



THOMAS P. MILLER & ASSOCIATES

ECONOMIC RECOVERY & RESILIENCY PLAN

LOWER GRANDE VALLEY DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

MARCH 2023

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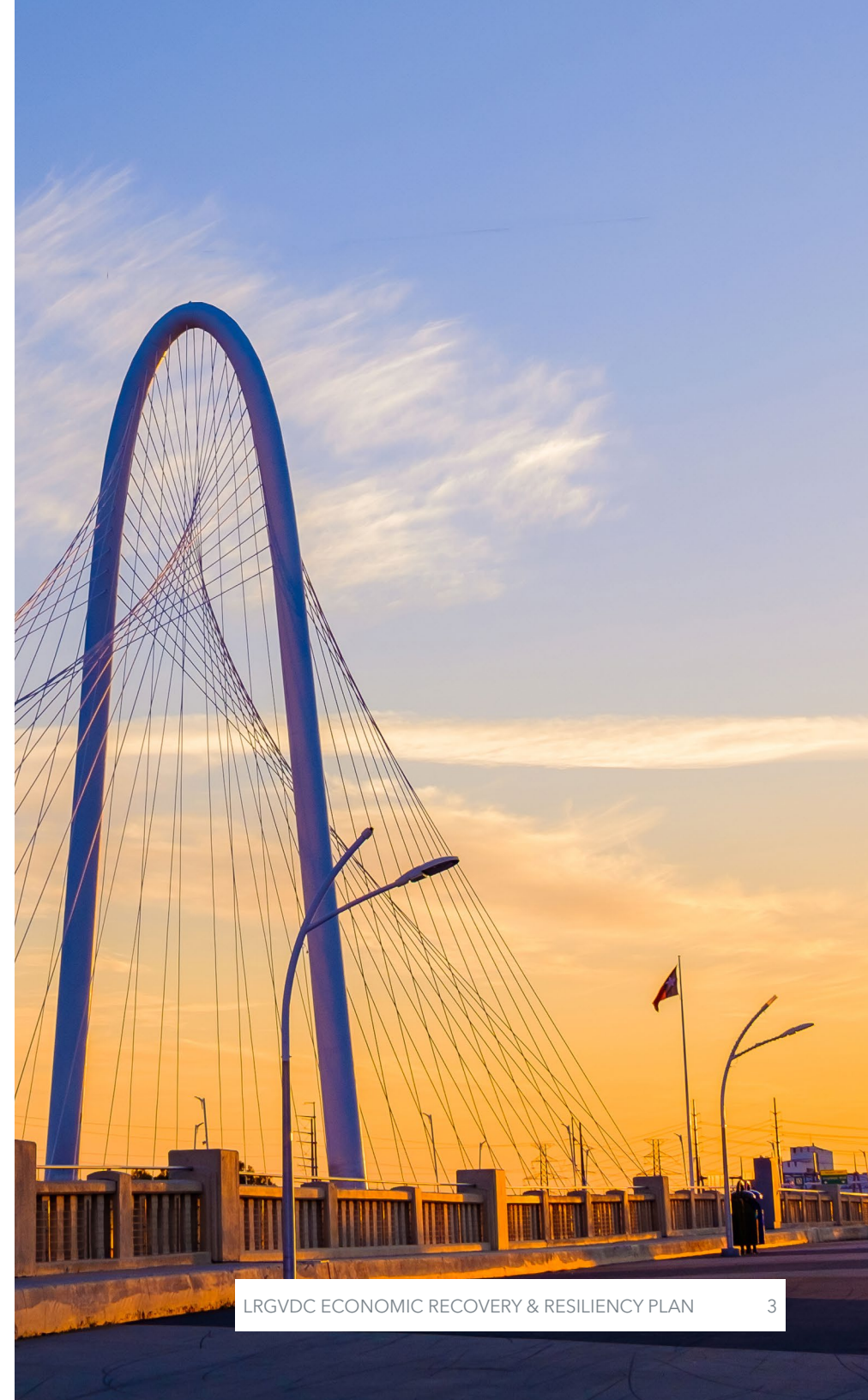
Stakeholder Engagement Sessions

Discussed During Stakeholder Sessions:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council, in partnership with Thomas P. Miller and Associates would like to acknowledge and thank the following organizations for their participation in various phases of the project process:

- McAllen Economic Development Corporation
- Pharr Economic Development Corporation
- Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation
- Alamo Economic Development Corporation
- Development Corporation of Mercedes
- Council for South Texas Economic Progress
- University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
- Weslaco EDC
- Workforce Solutions
- City of Alamo
- City of Donna
- City of Weslaco





INTRODUCTION

Lower Rio Grande Valley

The Lower Rio Grande Valley is located at the southernmost point of Texas at the meeting point between Mexico and the United States. As one of the fastest growing areas in the United States, it is a region rich in history, culture, and tradition. With a subtropical climate, characterized by sunny skies and warm weather, the Lower Rio Grande Valley offers residents a high-quality of life and a variety of economic opportunities. Known for its multicultural population, the region has an abundance of bilingual speakers in Spanish and English, and the diverse population is a driver of economic vibrancy, vitality, and variety.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (LRGVDC) is one of twenty-four (24) state planning regions and association of local governments formed under Texas Law to address issues and planning needs that cross the boundaries of individual local governments. The LRGVDC coordinates planning efforts, provides a regional approach to problem solving through cooperative action and provides direct services, when applicable. The designated geographical service area is the 3,643 square miles of Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy Counties. The LRGVDC is comprised of programs in the fields of economic development, public safety, transportation, environmental services and health and human services. Funding to support these programs originates from local, state, and federal sources. LRGVDC is governed by a twenty-seven (27) member Board of Directors of whom two-thirds are required to be elected officials of the designated boundaries.

Project Scope, Process, and Methodology

In December 2021, the LRGVDC issued a Request for Proposals to identify a professional consultant firm to complete an Economic Recovery and Resiliency Plan. With funding support from the federal Economic Development Administration via a CARES Act Recovery Assistance grant to help the region respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thomas P. Miller and Associates (the project team) was hired in January 2022 to complete the plan.

The project team outlined a scope of service to enable the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council to develop a recovery and resiliency plan that will help the region anticipate, mitigate, and respond to future economic disruptions. The development of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Resiliency Plan was developed by the following processes and tasks outlined below:

PROJECT LAUNCH:

TPMA facilitated a launch meeting with LRGVDC leadership to review the scope of work and deliverables, design a communication plan, and discuss information that may help develop context for the project.

DISCOVERY:

TPMA collected and reviewed regional plans and reports that provided further context around current planning efforts in the region, areas of concurrence, and localized priorities. The project team also conducted an extensive quantitative data collection and analysis.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT:

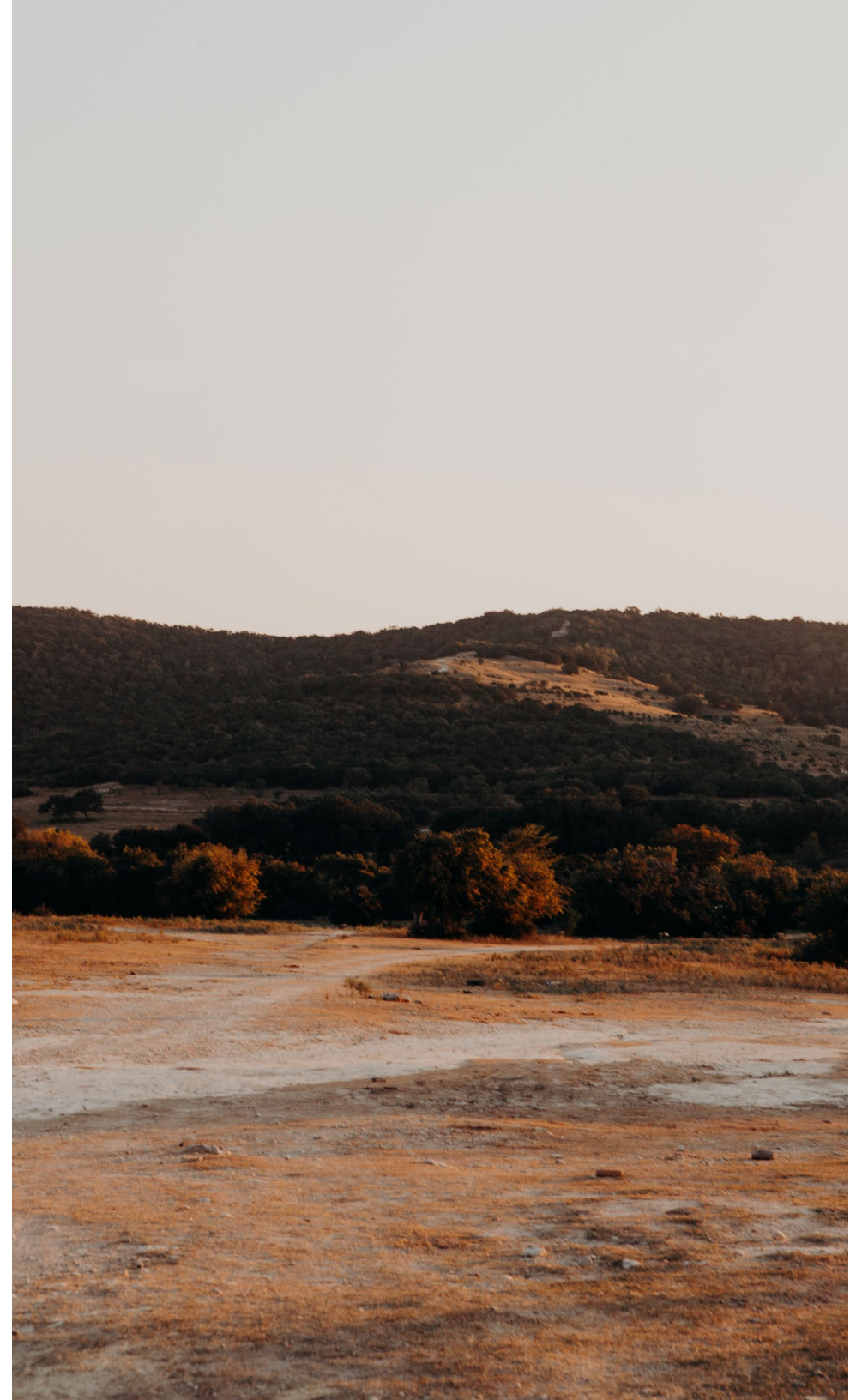
TPMA conducted an on-site engagement session over a two-day period that was complemented with virtual participants. With guidance from LRGVDC, TPMA was able to identify participants that included a broad representation of regional interests and diverse perspectives. In addition to the focus group sessions, TPMA also developed an online survey and conducted one on one interviews.

DEFINING AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT RECOVERY AND RESILIENCY PLAN

“Many definitions of economic resilience limit its focus on the ability to quickly recover from a disruption. However, in the context of economic development, economic resilience becomes inclusive of three primary attributes: the ability to recover quickly from a shock, the ability to withstand a shock, and the ability to avoid the shock altogether. Establishing economic resilience in a local or regional economy requires the ability to anticipate risk, evaluate how that risk can impact key economic assets, and build a responsive capacity.”

-U.S. Economic Development Administration

Recovery and resiliency have become vital conversations as we enter a post-COVID world. Communities across the world have made a commitment to learning from the economic shocks and social distress of the pandemic. They have taken this pandemic as a call to look inward and to emerge as stronger and more economically diverse communities. As a part of this process, it is imperative to develop strategies that help regional economies recover, withstand, or avoid economic disruptions altogether. With that in mind, the economic recovery and resiliency plan that follows will include both short and long-term strategies the LRGVDC can employ to facilitate a resiliency economy.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Regional Profile

Overall, the region's population is trending upward from 1,290,402 (2016) to 1,328,641 (2021), representing a 3% growth over the five-year period. This growth is expected to continue with the population reaching 1,361,994 people in 2026. Of the residents in the region, the average age skews younger when comparing to the State's average. This implies that the workforce will grow significantly if the region retains youth as they age into the workforce. While no age data on those who have left the region is available, more people are migrating to the region than migrating from the region. Over 96.9% of the population of the LRGV region is White, with a large majority of those identifying as Hispanic or Latino. The remaining percentage of the population is Black (0.93%), Asian (0.99%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.62%) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.06%).

When viewing educational attainment data, the region fairs better or equal in attainment rates to the State when looking at the subsectors of Less Than 9th Grade, 9th Grade to 12th Grade, and High School Diploma. The region begins to fall behind the State in attainment when looking at those who have completed Some College, Associate's Degree, Bachelor's Degree, and Graduate Degree & Higher.

The Healthcare Support occupation makes up the largest number of the region's jobs with 70,681. The remaining largest occupations include Office & Administrative Support (56,469), Sales & Related (47,616), Educational Instruction and Library (39,912) and Food Preparation and Serving Related (38,168). When viewing the top industries for average annual earnings, we see that the Utilities sector has the highest average annual earnings at \$106,676. Following is the Mining, Quarrying & Oil & Gas sector with average annual earnings of \$94,775, Management of Companies at \$73,107, Government at \$69,312, and Finance & Insurance at \$64,541.

For a more extensive regional quantitative analysis please visit Appendix A. *All quantitative data is derived from Emsi Burning Glass/Lightcase unless otherwise noted.*

Regional Key Findings and Themes

DEMAND FOR INCREASED INTER-SECTOR COLLABORATION

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both the need for streamlined inter-sector communication and collaboration as well as the region's ability to manage in a time of crisis. Stakeholders felt that public, private, and nonprofit sectors were asked to collaborate in ways they hadn't previously engaged, and the experience highlighted strengths to build on and challenges to overcome.

A tight-knit, welcoming culture was emphasized and described as an asset in terms of crisis response and hazard mitigation. Stakeholders cited food drives and high vaccination rates as ways that individuals and organizations build goodwill and social capital in response to the pandemic.

Despite the positives associated with the LRGV Region's COVID-19 response, stakeholders felt that it exposed silos and a lack of existing relationships and communication channels that will be important in responding to future crises. Furthermore, survey participants and stakeholder session participants shared that a catalogue of resources related to planning for and responding to disruptions would have been helpful.

LOW COST OF LIVING AND AFFORDABLE, DEVELOPMENT READY LAND

The low cost of living in the region emerged as a key theme across several areas of quantitative analysis and was reinforced in stakeholder engagement sessions. For the State of Texas as a whole, MIT calculates a living wage to be \$16.41 per hour. Living wage estimates in the LRGV Region are almost two dollars lower, at roughly \$14.50 per hour.

Monthly rental costs are concentrated from \$500-\$999, with more units below this range than above it. Home values in the region are also especially low, with most homes in the region priced below \$100k. The average home in Texas is valued at \$308.6k, making the LRGV Region an exceptionally affordable place to purchase a home.

Participants in Stakeholder Engagement Sessions highlighted the low cost of living as an asset and discussed the availability of low-cost, developable land as a tool for expansion and an indicator to investors that the region is primed for growth.

INADEQUATE BROADBAND AND STORMWATER INFRASTRUCTURE

Quantitative findings supported the assertion by stakeholders that two key types of infrastructure (broadband and drainage) in the LRGV Region present a liability in their current condition. Survey respondents identified “hurricanes or tropical storms” as the type of potential economic disruption that concerned them most, followed by “floods or flash floods.” Focus group participants believed that drainage improvements would help alleviate damage to properties, homes, and roads during the monsoon season and when hurricanes strike the area.

Stakeholders felt that a lack of reliable broadband service also presented a regional liability. Per the NTIA’s Indicators of Broadband Need map, Hidalgo County has the most dramatic demonstrated need, with M-Lab speed test results yielding an average speed of 13/11mbps. Speed test results yield a more acceptable 82/11mbps, although still qualifying as underserved. Based on federal standards that qualify areas achieving speeds slower than 25/3mbps as unserved and speeds slower than 100/20mbps as underserved, each county in the region qualifies as underserved in terms of broadband availability.



TALENT RETENTION CHALLENGES DESPITE STRONG EDUCATION NETWORKS

Education is among the LRGV Region's top sectors, with local school districts, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Texas State Technical College, and South Texas College acting as key employers. Stakeholders feel that a robust education system is an important asset for youth and adults.

Additionally, the LRGV Region has a higher share of population younger than 25 than the State of Texas as a whole, which promises population and workforce growth on the condition that an adequate share of young people remain in the region as they age into the workforce. However, Stakeholders discussed the "brain drain" occurring in the region, saying that the strong K-12 education system in the region is misaligned with the lagging levels of educational attainment largely because the educated population leaves the region to pursue employment or additional educational opportunities that they don't perceive as available in the region.



Photo Credit 1: lrgvdc.com



Photo Credit 2: utrgv.edu

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDUSTRY AND WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT

New entrants to the training and employment landscape encapsulate promising opportunities for workforce alignment with top occupations and talent retention. A new medical school at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley campus may provide pathways for students into the several healthcare-related sectors present in the region. In addition, beyond the medical school, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley has campus locations across the region, making a true regional institution of higher learning.

The SpaceX Starbase site located in Boca Chica Cameron County brings an aerospace presence to the region that has been and should continue to be leveraged by local agencies to retain and attract talent interested in innovation. The STARGATE project is a strong example of leveraging the presence of SpaceX to bolster aerospace R&D activity in the region. Scientific research and development are projected to be among the top-ten fastest growing sectors in the region from 2020-2030.



Photo Credit 3: utrgv.edu

Additionally, the Port of Brownsville is the only Deepwater port located along the US and Mexico border. The port features 40,000 acres of land available for development in addition to 17 miles of waterfront access. The port handles a wide variety of cargo, including steel products, liquids, dry bulk commodities. Given recent global supply chain challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic Development leaders should continue to look for ways to leverage this unique asset, and work with appropriate partners to ensure appropriate investments are made to modernize the port so that is a true economic driver for the region.



Photo Credit 4: portofbrownsville.com

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

A major component of any economic resiliency and recovery plan is local stakeholder participation. Engagement and involvement from the local community is critical to solicit local feedback and insights on regional priorities, challenges, and opportunities. The project team employed several engagement strategies, most notably, a multi-day site visit to the region in May 2022.

During the on-site engagement sessions, participants were asked to consider statements and answer questions regarding economic conditions in the Lower Rio Grande region. These prompts led to active and dynamic conversations about the region's current, and potential future state. Participants held a shared vision and had commonalities regarding the positive aspects and potential of the region. Conversations went in-depth when identifying areas and characteristics of the region that need more work. The group also identified positive and negative trends that may be hindering the optimal growth and economic resiliency of the area. In addition to onsite stakeholder engagement sessions, the project team conducted a survey with business owners across the region. The following section outlines key themes of the stakeholder discussions and survey results.

Stakeholder Engagement Key Findings and Themes

The following themes were prominent in discussion during on-site stakeholder sessions. Discussion themes were based on prompts based on questions soliciting answers on the overall description of the region, lessons learned from covid, regional challenges, and visioning and goal setting.

PROMPT ONE: DESCRIBE THE REGION

Great Quality of Life with a Low Cost of Living

The great quality of life and the low cost of living that are provided in the region were major responses from Prompt One. The low cost of housing, the short commute times (and time not spent in traffic), and the great weather were things expressed by most of the participants. As an individual from the Council for South Texas Economic Progress stated, "Monday through Friday rocks. Life doesn't revolve around commuting, and we have a great quality of life because of that."

Warm and Welcoming Communities

Similarly, to the expressed appreciation for the area's quality of life, a great majority of the responses also centered on the warm and welcoming community. Words like "tight knit," "very open," and "welcoming culture" were used to describe the community. Many credited the relatively successful response to the pandemic, citing the idea that the high vaccination rates and organized food drives were a result of people taking care of one another. This feeling of creating social capital will be important in mitigating future pandemics and risks.

Great Educational Systems

Participants were proud and excited about the educational system in the region. From K-12 to higher education, stakeholders expressed their appreciation of the learning environments in the area. Many responses centered around the great schools and educational community that are provided to the children of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The new medical school and the University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley are also thoughtful as great educational assets. As one participant commented, "the school of medicine is something that we should all be bragging about."

Workforce Pipeline and Economic Development Infrastructure

The great work ethic and availability of a trained and bilingual/bicultural workforce was also touted with pride. The overarching sentiment in this regard is that the region has a workforce and economic assets that are not readily available in other parts of the state. That the region shares a border with Mexico and that trade is a major industry cluster were seen as positives for the area. Space X in the Boca Chica / Brownsville area is seen as a game-changer for the region that will bring many opportunities but also many challenges that need to be addressed in a proactive manner.

Improved Transportation Infrastructure

Many felt that transportation infrastructure has greatly improved in the last several years but that more still needs to be done. Several participants touted the recent improvements made to the area's Metropolitan Planning Organization and felt hopeful that with these changes, more transportation projects would be coming to the area.

Availability of Land

The reasonable cost and availability of land is another item that many felt was a great asset for the region. This provides the ability to expand and gives outside investors an indication that the region is primed for growth.

Advantageous Geographic Location

The proximity to the ocean, San Antonio, Houston, and Monterrey were cited as key assets for people living in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Many appreciate the ability to visit several large metroplexes all within a few hours drive.

PROMPT TWO: LESSONS LEARNED FROM COVID-19

Regional Partners Stepped Up

According to many stakeholders, the pandemic illustrated the need for better communication, and many felt that the region came together across several sectors: private, public, non-profit, and educational. As one participant said, "For the first time, we had to maximize resources: people, knowledge, funding, and the region stepped up really well."

Service and Delivery Systems Could Have Been Centralized

Mechanisms and systems of resource administration and service delivery could have been more centralized. Many organizations tried to become the clearinghouse of information and services but that should not have been the case. A catalog of resources for training, support services, and funding availability would have been great to have.

Lack of Technology Was a Challenge

With many aspects of life moving indoors and to a virtual/remote platform, the pandemic highlighted the need for fast and reliable internet service. The region lacks consistent, reliable, and available internet service. Many felt that this is a huge liability that needs to be addressed.

Networks of Communication Were Good, But Not Great

Many felt that the channels of communication were good and that regional partners were willing to support each other and adapt. But several voiced that once things "went back to normal," that many went back to their silos. One participant stated that the high level of communication region wide during COVID could serve as a blueprint for future high-risk events.

Ample Resources for Low-Income Families

Partners recognized that the region lacks resources and that in general, there are many low-income families. However, during COVID, many felt that there were good resources for low-income families and individuals. From food delivery services to housing assistance, and financial resources for workers, many felt that the region did a good job disseminating these assets.



PROMPT THREE: COMMON REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Need Better Communication and Stronger Partnerships

As stated earlier, many felt that during COVID the region stepped up and communication among partners was great. However, the biggest issue that came up during these stakeholder sessions was the lack of communication in general. Most respondents felt that many organizations aren't communicating with each other. Silos and lack of willingness to communicate and partner are issues that many felt need to be addressed as one of the biggest challenges.

Need a More Cohesive Regional Message

The LRGV region has many and varied entities: three counties, many cities, several economic development agencies, nonprofits, binational organizations, and many key businesses. Yet many felt that there is no cohesive message. It seems that every entity has its own message and agenda. A unified message and strategy would help to move the area forward as one large, united region. This unified message would also help to counter the negative image that people in other parts of the country have of the border and the region.

Brain Drain

The exodus of talented and educated young people was expressed as another major issue. The amount of young people moving out to other areas is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

Lack of Upward Mobility

Many felt that the number of high paying jobs is very limited. There are very few high-level and high paying positions. This lack of high-level jobs creates a lack of upward mobility.

Health and Wellness Needs to be a Priority

The pandemic exposed various vulnerabilities of the population. To include the low health standards of many residents. The physical and mental health of people is a major concern, and many felt that moving forward the region needs to do better to address this issue.

PROMPT FOUR: VISIONING AND GOAL SETTING

A United Region

A more blended and connected region that is sharing resources, moving in the same direction, and no fragmentation. Having everyone acknowledge that the region is tapping into the same resources and that everyone should carry an equal load, making everyone better and more resilient. "We need to start to see ourselves as a region and not as separate cities and counties."

A Diverse Economy

A diverse economy with higher paying jobs. A multitude of industry clusters that include tier one manufacturing, tourism, medical device manufacturing, aerospace engineering, clean energy technologies, and binational trade and industry.

Multimodal Transportation Systems

Currently most people travel by car. But a transportation system that offers bike lanes, hike and bike trails, and public transit can provide alternative transportation that can improve air quality, health, and accessibility. A light rail system connecting the various communities to Boca Chica / Brownsville and Space X would make the region much more competitive.

Available Technology

Providing reliable internet and Wi-Fi for schools, businesses, and residents would be a massive improvement. It would also make the region more economically resilient and mitigate future external shocks.

Less Disparity

Addressing income disparity by providing higher wages, safe and affordable housing, and good healthcare would go a long way. By taking care of the most vulnerable, the region can become more competitive and improve the quality of life for everyone.

