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Introduction

In 2016, the Athens County Foundation commissioned a report on the state of Athens County. The 2016 report has since informed and directed the work of the foundation, and served as a resource for nonprofit organizations, government organizations, churches, and other organizations serving the community. This current report is intended to update information from the 2016 report and to capture the new developments in the county since 2016. This report provides a snapshot of those factors that affect progress toward the strategic priorities of the Athens County Foundation: economic vitality, vibrant communities, and individual health and wellbeing.

Information for this report was gathered during 2022 through the collection of publicly available secondary data and primary data from community members engaged in serving Athens County. This report discusses the longstanding challenges faced by the community, such as poverty and food insecurity, and the equally enduring work of the community to address the drivers of these complex problems while simultaneously supporting those most impacted by them. This report is not just about problems, though. Since 2016, Athens County has come through a global pandemic, opened a long-awaited land bank, secured historic funding for economic development, engaged in significant antiracism work, expanded public transportation, and carried out an ambitious plan to develop world-class outdoor recreation opportunities. This report celebrates those successes even while it highlights the work that remains.

This report was produced through the collaboration of the Athens County Foundation, Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, and the Athens County community members who gave their time to contribute information and feedback. 

This report provides a snapshot of those factors that affect progress toward the strategic priorities of the Athens County Foundation: economic vitality, vibrant communities, and individual health and wellbeing.

A note about data

This report draws on data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and other government agencies. While these data are among the most standardized, reliable data available, they have certain limitations.

Athens County has a relatively small population, so some data points of interest—such as breakdowns by race—are suppressed in order to protect survey takers' anonymity. Other data are available, but with margins of error that are too high for the data to be meaningful.

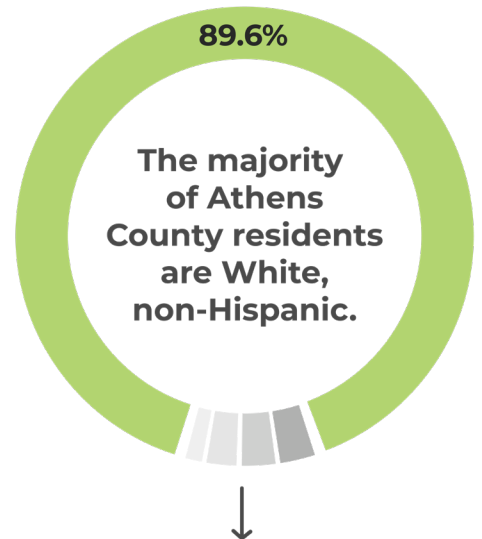
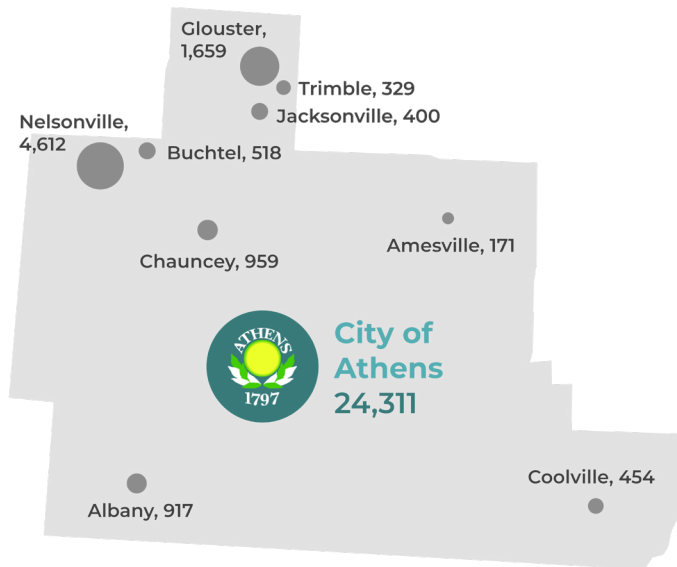
Much of the data in this report deals with long-term issues that are driven by a host of structural factors. Change in these areas is a slow process, and data can be even slower to reflect these changes. Several indicators used in this report are from American Community Survey estimates that are based on 5-year ranges. These are lagging indicators and will be slow to register important change that occurs at an incremental pace.

Athens County is home to roughly 20,000 Ohio University students, many of whom live off campus. Because data from off-campus students is incorporated into Census data, it can be challenging to tease out the impact of student-specific factors on the overall picture generated by the data. Poverty indicators and income inequality in particular can be heavily affected by student information.¹ To address this issue, this report separates data for the City of Athens from data for Athens County wherever possible. 🍃



Population

Athens County, Ohio is a 508-square-mile county in Southeast Ohio. Seventy-four percent of the county is covered by national forest, and the remainder of the county is home to 62,903 residents. 🌿



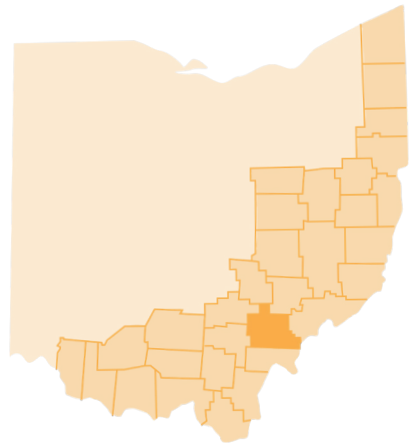
	Athens County	Ohio	US
White alone, non-Hispanic	89.58%	78.30%	60.09%
Two races excluding "Some other race," and three or more races, non-Hispanic	2.86%	2.66%	2.54%
Black or African American alone, non-Hispanic	2.79%	12.18%	12.25%
Asian alone, non-Hispanic	2.42%	2.28%	5.57%
White alone, Hispanic	1.43%	2.17%	10.32%
Some other race alone, Hispanic	0.30%	0.85%	4.83%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone non-Hispanic	0.25%	0.13%	0.64%
Black or African American alone, Hispanic	0.10%	0.17%	0.38%
Two races including "Some other race," Hispanic	0.10%	0.44%	1.84%
Some other race alone, non-Hispanic	0.08%	0.26%	0.31%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, non-Hispanic	0.05%	0.03%	0.17%
Two races including "Some other race," non-Hispanic	0.04%	0.13%	0.64%
Two races excluding "Some other race," and three or more races, Hispanic	0.01%	0.24%	0.53%

Income and Poverty

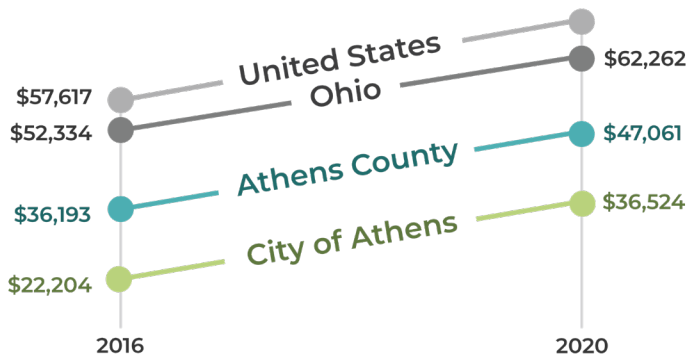
Achieving the goals of economic vitality, vibrant communities, and individual health and well-being requires confronting the persistent poverty experienced by many residents of Athens County. As in many rural and Appalachian counties, poverty has a large impact on the residents of Athens County. The county is one of only five Appalachian counties in the state that are classified as economically distressed,² and it ranks 86th out of Ohio's 88 counties in terms of per capita income.³ Roughly a third of Athens County residents live below the Federal Poverty Level.

