

Rockbridge Community Profile

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The Shepherd Program for the Interdisciplinary Study of Poverty and Human Capability

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WASHINGTON AND LEE
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Preface

This guidebook was created to acquaint Washington and Lee University students, faculty, and staff with the Rockbridge area, with a particular focus on poverty-related issues. Through this guide, the Shepherd Program hopes to facilitate meaningful discussion surrounding these issues, raise awareness about the challenges our community faces, and enable all readers to engage with Rockbridge in an informed manner.

Acknowledgements

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Part I: Rockbridge Overview

Location



Picture 1: Rockbridge County Vicinity Map¹

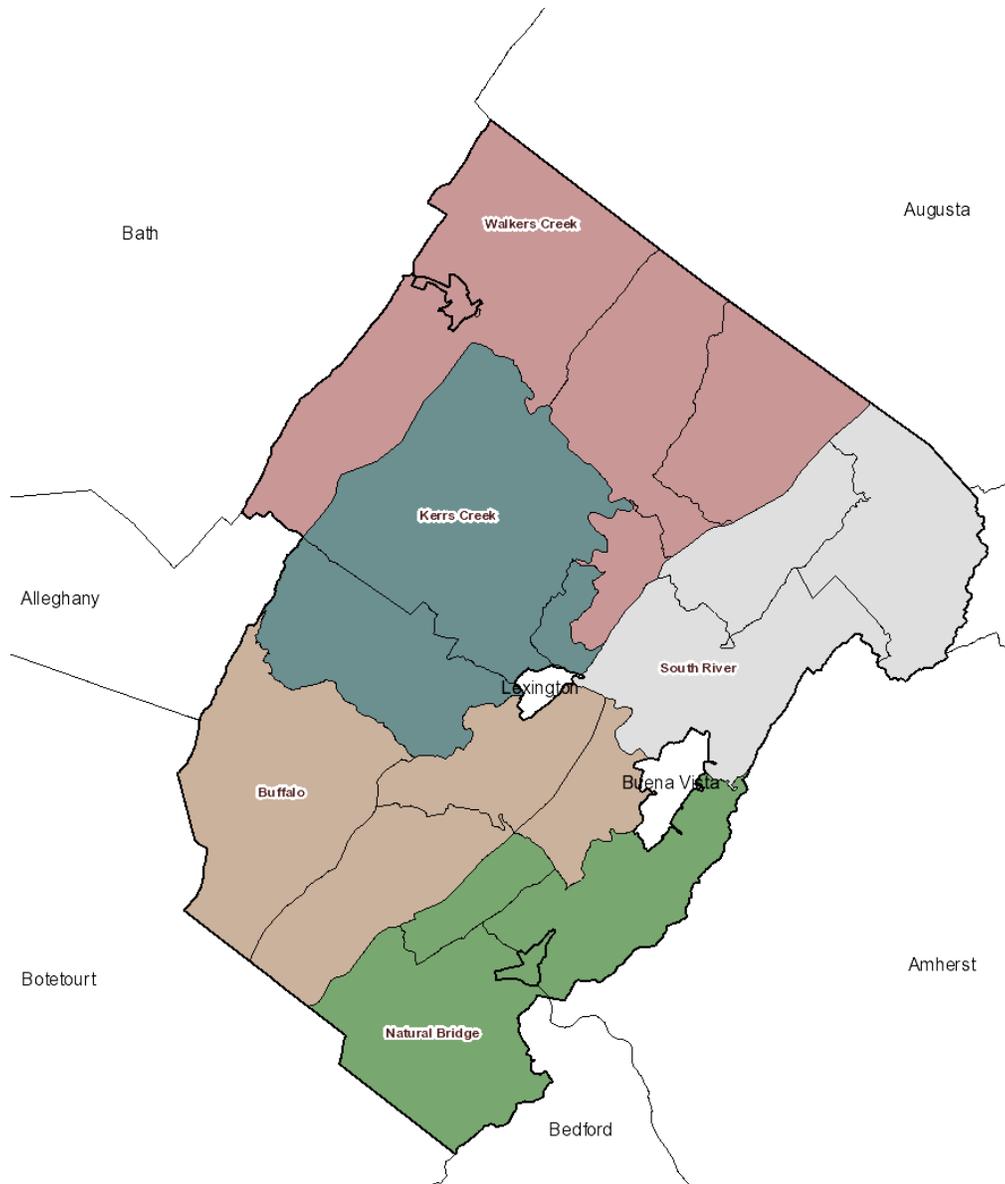
Rockbridge County is located in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley of West Central Virginia, nestled between the Allegheny Mountains to the west and the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east. Trisected by two major highways, Interstates 64 and 81, the area is easily accessible.

A 610 square mile region, the Rockbridge area consists of the two independent cities of Lexington (7,262 people) and Buena Vista (6,618 people), as well as Rockbridge County (22,354 people), which includes the two incorporated towns of Glasgow and Goshen.² While the area is

predominantly rural, it is within driving distance to more urban environments such as Roanoke (50 miles south), Richmond (135 miles east), and Washington, D.C. (180 miles northeast).³

Lexington was incorporated in 1778 and now serves as the governmental, service, retail, and educational center for the area.⁴ Tourists are often drawn to the city's historic ties and charming downtown. Buena Vista, located six miles east of Lexington, was incorporated as a town in 1890 and as a city in 1952.⁵ For several decades, Buena Vista served as the industrial and blue-collar manufacturing core of the region and is still home to some light industry today. Rockbridge County extends far beyond these two cities and is divided into five districts: Walkers Creek, South River, Kerr's Creek, Buffalo, and Natural Bridge.⁶

Picture 2: The Five Districts of the Rockbridge Area⁷



Demographics

It is hard to put a single label on the Rockbridge area, a vibrant region of 36,586 people, including multi-generational families, students, farmers, artists, small business owners, members of the military, and retirees.⁸

“It’s one of those amazing places...I can’t tell you how many people I’ve met that have told me they could live anywhere else in the world, and they chose to live here.”

–Stephanie Wilkinson of Main Street Lexington⁹

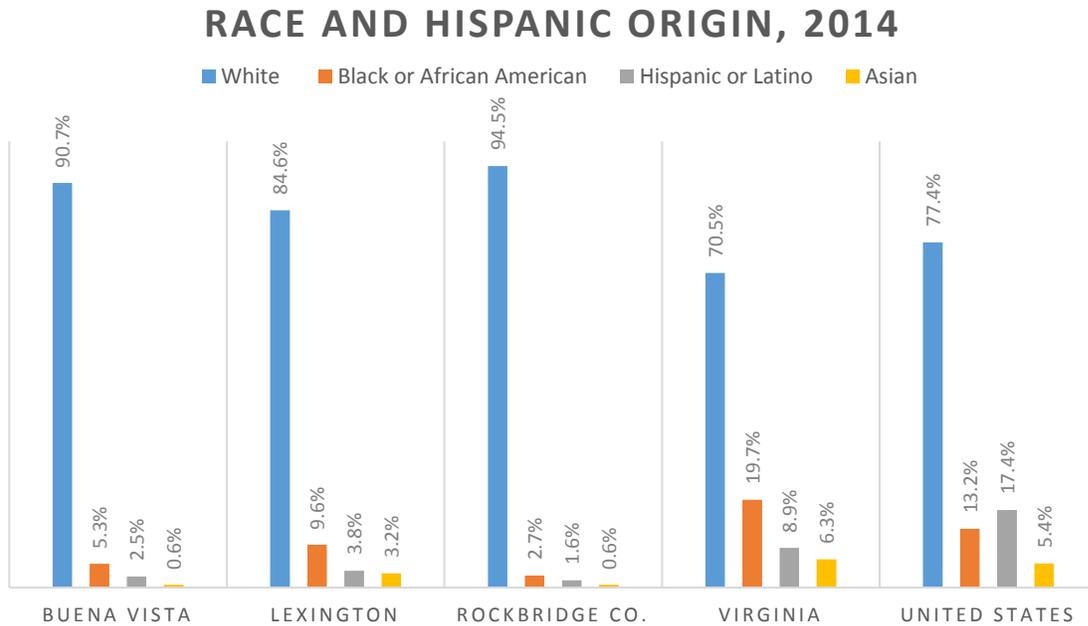


Figure 1: 2014 Racial and ethnic composition of the Rockbridge area in comparison to Virginia and the United States.¹⁰