Survey Results and Key Findings

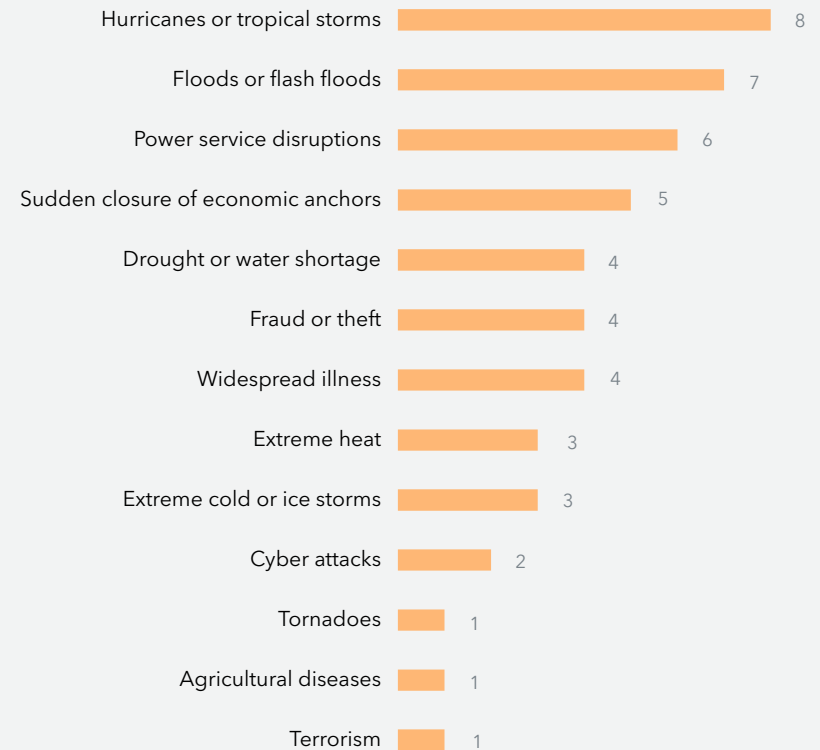
A Survey was distributed to businesses in the LRGV Region to understand the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and perceptions of the region's ability to respond to future disruptions. The survey was distributed via email, where a list of individuals and organizations from the LRGV business community were sent a link and a description of the effort on two occasions. Responses were used to inform the strategic framework and recommendations in this report.

KEY FINDINGS

Economic Disruptions

Respondents identified hurricanes or tropical storms as well as floods or flash floods as the potential economic disruptions that worried them most. This supports findings from stakeholder engagement sessions that the region's drainage systems and infrastructure may be unable to withstand a severe storm or flood, and that residents and business owners fear they may be affected.

WHAT POTENTIAL CRISES OR ECONOMIC DISRUPTIONS WORRY YOU THE MOST?



CONTINGENCY PLANNING

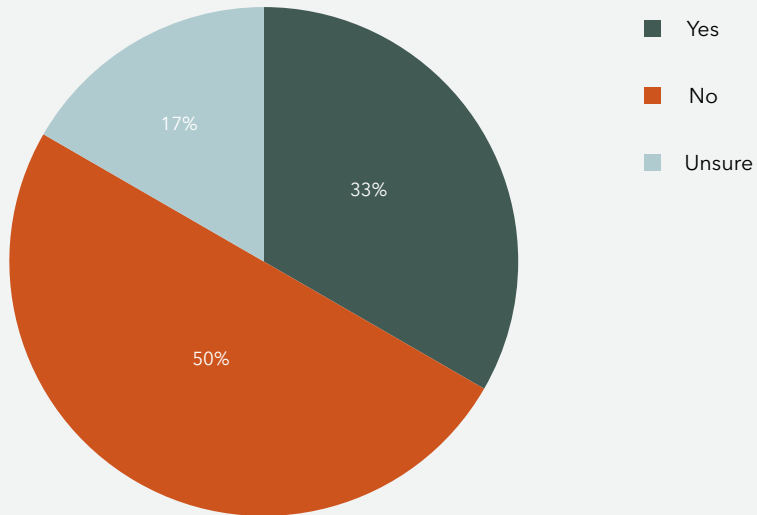
Most respondents did not have a plan in place to respond to potential disruptions, and respondents reported feeling they had a lack of resources to plan a crisis or disaster response. While one third of participants did have a contingency plan in place, 17% of respondents were unsure, indicating that messaging around crisis response and hazard mitigation hasn't reached a significant portion of the region's business community.

ECONOMIC DISRUPTION IMPACTS

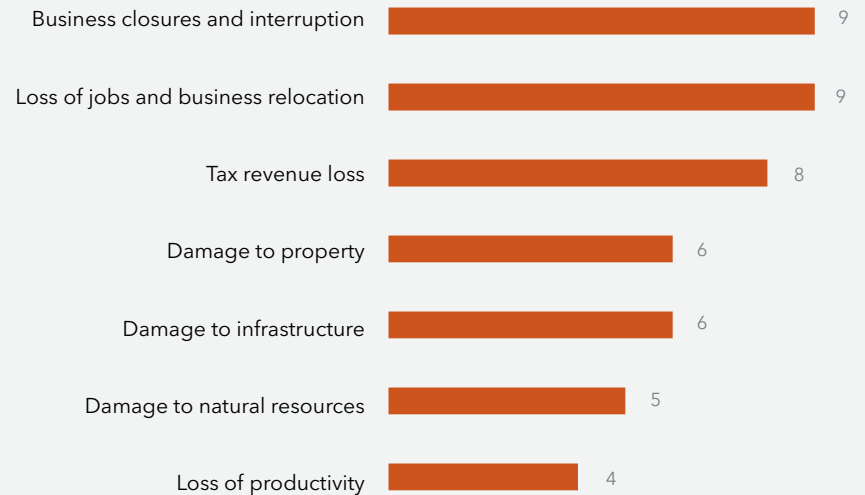
Respondents felt that business closure and job loss or relocation were the potential most harmful effects of a potential economic disruption. These impacts were also among those that participants reported experiencing most significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Damage to property and infrastructure were also reported concerns, likely as a result of respondents anticipating the damage that a hurricane or flooding could cause.

For a more detailed review of survey responses, please visit Appendix B.

DOES YOUR BUSINESS HAVE A CONTINGENCY PLAN TO RESPOND TO POTENTIAL ECONOMIC DISRUPTIONS?



WHAT POTENTIAL NEGATIVE IMPACTS ASSOCIATED WITH AN ECONOMIC DISRUPTION COULD BE MOST HARMFUL TO THE REGION?



STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The following strategic framework was informed by qualitative data analysis, quantitative data analysis, stakeholder feedback, and an understanding of recovery and resiliency best practices. The strategic framework is intended to serve as a guide for the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council to help prevent, prepare, mitigate, respond, and recover from economic disruptions. The strategic framework is intended to create a more resilient economy across LRGVDC's service area.

To better utilize the strategies and tactics outlined in the framework, it's important for LRGVDC and associated partners to fully recognize the types of risks that can cause economic disruptions, and the various high-level roles the organization can play in the region.

Types of Risk

Before we introduce the strategic framework, it's important to consider the types of economic disruptions that can potentially impact the Lower Rio Grande Valley region. Inspired by literature from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the most common types of risks include environmental, man-made, public health crisis, and economic risks.

ENVIRONMENTAL

Given its geographic location, the Lower Rio Grande Valley region is susceptible to a variety of environmental risks. Notably, with its location along the Gulf of Mexico, the region is often in the path of hurricanes and tropical storms. One only must look at Hurricane Harvey in 2017 to understand the potential impact a hurricane can have on the region and its economy. Further, the region is also susceptible to flooding, wildfires, and arctic freezes, all which can disrupt the regional economy in profound ways.

MAN-MADE

Man-made economic disruptions are becoming more prevalent due to the increased threat of cyber espionage and other related cybersecurity risks. The LRGVDC is potentially at risk given its location on the border, and with the presence of the country's only deep-water seaport. Additionally, the state of Texas has increased infrastructure failures in recent years, notably the power grid failure of 2020.

PUBLIC HEALTH

The world is all too aware of the potential impact a public health outbreak can have after the COVID-19 pandemic. While lessons were learned, regions need to more proactively prepare for potential future public health emergencies. Not only does the public health system need to be prepared, but regional organizations like the LRGVDC need to be prepared to support employers and employees should another outbreak destabilize the regional economy.

ECONOMIC

One relevant economic risk to the region is the uncertain status of migrant farmworkers across the region. With 1.6 million undocumented workers in the region, any abrupt federal policy changes or enforcement efforts could destabilize the critical agriculture economy across the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council's Role

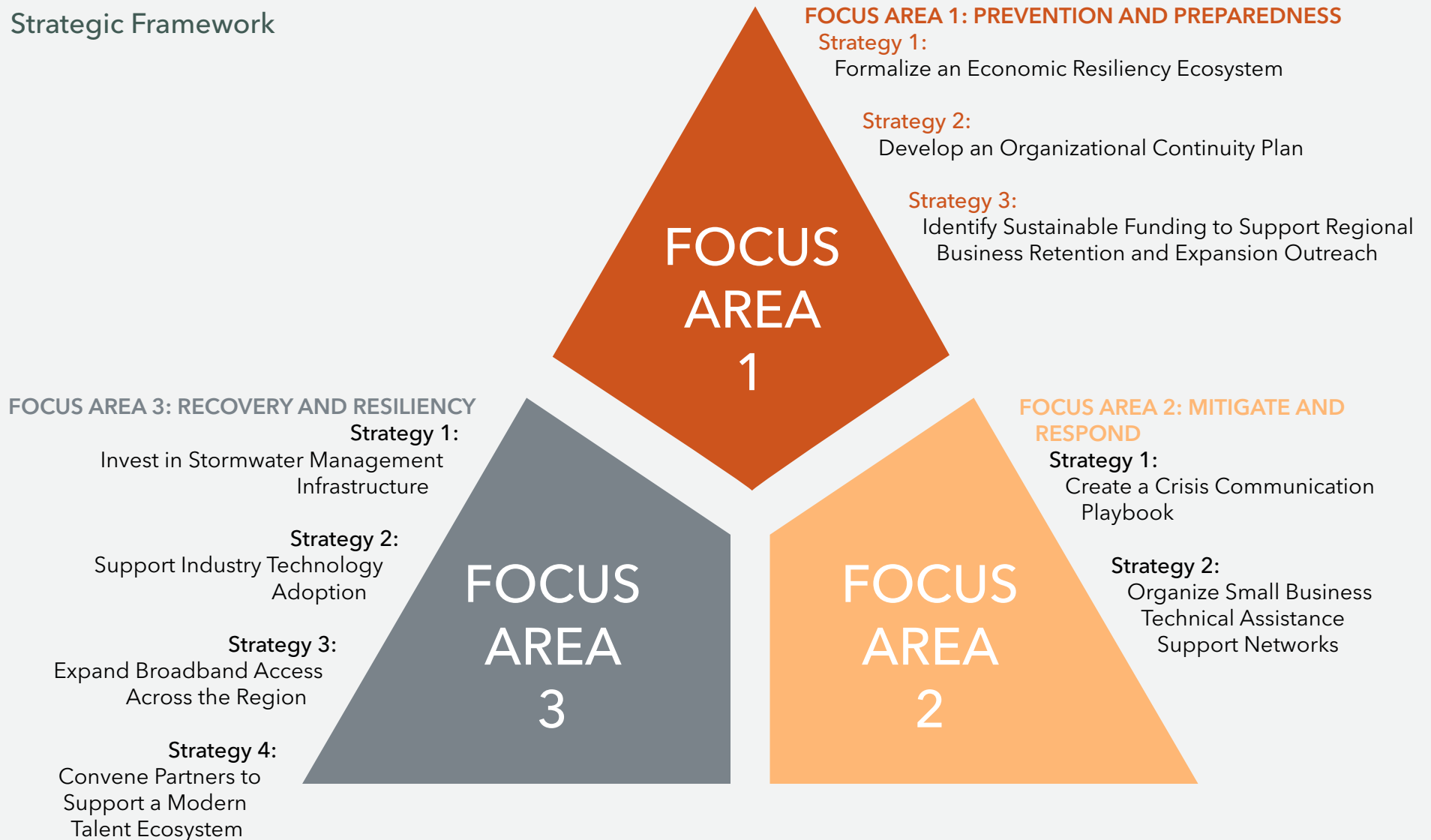
Before considering the Strategic Framework, it's important for the LRGVDC and associated partners to understand that a networked approach is critical in recovery and resiliency planning. When thinking about the three phases of recovery and resiliency - prevention and preparedness, mitigation and response, and recovery and resiliency - the LRGVDC can be expected to play any number of roles, depending on timing and circumstances. Roles the LRGVDC can play include:

- Analyst
- Educator
- Visionary
- Catalyst
- Gap Filler
- Connector
- Advocate

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the Lower Rio Grande Valley region must recognize that cooperation and coordination are the keys to a resilient economy. The LRGVDC can serve as the lead or convening entity to implement the strategies outlined below, but in some circumstances, it may be more appropriate for regional partners and associated organizations to serve as the champion to implement specific tactics. In other words, the region must take an ecosystem approach to implement the strategies and tactics outlined in this plan. Partners can include:

- Regional Economic Development Organizations
- Regional Workforce Development Organizations
- County Government
- Local Government
- State Agency Partners
- Federal Agency Partners
- Local Chambers of Commerce
- Small Business Development Centers
- Manufacturing Extension Partners
- Higher-Education Institutions
- Utility Companies
- Major Employers

Strategic Framework



Focus Area 1:

PREVENTION & PREPAREDNESS

STRATEGY 1: FORMALIZE AN ECONOMIC RESILIENCY ECOSYSTEM

The project team encourages LRGVDC to reconvene the organizations and leaders that rallied around the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. By re-connecting key organizations and leaders, the group will again bring together partners that are invested in the economic resiliency of the area. Additionally, collaboration will assist in breaking down silos that were found to exist.

Further, the team encourages LRGVDC to work with partners to identify a convening organization to formalize this consortium of regional organizations to ensure there is a platform for consistent communication and coordination of regional economic, workforce, and community development initiatives. Ensuring consistent communication around initiatives will serve as a mechanism for alignment of growth.

To support this group, the project team encourages leaders to develop an asset map of organizations, resources, and programs that can be proactively marketed to businesses and individuals across the region. This asset map will outline to business owners the resources available to them to continue to grow and expand their business operations. The asset map should include categories that focus on funding, technical resources, workforce and training resources, innovation support, and other business support programs and resources. This map will serve as a tool to identify existing resources and ensure targeted use of them quickly and easily.

STRATEGY 2: DEVELOP AN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTINUITY PLAN

To support the region, the LRGVDC itself needs to be prepared to function in the event of an economic disruption. As such, the project team encourages the LRGVDC to ensure the organization has an updated organizational continuity plan to keep it aligned in case of disruption or emergency. The plan should be updated annually to ensure relevancy.

For the plan, the LRGVDC should identify critical business functions for its daily operations and continuity of services. Establishing communication redundancies ensures that the region has multiple pathways to communicate and organize should one system fail. Also important is ensuring data safety during the communication process. In addition to communication redundancies with data protection, the LRGVDC needs to prepare a crisis communication plan to follow and execute during an emergency. In addition to communication, supplies for disaster response need to be collected and stored along with arrangements for alternative office locations and protocol in the event of a crisis.



STRATEGY 3: IDENTIFY SUSTAINABLE FUNDING TO SUPPORT REGIONAL BUSINESS RETENTION AND EXPANSION OUTREACH

Consistent business retention and expansion will help the LRGVDC, and regional economic development partners understand potential needs, gaps, and susceptibilities for the region. To do this, LRGVDC should consider creating a task force to help identify funding and resources to support a regional business outreach program. It may work with state and federal agencies to identify potential funding support for partner organizations, as well as work with local and regional elected officials to advocate for sustainable funding for business outreach activities.

It is recommended that LRGVDC prioritize outreach and support traditional industry clusters, like health care, agriculture, and tourism. LRGVDC may also consider the use of a regional Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to track business outreach visits to best understand the private sector and its disaster preparedness. These practices will help aid in the creation of long-term sustainability of funding.



Photo Credit 5: utrgv.edu



Photo Credit 6: weslaco.tamu.edu



OBJECTIVE:

Organize and marshal resources to help the Lower Rio Grande region prevent and prepare for economic disruption.



PARTNERS / CHAMPIONS:

Workforce Development Organizations, Higher-Education Institutions, Area EDO's, FEMA, State Emergency Response Commission, Local Chambers of Commerce, SBDC's



STRATEGIES



ACTION ITEMS



TIMELINE



METRICS FOR SUCCESS

FORMALIZE AN ECONOMIC RESILIENCY ECOSYSTEM

- Reconvene organizations that comprised the COVID-19 regional response team.
- Identify lead or convening organization.
- Develop an asset map of regional resources.
- Develop a marketing strategy to promote the regional asset map.

Short (1-2 years)

- # of regional partners identified
- # of regional participant partners
- Completion of regional asset map
- Standard marketing metrics to assess visibility of regional asset map

DEVELOP AN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTINUITY PLAN

- Identify critical business functions.
- Establish communication redundancies.
- Prepare a crisis communication plan.
- Gather necessary supplies in case of emergency.
- Commit to an annual update to continuity plan

Short (1-2 years)

- Demonstrable progress of current organizational assessment
- Launch of continuity plan
- Amount of necessary supplies purchased
- Demonstrated annual update to continuity plan

IDENTIFY SUSTAINABLE FUNDING TO SUPPORT REGIONAL BUSINESS RETENTION AND EXPANSION OUTREACH

- Create a regional BRE task force.
- Identify state and federal funding opportunities.
- Investigate potential Customer Relationship Management systems

Medium (2-3 years)

- # of task force participants
- Amount of funding opportunities identified
- Amount of funding secured
- CRM system adoption



Focus Area 2:

MITIGATE AND RESPOND

STRATEGY 1: CREATE A CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAYBOOK

During the time of an economic crisis, communication can save both lives and livelihoods. The LRGVDC can serve a critical function of facilitating communication between the regional business community, including regional economic development organizations, and elected officials and state and federal agencies.

To do this, the LRGVDC should create a Crisis Communication Playbook. The Playbook should include a process for both internal and external communication. Ultimately, the Playbook should include communication goals, communication channels, and key contacts. Particular attention should be paid to how the organization will cooperate with media outlets during a crisis as well. Having these procedures clearly outlined will facilitate easier and improved communication in the event of an emergency.



Photo Credit 7: sopadre.com

STRATEGY 2: ORGANIZE SMALL BUSINESS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SUPPORT NETWORKS

To organize support networks, the LRGVDC can serve as a convener and organizer to help local economic development ecosystems mobilize to provide needed technical assistance to small businesses in their communities. Potential partners that should be organized in the network include SBDC's, local universities, technical schools, MEP's, CDFI's, Chambers, and other nonprofit organizations dedicated to the success of local economies.

For technical assistance, LRGVDC should be prepared to help businesses with organizing and preparing financial records to high-quality levels for loans or grant assistance. Additionally, support should be provided for working with insurance agencies, legal services, and other entities. To aid in this, the LRGVDC would be wise to create a technical assistance asset map in preparation of the next economic disruptions. The asset map will assist small businesses with easily accessing the resources needed during a time of crisis.



Photo Credit 8: texastribune.com

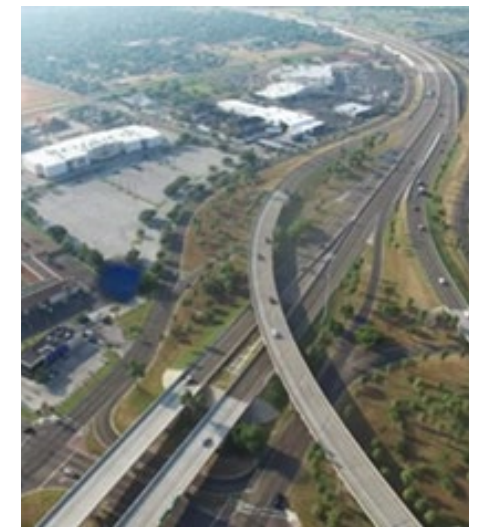


Photo Credit 9: Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council



OBJECTIVE:

Ensure the Lower Rio Grande Valley region has the resources necessary to respond to inevitable future economic disruptions



PARTNERS / CHAMPIONS:

Workforce Development Organizations, Higher-Education Institutions, Area EDO's, MEP's, SBDC's, Local Chambers of Commerce, Media Organizations, FEMA, State Emergency Response Commission



STRATEGIES



ACTION ITEMS



TIMELINE



METRICS FOR SUCCESS

CREATE A CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAYBOOK

- Develop both internal and external communication strategies.
- Identify communication goals, channels, and key contacts.
- Identify key media contacts; foster relationships with regional media outlets

Short
(1-2 years)

- Completed communications strategies
- List of goals, channels, and key media contacts
- # of meetings held with key media contacts

ORGANIZE SMALL BUSINESS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SUPPORT NETWORK

- Identify regional partners.
- Host semi-annual meetings with regional partners.
- Build relationships with regional private service providers.
- Develop an asset map of regional service providers.

Short
(1-2 years)

- # of network participants
- # of semi-annual meetings hosted
- # of attendees at semi-annual meetings
- Completion of asset map

Focus Area 3:

RECOVERY AND RESILIENCY

STRATEGY 1: INVEST IN STORMWATER MANAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

Numerous stakeholders identified modern stormwater infrastructure investments as a strategic priority to create a more resilient region. It was noted that regional drainage improvements would help alleviate damage to properties, homes, businesses, and roads during the monsoon season and when hurricanes strike the area. Stormwater management is typically defined as “the effort to reduce runoff of rainwater or melted snow in streets, lawns and other sites and the improvement of water quality,” according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency. An inadequate stormwater management system can result in flooding, erosion, sanitary sewer overflow, and further infrastructure damage. These results can impair and have a profoundly negative impact on a regional economy. As such, the project team encourages the LRGVDC to take a proactive approach to reinvesting and modernizing the regional system.

Leadership is encouraged to work through existing regional entities to explore federal funding options to address infrastructure investment. Notably, the Economic Development Administration’s Economic Adjustment Assistance Program is a program tailor made for regional infrastructure investment. Further, the United States Environmental Protection Agency offers several revolving loan fund programs that regional economic development organizations and governmental units can access to make needed improvements.

STRATEGY 2: SUPPORT INDUSTRY TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION

One of the more prominent threats to regional, state, and national economies is the threat of cybersecurity breaches. Because of this, the project team encourages the LRGVDC to work with regional and state partners to help small businesses across the region adopt the technology and processes necessary to protect themselves from cybersecurity threats. With an organized regional effort, and cooperation with regional universities, Small Business Development Centers, and the Texas Manufacturing Network, education, programming, funding, and resources can be allocated to small businesses, so they ensure they have the technology in place and the procedures outlined to minimize threats from outside cyber threats. Further, helping small businesses adopt new technologies, these companies will be better equipped to increase sales, diversify customer markets, improve efficiency, and become more profitable.



STRATEGY 3: EXPAND BROADBAND ACCESS ACROSS THE REGION

Broadband is a critical component for long-term economic resiliency. Our connected world via broadband internet is critical for business growth, entrepreneurs, education and workforce training, health, and quality of life. The COVID-19 Pandemic emphasized the necessity for broadband and its importance to quality of life across the country as essentially all parts of our lives moved online. Impacts from the pandemic include online schooling in PreK - 12 and higher educational institutions, employers utilizing “work from home” strategies, hospitals innovating to “telehealth” practices, and many basic services moving solely to online communications. The need for residential and commercial broadband moved from a quality-of-life aspect to a basic life necessity over the course of the pandemic. Recognizing this, the LRGVDC should take the lead to convene regional community and economic development organizations to develop a plan to improve broadband access across the region.

LRGVDC is recommended to identify funding and to support a regional broadband expansion feasibility analysis. This analysis would determine regions of essential need and predicted expansion that are likely to coincide with commercial, residential, and industrial development sites. A task force may be formed to help identify available funding opportunities for broadband expansion that arise from the study. Regional communities should be assisted in obtaining and completing funding for broadband and other infrastructure studies. Ongoing funding for studies that allow for inventory of expansion will help enhance the region’s infrastructure.

STRATEGY 4: ADDRESS DIGITAL EQUITY

Access is only one part of the broadband equation. COVID-19 highlighted the digital equity gap in communities across America, and the LRGVDC would be wise to work with partners to ensure residents across the region have the tools and skills necessary to participate in an increasingly connected world. The LRGVDC should look for opportunities to work with small businesses to ensure they’re taking advantage of modern tools to drive sales and connections, including online sales platforms, social media, delivery services, and advanced online marketing techniques. Intentional efforts should be made to connect with individuals and businesses in historically underrepresented communities and neighborhoods. Efforts should be made to connect with intermediary organizations that represent minority, new American, veteran, women, and LGBTQ+ coalitions and business owners.

STRATEGY 5: CONVENE PARTNERS TO SUPPORT A MODERN TALENT ECOSYSTEM

The project team encourages LRGVDC to develop a regional approach to workforce development. This will aid in creating a high-skill, high-wage workforce environment. LRGVDC may do so by working with regional employers to promote internships, apprenticeships, and work-based learning opportunities. To further the workforce pipeline, regional communities should be assisted in designing and funding programs that focus on youth employment. Additionally, allocating funding, resources, and time to conduct targeted business outreach to major industries, with a particular focus on identifying emerging workforce development needs and trends will be helpful in the process. Collaboration is essential for supporting a modern talent ecosystem and may be done by helping regional employers design and fund sector partnerships to aid in these efforts.

LRGVDC should consider organizing an annual workforce summit with representatives from regional workforce development focused organizations to attract and retain talent. In addition to a summit, it is recommended to create a workforce development ecosystem asset map. The map will ensure partners and private industry are aware of the breadth of workforce services available, in conjunction with the ongoing collaborative opportunities and summit.



Photo Credit 10: portofbrownsville.com



Photo Credit 11: Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council



OBJECTIVE:

Ensure the Lower Rio Grande Valley region is positioned for the future characterized by a resilient regional economy.



PARTNERS / CHAMPIONS:

Broadband Providers, Public Utilities, Workforce Development Organizations, Higher-Education Institutions, Area EDO's, Community Advocacy Organizations, School Districts, Training Institutions



STRATEGIES



ACTION ITEMS



TIMELINE



METRICS FOR SUCCESS

**INVEST IN STORMWATER
MANAGEMENT
INFRASTRUCTURE**

- Work with regional and state partners to identify appropriate funding opportunities.
- Conduct a needs-gap analysis to identify high priority improvements.

