Rural food banks and pantries also struggle to maintain a stable and consistent volunteer base. It is crucial to have volunteers who are knowledgeable about emergency food operations and who treat service recipients with respect and dignity. Food banks and pantries note that stigma diminishes benefits to service recipients and may prevent some people in need from accessing services at all.

Unique challenges and barriers across rural Pennsylvania. The size and geography of food banks shape which communities face these challenges. While larger food banks have greater capacity to take on innovative initiatives to meet residents' needs, they may not serve their rural partner agencies as well as urban agencies. Smaller food banks can establish closer relationships with all their partner agencies, but they may lack the capacity to integrate innovations and new programming into their operations.

Both the quality and quantity of emergency food available also vary greatly along the urban-rural continuum. Rural counties with lower populations and population densities (e.g., Greene) tend to have less variety and quantity than rural counties with higher populations and population densities (e.g., Lycoming). Within rural counties, communities with lower populations and population densities also tend to have less variety and quantity than those with higher populations and population densities.

Remaining unmet need. Due to these challenges and barriers, service recipients continue to face food insecurity, despite receiving emergency food. 52 percent

of interviewees told us they cut the size of their meals, skip meals, eat less than they should, or go hungry. Food banks also report that thousands of food-insecure residents in each county are not being served at all. The most remote rural areas are most likely to be unserved, as they may lack the infrastructure to meet residents' needs. Residents may need to travel 10 or more miles to a pantry, or operating hours may be limited. Food banks also struggle to adequately serve seniors, veterans, children, non-English speakers, and the unhoused.

Innovations to tackle challenges and barriers. Food banks are constantly looking to harness innovation to meet residents' needs. Innovations can be as simple as expanding to new types of partner agencies, shifting how they work with these agencies, and seeking new sources of donations. Other innovations involve harnessing new technologies or mechanisms for connecting service recipients with emergency food, such as using DoorDash to make home deliveries. These innovations make headway in overcoming the challenges and barriers, but unmet needs remain. These innovations help to inform our policy recommendations to expand food banks' capacity to meet remaining needs.

Policy Considerations

The researchers propose policy recommendations to bolster the emergency food network's ability to reduce food insecurity. They focus on key recommendations for the five main government programs that provide emergency food assistance. In the full report, other recommendations concern data tracking and hunger mapping, integration of food assistance into health care, transportation infrastructure, and organizational capacity.

1) *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP):* The General Assembly (GA) should consider providing a time buffer between reenrollment deadlines and benefit termination; tapering benefits for those between 200 and 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL); and reducing work requirements and age limits.

2) *The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP):* The GA should consider raising the eligibility threshold to 300 percent of the FPL; increasing flexibility on pickup locations and how many TEFAP boxes households can receive; and instituting cross-eligibility for other government programs.

3) *State Food Purchase Program (SFPP):* The GA should consider increasing annual funding (\$23 million) and creating rolling grant support for urgent infrastructure needs.

4) *Senior Food Box Program:* The GA should consider raising the eligibility threshold to match TEFAP and SFPP; ensuring that older adults can receive boxes from the pantries where they receive other foods; and providing funds (\$1 million) for box distribution.

5) *Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS):* The GA should consider allowing food banks to use PASS funding to purchase produce from approved non-farm vendors during the winter months and expanding the list of approved vendors to include farms in all food banks' service areas.

Read the full report at www.rural.pa.gov.

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Pennsylvania's Population is Declining Faster Than Expected

Key Findings

The U.S. Census Bureau recently released its U.S. County Population Estimates from 2020 to 2023. Zeroing in on rural and urban Pennsylvania, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania analyzed these data and found the following:

- Census Bureau population estimates show that Pennsylvania's rural and urban populations declined between 2020 and 2023.
- Pennsylvania's population is declining at a rate faster than projected.
- Within Pennsylvania, most of the population growth is concentrated in the east.
- Most of western Pennsylvania experienced a population decrease.
- Seven of Pennsylvania's 67 counties had positive natural changes (more births than deaths) between 2020 and 2023.
- Forty-two of Pennsylvania's 67 counties had an increase in net migration (more people moved in than out).
- Pennsylvania is not alone in these trends. Across the United States, 47 percent of all counties had a population decrease between 2020 and 2023. Most of the counties that lost population (82 percent) were rural.