While indicators of economic hardship in the county are generally improving, they continue to compare unfavorably to indicators at the state and national level. On the other hand, a look at neighboring counties shows that most of the poverty measures in Athens are typical of the surrounding area. A closer look within the county shows differences between the City of Athens and the county-at-large. The median income in the City of Athens, for example, is considerably lower than that of the county as a whole. A likely explanation for this difference between the city and the county is the previously mentioned presence of Ohio University students in off-campus housing, and their inclusion in Census data.⁴

The Athens County Foundation works as part of a vibrant ecosystem that addresses both the causes and the effects of poverty. This ecosystem includes organizations such as the Rising Sun Free Pharmacy, Good Works, food pantries, and organizations that provide assistance with housing and transportation. At the same time, this ecosystem also includes

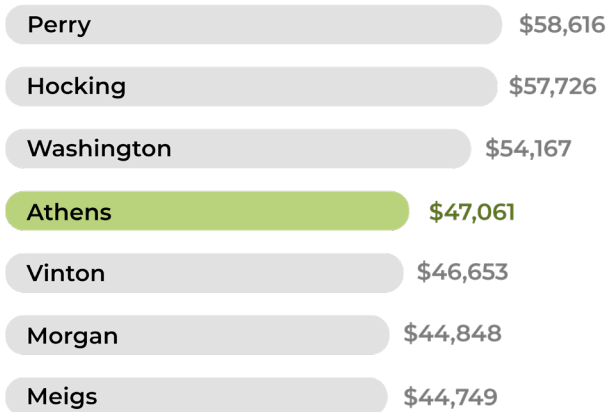


The Athens County Foundation works as part of a vibrant ecosystem that addresses both the causes and the effects of poverty. This ecosystem includes organizations such as the Rising Sun Free Pharmacy, Good Works, food pantries, and organizations that provide assistance with housing and transportation.



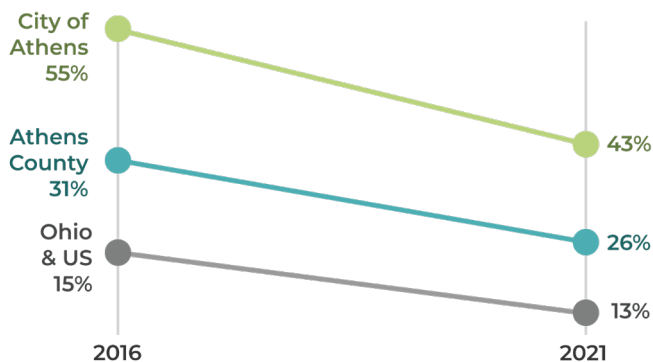
While median income levels in Athens County and the City of Athens have increased since 2016, they have remained below median income levels in Ohio and the US.

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1901: Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2016 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars) and Income in the Past 12 Months (In 2021 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars)



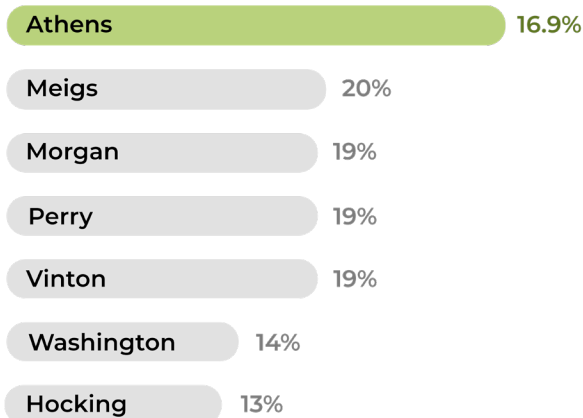
Compared to neighboring counties, Athens County's 2021 median income is neither especially high nor especially low.

Source: Office of Research/Ohio Department of Development. (n.d.). (rep.). County Profiles - 2021 Annual Edition.



Poverty rates in Athens County and the City of Athens have declined but remain higher than those in Ohio and the US.

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1701



Compared to neighboring counties, Athens County has a higher percentage of people living below the federal poverty level.

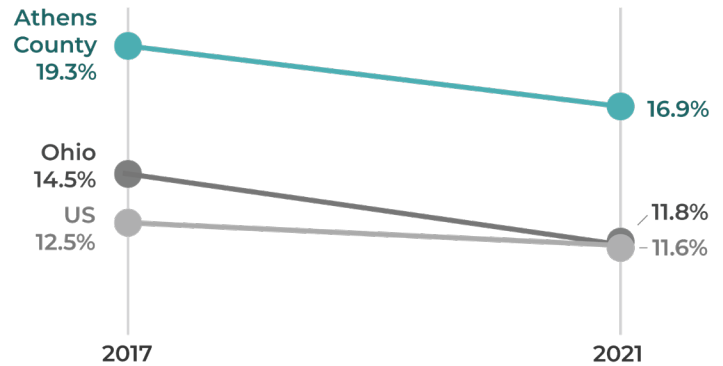
Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1701

organizations that are working to tackle the long-term drivers of poverty by improving broadband access, developing a non-extractive outdoor recreation economy, revitalizing communities through historic preservation and blight remediation, carrying out community-driven economic development, and addressing long term inequities through anti-racism. 🌱

Food Access

In 2019, organizations working to increase food access in the community—and the **Athens County Food Pantry** in particular—received an unexpected boost when Athens County native Joe Burrow made a specific reference to childhood food insecurity in his Heisman Trophy acceptance speech. The ensuing donations to the food pantry totaled over \$650,000. This influx of support came on the eve of the COVID pandemic, when close to 17% of the population in the county already experienced food insecurity and the county ranked in the bottom three counties in the state in terms of its food environment index (which measures ability to pay for food and proximity to healthy food sources).⁵ As COVID-related shutdowns began reducing many residents' incomes and increasing the insecurity of already vulnerable households, the Athens County Foundation incorporated a focus on food security into its responsive grantmaking. Over a quarter of the grants awarded in the community were invested in organizations that address food insecurity.

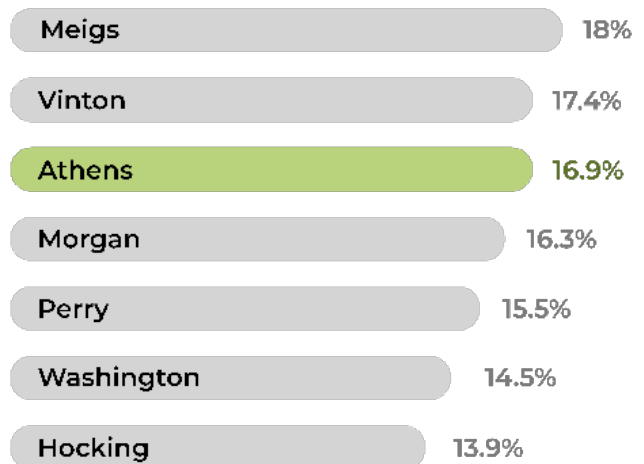
Fifteen food pantries in the county offer emergency food assistance to residents in need, and five organizations provide weekly or monthly meals to community members. Many of these food pantries and soup kitchens are housed in area churches.



Food insecurity rates are consistently higher in Athens County compared to the state and nation.

! Note that available data stop at the time the COVID pandemic began.

Source: Feeding America. (n.d.). Food insecurity among overall (all ages) population in Athens County; Map the meal gap. Overall (all ages) Hunger & Poverty in Ohio.

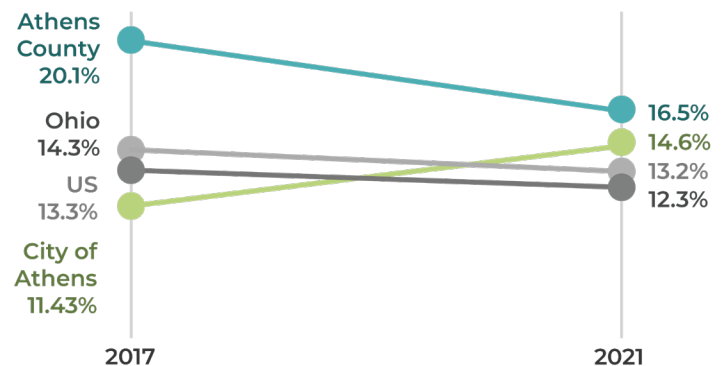


2021 Food insecurity rates in Athens County are similar to rates in neighboring counties.

Source: Feeding America. (n.d.). Food insecurity among overall (all ages) population in Athens County; Map the meal gap. Overall (all ages) Hunger & Poverty in Ohio.

