

Demographic Trends of Northampton, MA

Prepared by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission

This report explores Northampton's demographic, housing, transportation, and economic trends, looking at many different indicators across different time ranges¹ and comparing them to the rest of Hampshire County, Massachusetts, and the United States.

Executive Summary

- Northampton's population has been remarkably steady in the past 70 years.
- The population has a 60%-40% split between women and men.
- There are fewer people under 40 and more people over 40 than there were 30 years ago.
- As a result, the population is aging, with a median age of 40.
- Higher enrolment in Smith College has countered the fall in young adults.
- The aging population has not led to a considerable decline in the working-age population.
- The aging population has led to a decline of 20% in elementary school enrolment in the past 25 years.
- There are fewer children under five years old as a proportion of the total population compared to Hampshire County or Massachusetts.
- Nearly 80% of the population is non-Hispanic white, with some increase in racial diversity since 1990, especially among the school-age population.
- The majority of housing in Northampton was built before 1959.
- The city issued more approvals for multi-family homes in 2017 than at any other point in time since 2000.
- Despite the higher availability of multifamily housing since 2017, fewer people live in them.
- 70% of workers use a car to commute – over 90% of whom drive alone – while 25% walk, cycle, or telecommute.
- Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, few workers used public transport to get to work.
- Median house sale prices are higher in Northampton than in Hampshire County, and the spread is growing.
- Median sale prices for houses are three times higher than in 1994.
- Median rent is slightly higher than the rest of the county.
- Two-thirds of workers (8,900 people) commute out of the city while 16,000 commute in, creating a jobs-housing balance of 1.65.²
- The rent and mortgage burden (spending > 30% of income on housing) and extreme housing burden (spending > 50% of income on housing) in Northampton is similar to the rest of the county and state.
- Median income is lower, and poverty rates are higher in Northampton than in the rest of the county or state, though lower than in Amherst, Springfield, Chicopee, and Holyoke.

¹ Time ranges for data analysis vary somewhat due to differences in the availability of data.

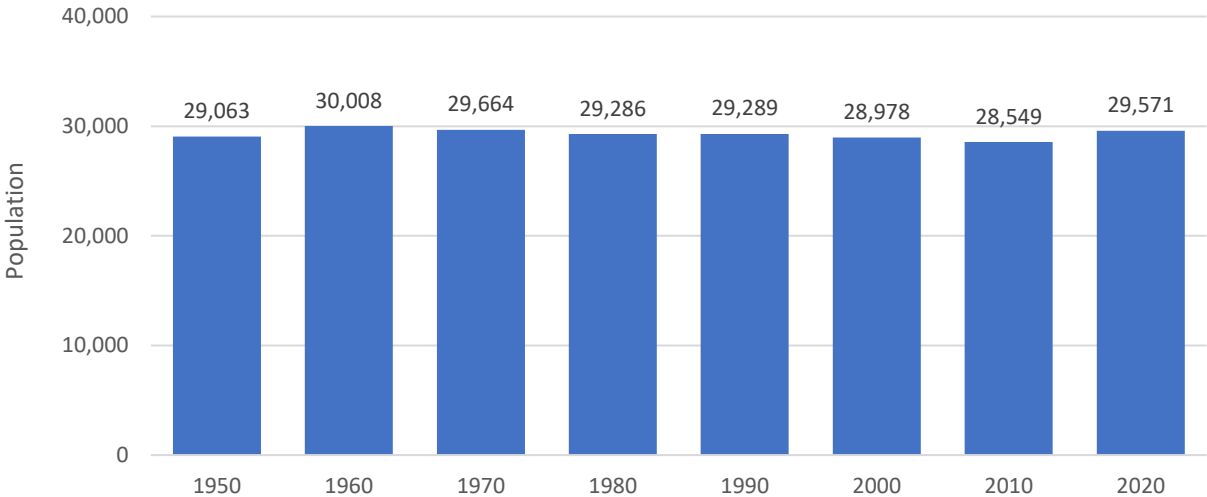
² Calculated by dividing the number of jobs in Northampton in 2019 (20,069) by the number of housing units in Northampton (12,137).

Demographic Trends

Population

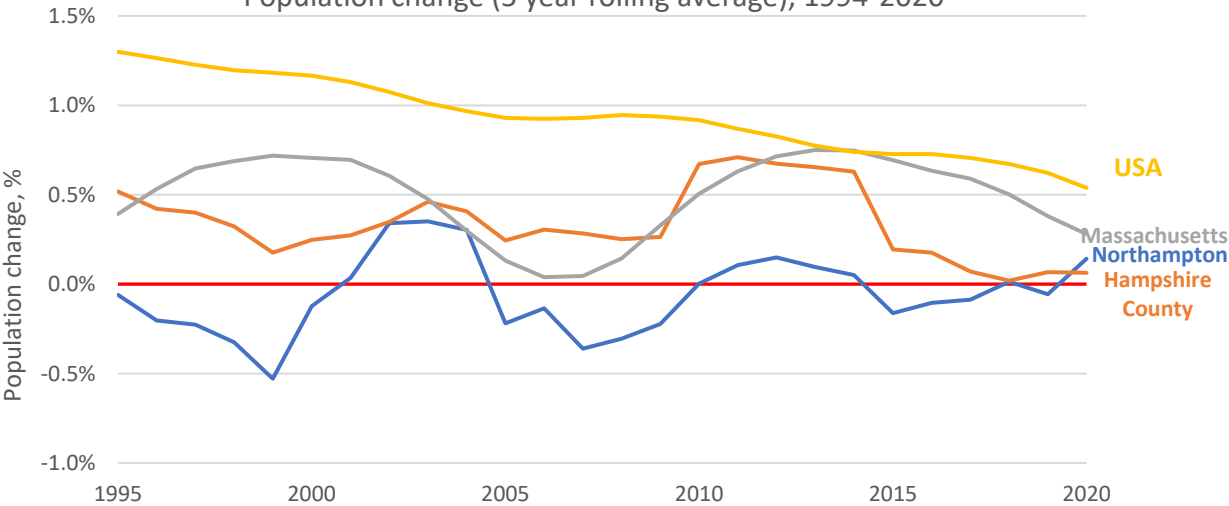
Northampton had 29,571 residents as of 2020. This has remained remarkably consistent over the past 70 years, varying between 28,000 and 30,000 people. By contrast, the rest of the county grew by 85% in the same period, from 87,594 in 1950 to 162,308 in 2020. Northampton is therefore increasing much more slowly than the rest of the county. Indeed, while population growth at the county, state, or national level has been mostly positive since 1990, population growth in Northampton has been more cyclical – with years of falling population and years with more people. The city’s population peaked in 1960 at just over 30,000 people.

Northampton Population by decade, 1950 - 2020



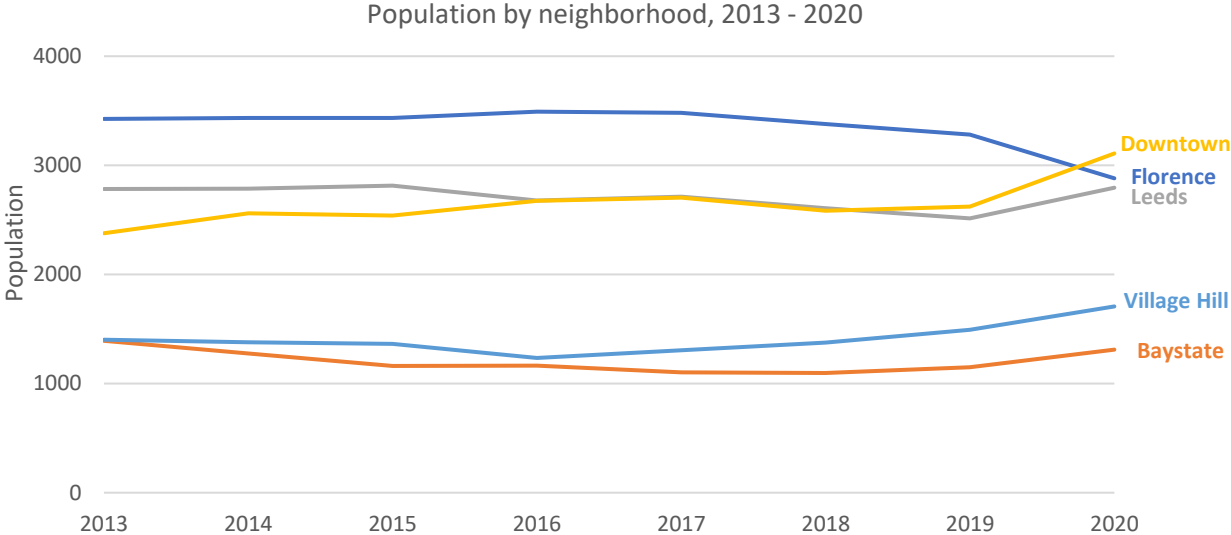
Source: US Decennial Census.

