



FSU



A Proposed Economic Analysis Project for Opportunity Florida – Final Report

**Prepared for:
Opportunity Florida**



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May, 2026

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Executive Summary

The FSU Center for Economic Forecasting and Analysis (CEFA) conducted an economic analysis study of the ten rural counties comprising Opportunity Florida, a designated Rural Area of Opportunity (RAO) spanning Florida's Panhandle region. The counties included are: Calhoun, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty, Wakulla, Walton, and Washington. Established under Florida statute §288.0656 through the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI), the RAO designation reflects longstanding economic disparities in these communities and unlocks targeted incentives aimed at fostering wage growth, job creation, and stronger local tax bases. This report documents the direct, indirect, induced, and total economic impacts of the region across employment, income, and sales, while developing a comprehensive framework of economic development activity at the local level.

The economic analysis draws on labor market data, demographic indicators, housing market conditions, and socioeconomic measures to provide a holistic picture of the region's economic landscape. Key data sources include the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW), the American Community Survey (ACS), and real GDP estimates, among others. Where possible, the analysis distinguishes between coastal and interior geographies and treats North Walton County as a separate sub-region to avoid masking structural differences beneath county-level aggregates.

The demographic and economic data documented across this report reveals a region defined by persistent and, in many cases, widening divergence. A set of mutually reinforcing patterns emerges from the analysis of population, health, education, income, labor markets, housing, fiscal capacity, and economic output that together explain why the Opportunity Florida counties were designated as a Rural Area of Opportunity and why that designation remains fully warranted.

The region's population trajectory has bifurcated sharply. Walton County's coastal communities have absorbed sustained in-migration, adding more than 30,000 residents since 2010 and reflecting the demographic profile of a growth region: younger households, rising incomes, and expanding labor force participation. The rural interior counties tell a different story. Calhoun, Gadsden, Jackson, and Liberty counties have experienced flat or declining populations, driven by working-age outmigration that simultaneously erodes the labor supply available to local employers and the consumer base that sustains small businesses. Liberty County, with approximately 8,400 residents, exemplifies the structural fragility of the region's smallest economies, where a single major employer disruption carries outsized consequences for population stability and fiscal health.

Educational attainment and health outcomes track closely with these population dynamics. Interior counties record the region's highest rates of adults without a high school diploma. Liberty County's share approaches one in five and the highest disability rates, which constrain labor force participation independent of broader employment conditions. Persistent family and child welfare challenges compound these disadvantages: SNAP utilization rates of one in four households in Gadsden and Liberty counties reflect structural poverty, not temporary economic disruption. High rates of food insecurity, elevated child poverty, and limited childcare infrastructure create conditions in which human capital formation is impaired from early childhood. These deficits actively limit the workforce available to prospective employers, reduce local consumer spending power, and increase the share of county budgets devoted to social services at the direct expense of the capital investment needed to support economic development.

The income, poverty, and labor market data confirm what the population trends suggest. The income gap between Walton County (average annual wages approximately \$49,000) and Holmes County (approximately \$24,000) is not narrowing; it widened between 2010 and 2025 as coastal appreciation drove Walton incomes up 77 percent while interior county income growth lagged at 38 to 50 percent over the same period. Labor market conditions reinforce this picture. Employment in the interior counties is concentrated in retail, government services, agriculture, and corrections; sectors that offer limited wage premiums and constrained career advancement. In several counties, declining labor force participation among working-age adults means that low headline unemployment rates overstate genuine labor market health: workers who have exited the labor force entirely are not counted as unemployed, but their absence represents both a social cost and a binding constraint on regional growth potential. Gadsden County's declining total commute minutes, despite persistent poverty and unemployment, reflects working-age residents leaving rather than finding better local jobs.

The business formation and failure data add further texture. Every county expanded its active business base between 1990 and 2023, but growth was concentrated in lower-wage sectors and proved more vulnerable to economic shocks than Walton County's tourism-driven expansion. Business failure rates spiked to between 14 and 19 percent across the region during the Great Recession, with rural inland counties requiring until 2014 or 2015 to return to pre-recession levels, a near-decade of elevated business stress with lasting consequences for local employment and tax revenue. The North Walton rural area's failure rate peak occurred four years after the countywide peak, a pattern that underscores the need to treat inland North Walton County (DeFuniak Springs, Freeport, and Paxton) as a distinct economic sub-region rather than a beneficiary of the coastal tourism recovery it did not

share. Real GDP data tell a consistent story: Walton County's share of the region's aggregate output grew from 23 percent in 2001 to 43 percent in 2023, meaning the rural counties that define Opportunity Florida's core mandate now account for a declining share of the region's total economic activity.