A recent Community Health Assessment conducted by the Athens City County Health Department found that **1.5% of Athens County residents report eating 5 or more servings of vegetables per day. Of those who do not, 34% say it is because these foods are too expensive.**

This emergency food distribution network has been supplemented with independently created Blessings Boxes, which are small cupboards set up in publicly accessible areas. Community members fill these boxes with shelf-stable food for anyone in need. Community Food Initiatives' (CFI) Donation Station program draws on the area's thriving local food culture to invest in local food growers while providing free, fresh produce to those in need. The Donation Station uses community-donated funds to purchase fresh food from the Athens Farmers Market, the Chesterhill Produce Auction, and local farms and food businesses. Many of these suppliers also donate fresh food to the program. This food is then distributed through a network of partners that includes food pantries, churches, healthcare providers, and libraries. Between 2019-2022, the Donation Station distributed over 344,000 pounds of food.⁷ The Athens County Foundation and others in the philanthropic community have supported these efforts as well as others, such as the Appalachian Accessible Food Network (AAFN). AAFN includes CFI, Rural Action, and the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks, and works to support the growth and distribution of local foods throughout Appalachia. 🍏



A higher percentage of households in Athens County receive Food Stamps compared to households in the City of Athens, Ohio and the US.

The percentage of Athens County households receiving food stamps has decreased slightly since 2017, while this percentage in the City of Athens has increased slightly.

Source: US Census, Table B19058. Public Assistance Income Or Food Stamps/Snap In The Past 12 Months For Households [3] 2016 1-Year Estimate Detailed Tables and 2020 1-Year Estimate Detailed Tables

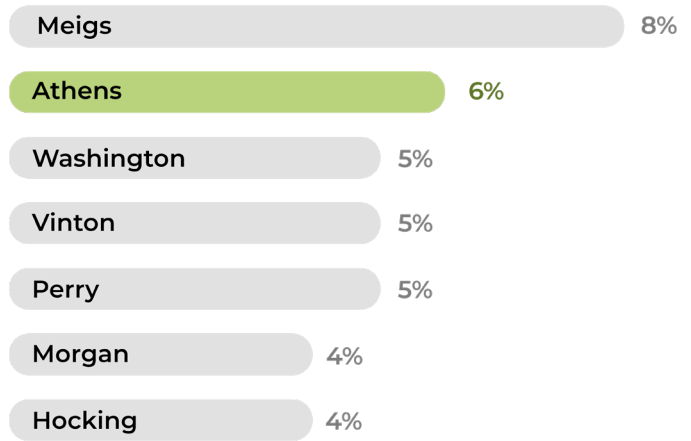
Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, in conjunction with the Athens County Foundation, has prepared an additional data brief on food access in Athens County. This brief is available from the Athens County Foundation.

Economic Development

Although several small businesses in Athens County closed during the pandemic, indicators suggest that the economic outlook in 2023 is positive. “Businesses are rebounding and hiring,” reports Mollie Fitzgerald, Executive Director of the Athens County Economic Development Council. The total number of employed individuals in the county has increased in the last year to 22,502, and the unemployment rate as of November 2022 was 3.8%, down from 4.1% in 2021.⁸

Ohio University’s Innovation Center, TechGROWTH Ohio, ACEnet, the Small Business Development Center, the Athens County Economic Development Council, the Athens County Chamber of Commerce, the Social Enterprise Ecosystem-Impact Project, and many other entities offer invaluable assistance for local businesses. These organizations provide physical space and training on topics such as market research, financial calculations, and business planning as well as access to free or reduced-cost technical assistance provided by experienced business professionals. As a result, there have been a range of successful start-ups in Athens County in recent years including RXQ Compounding (an FDA Approved

In 2017, Athens Mold and Machine reopened its doors after previously closing in the wake of the 2008 recession.



The percentage of unemployed individuals in Athens County is similar to that found in surrounding counties.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2021). Table S2301. Employment Status, 2021 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates.

503B Outsourcing Facility that manufactures sterile and non-sterile medications for hospitals and physicians and is housed in a multi-million dollar facility in Albany) and AC Green Metalworks (a woman-owned small business providing design, fabrication, and repair services). In addition to new businesses, Athens has seen the reopening of a local business that dates back to 1945. Athens Mold and Machine — which manufactures tire mold containers/mechanisms and is a custom machine shop for oil and gas, aerospace, marine, and many other industries—reopened in 2017 after closing following the 2008 recession.

There are also several promising new businesses currently housed in Ohio University’s Innovation Center,

“In the last 6 months, we have been getting calls every week from businesses—big and small—that need space for expansion.”

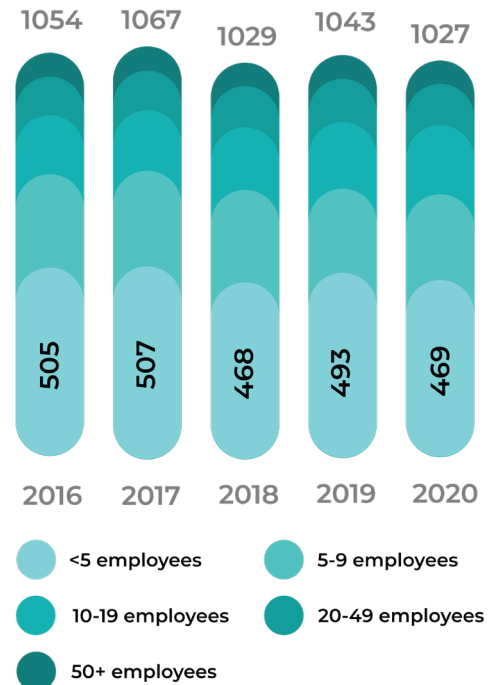
**-Mollie Fitzgerald,
Athens County Economic
Development Council
Executive Director**

including Alpha Phase Technologies, ASAKE Biotechnology, HyperPath Solutions, INFINIXBIO, OsteoDX, and Spot Cells. While the overall number of businesses in the county has fluctuated from year to year, most recently available data from the U.S. Census indicates that the number of businesses is on par with the number of businesses in 2014. In 2020, there were 1027 businesses compared to 1024 in 2014.⁹

In July of 2022, the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Economic Development Administration announced the award of a \$5 million

grant to Athens County Port Authority to build a 60,000-square-foot facility to house biomedical, biotechnology, and advanced manufacturing companies. This investment, along with a \$2.9 million grant for site work and construction from JobsOhio, will help attract and grow businesses and create high-wage jobs to diversify the region’s economy. This new facility and the wealth of local organizations make Athens County uniquely positioned to support economic development.

Having two institutions of higher education in the region is also an asset for economic development. “Businesses can benefit from the talent coming from the university and college, especially during the labor shortages we’ve experienced the last couple of years,” according to Fitzgerald. Outdoor recreation offerings and the low cost of living are also strengths. The cost of living is 16.2% lower in Athens County, Ohio than the U.S. average, and 5.8% lower than the Ohio average.¹⁰ 🌱



Most businesses in Athens County have under 5 employees.

Source: Data provided by the Athens County Economic Council



Athens County is

1 of only 5

**Appalachian
counties in the state
that are classified as**

economically

distressed.

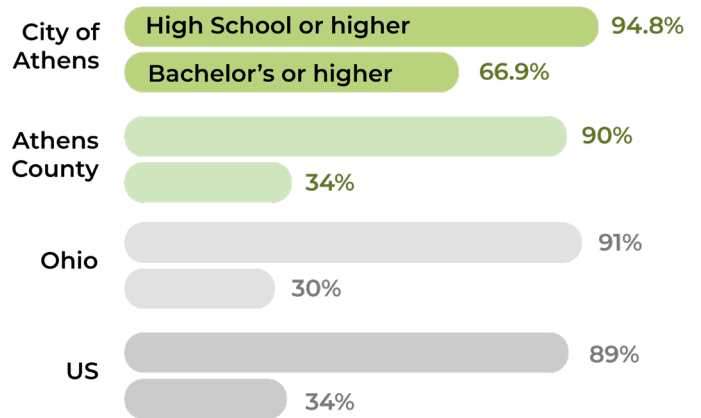
**and it ranks 86th out of
Ohio's 88 counties in terms
of per capita income.**

Education

Athens County is home to five school districts, Hocking College, and Ohio University. Rates of educational attainment (high school and college degrees, specifically) in the county at large mirror those of the state and nation. Within the City of Athens, which is home to Ohio University, rates of college completion and beyond are comparatively higher.