Medium (2-3 years)

- Amount of funding opportunities identified
- Completion of needs-gap analysis
- Amount of funding secured

**SUPPORT INDUSTRY
TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION**

- Identify regional partners.
- Convene regional partners quarterly.
- Identify funding for technology adoption programming.
- Help promote existing resources, programming, and training opportunities.

Short
(1-2 years)

- # of partnership organizations
- Amount of funding opportunities identified
- # of regional educational programming and trainings conducted
- # of business participants in training and programming

 STRATEGIES

 ACTION ITEMS

 TIMELINE

 METRICS FOR SUCCESS

EXPAND BROADBAND ACCESS ACROSS THE REGION

- Identify funding to support a regional broadband expansion feasibility analysis.
- Conduct a regional broadband expansion feasibility analysis.
- Create a regional broadband access task force.

Long
(3-5 years)

- Funding opportunities identified
- Regional broadband feasibility analysis completed
- Regional broadband task force formed

ADDRESS DIGITAL EQUITY

- Research best practices for digital equity
- Work with regional partners to support small businesses and their digital needs.
- Connect with intermediary organizations across the region to support underrepresented segments of the population.

Medium
(2-3 years)

- Best practice report completed
- Regional partners identified and engaged

CONVENE PARTNERS TO SUPPORT A MODERN TALENT ECOSYSTEM

- Build strong relationships with regional anchor employers.
- Work with local communities to develop youth employment programs.
- Dedicate resources to promote regional internship, apprenticeship, and work-based learning opportunities.
- Consider developing sector-partnerships.
- Host and convene an annual workforce development summit.
- Create a regional workforce development ecosystem asset map.

Medium
(2-3 years)

- # of anchor institutions engaged
- Youth employment programs launched
- Demonstrable progress promoting work-based learning opportunities
- # of sector partnerships launched
- # of workforce development summits hosted
- Completion of a workforce development ecosystem map



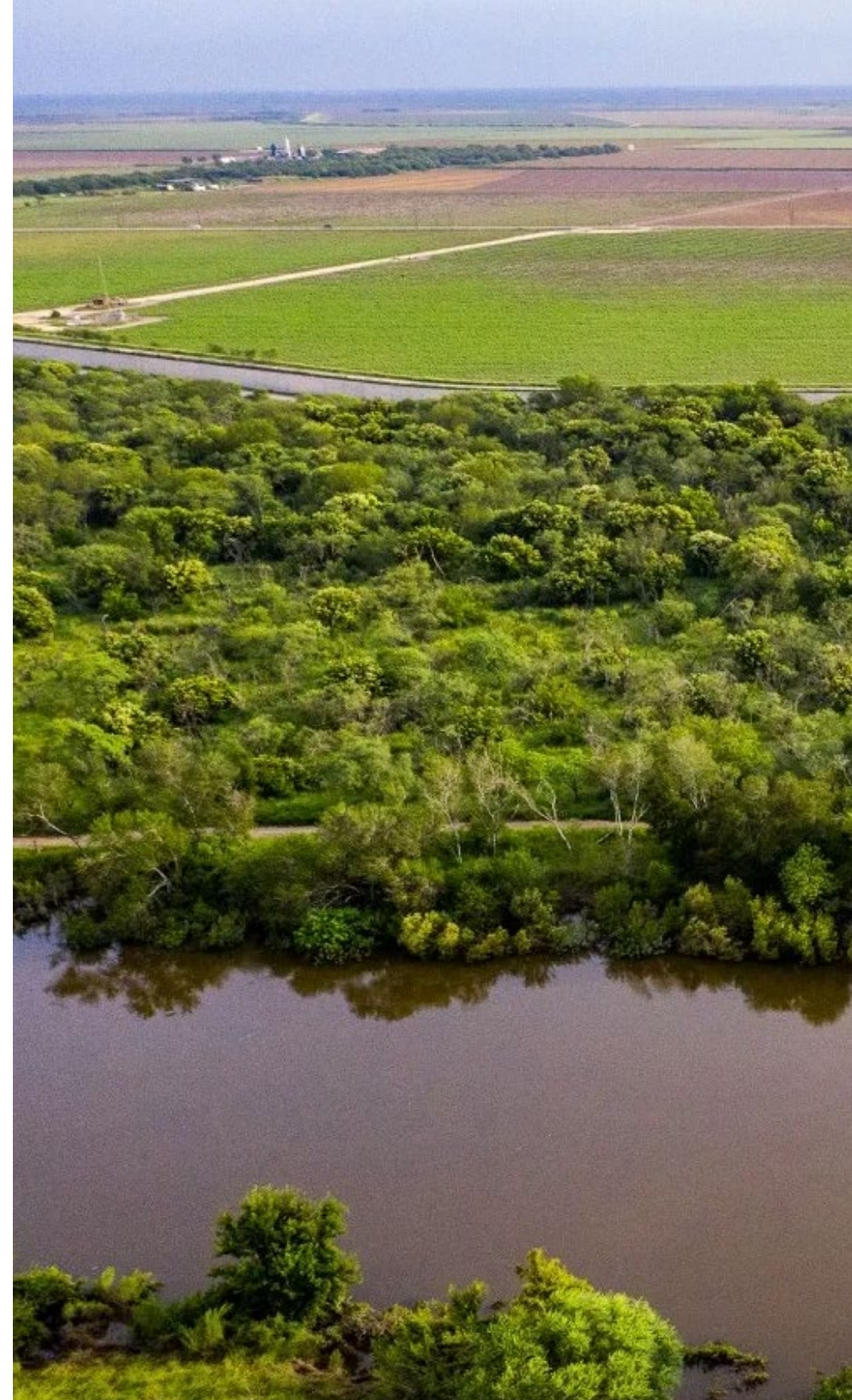
APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

County Profiles

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the document development process, we used a mixed method research approach that combined qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Through integrating both research methods into the document we were able to draw on the strengths of each approach and paint a clearer picture of the economic environment of the region.

We began the process with a deep quantitative data scan of the region. Once the data scan was complete, we then analyzed the data for trends, key findings, and information that needed to be highlighted. After the review of the data scan was completed, we used that analysis to develop our structure for the engagement portion of the project. From the key findings and trends, we developed themes and prompts of perspectives that would guide our stakeholder engagement sessions. The gained insights and input from the qualitative sessions were then combined with the quantitative data to help formulate the regional SWOT and the focus sections of the action plan.





CAMERON COUNTY


Cameron County Summary

Cameron County is home to the coastal resort town of South Padre Island, which draws an estimated one million tourists annually to enjoy the beaches and coastal amenities that the island offers. The County has seen a consistent population growth and is projected to reach 427,000 citizens by 2026. Within Cameron County, the age distribution slants towards the younger-than-30 subsection of the population, giving the County a younger population than the State's average. The county is 97.5% white (including the Hispanic population), with Black and Asian residents making up .8% of the population each, and those in the American Indian or Alaskan Native category making up .7% of the population. The County is 90% Hispanic and 10% non-Hispanic. Health Care and Social Assistance is the largest sector in Cameron County by number of jobs, followed by Government, Retail Trade, Accommodation and Food Services. In alignment with the largest sector data, Healthcare Support is the County's top occupation. That said, the Utilities sector (\$115,108) is the top sector in terms of average annual earnings, which accounts for 376 jobs in the County.

Cameron County In-Depth Analysis

Cameron County is the southernmost county in the State of Texas. The county borders the Gulf of Mexico to the East, and Matamoros, Mexico to the South. Cameron County is home to 425,029 residents, 89.47% of whom identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Median Household Income in Cameron County is \$38,800.


425,029
Population
(2021)


\$38.8K
Median Household
Income (2019)


160,613
Total
Employment

Cameron County is home to the coastal resort town of South Padre Island, which draws an estimated one million tourists annually to enjoy the beaches and coastal amenities that the island offers. It is also the site of the SpaceX South Texas Launch Site, which has been projected to generate 500 jobs by 2024. Cameron County outpaces the nation in Healthcare and Social Assistance jobs.

POPULATION TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

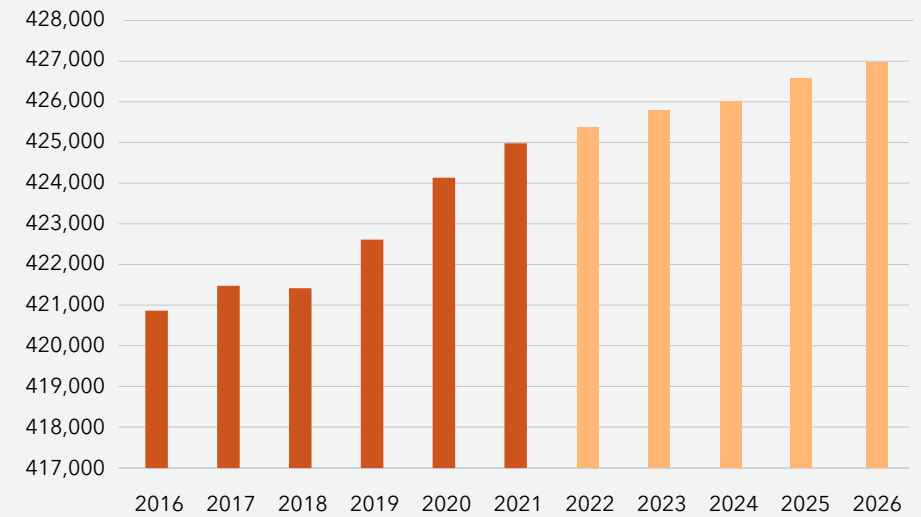
Cameron County's steady upward population trend has been interrupted only by a slight decline in 2018. If growth continues as projected, the county will be home to roughly 427,000 residents by 2026.

AGE DISTRIBUTION

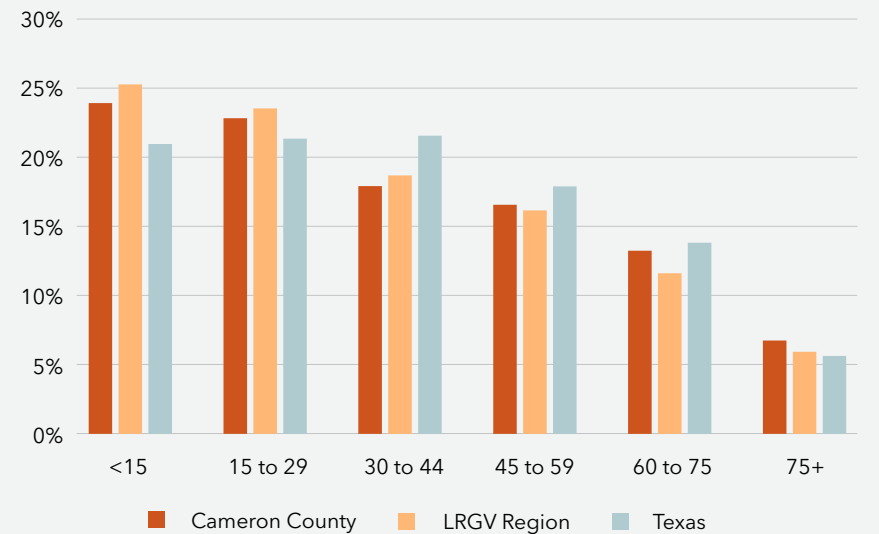
Age distribution in Cameron County differs slightly from the State of Texas, with more residents younger than 30 and older than 75. This concentration of young people in the county is a favorable indicator of population growth in the absence of forces driving young people to migrate from the county or region.

When compared to the LRGV Region, Cameron County is slightly older, with its share of residents 45 and older exceeding the regional figures.

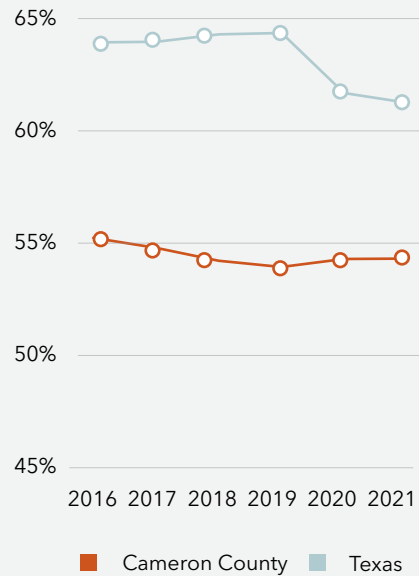
CAMERON COUNTY HISTORIC AND PROJECTED POPULATION



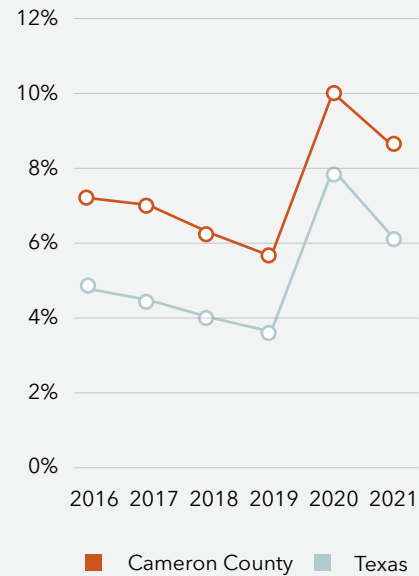
PERCENT AGE DISTRIBUTION



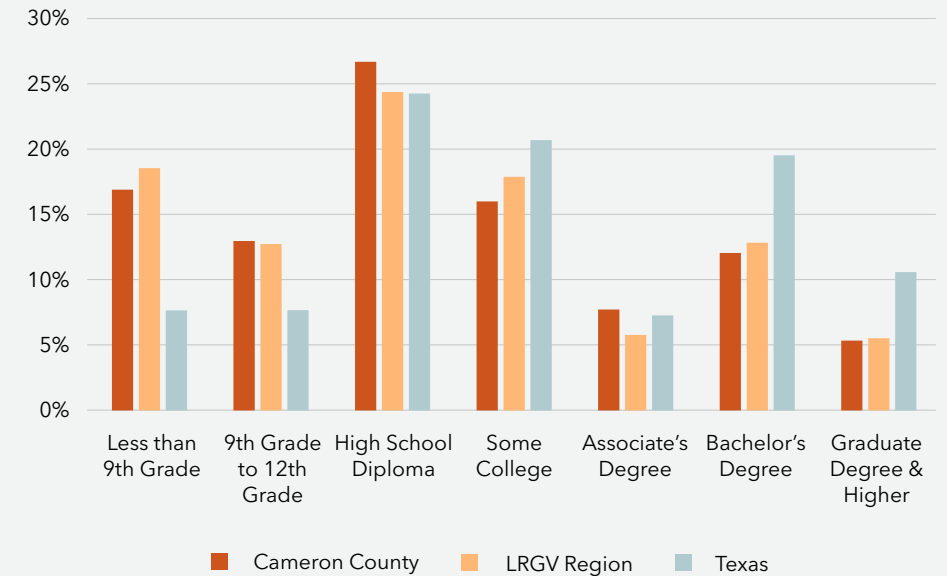
LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE



UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



UNEMPLOYMENT AND LABOR FORCE

Cameron County has a lower labor force participation rate and a higher unemployment rate than the State of Texas. While the State’s labor force participation rate fell from 2019 to 2020 presumably in response to the COVID pandemic, the County’s labor force participation rate rose slightly, from 53.9% to 54.2%.

Unemployment rate in Cameron County, while consistently higher than the State, mirrors the State trendline closely. The gap between County and State unemployment rate has grown wider in the post-pandemic years, clocking at a roughly 2-point difference in 2019 and growing to a roughly 2.75-point difference in 2021.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

A higher share of residents in Cameron County holds an associate degree than both the Region and State. The County also has a higher percentage of individuals whose highest educational attainment is a High School Diploma. When compared to the Region, Cameron County has fewer residents that have an educational attainment level of less than 9th grade. However, the region has a slightly larger share of residents ended their education between 9th grade and 12th grade, when compared to the region. The county comparatively has lower levels of educational attainment compared to the state, with a much smaller share of residents pursuing higher education or completing a postsecondary degree.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

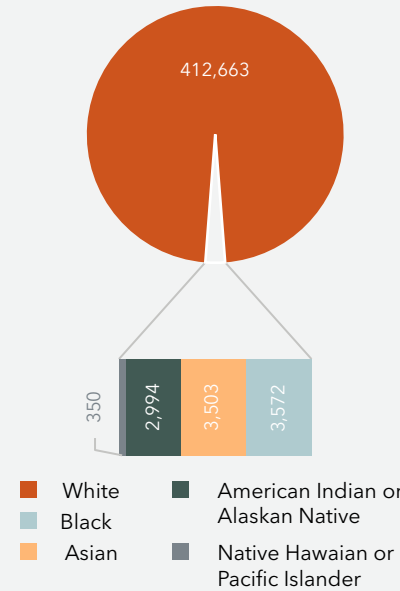
Cameron County is a majority-Hispanic community, as is the surrounding region. The county is 97.5% white (including the Hispanic population), with Black and Asian residents making up .8% of the population each, and those in the American Indian or Alaskan Native category making up .7% of the population. The County is 90% Hispanic and 10% non-Hispanic.

TOP INDUSTRY SECTORS

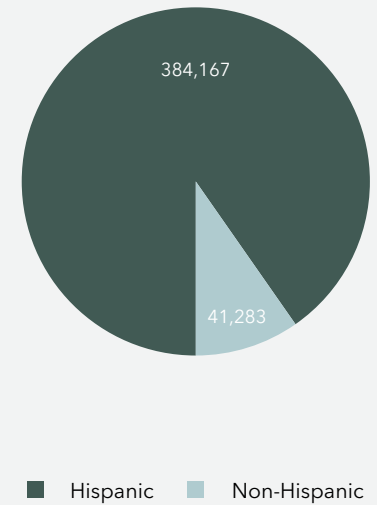
Health Care and Social Assistance is the largest sector in Cameron County by number of jobs, followed by Government, Retail Trade, Accommodation and Food Services, and Administrative & Support & Waste Management & Remediation Services. Although representing two of the top five sectors in the County, the Government and Retail Trade sectors lost jobs from 2016 to 2021. Health Care and Social Assistance added jobs in the same 5-year period, and has a Location Quotient of 1.94, implying that the sector is more concentrated in the county than the national average.

Utilities was the top earning sector in Cameron County in 2021, followed by Professional, Scientific, & Technical Services, Mining, Quarrying, & Oil & Gas Extraction, Government, and Manufacturing. Of these sectors, only Government ranks among the top 5 in terms of jobs. The County's top sector in terms of jobs, Health Care and Social Assistance, has an average earning per worker of \$37,752, just below the County's median household income. The top earning sector, Utilities, accounts for 376 jobs in Cameron County. While compared to other sectors the Utilities sector represents very few jobs, its 2021 count represents a 23% increase from 305 in 2016.

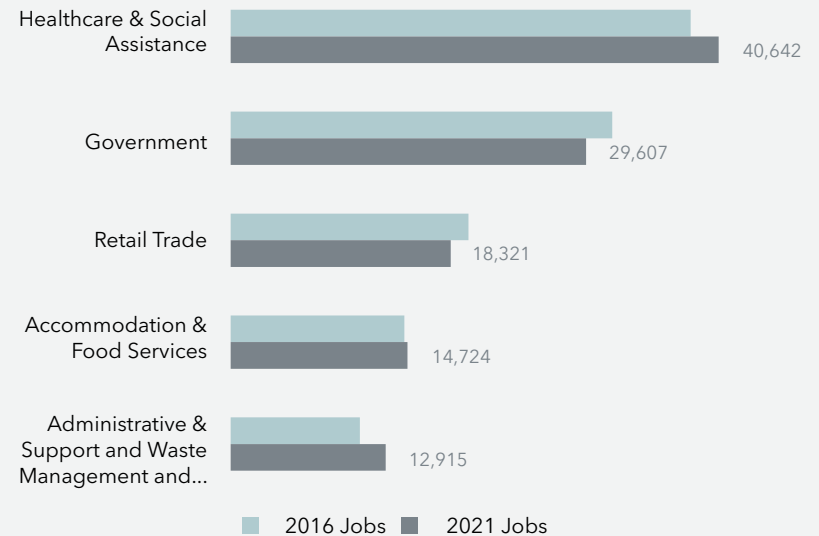
CAMERON COUNTY POPULATION BY RACE



CAMERON COUNTY POPULATION BY ETHNICITY



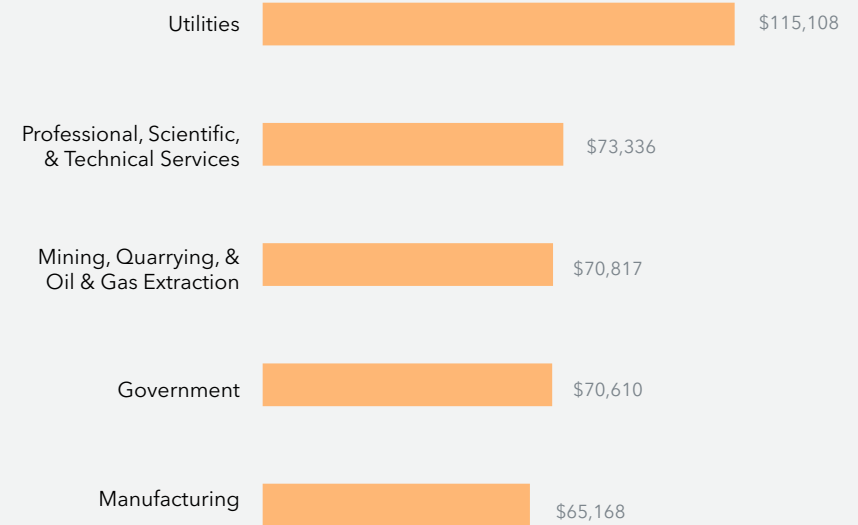
TOP SECTORS BY 2021 JOBS



The Location Quotient (LQ) compares the county's concentration jobs in a particular sector with the United States average. The number 1 represents the average, and industries are concentrated proportional to their distance from 1.

Cameron County's Health Care and Social Assistance sector has the highest LQ at 1.94, followed by Administrative & Support & Waste Management & Remediation Services, Accommodation & Food Services, Government, and Retail Trade. While we know that employment in these sectors is more concentrated in Cameron County than the national average, LQ cannot be interpreted as a measure of productivity or efficiency and may not capture niche markets within broad sector categories.

TOP SECTORS BY 2021 AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS



TOP SECTORS BY 2021 LOCATION QUOTIENT



TOP OCCUPATIONS

The largest occupations in Cameron County align with top sector trends. Healthcare Support is the County’s top occupation, to match Health Care and Social Assistance as the top sector. Hourly earnings for Healthcare Support in the county average \$10.93 an hour. Of the top 5 occupations, Educational Instruction and Library leads the way in terms of earnings at \$22.65 an hour, and Food Preparation and Serving Related occupations earn the lowest on average, \$9.35 an hour.

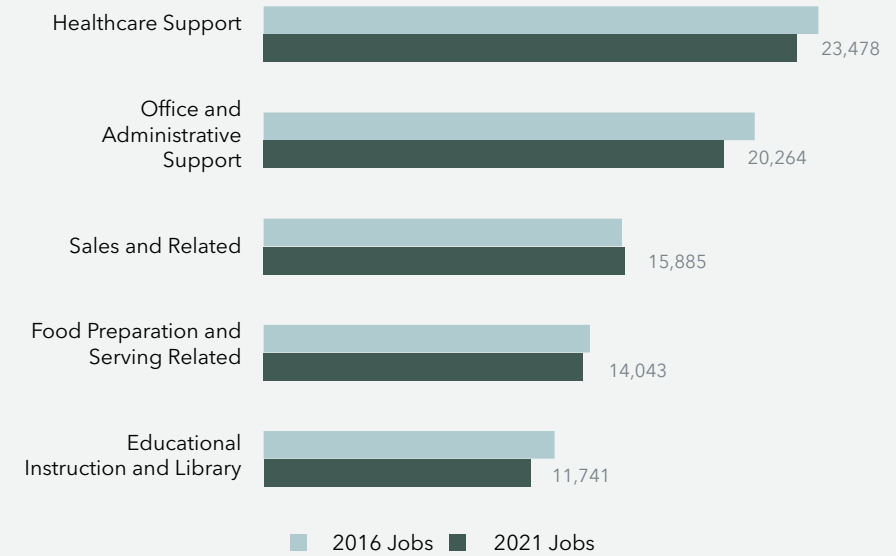
TOP EMPLOYERS

Top employers in Cameron County fall within the Education sector as well as Healthcare and Government. Within the top 8 employers, K-12 education accounts for over 4,000 jobs. Brownsville ISD is the largest profiled employer with 2,794 profiles.

Higher education makes up 1,568 profiles, with University of Texas holding 1,110 of those jobs.

Healthcare (Valley Baptist Health System) accounts for 575 profiles, and Government (City of Brownsville) accounts for 323 profiles.

LARGEST OCCUPATIONS BY 2021 JOBS



CAMERON COUNTY TOP COMPANY PROFILES

Company	Profiles
Brownsville ISD	2,794
University of Texas	1,110
Valley Baptist Health System	575
HC ISD	509
Texas State Technical College	458
San Benito CISD	356
IDEA Public Schools	346
City of Brownsville	323

HIDALGO COUNTY

Hidalgo County Summary

Hidalgo is the most populous county in the region and has a population of 882,426, which is a 4.1% increase since 2016. This growth is expected to continue with the county adding approximately 30,000 new residents in the next 5 years. The age distribution of Hidalgo's residents, trends younger than both regional and State average. In addition to being the largest populated county in the region, the 91.9% Hispanic and Latino residents make it one of the largest majority-Hispanic counties in the nation. The top sectors by jobs in 2021 were Health Care and Social Assistance, Government, and Retail Trade. Like Cameron County, Health Care and Social Assistance is the largest occupation but Utilities is the top sector for average annual earnings at \$103,261.