Although the Rockbridge area’s population is diverse in many respects, it is much more racially and ethnically homogenous than Virginia and the nation.¹¹ There are few people in the Rockbridge area who speak a language other than English at home: only 6.4% of the population in Lexington, 3.5% in the County, and 3.3% in Buena Vista.¹²

While Rockbridge is home to many families who have lived in the area for generations, the inclusion of Washington and Lee and Virginia Military Institute students in Census data masks characteristics of permanent Lexington City residents.¹³

In 2013, the median age in Lexington was 22, much younger than that of Buena Vista, 37, and Rockbridge County, 48.¹⁴ Adults ages 18-64 account for 62% of the population in the Rockbridge area.¹⁵ The next largest age group is the elderly, age 65 and older, who comprise 21% of the population.¹⁶ It is apparent that the area's historic nature and natural beauty make it an ideal spot for retirement. Children under 18 comprise an estimated 17% of the population and typically attend one of the area's public schools.¹⁷

Local Attractions

Arts and Entertainment: The Rockbridge area is home to regular performances by the Rockbridge Concert Theater Series, the Rockbridge Ballet, the Rockbridge Symphony, and the Rockbridge Area Youth Strings. Lime Kiln Theater and the Lenfest Center for the Arts both provide small scale and professional theater, dance, and music productions. Clark's Ole Time Music Center regularly hosts old-time mountain bluegrass music and dancing performances.

Families enjoy Hull's Drive-In movie theatre, a warm-weather favorite that prides itself in being the nation's first community-owned, non-profit theater. Additionally, the area has nine art galleries and artisan shops that offer classes and display local art. World-renowned artists like photographer Sally Mann and painter Cy Twombly have resided in Rockbridge. To this end, Sally Mann continues to be an integral part of the Rockbridge scene. The Reeves Center and Watson Pavilion display paintings, Chinese porcelain, and European ceramics.¹⁸

History: The area is well known for its Civil War era history and has been inhabited by Robert E. Lee, Cyrus McCormick, Sam Houston, and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson at various points in time.¹⁹ Accordingly, there are over 100 historical attractions and registered landmarks, including the Jacob Ruff House, the Cyrus McCormick Farm, Lee Chapel and Museum, Stonewall Jackson House and Cemetery, and the George C. Marshall Museum.²⁰

Nature and Recreation: The Rockbridge area is rich in natural assets, including the Natural Bridge of Virginia and the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests.²¹ Two rivers, the James and the Maury, run through the area while the Blue Ridge Parkway offers beautiful views from high altitude.²² Because of these natural features, Rockbridge is an excellent place for hiking, fishing, canoeing, kayaking, caving, mountain biking, and cross-country skiing. The Virginia Horse Center in Lexington is home to year-round horse sales and competitions.²³ In addition, there are a total of 29



Picture 3: Lime Kiln Theater



Picture 4: Natural Bridge Park

parks and playgrounds, 7 tennis courts, 12 campgrounds, 11 swimming pools, 18 picnic sites, and an 18-hole public golf course.²⁴

Events: Community favorites include the Rockbridge Beer and Wine Festival, Lee-Jackson Day, the Harvest Festival, the Maury River Fiddlers' Convention, the 4th of July Hot Air Balloon Rally, and Mountain Day.²⁵ The three major universities in the area, Washington and Lee University (W&L), Virginia Military Institute (VMI), and Southern Virginia University (SVU), often welcome local residents to lectures, conferences, concerts, and other public events.



Picture 5: Annual Fourth of July Hot Air Balloon Rally

Religion: Faith communities play a central role for many people, providing socialization, activities, and emergency relief. There are over fifty churches in the Rockbridge area, with the majority being Protestant or Roman Catholic. The closest synagogues and mosques require travel to Lynchburg, Staunton, Roanoke, or Harrisonburg.

Poverty

Rockbridge is a thriving area in many respects. Nevertheless, the area is not immune from poverty. As Pastor Lyndon Sayers of Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church notes, poverty in Rockbridge is compounded by isolation and relative invisibility:

“It’s a story that’s not widely known...”²⁶

Poverty impacts a person’s ability to fulfill his or her basic needs, decreasing opportunities and can thus lessen quality of life. In the United States, individuals and families are classified as being impoverished if their pre-tax cash income falls below a specific threshold. Mollie Orshansky, an economist working for the Social Security Administration, created this threshold in 1963, which takes into consideration family size and composition.²⁷ By multiplying the average family’s food expenditures by three-, she set an absolute threshold that became the Official Poverty Measure (OPM) for the United States.²⁸ Pre-tax cash income includes not only wages and salaries from work, but also retirement or pension income, child support, and cash assistance programs such as unemployment compensation, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, Disability Income, and TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families). It does not, however, include non-cash benefits such as subsidized housing or SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as Food Stamps).²⁹

Based on the 2016 Federal Poverty Guidelines seen below in Figure 2, a family of four would be considered impoverished if their household income were less than \$24,300.³⁰ Some assistance

programs, such as the National School Lunch Program, use a multiple of this amount (such as 130% or 185%) to determine eligibility.³¹ Families with incomes above 250% of the poverty line are generally considered middle-income and are rarely eligible for public assistance.

2016 Federal Poverty Guidelines

Household Size	100%	133%	150%	200%	250%	300%	400%
1	\$11,880	\$15,800	\$17,820	\$23,760	\$29,700	\$35,640	\$47,520
2	16,020	21,307	24,030	32,040	40,050	48,060	64,080
3	20,160	26,813	30,240	40,320	50,400	60,480	80,640
4	24,300	32,319	36,450	48,600	60,750	72,900	97,200
5	28,440	37,825	42,660	56,880	71,100	85,320	113,760
6	32,580	43,331	48,870	65,160	81,450	97,740	130,320
7	36,730	48,851	55,095	73,460	91,825	110,190	146,920
8	40,890	54,384	61,335	81,780	102,225	122,670	163,560

Figure 2: Federal Poverty Guidelines, 2016.³²

According to the 2013 U.S. Census, median household incomes in the Rockbridge area were significantly lower than the rest of Virginia (\$64,792) and the United States (\$53,482):

- Rockbridge County: \$48,550;
- Lexington City: \$36,840;
- Buena Vista City: \$32,789.³³

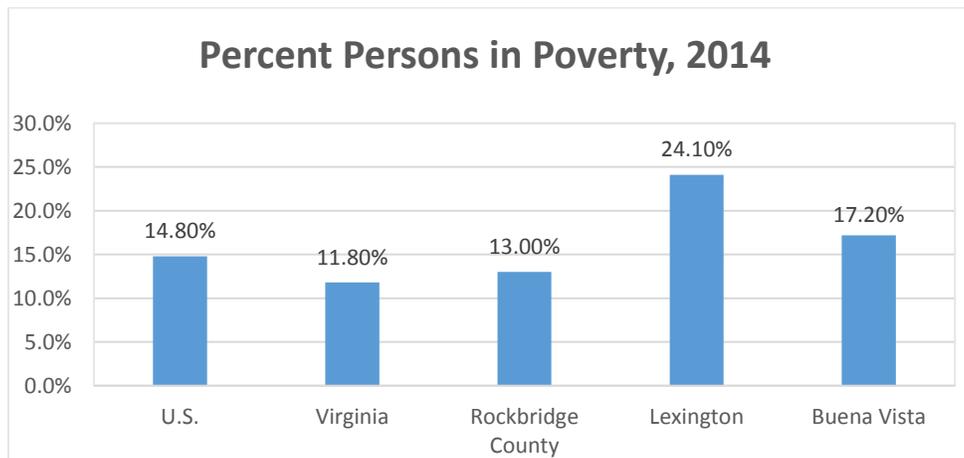


Figure 3: Poverty rates 2014³⁴

The poverty rates for the Lexington, Buena Vista, and Rockbridge County, in comparison to the state and nation, are found in Figure 3.³⁵ Compared to the state average of 11.8%, the Rockbridge area collectively holds a relatively high rate of poverty at 15.4%.³⁶ While the

percentage of people under the FPL in Lexington appears to be higher than the County and Buena Vista, it is important to keep in mind that the U.S. Census Bureau counts anyone living in a house or apartment in their calculations, including college and law school students who typically report little to no income. Community experts and longtime area residents tend to agree that Census numbers paint an artificially grim picture of average income and an artificially high poverty rate of 24.1% in the city of Lexington.³⁷

It is important to note that the federal poverty line is not a measure of economic self-sufficiency. This statistic does not include many other people in Rockbridge who, while not officially income poor, face vulnerabilities such as substandard housing, food insecurity, or social isolation.