The Child Educational Opportunity Index, which is calculated by Ohio State University's Government Resource Center, finds that students in the northwest portion of the county (specifically the census tracts that include Nelsonville, Buchtel, Trimble, Jacksonville, and Glouster) face more challenges than their peers in the rest of the county, and so have lower educational opportunity. These challenges stem from higher rates of poverty and high school educational quality.¹¹

Much has changed for K-12 schools since COVID, including a surge in the need for mental and behavioral health support for students. Ohio University's Voinovich School is preparing a separate data brief on the state of schools and students after the pandemic. This brief will be available through the Athens County Foundation. 🌱



Residents of Athens County have similar levels of education when compared to the state and nation. A higher percentage of residents of the City of Athens have college degrees.

Source: American Community Survey, Table S1501, 2021 ACS 5-Year Estimates S1501: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT - Census



Individual Health and Wellbeing

Access to care in Appalachian Ohio

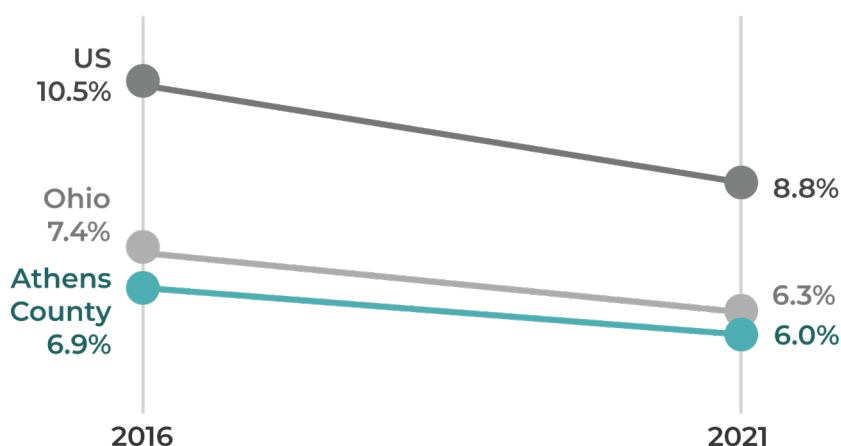
Athens County is located in a region of the state with a significant healthcare workforce shortage. A 2020 study by the Appalachian Regional Commission found many health-related disparities between Appalachian Ohio, non-Appalachian Ohio, and the US, including the following:

- Appalachian Ohio has 30% fewer primary care providers per 100,000 compared to non-Appalachian Ohio, and 25% fewer compared to the US.
- Appalachian Ohio has 41% fewer mental health providers per 100,000 compared to non-Appalachian Ohio, and 51% fewer compared to the US.
- Appalachian Ohio has 65% fewer specialty physicians per 100,000 compared to non-Appalachian Ohio, and 60% fewer compared to the US.
- Appalachian Ohio has 33% fewer dentists per 100,000 compared to non-Appalachian Ohio, and 36% fewer compared to the US.

Access to Care

Many of the residents of Athens County struggle to access physical, mental, and oral health care. Athens County has been designated as a Health Care Professional Shortage Area for primary care providers serving individuals with low incomes,¹² for dental care providers serving individuals with low incomes, and for mental health care providers serving individuals with low incomes. The Trimble and Lodi areas have been designated by the Health Resources and Services Administration as Medically Underserved Areas in the discipline of primary care.¹³ Access to care was identified as one of the top three health needs in the region by OhioHealth O'Bleness Hospital in its most recent Community Health Needs Assessment.¹⁴

One area of comparative strength for the county is health insurance coverage. While health insurance does not guarantee access to adequate care, a smaller percentage of Athens County residents are without health insurance compared to residents of Ohio and the US.



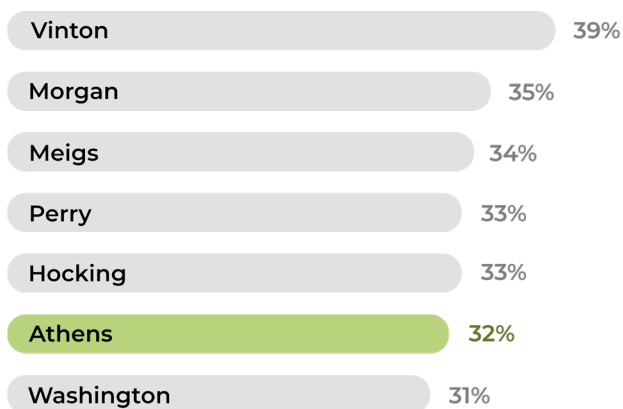
A smaller percentage of Athens County residents are uninsured, compared to residents of Ohio and the US.

Source: American Community Survey, Table S2701, 2021 ACS 5-Year Estimates S2701: Selected Characteristics of Health Insurance Coverage in the United States

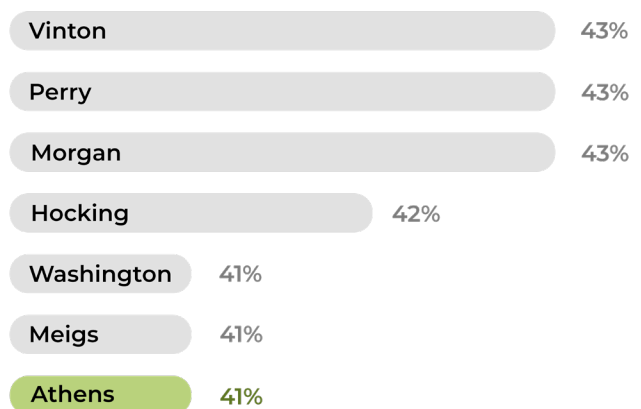
Members of the community are hard at work to increase Athens County residents' access to care. In 2017, Doctors Hospital of Nelsonville donated its former hospital building to Integrated Services for Behavioral Health. The building was then renovated into the Mary Hill Center, which is now home to providers of much needed new services, including Integrated Service's Qualified Residential Treatment Program and Hopewell Health Center's dental facility. Another positive development in this area was the start-up of the nonprofit Rising Sun Pharmacy, which began operations in 2022. The pharmacy provides free medication to area residents with limited or no insurance. 🌱

Health Behaviors

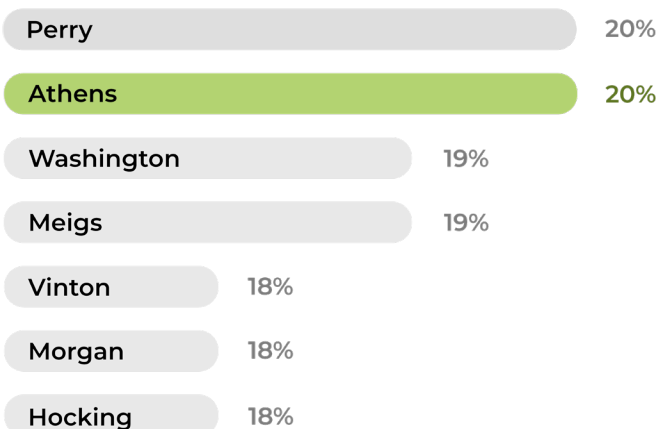
Adults in the county are using tobacco at a higher rate than adults in the state and the US, though at similar rates compared to surrounding counties. Athens County residents also report higher rates of physical inactivity than their counterparts across Ohio and the US. The percentage of Athens County residents who report excessive drinking is similar to that found in the state and nation. As the following figures indicate, though, the rates of physical inactivity, tobacco use, and insufficient sleep generally compare favorably to the same rates in surrounding counties. 🌱



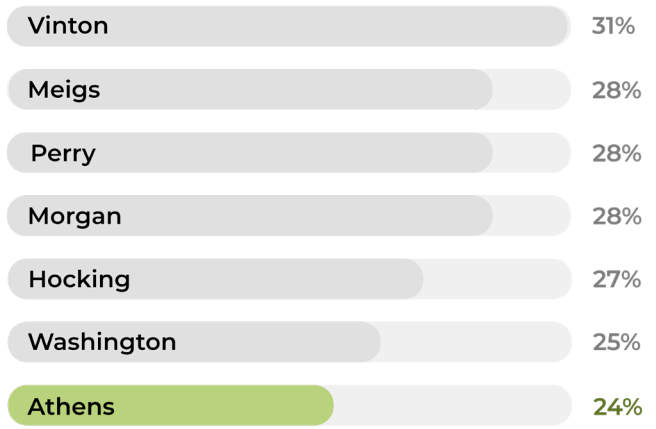
32% of Athens County residents report no leisure time physical activity.