Hidalgo County In-Depth Analysis

Hidalgo County sits to the West of Cameron County on Texas' Southern border. The county is the most populous in the region with a population of 882,426 - a 4.1% increase since 2016. Hispanic and Latino residents make up 91.87% of the county's population, making it one of the largest majority-Hispanic counties nationwide. Median Household Income in Hidalgo County is \$40,000, the highest MHI in the region.



882,426
Population
(2021)



\$40K
Median Household
Income (2019)



305,262
Total
Employment

Like Cameron County, Hidalgo County supports a Healthcare and Social Assistance industry much larger than the national average. The county also has a large share of land devoted to agriculture, and is a key producer of melons, vegetables, cotton, and sorghum. Jobs in the region are expected to grow in stride with population.

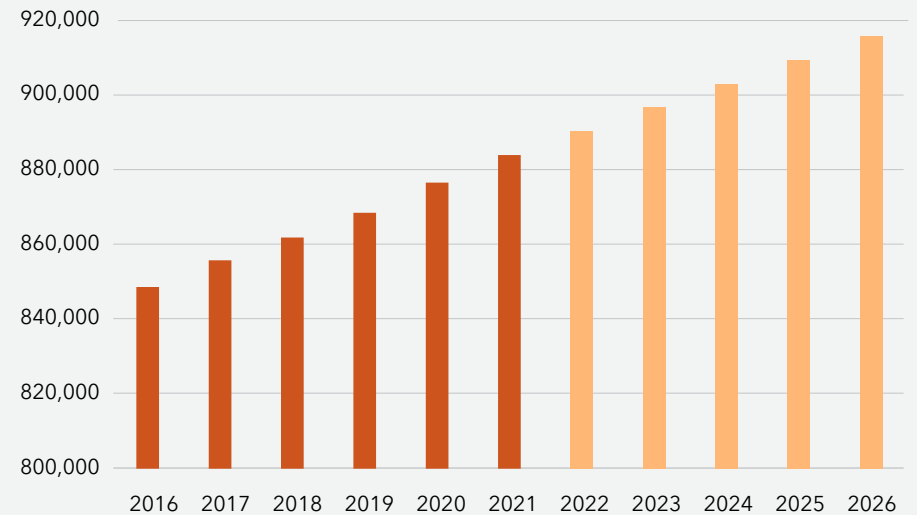
POPULATION TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

Population in Hidalgo County is projected to grow by roughly 30,000 residents in the next 5 years, continuing trends seen in previous years. Steady population growth in Hidalgo County contributes to the Region's projected growth and is an asset in terms of economic development and workforce growth.

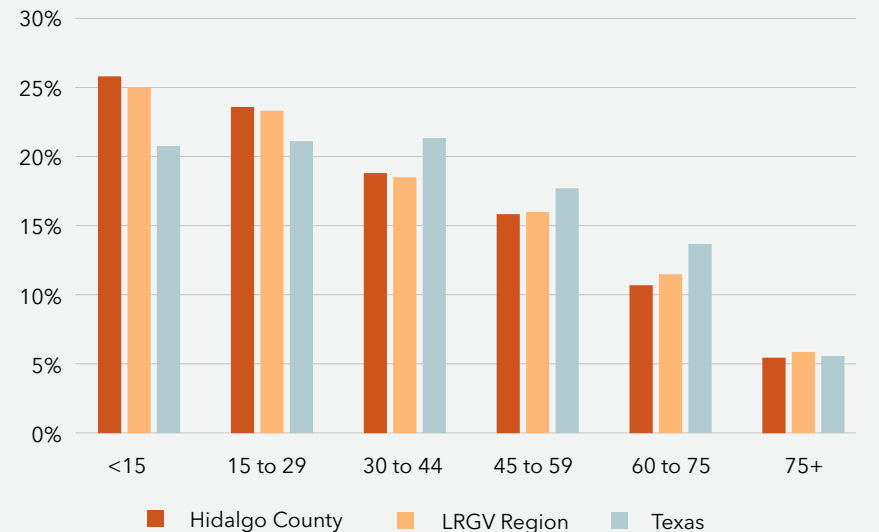
AGE DISTRIBUTION

Hidalgo County's age distribution trends are younger than the State average and regional totals. Assuming adequate retention, this bodes for robust population growth. Ensuring there is an adequate supply of jobs available for those aging into the workforce and ensuring that the supply of jobs align with education and training opportunities available in the region are key considerations for areas with a workforce projected to grow.

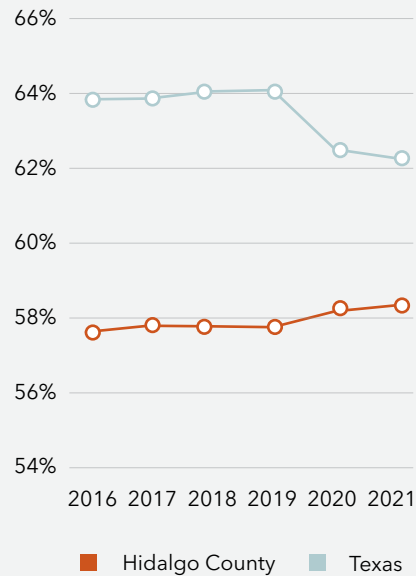
HIDALGO COUNTY HISTORIC AND PROJECTED POPULATION



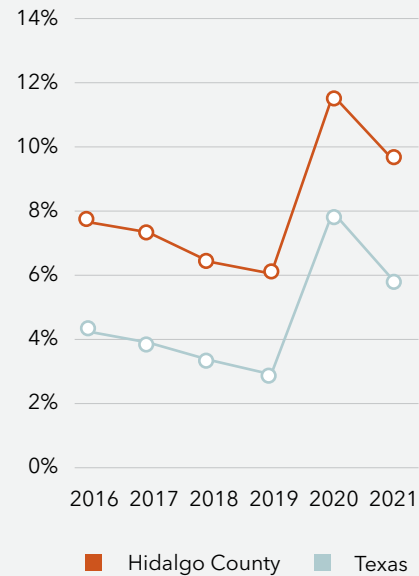
PERCENT AGE DISTRIBUTION



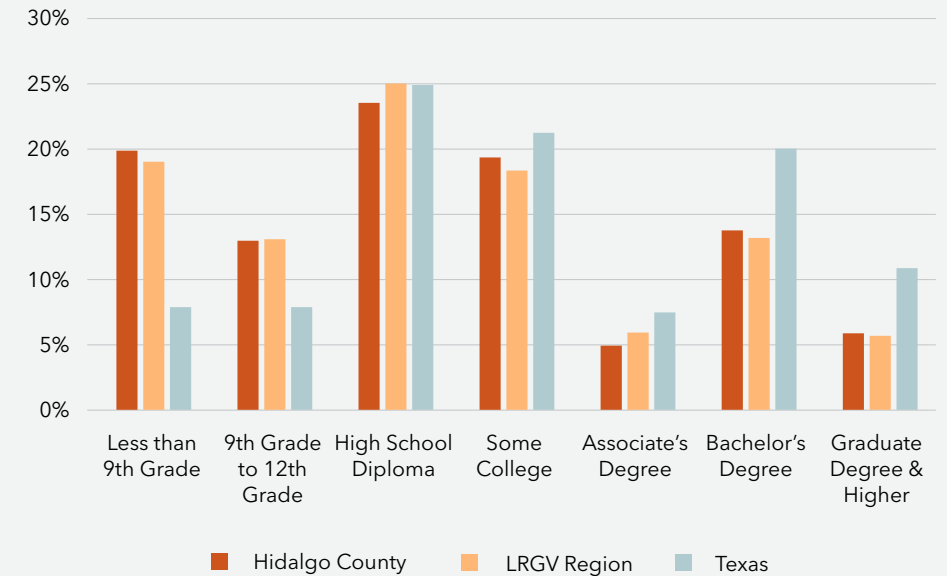
LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE



UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



UNEMPLOYMENT AND LABOR FORCE

The unemployment rate in Hidalgo County sits over 3 points higher than the state figure. It has mimicked state trends, including a spike due to the Coronavirus Pandemic and a decline from 2020-2021, although not fully returning to pre-pandemic numbers.

Labor force participation has not mimicked but mirrored State trends, remaining below the State figure but rising in participation from 2019-2021 as the State declined.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Hidalgo County shows slight variations from the regional levels of educational attainment, with both the County and the Region achieving lower levels of educational attainment than the State of Texas. Hidalgo county has a slightly higher share of residents with a bachelor's or graduate degree as well as a slightly higher share of those who have not completed 9th grade, when compared to the LRGV Region. It has a lower share of residents whose highest level of education is a high school diploma or an associate degree compared to the Region.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Hidalgo County is majority white and majority Hispanic. Roughly 1% of the population is Asian and roughly 1% of the population is Black, with other groups making up less than 1% of the county's racial makeup. Roughly 92% of Hidalgo County's population is Hispanic, with about 8% identifying as non-Hispanic. This trend based on the County's proximity to Mexico has cultural and political significance for the County and for the surrounding Region.

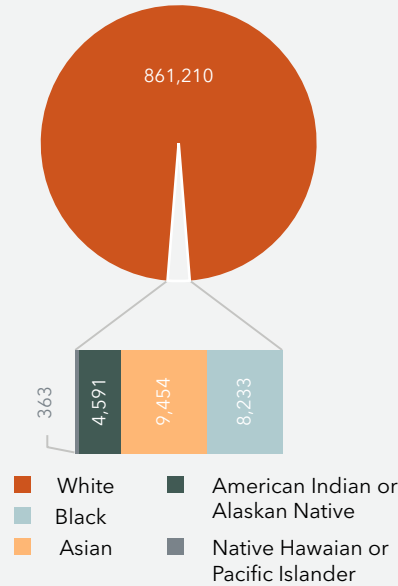
TOP SECTORS

The bar chart above shows the top 5 sectors in Hidalgo County by number of jobs. The County's top sector, Health Care and Social Assistance, experienced a jump in total number of jobs from 2016 to 2021. Of the other top 5 sectors, Administrative Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services experienced growth, and Accommodation and Food Services experienced a very modest increase in the number of jobs (about 30). The remaining two sectors, Government and Retail Trade, have declined in number of jobs from 2016 to 2021.

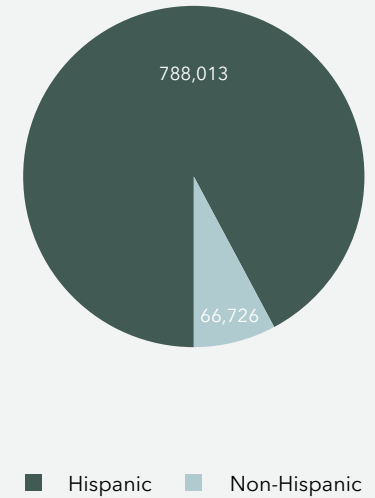
The top 5 sectors by average annual earnings in Hidalgo County range from \$103,000 annually to \$64,000 annually, all above the County's median income of \$40,000. Of these sectors, only Government also appears in the top 5 sectors by number of jobs, indicating that high-earning positions may be more specialized or in shorter supply. Accommodation and Food Service and Retail Trade, both of which appear in the top sectors by jobs, typically are among the lowest-earning sectors.

The Healthcare and Social Assistance Sector has the highest location quotient in Hidalgo County at 1.92. This is followed by Government (1.29), Retail Trade (1.24), Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting (1.13) and Accommodation and Food Services (1.07). The County's LQ is aligned with the top job sectors of 2021 which are Healthcare and Social Assistance, Government and Retail Trade.

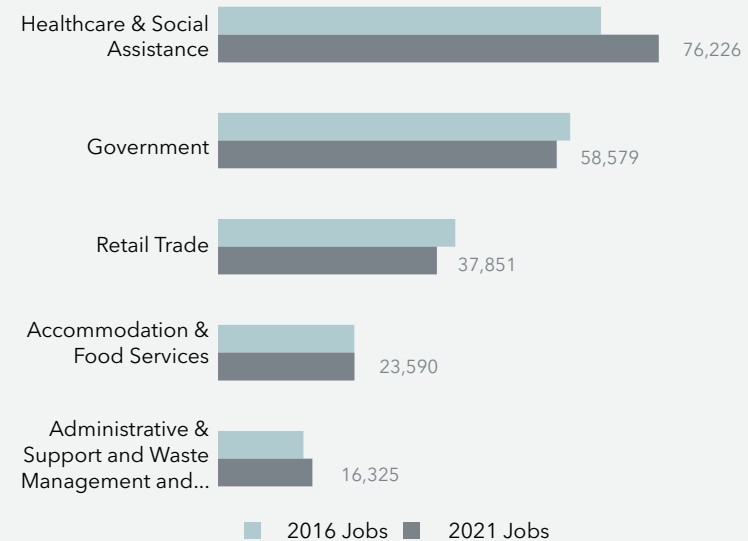
HIDALGO COUNTY POPULATION BY RACE



HIDALGO COUNTY POPULATION BY ETHNICITY



TOP SECTORS BY 2021 JOBS

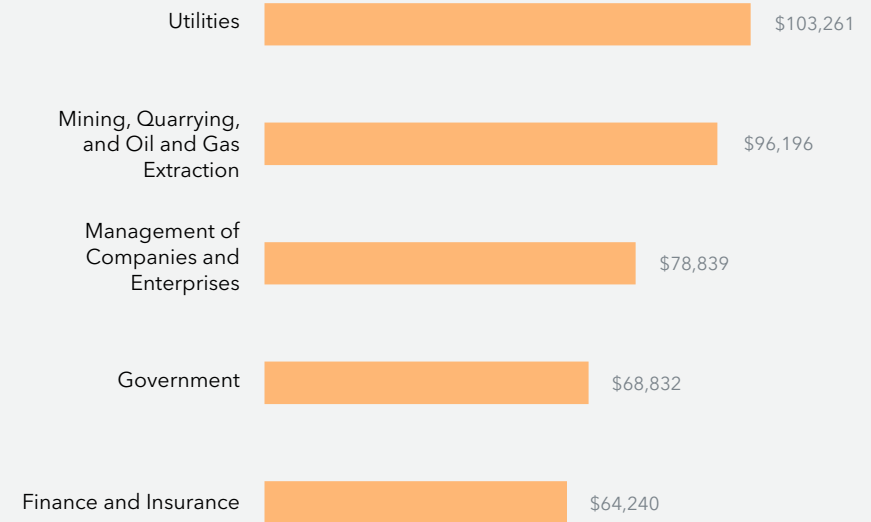


TOP OCCUPATIONS

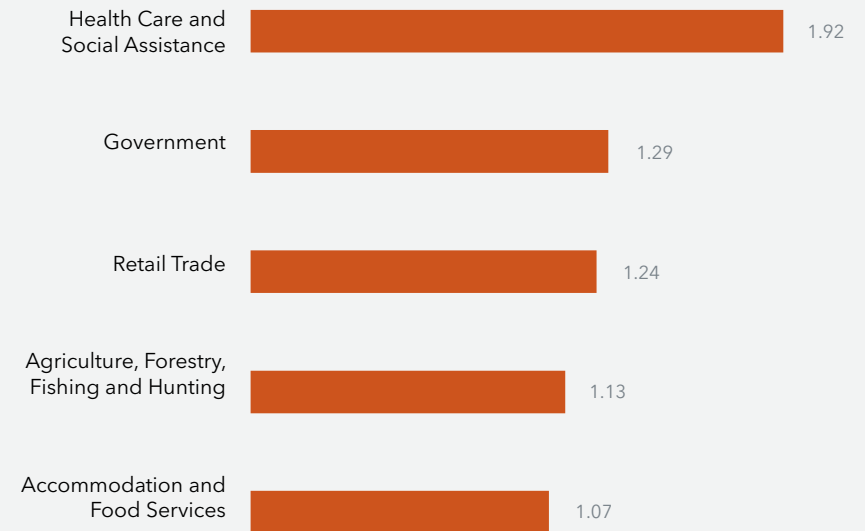
The largest occupations in Hidalgo County align with top sector trends. Healthcare Support is the County's largest occupation by jobs in 2021 at 46,992. This shows an increase in jobs in the sector when compared to 2016. The second and third largest occupations by jobs are Office & Administrative Support and Sales & Related, both of which saw a slight decline from 2016 to 2021.

The largest occupations in Hidalgo County align with top sector trends. Healthcare Support is the County's largest occupation by jobs in 2021 at 46,992. This shows an increase in jobs in the sector when compared to 2016. The second and third largest occupations by jobs are Office & Administrative Support and Sales & Related, both of which saw a slight decline from 2016 to 2021.

TOP SECTORS BY 2021 AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS



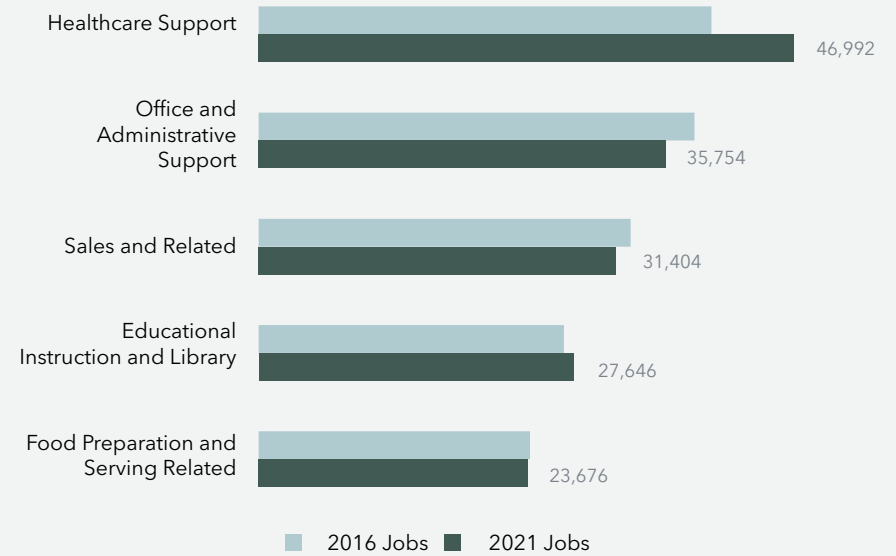
TOP SECTORS BY 2021 LOCATION QUOTIENT



TOP EMPLOYERS

Hidalgo County's top employer profiles are concentrated in the education sector. Higher education accounts for over 2,800 jobs in the list of top 10 employers by company profiles, and K-12 accounts for 4,226. The largest private sectors employers in the County are H-E-B (628) and Wal-Mart (618) - both in the retail trade sector. Rounding out the list of top employers in Hidalgo is the City of McAllen with 452 job profiles.

LARGEST OCCUPATIONS BY 2021 JOBS



HIDALGO COUNTY TOP COMPANY PROFILES

Company	Profiles
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley	1,610
Mcallen IDS	1,339
South Texas College	1,197
IDEA Public Schools	986
Edinburg ISD	822
H-E-B	682
Walmart	618
Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD	594
Edinburgh CISD	485
City of Mcallen, TX	452

WILLACY COUNTY

Willacy County Summary

Willacy County is the least populated county in the region and is experiencing population decline. From 2016 to 2020, the county saw a steady decline from 21,749 to 21,161. The population outlook shows the past trends of decline flattening out with population going from 21,185 in 2022 to 21,182 in 2026. When looking at the age distribution, Willacy is trending older than the regional average with the county having a larger share of residents aged 60+. The top sectors in terms of jobs in 2021 were Government, Administrative and Support, and Agriculture Forestry Fishing & Hunting. Mining, Quarrying, & Oil & Gas Extraction was the County's top average annual earning sector at \$211,879.

Willacy County In-Depth Analysis

Willacy County sits to the North of Cameron County and borders the Gulf of Mexico. It is the least populous county in the region with a population of 21,186. Total population has declined since 2016 and is not projected to grow in the coming years. The county conforms with the surrounding region demographically, with 87.34% of the population identifying as Hispanic or Latino. Median Household income in Willacy County is \$35,500.



21,186
Population
(2021)



\$35.5K
Median Household
Income (2019)



4,805
Total
Employment

Largest industries in Willacy County include Government, Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services, and Agriculture. The county is known for producing the Bermuda onion, which remains an important crop. There is also an oil and natural gas production presence in the county, which functions as the highest-earning industry.

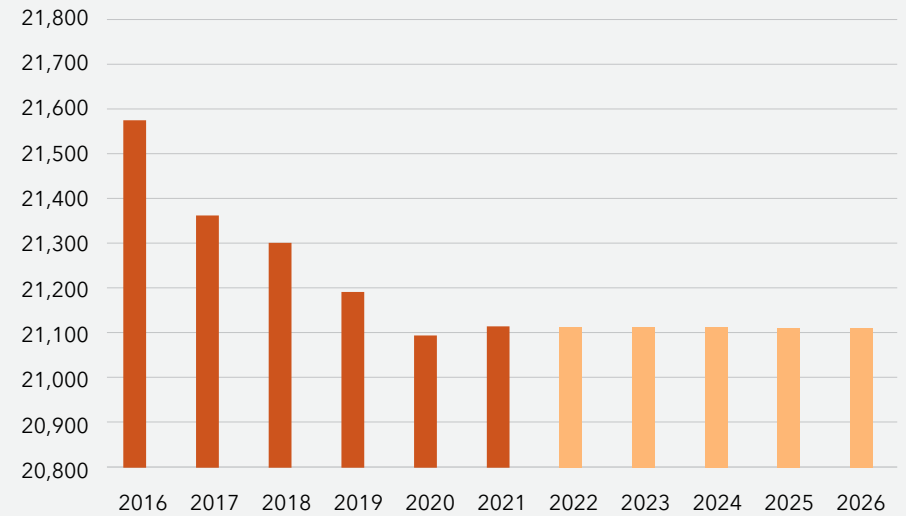
POPULATION TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

From 2016 to 2020, Willacy County saw a consistent decline in population, from a high of 21,749 to a low of 21,161. In 2021 the decline tempered, and the County saw a slight population increase of 25 citizens. The population outlook from 2022 to 2026 shows a relatively flat trend line with very little movement in the population numbers. In 2022 the population is expected to be 21,185 and in 2026 the population projection is 21,182.

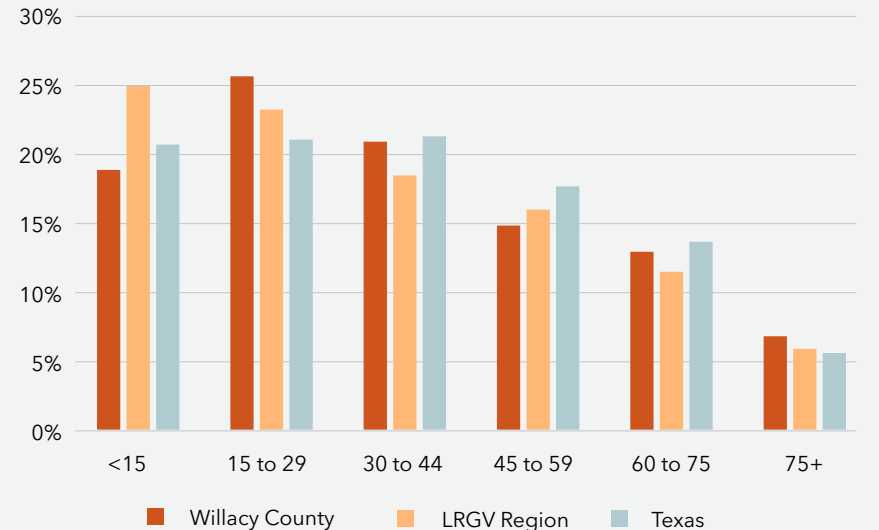
AGE DISTRIBUTION

In terms of age distribution, Willacy County has a larger share of residents aged 15-44 and aged 60 + than the LRGV Region. The county has a smaller share of residents under the age of 15 than both the Region and the State, which aligns with the stagnant and declining population trends the county has experienced. The county also has a larger share of older adults than both the Region and the State, which may call for expanded services targeted towards aging populations.