Housing development patterns mirror the economic divide with striking clarity. Walton County issued nearly 2,650 construction permits in a recent single year; Holmes County issued 11. The rental housing market across the interior counties is effectively absent. Calhoun, Holmes, and Liberty counties show minimal active listings and no meaningful expansion of rental stock between 2016 and 2024, a structural constraint on workforce attraction that market forces alone cannot resolve at current income and population levels. Broadband infrastructure has improved across the region through targeted federal investment, but a meaningful gap persists between coastal counties approaching 90 percent coverage and interior counties still near 75 to 76 percent, a headwind to remote work adoption, digital commerce, and educational access that will compound other workforce development challenges if left unaddressed.

Housing and infrastructure conditions compound these challenges. During this study period, interior counties such as Calhoun, Holmes, and Liberty have seen little to no expansion of rental housing stock, creating a structural barrier to workforce attraction that market forces alone are unlikely to resolve. Broadband coverage gaps between coastal counties are near 90 percent while interior counties hover near 75 to 76 percent, which further limit economic competitiveness. Meanwhile, interior counties carry the region's highest property tax millage rates on their lowest assessed value bases, leaving them without the local fiscal resources needed to fund the roads, utilities, and industrial site development that business recruitment requires. External funding channeled through Opportunity Florida is therefore not supplemental to the regional economic development strategy, but foundational.

The land use and fiscal capacity data document the binding constraint that underlies all of the above. Interior counties carry the region's highest property tax millage rates on its lowest assessed value bases. Calhoun, Liberty, and Holmes counties have seen property appreciation of only 19 to 20 percent since 2010, compared to Walton County's 358 percent, and a significant share of those bases, 47 to 56 percent in Calhoun and Holmes counties, is tied to agricultural and timberland use categories that generate modest per-acre tax revenue and are sensitive to commodity price cycles rather than residential demand. The fiscal arithmetic is straightforward: these counties cannot generate from local revenues the capital investment in roads, utilities, industrial sites, and workforce infrastructure that business recruitment requires. External funding in state and federal grant programs channeled

through Opportunity Florida is not supplemental to the regional economic development strategy but foundational to it.

The total economic impacts of the Opportunity Florida region are shown in the following table, and are estimated to be a total of 145,148 total jobs, \$7.68 (or \$7.7) billion in income or wages and about \$25.48 (or about \$26) billion in total economic output. The research team also estimates that state, local and federal taxes generated by the additional economic activity to be approximately \$2.8 billion.

Opportunity Florida	Economic Output (Sales/Revenues)	Employment	Income
Economic Measure			
Opportunity Florida	\$25,478,750,403	145,148	\$7,678,836,272
Grand Total	\$25,478,750,403	145,148	\$7,678,836,272

*** in 2026\$**

The data presented in the demographic analysis supports a clear and consistent conclusion: the Opportunity Florida counties are not a homogeneous region, and they cannot be treated as one for purposes of economic development policy. Walton County's coastal economy is a growth success by any standard measure, though North Walton's rural communities share many of the structural challenges facing the interior counties and are easily masked by county-level¹ aggregates. Gulf County and Wakulla County represent moderate success cases. Counties with growing populations, improving fiscal positions, and economies evolving beyond their legacy agricultural and government-sector bases may offer transferable lessons for more constrained neighbors.

Reversing the trajectory of the region's most challenged counties Holmes, Calhoun, Liberty, and Gadsden counties, will require sustained, coordinated investment across multiple domains simultaneously: educational access and attainment, healthcare infrastructure and disability support, broadband and transportation connectivity, site-ready industrial capacity, workforce housing development, and small business capital access. No single intervention will be sufficient because the constraints are mutually reinforcing: low educational attainment limits the workforce that employers require; thin housing stock constrains the ability to attract workers from outside; weak fiscal capacity prevents the infrastructure investment that makes sites competitive; and limited business density reduces the consumer base that new ventures need to survive.