Population change (5 year rolling average), 1994-2020



Source: US Decennial Census, USAfacts.

Northampton has five recognized villages or neighborhoods: Downtown, Village Hill, Bay State, Florence, and Leeds. Within Northampton, Florence town and Leeds village have shown remarkably stable populations between 2013 and 2019 (Florence’s population declined in 2020, while Leeds increased). The downtown population has steadily grown since 2013 from 2400 people to 3100 people in 2020 - an increase of around 30%. The population in Village Hill increased by 20% in the same period, from 1400 people to 1700 people in 2020.

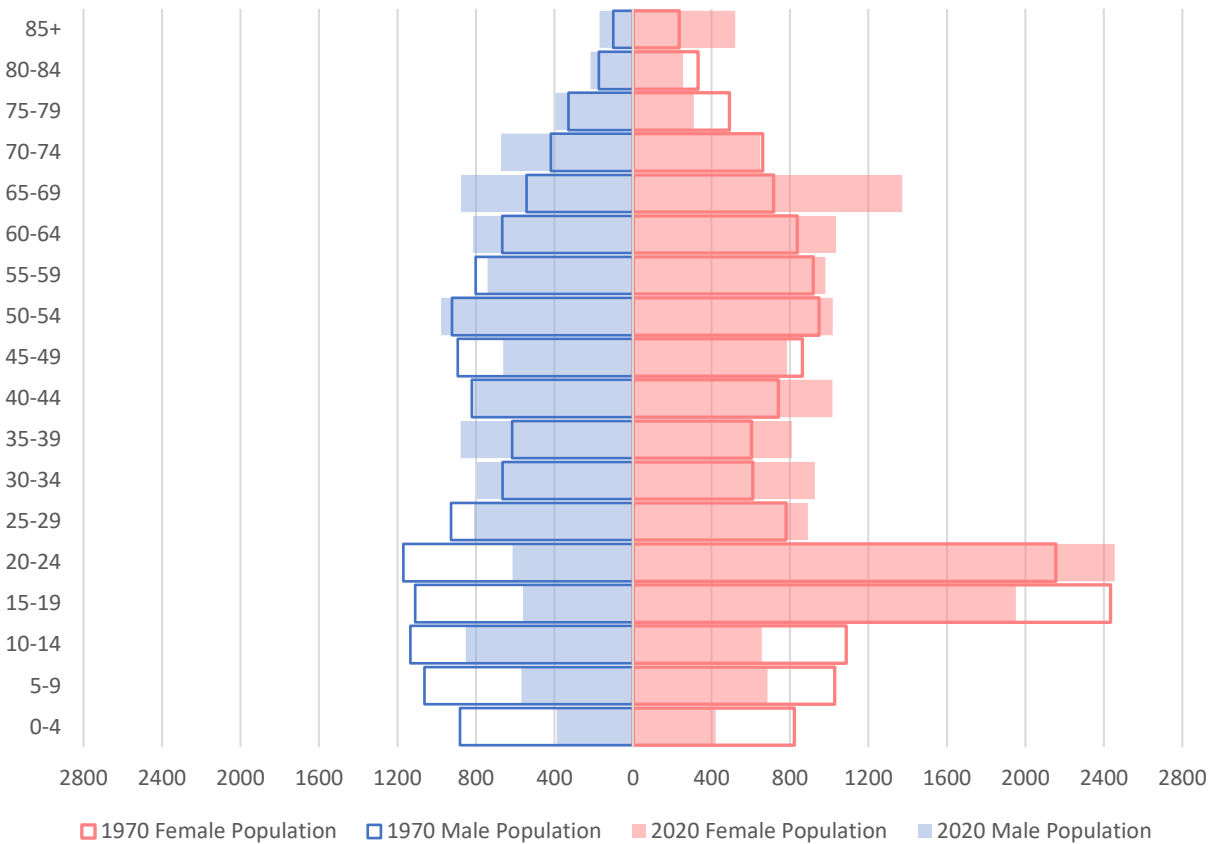


Source: American Community Survey.

Most of the population resides in single-family houses. The number of people living in single-family dwellings has risen since 2010, from 14,864 to 15,628 in 2020. Meanwhile, the number of people living in multi-family households has been cyclical in the past ten years, rising from 9,819 in 2010 to a peak at 10,402 in 2017 before declining to 9,100 in 2020. The share of people living in group quarters has halved since 1960, from more than 20% of the population in 1960 (6,300 out of a total population of 30,000) to just over 10% now (3,200 out of a total population of 29,571). The main reason for this decline is the closure of Northampton State Hospital in the late 1980s and the decline of the resident population at the Veterans Administration Medical Center. Now students at Smith College make up the bulk of Northampton’s group housing.

The population is split roughly by 60% women and 40% men. Women make up 80% of adults aged 20-24 in Northampton because of Smith College. The Population Pyramid below shows a large young cohort in 1970 and a small cohort aged 25-40. The youth bulge gets older over time but is not getting replaced. There are now fewer adults between 25-45 than there were in 1990. In fact, there are much fewer men under 50 than there were 30 years ago, excluding the 15-19 age group. By contrast, there are more adults are 50 and over than there were in 1990, except for women between 75-84.

Population Pyramid of Northampton, 1970 - 2020



Age structure

The takeaway from the Population Pyramid is that Northampton has an aging population. Its median age has risen from 37.6 years in 2020 – below the median for the state – to 40 in 2020 – above the state median. The rest of the county has a younger population, with a median age of 36.6 years in 2020.

Broken down by age group, the city has a similar age structure to the rest of the county. Both Northampton and Hampshire County have a greater share of people in their late teens and early 20s than the rest of the state, because of the number of colleges in the area. Northampton has a slightly higher proportion of young adults than the rest of the county, but a lower proportion compared to the rest of Massachusetts. Northampton has fewer children under five as a share of the population than the rest of the state or county.

Downtown has a slightly lower percentage of older adults (65+) than in other areas of Northampton. These latter three districts also have a higher rate of children than downtown, suggesting that downtown has a higher proportion of the working population.