In 2023, an estimated 3.36 million people lived in rural Pennsylvania. This is a 0.7 percent decrease from 2020. The same year, an estimated 9.60 million people lived in urban Pennsylvania, or a 0.2 percent decrease from 2020. As the map above shows, Pennsylvania's rural and urban population changes followed an east/west pattern. With some exceptions, counties in eastern Pennsylvania saw modest population increases (0.2 percent, on average), while those in the west saw population decreases (1.5 percent, on average). At the county level, the three fastest-growing counties between 2020 to 2023 were: Pike (5 percent), Cumberland (4 percent), and Chester (3 percent). The three counties with the steepest decreases were: Forest (7 percent), Greene (4 percent), and Clearfield (4 percent).

The 2023 population estimates are no surprise to rural Pennsylvania. They show the continuation of long-term population decline in rural counties. The causes of this decline are attributable to a declining birth rate and an increasing death rate. Still, net migration into rural Pennsylvania has, in many counties, remained positive.

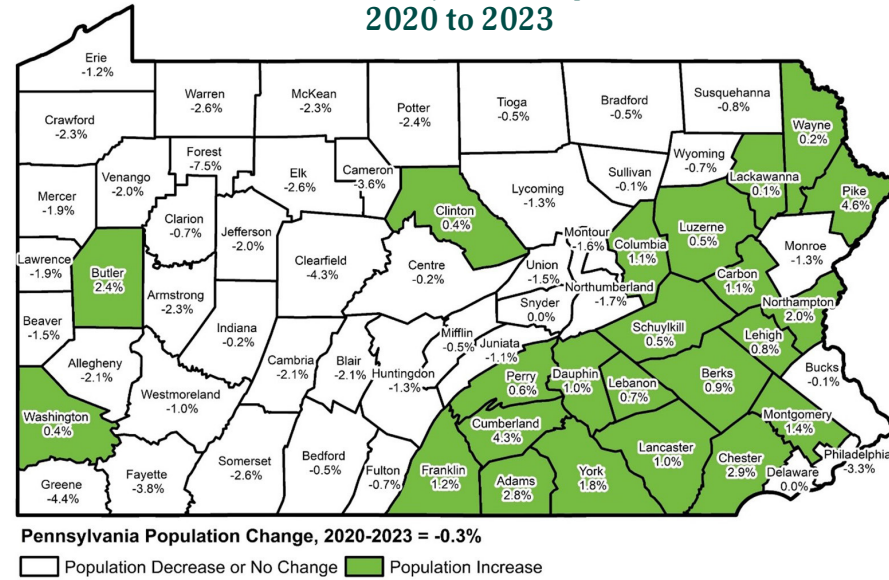
For urban Pennsylvania, there are some surprises. Urban population change has stagnated. Many urban counties have been hit with both negative natural change and negative net migration.

For both rural and urban Pennsylvania, it is too soon to say whether the population change from 2020 to 2023 is the start of a long-term trend or merely a momentary blip, particularly because this time frame includes the COVID-19 emergency. However, the population projections do indicate that Pennsylvania is likely to see very modest growth, if any, in the coming decades.

In rural Pennsylvania, moving the demographic needle from negative to positive will not be easy, but it is possible to mitigate these changes. To begin this process, the legislature recently passed Act 21 of 2024, which establishes the Rural Population Revitalization Commission. This Commission is responsible for identifying solutions and best practices to make rural Pennsylvania sustainable by attracting new residents, retaining its existing residents, and managing population change. With advanced planning, information, and resources, rural communities will be better positioned to address these changes.

