

Nash County, NC Workforce Evaluation and Strategic Action Agenda



January 2024





1. Introduction

In the national competition for workforce numbers and talent, Nash County has some important geographic advantages. Located on the eastern edge of North Carolina's Research Triangle region, Nash is adjacent to one of the nation's strongest-growing metropolitan areas. The Raleigh-Cary MSA grew by five percent just between 2020 and 2022, moving to a total population of 1,480,000 and in 41st place among metros nationally. In a new Site Selection Group estimate of the country's fastest-growing metros from 2023 to 2028, the larger Raleigh-Durham combined statistical area (CSA) is projected to be the fourth fastest gainer in America, adding population by 9.3 percent or about 200,000 people over five years.

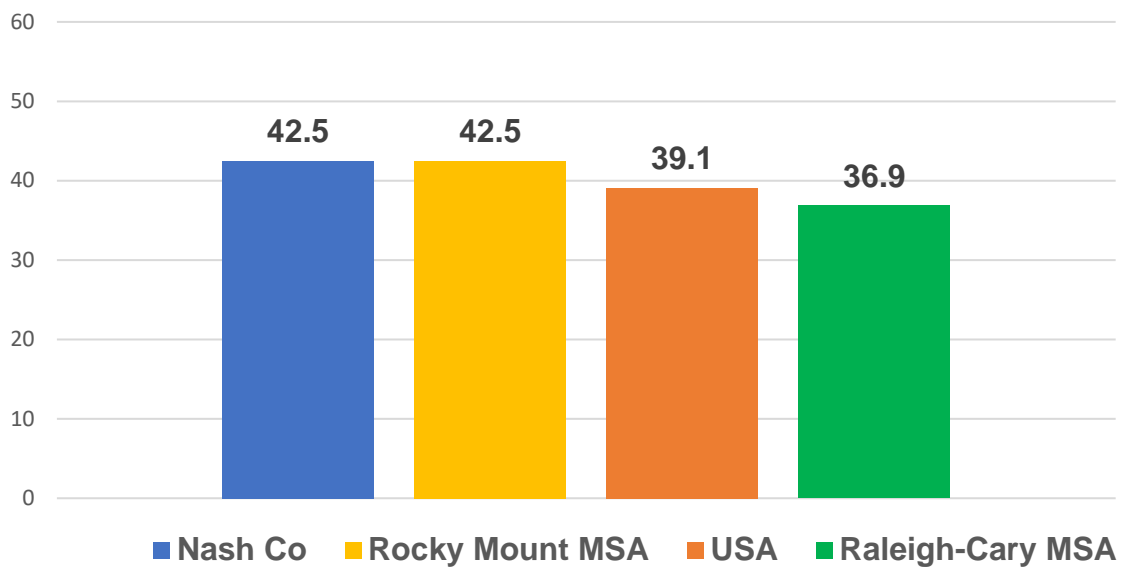
The Raleigh-Cary MSA population is also a highly educated one. An impressive 51.6 percent of the adult population has a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree. This level of education attainment places the region within the top ten metro areas in the United States. With an economy increasingly dependent on adoption of new technologies and automation, an educated workforce is a key selling point.

However, as many local employers will note, Nash County has distinctly different demographic conditions and challenges that can make hiring and retention more difficult. These challenges are not unique to Nash but shared with the Rocky Mount MSA and other nearby counties to the east of the Research Triangle region. The Rocky Mount MSA is comprised of Nash and Edgecombe counties and had a 2023 estimated population of 143,325.

One demographic challenge is population growth – Nash's population has been largely flat since 2010, with little growth projected through 2028. Global data provider Esri projects the county's annual growth rate to be 0.01 percent from 2023 through 2028, compared with 1.29 percent annually for the Raleigh-Cary MSA. Like the Rocky Mount MSA and other neighbors along the Interstate 95 corridor, the median age of the Nash County population is also substantially higher, raising concerns about the anticipated level of retirements among existing workers.



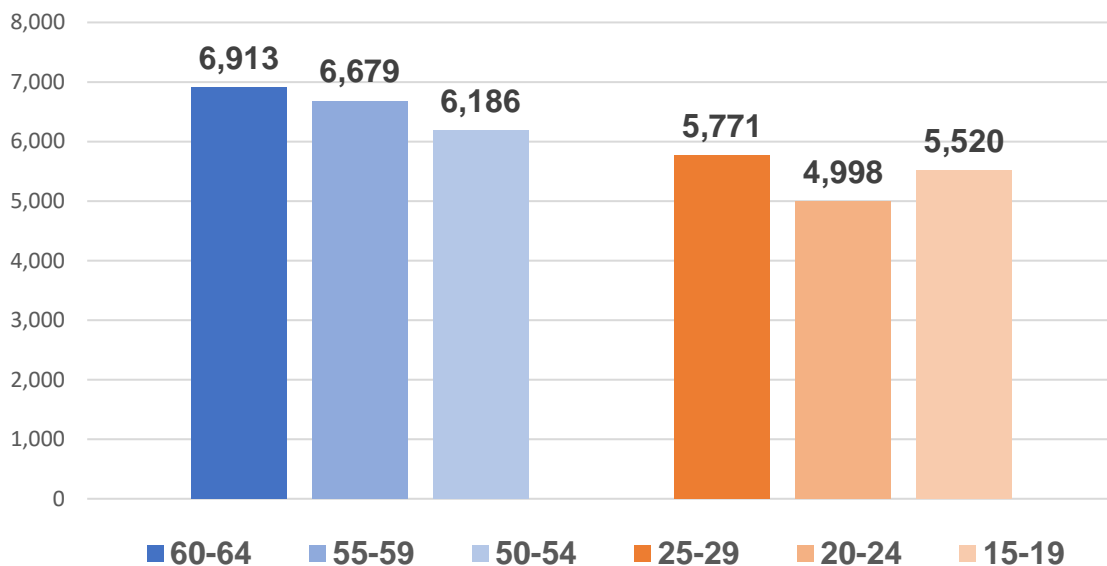
Median Age 2023



Source: Esri 2023

The challenge of having enough younger workers to replace older ones is illustrated by the size of age cohorts in Nash, as shown below.

Population by Age Group, Nash County 2023



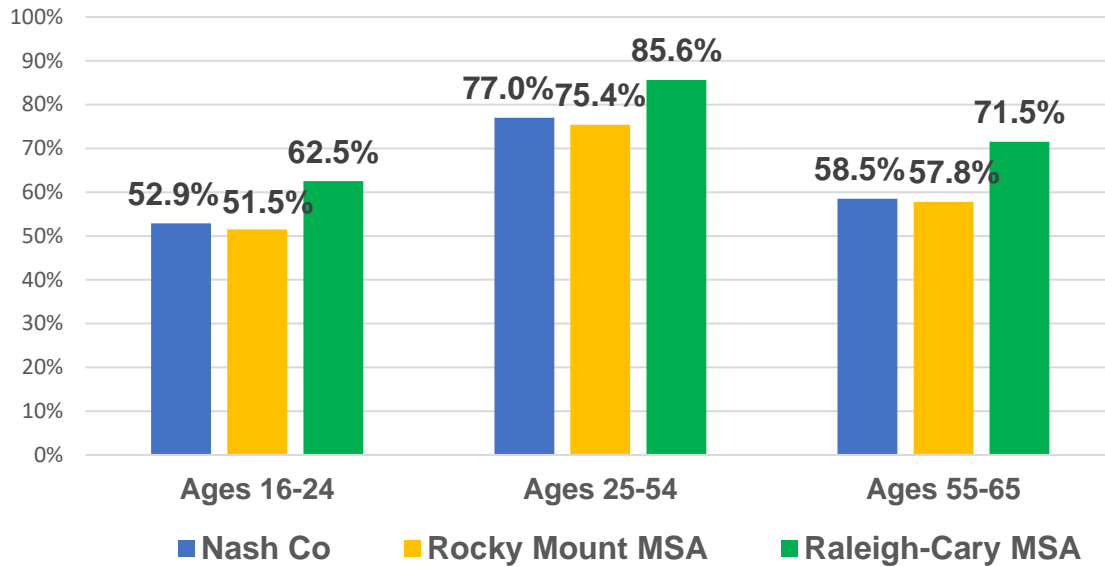
Source: Esri 2023

In addition to the total size of the working age population, another consideration is the percentage of adults that are active in the labor force. Low labor force participation rates can be a concern for



businesses exploring every avenue to increase the size and quality of applicant pools.

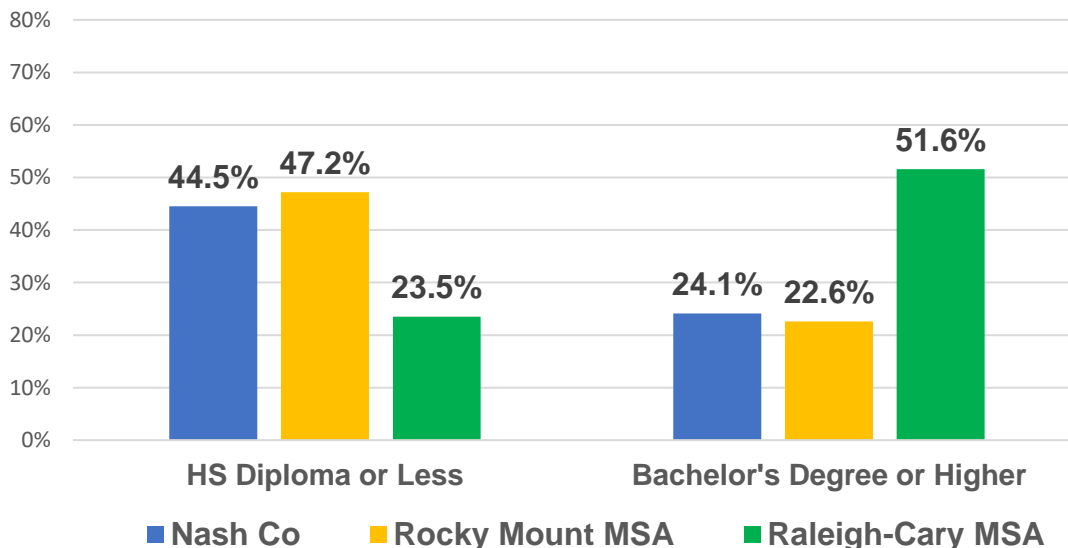
Labor Force Participation by Age Group 2023



Source: Esri 2023

A final demographic issue for the county is the education attainment of the population. The Raleigh-Cary MSA’s level of education is one of the highest in the United States and far above that of Nash County and many of its neighbors. Since a majority of jobs do not require a four-year college degree, this is not necessarily a negative for Nash. However, higher wages for local residents is usually an important community goal, and a higher level of education is often necessary to secure many well-paying professional and technical jobs.

Adult Education Attainment 2023

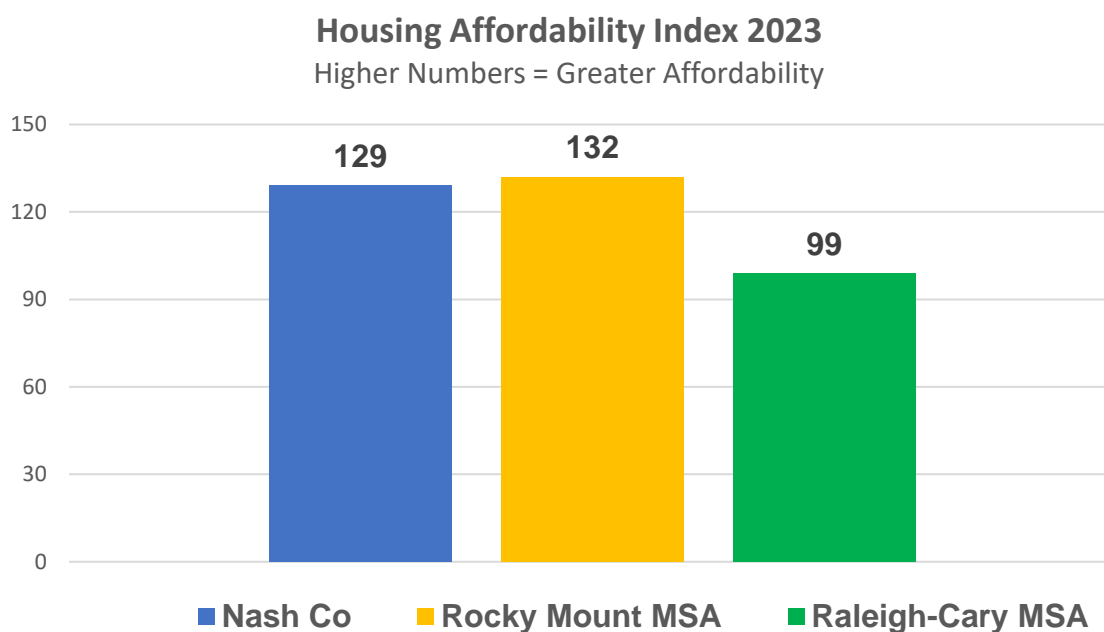




Source: Esri 2023

Despite these difficult comparisons with a star metro area, Nash still has a number of strengths when it comes to workforce quantity and quality. As detailed later in this analysis, the labor shed provides a total workforce of more than 1,100,000 adults within a 45-minute drive time from the center of Nash County.

The county's cost of living and cost of housing are attractive for young people and families looking to settle in the region. Data provider Esri's housing affordability index measures the ability of those with the median income in an area to afford the median home price. Higher numbers indicate greater affordability. Nash County offers a housing affordability index of 129 compared with 99 for the Raleigh-Cary MSA. Raleigh-Cary MSA homeowners pay an average of 24.8 percent of their income for a mortgage while Nash residents pay 18.9 percent of their income for a mortgage.



Source: Esri 2023

From a workforce quality perspective, Nash Community College's relationships with businesses to provide relevant training and education programs is greatly valued. The public schools' CTE offerings and institution of a Career Development Plan for every student provide a needed emphasis on work skills and career awareness for young people across the county.

Considering this mix of workforce positives and negatives leads to the question: What will it take to make workforce factors in Nash County more of a clear competitive advantage? Nash County Economic Development engaged the consulting firm Economic Leadership to tackle this question, obtain input from business and community leaders, and provide a blueprint for improvement. This evaluation and strategic action agenda set the course for Nash to strengthen both labor force quantity and quality, helping the county to stand out in an increasingly competitive economic development environment.



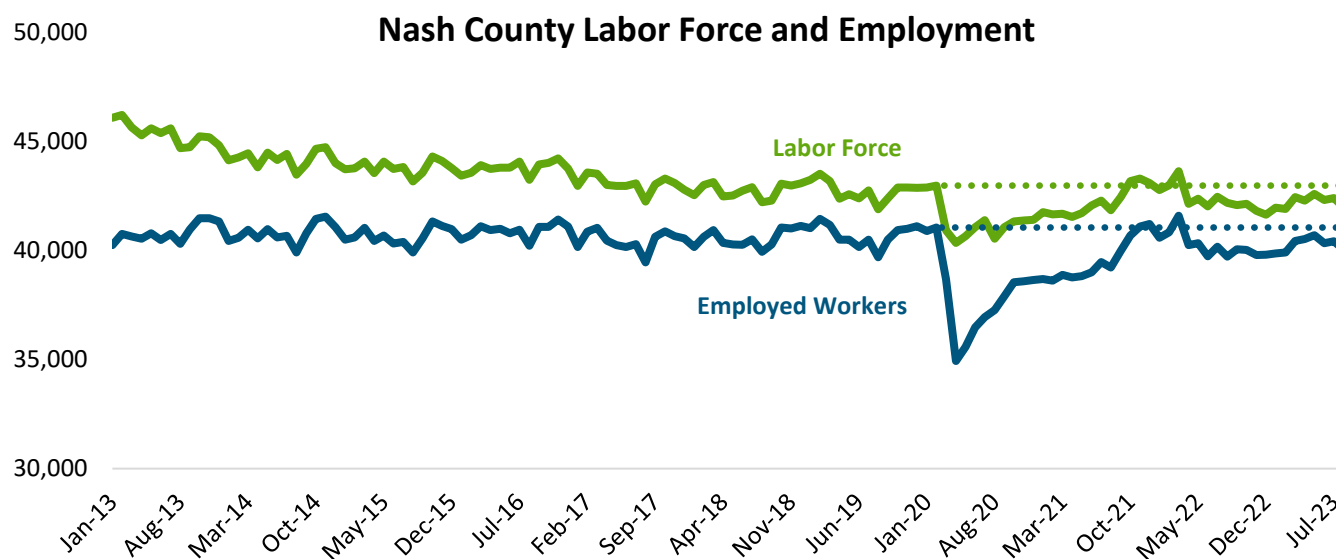
2. Nash County Workforce Analysis

The Great Workforce Challenges

This section examines recent workforce trends – especially over the last three years, since the onset of the pandemic – and how these forces have played out in the Nash County economy. This review will provide context for a deep dive into occupations to see where the greatest opportunities exist for developing workers for area businesses.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a severe disruption to the economy and exacerbated already complicated workforce challenges. Understanding how labor force trends are shifting can help Nash make informed decisions to improve workforce quantity and quality. This recession differed from previous declines because its impact was heavily concentrated on certain parts of the economy. Businesses that served people in person – such as restaurants and tourism – suffered while operations that made or distributed goods fared much better. Tech-oriented jobs that could go remote thrived as well. Most of the jobs negatively affected were lower wage jobs.

Nationally we are now in a period of recovery and “renormalization.” Many of the economic trends that spiked abnormally are starting to wane. Other long-term workforce trends existed before the pandemic and those will continue to be challenges going forward. In Nash County, the size of the labor force and number of employed workers have hovered just below pre-pandemic levels and have not grown significantly in the last year.



Source: BLS (2023)

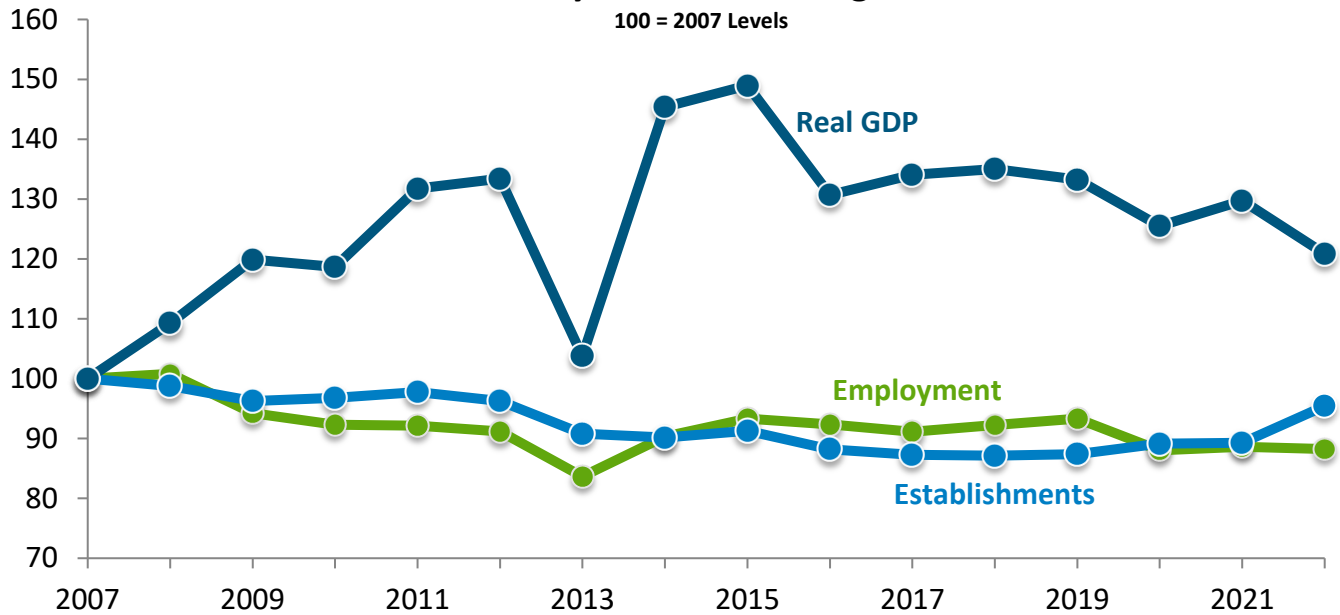
Economic struggles in the county are reflected in the decline of real (inflation-adjusted) GDP since 2015. Employment and establishments have remained stagnant and are lower than before the Great Recession. Establishment growth did tick up between 2021 and 2022. The total decline in jobs from 2019



to 2022 was 5.5 percent. This ranked Nash 88th out of the 100 North Carolina counties for change in employment during this period.