¹ It should be noted that economic data is primarily compiled and available at a county-specific level.

I - Introduction and Overview of Opportunity Florida

The purpose of the following research project by the FSU Center for Economic Forecasting and Analysis (CEFA) is to conduct an economic impact analysis study of the ten rural counties of Opportunity Florida. One of the goals of the project is to provide Opportunity Florida with a comprehensive economic analysis study that fully documents the direct, indirect, induced and total economic impacts of the region, in terms of employment, income and sales/revenues. In addition, this proposed project will aim to develop a comprehensive framework of all economic development occurring at the local level within Opportunity Florida's 10 rural counties.

Opportunity Florida is a rural area of opportunity (RAO) covering a region of Florida's panhandle that includes the following counties: Calhoun, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty, Wakulla, North Walton, and Washington. From the establishment of the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) by the Florida Legislature in 2014 under statute §288.0656, the designation of a region as a RAO provides various economic incentives for catalyst projects and prioritized infrastructure development. Such targeted economic efforts in the most distressed rural communities of Florida aim to revitalize their economies through wage growth, job creation, and strengthened tax bases. Rural communities within Opportunity Florida provide various advantages to businesses including a talented workforce, lower costs of business, large available sites for development, and an extensive transportation network for seamless trade. A diverse range of industries can be found within this region of the Florida panhandle including commercial horticulture, green energy, electronics, shipbuilding, aerospace, agriculture, construction, and more.

Rural communities often face unique challenges with not just incentivizing economic development but also measuring and analyzing economic changes over time. For capturing macro-level trends in economic development, The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) offers, as one data option, one of the most comprehensive sources of labor market data available. Its assessment of employment counts, wages, and establishment data by levels of geography will be a key resource to identifying historical patterns and identifying specific areas of growth and decline over time. One recognized approach to using this data would be to identify industry clusters in the region, helping determine areas where attracting investment could maximize the best economic outcomes. Since this dataset offers geocoded establishments, labor specific to North Walton county is achievable. It will also be possible to compare coastal and non-coastal areas with this data source.

While labor market data is crucial, a holistic perspective on economic development also depends on analyzing demographic data as it provides insights into population trends, workforce capacity, and community needs. For the prospects of incentivizing high wage industries to the region, measurements to determine availability of highly skilled and employable workers are vital. Without this information, areas within Opportunity Florida may appear riskier and less competitive for investment even when local conditions are well-suited for growth. Population trends will also be important for indicating at a macro- and micro- level the workforce capacity of certain areas, potential commuting patterns, and migration trends. All these demographic factors will be vital for addressing and prioritizing areas where infrastructure development may be in highest demand. Demographic data is also typically available at geographic levels smaller than county divisions, which will be beneficial as one can include North Walton county and make comparisons between coastal and non-coastal areas.

The labor and housing markets are strongly interconnected, as the availability, affordability, and location of housing is a significant factor influencing workforce attraction and retention in the region. Having economic indicators measuring the housing market is important in providing an explanation for population trends, workforce commuting patterns, zoning, and other labor market issues. When housing is limited in supply, unaffordable or poorly located, businesses have a harder time incentivizing and retaining workforce talent. Construction in general, including new housing, can also be a major contributor to economic activity in a region. Many economic indicators for the housing market are available in smaller subdivisions than at the county level such as the American Community Survey which will address some of the issues discussed above.

Recognizing that RAOs like Opportunity Florida were created to address longstanding economic disparities found in rural areas, it will also be important to measure and analyze socioeconomic indicators. This socioeconomic analysis is essential for understanding and tracking the impact of efforts by Opportunity Florida in promoting business opportunities in the region. Sociodemographic indicators such as poverty rates, median household income, food insecurity, childcare costs, and reliance on public assistance will provide perspective on the economic disparities in the region that are not typically accounted for by other economic indicators. Understanding how the quality of life for residents in the region has changed over time and how it varies by area may be important in determining what industries best promote career advancement, wage growth, and sustainable employment. Furthermore, it should be important for analyzing what infrastructure projects have been the most effective and could be the most beneficial for certain areas. Ultimately, determining the most impoverished areas in the region could help determine locations where incentivizing business investment may be most crucial.