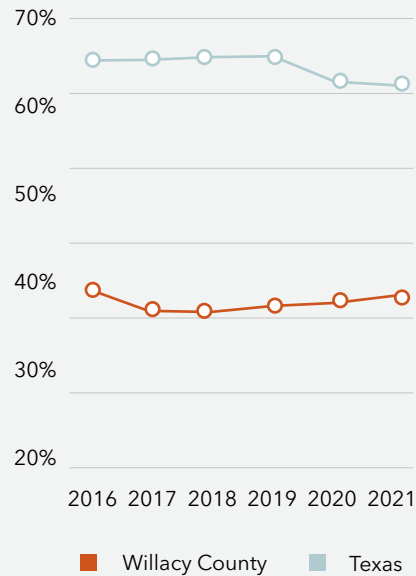
WILLACY COUNTY HISTORIC AND PROJECTED POPULATION



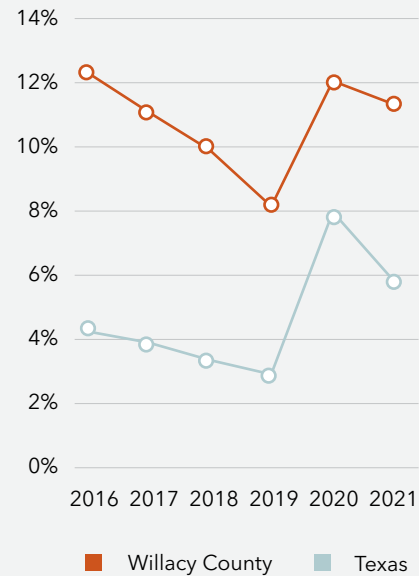
PERCENT AGE DISTRIBUTION



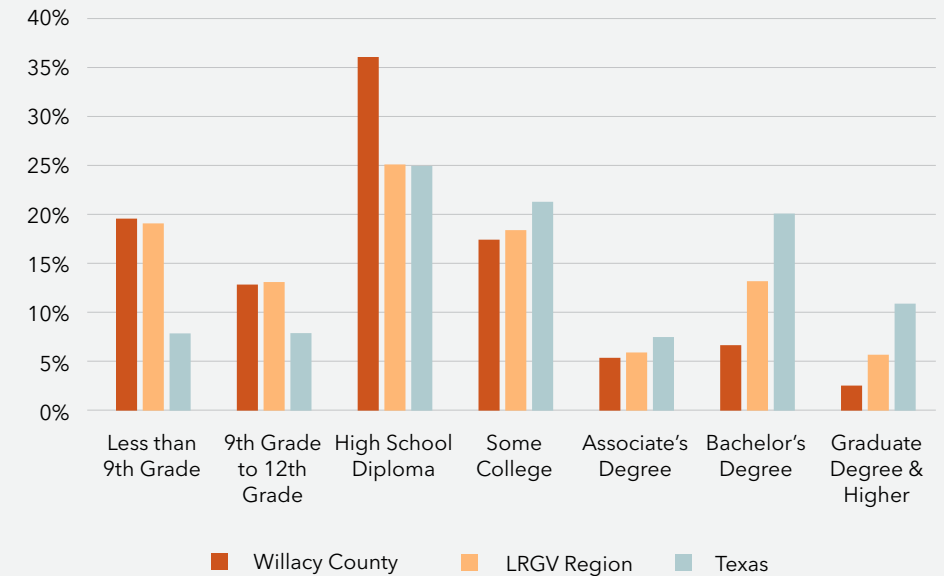
LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE



UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



UNEMPLOYMENT AND LABOR FORCE

The unemployment trendline in Willacy County mimics the shape of the State's trendline, but hovers above it at a higher overall rate. The lowest unemployment rate for the County came in 2019 when it reached a low of 8.23%. In contrast the highest rate that the State has seen came in 2020 with a rate of 7.6%.

Labor force participation trends put Willacy County consistently below the state, roughly 20 points below the State figures. Although the County didn't experience the same small trends as the State during the COVID-19 pandemic, variations in labor force participation rate have been minor.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Willacy County mirrors regional levels of educational attainment for levels below 12th grade, but the county has a much higher share of residents who have achieved a high school diploma as their highest level of educational attainment than both the Region and the State. The remaining categories consistently depict Willacy County with the lowest level of attainment, followed by the Region, with the State having the highest share of residents at a given educational attainment level.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Willacy County is majority white and majority Hispanic. Less than 3% of the population is Black, and roughly 1% of the population is Asian, with other groups making up less than 1% of the county's racial makeup. Roughly 88% of Willacy County's population is Hispanic, with about 12% identifying as non-Hispanic. This trend based on the County's proximity to Mexico has cultural and political significance for the County and for the surrounding Region.

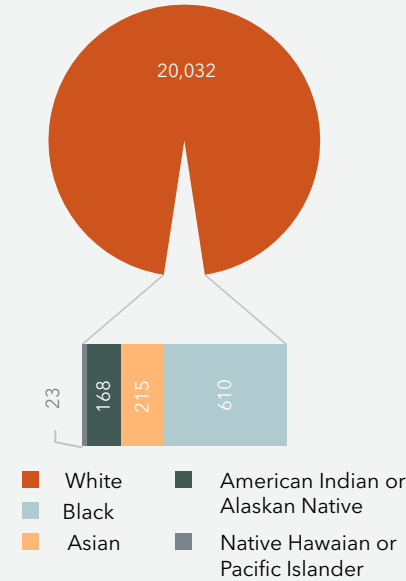
TOP INDUSTRY SECTORS

When looking at the top job sectors for the County in both 2016 and 2021, Government was the leading industry. When comparing jobs from 2016 to 2021, we see that the number of Government related jobs did decline. This contrasts with the other top sectors that all saw some level of job growth from 2016 to 2021. The biggest jobs increase came in the Administrative and Support and Waste Managements and remediation service sectors that saw the number of jobs increase to 627 in 2021.

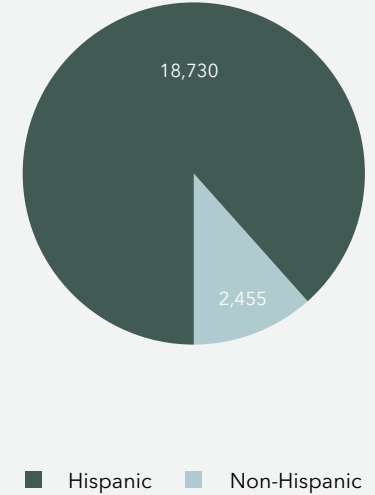
When looking at top sectors by average annual earnings, the Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas extraction industry is by far the top annual earning industry. Their average annual earnings are more than double that of the next two industries. With the fluctuation in the oil and gas industry, the county should pay close attention to this sector to avoid any downturns that would have an immediate impact on the average annual earnings of the sector. The other sectors average annual earnings are Wholesale Trade \$84,990, Information \$80,215, Finance & Insurance \$76,259, and Manufacturing \$73,367.

Willacy County's Agriculture, Forestry, and Hunting sector has the highest LQ at 9.37, which is followed by Administrative & Support & Waste Management & Remediation Services at 2.14 and Government at 1.60. While we know that employment in these sectors is more concentrated in Cameron County than the national average, LQ cannot be interpreted as a measure of productivity or efficiency and may not capture niche markets within broad sector categories.

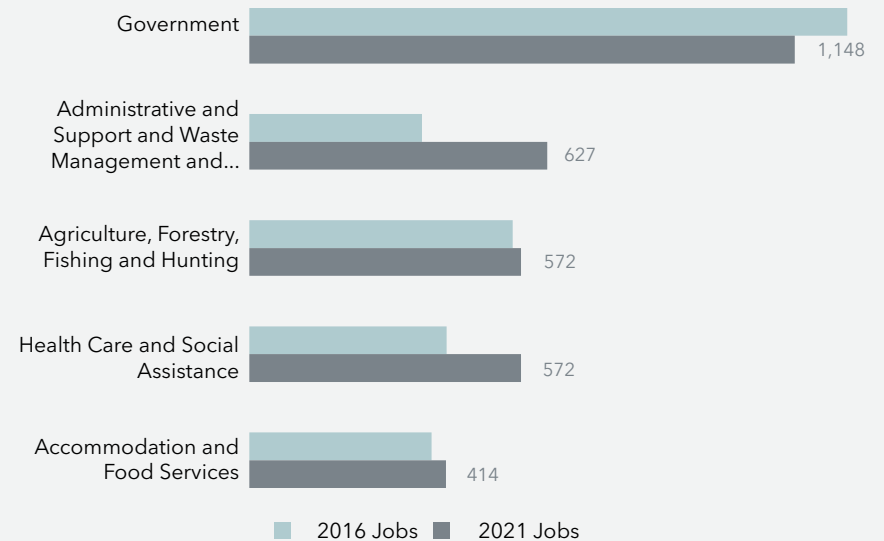
WILLACY COUNTY POPULATION BY RACE



WILLACY COUNTY POPULATION BY ETHNICITY



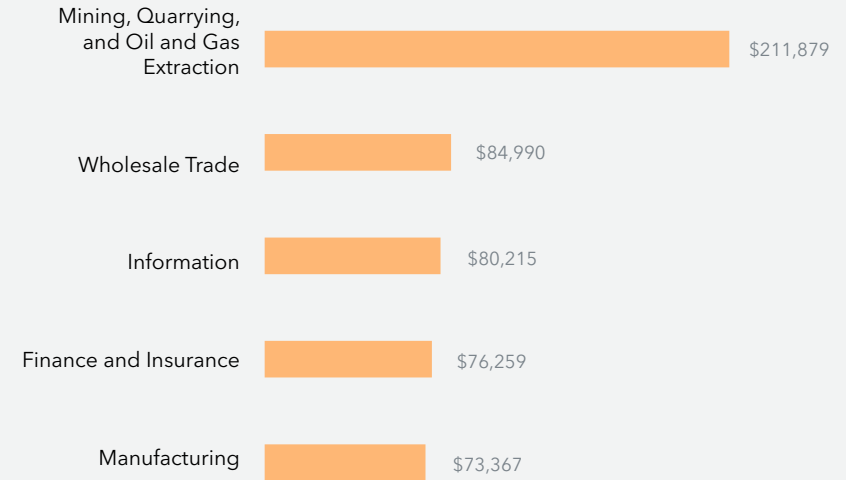
TOP SECTORS BY 2021 JOBS



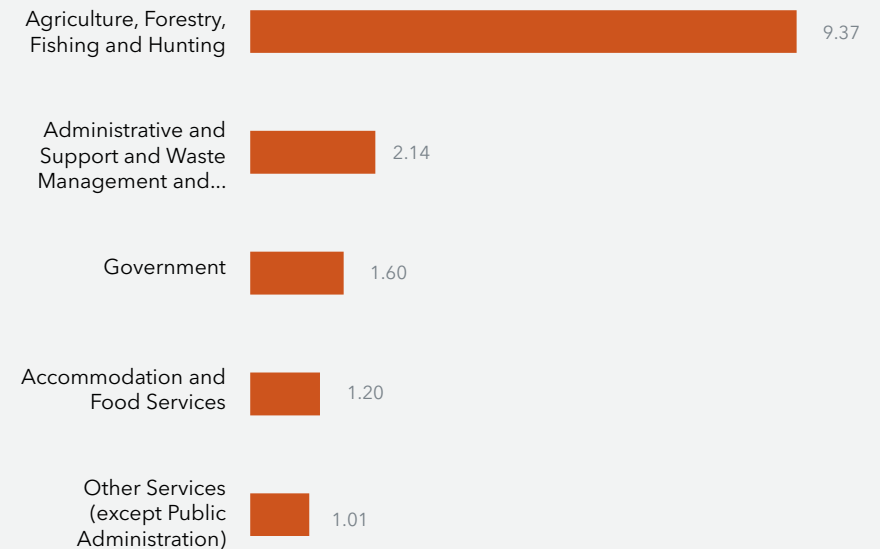
TOP OCCUPATIONS

The largest occupation in Willacy for 2016 and 2021 was in the Educational Instruction and Library. The remaining top occupation sectors are Office & Administrative Support, Food Preparation & Serving related, Management, and Sales & Related. From 2016 to 2021 Food Preparation & Serving Related, Management, and Sales & Related increased their jobs totals. This is in accordance with the trends the County has seen in the Top Sector job growth data discussed above.

TOP SECTORS BY 2021 AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS



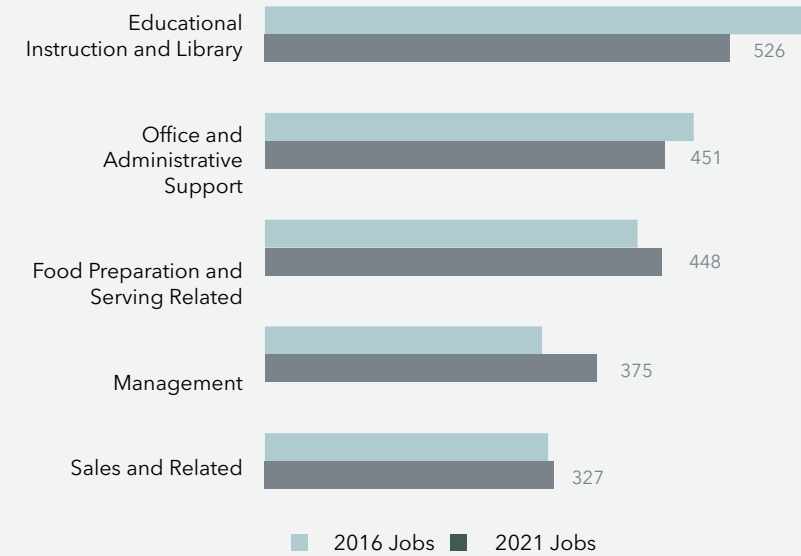
TOP SECTORS BY 2021 LOCATION QUOTIENT



TOP EMPLOYERS

Willacy County has a good diversity of sectors when looking at the top employers in the County which include K-12, retail, utilities, and social services. Within the County, K-12 has more than 78 profiles and is followed by Utilities with 33. Correctional related profiles for the County are 24, that includes Management & Training Corporation and Corrections Corporation of America.

LARGEST OCCUPATIONS BY 2021 JOBS



WILLACY COUNTY TOP COMPANY PROFILES

Company	Profiles
Lyford CISD	35
Lasara ISD	22
Vtx1 Companies	22
BCFS Health & Human Services	16
Management & Training Corporation	16
Raymondville ISD	12
Valley Telephone Cooperative	11
Raymondville High School	9
Corrections Corporation of America	8
H-E-B	8



REGIONAL QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

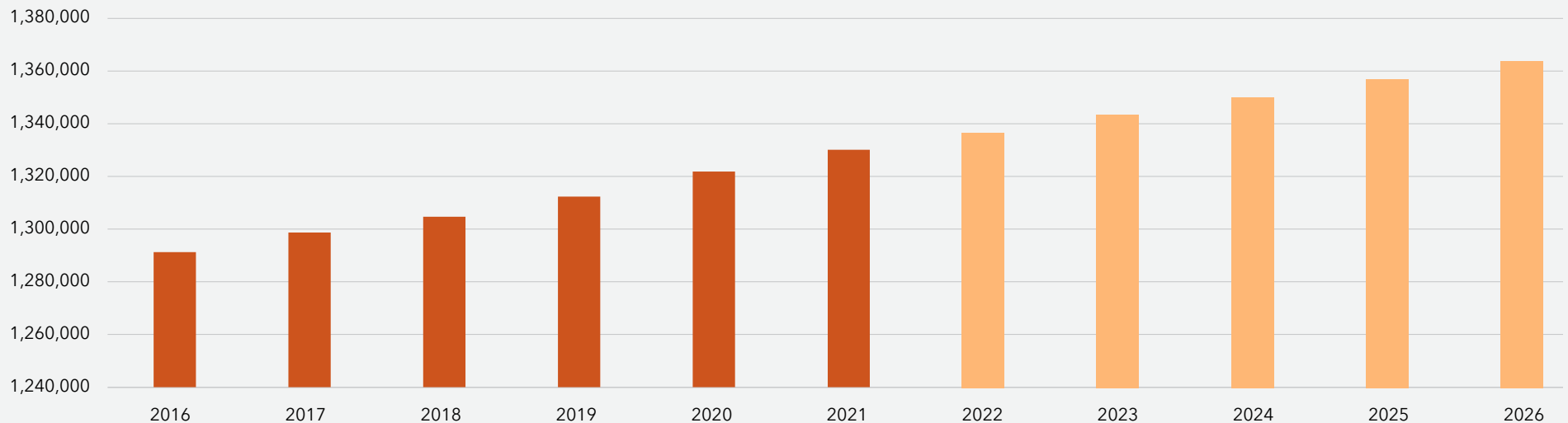
POPULATION HISTORICAL TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

The LRGV Region is projected to grow by roughly 33,000 residents in the next 5 years. The graph below depicts historical population data for the region and projected growth through 2026.

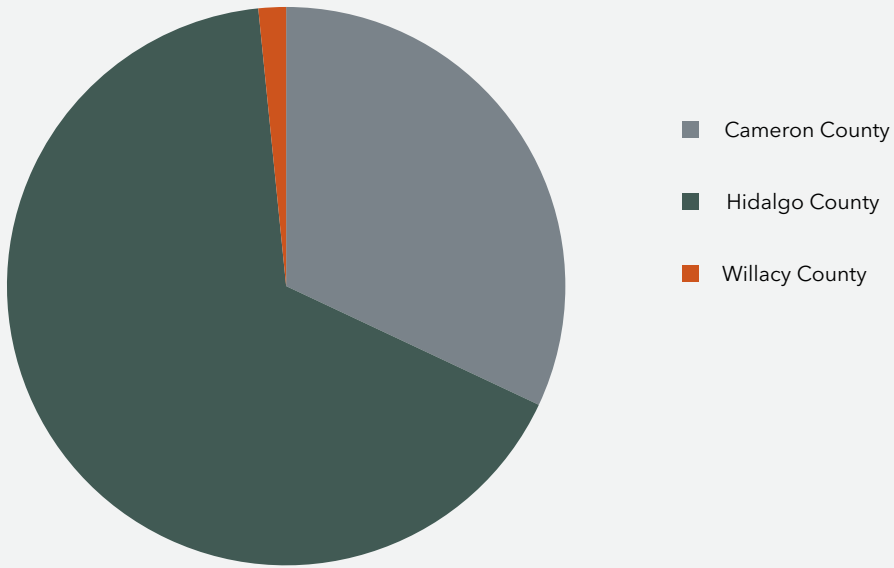
This upward trend in population isn't uniform across counties in the LRGV Region. While both Cameron County and Hidalgo County are expected to grow steadily, Willacy County experienced a decline from 2016-2020, and modest growth from 2020-2021 has tempered the projection to produce a marginal decline through 2026.

Although Willacy is projected to lose residents in the coming years, regional projections remain relatively unaffected due to the county's small share of regional population. Additionally, roughly half (50% of instances) of residents leaving Willacy County stay in the region, relocating to Cameron or Hidalgo County. Willacy County residents who leave the region are relatively dispersed, but migrate to Bexar County in about 12.5% of instances and migrate to Nueces County in about 9.5% of instances.

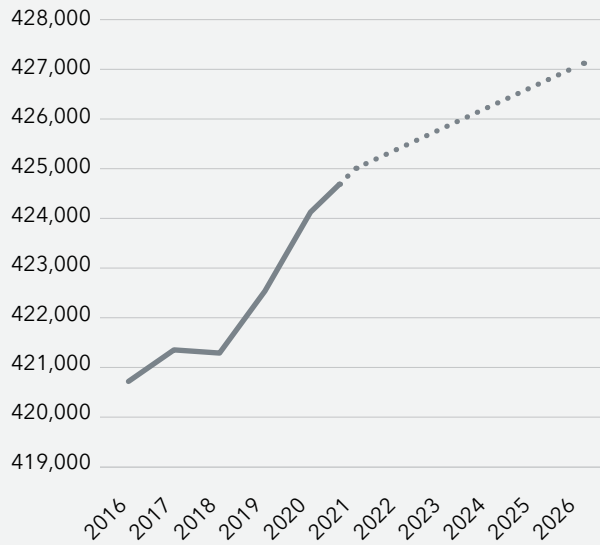
LRGV REGION HISTORIC AND PROJECTED POPULATION



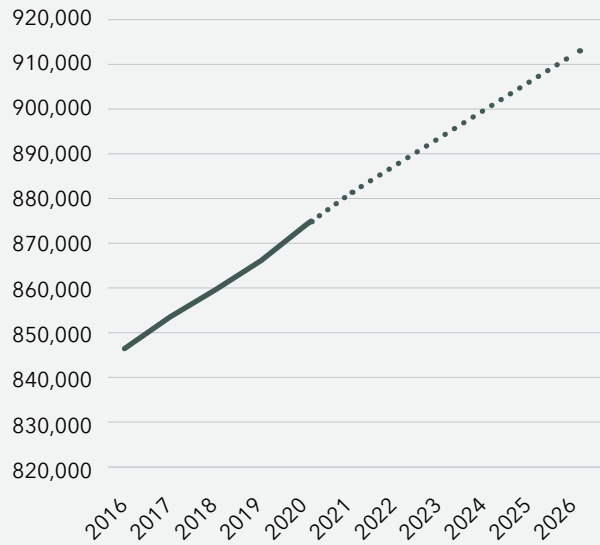
SHARE OF REGIONAL POPULATION BY COUNTY



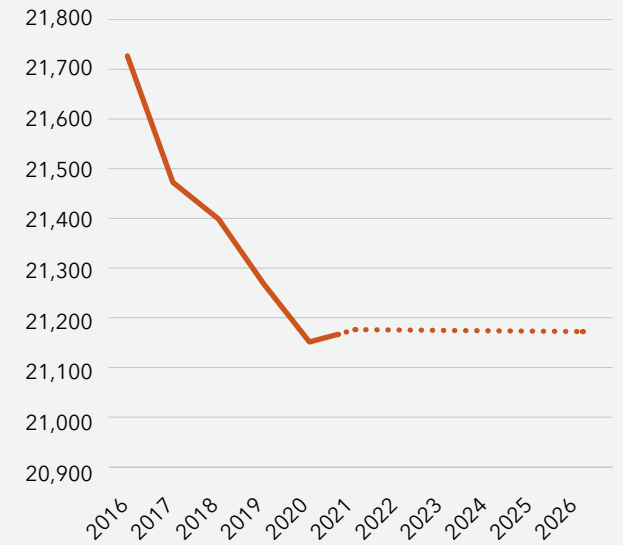
CAMERON COUNTY PROJECTED POPULATION



HIDALGO COUNTY PROJECTED POPULATION



WILLACY COUNTY PROJECTED POPULATION

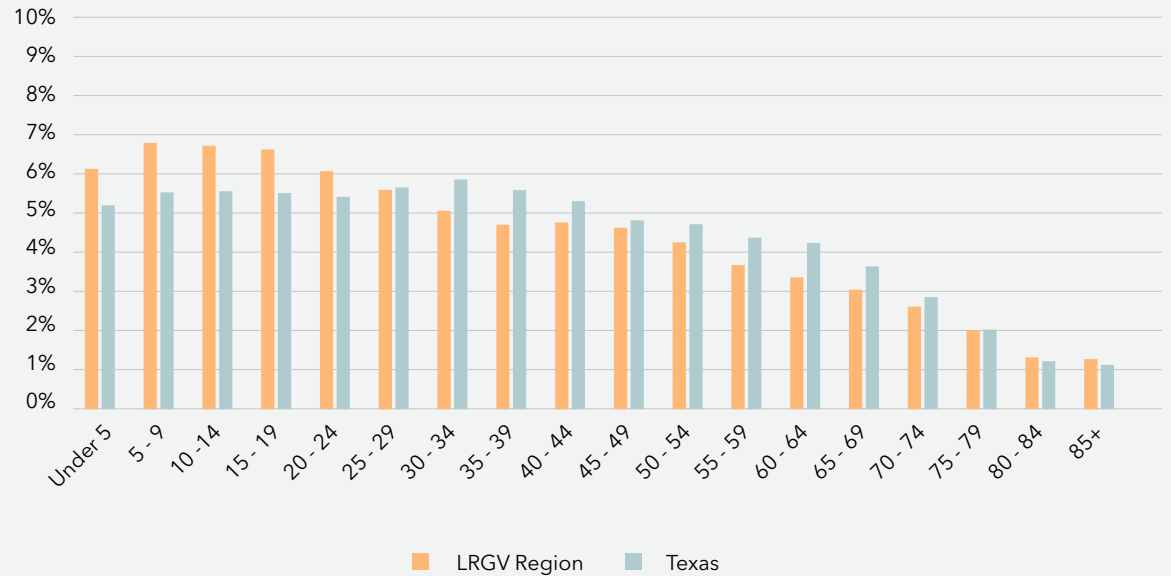


POPULATION BY AGE

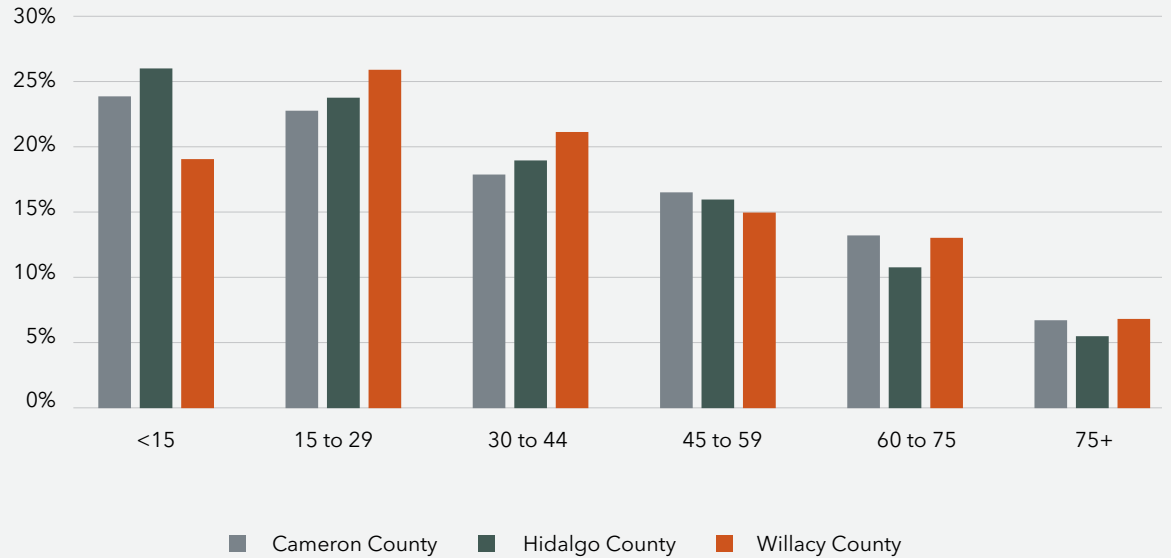
The LRGV Region skews younger than the State of Texas's distribution in categories below age 25, when the State figures surpass the Region. This implies that the workforce will grow significantly if the region retains youth as they age into the workforce. While no age data on those who have left the region is available, it is clear that more people are migrating to the region than migrating from the region.