Because of these failings in the official poverty rate, the United States also tracks poverty through the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). Rather than solely looking at pre-tax income, the SPM takes into account cash income plus noncash benefits (including SNAP, National School Lunch Program, WIC, and housing and home energy subsidies, which can be used to meet a household’s basic food, clothing, shelter, and utility (FCSU) needs).³⁸ Significant expenditures, such as taxes, work-, and childcare-related expenses, medical out-of-pocket expenses, and child support payments are then deducted. The SPM threshold adjusts for family type and geography, and is set by taking the average of the 30th to 36th percentile of FCSU expenditures from a household with two children and multiplying by 1.2. Some experts argue that the SPM presents a more realistic picture of family resources.³⁹

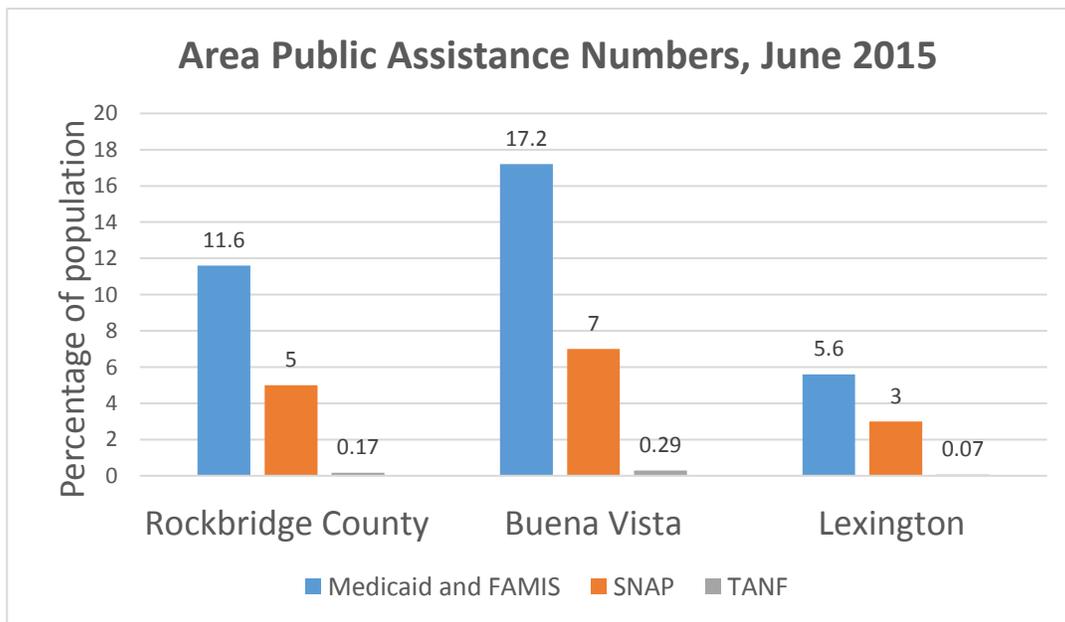


Figure 4: Percentage of the population receiving public assistance in June 2015⁴⁰

Public assistance numbers complement and correct the picture painted by the OPM. Figure 4 provides public assistance rates in the Rockbridge area for Medicaid and FAMIS (Virginia's health insurance for children), SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.) Based on these figures, we can conclude that the level of economic security is significantly higher in Lexington than in Rockbridge County and Buena Vista.⁴¹

Poverty challenges human capabilities in multiple ways. The remainder of this guidebook will examine several significant areas of human capacity in the Rockbridge area, analyzing both the opportunities and challenges faced by local residents.

Part II: Rockbridge in Depth

Education and Youth Enrichment

Education is a critical component of personal development and lifelong success. Even before kindergarten, poverty is strongly correlated with educational disadvantage. Students from low-income families are at greater risk than their peers for low educational achievement, which can harm self-esteem and dampen the desire to pursue further education. As the Vice Principal of Rockbridge County High School, Dr. Angela Wilder, states,

“Poverty impacts at a foundational level... Education is your exit ticket.”⁴²

Early Childhood

Receiving quality early childcare is crucial for later development. Early childhood is seen as especially formative for cognitive skills, social behaviors, and health.⁴³ Yet, early childcare is extremely expensive. In Virginia, full-time care for an infant in a day care center typically costs \$10,458, the equivalent of 11% of the average married couple’s joint income or 38% of the average single mother’s annual income.⁴⁴ This is almost as much as the average annual tuition at an in-state public university (\$10,898 per year).⁴⁵ Childcare then poses a special challenge for the single-parent households with median incomes less than the state average. 28.4% of children in the Rockbridge area live in single-parent households, which typically earn dramatically less annually than multiple-income households.⁴⁶

How expensive is child care?	Virginia	United States
Average annual fees for full-time care in a center		
Infant	\$10,458	\$4,822 - \$17,062
4-year-old child	\$7,957	\$3,997 - \$12,781
School-age child (before-/after-school care)	\$3,399	\$1,104 - \$8,919
Average annual fees for full-time care in a family child care home		
Infant	\$8,139	\$3,972 - \$10,666
4-year-old child	\$6,625	\$3,675 - \$10,030
School-age child (before-/after-school care)	\$2,763	\$1,846 - \$8,346
Compare with:		
Average annual tuition and fees for public four-year college (in-state)	\$10,898.95	\$8,980
Affordability (cost of full-time child care as percent of median family income):		
Infant in center, percent of income for MARRIED COUPLES	11%	7% - 15%
Infant in center, percent of income for SINGLE MOTHERS	38%	24% - 63%

Figure 5: Childcare costs in Virginia ⁴⁷

While the area has several fully licensed childcare centers (some with sliding scale fee schedules), the higher cost of care at such centers remains a barrier for many low and moderate-income families. In 2014, 41 families (67 children) in Rockbridge received childcare vouchers that reduced these costs.⁴⁸ Because of this, many families utilize smaller, lower-cost, home-based family day cares. In Virginia, family childcare homes with less than six children do not need to register with the state for licensure, so there is no comprehensive list of these centers.⁴⁹

Head Start and Early Head Start provide care and education to children ages 0-5 living in families below the FPL at six locations in the Rockbridge area. While Head Start is federally funded and does not require out of pocket tuition from parents, there are only about 20 Head Start slots each year for children ages 3 to 5 in the Rockbridge area.⁵⁰ These slots fill up fast, and children who do not get in are put on waiting lists. The state of Virginia supplements early childcare options by providing fully funded preschool for a small number of at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds through its Virginia Preschool Initiative program. However, there were only 45 VPI slots in Rockbridge County and Buena Vista in fiscal year 2014.⁵¹ In Rockbridge County where about 19.9% of 4 year-olds in the 2014- 2015 school year tested below Kindergarten Readiness, as compared to Virginia's 12.9%,⁵² access to early childhood education is particularly critical.⁵³

K-12 Education

There are three school districts in the Rockbridge area that provide public education for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Of these districts, Rockbridge County Public Schools serve about 2,500 students at Central, Fairfield, Mountain View, and Natural Bridge Elementary Schools and Maury River Middle School.⁵⁴ Lexington City Schools include Harrington Waddell Elementary School and Lylburn Downing Middle School.⁵⁵ Though Lexington and Rockbridge County have different elementary and middle schools, the Rockbridge County High School serves students from both areas. Students in Buena Vista typically go to FW Kling Elementary for Kindergarten through second grade, Enderly Heights Elementary for third and fourth grade, Parry McCluer Middle School for fifth through seventh grades, and Parry McCluer High School for grades eight through twelve.