Nash County Economic Change Metrics

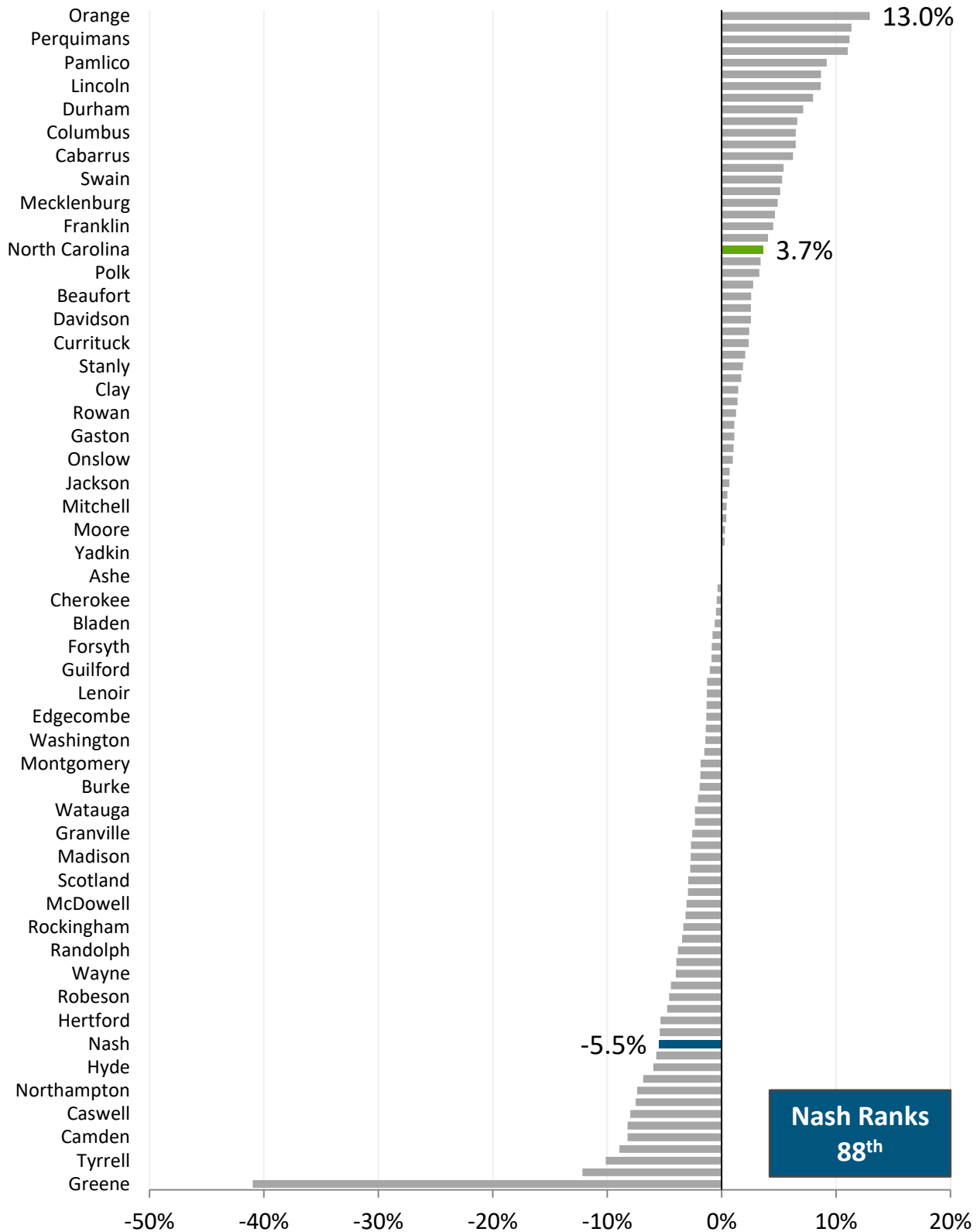
100 = 2007 Levels



Source: Lightcast 2023.3



Total Employment Change by NC County, 2019 - 2022

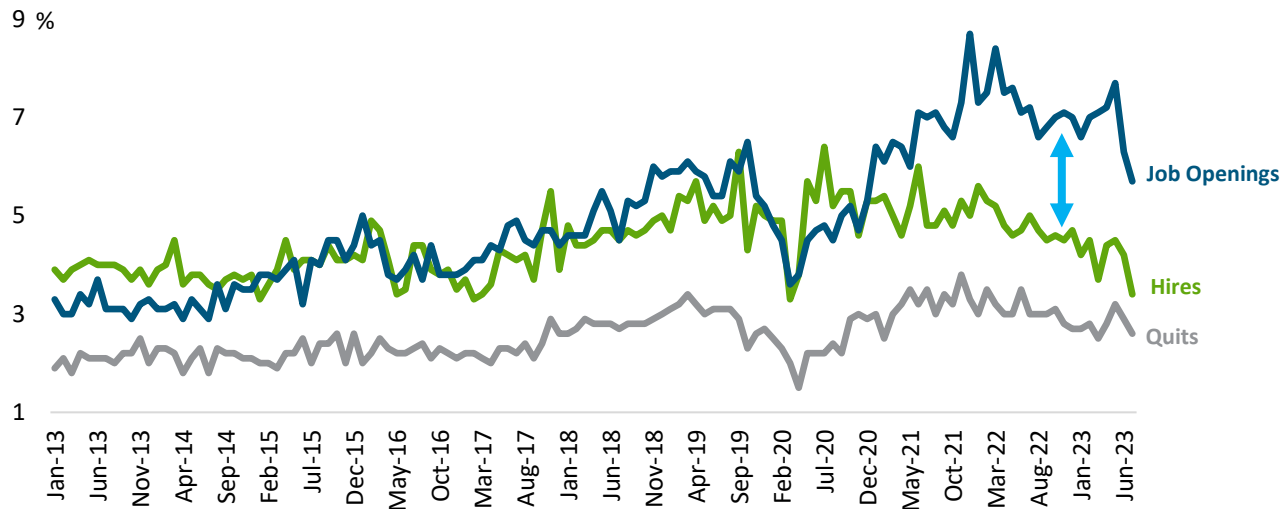


Source: Lightcast 2023.3



Even in economies like Nash's that have not fully returned to prior employment levels, employers are having trouble filling open positions. Across North Carolina, the rate of job openings has been elevated since early 2021. The hiring rate has lagged behind, showing the gap between employer need and workforce availability in the state. This gap also suggests that the economy could expand at a faster pace if employers could find the workers they need.

North Carolina Job Opening & Hiring Rates

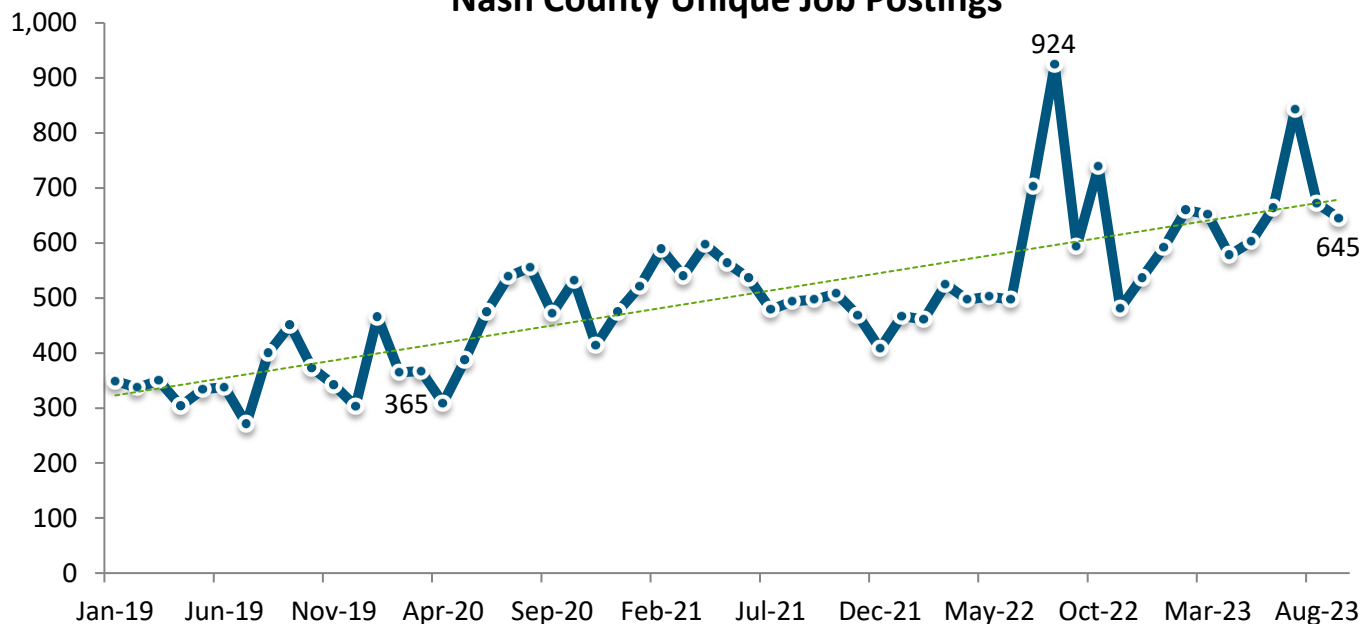


Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Job postings data also indicates that Nash County companies are aggressively looking for workers to fill their openings. Unique online monthly postings for jobs in the county spiked in 2022 to almost triple those posted in 2019. The number of monthly postings has come down in recent months but remains elevated.



Nash County Unique Job Postings



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

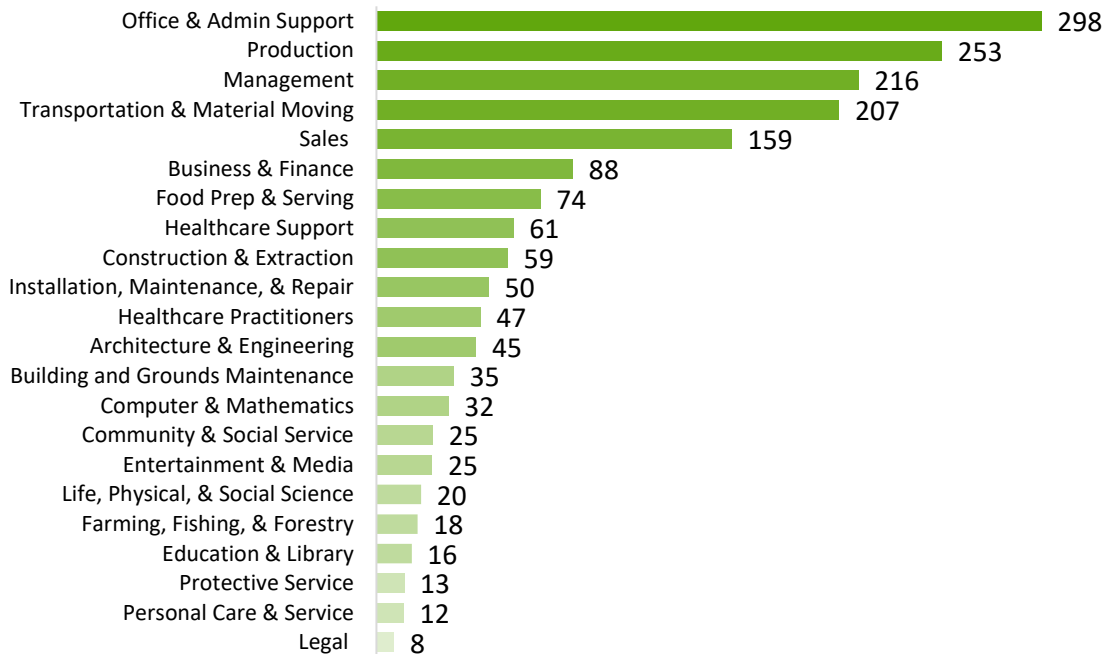
Unfortunately, when businesses started looking to rehire or expand their workforce, they found fewer applicants. Before the pandemic, manufacturers might have seen an average of ten applicants for each job posting. Today, the same hirer is lucky if they get two applicants despite offering higher wages for the same position. Labor markets were tightening across the country well before the pandemic.

Demographic shifts including an aging and retiring workforce, low birthrates, and limited immigration meant that workers were leaving jobs with fewer workers behind them to replace them. Then in the reopening of the economy, the labor market became even tighter. In the United States, there are now about 0.5 unemployed workers for every job opening. This trend does not appear likely to improve any time soon.

In Nash County, unemployment rates are hovering around 4.4 percent, at or below what economists would deem full employment. In April 2023, there were about 1,760 unemployed workers who were actively searching for jobs. The largest share of these workers, about 17 percent, have previous experience in office and administrative support jobs. Overall, there are relatively few unemployed workers ready to fill gaps for the region's businesses. Protection services and education are essential jobs that only have a few unemployed workers to fill gaps.

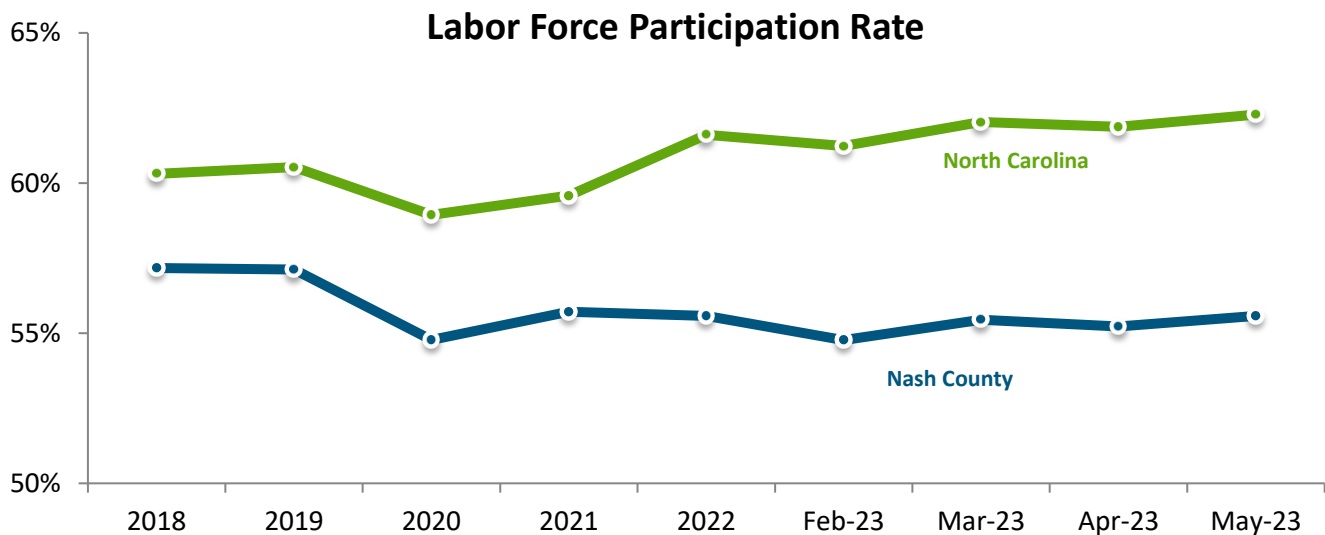


Nash County Unemployment by Occupation, April 2023



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

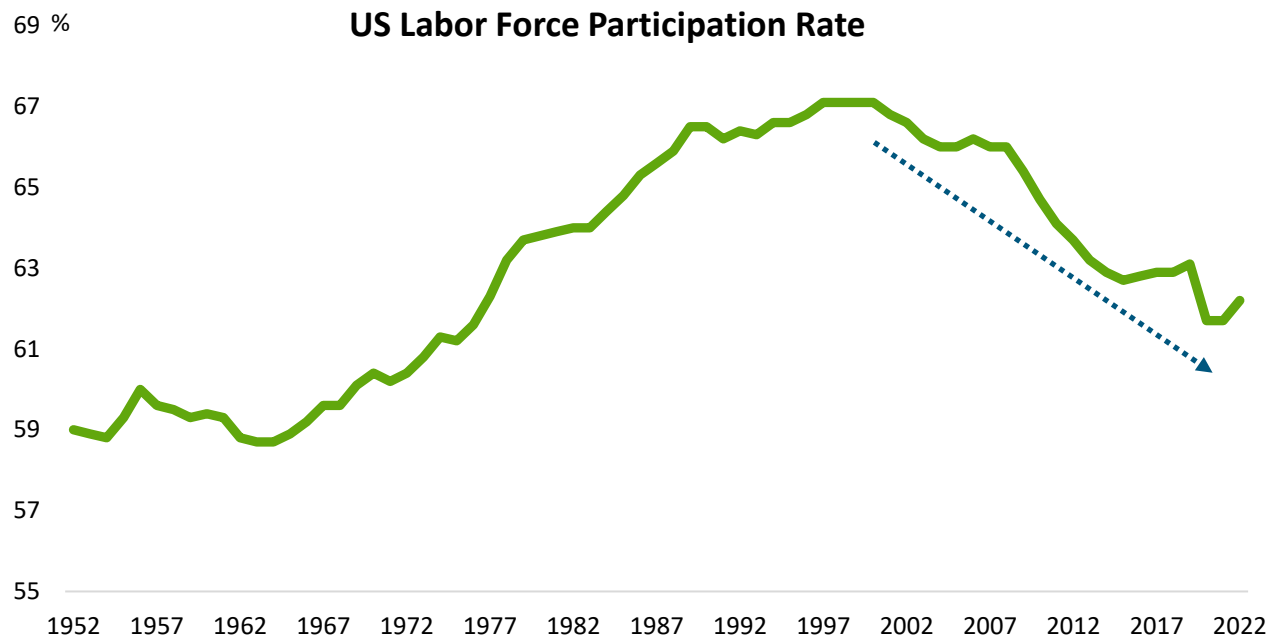
Unemployment data only counts those workers who are actively seeking employment. Those who have stopped looking for work are no longer counted in the labor force. Looking at the trend of employment and labor in Nash County, the data reveals the number of total people participating in the labor force is still below pre-pandemic levels and has diverged from the recent state trend of labor participation growth.



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

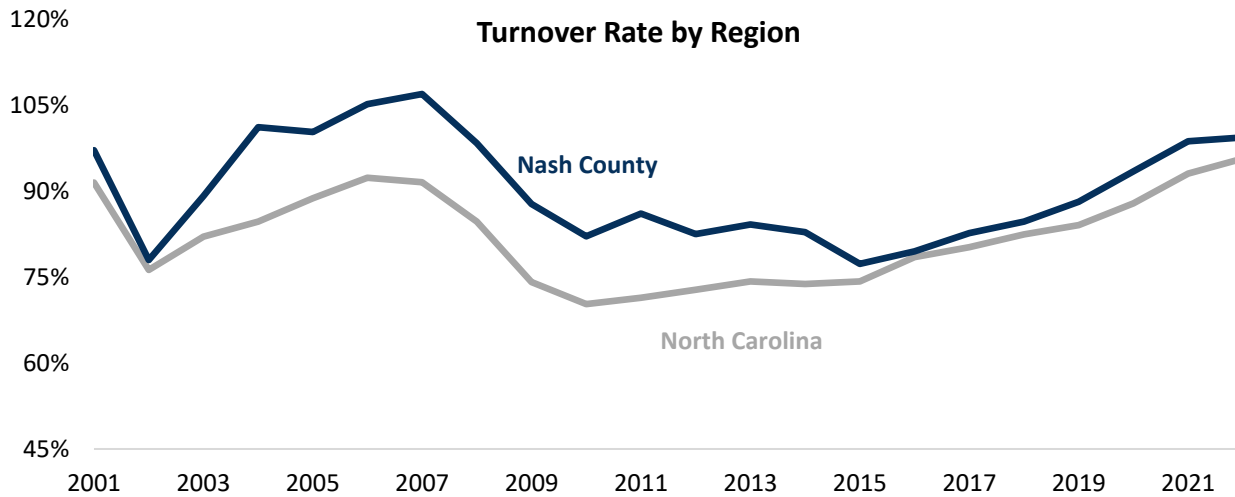


The national trend has seen labor force participation decline since 2001. Many factors contribute to this trend, including the aging of the U.S. population and women’s participation reaching a peak in the 1990s. Participation by those in the prime working age group (25 to 54) is near historical highs, but this is offset by lower participation among older workers.



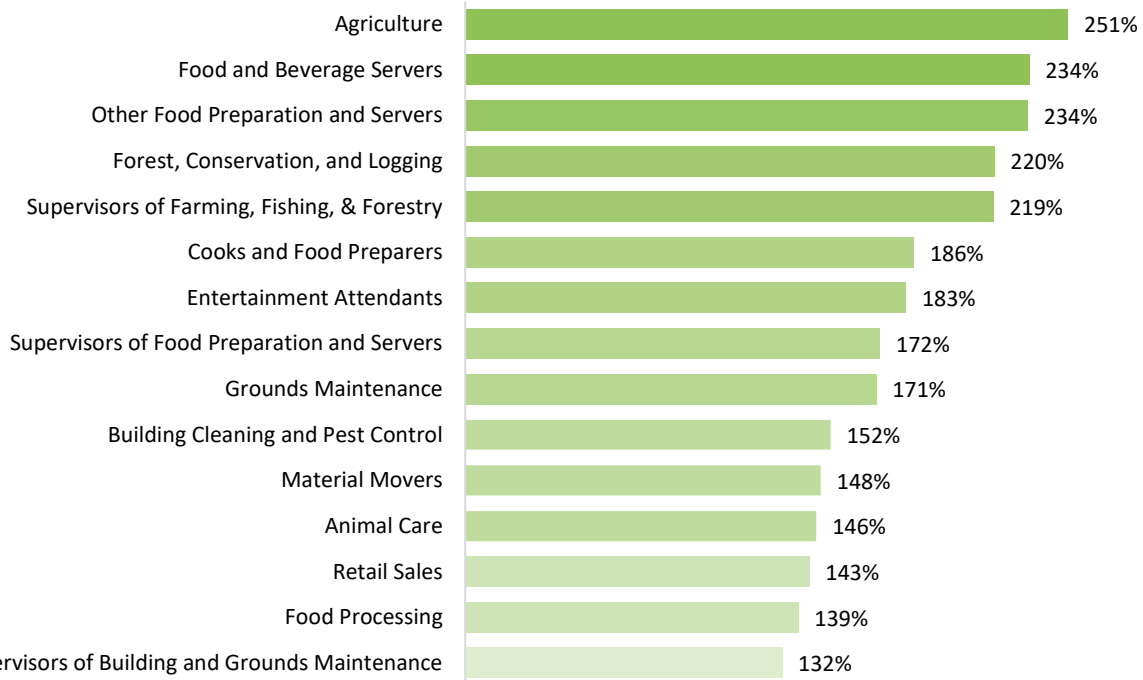
Source: BLS (2023)

Employers have also cited high turnover as impeding their ability to operate at peak capacity. In Nash County, turnover rates used to be much higher but declined in the aftermath of the 2001 recession and the Great Recession as workers who had jobs held on to them. Turnover rates have steadily climbed to higher levels in Nash County and North Carolina since 2015, though they are not as high as in 2007 or 2001. With workers understanding the level of opportunity in the job market, they may be more willing to risk leaving a job.



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Nash County Occupations with Highest Turnover Rates, 2022



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

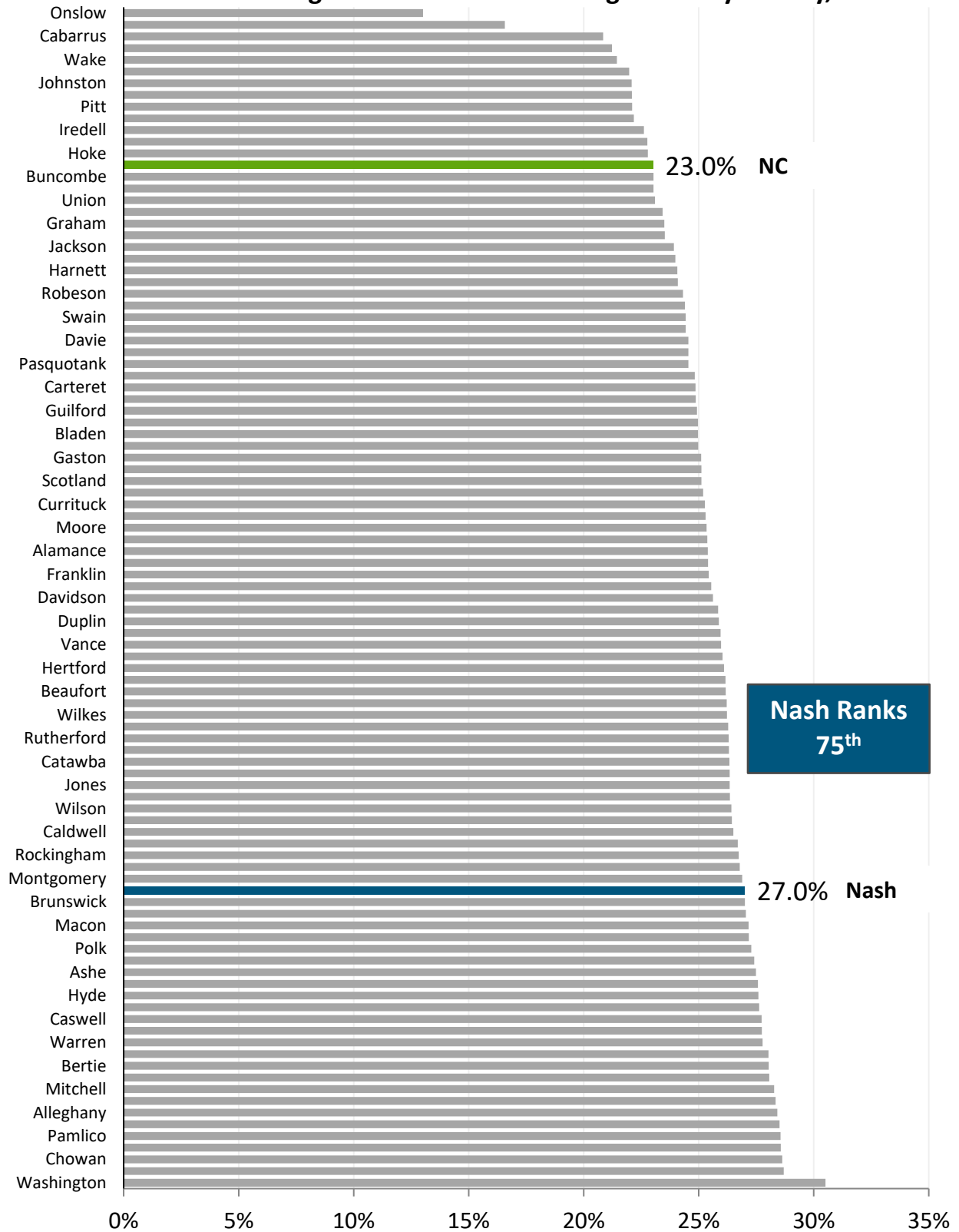
Turnover rates are heavily correlated with median annual wages in the region. Lower wage service jobs are those with the highest turnover. Agriculture and logging jobs are often subject to seasonal hiring patterns which can cause their turnover rates to be elevated.