Despite having the smallest population and the lowest projected growth, Willacy County has the largest share of total population in the 15 to 29 and 30 to 44 age ranges - a key demographic both for workforce availability and out-migration considerations.

PERCENT AGE DISTRIBUTION



PERCENT AGE DISTRIBUTION

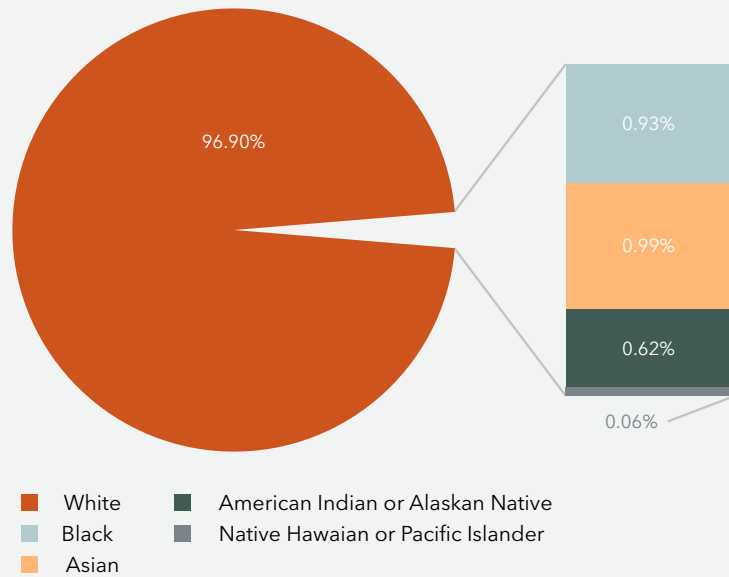




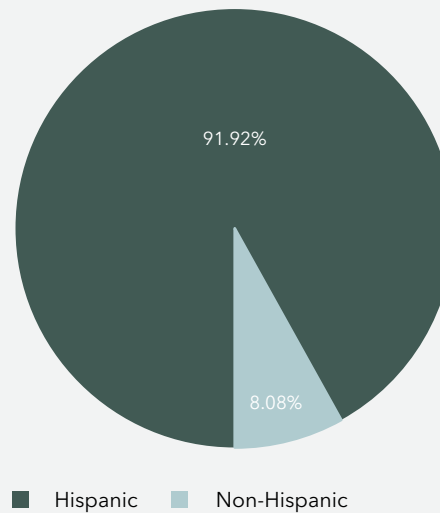
POPULATION BY RACE

Over 96.9% of the population of the LRGV region is White. The remaining percentage of the population is Black (0.93%), Asian (0.99%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.62%) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.06%). When looking at the ethnicities of the region, 91.92% are of Hispanic origin with the remaining 8.08% from non-Hispanic ethnicity.

LRGV REGION POPULATION BY RACE



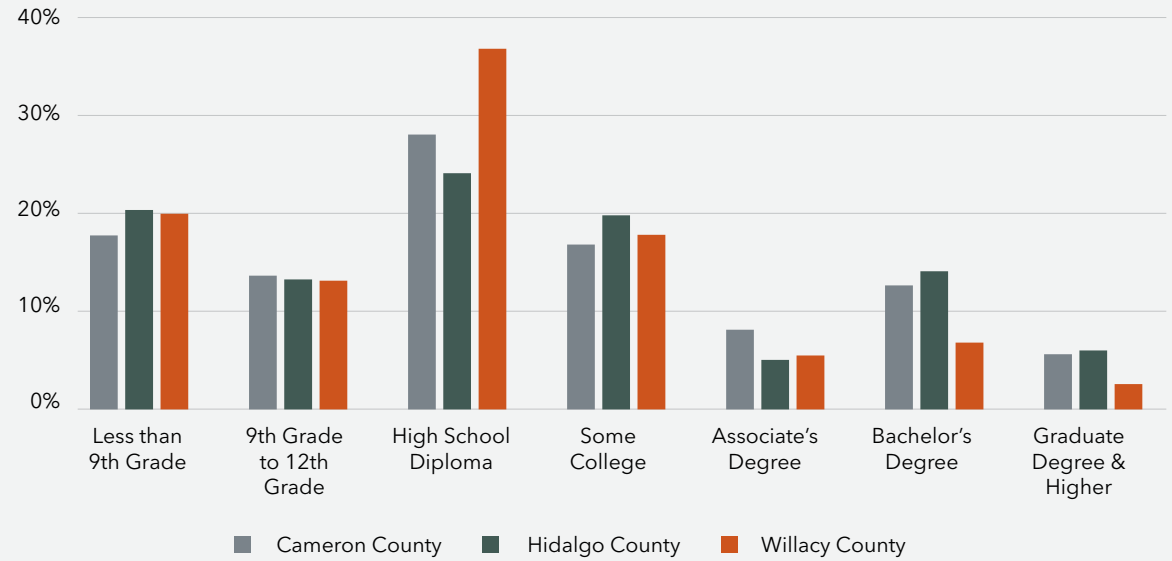
LRGV REGION POPULATION BY ETHNICITY



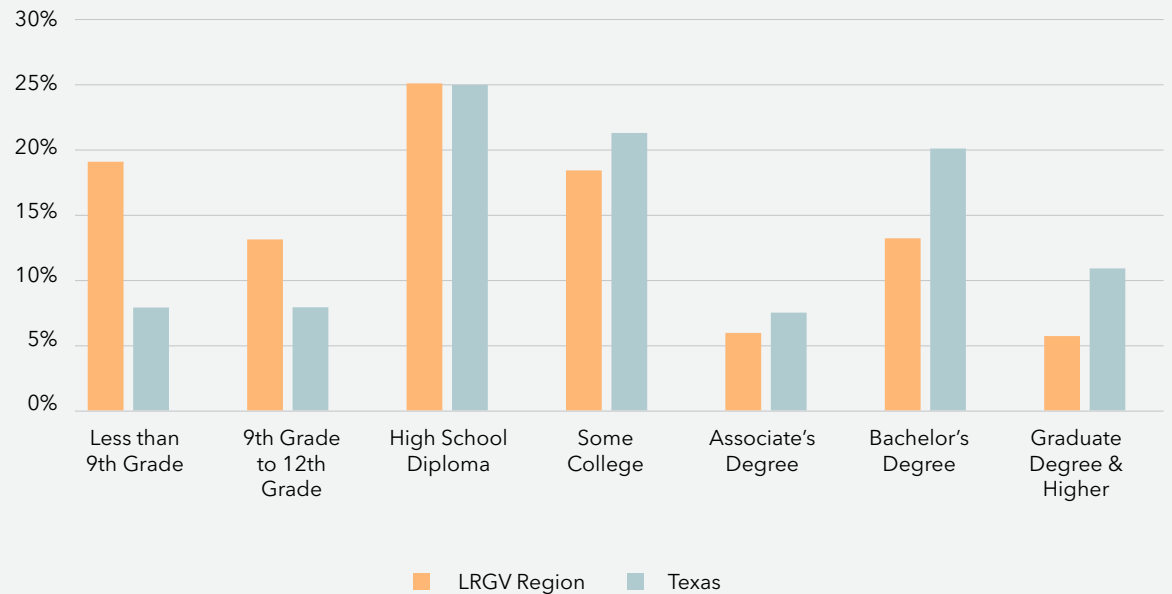
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

When viewing educational attainment data, the region fairs better or equal to the State when looking at the subsectors of Less Than 9th Grade, 9th Grade to 12th Grade, and High School Diploma. The region begins to fall behind the State when looking at Some College, associate degree, Bachelor's Degree, and Graduate Degree & Higher. This may imply that the citizens with some college and above are migrating away from the region. With the population projections trending upwards, retaining the educated population will help the region grow and diversify their economic base.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY COUNTY



LRGV REGION EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

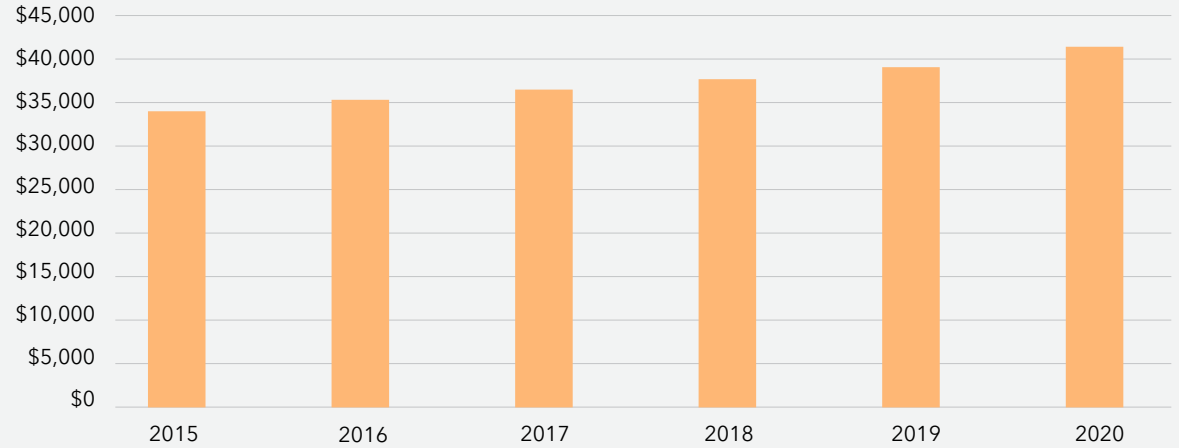


INCOME AND EARNINGS

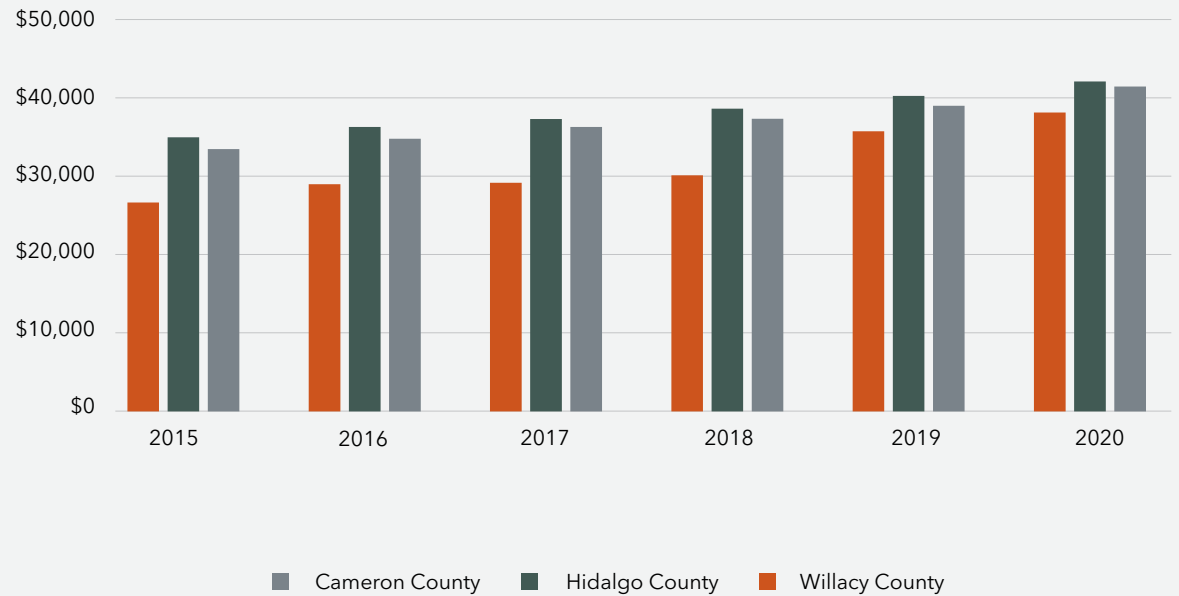
Since 2015, median household income in the region has steadily increased from \$34,127 in 2015 to a high of \$41,566 in 2020. This is an increase of more than \$7,439, or 21.8% growth from 2015 to 2020.

Hidalgo County is the highest-earning county of the region, with Cameron County following closely behind, and Willacy County trailing by a wider margin.

LRGV REGION MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME



MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY COUNTY

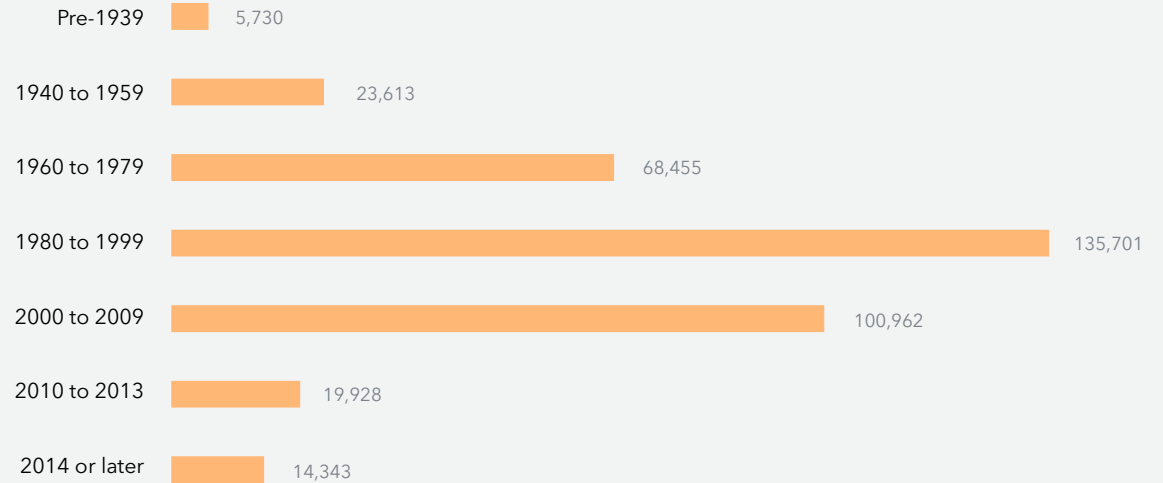


HOUSING BY YEAR BUILT

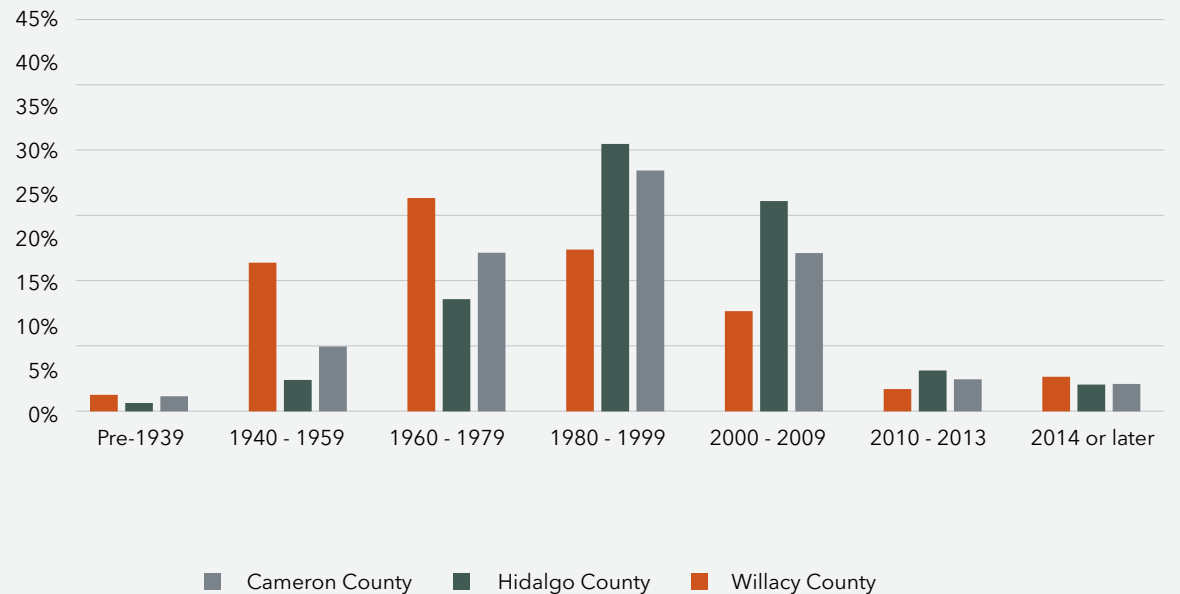
The largest subset of housing in the region was built between 1980 to 1999. More than 135,701 housing units were built during this time frame. The next largest period for housing construction was between 2000 to 2009 when 100,962 units were constructed. However, when looking at the time periods of 2010 to 2013 and 2014 or later, we see a sharp decline in the housing units being constructed. With fewer units being constructed within the past 12 years, results in the regions housing inventory average age to increase. Having aging housing inventory puts an added strain on the population’s ability to find adequate housing options and may have an impact on the quality of the aging units.

Hidalgo County has the youngest housing stock of the three counties, with an observably larger share of homes being built from 1980 to 2009. Housing in Willacy County tends to be older than Regions’ other two counties, with a larger share of homes being built before 1980. Despite Willacy County’s older overall housing stock, the county also has the highest share of homes built in 2014 or later - a smaller numerical figure than Cameron and Hidalgo Counties, but a larger share of overall housing stock.

LRGV REGION HOUSING BY YEAR BUILT



AGE OF HOUSING STOCK BY COUNTY



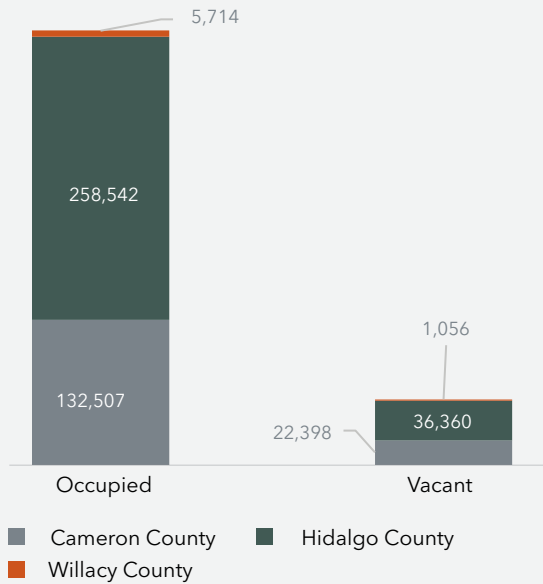
OCCUPANCY AND VACANCY RATES

Roughly 13% of homes in the LRGV region are vacant. This figure is higher than the 8%-10% that is typical nationally. Hidalgo County has a vacancy rate of 12.3%, with Cameron County at 14.5% and Willacy County at 15.6%. The higher vacancy rates may imply that the available units are poor quality, not the type of housing that is in demand in the region or may be too expensive. As recommended, convening a housing task force will allow the region to address the issues enduring the vacant units from being occupied.

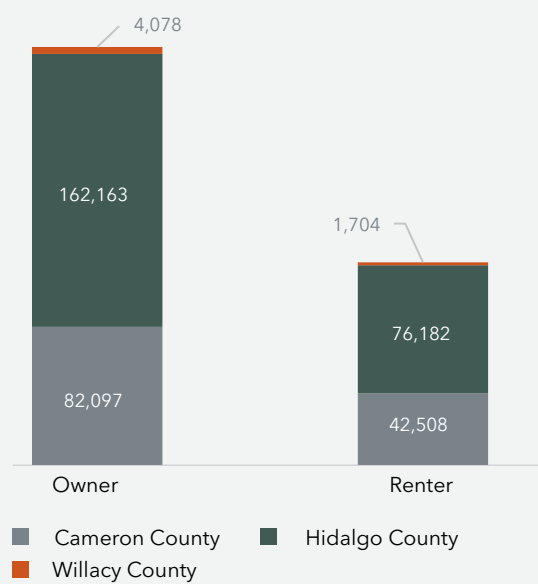
OWNER VS. RENTER OCCUPANCY

A relatively high share of the LRGV Region are renters, pointing to a need for rental units and, potentially, clearly defined paths to homeownership. Nationally, 30.9% of homes are renter-occupied, in a sample that includes vacant units in the total. Rates of renter-occupancy are estimated to be highest in Willacy County, with an estimated renter occupancy rate of 41.8%.

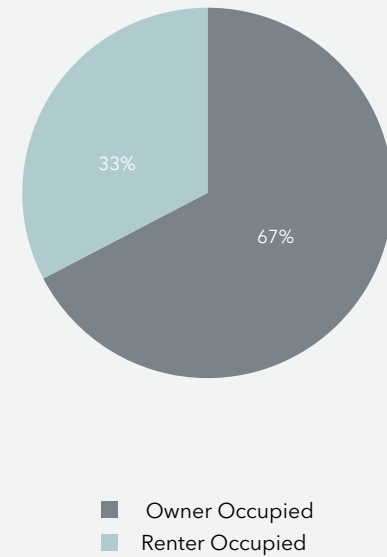
LRGV REGION
OCCUPANCY VS. VACANCY



LRGV REGION
OWNER VS. RENTER OCCUPANCY



LRGV REGION
OWNER VS. RENTER OCCUPANCY



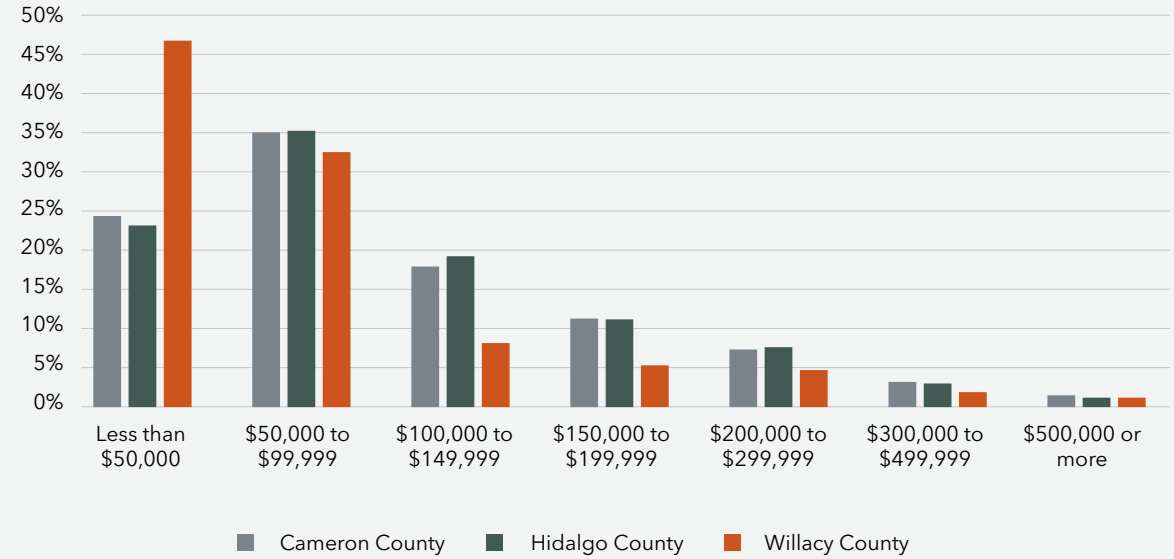
OWNER-OCCUPIED HOME VALUES

Home values in the LRGV Region are concentrated in the \$50-\$100k range, with roughly 25% valued below \$50k and roughly 18% valued from \$100-\$150k. Willacy County holds a much higher share of owner-occupied homes with values less than \$50,000. Cameron and Hidalgo counties hold similar percent shares of owner-occupied home values.

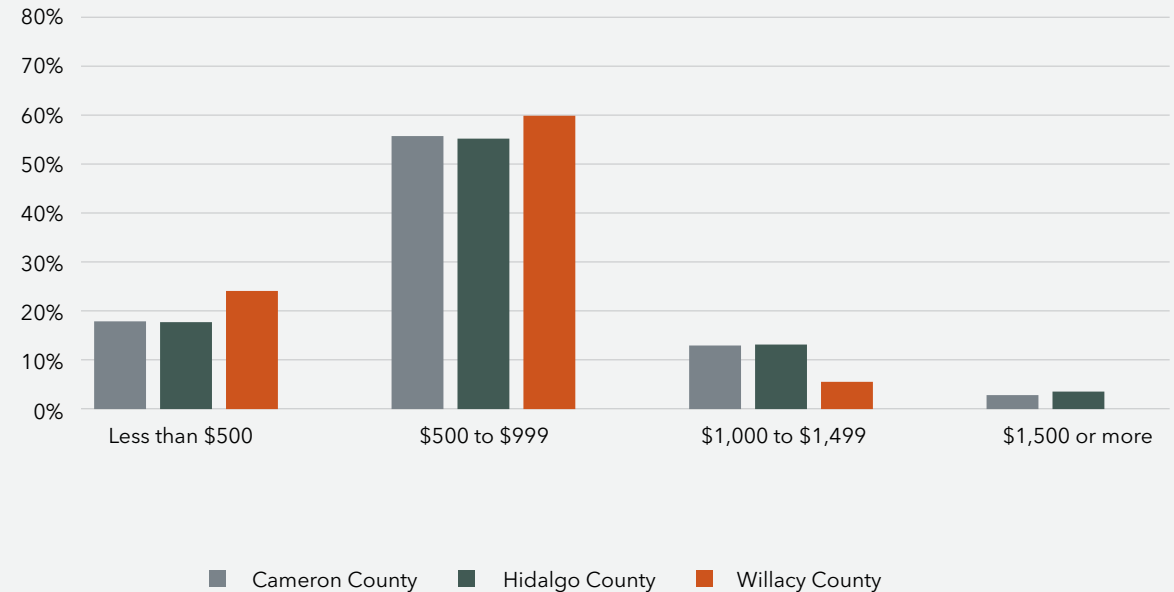
HOUSING COST BURDEN ANALYSIS

Housing cost burden is defined as the share of the region contributing more than 30% of their income towards housing costs. The chart to the left indicates the housing cost-burdened share of the population in each county as well as the region. There is also a distinction between owner-occupied households and renter-occupied households, with renter-occupied households more likely to be cost-burdened. In the LRGV Region, 31.2% of all households are cost-burdened, while this figure is only 19.03% for owner-occupied households and rises to 51.61% for renter-occupied households. Willacy County has the lowest share of cost-burdened residents, but it's small share of regional population does not skew total regional figures.