In this area, the 2015 on-time high school graduation rate was 92.4% for Lexington and Rockbridge County combined and 84.2% for Buena Vista, compared to Virginia's 90.5%.⁵⁶ The rates were significantly lower for economically disadvantaged students.⁵⁷

Student achievement in English, History/Social Science, Science, and Mathematics is assessed annually through the Standards of Learning tests (SOLs). As a major component of Virginia's accountability system, these assessments set a benchmark score for schools to meet in order to

receive accreditation. Ratings range from fully accredited to accreditation denied. Schools not reaching full accreditation status must develop and implement improvement plans and are subject to intervention.⁵⁸ The Rockbridge area schools fully accredited in 2015-2016 were Rockbridge County High, Mountain View Elementary, Lylburn Downing Middle, Harrington Waddell Elementary, Central Elementary, Fairfield Elementary, and Maury River Middle School.⁵⁹ The other five schools were partially accredited.⁶⁰ Progress is being made, according to the Rockbridge County Public Schools Superintendent, as five of the six County schools are fully accredited for the 2015-2016 school year, with Natural Bridge Elementary receiving an accreditation with warning.⁶¹

Postsecondary Education

In the Rockbridge area, 76.1% of students continue education after high school graduation,⁶² while others begin working immediately. Students at Rockbridge County High School have the opportunity for career and technical education as part of a dual enrollment program that trains students in family and consumer science, agriculture, automotive technology, building trades, collision repair, and culinary technology.⁶³ Although there are three major four-year universities in the area, only a small percentage of Rockbridge students attend these schools. The graph below shows the percentage of people with high school diplomas and college degrees living in the Rockbridge area.⁶⁴ While the majority of people have graduated high school, the lack of bachelor's degrees creates employment and income challenges for many. Lexington has a particularly high rate of people with bachelor's degrees, most likely stemming from the universities' faculty, administration, and graduated students who reside in the area after college.

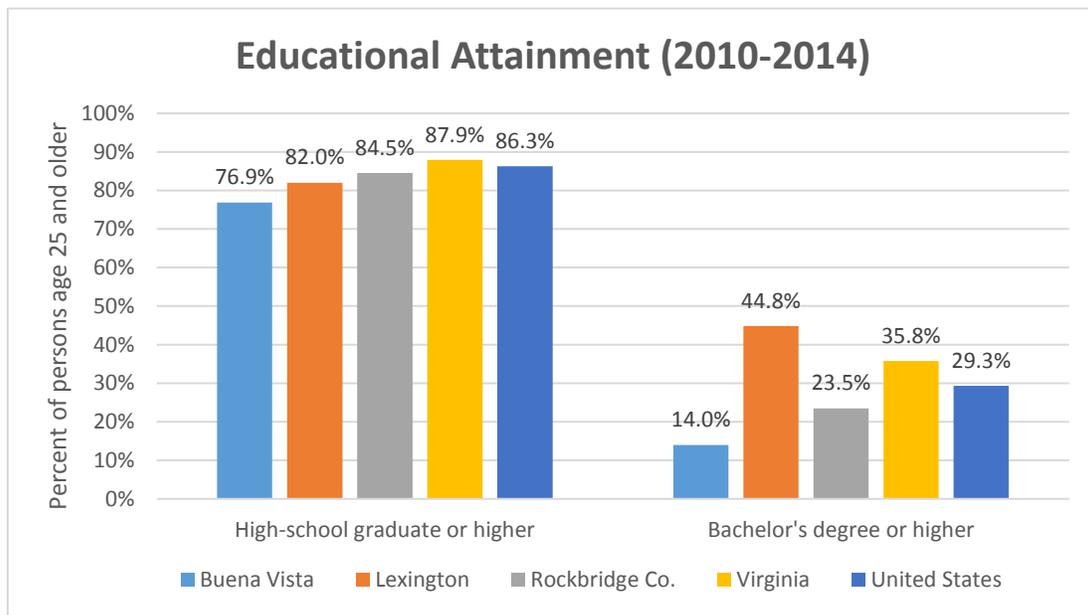


Figure 6: Percent of population that has a high school diploma and bachelor's degree or higher⁶⁵

Health, Aging, and Disability

Health

Social factors, such as educational and occupational opportunities, access to quality healthcare, in addition to individual behaviors, are determinants of the health of a community.⁶⁶ Across Virginia’s counties, population health varies. Rural areas, such as Rockbridge, typically fare worse on common indicators of community health, compared to suburban or urban areas.⁶⁷ For example, a significant number of children in the County are at risk for obesity because of a lack of physical activity and access to nutrient-dense foods.⁶⁸

The ratio of patients to primary care providers is higher in the County and Buena Vista than the national benchmark as of 2016.⁶⁹ Due to the concentration of goods and services in the cities, residents of the County may have to travel up to thirty minutes to reach medical care in Lexington. This extended travel time is a burden, particularly for low-income households who might also have limited access to transportation.

When the 95 counties plus the 38 independent cities of Virginia are ranked according to their health outcomes and health factors, those having the high ranks (1 or 2) are estimated to be the healthiest.⁷⁰ Health outcomes are measured by an average of the incidence of disease and death rates, while health factors are measured by, “weighted scores for health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic factors, and physical environment.”⁷¹ Although the entire Rockbridge area has fairly average health factors and outcomes, the results in Figure 7 indicate that Buena Vista is the area facing the most significant challenges.⁷² Additionally, high blood pressure is a persistent problem in the Rockbridge area, affecting 27% of adults in Buena Vista, 32% in Lexington, and 30% in the County.⁷³ Lexington City’s high percentage number exceeds the statewide percentage of 30% adults diagnosed.⁷⁴ More positively, Buena Vista has a lower percentage of adults diagnosed with high blood pressure than the state of Virginia.⁷⁵

County/City	Health Factors	Health Outcomes
Buena Vista City	93	76
Lexington City	58	45
Rockbridge County	43	41

Figure 7: 2016 health factors and outcome rankings by locality.⁷⁶

Healthcare Providers and Services

In the Rockbridge Area, there are multiple sources of care for residents, including health departments, a hospital, health centers, pharmacies, and private providers.

The Health Departments of both Buena Vista and Lexington provide access to immunizations, family planning, prenatal care, the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, environmental health services, and dental care. ⁷⁷



Picture 6: Carilion Stonewall Jackson Hospital

The Carilion Stonewall Jackson Hospital is part of the Critical Access Hospital federal program, which helps rural communities maintain their health care facilities. Consequently, the financial viability of this small hospital is strengthened through enhanced reimbursements. The hospital provides 24-hour emergency care services and maintains access to primary care. However, it has no more than 25 inpatient beds and the length of patient stays average no more than four days.

Patients who need more intensive or longer-term care are generally transferred to another facility outside of the Rockbridge area. An urgent care clinic was established at the hospital in 2016.

As of 2012, there are ten private primary care practices in the area. Though eight of these practices accepted new patients, only two practices accepted new Medicaid clients. ⁷⁸

The Rockbridge Area Free Clinic became the Rockbridge Area Health Center (RAHC) after receiving recognition as a federally qualified health center. Such health centers receive grant money from the Public Health Service Act and qualify for Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement. ⁷⁹ This non-profit community-directed provider is open to all residents, regardless of ability to pay or insurance status. Along with providing comprehensive health care services, the health center provides assistance that help its patients access care, such as transportation, translation, and case management. In addition, the Health Center is cost-effective, reducing expensive emergency, hospital, and specialty care. The former Development Director of the RAHC speaks positively about the impact of the Health Center in providing care in the community:

“We are in a position to provide quality care that isn’t happening otherwise... There is nowhere to go but ‘up’ in terms of care for our community.”