Another post-pandemic trend contributing to workforce challenges has been the high rates of retirement among baby boomers. The large number of retiring workers has created bigger voids in the workforce than there are younger workers to replace them. A workforce with a large percentage of workers over the age of 55 is at a higher risk of retirements. In Nash County, about 27 percent of the workforce is 55 or older. This is one of the older workforces in the state (75th youngest out of 100) and higher than the state average of 23 percent.



Percentage of Workers Over the Age of 55 by County, 2022



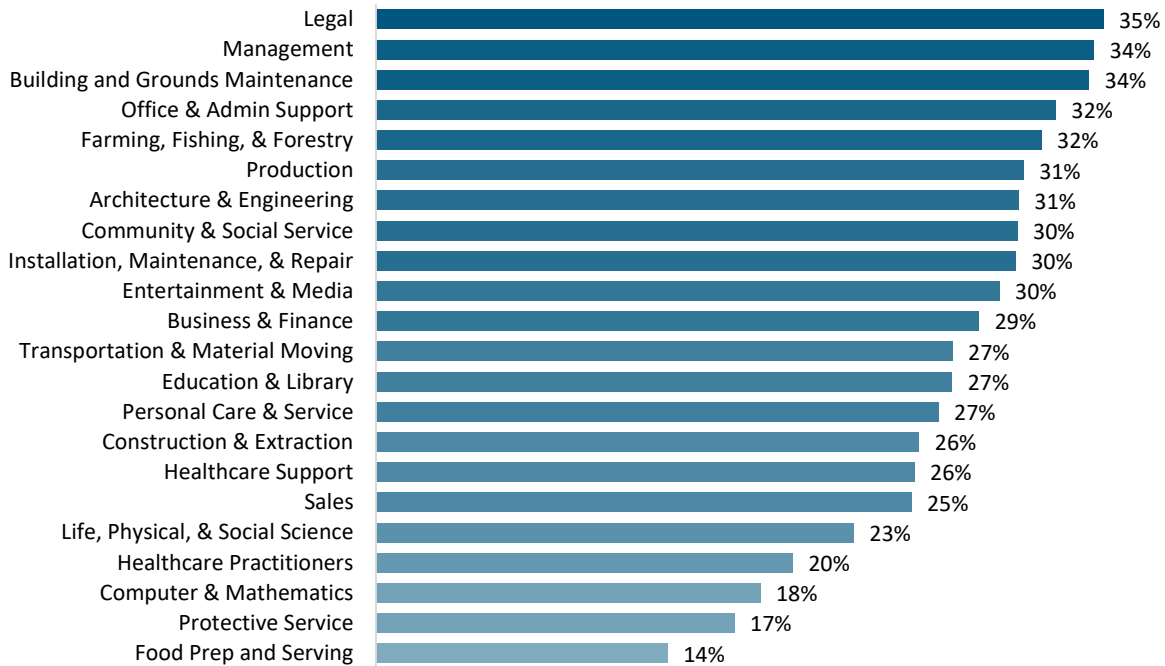
**Nash Ranks
75th**

Source: Lightcast 2023.3



The retirement risk varies significantly across different occupations. In Nash County, lawyers, grounds maintenance, management, and office administrative jobs have higher percentages of workers aged 55 and older. Many managers we speak with mention the loss of institutional knowledge when a long-time worker retires, particularly in the trades like machinery maintenance. It is important that workforce development initiatives strive to fill these anticipated gaps.

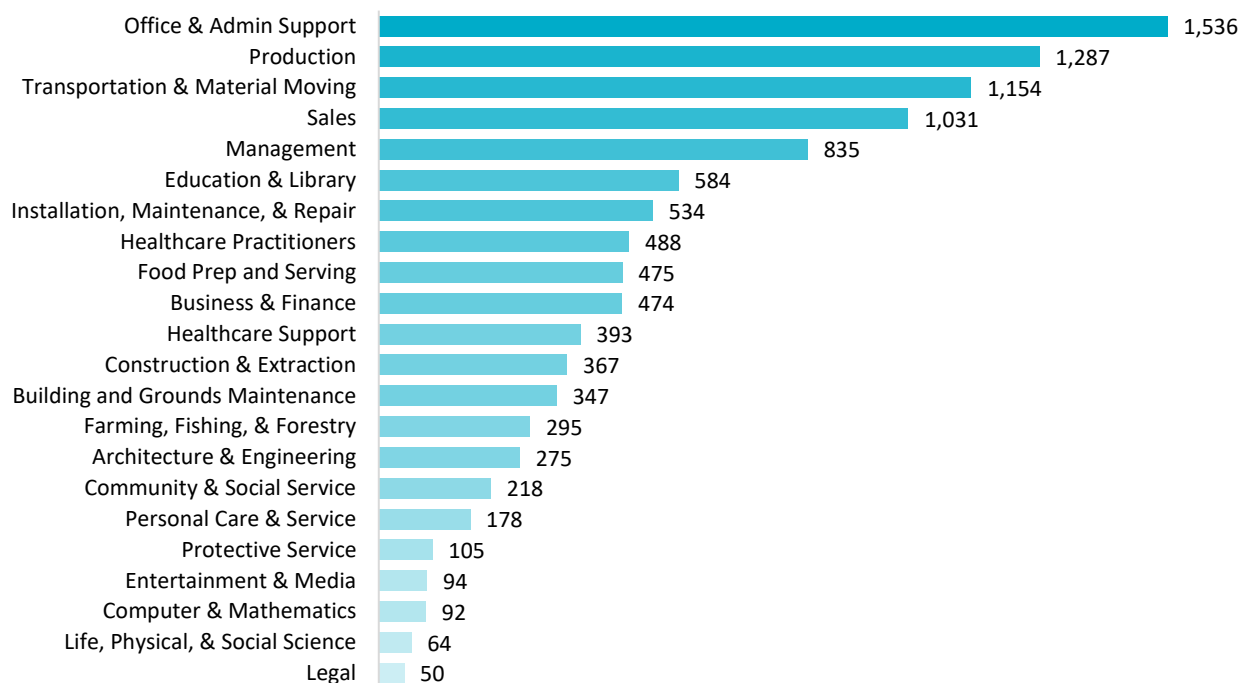
Nash County Occupations by Percentage of Workers Age 55 and Older, 2022



Source: Lightcast 2023.3



Nash County Occupations by Number of Workers Age 55 and Older, 2022



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

In terms of raw numbers, administrative support, production, transportation, and sales jobs in the county have the most workers nearing retirement. Many of these jobs already face labor shortages that will be exacerbated by retiring workers.

The flexibility to work from home is also affecting worker’s decisions. This flexibility has given some workers the chance to relocate to lower cost markets or be closer to family. Given the tight labor market, some workers may be searching only for remote work. Research shows that some mid-sized metros gained new residents from the pandemic and remote work. In a tight job market workers are using their leverage to continue working from home (either full time or in hybrid arrangements). Areas with a high quality of life and good internet infrastructure can position themselves to compete for remote and hybrid talent. This can impact employers who require their staff to work in person, as they compete for workers who may wish to work remotely. Using five-year average data from the American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2021, the remote work trend is not as pronounced in Nash County as across the state. Levels are up nationally compared to before the pandemic.

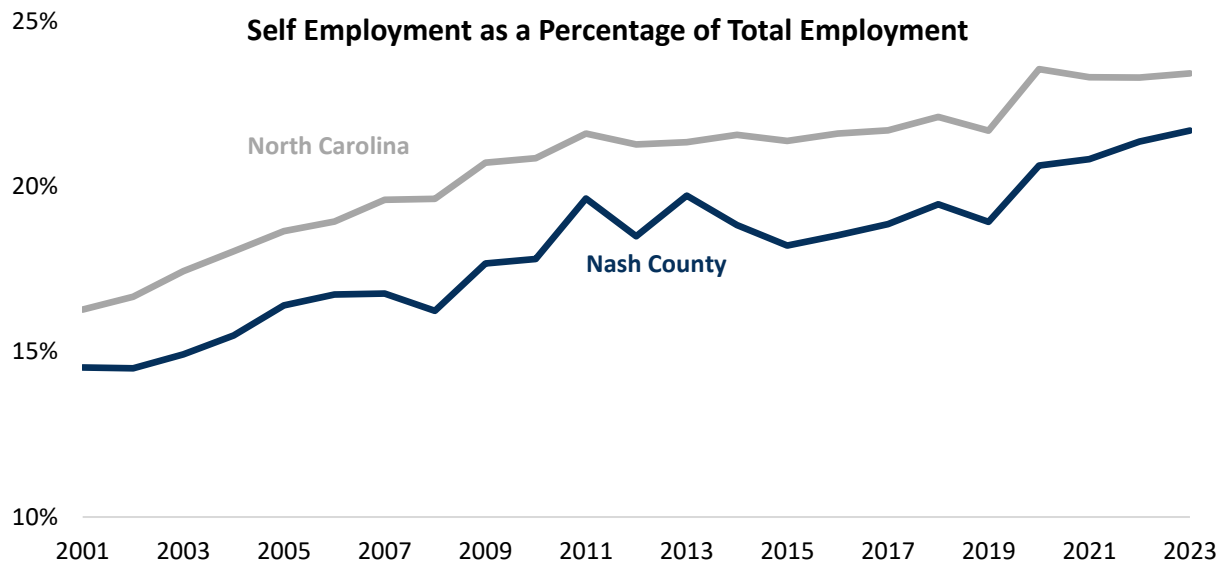


Percentage of Workers Working from Home, 2021



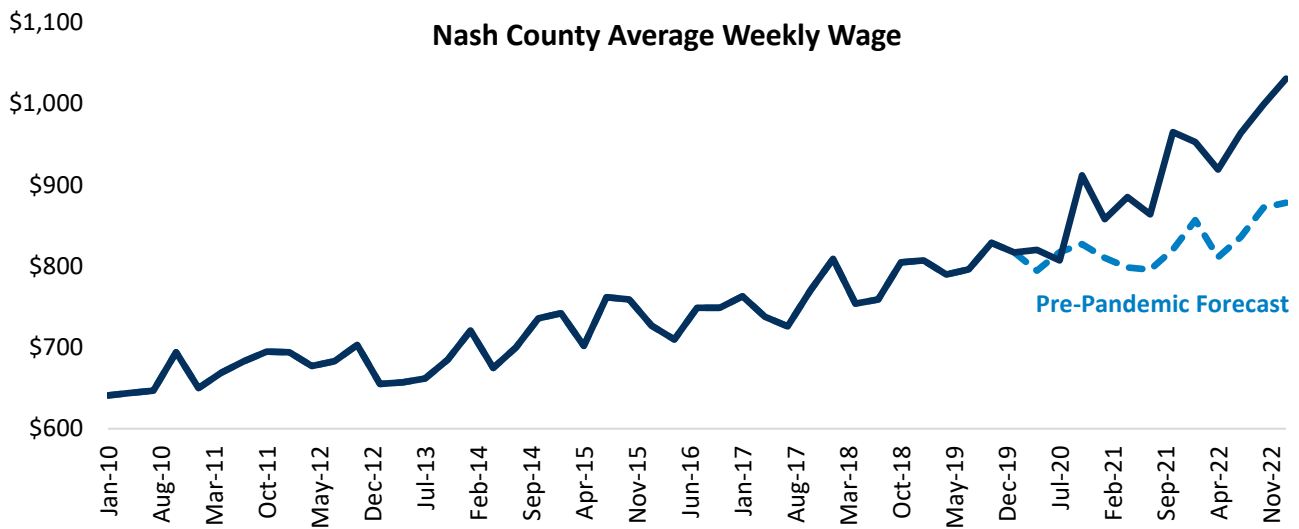
Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Employers are also having to compete with the opportunities that workers have to strike out on their own. Technology has enabled more people to start their own companies or perform gig work. Self-employment rates have risen steadily in the last two decades. During the pandemic these rates spiked and have remained elevated.



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

As jobs remain difficult to fill, employers have turned to raising wages to attract and retain employees. The Nash County average weekly wage is trending up and at higher levels than would have been predicted before the pandemic.

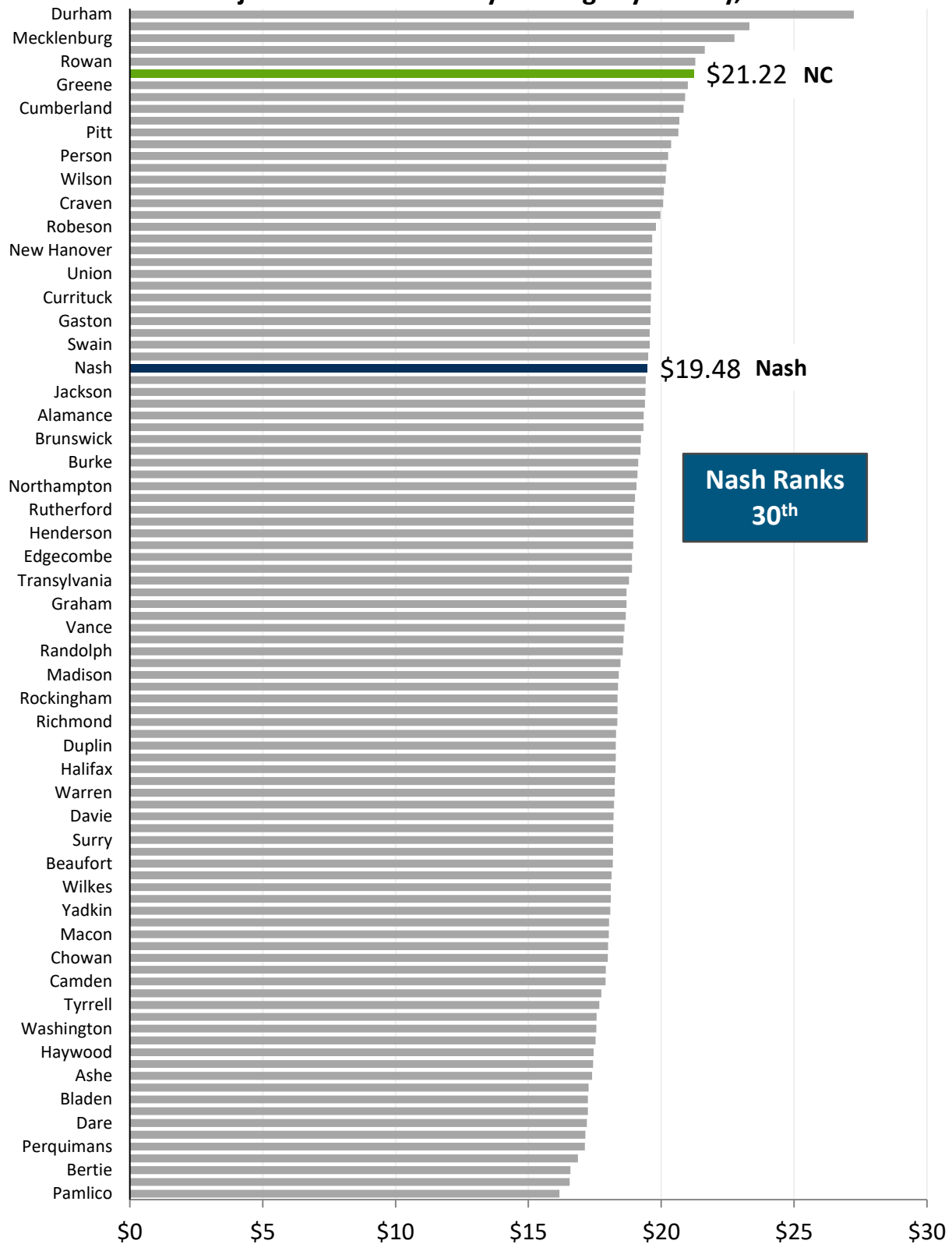


Source: BLS (2023)

The median hourly wage across all jobs in the county is \$18.21. Workers will balance their offered wages with the cost of goods and services in an area. A cost-of-living index (COLI) can be applied to a county's wage to compare different costs across regions. The local cost of living adjusted median wage is \$19.48 per hour, about \$2.50 less than the national average. If workers think they can earn significantly more in another region this could hurt worker recruitment and retention. In North Carolina, Nash has the 30th highest COLI adjusted median wage among the 100 counties.



COLI Adjusted Median Hourly Earnings by County, 2022



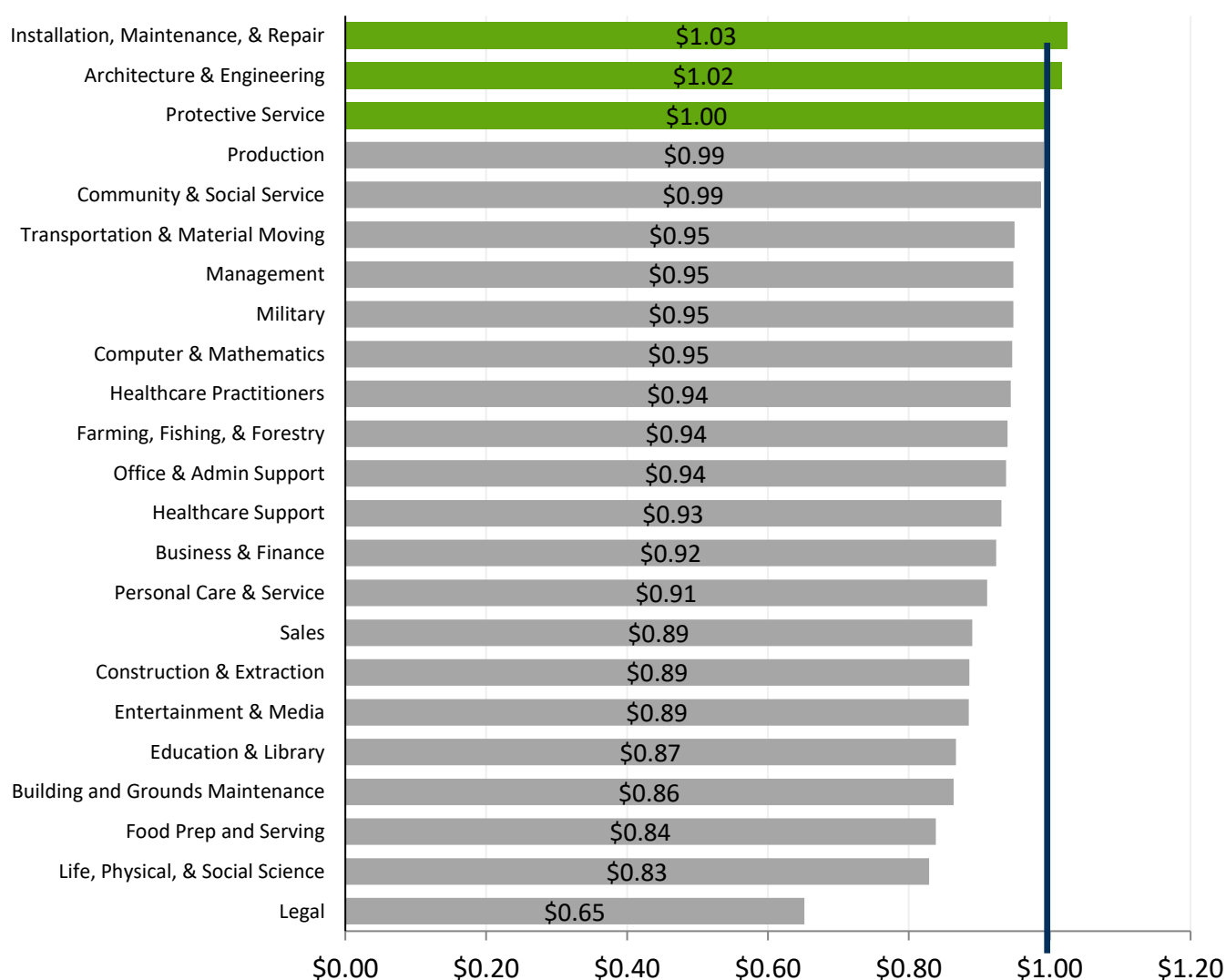
**Nash Ranks
30th**

Source: Lightcast 2023.3



This cost-of-living adjustment can also be applied to each occupation group. When adjusted for cost of living and compared to the national median hourly wage, many occupations in the county offer lower wages than workers can earn elsewhere. Three occupation groups (installation, maintenance, and repair; architecture and engineering; and protective services) have more competitive wages compared to the national average when COLI is included. Knowledge-based workers (tech, education, scientists, management, healthcare practitioners, etc.) are earning less than the national average when cost-of-living is included. These workers may choose other regions where their adjusted wages might be higher. County employers may need to market other positives, like work schedule flexibility, short commutes, or affordable housing, to help recruit workers given these lower wages.