The full report is available on the Center's website at www.rural.pa.gov.

Percent Change in Pennsylvania Population Estimates, 2020 to 2023



Population and Components of Population Change, 2020 to 2023

| | Population, 2023 (Est.) | % Change in Population, 2020 to 2023 | # Births, 2020 to 2023 | # Deaths, 2020 to 2023 | Natural Change (Births-Deaths), 2020 to 2023 | Net Migration, 2020 to 2023 |
|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| United States | 334,914,895 | 1.0% | 11,811,192 | 10,895,395 | 915,797 | 2,534,150 |
| Pennsylvania | 12,961,683 | -0.3% | 424,237 | 491,580 | -67,343 | 21,873 |
| Adams (Rural) | 106,748 | 2.8% | 3,047 | 3,904 | -857 | 3,862 |
| Allegheny (Urban) | 1,224,825 | -2.1% | 39,584 | 48,078 | -8,494 | -18,254 |
| Armstrong (Rural) | 64,074 | -2.3% | 1,746 | 3,205 | -1,459 | -47 |
| Beaver (Urban) | 165,631 | -1.5% | 4,874 | 7,669 | -2,795 | 162 |
| Bedford (Rural) | 47,350 | -0.5% | 1,523 | 2,288 | -765 | 540 |
| Berks (Urban) | 432,821 | 0.9% | 14,628 | 15,101 | -473 | 4,203 |
| Blair (Rural) | 120,273 | -2.1% | 3,703 | 5,911 | -2,208 | -439 |
| Bradford (Rural) | 59,695 | -0.5% | 2,069 | 2,583 | -514 | 230 |
| Bucks (Urban) | 645,984 | -0.1% | 18,271 | 22,000 | -3,729 | 2,815 |
| Butler (Rural) | 198,413 | 2.4% | 5,405 | 7,589 | -2,184 | 6,967 |
| Cambria (Rural) | 130,668 | -2.1% | 3,751 | 6,585 | -2,834 | 34 |
| Cameron (Rural) | 4,380 | -3.6% | 92 | 247 | -155 | -3 |
| Carbon (Rural) | 65,458 | 1.1% | 1,932 | 3,110 | -1,178 | 1,910 |
| Centre (Rural) | 157,795 | -0.2% | 3,589 | 3,933 | -344 | -185 |
| Chester (Urban) | 549,784 | 2.9% | 18,059 | 14,136 | 3,923 | 11,322 |
| Clarion (Rural) | 36,970 | -0.7% | 1,145 | 1,880 | -735 | 485 |
| Clearfield (Rural) | 77,090 | -4.3% | 2,173 | 3,760 | -1,587 | -1,756 |
| Clinton (Rural) | 37,607 | 0.4% | 1,217 | 1,542 | -325 | 526 |
| Columbia (Rural) | 65,439 | 1.1% | 1,744 | 2,735 | -991 | 1,665 |
| Crawford (Rural) | 82,001 | -2.3% | 2,820 | 3,798 | -978 | -979 |
| Cumberland (Urban) | 270,738 | 4.3% | 8,401 | 8,753 | -352 | 11,789 |
| Dauphin (Urban) | 289,234 | 1.0% | 10,525 | 9,923 | 602 | 2,133 |
| Delaware (Urban) | 576,720 | 0.0% | 20,623 | 19,389 | 1,234 | -1,844 |
| Elk (Rural) | 30,198 | -2.6% | 825 | 1,422 | -597 | -212 |
| Erie (Urban) | 267,571 | -1.2% | 8,771 | 10,628 | -1,857 | -1,520 |
| Fayette (Rural) | 123,915 | -3.8% | 3,237 | 7,103 | -3,866 | -1,069 |
| Forest (Rural) | 6,449 | -7.5% | 80 | 368 | -288 | -259 |
| Franklin (Rural) | 157,854 | 1.2% | 5,497 | 6,366 | -869 | 2,736 |
| Fulton (Rural) | 14,468 | -0.7% | 452 | 694 | -242 | 137 |
| Greene (Rural) | 34,357 | -4.4% | 802 | 1,684 | -882 | -728 |
| Huntingdon (Rural) | 43,514 | -1.3% | 1,347 | 1,873 | -526 | -105 |
| Indiana (Rural) | 83,094 | -0.2% | 2,443 | 3,512 | -1,069 | 918 |
| Jefferson (Rural) | 43,612 | -2.0% | 1,465 | 2,086 | -621 | -282 |
| Juniata (Rural) | 23,243 | -1.1% | 924 | 1,115 | -191 | -75 |
| Lackawanna (Urban) | 216,123 | 0.1% | 6,797 | 9,397 | -2,600 | 2,783 |