Percent of population in age group, 2020

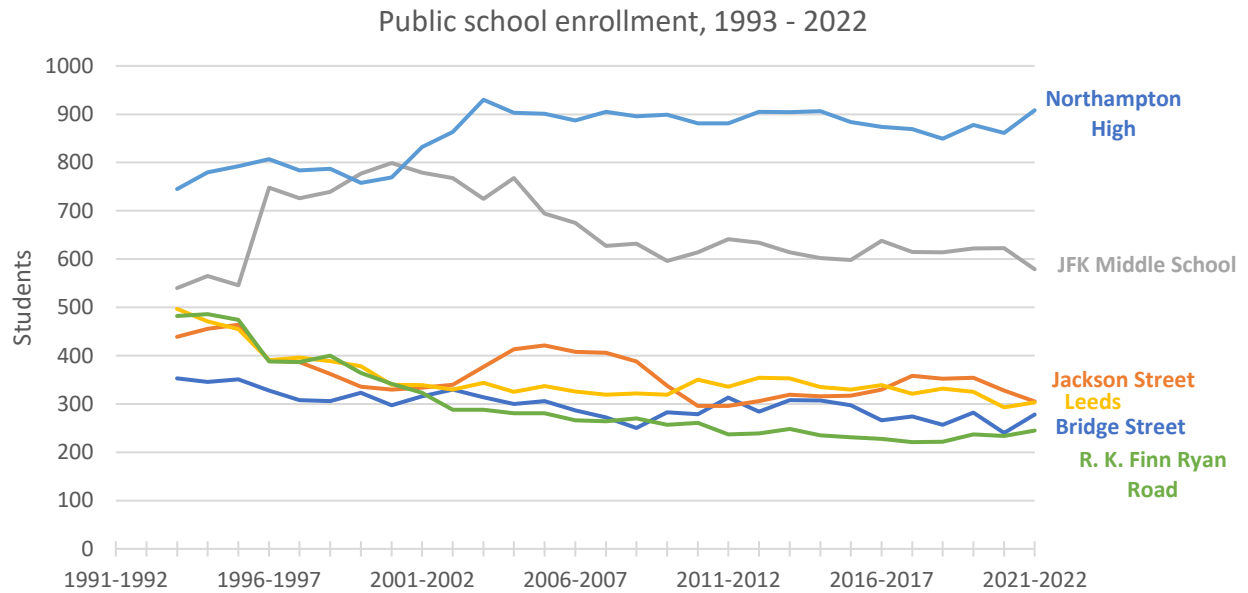
| Age Composition | Northampton | Hampshire County | Massachusetts |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Under 5 years | 2.8% | 3.4% | 5.2% |
| 5 to 9 years | 4.4% | 3.8% | 5.3% |
| 10 to 14 years | 5.3% | 4.5% | 5.7% |
| 15 to 19 years | 8.8% | 11.4% | 6.6% |
| 20 to 24 years | 10.7% | 14.8% | 7.1% |
| 25 to 29 years | 6.0% | 5.4% | 7.3% |
| 30 to 34 years | 6.0% | 5.0% | 7.0% |
| 35 to 39 years | 5.9% | 4.8% | 6.3% |
| 40 to 44 years | 6.4% | 4.9% | 6.0% |
| 45 to 49 years | 5.1% | 5.4% | 6.4% |
| 50 to 54 years | 7.0% | 6.0% | 6.9% |
| 55 to 59 years | 6.0% | 6.7% | 7.1% |
| 60 to 64 years | 6.5% | 6.6% | 6.5% |
| 65 to 69 years | 7.9% | 6.2% | 5.4% |
| 70 to 74 years | 4.6% | 4.4% | 4.1% |
| 75 to 79 years | 2.5% | 2.7% | 2.7% |
| 80 to 84 years | 1.7% | 1.8% | 1.9% |
| 85 years and over | 2.4% | 2.2% | 2.4% |

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

The city has experienced a sustained decrease in children since 1970. In the past 50 years, the number of residents under 18 years old has fallen from 7,500 to 4,300. Fewer young children have led to lower enrollment in elementary schools. Together, elementary school enrollment has declined from 1771 students in the 1993-94 school year to 1198 in 2019-2020.³ In other words, **elementary school enrollment has reduced by 20% since 1996**. Enrollment in Northampton High School has increased since 1993, while enrollment in JFK Middle School has been gradually declining after a significant increase in 1995 (when 6th graders started going to

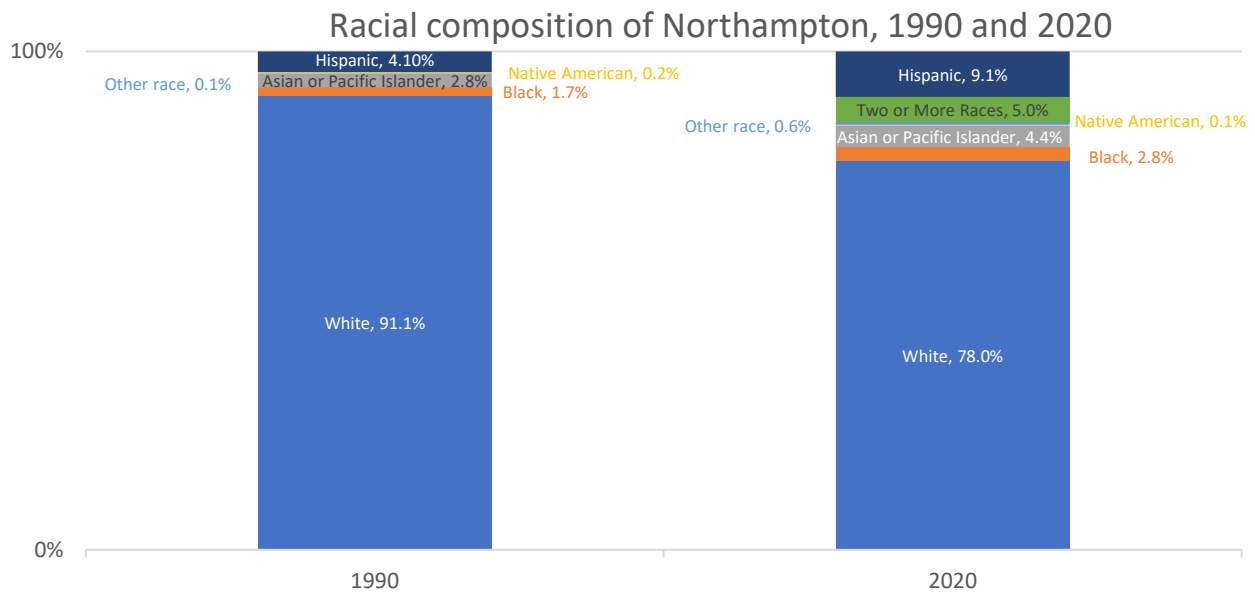
³ Comparison with the 2020-21 or 2021-22 school years has been deliberately omitted because of the extraneous circumstances of COVID-19.

middle school rather than elementary school). The decline in school-age children parallels a similar trend across the county and state.



Racial characteristics

Northampton does not have a lot of racial diversity, though it has become more diverse since 1990. Nearly 80% of the population is non-Hispanic white (26,900 people), lower than in 1990 (28,100 people or 91%). Less than 3% of the population is Black. Hispanic people of various races have more than doubled in the past 30 years, from 1,200 people to 2,700 people. The number of Native Americans has been declining since 2000, and now there are just 34 Native Americans in Northampton – half that from 20 years ago.



Source: US Decennial Census.

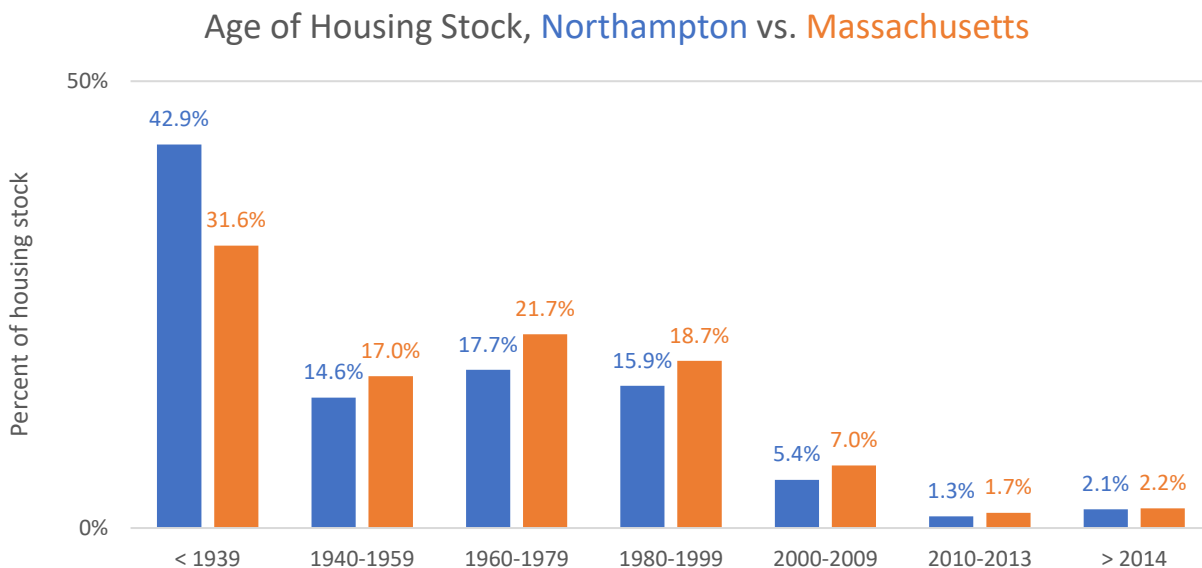
Housing Trends

There are an estimated 13,668 housing units in Northampton as of 2020, an increase of about 940 units since a decade ago, mostly from a significant building boom in the last few years. There are 50% more units than there were 50 years ago – even though the population has stayed the same. As a result, household size has declined substantially, from 3.3 people per unit in 1970 to 2.2 in 2020. Household size is slightly lower than the rest of the county (2.3 in 2020) or the state (2.5).