Nash County Median Hourly Earnings COLI Wages vs National Average, 2022

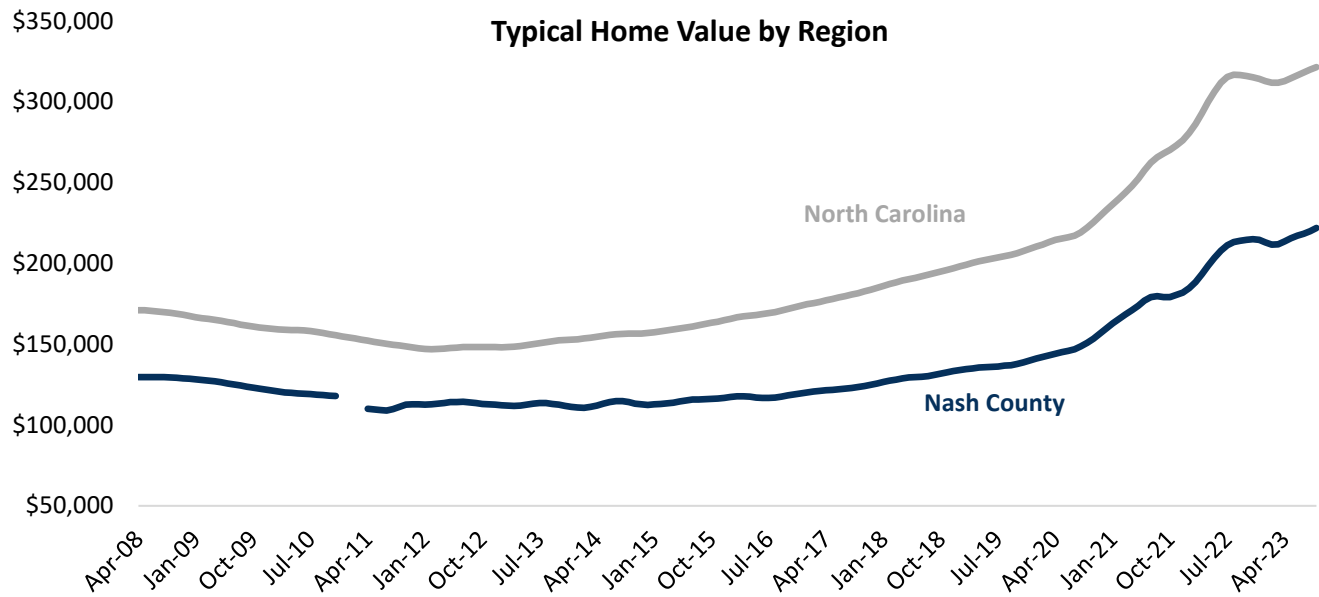


Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Despite wage increases, some residents are still struggling to make ends meet. Inflation pressures have increased costs for most goods, with housing prices among the “stickiest” of costs given that they are less likely to fall back to prior, lower levels. While Nash County home prices are more affordable than



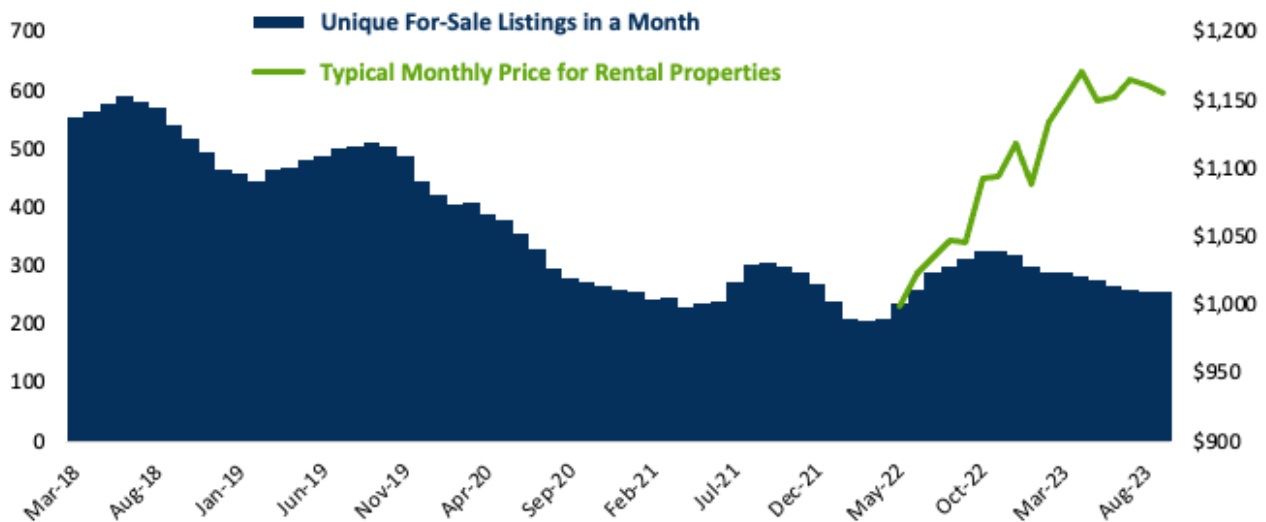
other areas, prices have still risen dramatically in the last few years.



Source: Zillow (2023)

Housing cost pressures are also found in rent increases. Rental rates followed the spike in home values in recent years, although both have leveled off. The price of area rentals may be impacted by a decrease in housing market inventory over the last few years. About 27.3 percent of households in the county spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. This value is lower than the national average.

Nash County Inventory vs Rental Prices

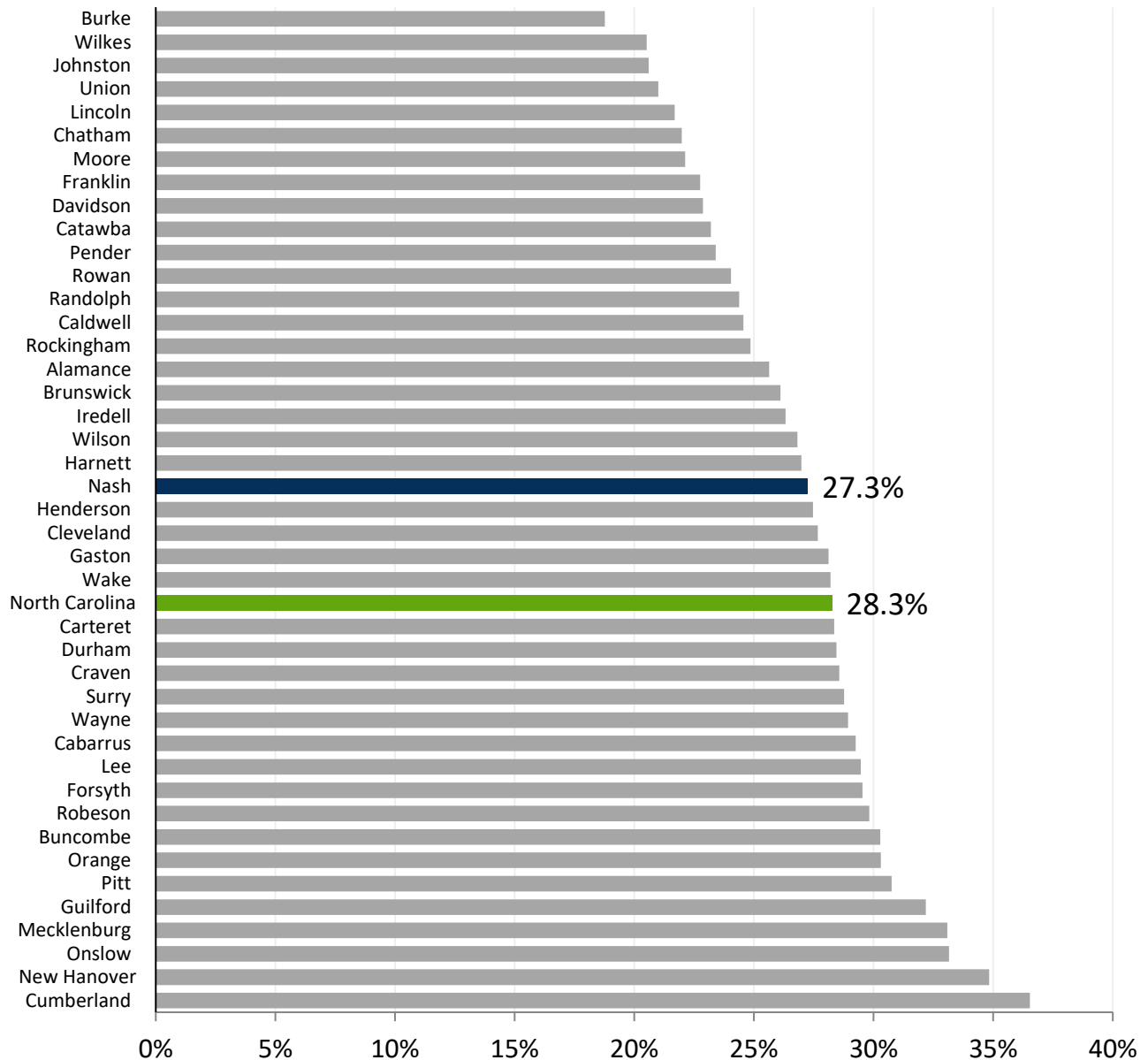


Source: EL calculations based on Zillow (2023)

Note: Rental price data not available before May 2022. Inventory data for Rocky Mount MSA.



Percent of Households that are Cost-Burdened by Rent or Mortgage, 2022



Source: EL calculations based on US Census Bureau (2023)

Note: Data not available for all NC counties

Another major expense for residents that impacts their ability to join the workforce is childcare. The challenges with childcare include both availability and cost. Childcare Aware of America estimates that across the U.S. there are not enough slots in childcare facilities for all children with parents in the workforce. If a working parent is able to secure a childcare spot, the cost can be another barrier. In most regions across the U.S., the cost of putting an infant into childcare is more than 10 percent of the annual household income.

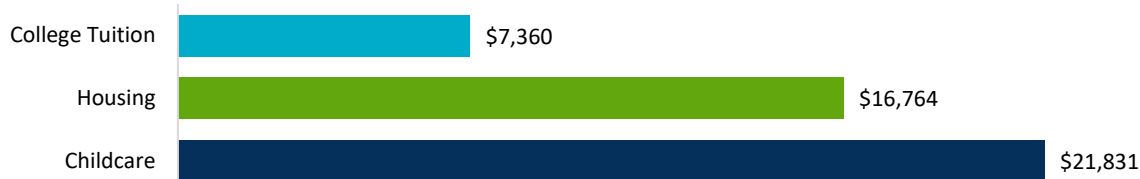


Cost of Full-Time, Center-Based Childcare, 2022

State	Infant	Toddler
North Carolina	\$11,833	\$11,209

Source: Childcare Aware of America (2023)

North Carolina Average Annual Household Expenses, 2022



Source: Childcare Aware of America (2023)

Note: Child care cost is for two children (one infant and one four-year old) in a center.

When compared to median household incomes in the state, childcare for one infant can cost about 12 percent of a married couple household’s annual income and 40 percent for a single parent household in North Carolina. Obviously, in households with multiple children under the age of five, these percentages increase. For many households in North Carolina, this cost is higher than housing or college costs.

Cost of Full-Time, Center-Based Child Care for Infant and Median Income, 2022

State	Infant Cost	Single-Parent Median Income	% of Income	Married Couple Median Income	% of Income
North Carolina	\$11,833	\$29,900	40%	\$102,100	12%

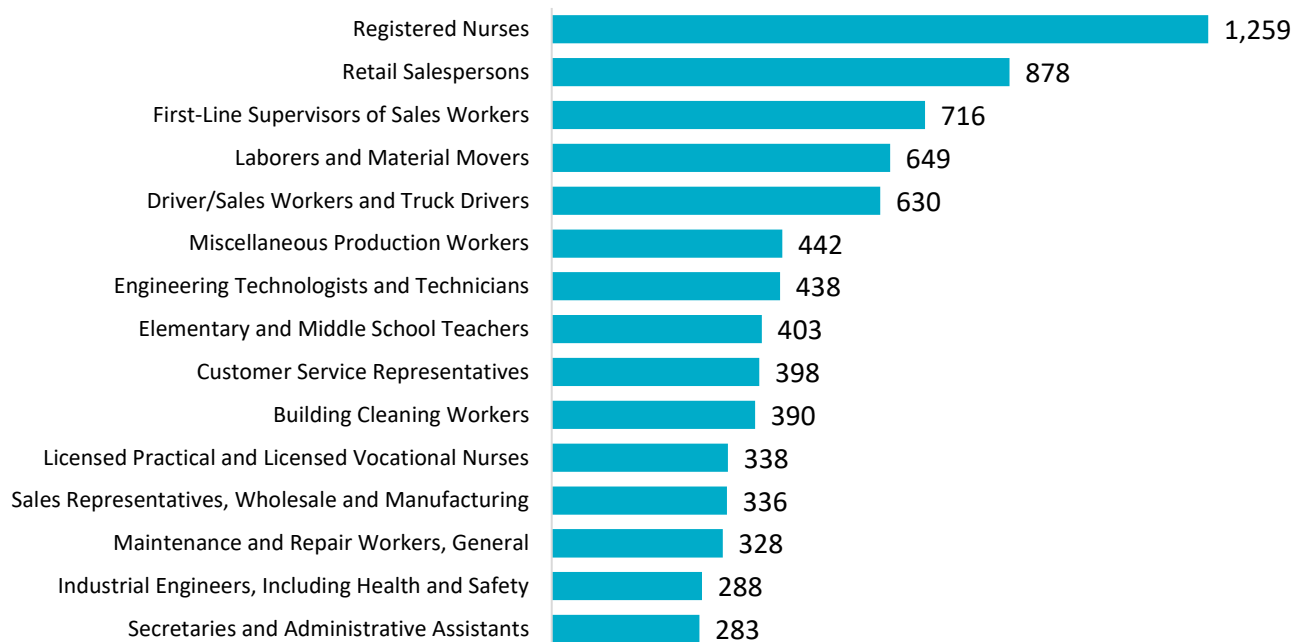
Source: Childcare Aware of America (2023)



Leading Career Opportunities in Nash County

This next section analyzes labor market data to illustrate the jobs in Nash County that have the largest demand and offer the best opportunities for residents. Looking at the top job postings by occupation we see that demand is strong in healthcare (particularly nursing), food service, maintenance, general production, and retail. However, the results also show labor shortages across many occupations, industries, and skill levels.

Nash County Top Unique Job Postings by Occupations, Sept 2020 - Sept 2023



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

When the job postings are broken down by the specialized skills listed in the posting, retail, accounting, and sales skills are in high demand. In the trades, warehousing, good manufacturing practices, inventory, and forklift skills are in high demand. Given the large presence of jobs in the biopharmaceuticals cluster, several jobs require specific skill in pharmaceuticals.



Nash County Top Specialized Skills in Job Postings, Sept 2020 - Sept 2023



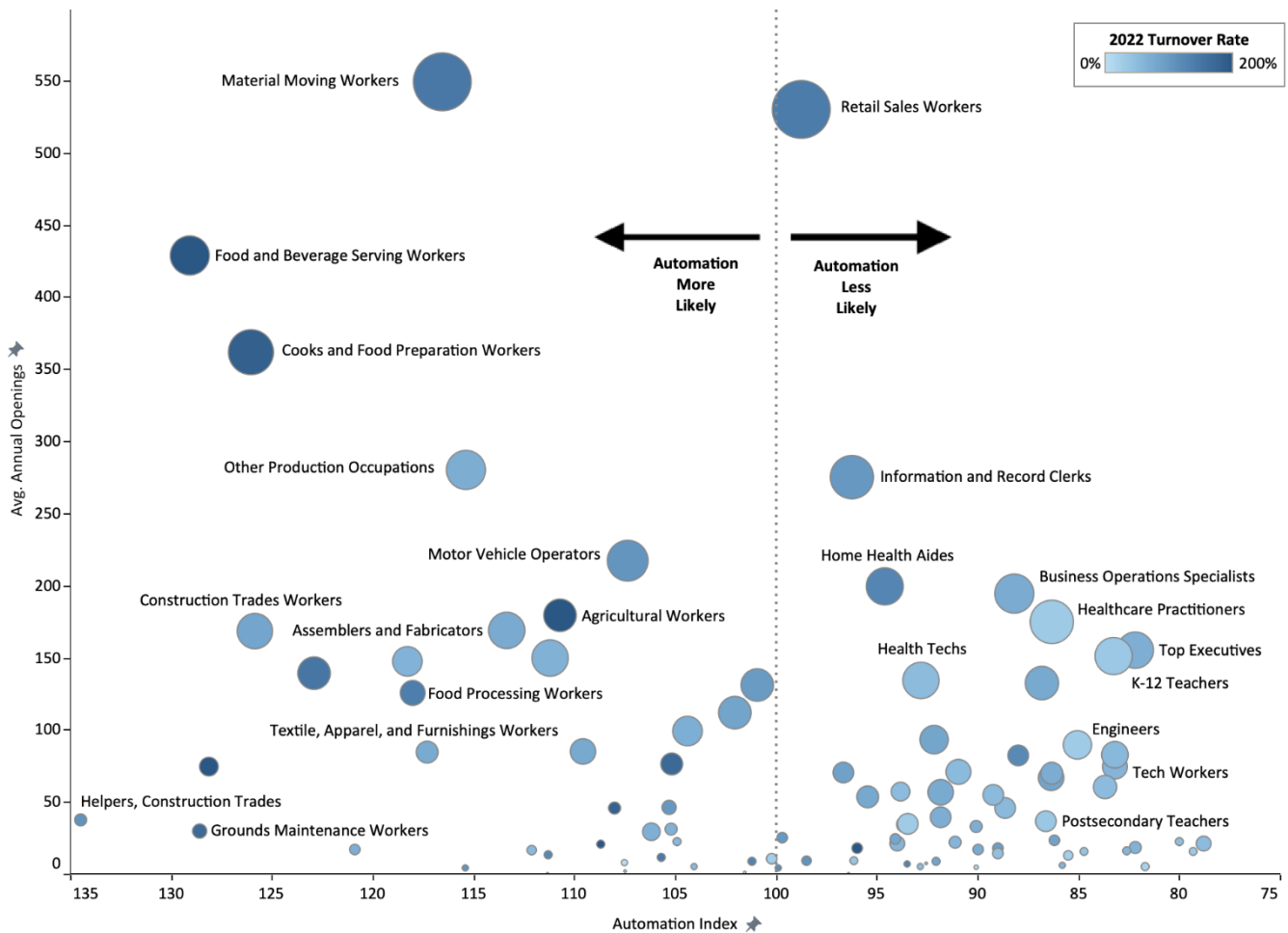
Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Another piece of data that can help illustrate demand is the average number of annual openings. This is a calculation of the jobs needed to be added each year to replace retiring workers and keep pace with industry growth. When we combine this data with the automation index (an occupation is more likely to be automated if the value is higher than 100), we see that many of the jobs that have the most needs are those most likely to be automated.

For workforce efforts the goal is to train individuals and provide job openings that offer good long-term opportunities. Therefore, the jobs that have high annual openings but have a lower automation index offer the best long-range opportunities. In Nash County, this includes healthcare practitioners, tech workers, and business operations specialists. This data can also be used to determine the jobs most at risk of automation and where workers currently in these fields might need to be upskilled for the jobs of the future.



Nash County Top Occupations by Openings and Automation Index

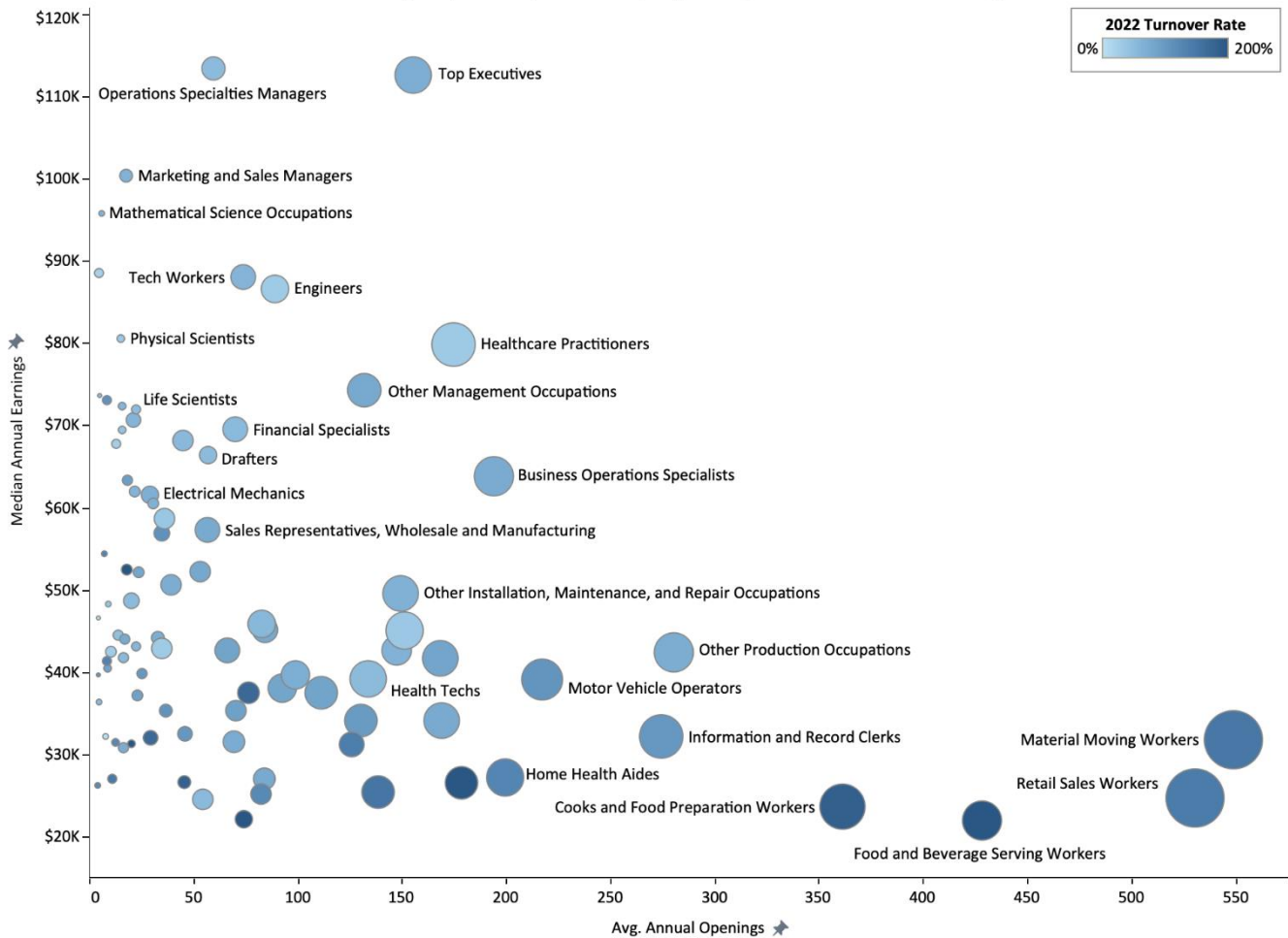


Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Similarly, the occupations with the top annual openings are often lower paying. Economic developers also want to create opportunities for local workers to earn higher wages. Some of the jobs in the region that have a high need for workers and also pay above \$50,000 are in tech, finance, management, and engineering. The county has high needs for administrative clerks, material movers, home health aides, and food service workers but these positions do not offer a median annual wage that is above average.