41% of Athens County residents report insufficient sleep.



20% of Athens County residents report excessive or binge drinking.



24% of Athens County residents smoke.

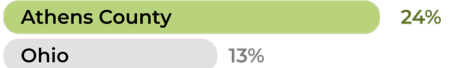
Source: University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2023). County Health Indicators

Addiction

The most recent health assessment conducted by the Athens City County Health Department identified addiction as the most pressing health problem in the county.¹⁵ Bureau of Criminal Investigations (BCI) data indicate that rates of availability and use of fentanyl, methamphetamine, and marijuana continue to be high in Athens County and the use of methamphetamines in particular is increasing. BCI also reports an increase in the use of sedative-hypnotics such as Xanax, including among young people. BCI informants attributed the use of these substances among high school-aged youth to school-related stress.¹⁶

Youth in the county are also vaping, or using electronic vapor products. The 2021 Ohio Youth Health Environment Survey found that a higher percentage of respondents from Athens County reported that they had ever vaped and/or that they had vaped in the last 30 days, compared to the survey sample as a whole. 🌱

Used in the past 30 days

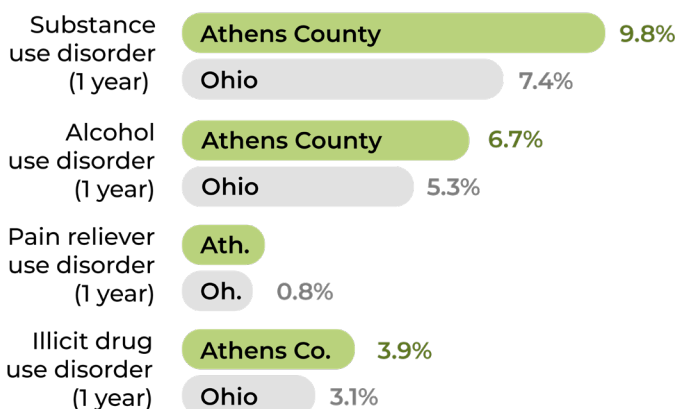


Ever used an electronic vapor product

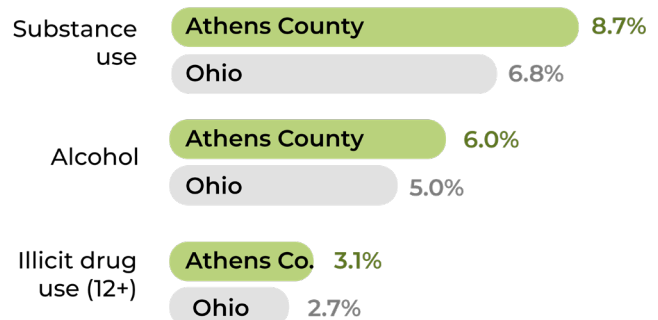


A higher percentage of Athens County youth report that they have ever vaped and/or that they have vaped in the past 30 days compared to survey respondents from across Ohio.

Source: Ohio Healthy Youth Environments Survey (OHYES!). (2021). OHYES! Report for Athens County - 2020-2021. Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.



Needing but not receiving treatment at a speciality facility in the past year



Athens County has slightly higher rates of substance use disorders compared to Ohio as a whole.

Athens County also has higher rates of individuals reporting unmet needs for substance use treatment.

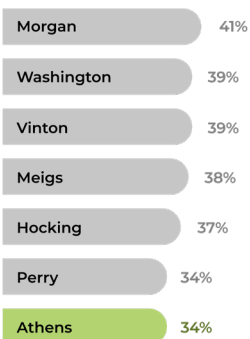
Source: OhioMHAS County Profiles, 2023-2035 ADAMH Community Plan (1-June-2022)



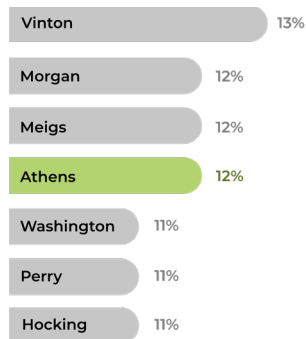
Health Outcomes

The Health Opportunity Index compiled by Ohio State University identifies the eastern portions of the county as those scoring highest on its **index of health factors** (meaning this area provides the most opportunity for good health). On the other hand, those living in the northwest corner of the county experience the most challenges in terms of health. Higher rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, preterm births, preventable emergency department admissions, and drug use disorder diagnoses contribute to the ranking of the Nelsonville and Glouster areas (and a portion of The Plains) in the bottom quartile of the state in terms of health opportunities.¹⁷

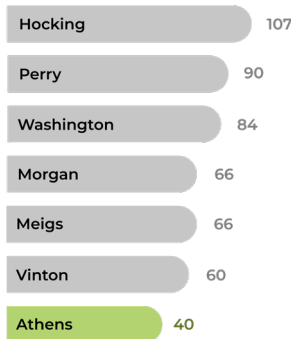
In 2016, a cohort of Athens County residents from the Athens City County Health Department and Ohio University became



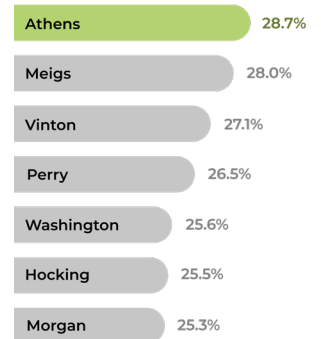
Rates of obesity in Athens County are among the lowest in the area.



Athens County has slightly higher rates of substance use disorders compared to Ohio as a whole.




COVID-19 age-adjusted mortality rates per 100,000 were lower in Athens County compared to neighboring counties.



Rates of depression among adults 18 and older are higher in Athens County compared to neighboring counties.

I was thinking how perfect this model is for our Appalachian region... I'm so impressed by this model that respects our local beliefs and values and we are building a whole new system to care for folks and respecting who they are and where they come from. It just blows my mind.

-Friendship Bench
Community Health Worker

certified to train Community Health Workers (CHWs). CHWs are frontline workers who provide information, social support, and advocacy for community members navigating the health system or dealing with health circumstances such as chronic disease behavioral health challenges, and aging. CHWs are typically members of the communities that they serve, and so bridge many of the cultural and linguistic barriers that face their clients.¹⁸ Through a variety of grants, the Health Department and Ohio University have increased the number of CHWs in the area. 