II –Literature Review - Rural Economic Development

Purpose and Policy-Aligned Analytical Frame

This literature review establishes the analytical foundation for the economic impact analysis of Opportunity Florida’s ten rural counties. The objectives of the review are threefold: (1) to justify the selection of economic, demographic, infrastructure, and capacity indicators; (2) to guide interpretation of employment, income, and output impacts; and (3) to situate the analysis within established rural and regional economic theory relevant to federal and state place-based investment programs.

The review emphasizes measurement, comparability, and policy applicability rather than formal welfare optimization or long-run equilibrium modeling. The analytical progression from global theory to county-level evidence grounds local outcomes in widely accepted economic frameworks while focusing on infrastructure readiness, workforce capacity, and institutional conditions that shape investment feasibility in areas identified by the regional economic development alliance Opportunity Florida.

Regional Designations and Economic Revitalization in Florida’s Panhandle

Opportunity Florida serves a Rural Area of Opportunity (RAO) covering a region of Florida’s panhandle that includes ten counties: Calhoun, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty, Wakulla, North Walton, and Washington. Following the establishment of the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) by the Florida Legislature in 2014 under statute §288.0656, designation as a RAO facilitates various economic incentives for catalyst projects and prioritized infrastructure development. These targeted efforts in some of Florida’s most distressed rural communities aim to revitalize local economies through job creation, wage growth, and strengthened tax bases.

Rural communities within Opportunity Florida’s service area offer several potential advantages to businesses, including an available workforce, lower business costs, large developable sites, and access to regional transportation networks. The regional economy exhibits the presence of a diverse set of industries, including commercial horticulture, green energy, electronics, shipbuilding, aerospace, agriculture, and construction, though many of these sectors operate at limited scale and employ relatively small shares of the local workforce.

While RAO designations and related state initiatives emphasize wage growth alongside job creation and tax base expansion, the literature reviewed here makes clear that wage growth in rural regions is not an automatic consequence of employment expansion. In spatial

equilibrium settings characterized by labor mobility and housing constraints, job creation may primarily stabilize population or attract in-migrants rather than generate persistent wage increases for incumbent workers. Accordingly, wage growth should be understood as a conditional outcome that materializes when investments successfully relax binding constraints in housing, workforce capacity, and institutional coordination, rather than as an invariant objective of place-based intervention.