-Katy Datz⁸⁰

Although there are several local health care providers, these resources are often least accessible to those who need them most. The federal government designates certain geographic areas, population groups, or healthcare facilities as having a shortage of health professionals (primary, dental, mental health), deeming them Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). Of these, the Rockbridge Area has the following designations as specified in the *2015 Rockbridge Area Community Health Needs Assessment*:

- Low-income residents of Buena Vista, Lexington, and Rockbridge County are a *Medically Underserved Population*;
- Low-income residents of Buena Vista, Lexington, and Rockbridge County live in a *Primary Care Health Professional Shortage Area* and a *Dental Health Professional Shortage Area*; and
- The entire Rockbridge service area is labeled as a *Mental Health Professional Shortage Area*.⁸¹

Locally, there are twelve private mental health providers, only two of which accept Medicaid and Virginia's public insurance program for pregnant women and children.⁸² Rockbridge Area Community Services (RACS) provides mental health and substance abuse services, including emergency services to low-income children and adults. However, with an approximate three-month wait for psychiatric services and no inpatient mental health facilities in the whole Rockbridge area, mental healthcare is limited.⁸³

Maternal and Prenatal Care

Although teen pregnancy rates in the County (107.7 per 1,000) are higher than the state (89 per 1,000),⁸⁴ there is no labor and delivery unit in the Rockbridge area. Therefore, expecting mothers must deliver at Augusta Health in Fishersville, Virginia. Though full prenatal care is available through the Lexington Health Department, 18.80% to 27.20% of Rockbridge area women enter into prenatal care late after the first trimester. This rate of late access is a significantly higher than the state's average of 17%.⁸⁵ Late access to prenatal care, combined with other social risk factors, lead to poor prenatal and perinatal health indicators in the area, including high infant mortality (19.5 per 1,000 births) in the County, which is 3 times higher than the State (6.2 per 1,000 births).⁸⁶

Insurance Coverage and the Affordable Care Act

In the *2015 Rockbridge Area Community Health Needs Assessment*, 47.2% of respondents reported that cost prevents them from receiving needed healthcare.⁸⁷ Medicaid is a public health insurance program for low-income people, with different eligibility requirements determined by states. In Virginia, eligibility for Medicaid is very restrictive, as applicants must meet certain

criteria based on income and assets. Although some people living below the FPL are eligible for Medicaid (pregnant women, children and their parents, the elderly, and disabled people); childless adults are not.

Under the Affordable Care Act, thirty-one states plus the District of Columbia have chosen to expand Medicaid coverage.⁸⁸ Virginia did not. Without the Medicaid expansion, 191,000 uninsured adults remain in the so-called “coverage gap,” meaning their incomes are above Medicaid eligibility levels but too low to be eligible for Marketplace subsidies (generally 138% FPL).⁸⁹ These subsidies decrease the cost of purchasing private health insurance on the federal exchange.⁹⁰ Even for those with higher incomes who might qualify for Marketplace subsidies, enrollment is open only for three months of the year, compared to the year-round enrollment period for Medicaid and Children’s Health Insurance Program.⁹¹ In Virginia, the uninsured rate decreased from 13.3% in 2013 to 13% in 2014.⁹² However, community health centers report a 20% increase in uninsured patients over the past two years.⁹³

Aging

Although aging is a natural part of life, the elderly population is at greater risk for poverty-related problems as personal savings diminish with time and medical complications and expenditures rise. In addition to needing more medical and social services, the size of Rockbridge County, coupled with limited access to transportation, increases social disconnection and isolation among area seniors. Jeri Schaff, Executive Director of the Valley Program for Aging Services, explains that due to this sense of seclusion, simply talking to someone can make their entire week.

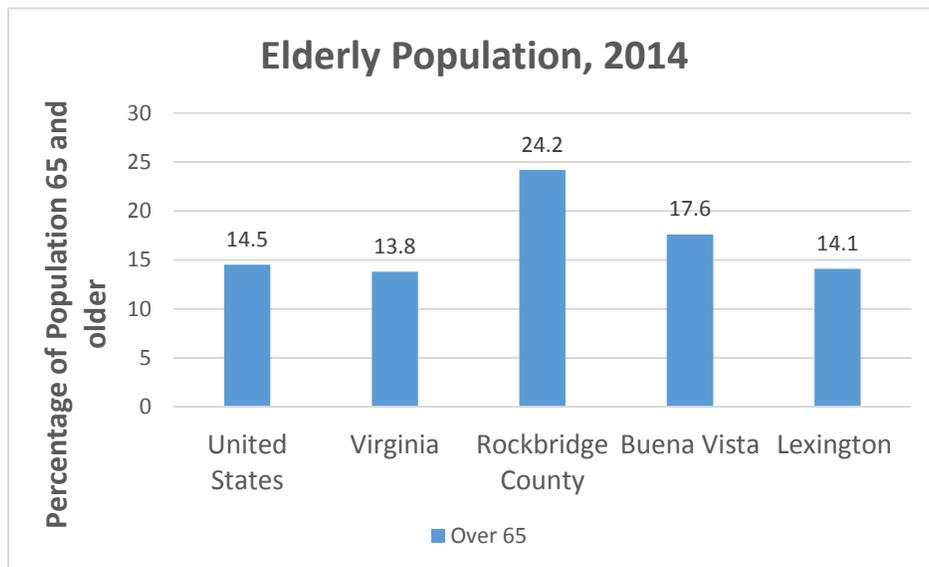


Figure 8: Comparison of proportion of population that is age 65 and older, 2014.⁹⁴

“It’s amazing how little it actually takes to make a difference in these folks’ lives.”

-Jeri Schaff⁹⁵

Figure 8 shows that compared to Virginia and the nation, Rockbridge County has a significantly greater proportion of people 65 and older.⁹⁶

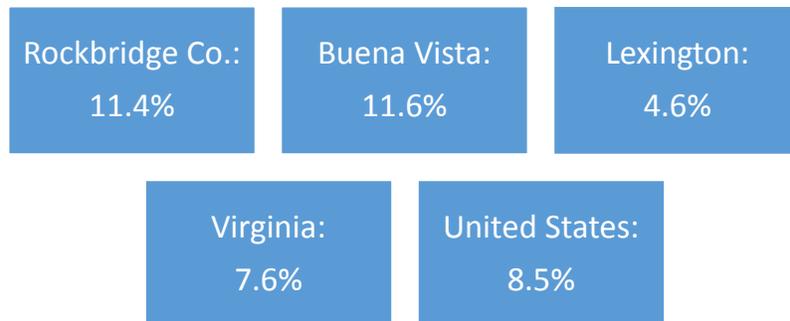
Several local assisted-living facilities, although expensive, provide elderly people with personal care in a safe and social environment. Those with moderate to low incomes are often unable to pay for these services and rely on family and community resources.

Disability

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, individuals are disabled if they have, “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. This includes people who have a record of such an impairment, even if they do not currently have a disability.”⁹⁷ People with disabilities often face additional struggles that inhibit their ability to support themselves or their families. Employment, transportation, and healthcare challenges are further compounded by the correlation between disability and poverty.