Mortality in Appalachian Ohio

A 2020 study by the Appalachian Regional Commission found many health-related disparities between Appalachian Ohio, non-Appalachian Ohio, and the US, including the following:

- Appalachian Ohio has a 35% higher Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease mortality rate compared to the US, and a 15% higher rate than non-Appalachian Ohio.
- Appalachian Ohio has a 29% higher injury mortality rate than the US, and a 21% higher rate than non-Appalachian Ohio.
- Appalachian Ohio has a 28% higher diabetes mortality rate than the US, and an 8% higher rate than non-Appalachian Ohio.
- Appalachian Ohio has a 19% higher suicide rate than the US, and an 8% higher rate than non-Appalachian Ohio.
- Appalachian Ohio has a 48% higher poisoning mortality rate (including deaths from drug overdoses) compared to the US, and an 18% higher than non-Appalachian Ohio.
- Appalachian Ohio has a 21% higher rate of infant mortality compared to the US, and a 1% lower rate compared to non-Appalachian Ohio.

Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, in conjunction with the Athens County Foundation, has prepared an additional data brief on health outcomes in Athens County. This brief is available from the Athens County Foundation.

Infrastructure

Achieving the goals of economic vitality, vibrant communities, and individual health and wellbeing requires a well-functioning underlying infrastructure. This infrastructure should reliably provide residents with utilities—including broadband access—and provides for safe transportation between residents' homes and resources such as healthy food and medical care. Athens County, like much of Appalachia, faces significant infrastructure-related challenges. Since 2016, Athens County has seen concerted efforts to expand public transportation, increase access to broadband, and remove blighted housing. 🌱





Nelsonville
Historic Square
Arts District

Transportation

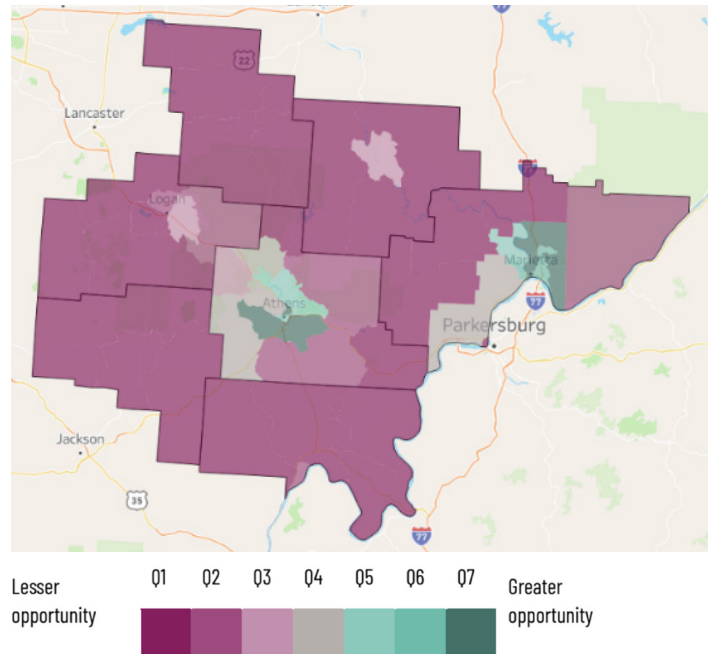
In order to access food, medical facilities, educational institutions, and many job opportunities, it is often necessary to travel to the City of Athens or the City of Nelsonville. In 2019, Hocking Athens Perry Community Action (HAPCAP) launched a pilot program that provides service to Nelsonville and Albany, to and from the City of Athens, in response to findings from the 2018 Athens County Coordinated Transportation Plan. In 2020, this pilot program became a permanent part of Athens Public Transit's regular service.¹⁹ Another result of the identified needs from the 2018 coordinated plan was the merger of Athens On-Demand Transit and Athens Public Transit, in order to provide service county-wide.

The 2020 Comprehensive Transportation plan identified several gaps in services, despite the growth of transportation options in the county and increasing coordination in the area of public transportation. The gaps identified in the report include: insufficient public transportation on weekends, during early morning hours, and evening hours of weekdays; limited availability of affordable, county-wide services; limited awareness of available transportation services among potential users; limited non-emergency



In 2019, Athens Public Transit expanded to include service to Nelsonville and Albany.

medical transportation options; and the need for coordination of public transportation efforts, especially with wheelchair-accessible transportation. The review also noted that residents who are 65 and older are geographically concentrated in the more rural areas of the



Transportation opportunities are concentrated in the City of Athens.

Athens County Board of County Commissions (2022), Athens County Coordinated Transportation Plan 2022-2026.

county, and these areas are not as well serviced by affordable transportation options. Athens County seniors who do live in the service area of transportation providers report that these services are often at full capacity, and they are not able to use the services when needed.

The inroads that have been made in addressing transportation barriers can be seen in the Transportation Opportunity map, which shows Athens and neighboring counties. The only areas in the seven-county region that are categorized as having high opportunity are in the Marietta area and in the City of Athens and surrounding communities. Opportunity is calculated based on commute time, households without a vehicle, and availability of public transportation. 🌱

Broadband

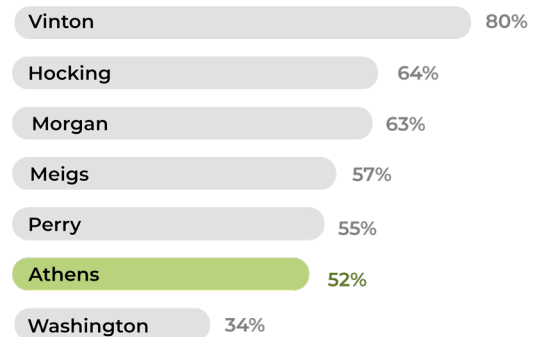
While census data and the state Broadband Strategy indicate that most of Athens County has access to broadband and home computers with internet connection, independent analyses indicate that the true state of broadband access in Athens County is much different. A large number of Athens County households do not have access to the internet. According to the Connecting Appalachia project, 52% of households in Athens County are not served by the current broadband network.²⁰ 81% of the populated area of the county does not have access to the Federal Communications Commission minimum of 25/3 megabits per second. It is estimated that bringing adequate broadband coverage to

Collaboration between the Athens County Foundation, the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations, and the Hocking Athens Perry Community Action Program led to the creation of a dedicated Athens County Broadband Coordinator.

the whole county will require over \$84 million and 921 miles of fiber.²¹

Much work is being done to advocate for expansion of the broadband infrastructure throughout the area. The Athens County Foundation has been a key participant in this process. Along with the Osteopathic Heritage Foundations and HAPCAP, the foundation has helped create and fund the position of Athens County

Broadband Coordinator. The Athens County Broadband Committee, Broadband Ohio, Buckeye Hills Regional Council, the Athens County Economic Development Council, the Appalachian Regional Commission, Connecting Appalachia, and others are working on both county-level and regional strategies to overcome the cost barriers to broadband expansion. The new funding is becoming available through the Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Program.²² 

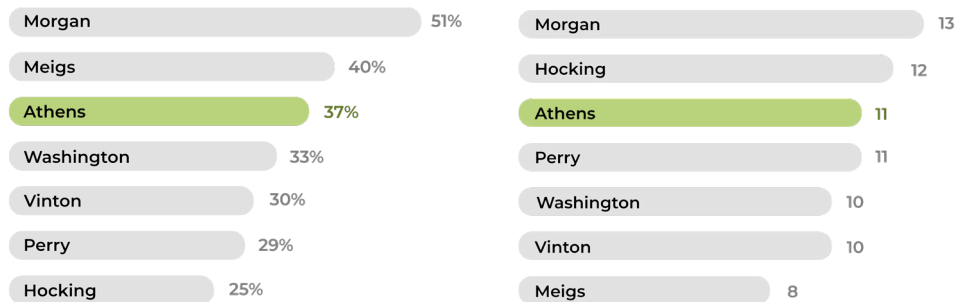


Broadband access in a regional problem. The % of Athens County households not served by a broadband network, while high, is lower than that of most neighboring counties.

Source: Connecting Appalachia. (2022, March 28). County profiles. Connecting Appalachia.

Childcare

Adequate childcare is a key driver of economic development and family stability. In Athens County, there are 11 childcare centers per 1,000 children under the age of five. These childcare centers are typically open during business hours on weekdays only, posing a challenge for parents or guardians who do shift work or work on weekends. When a household can find childcare, it is expensive. A household with two children can expect to pay roughly 37% of the Area Median Income for childcare. 🌱



Athens County residents with two children pay an average of 37% of the Area Median Income for childcare.