Housing units in the downtown area have been trending upward, while units in Florence and Leeds have declined. There was a sharp decrease in units in Leeds between 2019 and 2020, while there was a moderate uptick in units in Bay State Village during that period.

Most households are single-family homes. There are 6,286 occupied single-family homes in Northampton, compared to 5,066 occupied multi-family units. The number of occupied multi-family units has been declining steadily since 2010. Just under 60% of units are owner-occupied.

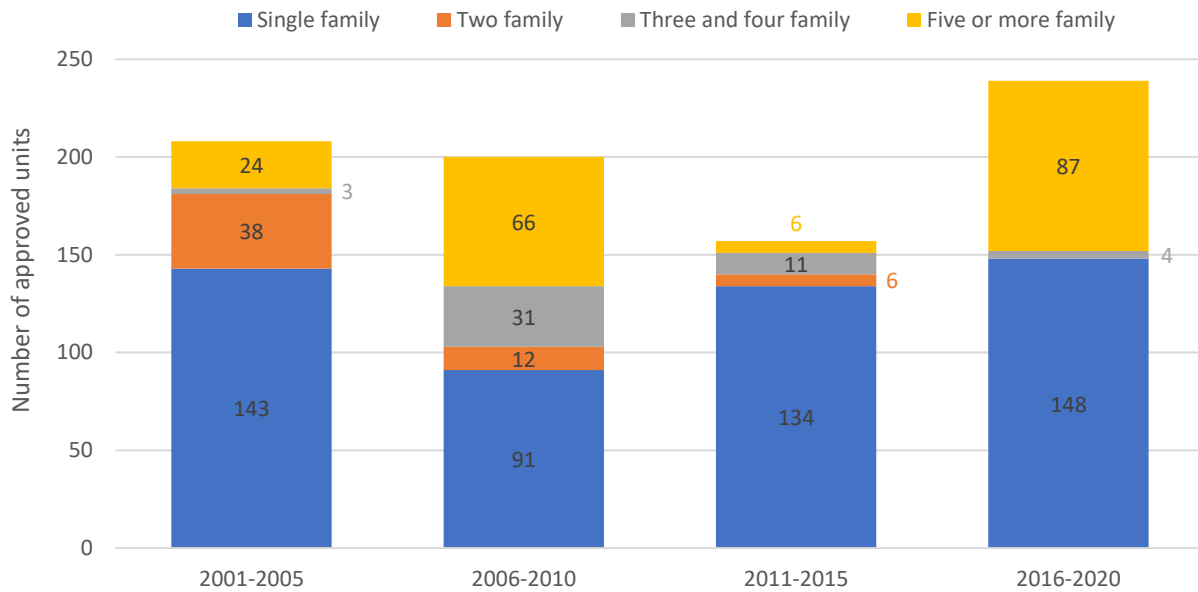
Most housing stock was built before 1959, and more than 40% before World War Two. Houses in the rest of the state are slightly younger.



Source: Massachusetts Housing Partnership.

Housing approvals have, predictably, followed the national economic performance, with years of decline during recessions. There has been recent interest in constructing multi-family homes in Northampton. Planned medium-density apartment buildings such as Live 155 and the Lumber Yard resulted in many units being approved in 2017.

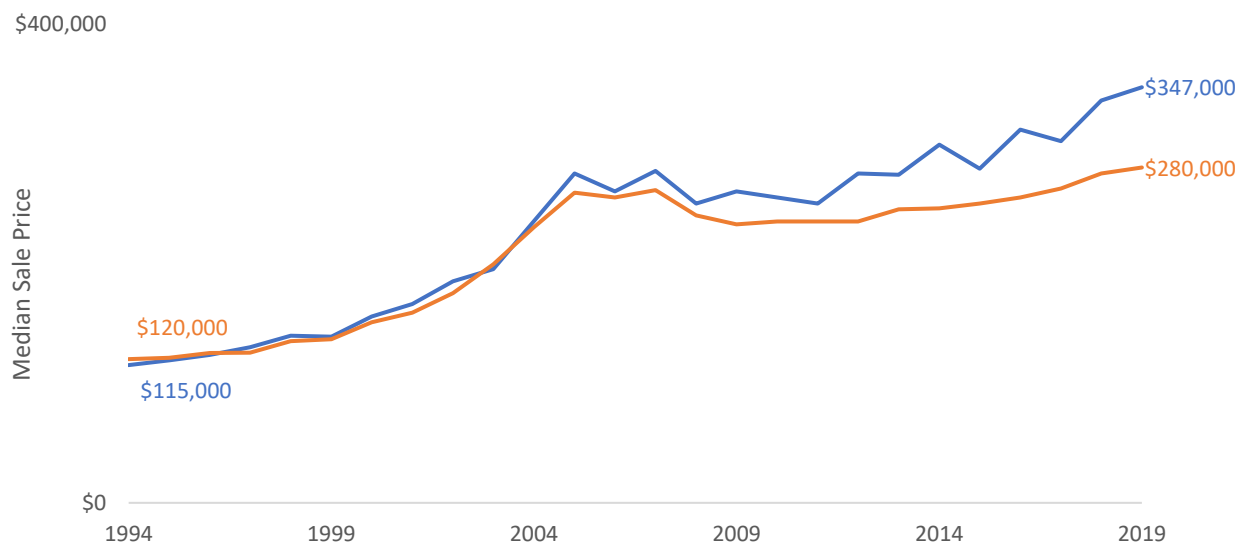
Approved residential building units, 2000 - 2020



Source: MHP Center for Housing Data

Median sale **prices for single-family homes are about three times higher in 2019 than in 1994.** It increased from \$118,000 to nearly \$350,000 in that period. Since 2005, median sale prices have risen faster in Northampton than in the rest of the county, even though there is more significant population growth outside of Northampton. The share of houses valued under \$300,000 has fallen in the past decade, while those above \$300,000 now constitute most of the housing in the city. Indeed, the share of houses valued at over \$1 million has tripled since 2010, from 0.9% to 2.7%. House values will likely be even higher in 2022, given nationwide trends. This pattern suggests that not enough housing units are being constructed to serve market demand, which presumably leads to a higher rate of housing price and rental inflation.