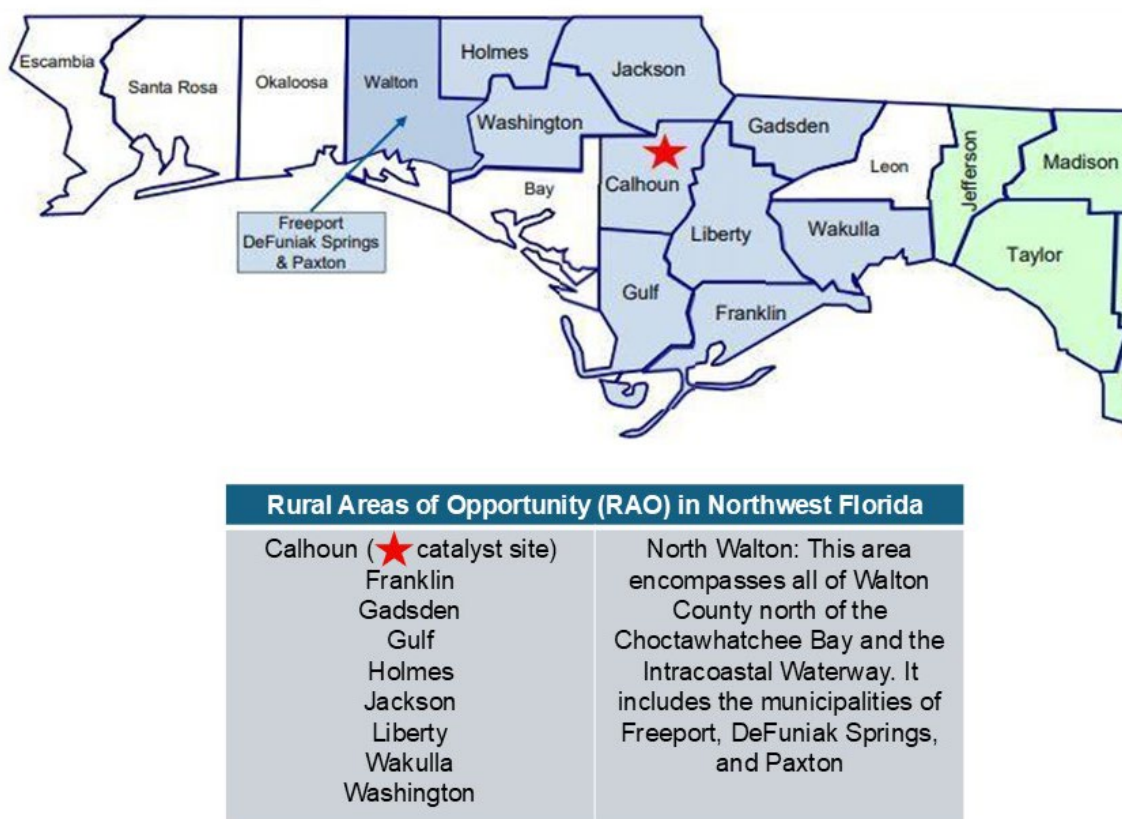


Figure 1. Counties Comprising Opportunity Florida (RAO) in Northwest Florida

Global Lessons on Rural Economic Development

A consistent finding in the global rural development literature is that regional policy works primarily by addressing specific local constraints rather than by pushing rural places to resemble large metropolitan economies.

In the spatial equilibrium tradition, persistent differences in wages, population, and amenities across regions are not necessarily signs of market failure. Instead, they reflect equilibrium outcomes shaped by local productivity, costs, and amenities under conditions of

labor and firm mobility (Rosen, 1979; Roback, 1982). From this perspective, uneven development can be efficient. Policy intervention is justified when binding constraints prevent regions from adjusting in ways that would otherwise be feasible and when those constraints are plausibly addressable through public investment or institutional reform.

Subsequent research emphasizes that spatial adjustment is often slow and uneven when mobility is constrained by durable housing, limited land supply, migration costs, and institutional frictions. Cun and Pesaran (2022) show that wages, housing prices, and migration flows are jointly determined and respond differently depending on local conditions. Regions with more flexible housing and land markets tend to adjust to productivity shocks through population inflows and employment growth. More constrained regions absorb shocks through rising housing costs and limited labor reallocation. This distinction highlights the central role of infrastructure, land availability, and regulatory capacity in shaping development outcomes.

The agglomeration literature further clarifies why addressing constraints is more relevant than attempting to replicate urban scale. Duranton and Puga (2004) identify sharing, matching, and learning as the key mechanisms behind agglomeration economies. Each depends on adequate infrastructure, sufficiently thick labor markets, and institutional capacity. Where these conditions are absent, regions may remain in low productivity equilibria even when they possess underlying advantages. In such cases, the binding constraint is not a lack of effort or incentives, but the absence of complementary capacity.

Comparative policy evidence outside the United States reinforces this interpretation while drawing attention to governance. Although the OECD New Rural Paradigm emphasizes bottom-up development and local competitiveness, national governments have often been reluctant to devolve real authority and resources to rural regions, citing concerns about weak administrative capacity and leadership (Freshwater and Trapasso, 2014). However, continued centralization can reinforce these weaknesses by limiting opportunities for rural communities to build planning expertise and institutional competence.

International experience, including the LEADER program in the European Union, Québec's Pacte rural, and Mexico's Micro Regions program, shows that local capacity can emerge when higher levels of government invest explicitly in leadership development and coordination. In these cases, decentralization paired with sustained support enabled rural regions to design strategies aligned with local conditions rather than externally imposed templates. More broadly, this evidence cautions against the uncritical transfer of best practices across regions and instead supports an adaptive learning approach.

Taken together, the global literature frames place-based policy as policy action that targets specific geographic areas rather than individuals or firms regardless of location. Instead of asking who should be helped, place-based policy asks where intervention is most needed and why. In this literature, place-based policy is understood as a second-best, but potentially welfare enhancing response when mobility frictions, housing constraints, or institutional weaknesses prevent efficient adjustment. Infrastructure and capacity investments operate by shifting local equilibria. They reduce production and transaction costs, expand effective labor supply, and improve access to broader markets. Importantly, this framework does not predict uniform growth or convergence toward metropolitan benchmarks. Outcomes are expected to differ across places depending on local constraint profiles.