In 2014 those with a disability made up a larger share of the U.S. population in poverty (29%) than those without a disability (12%).⁹⁸ In other words, the disabled make up a greater portion of the U.S. population in poverty than they do the overall population. The percentages of individuals with disabilities residing in Buena Vista or Rockbridge County are significantly higher than the state and national percentages,⁹⁹ as seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Comparison of percentage of population with a disability under 65 years of age, 2014.¹⁰⁰



Food and Shelter

Hunger and Food Insecurity

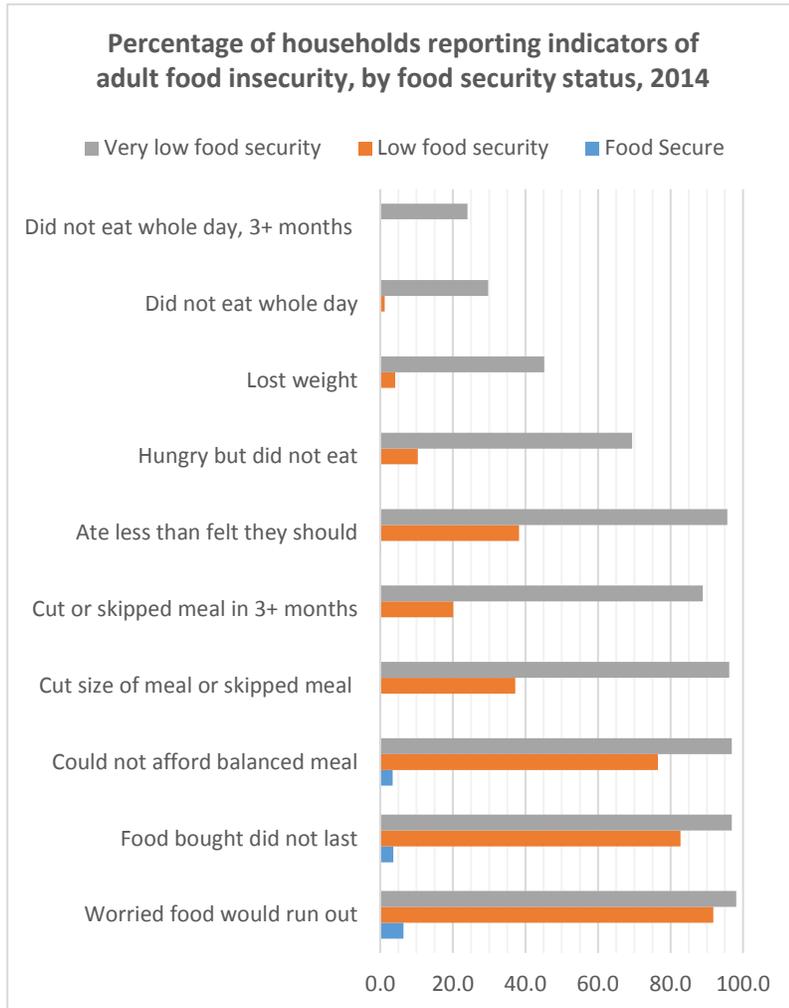


Figure 10: Percentage of households reporting indicators of adult food insecurity, by food insecurity status, 2014.¹⁰⁴

According to a recent report for the FDA by the Committee on Statistics of the National Academies (CNSTAT), hunger refers to “a potential consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.”¹⁰¹

Households with low food security live with “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. [There is] little or no indication of reduced food intake.”¹⁰² Households with very low food security are characterized by “multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.”¹⁰³

Experts estimate that 15.4% of Americans in 2014 were food-insecure,¹⁰⁵ though the rate for Virginia was 11.8%.¹⁰⁶ In the Rockbridge area specifically, 4,380 people were food insecure. Though it is worth noting that the estimate for Lexington City could be artificially skewed due to its deflated income figures, the percentage of individuals by locality estimated to have experienced any level of food insecurity in 2014 are as follows:

- Rockbridge County: 10.4%
- Buena Vista City: 14.1%
- Lexington City: 15.5%.¹⁰⁷

Food insecurity can have many causes, but living in a food desert may be a contributing factor. These areas are identified as meeting thresholds for being low-income AND not having ready access to healthy fresh and affordable food.¹⁰⁸



Figure 11: Criteria for determining an area a Food Desert¹⁰⁹

Although the Rockbridge area is heavily agricultural and has many farms, a substantial amount of residents live in food deserts, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and are at greater risk for high intake of highly processed foods at convenience stores and fast food restaurants. The full-service supermarkets are heavily concentrated in the main commercial corridors of Lexington and Buena Vista, making it hard for County residents to access them.

Nutrition

Children ages 0-3 who experience food insecurity, are more likely to be sick than children in food-secure families, and have a one-third higher chance of being hospitalized.¹¹⁰ Because processed food is cheaper and more easily accessible than nutrient-dense, healthy foods, food-insecure families are more likely to have weight problems that may lead to obesity. This growing disease impacts 31% of Rockbridge adults.¹¹¹ Obesity is correlated with many adverse health problems that hinder earning potential, and shorten life span, including hypertension, cardiovascular disease, asthma, and joint degeneration. Diabetes affects 10.2% of adults in Rockbridge, which is higher than the national rate of 8.1%.¹¹² In addition, poor nutrition among children is also associated with decreased academic performance and behavioral problems, as well as contributing to poorer mental health.¹¹³

Food Safety Nets

Multiple services are available to those who cannot purchase adequate quantities of nutritious food, including national and local food safety nets.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps, offers nutrition assistance to millions of individuals and families in the United States. People with a gross monthly income below 130% of the FPL are eligible for these benefits,¹¹⁴ which come in the form of credits on an Electronic Benefits Transfer card that allows them to pay for food products.¹¹⁵ Cards are reloaded the first week of the month,¹¹⁶ a great supplement to 6,176 recipients in the greater Rockbridge area.¹¹⁷ Supplemental foods, nutrition education, health care referrals, and support are provided to pregnant women, their infants, and children through the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program.¹¹⁸

The National School Lunch Program provides free school lunches to families living below 130% of the FPL, and reduced price lunches (students pay less than 40 cents) to those falling between 130% and 185% of the FPL.¹¹⁹ Figure 12 shows the percentage of students who were eligible for these programs in 2015, identifying Buena Vista as the area with most need.¹²⁰

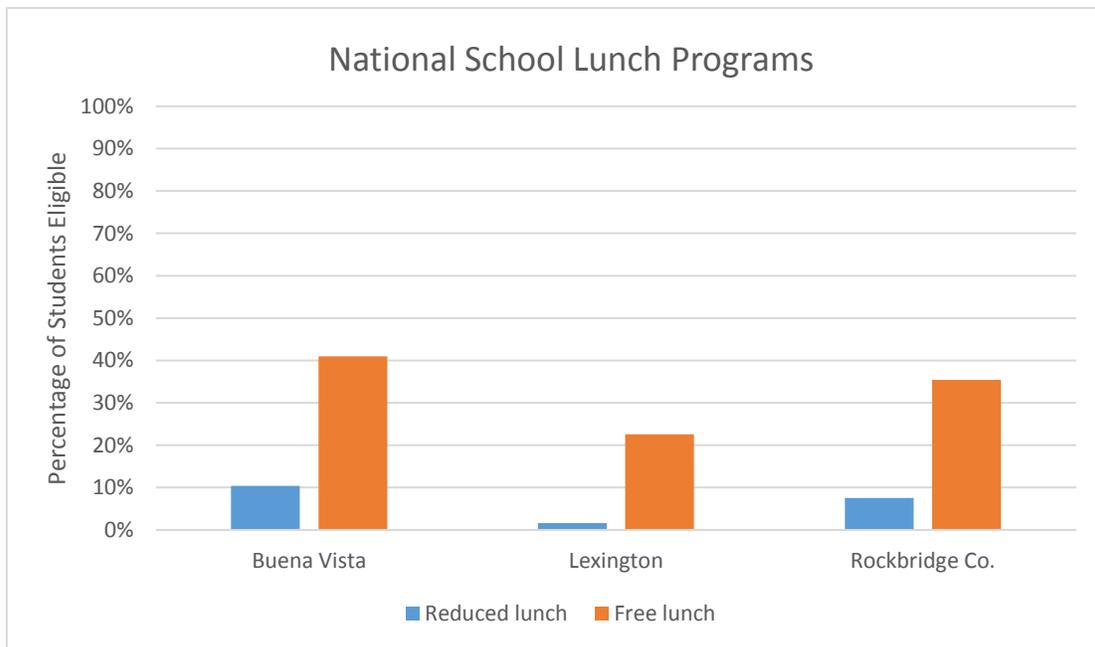


Figure 12: Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch through the National School Lunch Program¹²¹

Located in Lexington, the Rockbridge Area Relief Association (RARA) provides emergency relief to community members when other resources have been exhausted. In 2013, they provided supplemental food to 17,626 individuals.¹²² Food banks offer supplemental nutrition assistance to those in need. Aside from the RARA Food Pantry, which offers food aid through a self-serve system to those eligible,¹²³ other food banks in the area exist in Buena Vista and Glasgow.