Median Sale Prices for Single-Family Homes, Northampton vs. Hampshire County

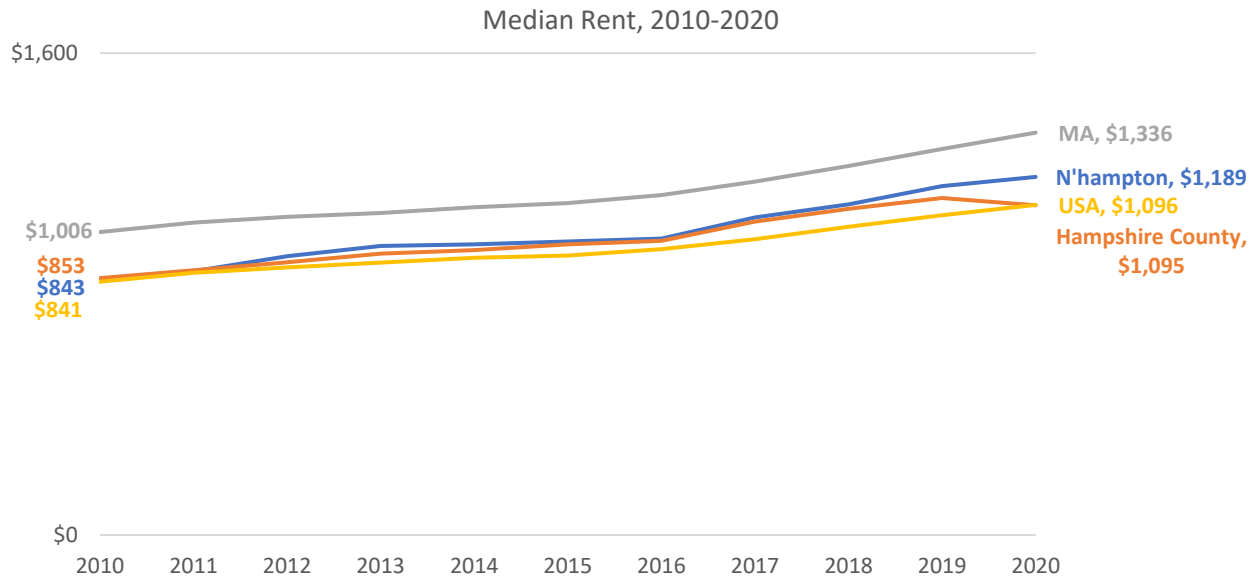


Source: The Warren Group

Despite the increase in average sale prices in Northampton compared to the rest of the county, the city has a slightly lower percentage of people paying 30% of their income on their mortgages. In Northampton, 28% of homeowners have a high ownership burden compared to 29% for the county and 30% for the state.

The divergence between Northampton and Hampshire County for median rent is less pronounced. Median rent increased from \$843 in 2010 to \$1,189 in 2020 in Northampton and \$853 to \$1,095 in Hampshire County. The median rent in Northampton (and the rest of the county) has consistently been lower than the rest of the state but often higher than the rest of the country. Even though median rent is lower in Northampton than in the rest of Massachusetts, the share of people paying more than 30% of their income on rent is higher. In Northampton and the county, 53% of renters pay more than 30% of their income on rent, compared to 49% for the entire state. Over a fifth of Northampton renters pay more than half of their income on rent. Reported rental prices, however, do not include broker fees charged to many renters at the start of their tenancy. Broker fees can range between 60-75% of rent.⁴

⁴ Daily Hampshire Gazette. "Northampton eyes ban on rental broker fees." March 31, 2022.



Source: American Community Survey.

Transportation and Commuting

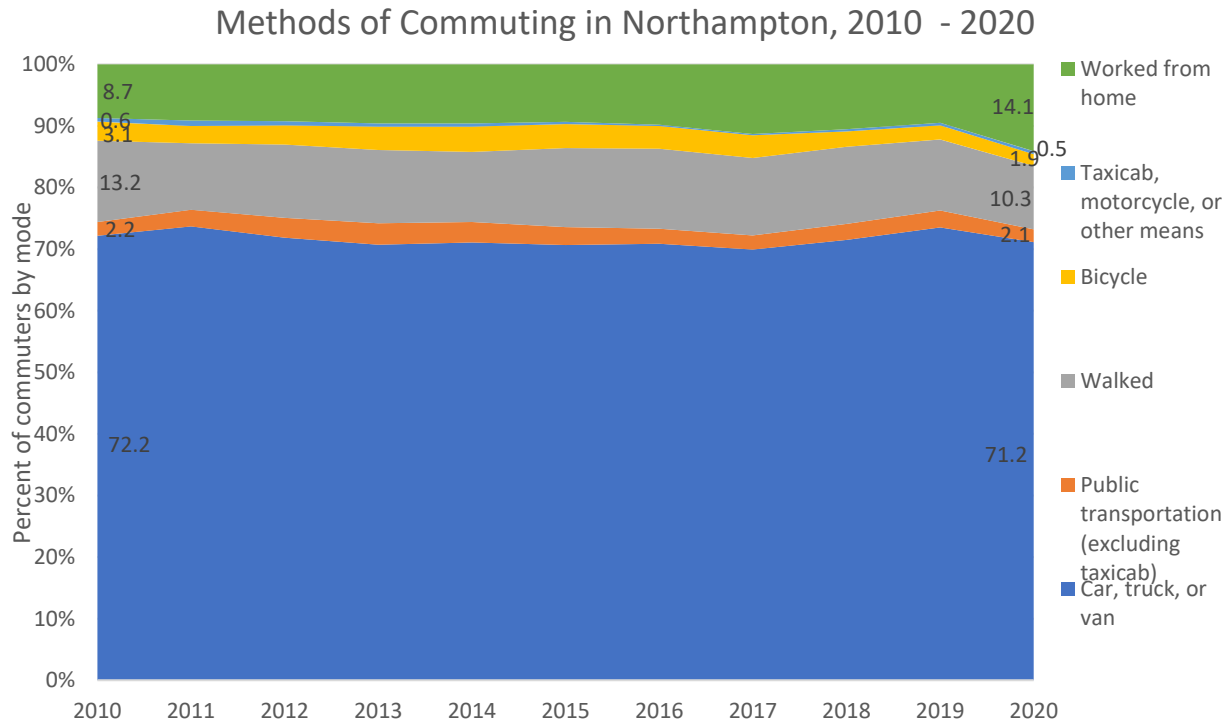
The average number of cars per household in Northampton has increased in the past 30 years. In 1990 the number of cars per household was 0.5, rising to 0.9 by the late 2000s. It dropped to 0.8 in 2015.

Around 10% of households do not own a car, higher than the country and county averages but lower than the state average. Fewer than 40% of households have one car, a decline of six percentage points since 2010, but still higher than the county, state, and country. The share of households owning two vehicles has increased from 31% in 2010 to 37% in 2020. The proportion of households owning three or more cars decreased from 12.5% in 2010 to 9.6% in 2015 but increased to 13.2% in 2020. It is unclear whether the increase in 2-car households is because of people buying second cars (accounting for the reduction in 1-car families) or selling their cars (accounting for the decrease in 3+ car households). Surprisingly, downtown has a higher average vehicle ownership rate per building than other neighborhoods, apart from Leeds – although this is likely because of the surrounding residential areas that buffer downtown.

| Number of Vehicles per Household, 2020 | USA | Massachusetts | Hampshire County | Northampton |
|--|--------|---------------|------------------|-------------|
| 0 | 8.50% | 12.20% | 7.60% | 9.80% |
| 1 | 32.50% | 35.10% | 35.10% | 39.50% |
| 2 | 37.10% | 36.10% | 38.70% | 37.40% |
| 3+ | 22.00% | 16.50% | 18.60% | 13.20% |

Source: American Community Survey.

Around 70% of workers in Northampton use a car to get to work. Of those that drive to work, 90% drive alone, and the remaining carpool. As discussed later in the Economy section, the majority of workers commute in from outside the city, resulting in high car use. Just 2 percent of workers use public transport, while 16% walk or use a bicycle. Between 9 and 10 percent of workers telecommuted in the past decade. Modes of commuting have not changed considerably in the last decade, although the percentage of people working from home had increased in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.