Within this tradition, rural development policy is best evaluated not by whether regions converge toward urban outcomes, but by whether targeted investments relax the constraints that inhibit endogenous adjustment. This perspective provides the foundation for evaluating contemporary place-based initiatives such as broadband expansion, industrial land development, housing availability, and workforce systems.

National Debate on Constraint Relaxation and Urban Convergence

Building on the global literature, research in the United States focuses on how constraint-based adjustment shapes the design and evaluation of place-based policy in a national context.

A central issue in this literature is whether place-based interventions distort natural agglomeration forces or instead address structural barriers that markets alone do not resolve. Evidence from long run U.S. experience suggests that persistent rural disparities often reflect constraints such as low density, distance to markets, and limited institutional capacity rather than policy failure (Irwin et al., 2010). From this perspective, effective rural strategies emphasize relaxing binding constraints, particularly in human capital and local institutions, rather than pursuing convergence with metropolitan economies.

More recent work formalizes this argument within a spatial equilibrium framework. Kline and Moretti (2014) show that place-based policies are most defensible when mobility frictions, housing limitations, or institutional shortcomings prevent efficient adjustment. In these settings, public investment influences outcomes by altering local equilibria through infrastructure, institutional capacity, and improved functioning of labor and housing markets. The objective is not to replicate urban agglomeration or force convergence with metropolitan economies, but to reduce localized frictions that prevent efficient adjustment given a region's scale, location, and institutional context.

Applied research further underscores the importance of capacity in mediating the effectiveness of infrastructure investment. Emery and Flora (2006) show that investment in built capital alone rarely produces durable change. Sustained development emerges when built capital is complemented by human, social, political, and financial capital, allowing communities to move beyond short term stabilization.

Consistent with this literature, the present study uses IMPLAN as a descriptive tool to characterize economic structure and inter-industry linkages within Opportunity Florida. Results are interpreted with reference to observed infrastructure, housing, workforce, and institutional conditions rather than as predictions of long run equilibrium outcomes. In this framework, IMPLAN is used to inform understanding of existing economic relationships within a broader spatial adjustment context, not to imply automatic convergence or unconstrained growth.

Persistent Constraints and Development Tradeoffs in Rural Florida

The rural counties served by Opportunity Florida operate under a distinct set of economic and fiscal constraints that shape how development investments translate into employment, income, and tax base outcomes. While the Panhandle benefits from access to interstate corridors, port infrastructure, and available land, outcomes vary sharply across counties due to differences in housing supply, workforce availability, fiscal capacity, and institutional readiness. These differences influence not only whether projects locate in a county, but whether announced investments are ultimately realized, sustained, and fiscally viable.

Rather than converging toward metropolitan growth patterns, many rural Southern regions follow adjustment paths shaped by distance to markets, low population density, and thin labor markets. Research consistently shows that these structural conditions limit the effectiveness of one-size-fits-all development strategies and make county-level analysis essential for identifying binding constraints (Isserman, Kilkenny, and Partridge, 2010; Goetz et al., 2012).

In North Florida, these constraints are evident in both labor market structure and fiscal capacity. Counties differ substantially in employment composition, wage levels, and population dynamics, even within the same RAO designation. As a result, infrastructure and incentive programs interact with local conditions in uneven ways, producing heterogeneous outcomes across counties.

Labor Market Structure and Non-convergent Adjustment

Labor market data from the Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR, 2025Q1) highlight a consistent pattern across Opportunity Florida counties. While high-wage industries exist in most of these areas, they employ very few people. Instead, the largest employment sectors tend to be lower-wage service industries.

For example, professional and technical services in counties like Jackson and Liberty report some of the highest average quarterly wages in the region. This includes specialized fields like software publishing and computer systems design, yet the actual number of people working in these roles remains extremely small. On the other hand, counties such as Franklin and Gulf are dominated by the leisure and hospitality industry. These jobs account for a large share of total employment but are associated with lower average wages and pronounced seasonal volatility.

This pattern aligns with national trends showing that rural labor markets often have high-value but "thin" sectors. These industries are hard to grow without better housing, broadband, and workforce training. While adding these jobs might help stabilize the population or bring in new residents, it often fails to raise wages for the people who already live and work there.