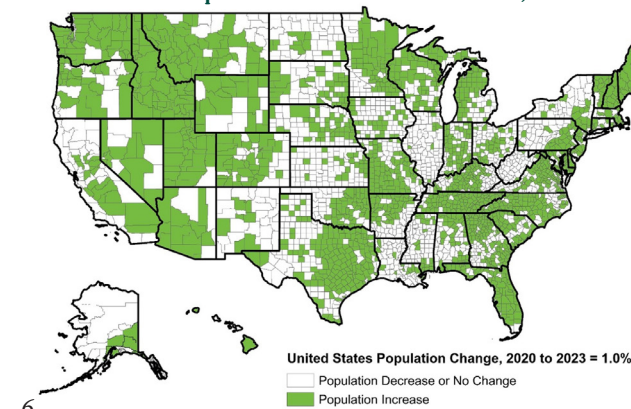
Data source: 2023 Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau.

Population and Components of Population Change, 2020 to 2023 (Cont.)

| | Population, 2023 (Est.) | % Change in Population, 2020 to 2023 | # Births, 2020 to 2023 | # Deaths, 2020 to 2023 | Natural Change (Births-Deaths), 2020 to 2023 | Net Migration, 2020 to 2023 |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Lancaster (Urban) | 558,589 | 1.0% | 22,471 | 18,724 | 3,747 | 1,630 |
| Lawrence (Rural) | 84,472 | -1.9% | 2,568 | 4,482 | -1,914 | 289 |
| Lebanon (Urban) | 144,252 | 0.7% | 5,081 | 5,938 | -857 | 1,827 |
| Lehigh (Urban) | 377,754 | 0.8% | 12,936 | 12,696 | 240 | 2,690 |
| Luzerne (Urban) | 327,388 | 0.5% | 10,321 | 14,702 | -4,381 | 6,103 |
| Lycoming (Rural) | 112,724 | -1.3% | 3,394 | 4,974 | -1,580 | 96 |
| McKean (Rural) | 39,519 | -2.3% | 1,108 | 1,921 | -813 | -111 |
| Mercer (Rural) | 108,503 | -1.9% | 3,302 | 5,588 | -2,286 | 110 |
| Mifflin (Rural) | 45,922 | -0.5% | 1,768 | 2,160 | -392 | 171 |
| Monroe (Rural) | 166,053 | -1.3% | 4,472 | 5,812 | -1,340 | -1,029 |
| Montgomery (Urban) | 868,742 | 1.4% | 27,946 | 27,207 | 739 | 11,311 |
| Montour (Rural) | 17,860 | -1.6% | 629 | 815 | -186 | -101 |
| Northampton (Urban) | 319,091 | 2.0% | 9,098 | 11,325 | -2,227 | 8,628 |
| Northumberland (Rural) | 90,120 | -1.7% | 2,872 | 4,346 | -1,474 | -104 |
| Perry (Rural) | 46,083 | 0.6% | 1,497 | 1,817 | -320 | 560 |
| Philadelphia (Urban) | 1,550,542 | -3.3% | 62,792 | 53,497 | 9,295 | -63,644 |
| Pike (Rural) | 61,247 | 4.6% | 1,328 | 2,133 | -805 | 3,562 |
| Potter (Rural) | 15,999 | -2.4% | 544 | 883 | -339 | -57 |
| Schuylkill (Rural) | 143,786 | 0.5% | 3,932 | 6,872 | -2,940 | 3,660 |
| Snyder (Rural) | 39,717 | 0.0% | 1,332 | 1,403 | -71 | 31 |
| Somerset (Rural) | 72,197 | -2.6% | 1,930 | 3,696 | -1,766 | -161 |
| Sullivan (Rural) | 5,834 | -0.1% | 137 | 418 | -281 | 278 |
| Susquehanna (Rural) | 38,109 | -0.8% | 1,158 | 1,806 | -648 | 332 |
| Tioga (Rural) | 40,840 | -0.5% | 1,265 | 1,836 | -571 | 374 |
| Union (Rural) | 42,042 | -1.5% | 1,184 | 1,530 | -346 | -334 |
| Venango (Rural) | 49,431 | -2.0% | 1,487 | 2,668 | -1,181 | 146 |
| Warren (Rural) | 37,572 | -2.6% | 1,153 | 2,065 | -912 | -95 |
| Washington (Rural) | 210,232 | 0.4% | 6,150 | 9,195 | -3,045 | 3,909 |
| Wayne (Rural) | 51,262 | 0.2% | 1,312 | 2,546 | -1,234 | 1,348 |
| Westmoreland (Urban) | 351,163 | -1.0% | 9,185 | 16,492 | -7,307 | 3,785 |
| Wyoming (Rural) | 25,902 | -0.7% | 778 | 1,261 | -483 | 318 |
| York (Urban) | 464,640 | 1.8% | 15,546 | 16,405 | -859 | 8,891 |