OWNER-OCCUPIED HOME VALUES BY COUNTY



MONTHLY RENT BY COUNTY



HOUSING COST BURDEN

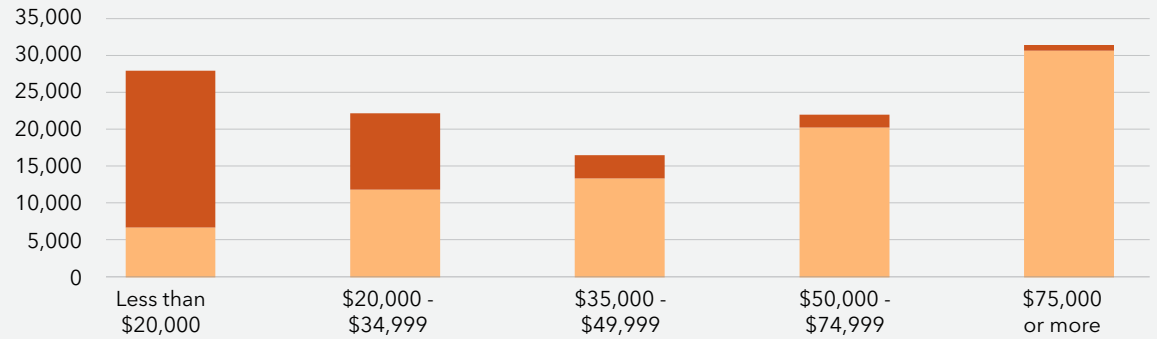
	Total	Owner-Occupied Households	Renter-Occupied Households
Cameron County	30.92%	21.27%	51.44%
Hidalgo County	31.54%	18.24%	51.90%
Willacy County	22.34%	13.59%	43.03%
LRGV Region	31.20%	19.03%	51.61%

HOUSING COST BURDEN BY INCOME

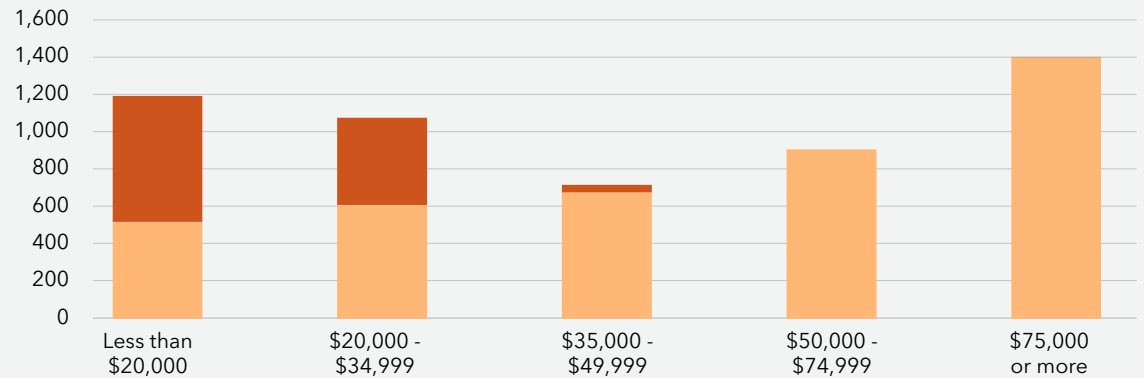
Lower-income households are more likely to be housing cost-burdened than higher-income households. In Cameron County, more than 75% of households earning less than \$20,000 a year are cost burdened. In the \$20,000-\$34,999 range, fewer than 50% of households are cost-burdened, and the figure is reduced to only 2% for households earning \$75,000 or more annually.

Willacy and Hidalgo Counties experience similar housing cost-burden trends, with 57% and 81% of households earning less than \$20,000 annually being housing cost-burdened, respectively. Among those who make \$75,000 or more annually, less than 1% of Willacy County residents are housing cost-burdened, and roughly 5% of those in Hidalgo County are housing cost-burdened.

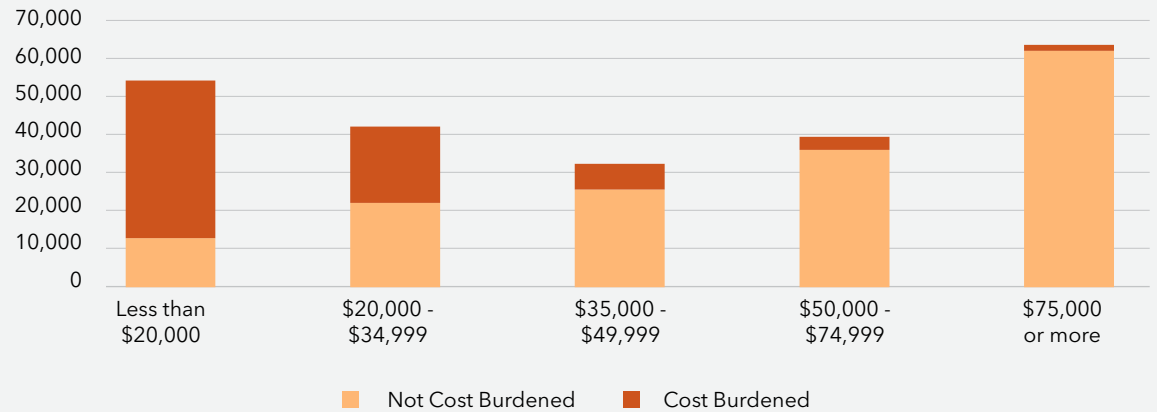
CAMERON COUNTY HOUSING COST BURDEN



WILLACY COUNTY HOUSING COST BURDEN



HIDALGO COUNTY HOUSING COST BURDEN

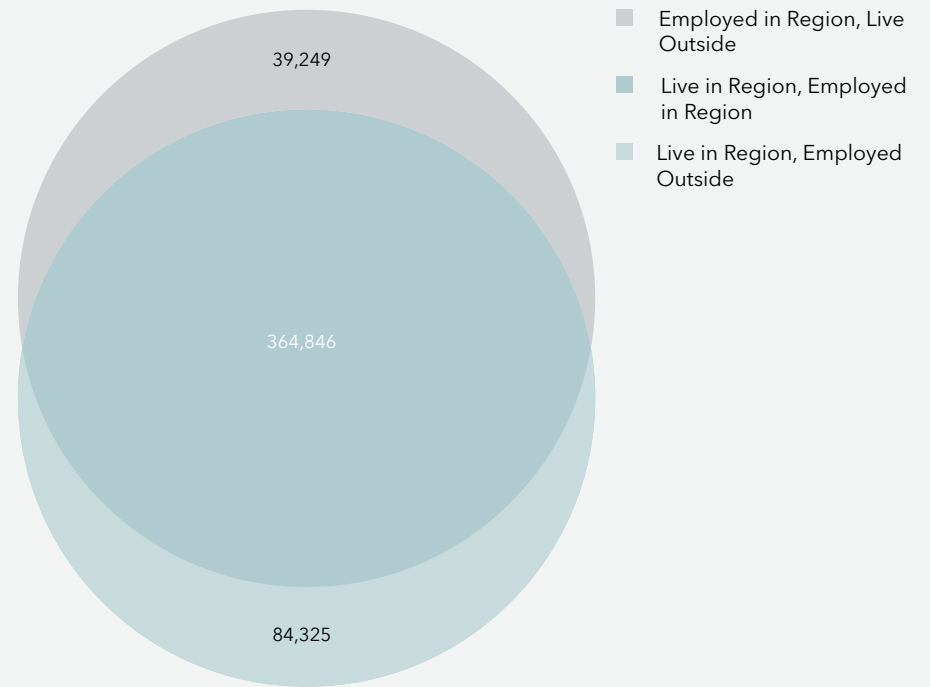


COMMUTING PATTERNS

The visual below depicts regional commuting patterns that help to clarify the alignment between the area's workforce and jobs. Most LRGV residents both live and work in the region, but there are more residents who live in the region and commute to a job outside of the region than there are who live outside the region and commute to a job in the region. This amounts to a labor loss of roughly 55,000 workers.

When looking at the commuting patterns of the region we see that the bulk (364,846) of the population live and work in the region which is about 74.7% of the regional workforce. 84,324 workers live in the region but commute outside of the region for employment. The remaining 39,249 workers live outside the region but commute into the region for employment.

LRGV REGIONAL COMMUTING PATTERNS



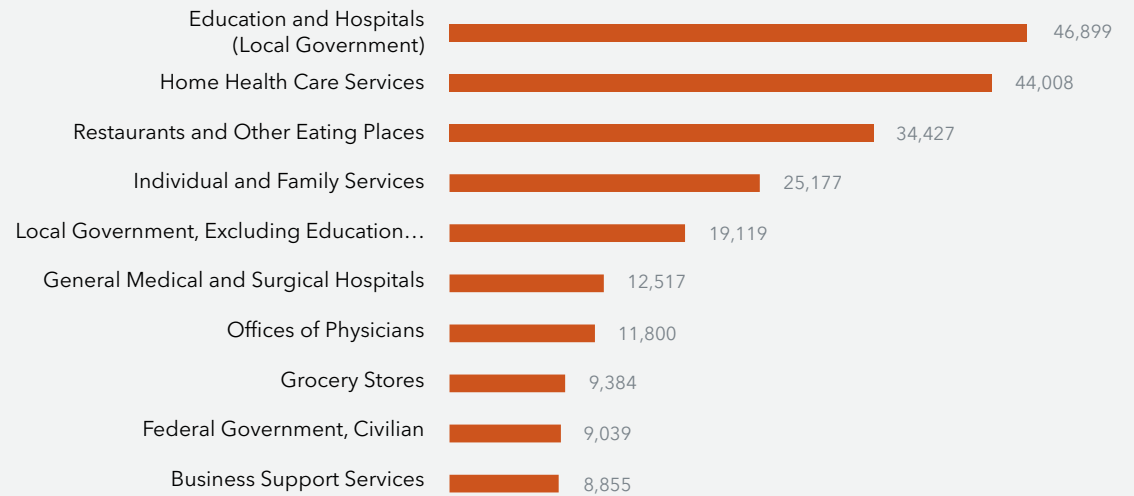
LARGEST INDUSTRIES

Top industries by number of jobs in the LRGV region include Health Care and Education as well as various functions of Local Government. Industries related to retail trade are also present in the list.

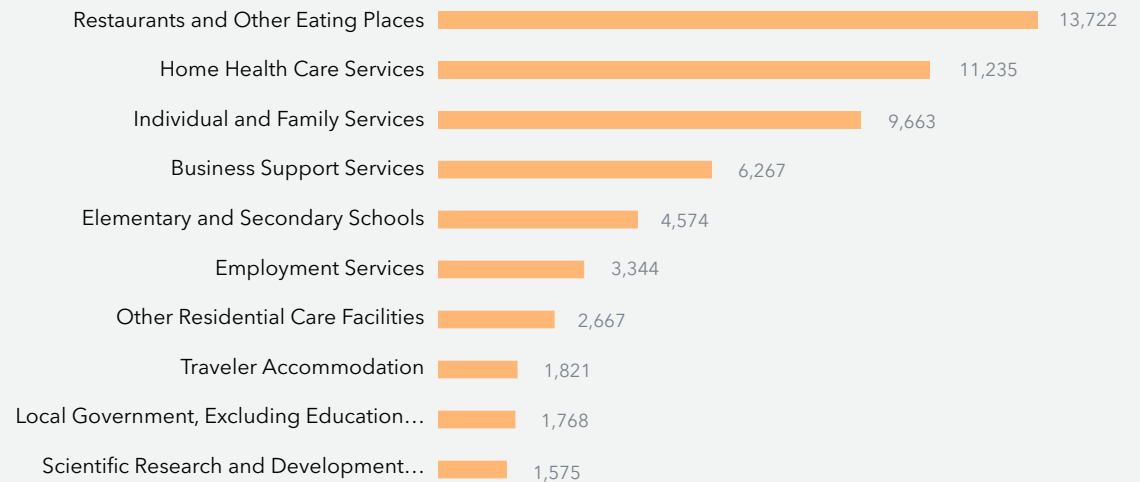
TOP GROWING INDUSTRIES

Projected jobs added between 2020 and 2030 predict that Restaurants & other eating places (13,722), Home Health Care Service (11,235), and Individual & Family Services (9,663) will be the three fastest growing industries. These three fastest growing industries are also ranked in the top five for largest industries in the region. With the current jobs within these industries and the projections for job growth, creating a talent pipeline that feeds these industries adequate workforce will need to be a focus for the region.

LARGEST INDUSTRIES BY 2021 JOBS



FASTEST-GROWING INDUSTRIES (2020-2030)



MOST HIGHLY CONCENTRATED INDUSTRIES

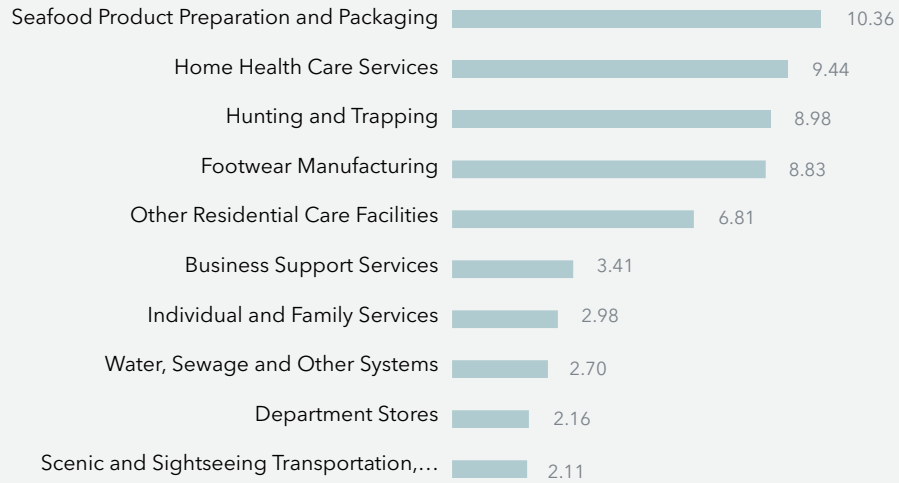
When looking at the highly concentrated industries in the region, we can see industries that the region may be able to leverage to attract ancillary industries. The region's top five industries have more than six times the concentration of the national average for those industries. As part of our recommendations, we will highlight the need for Business Retention Expansion and Attraction (BREA). When a region has this high ratio of industries, they need to give a targeted effort to have business outreach with the companies that make up the industries to ensure the region stay abreast of the needs, issues, and opportunities to assist these businesses.

TOP INDUSTRY GROSS REGIONAL PRODUCT

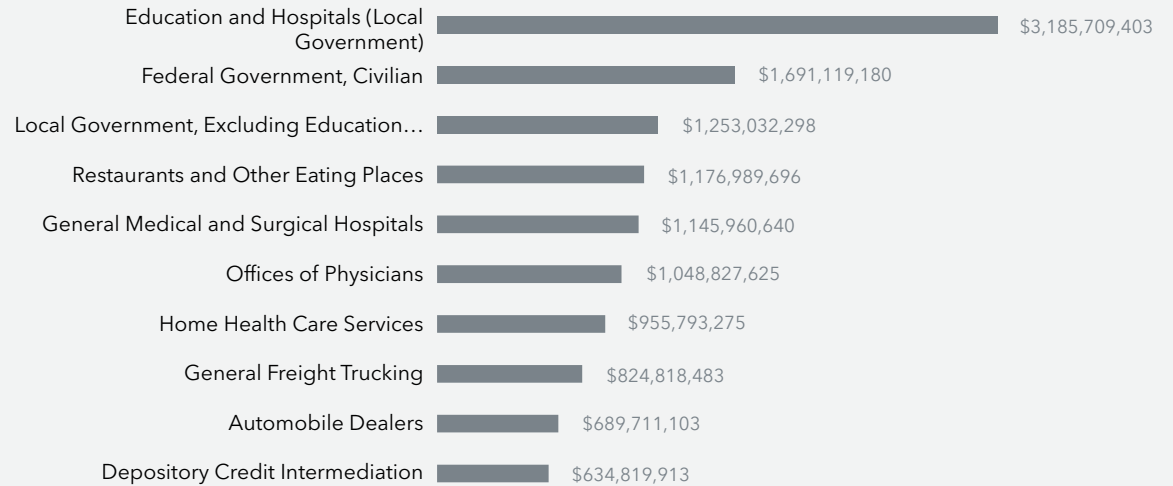
Government related industries hold the top two spots for total regional Gross Regional Product (GRP). When combined they account for more than \$4.8B in GRP which is over 38% of the total GRP of the top 10 industries.

When viewing the top sectors for average annual earnings, we see that the Utilities sector has the highest average annual earnings at \$106,676. Mining, Quarrying & Oil & Gas average annual earnings are \$94,775, Management of Companies average is \$73,107, Government is \$69,312, and Finance & Insurance is \$64,541.

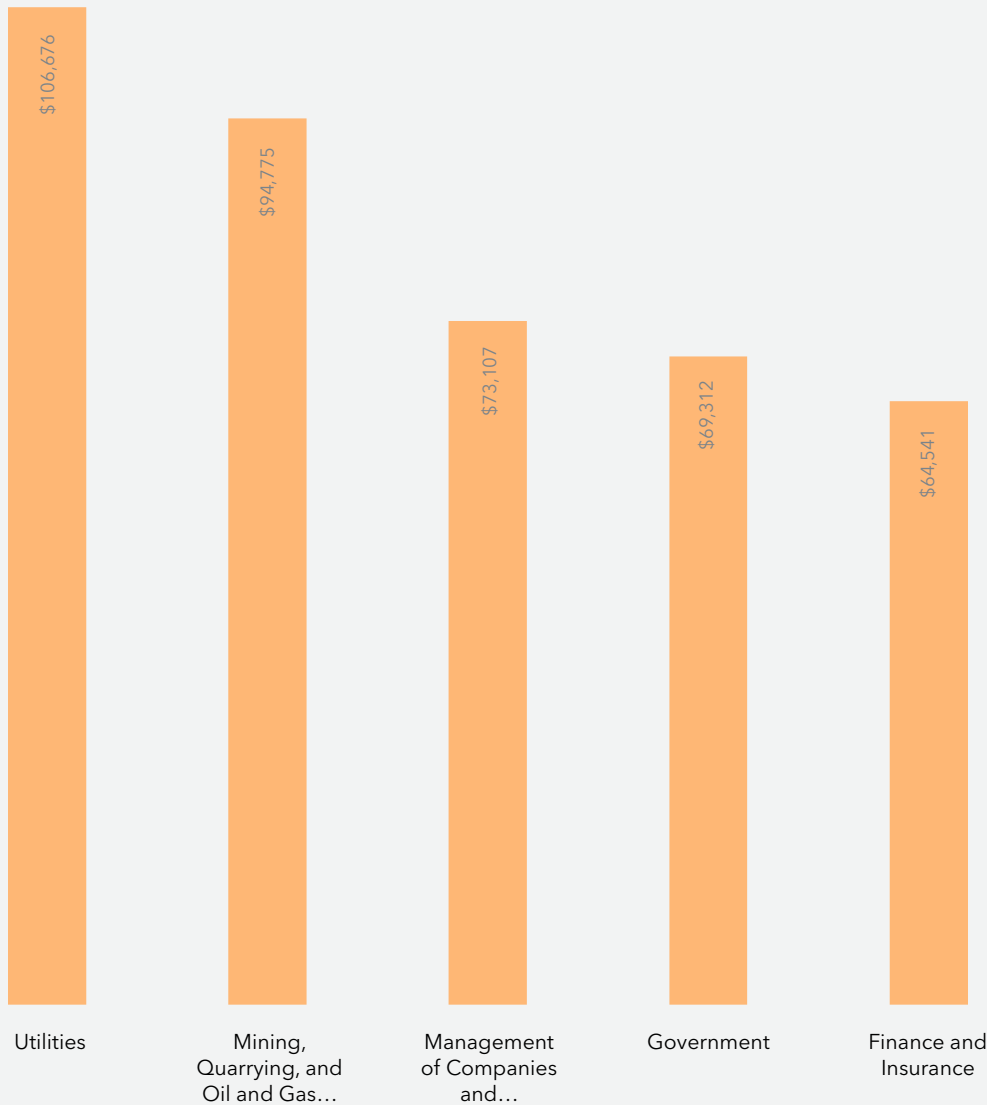
MOST HIGHLY CONCENTRATED INDUSTRIES



TOP INDUSTRIES BY GRP



TOP SECTORS BY 2021 AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS



LARGEST OCCUPATIONS

When looking at the largest occupations by 2021, Home Health and Personal Care aides is by far the largest occupation with more than 61,073 jobs. The second and third largest are Fast Food & Counter workers (16,256) and Retail Salesperson (14,712). The large number of jobs for Home Health & Personal Care Aides will put additional pressure on the talent pipeline the workforce with those qualifications.

Median hourly earnings for top occupations (shown in figure x using 6-digit NAICS codes, and figure x using 4-digit NAICS codes) range from an hourly rate of \$9.56 in Food Preparation and Serving Related to \$24.06 in Educational Instruction and Library. For the three counties in the region, a living wage for one adult with no children is around \$14.50 per hour. The figure increases to nearly \$28 per hour if the adult is supporting one child and drops to roughly \$11.25 for two working adults with no children. For two working parents supporting one child, a living wage is estimated to be \$15.60 per hour.

Median hourly earnings estimates from EMSI coupled with living wage estimates from MIT indicate that wages in the LRGV Region may be sufficient for certain households in some occupations, but other common occupations do not offer a living wage to any configuration of household or family structure.

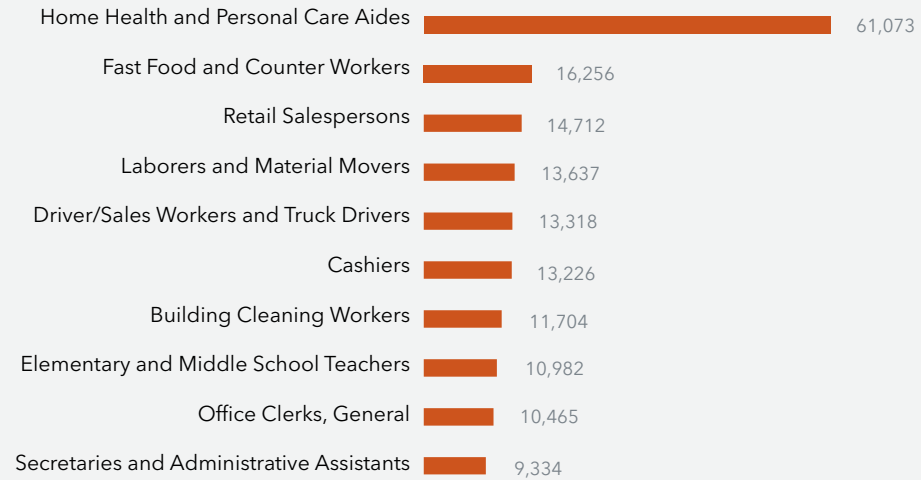
TOP GROWING OCCUPATIONS

With the top two fastest growing industries in the region being Restaurants & Other Eating places and Home Health Care Services, the fast-growing occupations from 2020 to 2030 are aligned with industry trends. Home Health and Personal Care Aides are currently the top occupation in the region by number of jobs, and the occupation's presence is projected to grow even larger, adding 15,586 jobs between 2020-2030. Fast Food & Counter workers will add 3,796 and cooks will add 3,080 jobs within the same timeframe.

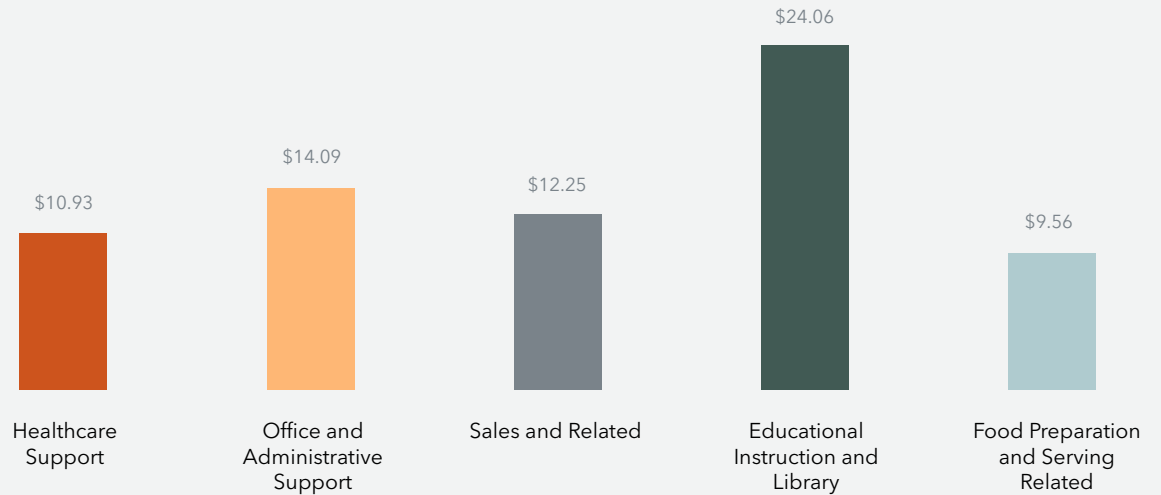
TOP OCCUPATION LOCATION QUOTIENT

As stated, before the location quotient measures an areas concentration of an industry sector in relation to the national ratio. In the region, the highest LQ is in the Health Care & Social Assistance sector with an LQ of 1.91. The other highest LQ for the region include the following sectors: Government (1.27), Retail Trade (1.21), Accommodation & Food Services (1.14), and Administrative and Support & Waste Management & Remediation Services (1.04).