Nash County Top Occupations by Openings and Annual Earnings



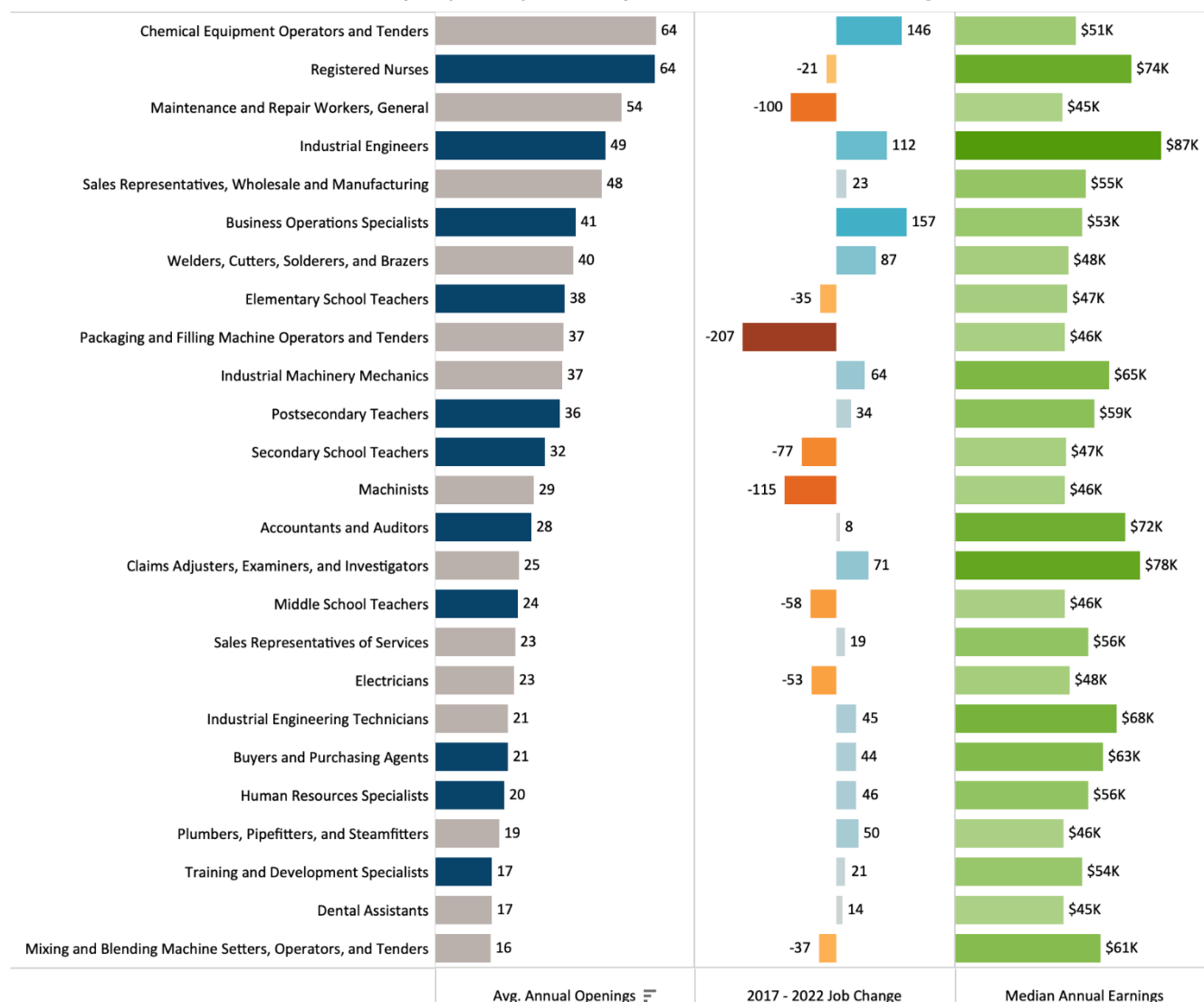
Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Since it can be hard to determine high demand positions that also pay higher wages and are not at a great threat of being automated, we filtered for entry-level jobs that pay more than \$45,000 per year and have lower predictions of automation. This group could offer some of the best options for recruiting and reskilling workers. We also expanded the occupation list from the three-digit SOC codes to five-digit codes to get a more granular understanding.



In this group of high demand and high opportunity, we find several production and mechanical jobs like chemical equipment operators, industrial engineers, machinists, and welders. Eleven of the top demand jobs require a bachelor’s degree or higher for entry-level work (denoted in dark blue). This is changing as human resources teams begin to shift away from a focus on degree attainment to measurable skills, but this is happening slowly. Some of the top demand jobs in Nash have experienced net employment decline. However, even though overall jobs are declining, the rate of retirement and turnover requires many new applicants each year. The county has several high demand jobs that do not require a bachelor’s degree or higher. Mechanic skills can provide lucrative opportunities for workers in the county. This type of data may be helpful in showing students and parents the promising opportunities in skilled trades. If students enter the trades, they could earn as much as a human resources professional with half as much schooling required.

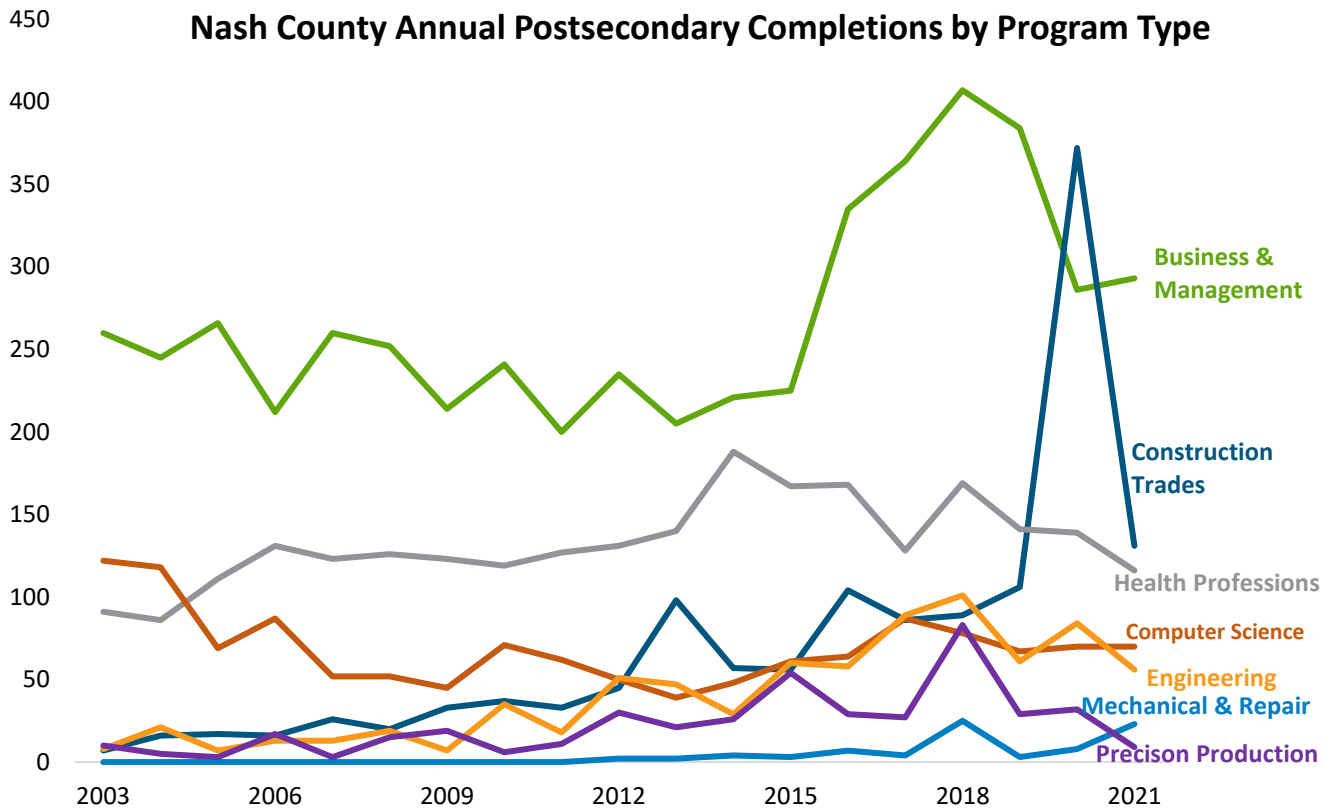
Nash County Top Occupations by Demand, Growth, and Wage



Source: Lightcast 2023.3



Comparing this data with the number of students who complete a degree or postsecondary certificate from institutions in the county shows general alignment between demand and supply. Health professions are in high need and offer good wages. Business and management professions are in high demand and are the most popular postsecondary path in the county. This can help lead workers to high demand business-related jobs like project management and accounting. Precision production completions have fallen in recent years while the demand for these jobs remains high.



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Please also see the Nash County Industry Cluster Analysis in the appendix



3. Nash County Regional Labor Shed Analysis

Establishing a location in Nash County provides a company with access to workers who live in the county, but also those workers in surrounding areas who are willing to commute. To create an accurate picture of potential workers for a business considering locating in the county, we evaluated the labor supply from Nash and the surrounding counties that are within a reasonable driving distance (see map below). The surrounding counties were chosen by those within a 45-minute drive time of the center of Nash County.

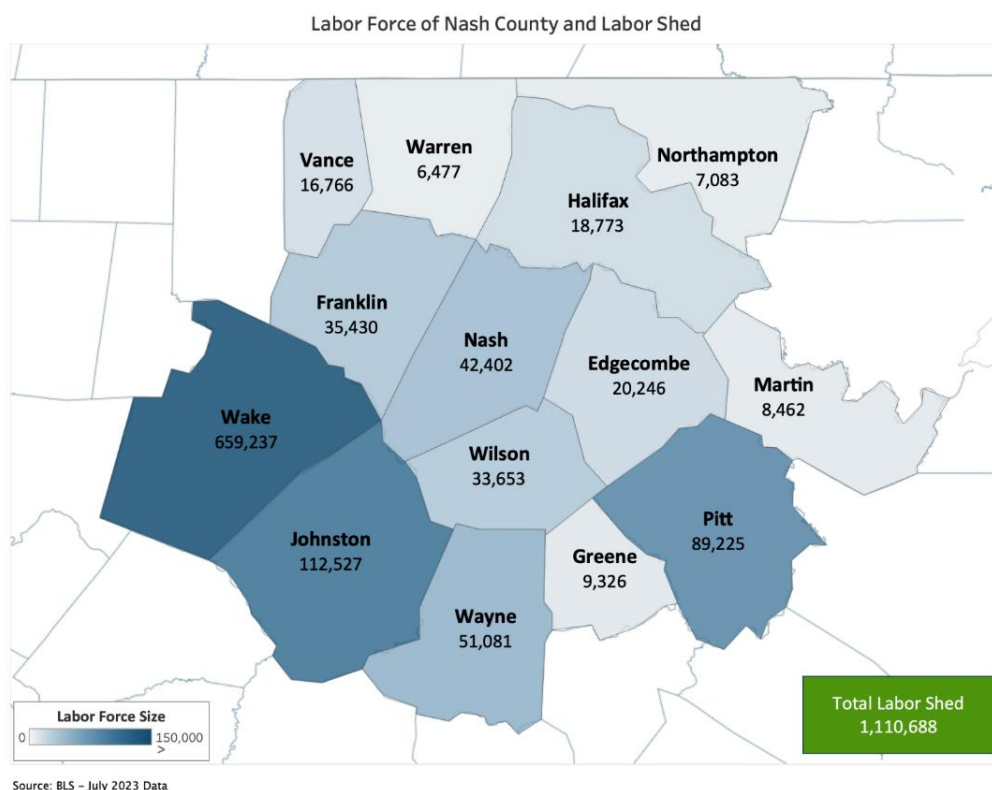
To establish the potential supply of talent we use the following categories and definitions:

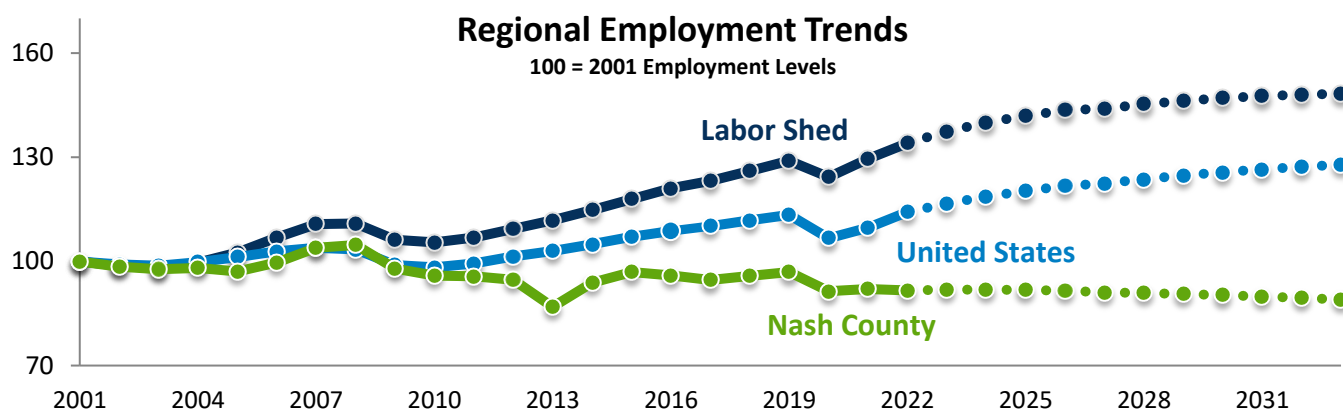
- **Labor Force** – Those who live in the region and are employed and those who live in the region but are unemployed.
- **Local College Graduates & Migrants** – These are a potential source of additional workers often not collected within employment data. We calculate this portion of the labor force using IRS migration data and educational program completions data.

When the entire labor shed is measured, the available labor force totals more than **1,100,000 adults**. Wake, Johnston, and Pitt Counties offer the biggest pools of workers for in-bound commuting to Nash County.

Through a different BLS dataset, we know that in 2022 there were 43,070 jobs based in Nash County (determined by where the company payroll is based). This indicates that some workers in the county are commuting or working remotely. Commuters may be more likely to leave an

existing job to work closer to where they live if they're aware of opportunities in Nash County. The broader labor shed also allows Nash-based employers to access a growing pool of workers, as the regional labor shed has experienced consistent high levels of growth in the last two decades.





Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Migration Rates

To best understand migration and its potential labor force impact, Lightcast’s evaluation of IRS migration data was utilized. This allows for the review of the movement of domestic taxpayers, the migration contingent most likely to be working. Other migration data can include groups unlikely to work, like young children. This data is also available annually compared to other migration data at the county level which is focused on five-year trends. This data shows that in 2020, 4,977 taxpayers moved into Nash County. A smaller number, 4,495 taxpayers, left the county during the same year. This results in a net increase of 482 domestic taxpayers to the county. When the region is expanded to the entire labor shed, the net increase is 14,470 domestic taxpayers. This represents a sizeable annual increase to the labor force and workers that could be looking for new opportunities locally.

Migration Patterns of Domestic Taxpayers, 2020

Migration Type	Nash County	Surrounding Counties	Total Labor Shed
Inflows	+4,977	+80,683	+79,469
Outflows	-4,495	-66,695	-64,999
Net Migration	+482	+13,988	+14,470

Source: EL calculations based on Lightcast 2023.3

Potential Sources of Labor

Labor Source Type	Nash County	Surrounding Counties	Total Labor Shed
Labor Force	42,402	1,068,286	1,110,688
Postsecondary Graduates	1,247	39,814	41,061
New Residents	482	13,988	14,470

Source: EL calculations based on Lightcast 2023.2 and BLS (2023)

Note: Labor shed includes Johnston County. Employed and unemployed worker data from July 2023, postsecondary data from 2021, and domestic taxpayer migration data from 2020. Some duplicates across labor source types may exist.



With over 42,400 workers in the labor force living within its borders, over 1,240 annual graduates, and a positive net migration of 480 taxpayers, Nash County has many potential sources of labor. Beyond Nash there are another 1,068,290 workers in the labor force living in the surrounding counties. These counties also offer an additional 39,810 graduates and 13,990 recent migrants to add to the labor supply.

Sources:

Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2023. "Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages." <https://www.bls.gov/cew/>

Childcare Aware of America. 2023. "Annual Price of Care: 2022 Child Care Affordability." <https://www.childcareaware.org/catalyzing-growth-using-data-to-change-child-care-2022/#PriceofCare>

Lightcast. Developer Tool: Class of Worker 2023.3. <https://e.economicmodeling.com/analyst>

US Census Bureau. 2023. "American Community Survey: ACS 1-Year Estimates." Accessed through data.census.gov

Zillow. 2023. "Housing Data." <https://www.zillow.com/research/data/>



4. Nash County Stakeholder Input

A crucial part of data gathering for this workforce evaluation was receiving input from business, education, and community leaders from across Nash County. Large and small employers were able to describe their biggest labor force challenges, their awareness of education and training resources, and the strategies they are trying to attract and retain good people. Input was received in three ways: through one-on-one stakeholder interviews, two employer focus groups, and an online business survey. Here is what they said.

One-on-One Interviews Summary

Economic Leadership conducted one-on-one interviews with six stakeholders in the county in the fall of 2023. Three of these were from manufacturing firms – one large and two smaller. Another came from the hospital and healthcare sector. The others represented Nash Community College and a non-profit organization that is focused on education and workforce development.

Describing the Current Workforce

The quantity of available workers may be less than ideal, but for the most part Nash stakeholders don't consider this to be as big of an issue as in much of the country, where there is lower population growth and less in-migration. An exception to this is in nursing – where the labor pool is described as of good quality but lacking in numbers.

Thoughts about the overall quality of the workforce were more mixed. Some bemoan workers' lack of commitment, passion, and sense of urgency. Another, however, praises the work ethic of employees in Nash County compared with those in more urban areas. A common refrain is that older workers are reliable, committed, and have good manufacturing know-how, but they are weaker in digital skills and adapting to new technologies. Younger workers are better with technology but lack initiative and commitment. A specific weakness of the workforce is with manufacturing-related skills and experience in areas such as machine programming controllers, soldering, and aseptic production.

More employers say that, by necessity, they are increasing their onboarding and training activities to make sure new employees get up to speed.

The most difficult to fill positions in healthcare include nurses, CT, MRI, and ultrasound techs as well as occupational and physical therapists. In manufacturing, the hardest slots to keep filled include production supervisors, solderers and other skilled trade positions, and programming controllers.

As is often heard across the nation in 2023, stakeholders say that workforce constraints are limiting Nash companies' ability to accept more work, increase production, and grow revenues.



Relationship with Workforce Resources

Interviewees praise Nash Community College (NCC) as being a “great partner.” For healthcare, they wish that NCC would be able to hire more teaching staff and thus produce a greater number of qualified graduates. One smaller manufacturer complained that they have little relationship with NCC, which “should be knocking on my door” and bringing groups of teachers and students for facility site visits. NC State University is also noted as an important workforce partner for higher-level occupations. There appears to be little or no relationship between these stakeholders and the local NC Works Career Center.

Relationship with K-12 Schools

The employers we spoke with do not have deep relationships with the K-12 schools. Interestingly, two of them say that they rarely hire young people who are recent high school graduates. They focus on older, more experienced workers instead. Another says that they and their company’s local facility are too new to Nash County to have interacted much with the schools.

Importance of Career Awareness among Young People

Despite the lack of deep connections with the public schools, stakeholders are enthusiastic about career awareness activities for young people and are willing to participate. Interviewees say it is “hugely important” for K-12 and community college students to get exposure to the workplace and career paths. They suggest starting with teacher visits to Nash County workplaces, followed by student site visits and business speakers in the schools. Ideally, this interaction would lead to the development of more student internships with local employers. Manufacturers would particularly like to identify young people who might not want to attend a four-year college, to inform them about local career opportunities in manufacturing.

Increasing Applicant Pools

Employers are trying to cast a wider net, using online sites like Indeed as well as staffing companies. They are reevaluating their job descriptions to focus on the most necessary skills, possibly dropping some education requirements. Several are offering significant employee referral bonuses, but haven’t seen great results from that yet. One interviewee indicates that their best attraction tactic has been to set up career fairs at locations around eastern North Carolina, and immediately give a job offer to strong candidates. They believe that a very quick hiring process is effective in the current environment.

Employee Retention

Not surprisingly, money talks. Wage increases and bonuses are the number one retention tool, with one employer saying that their starting wage has increased by nearly 50 percent in two years. Strong benefit packages including full health coverage are also important. Paid time off is attractive to employees. Beyond that, firms are increasingly stressing a positive work atmosphere, work-life balance, promoting internally, frequent communication and feedback for staff members.

Quality of Life

Nationwide, job applicants are increasingly giving heavy weight to the quality of life and community amenities when deciding to work and/or live in a particular place. Several interviewees express that



despite the availability of good employment opportunities in Nash County, it can be a difficult place for attracting and keeping talented employees. There is a negative perception around issues such as the quality of the public schools, crime rates, and the county's reputation as a place of outmigration. Stakeholders urge a greater leadership commitment to making community investments, creating amenities that will attract individuals and families, and building a high-quality sense of place in Nash County.

Commuting

We also asked about whether out-commuting of residents from Nash or in-commuting to Nash are issues for hiring and retention. Interestingly, one employer says that they now take pains *not* to hire people from Wake County (from Cary, for example), believing that they will be “temporary at best” and leave as soon as they get a job offer in Wake County. Some stakeholders indicate that they aren't sure of how to target local residents and they aren't aware of “local resources to find local people.” One suggests that it would be valuable if they could be connected with local unemployed or underemployed people.

Top Recommendations

Finally, we asked stakeholders if they could make one thing happen for workforce development in Nash County, what would it be? Here are their top priorities:

- Increasing engagement between employers, community college and high school students – saying that students “don't know us and we don't know them.” Greater engagement should help local employers tap into the potential workforce of young people in Nash County.
- Increasing funding for and expanding the capacity of Nash Community College to produce qualified graduates in larger numbers.
- Improving the leadership and management skills of the workforce – skills such as conflict resolution and holding co-workers accountable.
- Getting Nash County and Rocky Mount to communicate and work together.
- Creating a Workforce Center or workforce director position to coordinate all workforce development activities throughout the county and improve the talent development ecosystem.



Workforce Focus Group: Services

The service sector focus group in November 2023 featured six participants from areas including healthcare, construction, restaurants, hospitality and tourism.

The Existing Workforce

Participants are critical of the existing workforce in terms of both quantity and quality, with quality described as “not as solid” as they’d like to have. A major issue in the skilled trades is an aging workforce – with the average technical skilled worker being in their low 60s – and few new people entering the field.

In terms of the specific workforce challenges that employers in Nash face, in healthcare it is a lack of customer service skills. This includes a lack of empathy and “simply being nice.” Several participants mention soft skills, poor communication, and the need to treat coworkers and customers with respect. Others mention a lack of commitment to the job and reliability. Transportation is an issue for some employees.

Some of the jobs that are hardest to fill and keep filled include:

- Leadership and management positions (restaurants);
- Clinical staff and front desk (healthcare); and
- Front desk and housekeeping (hospitality).