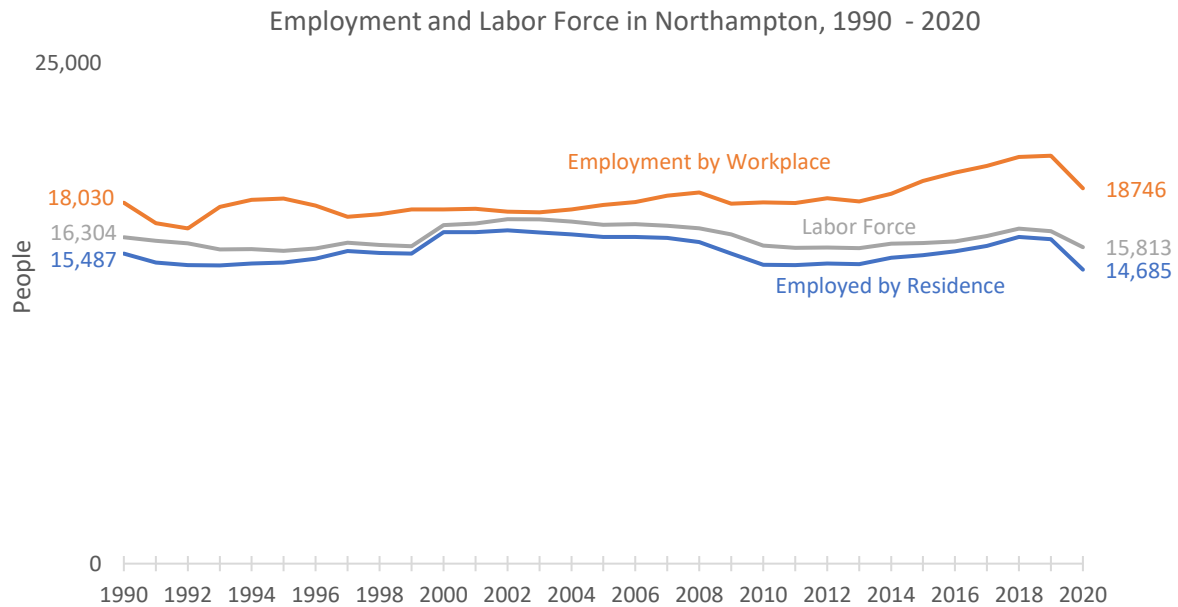
Source: American Community Survey.

In 2018, the municipal government installed ValleyBike Share stations around the city. There are 19 stations as of 2021. Ridership in 2019, the first full year of operation, was 23,000. This fell by more than half in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. By 2021 ridership had more than recovered to 29,000 rides. Most trips are intra-city; about 5-6% of trips taken to Amherst and the same percentage to Easthampton.

Economy

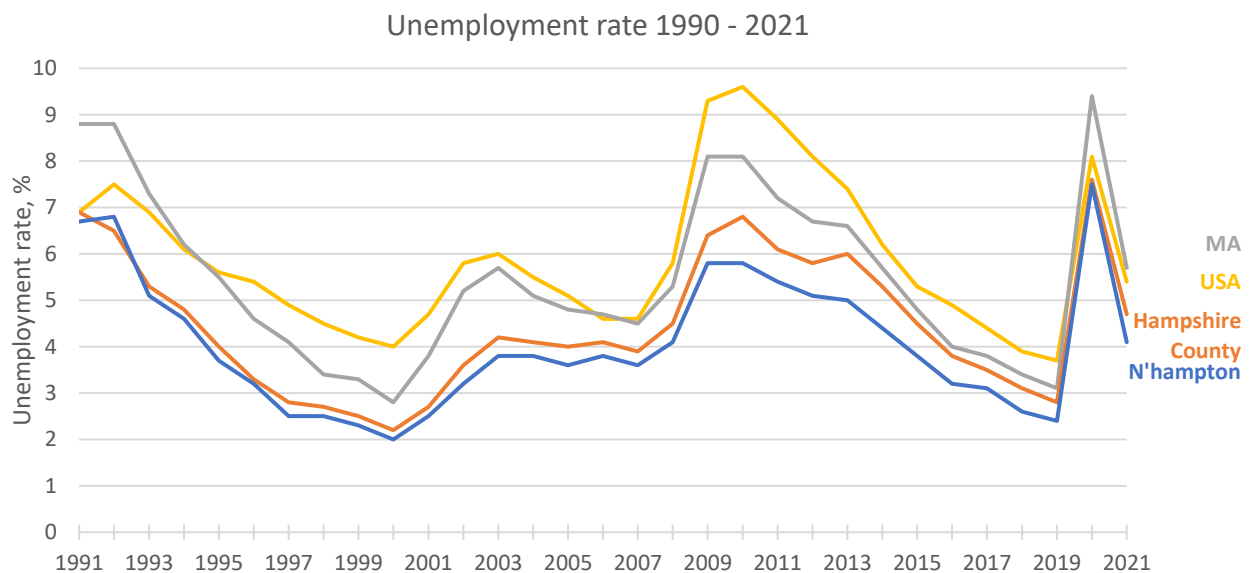
Employment in Northampton follows trends in the rest of the country, with increases in unemployment during the recessions of 1991-1992, 2008-2010, and 2020. Overall, the employed population in Northampton has barely changed in the last 30 years – a sign of the city’s steady labor force. The continuity of its population and labor force, especially compared to the rest of the county, suggests that Northampton has not undergone profound structural

change in its economy since 1990, either from the opening or closure of a large employer or from a shift in the city's economic composition.



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

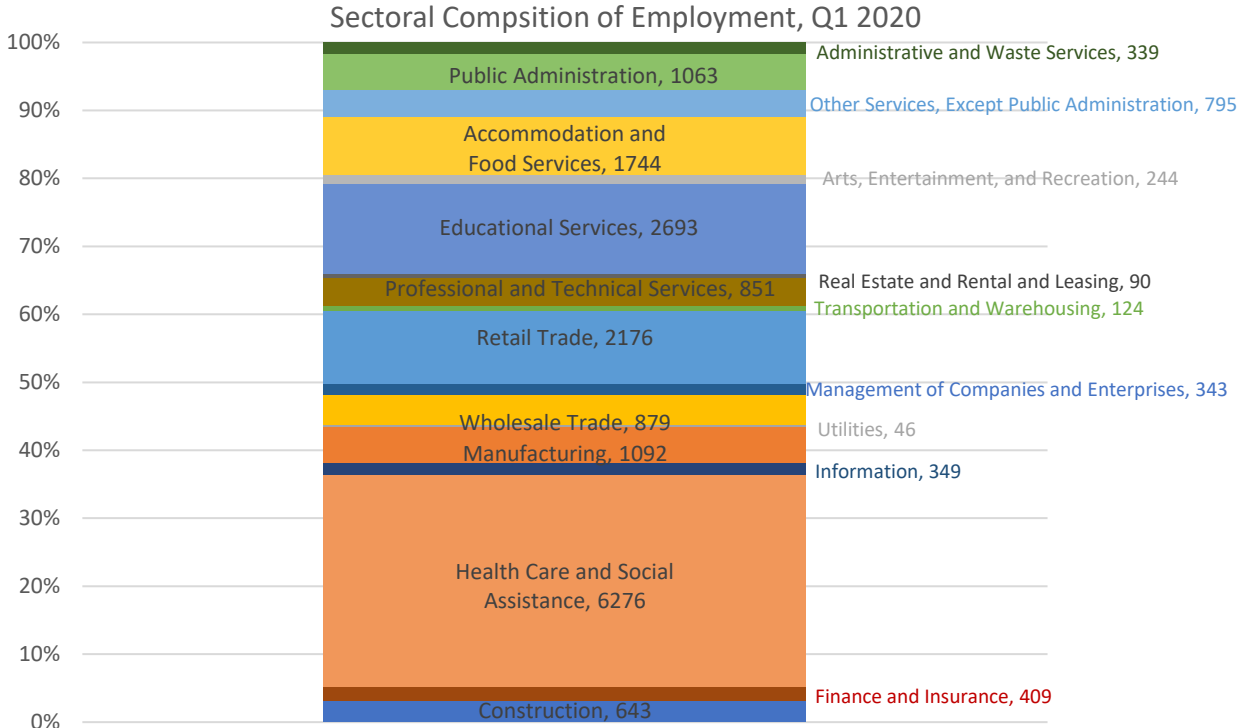
Northampton has a more resilient labor market than the rest of the country with consistently lower unemployment throughout the past 30 years than Hampshire County, Massachusetts, or the United States. Even during the Great Recession, unemployment was 4.5 percentage points lower than the country average. While academic and health sectors are generally less cyclical than other aspects of the national economy, the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 induced recession deviated from that pattern.