Data source: 2023 Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau.

Counties with a Population Increase and Decrease, 2020 to 2023



United States Population Change

The United States grew from nearly 331.5 million in 2020 to 334.9 million in 2023. This 1 percent increase, however, was not evenly distributed. As the left map shows, 47 percent of the 3,144 counties in the United States lost population between 2020 and 2023.

A closer analysis of the data shows that 49 percent of U.S. counties that had a decrease in population between 2020 and 2023 had both negative natural change and negative net migration. Counties that gained population during this period did so through positive net migration and were less reliant on positive natural change.

Center for Rural Pennsylvania

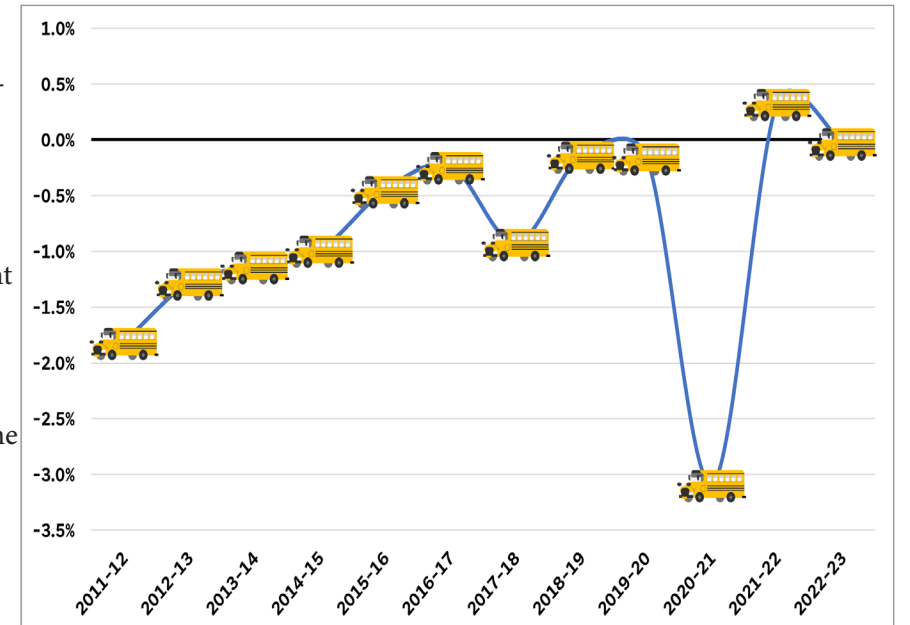
JUST THE FACTS: BACK-TO-SCHOOL

The latest projections for enrollment expect that about 1.65 million students will attend public schools (including charter and technical schools) in the upcoming 2024-25 school year, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education. This edition of Just the Facts summarizes historical enrollment trends across the Commonwealth's schools up through the latest full year of available enrollment data (2022-23). During the most recent school year, 1.74 million students attended public schools in Pennsylvania. The 10th grade enrolled the most students, while less than 1 percent of students attended preschool. That same year, about 236,000 students were enrolled in a private or other non-public school, and another 40,000 students were homeschooled.

The figure to the right displays the year-over-year percent change in school district enrollments. Historically, enrollments have declined by around 1 percent each year. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, statewide school district enrollments decreased significantly by over 3 percent, a loss of nearly 50,000 students. Private and other non-public schools also declined in enrollments that same year (5 percent, or a loss of almost 9,000 students), while the number of homeschooled students increased by over 15,000 (60 percent). The uptick in homeschooling occurred primarily in urban districts (61 percent), although there were increases in rural school districts as well (39 percent).

Data source: Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Year-Over-Year Percent Change in School District Enrollments, 2011 to 2023



RURAL COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHTS: WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Your stories, achievements, and ideas are the backbone of our rural communities. Whether you've conquered a challenge, achieved a milestone, or have a unique perspective to share on rural revitalization, we invite you to contribute to our community highlights section. Your contributions inspire us all and help showcase the revitalization efforts of our rural communities. Share your successes, ideas for change, or personal stories by emailing the Center at contact@rural.pa.gov. We look forward to hearing from you and celebrating your many positive contributions to rural Pennsylvania.