Workforce Resources

In terms of interacting with workforce resources in the area, a healthcare stakeholder notes a very good relationship with Nash Community College and its clinical programs. Healthcare employers could benefit from a larger pipeline of certified medical assistants. They are also participating in a medical assistant apprenticeship program, described as “very good.” Healthcare firms have a relationship with Edgecombe Community College as well. A hospitality representative said that hotels are involved with area colleges’ management programs, and they interact with colleges for recruitment.

Students, Career Awareness, and Work Experience

Focus group participants are less involved with K-12 schools and students, though some interact with schools on initiatives like parent engagement programs.

Stakeholders think it is important to heighten the awareness of young people in the county – and their parents – regarding area career opportunities and potential work experiences. Examples include letting students know about the money available in skilled trades and construction. Those familiar with the K-12 schools note that there is exposure to career pathways in the middle schools now, and this will be brought into elementary schools. As of next year, all Nash County public school students will need to have a Career Development Plan starting in the seventh grade. Nash public school career pathways lead to internships, though liability and insurance concerns are issues for allowing those younger than 18 in



the workplace. Representatives from healthcare (HIPPA confidentiality issues) and construction agree that it is difficult to let younger students in actual work settings due to these concerns.

Employee Attraction and Retention

Regarding the attraction and retention of talented workers, participants are trying a variety of tactics. Several mention greater employee engagement such as recognition and gratitude programs. Others note success using employee referral bonuses. Hybrid work scheduling and frequent pay reviews are also helpful. Finally, a stakeholder from the construction industry says that shortening travel distances so that key staff members can return to their homes at night is a successful retention initiative.

Quality of Life

We also asked how the perception of quality of life in Nash County affects businesses' ability to attract and keep good employees. Some note that online information on school performance and crime can be negatives, especially when recruiting professionals. However, healthcare firms say they've found that once young physicians and their families settle in Nash, they like it. Rocky Mount Mills has been "100 percent helpful" by hosting nightlife, music, and family-oriented activities. Others say that the lack of traffic and overall convenience are selling points.

Top Recommendations

Finally, stakeholders were asked what is the one thing they would focus on to improve the workforce pipeline in Nash County. A couple of participants stress better soft skills (such as communication) among the workforce. Others emphasize public school quality overall, which they believe is improving. They note that school quality is important both for preparing young people and to boost the county's reputation as a place to live. Stakeholders also mention heightened career awareness among young people (via more business site visits, etc.) and improved technical skill development (with greater numbers of internships and apprenticeships.)



Workforce Focus Group: Manufacturing

This focus group had seven attendees including representatives from some of Nash County's major manufacturing employers.

Describing the current workforce

Employers say it can be challenging to stay positive amid workforce challenges. Several have a core group of long-time staff members who are "rock solid," but it is often a "revolving door" with newer hires who may or may not show up for work. In general, the supply of applicants is pretty good but turnover and longevity are concerns. This includes the skilled trades. For higher-skilled positions more employees are likely to commute in from a distance, and this can cause retention challenges.

Among specific skill issues, "basic employability" skills are lacking most often. Pharmaceutical manufacturing experience is difficult to find. Positions that are the hardest to fill and keep filled are:

- Laborers, lower-skilled jobs (including in distribution).
We are increasing pay but is still tough to retain workers.
- Skilled maintenance
- Technicians
- Automation-related roles.

Education and Training Resources

One manufacturer says they are a member of every advisory committee (such as at Nash Community College and the public schools), and it has been fruitful for them especially in regard to skilled trade candidates. Another is increasingly using Nash Community College for customized training after they hire new workers and to upskill existing workers. There is some concern with community colleges that eliminate programs due to lack of student interest or when the school's capacity to turn out graduates is limited. Edgecombe Community College eliminating its machining program is an example.

Some manufacturers have a good ongoing relationship with the K-12 schools, primarily through STEP (Strategic Twin Counties Education Partnership). One notes that they are active down to the middle school level. An issue is the age of students considering skilled trades and their ability to be at the workplace due to liability and insurance concerns.

Career Awareness and Work Experience for Young People

Focus group participants think that this is critical and believe there is some positive momentum in Nash. Still, they complain that area schools all promote four-year college as the best path. They're concerned that talented young people leave the county for college, and it is difficult to stay in touch with them and encourage them to return. Employers are interested in identifying those who might be interested in a local manufacturing career and would be willing to pay for their schooling. Another is unsure if there is an active youth apprenticeship program as there used to be. Company representatives again point to insurance and liability problems involved with bringing young people on site in a production setting.



Overall, participants see a need to better partner and coordinate on career awareness and work experience efforts, and think that an organization like STEP could play an important role.

Talent Attraction and Retention

In addition to the always-important issue of pay, manufacturers are trying these measures to attract and retain good people:

- Longevity bonuses (at six months and 12 months) for new hires;
- Childcare – backup care slots at childcare centers; PTO and caregiver days;
- Managing overtime – older workers want it, younger workers don't;
- Offering benefits from day one;
- Promoting from within and cross-training;
- Having certain hybrid workers (engineers) on site three days a week;
- Parental leave;
- Helping with transportation, rental cars when needed;
- Financial education.

Quality of Life

Area firms find quality of life issues in the county to be a mixed bag when it comes to appealing to potential and existing workers. A few say that the housing market in Nash is fairly affordable and is improving. Others say that older people find Nash County to be more palatable while it is harder to land young workers. For older workers, however, crime and school perceptions can be negatives. Rocky Mount Mills is cited as a “prime” example of the amenities needed to appeal to a younger workforce.

Top Recommendations

Overall, manufacturing focus group members say that these are their number one priorities for improving the Nash County workforce pipeline:

1. Strive to increase the basic employability skills and work ethic of young people.
2. Help businesses get in front of students more often, from throughout K-12 schools to four-year colleges. One stakeholder has a full-time staff person to accomplish this. Related to this is having more businesses evaluate and provide input on career-related K-12 and community college programs.
3. Addressing childcare shortages – perhaps by starting an employers' childcare co-op.



Online Survey

To supplement the focus groups and one-on-one interviews, Nash County Economic Development and Economic Leadership also conducted an online survey on workforce challenges and possible solutions. There were 36 responses to this survey. Of the respondents, 46 percent are business owners. Twenty-three percent are plant or site managers, and another 23 percent are human resources managers or staffers. The remainder are front line supervisors or employees.

Following trends that we often see nationally, respondents are bullish about their company's performance and future prospects but more guarded about the broader economy. **Forty-four percent rate their business' recent performance as good, 39 percent as very good, and 14 percent excellent.** When asked about the **Nash County economy overall, 53 percent feel it is good but 25 percent only fair.** Twenty-two percent say it is very good and none rate it as excellent.

Local companies expect to do moderate hiring over the next one to two years and are more bullish long term. In the shorter term, 58 percent plan on modest staff level increases while 31 percent expect no change. Eleven percent plan on a more rapid pace of hiring. Over the longer term, 53 percent expect small staffing increases, 31 percent large increases and 17 percent no change.

On a scale from 1 to 100, respondents give the **area workforce an overall score of 52**, taking into account both quantity and quality.

When it comes to **describing the current workforce and primary staffing challenges**, these issues are chosen most often (respondents could choose more than one):

Trouble finding workers with good soft skills	61%
Trouble finding workers with the right technical skills	58%
Issues related to work ethic	56%
Labor pool is too small, stifles company growth	39%
Commuting-related issues are challenging	31%

Asked about **specific skill deficiencies**, most replies clearly fall into one of two camps:

1. **Lack of essential employability skills** such as reliability, commitment, motivation, communication, and customer service.
2. **Very difficult to find those with technical skills** involving a) the skilled trades or b) interfacing with computers and new technologies.

A third set of replies involves a lack of leadership and management skills.

When asked about possible **reasons for skill mismatches** in the workforce, these receive the greatest number of votes:

42% - **demographic issues**, with older workers lacking the ability to interface with technology and younger workers lacking employability and soft skills.



39% - **employers are unaware of the workforce training resources** available to them.

39% - mismatch between **what is taught in the K-12 schools** and the skills that employers need.

28% - mismatch between **what is taught in higher education** and the skills that employers need.

Companies were also asked what **public policy initiatives** would provide the best return in terms of improving the workforce pipeline. These are mentioned most often (respondents could each choose two):

Improve student and parent awareness of local career opportunities	56%
Create more work experience opportunities for students	44%
Invest more in K-12 education	42%
Invest more in job training for existing workers	31%
Create a new Workforce Center or Workforce Director position to coordinate all activities across the county	31%
Invest more in early childhood education and childcare	28%

A great majority of businesses – 78 percent – have **interacted with Nash Community College** for workforce-related needs.

Companies were also asked about what strategies they’re using to **retain good employees**. These are their top responses:

Pay increases	86%
Flexible schedules, accommodating work-life balance	47%
Better benefit packages	44%
Offer hybrid or remote working	19%
Transportation assistance	14%

Because **community quality of life factors** are very important for the ability of businesses to attract and keep talented employees, we asked in what areas Nash County should prioritize making quality of life investments. These are the top replies:

Housing – to affect supply, variety, and affordability	56%
Public K-12 school quality	53%
Crime	50%
Parks and recreation	31%
Childcare availability and/or affordability	28%

Please see the appendix for complete survey results.



5. Best Practices Impacting Workforce Quantity and Quality

The following are examples of promising practices from around the United States to impact the workforce pipeline in the areas most important to Nash County – career awareness, work experience, skill development, and quality of life to attract and retain talent.

Career Awareness

- The successful Be Pro Be Proud career awareness program began in Arkansas in 2016, a joint initiative of Associated Industries of Arkansas and the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce. The Be Pro Be Proud model has now been adopted in five additional states, launching in North Carolina in the fall of 2022. Be Pro Be Proud touts the attractiveness of careers in skilled professions such as automation and robotics, CNC operations, commercial truck driving, medical technicians, and welding. It features mobile workshops that bring hands-on exposure to skilled trade careers to school students across a state. Be Pro Be Proud has impacted over 312,000 young people nationally so far. The new BPBP mobile workshop in North Carolina has already made 213 tour stops.

<https://www.beprobeproudnc.org/>

- The Gold Collar Careers website is targeted at middle and high school students, parents, and teachers in northwest Wisconsin, helping them to learn about regional manufacturing career opportunities. Gold Collar Careers (the name indicates a new blend of blue collar and white collar occupations in modern manufacturing) was started by the Manufacturing Works volunteer group that includes area businesses and workforce development partners. The website advertises a 100 percent placement rate for post-secondary program completers, 25 percent higher average incomes, and job security.

<https://www.goldcollarcareers.com/>

Work Experience

- Surry-Yadkin Works in north-central North Carolina is a recent collaboration between four public school districts, businesses, and Surry Community College. It seeks to significantly ramp up paid internships for high school students, with internships available in 16 career areas. Surry Community College provides intern training covering such topics as soft skills, LEAN manufacturing, personal finance, Outlook and Excel. Surry-Yadkin Works also seeks to expand other work experiences including job shadowing and apprenticeships.



<https://www.surryadkinworks.org/>

- To strengthen the pipeline for major Charleston SC area employers like Boeing, Bosch, and Volvo, the Charleston Regional Youth Apprenticeship Program and Trident Technical College created a two-year paid youth apprenticeship initiative. About 130 companies participate in the program, which is available in 15 career pathways. It is open to high school juniors and seniors, who also receive a year of college credit at no cost.

https://www.tridenttech.edu/career/workforce/car_youth_apprentice.htm

Skill Development

- Partners in northeast Tennessee developed their own Work Ethic Distinction program, prompted by a state grant awarded to a local Tennessee College of Applied Technology. The Work Ethic Distinction work readiness credential can be earned by high school seniors who accumulate 32 points in 13 achievement categories. Participating employers agree to grant a job interview to any qualified applicant with the credential. The program has expanded to high schools across Tennessee.

<https://tnworkethic.com/>

- More colleges are preparing students for advanced manufacturing employment by offering Industry 4.0 education and training. Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC), based in Green Bay, is one example. NWTC's Industry 4.0 curriculum can be used to upskill workers at a manufacturers' site, or to train new workers at one of the college's locations. Topics covered include:

Introduction to Industry 4.0

IoT Data Analysis and Visualization

Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality Training and Remote Troubleshooting

Supervisory Controls and Data Acquisition.

Manufacturing students can obtain a certificate in Additive Manufacturing or an associate degree in one of seven manufacturing subareas.

Workplace Liability for Student Work-Based Learning

- In recent years, several states have enacted measures that make it easier for companies to host students in work-based learning (WBL) by reducing concerns about liability and insurance coverage. Tennessee requires coverage for working students to be provided by school districts or colleges. Kentucky and Ohio coordinate WBL through staffing firms that provide liability coverage and other



services for host employers. Georgia offers a worker's compensation premium discount for firms that provide work experiences for young people.

Housing

- Cities and states are increasingly tackling zoning regulation reforms to allow more by-right development of housing, including homes on smaller lots and different housing types such as townhomes, duplexes, apartments, and accessory dwelling units (ADUs). Some have eliminated single-family zoning, allowing more types of housing anywhere in their jurisdiction. Cities from Arlington, VA to Minneapolis, MN have recently done this – even smaller towns like Walla Walla, WA. A few states, such as Maine and Oregon, have also banned zoning that allows only single-family homes.

Quality of Life Messaging

- Oklahoma City's quality of life website A Better Life OKC highlights the factors that are often most important to those considering relocation: job opportunities and cost of living. The site features a cost-of-living calculator showing how far your current salary would go in Oklahoma City.

<https://www.abetterlifeokc.com/>

- Several cities are now offering remote worker incentives to encourage those who can work from anywhere to consider a more affordable location. Cities with remote worker incentive programs include Savannah, GA, Tulsa, OK, and Topeka, KS. These incentives start with \$2,000 for moving expenses (Savannah) and go up to \$15,000 toward a home purchase in Topeka.



6. Strategic Action Agenda

Over the next three to five years, Nash County should focus on improving workforce quantity and quality through a small set of ambitious strategies as outlined below. Successful execution of these strategies will require adequate funding and staffing resources from public and private partners and a new, higher level of coordination between stakeholders across the county and its cities and towns.

A. Increase the attachment of young people to Nash County and local careers through greater awareness of local career opportunities and more plentiful work experiences.

- Increase funding for K-12 school CTE programming and strive to expand the percentage of high school students taking any CTE courses and those who concentrate in a CTE Career Pathway.
- Continue support for the rollout of Nash County's new Work in Nash online platform, and use it to increase area student and parent awareness of good job and career opportunities with employers in the county. This platform contains information about leading industry sectors in Nash, top employers, and links to those employers' websites.
- Bring North Carolina's Be Pro Be Proud mobile workshop to Nash County schools on a regular basis, to increase student and parent understanding of attractive, well-paying careers in skilled professions.
- Consider the creation of a countywide Workforce Coordinator position to assist the business community with facilitating workplace exposure and work experiences for area K-12 school students and community college students. Relevant activities could include business speakers in the schools, site visits to area employers, business mentors, job shadowing, internships, part-time and summer jobs, and apprenticeships. Funding would ideally come from a combination of private sector contributions, government and educational institution funds. A coordinator position could be housed with STEP, Nash Community College, or Nash County Economic Development.

B. Contribute to important state legal reforms that decrease employer liability when hosting young people under the age of 18 for workplace experiences.

- This is a heavy lift, but Nash County's state legislative delegation can lead state-level efforts to make it easier for local businesses to host students on-site for workplace exposure (site visits, job shadowing) and work experiences (internships, apprenticeships). A number of states have enacted laws to provide liability coverage for work-based learning or provide workers compensation premium discounts to firms that allow students under 18 in the workplace. Nash County and its legislators should join with other North Carolina counties that have significant manufacturing employment to introduce and support reform measures in the General Assembly.



C. Enhance the ability of Nash Community College to prepare area students for in-demand careers in Nash County.

- Business, government, and community leaders should work together to ensure that Nash Community College has the necessary funding for teacher staffing and other resources that will provide sufficient capacity for NCC to increase the pipeline of students ready to take in-demand jobs in healthcare, manufacturing, and other important area industry sectors.

D. Improve the reality and the perception of the quality of life in Nash County to raise its attractiveness as a place to work, live, and raise a family.

- For housing, urge an evaluation of zoning regulations in every jurisdiction within Nash County and updating of zoning codes to proactively encourage more housing development with a wider variety of housing products. This should specifically include housing types of interest to younger people, including single-family homes on small lots, apartments, townhomes, condominiums, duplexes, and accessory dwelling units (ADUs).
- Convene a panel of community leaders for a one-year study of crime concerns across the county and targeted actions to address problem areas and trends. The panel should include representation from law enforcement, the business community, municipal and county government leaders, and community organization leaders.
- Create a social media campaign touting the quality of life in Nash County, targeted at adults ages 18 to 45 years old living within the identified Nash labor shed. The campaign should highlight housing affordability and community amenities such as Rocky Mount Mills, parks, trails, and recreation options. The campaign could be coordinated through Nash County Tourism in cooperation with chambers of commerce and Nash County Economic Development. It should be funded by a combination of public and private sector dollars.



APPENDIX

Nash County Industry Cluster Analysis

Traded or exporting clusters are groupings of industries that serve markets outside of a specific geography (domestically and/or internationally) – in this case, outside of Nash County, NC. Traded clusters typically generate the funds that ultimately support local clusters such as entertainment, retail, and personal services. Traded clusters usually contain a supply chain that supports the specific industry via suppliers, infrastructure, specialized training, and machinery. Focusing on traded clusters in an economic development strategy narrows efforts to those industries which are most likely to thrive there. This is particularly important as the competition for investment and jobs is intense. Studies have shown that assets that support clusters are more efficient and cost effective than shotgun marketing or providing subsidies to individual companies.

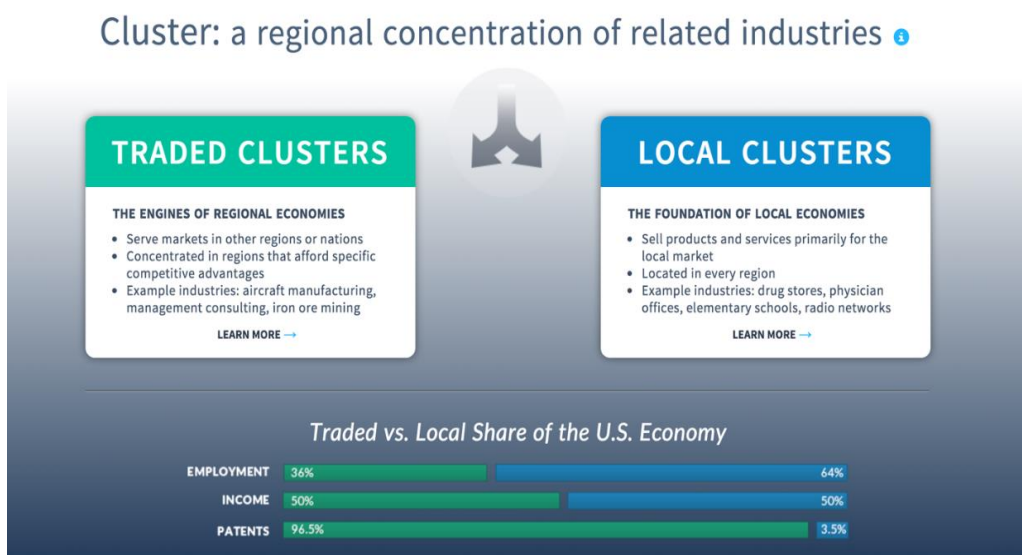
“What makes clusters unique is not just that companies with similar or complementary interests, competencies, and needs congregate around each other. It’s that an entire value chain exists within a cluster: suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, academic institutions, researchers, and workforce training, as well as those who provide relevant support services.”
-Bloomberg

As the accompanying chart from U.S. Cluster Mapping shows, traded clusters often account for less than 40 percent of a state’s employment. However, they are usually responsible for 50 percent or more of a state’s income and innovation.

To determine the current state of traded clusters in Nash County we collected employment and wage data for over 680 six-digit NAICS code industries within the county. These industries were then grouped into 53 traded clusters.

The cluster groupings are very closely related to those provided by U.S. Cluster Mapping, a project of the Harvard Business School. Those cluster groupings have not been updated to reflect the most recent iteration of NAICS codes. Therefore, we used data from Lightcast (formerly EMSI Burning Glass) and their conversion of the

Harvard clusters using 2022 NAICS codes. A few technology-related sectors were moved from the business services cluster to the technology cluster. An appendix at the end of this report shows the



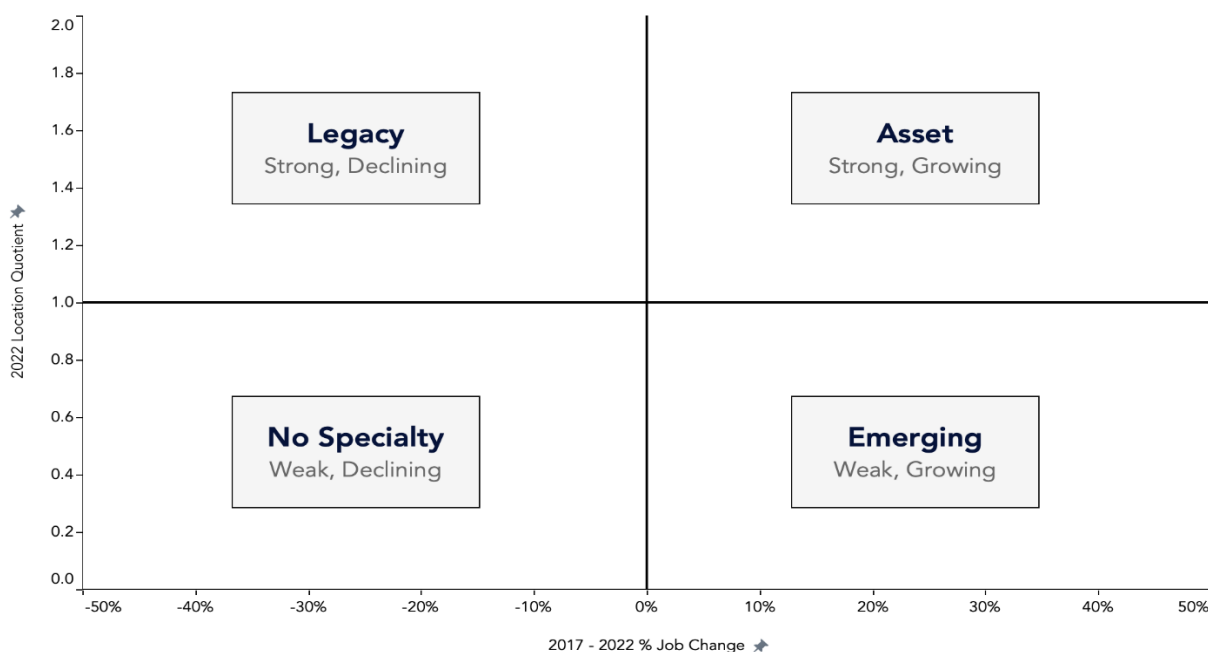


cluster groupings in detail. These clusters were then evaluated on recent growth, location quotients, wages, and total employment.