Source: St Louis Federal Reserve, Massachusetts Labor Market Information

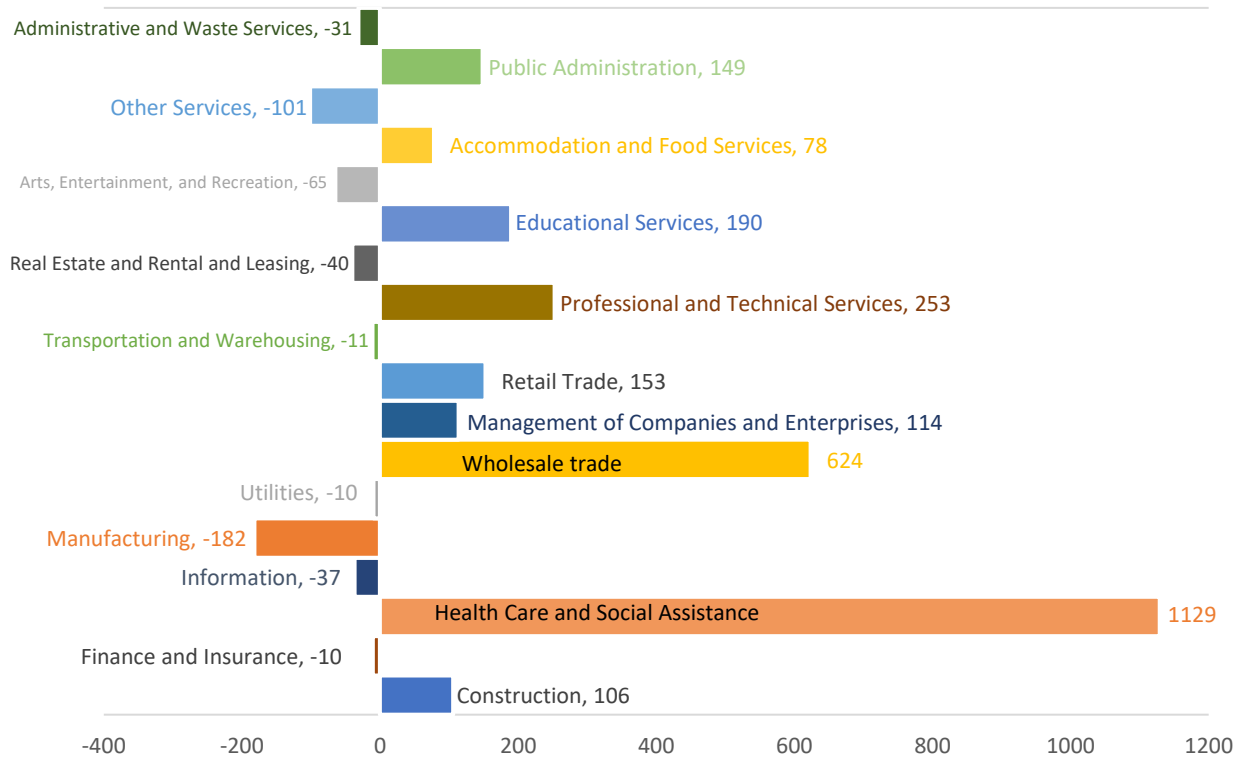
Nearly half of employment in the city is in health and education. Wholesale trade employment has grown rapidly in the past ten years, from 255 jobs to 879 jobs, though this is still less than 5% of total work. Other growing sectors include professional and technical services (perhaps benefiting from the concentration of colleges in the area), business consulting and management, construction, public administration, and education (despite fewer students – possibly greater hiring at Smith College or schools). Retail trade may grow further in the coming years with the planned opening of several cannabis dispensaries. Declining sectors include manufacturing, real estate, and utilities. The closure of the Coca-Cola bottling plant in 2023 will lose an estimated 300 jobs.

Despite Northampton being a cultural center for arts and entertainment, this sector does not generate many jobs compared to the rest of the economy. Indeed, the arts and entertainment sector has lost a sixth of its jobs since 2010. On the other hand, hotels, restaurants, and retail trade together account for a fifth of employment in the city and indirectly benefit from arts and entertainment. These sectors were growing, at least until the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Between March and April 2020, retail, accommodation, and food service businesses shed more than 1,600 jobs – about 8% of total employment. Healthcare and social assistance paradoxically lost jobs in the early months of the pandemic.



Source: US Department of Labor.

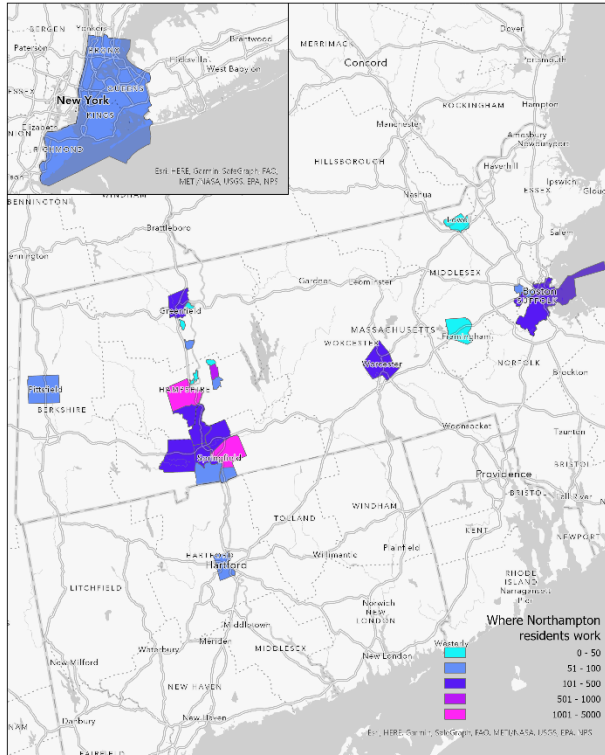
Growth and decline of industry employment, Q1 2010 and Q2 2020



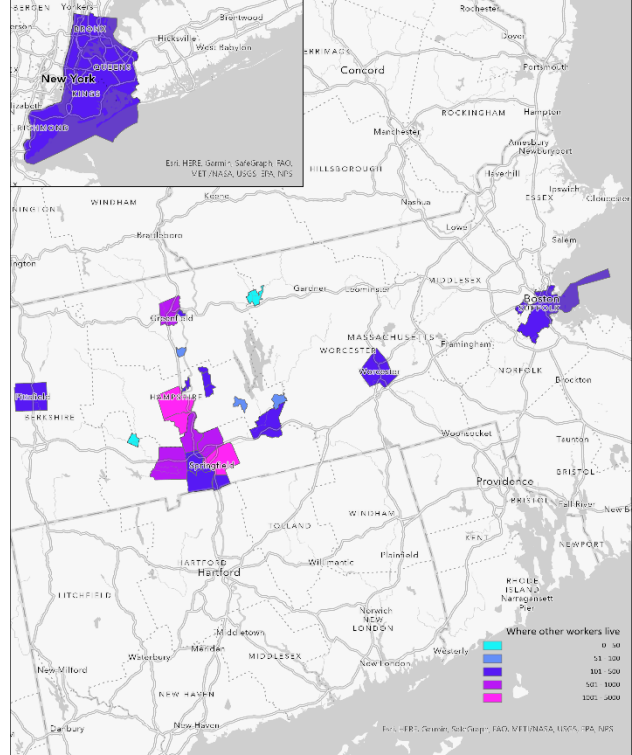
Source: US Department of Labor.

Nearly a third of workers (4,000) in Northampton also work in the city. Around 16,000 people commute into the city to work, primarily from elsewhere in the Pioneer Valley. About 8,900 people living in Northampton work outside the city. Therefore, twice as many workers come into Northampton than residents commuting out of the town suggesting a lack of housing options that force people to commute in. Most work elsewhere in the Pioneer Valley. Many residents also work in nearby large cities such as Worcester, Boston, Hartford, and even New York City. The total number of jobs in the city – just over 20,000 – divided by the number of housing units in the city – just over 12,000 – results in a jobs-housing balance of 1.65, suggesting a large number of dual-income households.

Map of where Northampton residents work



Map of where other workers live



Source: US Census Bureau.

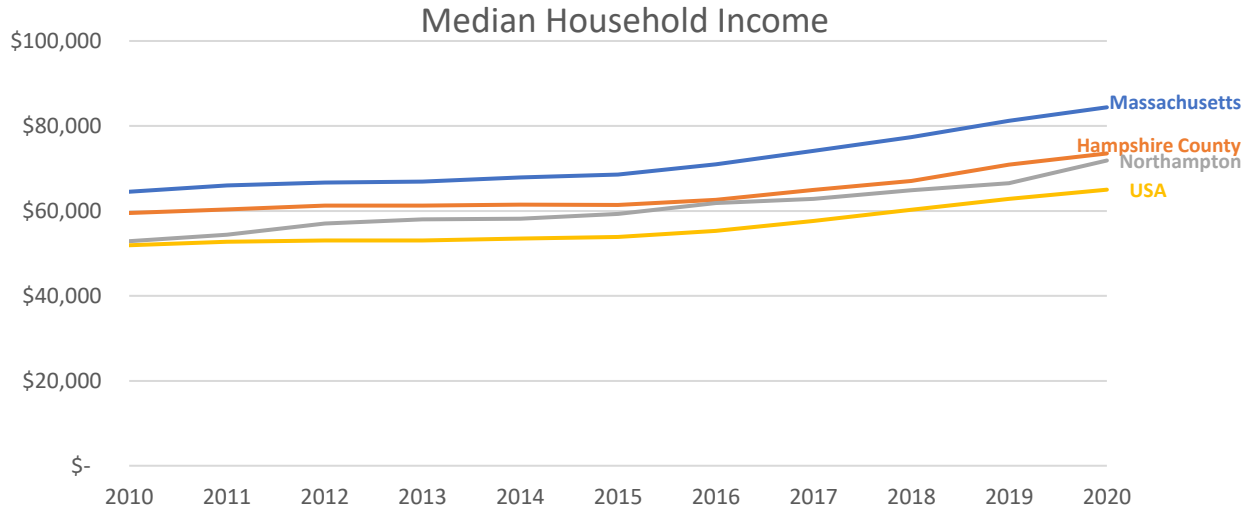
The median household income in Northampton in 2020 was around \$72,000, a little lower than in Hampshire County. This is an increase of about \$20,000 since 2010. Median household income in the rest of the state has consistently been more than \$10,000 higher than Northampton.

Lower household income in the city correlates with higher poverty rates than in the rest of the county and state. There were times when poverty rates in Northampton exceeded the country average, although it has fallen sharply since 2018. The pandemic may have reversed those gains. The fact that Northampton has lower unemployment, yet higher poverty compared to the county and state may indicate a prevalence of low-wage service-sector jobs.

Northampton has the eighth-highest poverty rate in the Pioneer Valley for municipalities larger than 1,000 people. Even so, it has a lower poverty rate than Amherst, the other significant university town in the area.

| Population living below poverty in the Pioneer Valley, by rank | | | | | |
|--|------------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| Rank | County | Community | Population | Population Below Poverty | Poverty Rate |
| 1 | Hampden | Holyoke | 40,241 | 11,471 | 28.5% |
| 2 | Hampden | Springfield | 154,139 | 40,102 | 26.0% |
| 3 | Hampshire | Amherst | 39,814 | 6,426 | 16.1% |
| 4 | Franklin | Charlemont | 1,086 | 149 | 13.7% |
| 5 | Hampden | Chicopee | 55,421 | 7,562 | 13.6% |
| 6 | Hampshire | Ware | 9,801 | 1,298 | 13.2% |
| 7 | Franklin | Sunderland | 3,647 | 471 | 12.9% |
| 8 | Hampshire | Northampton | 28,516 | 3,407 | 11.9% |
| 9 | Franklin | Buckland | 1,950 | 223 | 11.4% |
| 10 | Franklin | Colrain | 1,771 | 202 | 11.4% |

Source: American Community Survey.



Source: American Community Survey.

Over a fifth of children under the age of 5 are in poverty, almost twice as high as the county average and eight percentage points higher than the state average. However, the margin of error for child poverty estimates in Northampton is also very high. Poverty among the elderly is slightly higher than in the rest of the country but lower than the state or country average. There is low homelessness among the youth; most people who use shelters in Northampton are middle-aged. On the other hand, young people are more likely to experience short-term homelessness, whereas older people experience more chronic homelessness.⁵

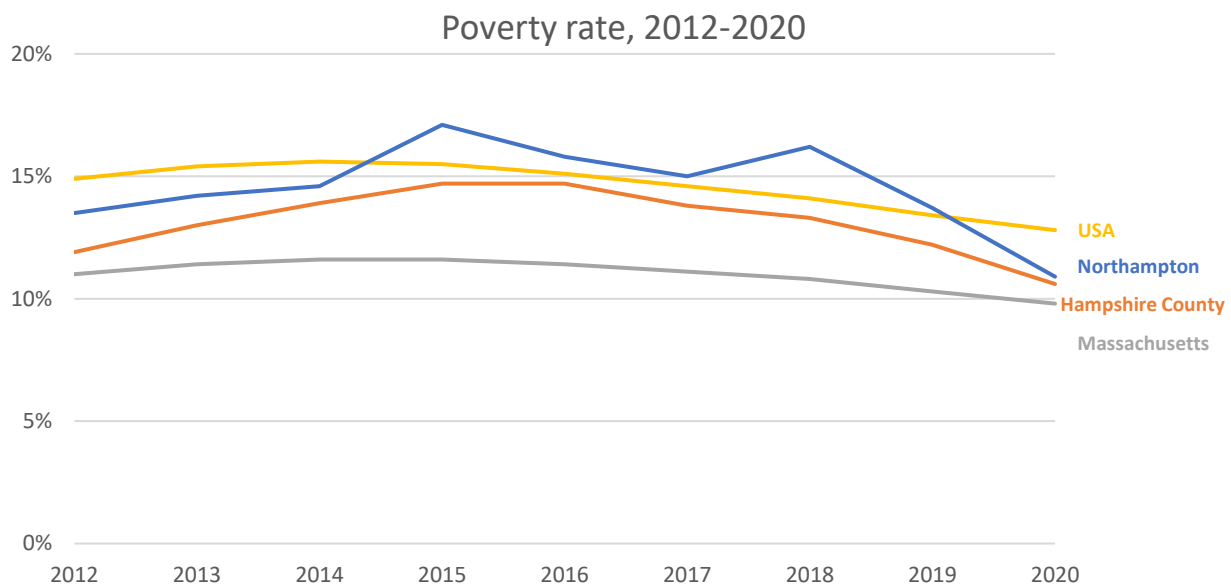
Around 10% of white residents are in poverty, about half the rate among Black residents – though, again, the margin of error for Black poverty, given the small Black population, is high. On the other hand, there is a higher proportion of Black homeless people who used the Grove Street

⁵ Mayor’s Work Group on Panhandling Study Report, October 2019.

Shelter in Northampton (6%) than the proportion of all Black people among the population (2%). Hispanic residents have a poverty rate similar to white residents. Again, however, while less a tenth of the population in Northampton is Hispanic, a fifth of sample respondents at the Grove Street Shelter were Hispanic.

Poverty is higher among people with disabilities. About a third of people with a disability have incomes below the poverty line, compared to about an eighth of people without a disability. Working-age adults with disabilities make a quarter of people below the poverty line even though they represent just over ten percent of the adult population in Northampton.

Poverty is often correlated with educational attainment, with higher rates of poverty among those that have less than a high school education. Indeed, 40% of people who have less than a high school education was in poverty in Northampton. However, because Northampton has higher levels of educational attainment than the rest of the Pioneer Valley, county, and state (more than half of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher), it has a higher absolute number of graduates in poverty (around 800, with a margin of error of +/- 200). Though this is about 7% of all graduates in Northampton, it is 35% of all working-age adults in poverty.



Source: American Community Survey.

Poverty and homelessness among veterans are also high. In fact, nearly 90% of homeless veterans are in Northampton and Pittsfield, according to the Mayor's Working Group on Panhandling. The VA Medical Center serves many homeless veterans. Veterans are also more likely to have a disability. About 15% of non-veterans have a disability, compared to 35% among veterans.