In Ohio, this average is 29%.

In Athens County there are 11 child care centers per 1,000 children below the age of 5.

The number for the state as a whole is 8.

Source: University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2023). County Health Indicators

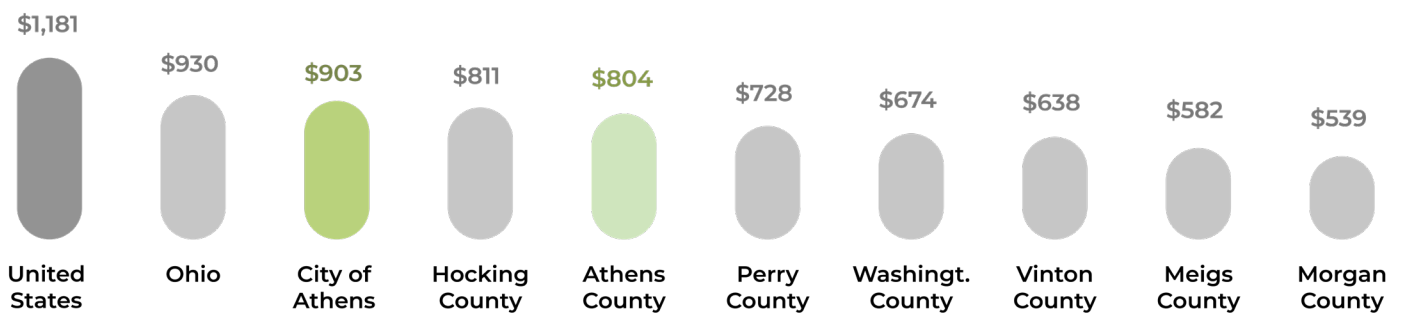


Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, in conjunction with the Athens County Foundation, has prepared an additional data brief on childcare in Athens County. This brief is available from the Athens County Foundation.



Housing

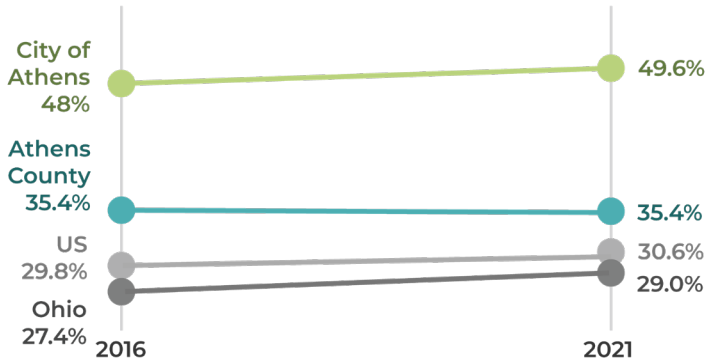
Whether an individual or family has access to safe, affordable housing affects their personal safety, employment opportunities, and transportation costs, as well as their future prospects for financial stability, educational attainment, and positive health outcomes. On a community level, available and affordable housing and available workforce are also necessary for economic development. In Athens County, there is much work being done to address the severe housing problems many community members face. 🌿




2021 median monthly housing costs in Athens County and the City of Athens are lower than median monthly housing costs in Ohio and the US, and generally higher than similar costs in surrounding counties.

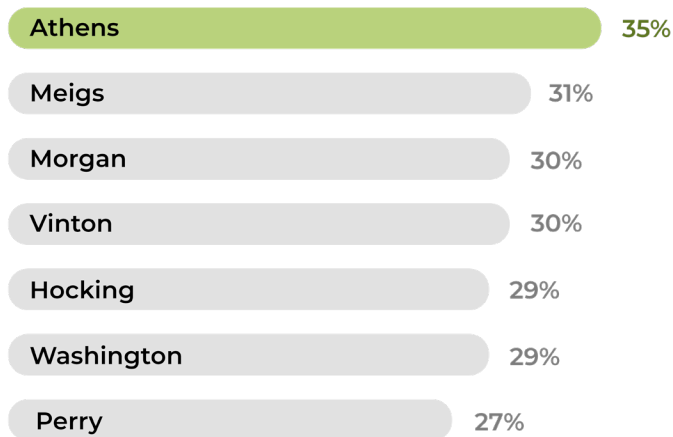
Source: American Community Survey, Table B25105, 2021 5-Year Estimates, Median Monthly Housing Costs (Dollars)

Rental Housing



Since 2016, median gross rent as a percentage of income has stayed the same in Athens County and risen slightly in the City of Athens.

 Note that available data stop at the same time COVID started.



2021 median gross rent as a percentage of income is higher in Athens County compared to surrounding counties.

 Note that available data stop at the same time COVID started.

Source: American Community Survey, Table B25071, 2021 5-Year Estimates, Median Gross Rent as a Percentage of Household Income in the Past 12 Months (Dollars)

The median gross rent in Athens County exceeds the threshold for housing cost burden, meaning that many community members spend over 30% of their monthly income on housing costs. When an individual or family is housing cost burdened, they are often forced to make difficult choices about spending priorities, such as choosing between prescription medication and groceries or gas money. This dilemma only intensifies with severe housing cost burden, or the need to spend over half of one's monthly income on housing. 40.4% of Athens County renters are classified as having a severe rent burden, which is a much higher rate than that seen statewide (23.0%).²³ The housing cost burden is highest for residents in Buchtel, Stewart, and New Marshfield.²⁴

Paying for other necessities besides rent is not the only problem faced by Athens County renters. Finding affordable, safe housing poses another significant challenge. In Athens County, for every 100 Very Low-Income renters (whose incomes are between 30 and 50 percent of area median income), there are only 58 available affordable units, while there are 80 available affordable units for every 100 VLI renters statewide.²⁵ The ratio worsens as income declines. For every 100 Extremely Low Income (ELI) renters (whose incomes are less than 30% of the area median income), there are only 22 affordable units available in the county. This is half the number of available, affordable units for every 100 ELI renters in the state of Ohio.²⁶

Homeownership

Athens County has a lower homeownership rate than that found in neighboring counties and the state as a whole. This rate is likely affected by the presence of Ohio University students in the county. 56.1% of Athens County residents are homeowners, compared to 67.3% of all Ohioans.²⁷ A little over 10% of Athens County homeowners are severely cost burdened by their mortgage payments, which is a somewhat higher percentage than the 8.44% found in the state. Nonetheless, the foreclosure rate in Athens County (0.55%) is slightly lower than the state's foreclosure rate (0.58%). 🌱

**Revitalization
is our game
and we're just
getting started.**

— Ric Wasserman,
Athens County
Land Bank
Chair, 2020
Annual Report



Vacant Housing

Blighted housing has been a persistent problem in the county, one that negatively impacts the property values of neighboring structures and creates the opportunity for crime. Over 4,000 housing units in Athens County (roughly 15.5% of all units) are vacant.²⁸ The launching of the Athens County Land Bank in 2018 has begun to address this issue, which is one that has been of great interest to local governments. As of 2021, the land bank has acquired 155 parcels, and returned 44 of these parcels to the tax rolls.²⁹

The Housing Opportunity Index, which is drawn from the Ohio State University's Ohio Opportunity Index project, indicates that housing challenges are greatest in the western portions of the county, in the City of Athens, and in the area immediately southeast of the City of Athens. The most overcrowding can be found in the far southwestern Census tract that includes the Village of Albany. The most housing turnover is found in the City of Athens, which is likely due to the presence of Ohio University. Opportunities for adequate housing are greatest in the eastern portions of the county. 🌱

Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, in conjunction with the Athens County Foundation, has prepared an additional data brief on housing in Athens County. This brief is available from the Athens County Foundation.