Employment concentration ratios (also called location quotients or LQs) offer an understanding of the concentration of an industry in an economy. Concentration values greater than 1.00 indicate that an industry is more concentrated than the national average and is a significant part of a region's economic base. Industries with high concentrations often generate much of an economy's exports and wealth. This can reveal what clusters are strongest in Nash County and which industries attract significant money from outside the area by exporting goods and services.

Concentration values when mapped alongside employment growth can show which clusters are thriving or declining. The chart below demonstrates where a cluster may fall on the map and how it corresponds to its strength and growth. Positioning on the map provides one piece of intelligence to support the choices that county's economic development organizations make to determine how to use marketing and personnel resources.

Example Chart for Cluster Mapping



Mapping Nash County's clusters in this way reveals an economy in transition. There are several large and concentrated clusters that have long been pillars in the county's economy but have been losing jobs in recent years. These legacy clusters include tobacco, industrial machinery, furniture, and agriculture. However, the data reveals several asset clusters (strong and growing) including lighting and electrical equipment, textiles, and biopharmaceuticals. The one quadrant where the county appears to be lacking is in the group of emerging clusters (lower employment/lower LQs but growing), although hospitality and tourism is a positive example.



Other top assets clusters in the county are upstream metal manufacturing, apparel, construction products, food processing, and state government services. Upstream metal products is driven by the copper rolling, drawing, extruding, and alloying industry. Nash County also has a strong presence of other related clusters like upstream chemical products and downstream metal products. The presence of power boiler and heat exchanger manufactured products helps the construction products and services cluster rank as an asset. In the food processing cluster, the fruit and vegetable canning industry has added over 270 jobs in the last five years. The presence of the Nash Correctional Institution state prison is likely contributing to the strong concentration of state government jobs

Nash County, NC Cluster Map



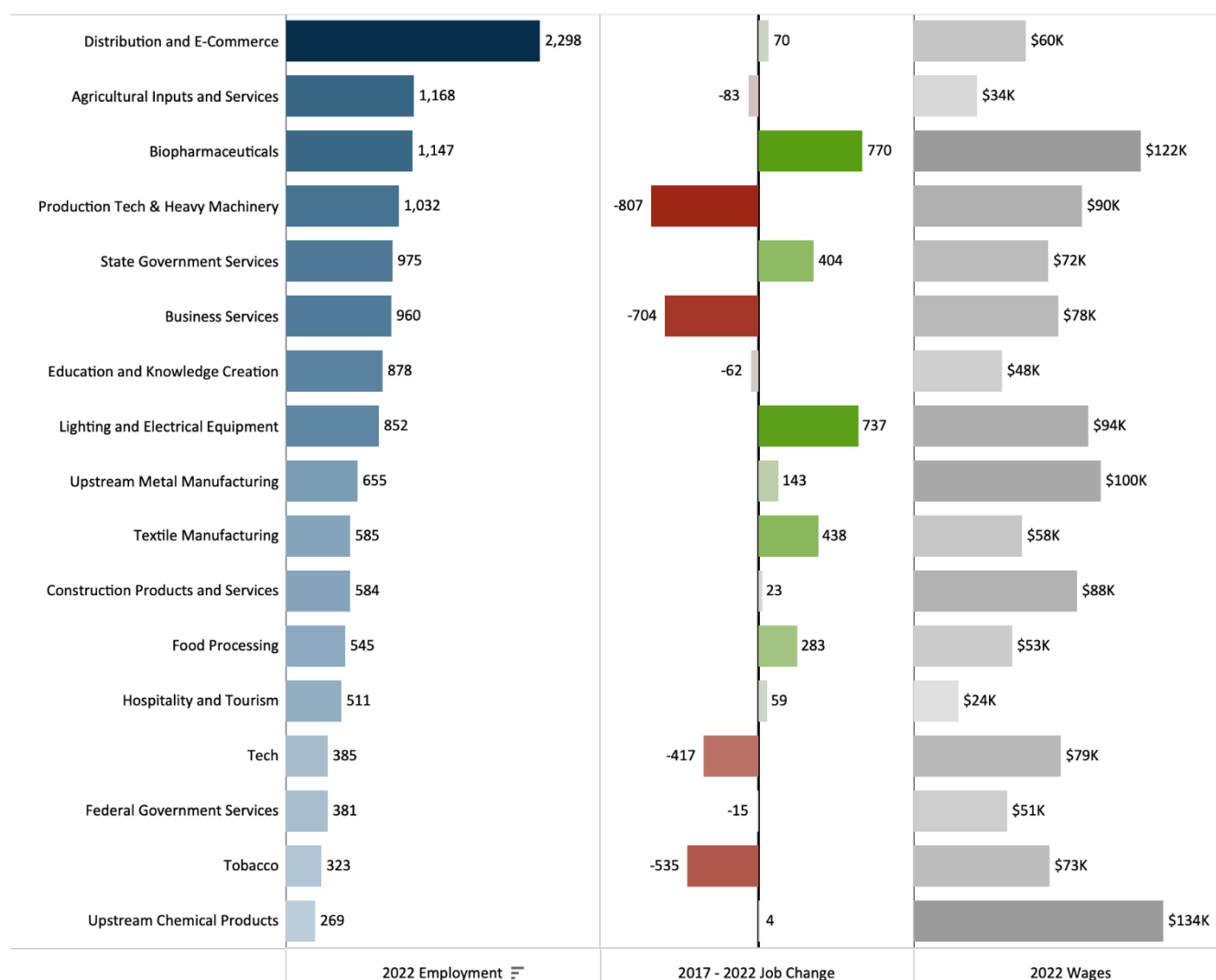
Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Note: The size of each cluster bubble is determined by the size of 2022 employment levels. The color of each cluster is determined by the percentage of net jobs change from 2017 to 2022. Clusters with fewer than 50 employees were omitted. The location quotient of the tobacco cluster was so large that a split was created in the y-axis.



Distribution and e-commerce, agriculture, biopharmaceuticals, and production tech & heavy machinery are the largest employing clusters in the county. Distribution and e-commerce is a cluster that has seen significant gains nationally. Seven out of the county's top 17 employing clusters saw net job growth in the last five years. The advanced manufacturing clusters like biopharmaceuticals, production tech, lighting and electrical equipment, upstream metal manufacturing, and upstream chemical products offer average earnings well above the county average of \$60,470. The production tech cluster includes the other engine equipment manufacturing and industrial air equipment manufacturing industries. Jobs in this cluster have declined by over 800 workers, about 44 percent, in the last five years. Business services also saw a large decline during this time due to job losses in corporate offices, management consulting, and engineering firms. Surprisingly the county lost tech jobs while the cluster has been booming nationally. In Nash County, the tech cluster suffered due to a large decline in the data processing, hosting, and related services industry.

Top Traded Clusters by Employment in Nash County

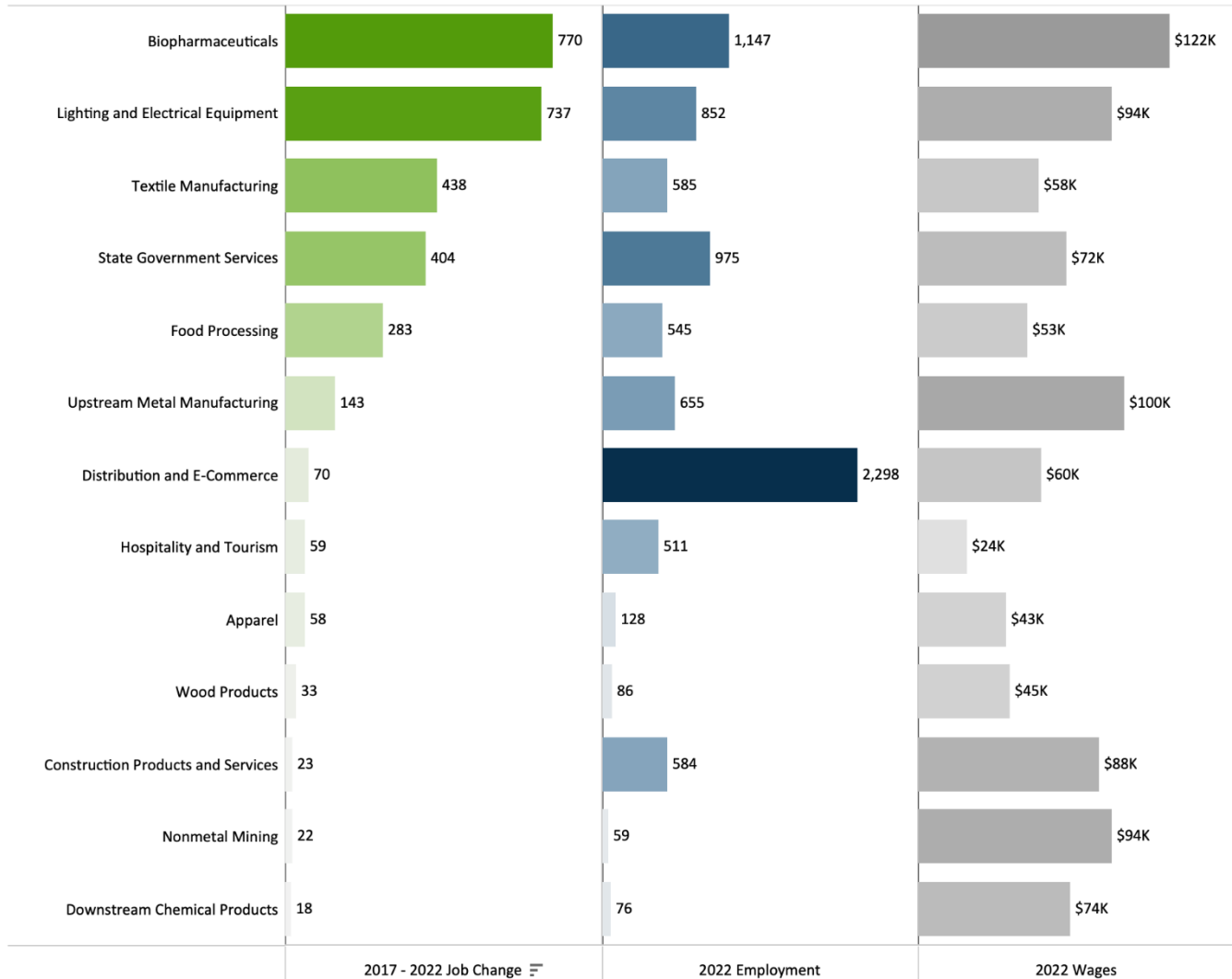


Source: Lightcast 2023.3



Thirteen clusters in the county added a net of more than 15 jobs in the last five years. This demonstrates that even though some of the historically important clusters have been struggling to maintain job numbers, other emerging opportunities exist. The fastest growing cluster in this timeframe was biopharmaceuticals. However, right before this period there were significant job losses, so the growth is more consistent with a recovery rather than an expansion. The lighting and electrical equipment cluster was buoyed by a large jump solely in the motor and generator manufacturing industry.

Fastest Growing Clusters in Nash County



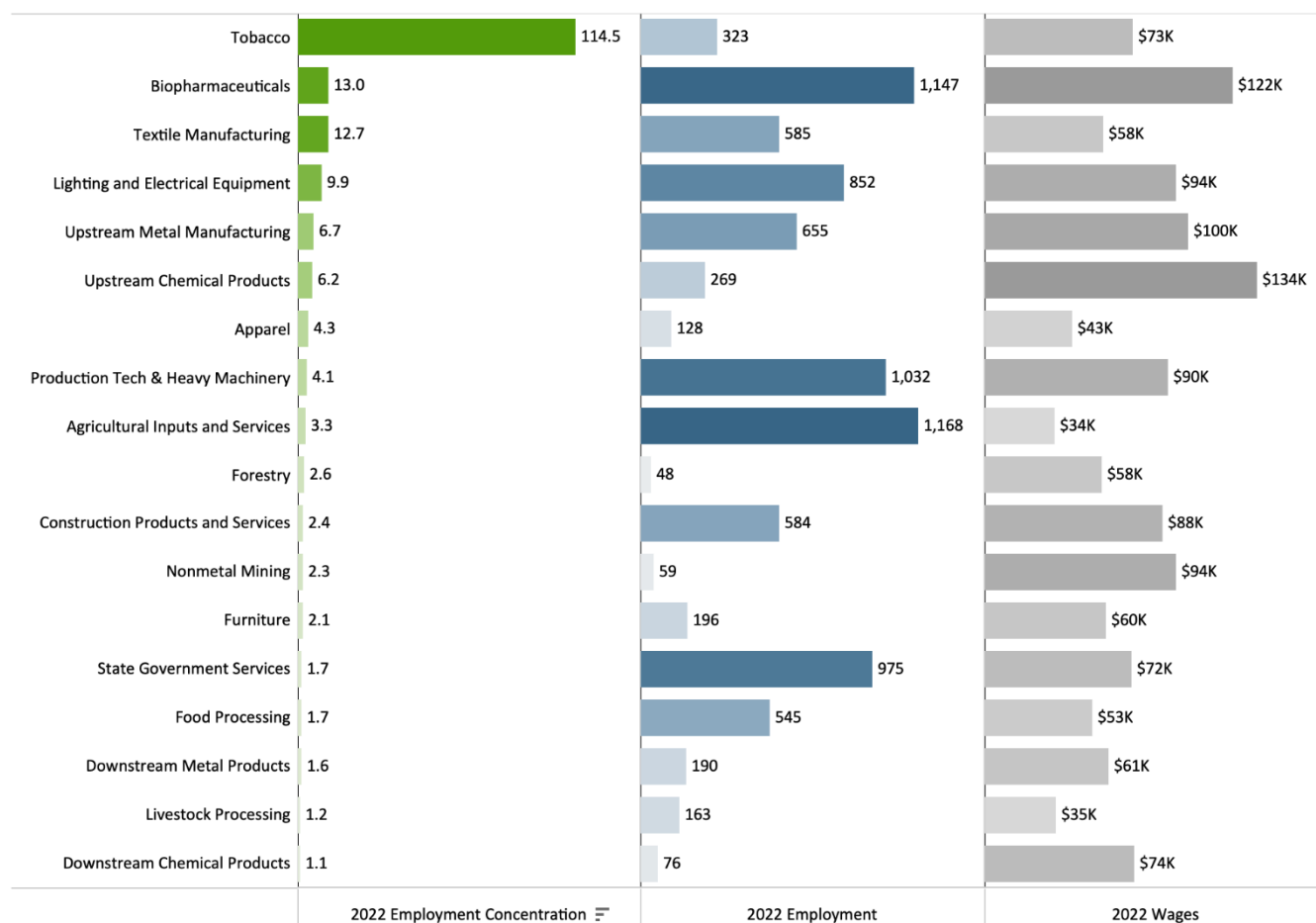
Source: Lightcast 2023.3

The county has 18 clusters with employment concentrations higher than the national average. Tobacco is by far the most concentrated cluster with employment over 100 times the national average. The tobacco industry is a legacy cluster as the industry has continued to shed jobs over the last five years and years prior. Beyond the tobacco outlier, the county has strong concentrations in a variety of clusters. Many of the top concentrated clusters focus on manufacturing with a balance of advanced and traditional clusters.



The upstream chemical products cluster is over six times higher in the region than expected based on the national average. In Nash County, the performance of this cluster is focused in phosphatic fertilizer manufacturing. This ties in with the strong agricultural cluster performance. Several other highly concentrated clusters focus on extracting raw materials like forestry and nonmetal mining.

Clusters with the Highest Employment Concentration in Nash County

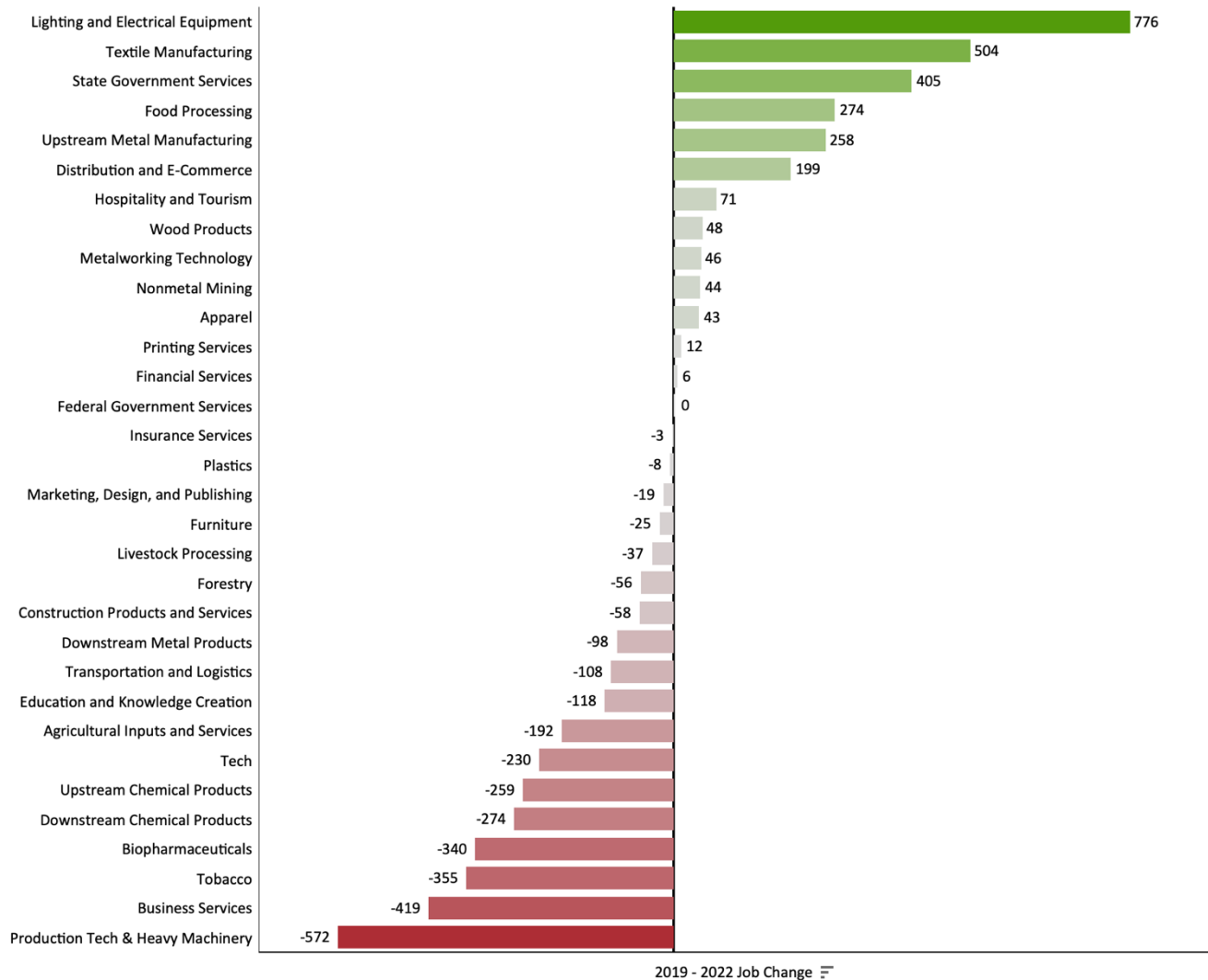


Source: Lightcast 2023.3

Given the unique disruption of COVID-19 to the economy, it was important to determine if some of the job changes were related to the pandemic. When comparing the past three years (2019 to 2022 job levels), Nash County bucks the trend seen in many communities during this time. In Nash County jobs declined in manufacturing and professional services focused clusters. In many other communities we have seen industries like tech grow the fastest while industries like education and tourism lost the most jobs. In Nash County, the script is flipped. There were some clusters that performed very well during this turbulent time in the national economy. In Nash those clusters were electrical equipment, textiles, food processing, and upstream metal manufacturing.



Pandemic Employment Impacts in Nash County



Source: Lightcast 2023.3

For traded clusters, certain economic development opportunities are grounded in industries with long histories in the county. With continued support these clusters will continue to add some jobs and contribute significantly to the county’s economy:

- Biopharmaceuticals
- Tobacco
- Textile Manufacturing
- Lighting and Electrical Equipment
- Upstream Metal Manufacturing
- Downstream Metal Products
- Upstream Chemical Products
- Construction Products & Services



- Production Tech & Heavy Machinery
- Food Processing
- Agricultural Inputs and Services.

In addition to these industries, Nash's future can be enhanced by focusing support on and devoting resources to the following emerging industries:

- Distribution and E-Commerce
- Hospitality and Tourism
- Metalworking Technology
- Wood Products.

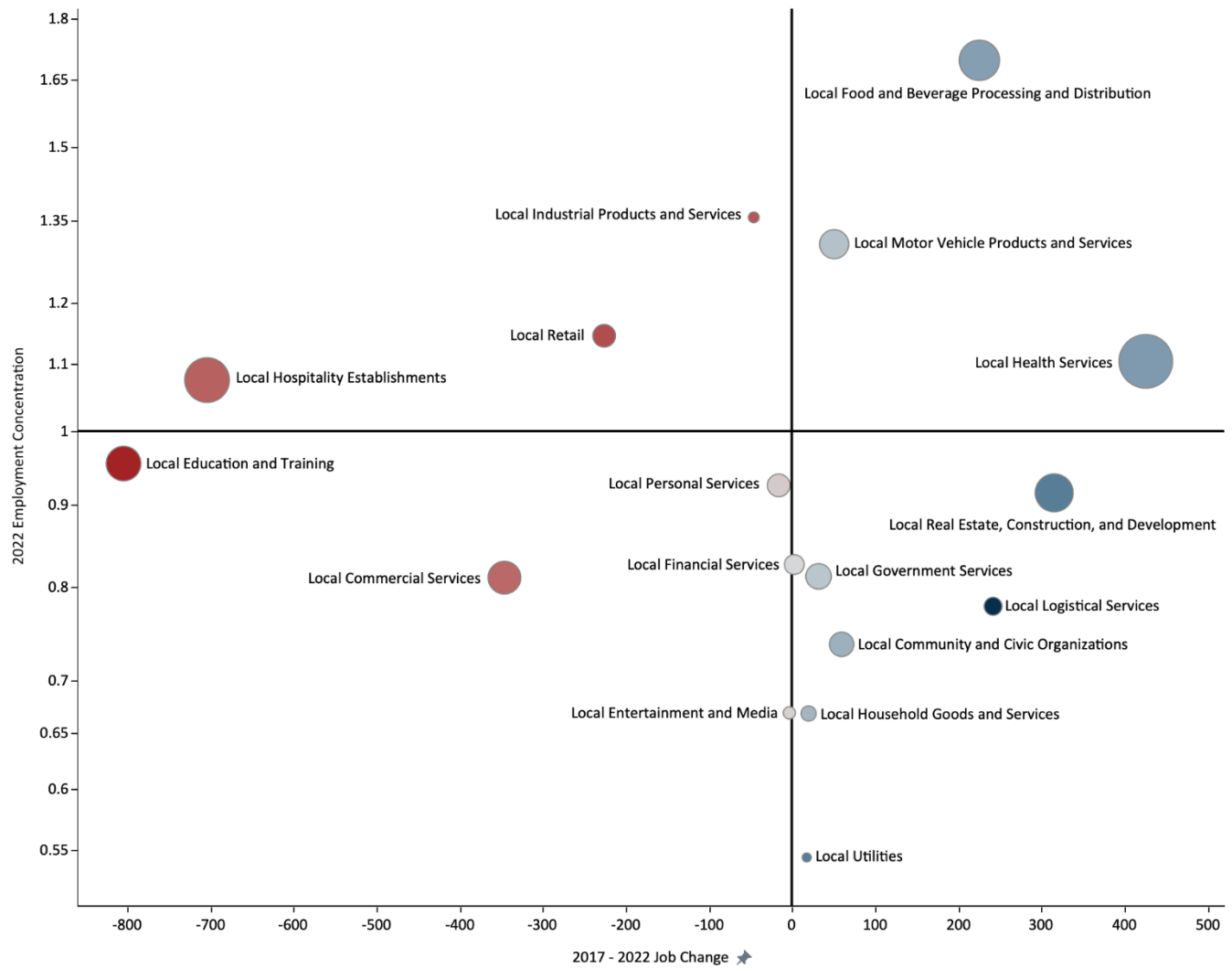
Local Clusters

While economies are driven by traded clusters, local clusters account for a large portion of area employment. They are also experiencing workforce challenges. Often without well-functioning local clusters it can be difficult to recruit traded clusters to a region. Local clusters were in general more impacted by the pandemic lockdowns. While consumers still needed and spent money on goods that kept traded clusters operating, local event venues, restaurants, and many non-essential services suffered. This appears to have especially impacted local hospitality, retail, and education services. The biggest asset in the local cluster space is food and beverage processing and distribution. This group includes grocery wholesalers, supermarkets, and alcohol retailers.