The Campus Kitchen at Washington and Lee also aids in hunger relief and promotes nutrition by creating balanced meals out of food that would otherwise go to waste and then delivering them to various organizations around the area. The newly launched CKWL Mobile Food Pantry also makes monthly deliveries of groceries in Buena Vista and Goshen, while the Backpack Program provides weekly assistance to all of the area’s elementary schools.¹²⁴

Housing

The cost of housing can place a great burden on low-income families and limit how their remaining resources are used. The Rockbridge area has a higher homeownership rate than that of both Virginia and the country. In 2010, 67.7% of housing units in the Rockbridge area were owner-occupied.¹²⁵ Of the three localities, the County has the highest proportion of owner-occupied housing in 2014.¹²⁶ Lexington has the highest proportion of renter-occupied units inhabited by non-family occupants, which is likely due to a high concentration of college students who rent off-campus homes and apartments.¹²⁷

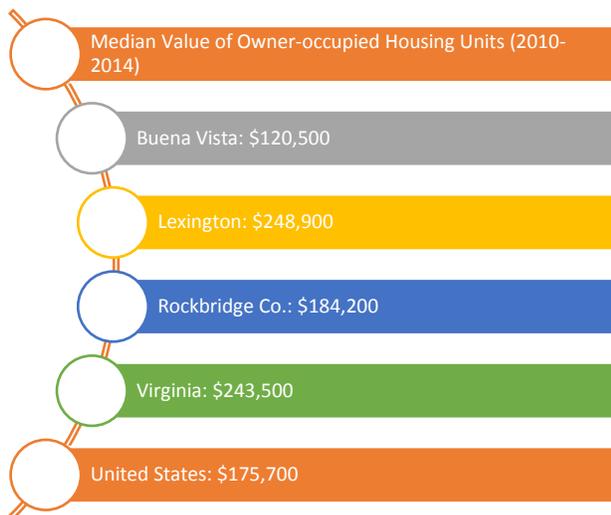


Figure 10: Median value of owner-occupied housing units (2010-2014)¹³⁰

Affordability

Housing costs are especially important for many families because they are often the highest monthly expense for the household. The median values of houses in the Rockbridge County and Buena Vista are less than those of Virginia and Lexington City.¹²⁸ However, as specified by a 2012 Rockbridge housing study, “1,492 low-income households earning sixty percent or less of area median income pay more than thirty percent of their income toward housing costs.”¹²⁹

In order to address the need for affordable rental housing, the Rockbridge Area provides subsidized project-based units in the form of Housing Choice Vouchers (also known as Section 8

vouchers) and low rent private units. Although each serves a different type of population and has certain income-based requirements, these programs work together to supply affordable rental housing for people with limited financial resources. As stated by the 2012 Rockbridge Housing Study,

- In the area, there are several project-based units. All of these units are subsidized by the Virginia Housing Development Authority and all tenants pay no more than 30% of their income towards rent. All these families are considered “very low income,” earning no more than \$27,750 for a family of four.¹³¹
- Housing Choice Vouchers assist families by subsidizing the difference between Fair Market Rent as determined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and thirty percent of the household income. Clients live in private housing instead of public units. Although the program distributes 157 vouchers throughout the area, demand far surpasses the supply.¹³² Landlords in the region are more willing to accept these vouchers than in other areas, likely due to the comparatively inflated cost of housing in the region.¹³³

Housing and Poverty

Both the cost and quality of housing are determinants of an individual’s social and economic wellbeing. Community leaders have described the quality of current housing stock in the Rockbridge area as “very poor.” As stated in the *Rockbridge Poverty Assessment 2008*, “Some residential properties lack adequate plumbing and kitchen facilities.”¹³⁴ However, the recent *Rockbridge Assessment 2016* noted a decreasing number of homes that lack these assets.¹³⁵ Substandard housing can both cause and worsen illness. In the case of a serious problem, like poisoning from lead in house paint or soil, developmental trajectories for individuals are stunted.¹³⁶ Condemned housing not meant for human habitation can also greatly harm an individual’s wellbeing physically, mentally, and socially. For those that must temporarily seek shelter with family and friends, social stressors may compound these health risks.¹³⁷

A 2015 community-based research report identified that homelessness does exist in Rockbridge and its nature is markedly different from urban homelessness.¹³⁸ In rural settings like Rockbridge, homeless shelters are rare. Those that exist often target a very particular population. For example, in Lexington, Project Horizon provides a temporary shelter for victims of domestic and/or sexual violence. Due to a lack of shelters, homeless and housing-insecure individuals and families are sometimes at risk of living in extreme conditions, such as condemned housing, vehicles, outdoor/exposed dwellings like tents, or “doubling up” with family members.¹³⁹

Community Development

Employment

Respondents to a 2016 survey identified employment as the most problematic issue impacting the Rockbridge area.¹⁴⁰ Rockbridge County has a 4.0% unemployment rate, which is higher than the state average of 3.8%,¹⁴¹ but lower than the 4.7% national rate as of May 2016.¹⁴² Consistent with national trends, the graph above shows that the unemployment rate is decreasing in Lexington, Buena Vista, and Rockbridge County, likely due to the nationwide economic recovery.¹⁴³

While unemployment is the standard measure for assessing the economic well-being of a given area, underemployment and the prevalence of poorly-paying jobs can be equally revealing about the area's labor market. In the Rockbridge area, nearly 1,791 people are underemployed, which means that workers with high skill levels are not reaching their full economic potential because they work in low-skill or low-paying jobs.¹⁴⁴

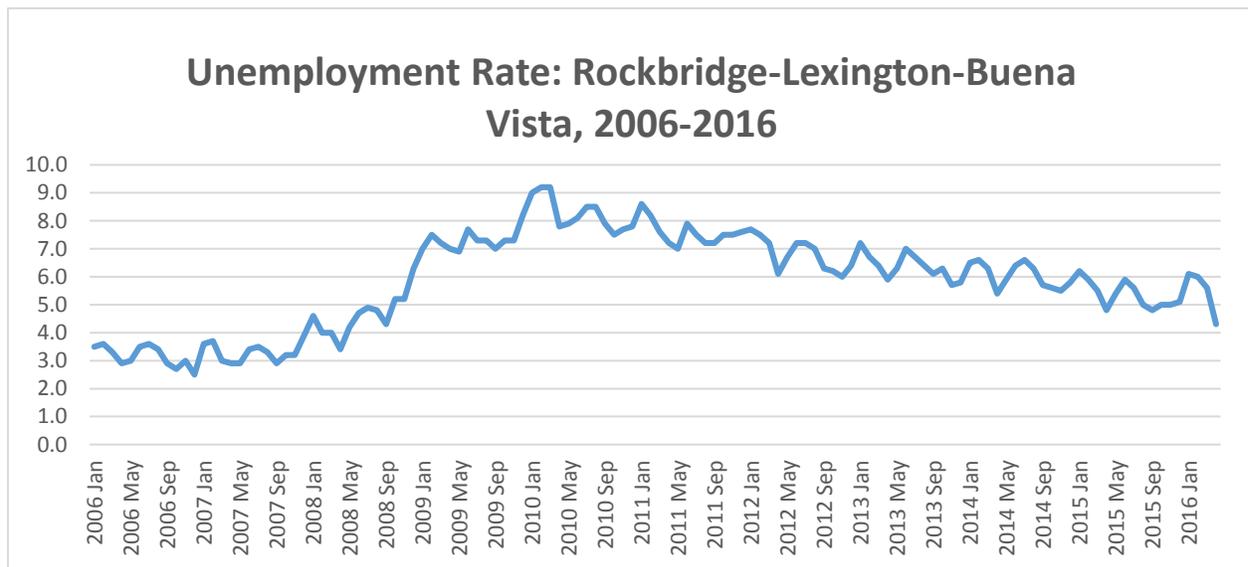


Figure 11: Unemployment rates for the Rockbridge area from 2006 to 2016.¹⁴⁵

Locally, those without higher education often have difficulty in finding employment. A few decades ago, the manufacturing sector provided many people with well-paying, blue-collar jobs in the Rockbridge area. Today, this sector only makes up 14% of existing jobs.¹⁴⁶ Among the other employment sectors that offer the largest number of employment opportunities are government (20.2%), retail (12.0%), healthcare (10.0%), and education, though the figures for the latter are undisclosed.¹⁴⁷

