



The Berkshire Eagle

Berkshire jobless rate falls: 'We're just starting to bounce back'

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July unemployment rates by Massachusetts county*

1. Hampden, 19.0 percent
2. Suffolk, 18.9 percent
3. Bristol, 17.5 percent
4. Plymouth, 16.7 percent
- 5t. Berkshire, 15.8 percent
- Worcester, 15.8 percent
7. Norfolk, 15.5 percent
8. Barnstable, 15.2 percent
9. Franklin, 14.6 percent
10. Middlesex, 13.7 percent
- 11t. Hampshire, 13.6 percent
- Franklin, 13.6 percent
13. Dukes, 10.9 percent
14. Nantucket, 9.2 percent

*Source: Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development || BREAKOUT_1 || Unemployment rates by Massachusetts county*1. Ham

By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — After jumping almost a full percentage point in June, the Berkshire County unemployment rate fell back to 15.8 percent last month, the same level that it reached in May.

Slight increases in the county's total labor force and the number of employed residents, combined with a small decrease in the number of unemployed, caused unemployment in the Berkshires to fall from 16.5 percent in June, according to state figures released Tuesday. Berkshire unemployment has been in double figures since the COVID-19 pandemic caused unemployment levels to soar in April.

Although state unemployment fell substantially, to 16.2 percent, in July, the local jobless rate remained below the state's rate for the third consecutive month. But, the unemployment rates for the Pittsfield metropolitan area, and the cities of North Adams and Pittsfield, all are higher than the state's unemployment rate, with Pittsfield topping the list at 19.1 percent. The national unemployment rate is 10.2 percent.

The Berkshire unemployment rate had peaked at 16.7 percent in April — it was the highest rate recorded in the Berkshires in at least 22 years — before falling in May. But, last month's decline indicates that the high unemployment numbers caused by the coronavirus pandemic might be starting to fade, said Shannon Zayac, industry relations manager for the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board.

"I think we're just starting to bounce back out," Zayac said. "We talked last month that it was going up because we were collecting more [unemployed] people. We're starting to see that recovery, with more people entering the labor force. The unemployment rate bounced back down to May's rate, but the labor force continues to rise. We're up another 1,000 since June and about 5,000 from May."

Berkshire County has the second-highest unemployment rate among the four counties of Western Massachusetts, trailing only Hampden County, which, at 19 percent, has the highest unemployment rate in the state. Every county in Massachusetts except Nantucket has an unemployment rate higher than 10 percent.

The county's total labor force added an additional 769 workers in July to the almost 4,000 who came back in June, breaking the 64,000 mark for the first time since February. The number of employed increased by 1,088 workers, to 54,475, the highest level since March.

The number of unemployed fell by just over 300 residents, but it remained above 10,000 for the second consecutive month. By contrast, the number of unemployed county residents is more than 8,000 higher than 12 months ago, when the unemployment rate was 3.3 percent. Over 65,000 county residents were employed in July 2019, the height of the traditional Berkshire tourist season.

"We're still seeing an increase in the number of job listings," Zayac said. "It's going to take some time, but we're seeing a bit of a dip back toward the good."

The unemployment rates in the county's three labor market areas all dropped slightly last month. The Pittsfield metro area's rate of 17 percent is almost a full percentage point lower than in June.

The North Adams area, which includes part of Vermont, fell from 15 percent to 14.7 percent. The Great Barrington area dropped from 13.0 percent to 12.7 percent.

In the county's two cities, the unemployment rate dropped from 18 percent to 17.8 percent in North Adams last month, and fell more steeply in Pittsfield, from 19.9 percent to 19.1 percent. The number of employed Pittsfield residents increased by almost 400, to 17,466.

Regarding the much higher rate in Pittsfield, Zayac said, "Berkshire County includes all of Berkshire County, so, you're getting the people who live away from the cities who are more stable. ... When we had the big losses, I think it impacted the bigger cities more. But, it's starting to tick down again. It's a small decrease, but still a decrease from [June]."

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