Amid the Center's recent research on population projections and addressing the pressing issue of population decline in rural Pennsylvania, we are excited to spotlight the collaborative efforts driving revitalization for our rural communities in the Commonwealth. From community initiatives like the Warren Worx in Warren County to the statewide efforts of the Pennsylvania Rural Population Revitalization Commission, a wide array of inspiring programs are actively working to find solutions to address population decline and other rural challenges, while also identifying best practices for other communities to follow.



Rural Perspectives July/August 2024



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Resources

Digital Technology Connectivity Program

The Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority (PBDA) is now accepting applications for its new Digital Connectivity Technology Program!

Through the new program, the PBDA will purchase and distribute \$20 million in laptops for eligible public-facing institutions such as libraries, municipalities, workforce training organizations, not-for-profit organizations, and other community anchor institutions located in areas where affordability has been identified as a barrier to broadband adoption and use, who will then make them available to individuals who lack the technology needed to access the internet.

The PBDA will begin reviewing Digital Connectivity Technology Program applications on August 20 and anticipates announcing the grant awards in November. Projects are expected to begin in early 2025.

Visit the PBDA's website to learn more and apply for the program at www.broadband.pa.gov. The application period closes on August 19.

United Way of Pennsylvania's ALICE

Looking for data on Pennsylvanians who are working, but struggling to survive and afford child care? The United Way of Pennsylvania's ALICE, or Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, website provides data regarding the 28 percent of Pennsylvanians who work, but struggle to survive.

ALICE earns above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), but makes less than what's needed to afford basic essentials. ALICE often earns too much to qualify for government assistance, and there is no room in ALICE's budget for emergency expenses. If you combine PA households earning below the ALICE Threshold with those living below the FPL, that's 41% of PA households who face financial hardship every day, in every county in Pennsylvania.

Learn more about ALICE by visiting the United Way of Pennsylvania's website at www.uwp.org/alice.