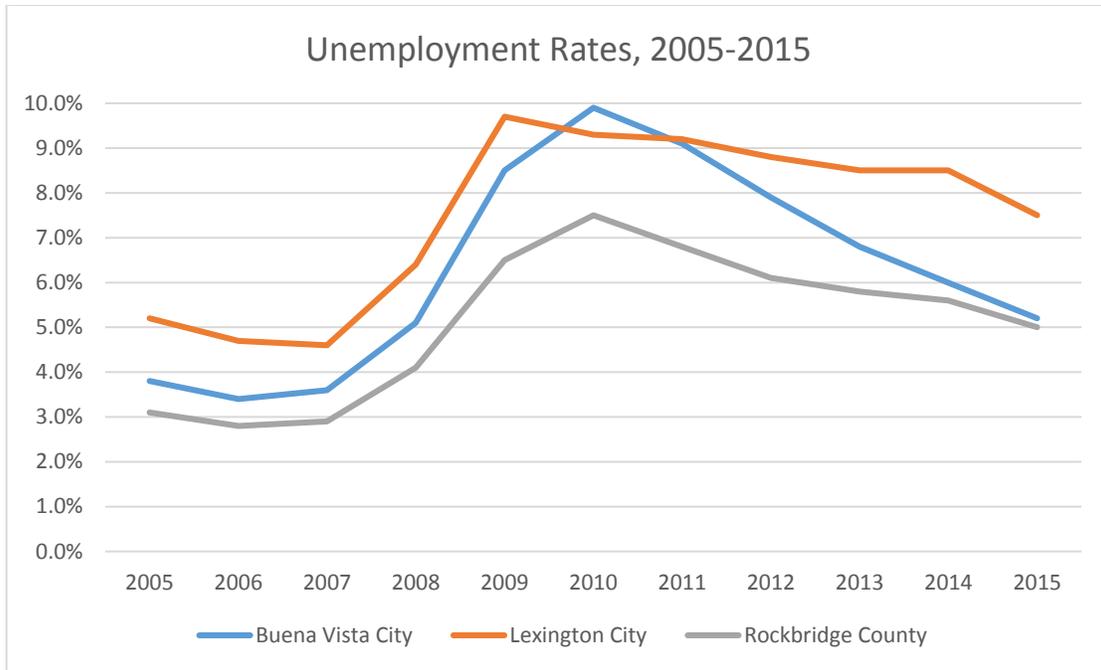


Figure 12: Comparison of unemployment rates in the Rockbridge area, 2005-2015.¹⁴⁸

In Virginia, the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour puts people at great risk of being either under or close to the Federal Poverty Level.¹⁴⁹ The average median household income of the area is lower than the state and national averages, as show in Figure 16.¹⁵⁰

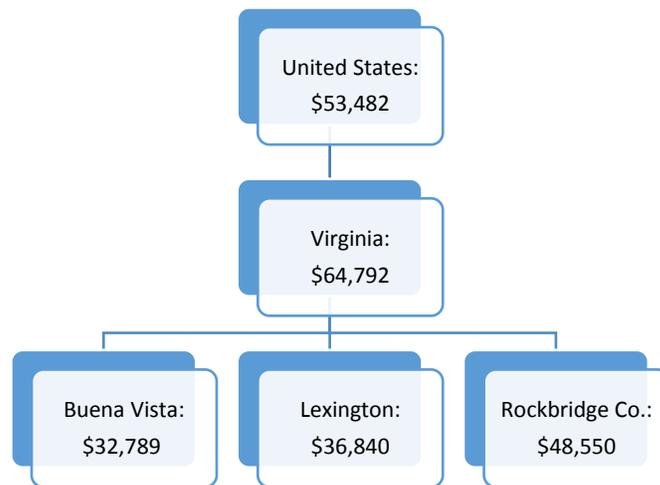


Figure 13: Average median household income, 2014¹⁵¹

Unemployment Insurance

Of all Virginians who are not employed but are actively looking for work, only 22% received unemployment insurance, placing Virginia at the second lowest rate in the country.¹⁵² The Federal-State Unemployment Insurance Program provides unemployment benefits to “eligible workers who become unemployed through no fault of their own and meet certain other eligibility requirements.”¹⁵³ In Virginia, the unemployed must also meet additional criteria such as asset tests, separation qualifications, and weekly re-certification of eligibility,¹⁵⁴ which can pose as deterrents to obtaining unemployment insurance.

Immigration and Language Access

1 out of 9 Virginians are immigrants.¹⁵⁵ While data are limited, anecdotal evidence from community stakeholders suggests that the local immigrant populations are small relative to other regions of Virginia, but growing. In the Rockbridge area, immigrants are primarily Spanish-speakers and have the biggest presence, in terms of proportion to the overall population, in Lexington.

Routine or non-emergency translation, education, and support services for non-English speaking persons are greatly limited in the Rockbridge area. Only a few organizations-- ESOL at Washington and Lee University,¹⁵⁶ the Rockbridge Area Health Center,¹⁵⁷ and the hospital--offer routine interpretive services to non-English speaking populations free of charge.

The Immigrant Rights Clinic at the Washington and Lee School of Law provides legal representation to non-citizen clients in immigration matters, focusing on removal proceedings with a particular emphasis on vulnerable populations, including refugees, unaccompanied minors, and victims of domestic violence.¹⁵⁸ The closest nonprofit organization that aids in the legal documentation application process is in Harrisonburg. Although families in financial need have mostly characterized participation in such programs, it is important to remember that these services are open to all immigrant families, regardless of financial status.

Transportation

Rockbridge residents commonly regard transportation as a prominent problem, particularly for those trying to access health care or employment. Over 11.5% and 7.5% of individuals in Buena Vista and Lexington do not have access to a private motor vehicle respectively, compared to 6.4% of individuals in Virginia.¹⁵⁹ These higher percentages may be due to the convenient walkability of the two cities.

Those without access to personal transportation must rely on other services. This becomes a challenge because public transportation services in the area are limited. An individual's ability to affordably transport themselves determines their ability to maintain secure employment.¹⁶⁰ The problem is further complicated when individuals look for alternative, cheaper housing away from cities, which are the area's employment hub.¹⁶¹ In areas where public transportation is nonexistent or insufficient, the more vulnerable populations such as the elderly, people with disabilities, and youth, may find themselves in involuntary social isolation and with diminished access to resources and social programs.

In the area there two existing transportation systems: the Rockbridge Area Transportation System (RATS) and the Maury Express. RATS is a United Way agency that transports people to and from appointments, workplaces, shopping centers, and social gatherings. Their buses operate five days a week based on demand and typically require reservations made two days in advance. Although RATS is supported by grants from the local government and the community, passengers are charged based on length of trip and income.¹⁶²

The Maury Express is more flexible, operating six days a week and stopping at 35 scheduled stops on a fixed route between Lexington and Buena Vista (including important retail and service locations like Kroger, Goodwill, Rockbridge Area Health Center, Dabney Lancaster Community College, and the Senior Center).¹⁶³ The cost is also minimal at \$0.50 per trip.¹⁶⁴ However, the entire route takes about two hours and is geographically-constrained, leaving out much of the County. In addition, the Maury Express only operates during the normal workday hours (8am-6pm). Facing a difficult situation, many Rockbridge residents resourcefully turn to and depend on an informal transportation system supported by friends and families.¹⁶⁵

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