Local health services is the top local cluster in terms of employment. The cluster added over 420 net new workers in the last five years. This was also the fastest growing local cluster. Local hospitality, industrial products, and motor vehicle products and services are also highly concentrated in Nash County. The average wages for most local clusters are lower than most of the traded clusters.



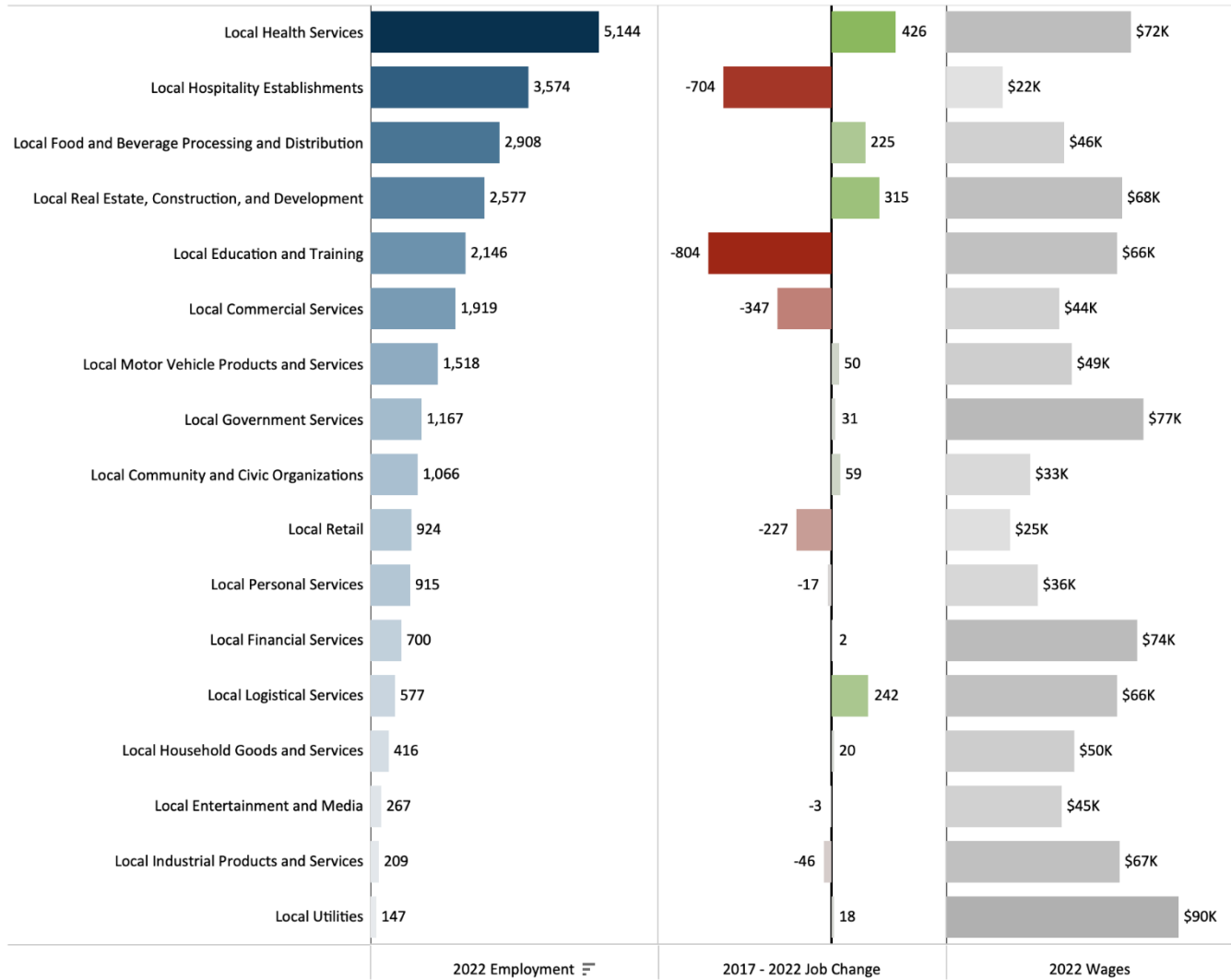
Nash County Local Clusters Map



Source: Lightcast 2023.3



Nash County Local Clusters



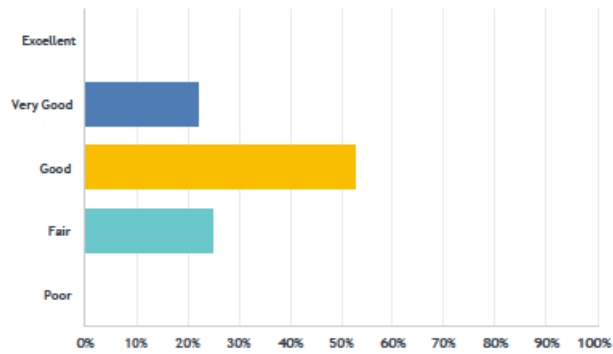
Source: Lightcast 2023.3



Complete Nash County Workforce Online Survey

Q1 How would you describe the current economic conditions in Nash County?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0

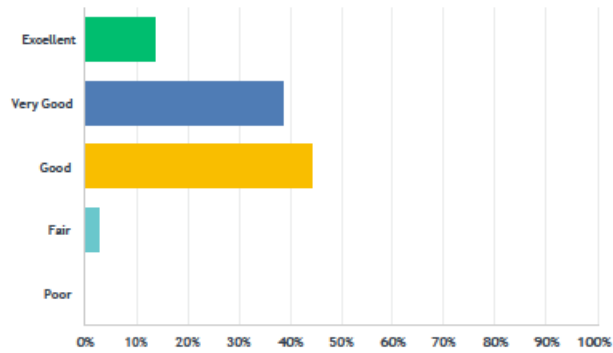


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Excellent	0.00% 0
Very Good	22.22% 8
Good	52.78% 19
Fair	25.00% 9
Poor	0.00% 0
TOTAL	38



Q2 How would you describe the performance of your business over the past 12 months?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0

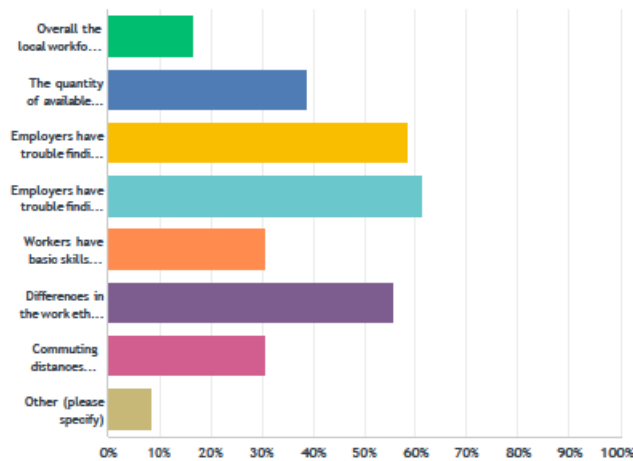


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Excellent	13.89%	5
Very Good	38.89%	14
Good	44.44%	18
Fair	2.78%	1
Poor	0.00%	0
TOTAL		38



Q3 What is the state of the workforce as it relates to your company's employment needs? (Please check as many as you feel are true.)

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0

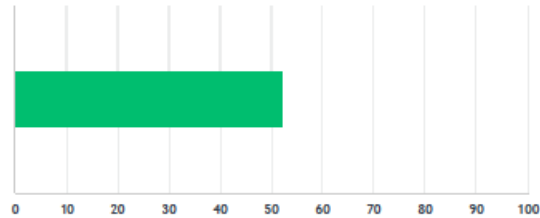


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Overall the local workforce has good skills.	16.67% 6
The quantity of available workers is too low and this stifles company growth.	38.89% 14
Employers have trouble finding people with the right technical skills.	58.33% 21
Employers have trouble finding people with good "soft" skills. (Reliability, commitment, communication and interpersonal skills.)	61.11% 22
Workers have basic skills but need upskilling/retraining for specific job requirements.	30.56% 11
Differences in the work ethic present challenges.	55.56% 20
Commuting distances present challenges (transportation issues, childcare issues, workers will stay closer to home if possible).	30.56% 11
Other (please specify)	8.33% 3
Total Respondents: 36	



Q4 How would you rate the overall workforce pipeline in the area (quantity and quality)?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	52	1,884	38
Total Respondents: 38			
Rate 1 - 10	1		
Rate 11-20	0		
Rate 21-30	4		
Rate 31-40	1		
Rate 41-50	11		
Rate 51-60	9		
Rate 61-70	6		
Rate 71-80	3		
Rate 81-90	1		
Rate 91-100	0		



Q5 What are the most difficult skill/competency issues your firm faces in local hiring and retention?

Answered: 32 Skipped: 4

Question 5 responses:

Attitude

ranges from the most basic healthcare experience (nursing assistants, RNs, etc) to the most highly-skilled (surgical technicians, imaging technicians, etc).

1. Basic Skills (reading, writing, math) 2. Communication (verbal and non-verbal/written) 3. Lack of Intuitive Capabilities (self-learning) 4. Lack of Self-Motivation 5. Poor Customer Service 6. Poor Workplace Behavior (especially around Customers)

Competing with other employers' wages and benefits.

lack of autobody repair training - I'm sure there are other less popular skill sets that are difficult to find employees to fill, as well.

None

Basic labor even at \$ 15 per hour plus incentives

Technical skills of the vocational type and basic computer interacting with newer technology.

Experience in mechanical, electrical, plumbing trades is hard to find. Most of our employees are younger and in need of training. Experienced tradesmen are extremely difficult to find.

Understanding and using basic computer to do basic computer task.

Commitment, Common Sense...

Industrial Maintenance Tech

Leadership and management skills

Salaries

Finding people with skills in a professional workplace.

Finding more areas and School events to attend

Soft Skills

Come to work on time. Don't look for your next job as soon as you land your current job Stay your full shift and give 100% during it Lack of durable skills...conflict management, time management, etc

Technical skills of the vocational type and basic computer interacting with newer technology.

Shortage of skilled labor (welders, pipe fitters, crane operator, etc.) and competing with competitors and customers for the few that are available.

Work ethic

finding people who are willing to commit to a 40 hr/week job with some skills

A general lack of a solid work ethic by many employees, along with more individuals seeking a "job" and not a "career".



Attendance

Reliability - staying on task, showing up for scheduled shifts.

The most common trend we are seeing that impacts our industry is that many of our applicants fall short in typing tests (inability to meet 35 wpm requirements), do not speak clearly enough, or they do not have the best written skills (misspellings, punctuation errors, poor grammar).

Most difficult is just basic soft skills like showing up on time and being able to get along with co-workers. That said, skilled labor (maintenance and electricians) are extremely difficult to get because there is so much competition.

basic computer and analytical skills

Salary

Our requirement to work on-site and not remotely Ability to work with different personalities Respect for authority, work ethic - doing their very best rather than just the bare minimum

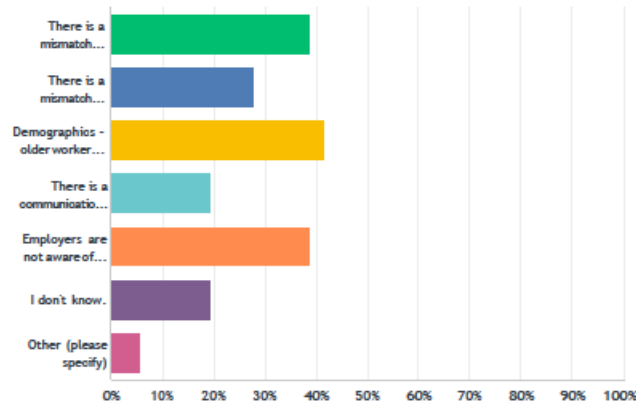
Technical & soft skills.

Attendance, dependability and Professional maturity



Q6 We hear that there may be a mismatch between the skills of Nash County's workers and the jobs that are available. Which of the following are true? (Please check as many as you feel are true.)

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



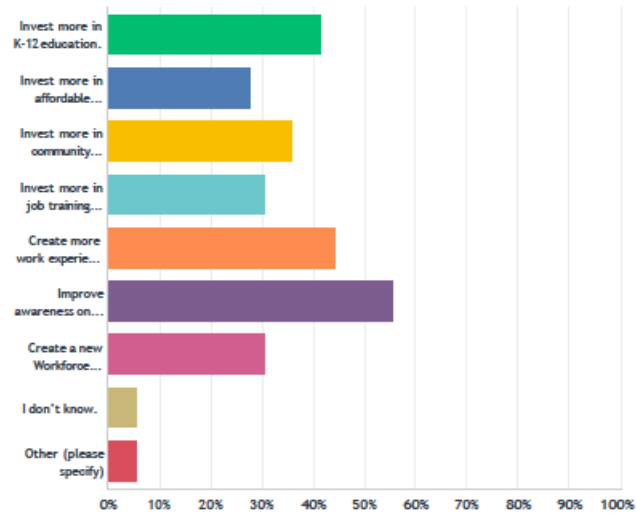
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
There is a mismatch between what is being taught in K-12 schools and the skills employers identify as necessary to be successful in the workplace.	38.89% 14
There is a mismatch between what is being taught in higher education and the skills employers identify as necessary to be successful in the workplace.	27.78% 10
Demographics – older workers lack the new (digital and technical) skills necessary to be successful, while younger workers lack the soft skills needed to be successful.	41.67% 15
There is a communications problem. The people searching for work are not aware of local businesses looking for their skills, and vice versa.	19.44% 7
Employers are not aware of the workplace training programs that might be available in their communities.	38.89% 14
I don't know.	19.44% 7
Other (please specify)	5.56% 2
Total Responses: 36	



Q7 What public policy initiatives do you think would provide the greatest impact on workforce in Nash County?

(Please select the 2 choices you feel are most important.)

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



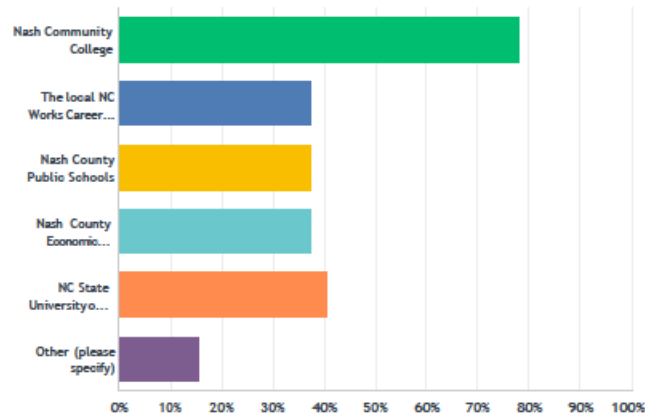


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Invest more in K-12 education.	41.67% 15
Invest more in affordable early childhood education/childcare opportunities.	27.78% 10
Invest more in community colleges and other higher education.	38.11% 13
Invest more in job training for existing workers.	30.56% 11
Create more work experience opportunities for students.	44.44% 16
Improve awareness on the part of students, parents, underemployed workers, etc. on where local career opportunities exist and how people can prepare for those jobs.	55.56% 20
Create a new Workforce Center or a workforce director position to coordinate all workforce development activities across the county.	30.56% 11
I don't know.	5.56% 2
Other (please specify)	5.56% 2
Total Respondents: 38	



Q8 Have you partnered with any of the following agencies for workforce training?

Answered: 32 Skipped: 4

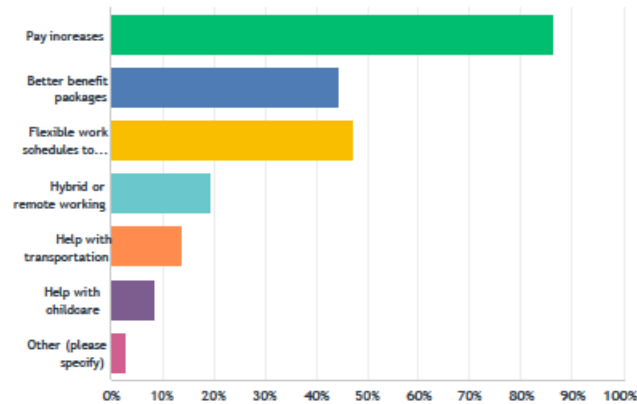


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Nash Community College	78.13% 25
The local NC Works Career Center	37.50% 12
Nash County Public Schools	37.50% 12
Nash County Economic Development	37.50% 12
NC State University or other four-year universities	40.63% 13
Other (please specify)	15.63% 5
Total Responses: 32	



Q9 In what areas has your firm made changes to increase employee retention? (Please check all that apply.)

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0

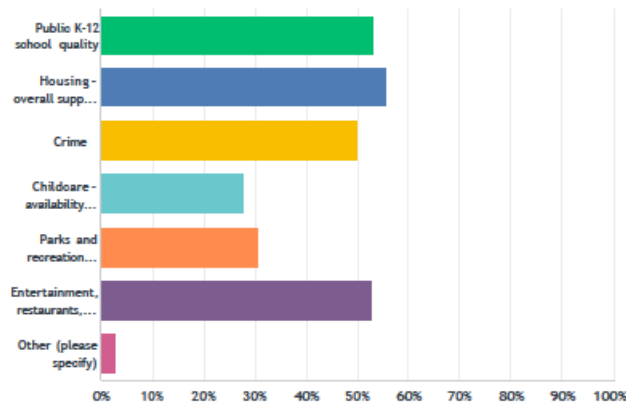


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Pay increases	86.11%	31
Better benefit packages	44.44%	16
Flexible work schedules to accommodate work-life balance	47.22%	17
Hybrid or remote working	19.44%	7
Help with transportation	13.89%	5
Help with childcare	8.33%	3
Other (please specify)	2.78%	1
Total Respondents: 38		



Q10 In order to help employers attract and keep talented people, many communities are promoting a high quality of life. What are the top areas that Nash County should focus on to build an improved quality of life? (Please select the 2 issues you feel are most important.)

Answered: 36 Skipped: 0

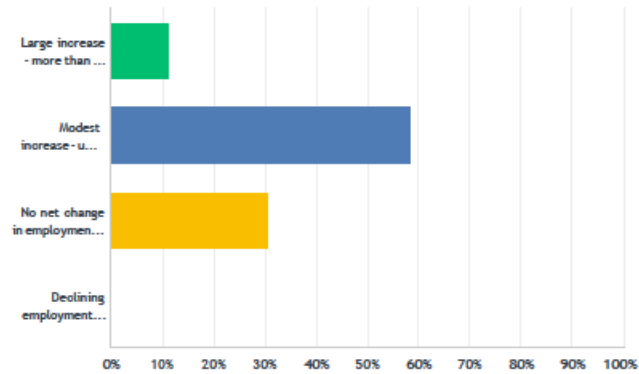


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Public K-12 school quality	52.78% 19
Housing – overall supply, variety of choices, and/or affordability	55.56% 20
Crime	50.00% 18
Childcare – availability and/or affordability	27.78% 10
Parks and recreation options	30.56% 11
Entertainment, restaurants, events, and vibrant downtowns	52.78% 19
Other (please specify)	2.78% 1
Total Respondents: 36	



Q11 What are your company's local hiring expectations over the next one to two years?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0

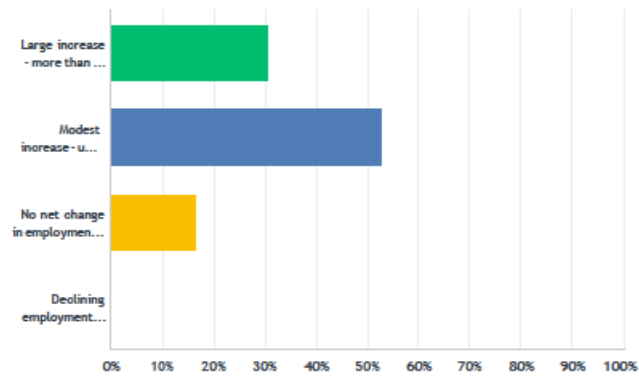


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Large increase - more than 20%	11.11%	4
Modest increase - up to 20%	58.33%	21
No net change in employment levels	30.56%	11
Declining employment levels	0.00%	0
TOTAL		38



Q12 What are your company's local hiring expectations over a longer term (three to five years)?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0

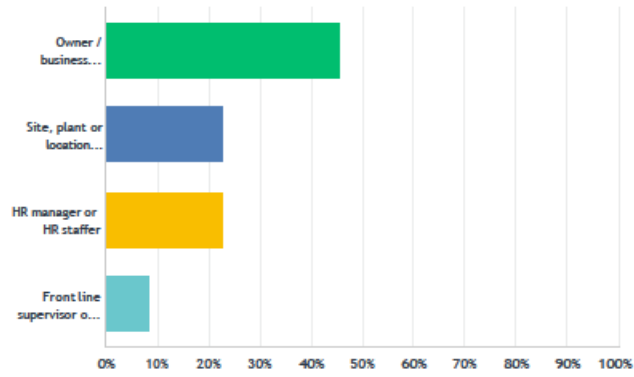


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Large increase - more than 20%	30.58%	11
Modest increase - up to 20%	52.78%	19
No net change in employment levels	16.67%	6
Declining employment levels	0.00%	0
TOTAL		38



Q13 What is your role with your company?

Answered: 35 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Owner / business partner	45.71% 18
Site, plant or location manager	22.86% 8
HR manager or HR staffer	22.86% 8
Front line supervisor or employee	8.57% 3
TOTAL	35