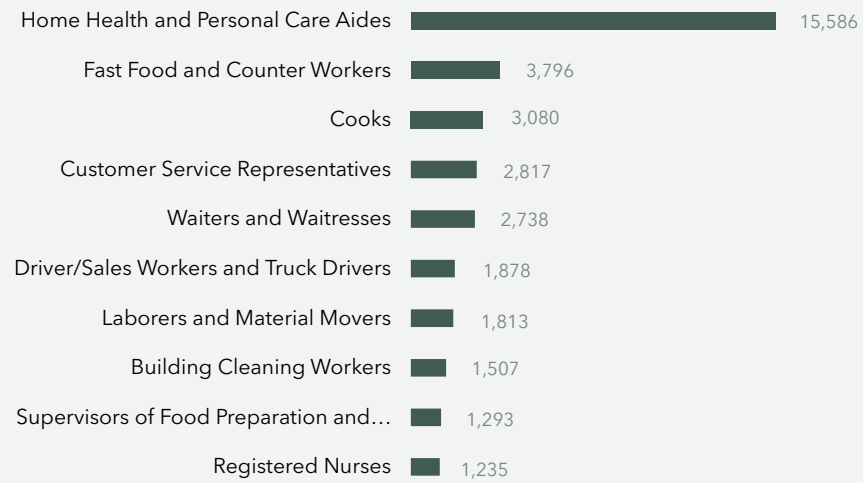
LARGEST OCCUPATIONS BY 2021 JOBS



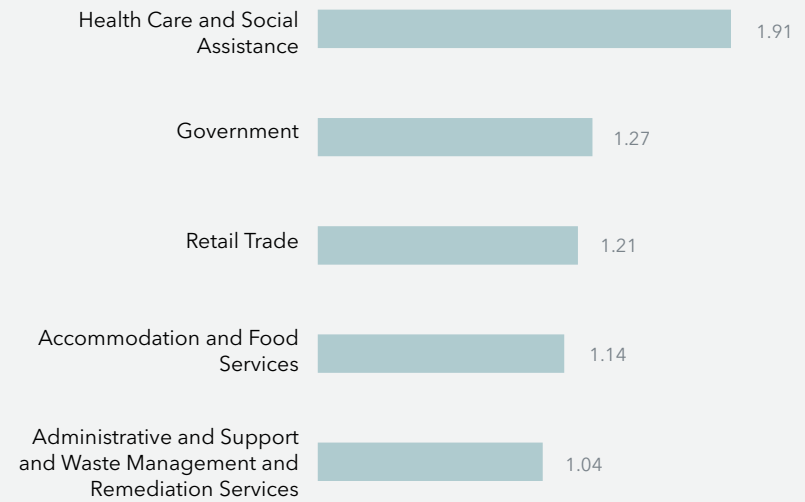
MEDIAN HOURLY EARNINGS FOR LARGEST OCCUPATIONS



FASTEST-GROWING OCCUPATIONS (2020-2030)



TOP SECTORS BY 2021 LOCATION QUOTIENT



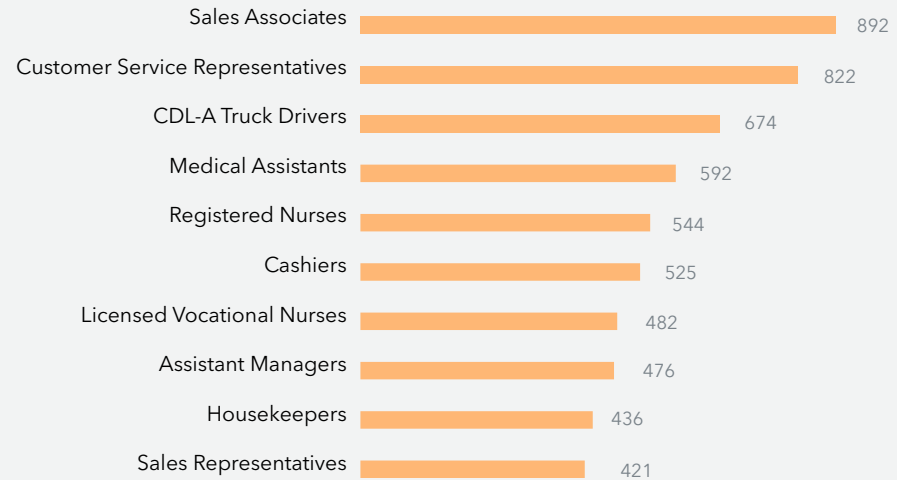
MOST IN-DEMAND OCCUPATIONS

Sales Associates and Customer Service Representatives were the top two most demanded positions from May 2021- May 2022. This may be in part due to a resurgence of brick-and-mortar retailers and/or an uptick in retail sales following the COVID-19 pandemic. Also relevant to the retail trade sector, cashier appears on the list as the 6th most demanded position and sales representative appears on the list the 10th most demanded position. Number 3 on the list is CDL Class-A truck drivers, an industry with nationwide demand and high turnover. Also, well-represented in the job postings are medical assistants and nurses, in alignment with the region's robust healthcare sector.

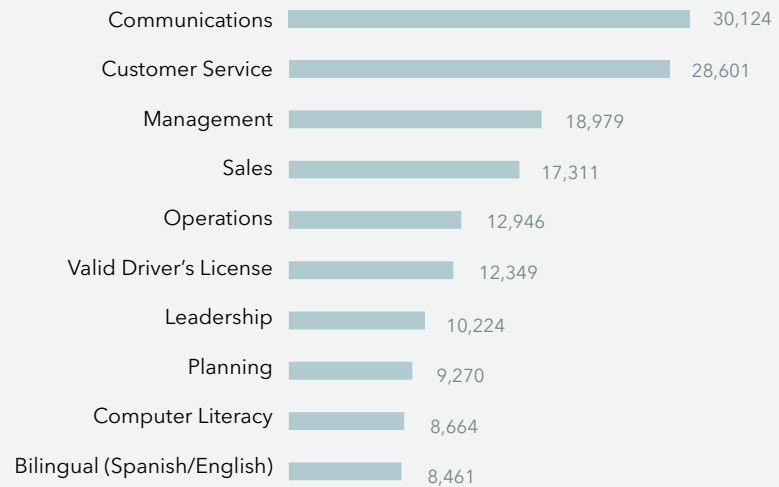
IN-DEMAND SKILLSETS

Skills mentioned in job postings in the LRGV Region from May 2021 to May 2022 correspond heavily to the retail trade presence in the region but include transferable skills that likely appear across sectors. The region's majority-Hispanic population calls for customer/client/patient-facing positions to be bilingual, which is likely an asset to the role and not a barrier for the applicant.

MOST IN-DEMAND JOBS



MOST IN-DEMAND SKILLS

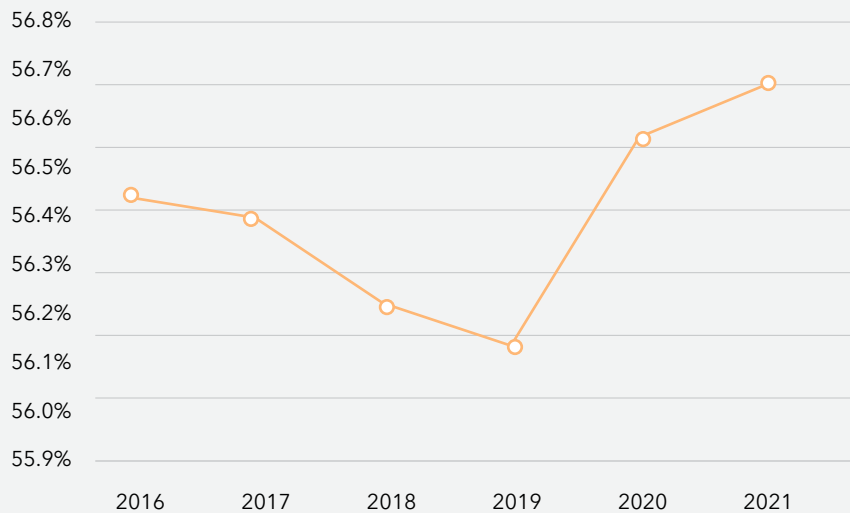


LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION TRENDS

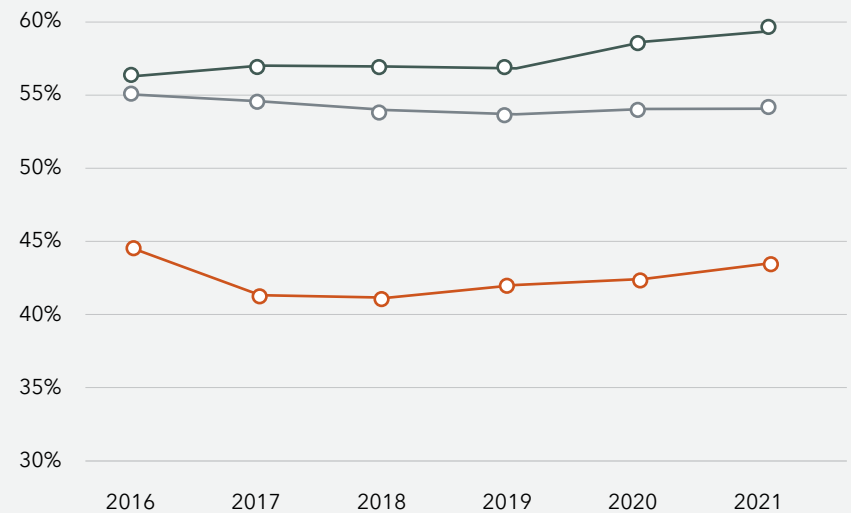
The regional labor force participation rate has stayed within the 56.17-57.24% range from 2016 to data collected in November 2021. The regional consistency is aligned with the trends seen on the county level (figure X) regarding labor force participation.

Despite a relatively level trendline, the regional labor force participation rate was in marginal decline until 2020, when it rose above the figure seen in 2016 and continued to rise in 2021. Willacy County has a much lower labor force participation rate than Hidalgo and Cameron Counties and had a 2021 rate slightly lower than its 2016 figure. Sitting over 10 points higher than Willacy County, Cameron County also experienced a marginal decline labor force participation rate from 2016 to 2021, with Hidalgo County experiencing the highest overall rates and a marginal increase in the 5-year period displayed.

REGIONAL LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE



LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

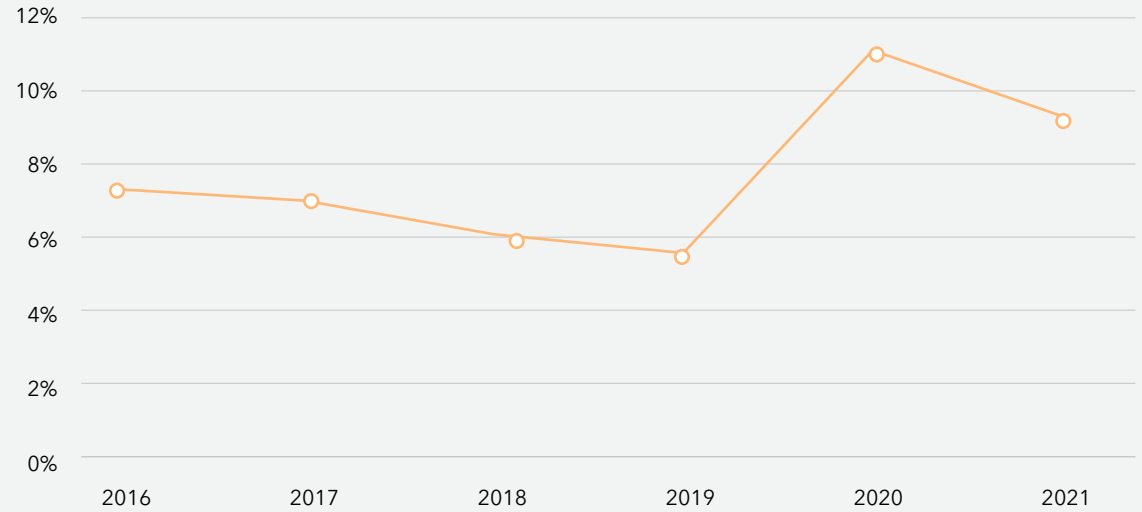


■ Cameron County ■ Hidalgo County ■ Willacy County

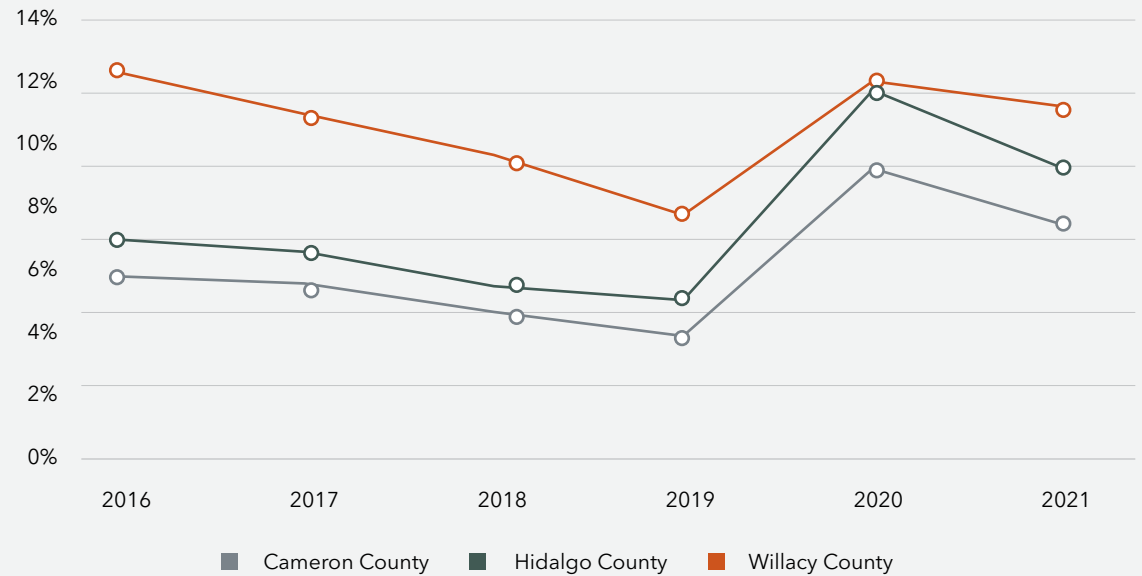
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE TRENDS

The region saw its lowest unemployment rate in 2019 before the pandemic when it hit a low of 6.05%. From 2016 to 2019 the region was seeing the unemployment rate steadily declining. In 2020, the unemployment rate shot up to 11.21%. Since 2020, the region has seen the unemployment rate steadily decrease to a rate of 7.43% in November 2021.

REGIONAL UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



UNEMPLOYMENT RATE





APPENDIX B: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS

Summary of Stakeholder Engagement Sessions.

"This region is one of the last kept secrets for investment potential."

-Rick Carrera, Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council

A major component of any great Resiliency Plan is local stakeholder participation. Engagement and involvement from the local community is important to drafting a plan that is implementable and impactful. This project employed several engagement strategies. The most notable is the multi-day site visit to the region by several TPMA associates. This section outlines the Stakeholder Engagement Sessions.

Stakeholder Engagement Sessions

The two-day in-person sessions were scheduled from Monday, May 9 to Tuesday, May 10. Adriana Sudimack, consultant with TPMA and Carlos Gallinar with Gallinar Planning & Development traveled from El Paso to Willacy to conduct several sessions. The sessions took place at the LRGVDC offices and were designed to provide the TPMA teams the opportunity to hear from the local and regional partners. Over the course of the two days and through four separate sessions conducted in two-hour meetings, we heard from several key stakeholders.

The Organizations that attended are as follows:

- Development Corporation of Mercedes
- Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council
- Council for South Texas Economic Progress
- University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
- Weslaco EDC
- Workforce Solutions
- City of Alamo
- City of Donna
- City of Weslaco



WHAT WE HEARD

The sessions were conducted in a Round-Table format with participants joining both in person at the LRGVDC conference room and simultaneously via Zoom. Each session kicked off with a short presentation conducted by Adriana and Carlos in which they presented the project scope and process, pertinent economic data, and a series of “Prompts for Perspectives.”

Prompts for Perspectives

Many definitions of economic resilience limit its focus on the ability to quickly recover from a disruption. However, in the context of economic development, economic resilience becomes inclusive of three primary attributes: the ability to recover quickly from a shock, the ability to withstand a shock, and the ability to avoid the shock altogether. Establishing economic resilience in a local or regional economy requires the ability to anticipate risk, evaluate how that risk can impact key economic assets, and build a responsive capacity.

-U.S. Economic Development Administration

The Prompts for Perspectives helped engage participants about various topics related to the region, lessons learned from the pandemic, the region’s assets and liabilities, and the future aspirations that stakeholders have for region. The responses from participants were thoughtful and engaging. And are important in structuring the plan’s goals and objectives.

The following section categorizes each prompt and synthesis the various responses into the top most-commonly discussed general themes, ideas, and points.

PROMPT ONE: DESCRIBE THE REGION

If I was looking to move to the region, what would you tell me? What are the unique characteristics of the region including people, places, and experiences? What does the region do best? What are some resources available within the region? What are some success stories or achievements within the region?

(1). Great Quality Of Life With A Lower Cost of Living:

The great quality of life and the low cost of living that are provided in the region were major responses from Prompt One. The low cost of housing, the short commute times (and time not spent in traffic), and the great weather were things expressed by the majority of the participants. As Matt from the Council for South Texas Economic Progress stated, "Monday through Friday rocks. Live doesn't revolve around commuting and we have a great quality of life because of that."

(2). Warm & Welcoming Community:

Similarly, to the expressed appreciation for the area's quality of life, a great majority of the responses also centered on the warm and welcoming community. Words like "tight-knit," "very open," and "welcoming culture" were used to describe the community. Many credited the relatively successful response to the pandemic, citing the idea that the high vaccination rates and organized food drives were a result of people taking care of one another. This is feeling of creating social capital will be important in mitigating future pandemics and risks.

(3). Great Educational System:

Participants were really proud and excited about the educational system in the region. From K-12 to higher education, stakeholders expressed their appreciation of the learning environments in the area. Many responses centered around the great schools and educational community that are provided to the children of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The new medical school and the University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley are also thoughtful as great educational assets. As one participant commented, "the school of medicine is something that we should all be bragging about."

(4). Workforce Pipeline & Economic Development Infrastructure

The great work ethic and availability of a trained and bilingual/bicultural workforce was also touted with pride. The overarching sentiment in this regard is that region has workforce and economic assets that are not readily available in other parts of the state. That the region shares a border with Mexico and that trade is a major industry cluster were seen as positives for the area. Space X in the Boca Chica / Brownsville area is seen as a game-changer for the region that will bring many opportunities but also many challenges that need to be addressed in a proactive manner.

(5). Improved Transportation Infrastructure:

Many felt that transportation infrastructure has greatly improved in the last several years but that more still needs to get done. Several participants touted the recent improvements made to the area's Metropolitan Planning Organization and felt hopeful that with these changes, more transportation projects would be coming to the area.

(6). Availability Of Land

The reasonable cost and availability of land is another item that many felt was a great asset for the region. This provides the ability to expand and gives outside investors and indication that the region is primed for growth.

(7). Geographic Location

The close proximity to the ocean, San Antonio, Houston, and Monterrey were cited as key asset for people living in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Many appreciate the ability to visit several large metroplexes all within a few hours drive.

PROMPT TWO: LESSONS LEARNED FROM COVID:

As you think about the last two years and living/working through the pandemic, what things did the region do well? What things could have been different? What resources/items need to be in place to weather the next shock / disruption?

Like many regions across the country, the COVID-19 pandemic brought challenges and impacted many lives. The LRGV region was no exception. The pandemic also brought many opportunities to improve the lives of residents, change systems that didn't work, and work toward making necessary improvements. The responses from participants reflected these sentiments. Below are the lessons learned from COVID that stakeholders felt are important to recognize moving forward.

(1). Region & Partners Stepped Up

According to many stakeholders, the pandemic illustrated the need for better communication and many felt that the region came together across several sectors: private, public, non-profit, and educational. As one participant said, "For the first time, we had to maximize resources: people, knowledge, funding, and the region stepped up really well."

(2). Services & Delivery Mechanisms Could Have Been Centralized

Mechanisms and systems of resource administration and service delivery could have been more centralized. Many organizations tried to become the clearinghouse of information and services but that should not have been the case. A catalog of resources for training, support services, and funding availability would have been great to have.

(3). Lack Of Technology Was An Issue:

With many aspects of life moving indoors and to a virtual/remote platform, the pandemic highlighted the need for fast and reliable internet service. The region lacks consistent, reliable, and available internet service. Many felt that this is a huge liability that needs to be addressed.

(4). Networks Of Communication Were Good (But Not Great)

Many felt that the channels of communication were good and that regional partners were willing to support each other and adapt. But several voiced that once things "went back to normal," that many went back to their silos. One participant stated that the high level of communication region wide during COVID could serve as a blueprint for future high-risk events.

(5). There Were Good Resources For Low Income Families

Partners recognized that the region lacks resources and that in general, there are many low-income families. However, during COVID, many felt that there were good resources for low-income families and individuals. From food delivery services to housing assistance, and financial resources for workers, many felt that the region did a good job disseminating these assets.



PROMPT THREE: REGIONAL CHALLENGES

What are the challenges facing the region? What may become a future challenge or threat to the region? What resources do you need to address these future challenges or threats?

(1). Need Better Communication & Partnering

As stated earlier, many felt that during COVID the region stepped up and communication among partners was great. However, the biggest issue that came up during these stakeholder sessions, was the lack of communication in general. A majority of respondents felt that many organizations aren't communicating with each other. Silos and lack of willingness to communicate and partner are issues that many felt need to be addressed as one of the biggest challenges.

(2). Need A Cohesive Message

The LRGV region has many and varied entities: three counties, many cities, several economic development agencies, nonprofits, binational organizations, and many key businesses. Yet many felt that there is no cohesive message. It seems that every entity has its own message and agenda. A unified message and strategy would help to move the area forward as one large, united region. This unified message would also help to counter the negative image that people in other parts of the country have of the border and the region.

(3). Brain Drain

The exodus of talented and educated young people was expressed as another major issue. The amount of young people moving out to other areas is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

(4). Lack of Upward Mobility

Many felt that the number of high paying jobs are very limited. There are very few high-level and high paying positions. This lack of high-level jobs creates a lack of upward mobility.

(5). Need Better Drainage Infrastructure

Stormwater infrastructure was identified as concern that is hindering the region. Regional drainage improvements would help alleviate damage to properties, homes, and roads during the monsoon season and when hurricanes strike the area.

(6). The Health & Wellness Of All Residents Need To Be A Priority

The pandemic exposed various vulnerabilities of the population. To include the low health standards of many residents. The physical and mental health of people is a major concern, and many felt that moving forward the region needs to do better to address this issue.



PROMPT FOUR: VISIONING & GOAL SETTING:

If we could fast forward 10 years, what vision would you like to see the region transformed in to? With that vision would do you think would be the first step to take in order to begin the process of transformation? What are some regional goals that you would like to reach? What efforts are in place to achieve those goals?

(1). A United Region

A more blended and connected region that is sharing resources, moving in the same direction, and no fragmentation. Having everyone acknowledge that the region is tapping into the same resources and that everyone should carry an equal load making everyone better and more resilient. "We need to start to see ourselves as a region and not as separate cities and counties."

(2). A Diverse Economy

A diverse economy with higher paying jobs. A multitude of industry clusters that include, tier one manufacturing, tourism, medical device manufacturing, aerospace engineering, clean energy technologies, and binational trade and industry.

(3). Multimodal Transportation Systems

Currently most people travel by car. But a transportation system that offers bike lanes, hike and bike trails, and public transit can provide alternative transportation that can improve air quality, health, and accessibility. A light rail system connecting the various communities to Boca Chica / Brownsville and Space X would make the region much more competitive.

(4). Available Technology

Providing Having reliable internet and Wi-Fi for schools, businesses, and residents would be a massive improvement. It would also make the region more economic resilient and mitigate future external shocks.

(5). Less Disparity

Addressing income disparity by providing higher wages, safe and affordable housing, and good healthcare would go a long way. By taking care of the most vulnerable, the region can become more competitive and improve the quality of life for everyone. Other Topics

Discussed During Stakeholder Sessions:

- Regional Planning
 - Air Quality
 - Transportation
 - Parks & Rec (Trails)
- Tourism
- Agribusiness
- Economic Development
 - Deep Water Port
 - Declining Industries
- Educational Attainment
- Geopolitical Issues
- Supply Chains
- Entitlement Concerns
- (Zoning, Platting, Permitting)
- Environmental Threats
 - Flooding
 - Hurricanes
- Ability and Willingness to Adapt to Emerging Opportunities





ECONOMIC RECOVERY
& RESILIENCY PLAN

LOWER GRANDE VALLEY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION