



# The Berkshire Eagle

**'Hit hard': Berkshires jobless rate may be 30%**

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The Boston-based Pioneer Institute estimates the Berkshire County unemployment rate to be 29.3 percent, and the jobless rates in Pittsfield and North Adams to be at 30.3 and 32.3 percent, respectively, through the week of May 9.

**By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle**

PITTSFIELD — In March, about 2,756 Berkshire residents filed for jobless benefits; the local unemployment rate was at 4.4 percent.

Then the coronavirus hit.

Just a month later, the number of first-time filers in the Berkshires jumped to more than 7,500, according to early information provided by the state Department of Unemployment Assistance.

So, when the state releases official figures Friday morning, the Berkshires could have an unemployment rate approaching 30 percent, according to an analysis by a Boston-based research firm.

"Our hospitality industries have been hit hard and we are working with many organizations to help retool, retrain, and reemploy these individuals," Heather Boulger, executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield, said via email.

Unemployment has exploded across the state since Gov. Charlie Baker ordered nonessential businesses to shut in March as the coronavirus spread across Massachusetts. More than 1 million workers in the state have sought unemployment benefits since March 15 through the traditional unemployment system and the new Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program.

On Friday morning, Massachusetts will update its unemployment rate for April, Labor and Workforce Development Secretary Rosalin Acosta told the State House News Service on Wednesday. She said she will be looking at job losses from specific sectors to get a sense of how many jobs might not return post-pandemic.

The Boston-based Pioneer Institute estimates the Berkshire County unemployment rate to be 29.3 percent, and the jobless rates in Pittsfield and North Adams to be at 30.3 and 32.3 percent, respectively, through the week of May 9.

"As far as we can tell, they're really good projections," said Pioneer Institute research analyst Rebekah Paxton.

Neither North Adams Mayor Thomas Bernard nor Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyer returned telephone calls seeking comment Wednesday on the Pioneer Institute's findings.

The Pioneer Institute's study is based on an economic model called the "COVID-19 Unemployment Tracker" created by a California group that is using weekly federal Bureau of Labor Statistics unemployment insurance claim reports and labor force data to estimate rolling weekly unemployment rates in Massachusetts by the block group, ZIP code and county levels.

The study estimates the overall state unemployment rate to be 25 percent, said Paxton, who monitors the tracker for the Pioneer Institute. State unemployment was 2.9 percent in March.

Among the 7,689 total claims that were filed in the Berkshires last month, the fields with the most were 2,055 in the accommodations and food services sector; 1,141 in retail trade; 921 in construction; 920 in health care and social assistance; and 540 in other services, which include businesses like barbershops and spas.

In Pittsfield, the county's largest municipality, 828 unemployment claims were filed in accommodations and food service; 464 in retail trade; and 403 in health care and social assistance.

Boulger said unemployment insurance claims "seem to have leveled off" in the Berkshires. But virtual town halls still are available daily to assist people with a step-by-step process of achieving a successful unemployment claim.

Acosta told the State House News Service she will be "keeping an eye" on some other job sectors to see how deep the recession might be.

"Some of the jobs in finance and insurance and professional services, when we start seeing an uptick in those — and we are seeing that — then you start seeing more of a base level of unemployment that may be harder to get out of because those may be permanent losses," she said.

Cape Cod and the islands, the Springfield area, Western Massachusetts and the state's Gateway Cities have the highest estimated unemployment rates in the Pioneer Institute's study, Paxton said. Pittsfield is one of the state's Gateway Cities. A ZIP code in Amherst has an unemployment rate of 40 percent.

"The reason there are higher unemployment rates on the Cape and parts of Western Massachusetts is because we think it correlated a lot with [the losses] in hospitality and tourism and retail trade," Paxton said.

The Pioneer Institute conducted the study because of the interest in how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the state's unemployment rates.

"In Massachusetts and across the country, people are struggling to grasp what unemployment looks like," Paxton said. "Statewide jobless claims numbers are large, and it's hard to make sense of them. So, we wanted to use this model that we found because it seems to make sense of these jobless claims reports."

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