Outdoor Recreation, the Arts and Culture

With nearly 75% of the county covered in forests and grasslands, Athens County offers the opportunity to enjoy natural beauty and outdoor activities without the crowds found in some of Ohio's more well-known resort areas.³⁰ Residents and visitors can find ample opportunities for hiking, bicycling (road and mountain), camping, picnicking, horseback-riding, rock-climbing, ATV riding, backpacking, swimming, fishing, hunting, canoeing, kayaking, boating, and nature study. The county's abundance of public land includes city parks in Athens and Nelsonville, Strouds Run and Burr Oak State Parks, the Wayne National Forest, Giffer State Forest, Strouds Ridge Preserve, Dale and Jackie Riddle State Nature Preserve, Desonier Nature Preserve, Waterloo Wildlife Area, Poston Plant Lands Hunting Area, Hocking River Water Trail, Fox Lake Wildlife Area, Taylor Ridge Wildlife Area, and the Wallace H. O'Dowd Wildlife Area. Other resources include the 22-mile Hockhocking Adena Bikeway, the Moonville Rail Trail, the Athens to Belpre Rail Trail, The Ridges at Ohio University, Lake Snowden operated by Hocking College, Ferndale Park, Trimble Township Community Forest, and 13 Athens Conservancy Preserves.

In its first year of operation, the Baileys Trail System generated an estimated \$5.3 million.

To utilize Appalachian Ohio's plentiful outdoor recreation assets, diversify the regional economy, and provide social, environmental, and health benefits for Ohioans, the Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia (ORCA) was established in 2019. ORCA is managing the development and operations of the new Baileys Trail System in partnership with the Wayne National Forest and Athens Bicycle Club. The Baileys Trail System will offer 88 miles of trails for all skill levels of cyclists, hikers, runners, adaptive athletes, hunters, and nature enthusiasts. "Since June 2020, 49 miles of trails have been added, and by the end of 2023, 57 miles are expected to be completed," states Jessie Powers, Executive Director of ORCA. Two trailheads are currently open--the Chauncey-Dover Park Trailhead and the Doanville-York Trailhead, with a third trailhead to be constructed in Buchtel adjacent to the Snow Fork Event Center and within one mile of the school complex.

Since its founding, Baileys has demonstrated that outdoor recreation opportunities can be a boost for the region. "To date, Baileys has raised \$14 million in investments," says Powers. Baileys received a \$2 million Appalachian Regional

Commission Power Grant in 2021, and they have received an Ohio Department of Natural Resources grant for construction to begin in 2024 on a 5,000 square foot visitors center/community space at the Chauncey-Dover Trailhead. In addition, an economic impact study by Ohio University's Parks, Recreation, and Leisure Studies Program & the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service conservatively estimated that in the trail system's first year of operation, the total economic impact related to trail tourism of Baileys was \$5.3 million.³¹ Of the estimated \$5.3 million, over \$3.6 million was directly contributed to the local economy through the demands of goods and services, the study found. Powers notes that, "This level of impact was with no amenities, no restrooms, and no water," and expects the impact to increase beyond \$5.3 annually as amenities are added.

Supporters anticipate that the Baileys Trail System and other opportunities will lead to the development, small scale manufacturing, and sale of outdoor recreation products in Athens County. As Powers predicts, "With our abundance of public land, if we develop world class recreational opportunities, we will bring investment and attract people." 

Racial Equity

In June of 2020, the Athens City Council passed Resolution R-10-20, which declared racism a public health crisis. The city then began an extensive review of its practices, policies, and procedures, the results of which will inform training that will be provided to all city employees. This development built on the work of many organizations that have worked throughout the county to address racial inequities and celebrate the diversity of Athens County residents. 🌱

Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, in conjunction with the Athens County Foundation, has prepared an additional data brief on racial equity in Athens County. This brief is available from the Athens County Foundation.



- 1 Bishaw, A. (2013). Examining the effect of off-campus college students on poverty rates. US Census Bureau, Social, Economic & Housing Statistics Division, Poverty Statistics Branch.
- 2 <https://www.arc.gov/classifying-economic-distress-in-appalachian-counties/>
- 3 <https://devresearch.ohio.gov/files/research/C1091.pdf>
- 4 For this reason, this report does not include measures of income inequality, even though Athens County is widely cited as the county with the largest rate of inequality in household incomes. Research shows that controlling for students in off-campus housing changes the income inequality ratio considerably.
- 5 Food Environment Index | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps
- 6 Athens City County Health Department, Athens County Community Health Assessment, 2020-2023
- 7 https://cms2.revize.com/revize/athenssch/2020HealthAssessment_ACCHD_v3.pdf
- 8 <https://communityfoodinitiatives.org/about/financials-reports-governance.html>
- 9 Chmura Economics and Analytics (2023). JobsEQ Economic overview, Athens County, Ohio.
- 10 U.S. Census County Business Patterns (2023). Athens County business establishment counts by number of employees and total county employment, 2014-2020. Provided by James Woodard, Research Analyst, Ohio Southeast Economic Development, via personal communication February 3, 2023. Note: data for businesses with >999 employees are withheld to avoid disclosure.
- 11 Chmura Economics and Analytics (2023). JobsEQ Economic overview, Athens County, Ohio.
- 12 https://hpdw.osu.edu/t/OID/views/OIDashboard2020-07-10_6AM_E/Dashboard1?%3Aembed_code_version=3&%3Aembed=y&%3AloadOrderID=1&%3Adisplay_spinner=no&%3AshowAppBanner=false&%3Adisplay_count=n&%3AshowVizHome=n&%3Aorigin=viz_share_link
- 13 <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/shortage-area/hpsa-find>
- 14 <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/shortage-area/mua-find>
- 15 2022 OhioHealth O'Bleness Hospital Community Health Needs Assessment <https://www.ohiohealth.com/siteassets/find-a-location/hospitals/oblness-hospital/about-us/community-health-needs-assessment/ohiohealth-chna-2022-oblness-hospital.pdf>
- 16 2022 OhioHealth O'Bleness Hospital Community Health Needs Assessment <https://www.ohiohealth.com/siteassets/find-a-location/hospitals/oblness-hospital/about-us/community-health-needs-assessment/ohiohealth-chna-2022-oblness-hospital.pdf>
- 16 Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring Network (2022). Surveillance of Drug Abuse Trends in the State of Ohio. <https://mha.ohio.gov/static/ResearchandData/DataandReports/OSAM/OSAM-Drug-Trend-Report-January2022.pdf>
- 17 https://hpdw.osu.edu/t/OID/views/OIDashboard2020-07-10_6AM_E/Dashboard1?%3Aembed_code_version=3&%3Aembed=y&%3AloadOrderID=1&%3Adisplay_spinner=no&%3AshowAppBanner=false&%3Adisplay_count=n&%3AshowVizHome=n&%3Aorigin=viz_share_link
- 18 Information provided by Kerri Shaw, Associate Professor of Instruction and Community Health Worker Lead, Ohio Alliance for Population Health, Ohio University.
- 19 Athens County Board of County Commissions (2022), Athens County Coordinated Transportation Plan 2022-2026
- 20 <https://connectingappalachia.org/countyprofile/athens-county/>
- 21 Reid Consulting Group (July 30, 2022). Broadband Planning Project, funded by the Ohio Valley Regional Development Commission; <https://connectingappalachia.org/mapping/county-profiles/printable-county-profiles/#1648495209194-a87e2c0a-79e2>
- 22 Office of the Governor, State of Ohio (March 18, 2022). Governor DeWine, Lt. Governor Husted Announce New Broadband Expansion Projects <https://governor.ohio.gov/media/news-and-media/Governor-DeWine-Lt-Governor-Husted-Announce-New-Broadband-Expansion-Projects-03182022>
- 23 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Tables B25070 and B25106 via OHFA
- 24 U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, GROSS RENT AS A PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS Table B25070
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- 26 Ohio Housing Finance Agency, Fiscal Year 2021 Housing Needs Assessment <https://ohiohome.org/hna-20/executivesummary-hna.aspx>
- 27 OHFA 2021
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- 31 Jordan, K.A., Wilson, N.B. & McCarthy, D. (2021). Economic impact of the Baileys Trail System. The Parks, Recreation, and Leisure Studies Program & the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.

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