Labor Demand Shocks, Migration, and Population Adjustment

The literature on labor market adjustment provides important context for interpreting these patterns. Bartik's framework shows that local labor markets respond to demand shocks through changes in employment, wages, and population (Bartik, 1991). However, evidence from Blanchard and Katz (1992) demonstrates that over time, population adjustment tends to absorb much of the shock, limiting persistent wage growth.

In rural regions such as North Florida, this mechanism implies that job creation frequently leads to changes in population or commuting patterns rather than durable income gains. BEBR population and employment data are consistent with this dynamic, showing modest long run wage growth alongside population fluctuation in several Opportunity Florida counties.

These dynamics complicate evaluation of development initiatives. Employment gains alone may overstate improvements in local economic well-being if they are offset by in-migration, commuting, or labor force expansion.

Housing availability plays a central role in this adjustment process. In coastal counties such as Franklin, Gulf, and Wakulla, seasonal and second home demand has tightened housing markets, raising costs for local workers even when job creation occurs. In inland counties, limited new construction and aging housing stock constrain in-migration, reducing the ability of firms to expand employment at scale. These dynamics mean that job announcements alone overstate the likely long run impact of development projects unless housing and workforce constraints are addressed simultaneously.

As a result, evaluations that focus exclusively on job counts risk overstating welfare improvements in rural labor markets where population and commuting responses absorb much of the adjustment.

Infrastructure, Housing, and Adjustment Constraints

Infrastructure and housing conditions play a central role in shaping how labor markets adjust to economic change. Constraints on broadband access, housing availability, transportation networks, and commuting options limit workforce attraction and retention, and influence whether new employment opportunities translate into local income gains.

The literature emphasizes that these constraints interact. Inadequate housing supply can prevent firms from expanding even when labor demand exists. Limited broadband access can restrict the growth of high-wage service sectors that appear in the BEBR data but remain small in scale. Transportation constraints can increase commuting costs, dampening labor market integration across counties.

As a result, joint analysis of employment, population change, housing availability, and infrastructure access is necessary to interpret observed outcomes and to evaluate the likely effectiveness of infrastructure-based interventions in the rural South.

Human Capital, Workforce Systems, and Local Capacity

Human capital and workforce systems further mediate regional adjustment. Contrary to the perception that rural economies are locked into low-skill trajectories, national evidence shows that rural adjustment often occurs through occupational upgrading within existing industries rather than wholesale sectoral transformation. USDA Economic Research Service findings indicate that declines in low-skill rural employment during the 1990s were driven primarily by changes in occupational composition within industries, leading to real earnings gains for many rural workers (USDA ERS, 2005).

At the same time, human capital externalities documented by Glaeser et al. (1992) highlight the importance of education and skills for sustained growth. However, workforce development effectiveness depends not only on educational attainment but also on local capacity, including access to training institutions, childcare, transportation, and coordination between employers and educators.

In North Florida, these capacity conditions vary substantially across counties. Where they are binding, increased labor demand may be offset by commuting or in-migration, dampening observed wage effects. This reinforces the importance of interpreting wage, employment, and population outcomes jointly when evaluating rural development strategies.

Fiscal Outcomes of Development Choices in Florida

Urban3's analysis of rural land use in Florida reinforces this point by conveying that low density development patterns common in rural counties often generate infrastructure and service costs that exceed long run tax revenues.

While Nassau County is not part of Opportunity Florida's service area, the case is illustrative of fiscal dynamics common across rural Florida counties facing similar land-use and infrastructure tradeoffs.

Florida land-use case studies provide concrete evidence on how development patterns translate into fiscal outcomes, particularly in rural and fiscally constrained counties. One such analysis by Urban3 and 1000 Friends of Florida (2025) examined a 44-acre parcel in Nassau County, comparing three distinct scenarios: agricultural use, conservation, and residential development.

Under the agricultural scenario, the parcel generated about \$1,300 in annual property tax revenue while requiring \$3,100 in public infrastructure costs. However, it produced an estimated \$38,000 in ecosystem service value, resulting in a net positive return of \$36,200, or roughly \$812 per acre.

The conservation easement scenario was even more efficient. It generated \$300 in annual property tax revenue and required no additional infrastructure investment. By preserving the same ecosystem service value, this option yielded a net positive return of \$38,300, which comes out to about \$900 per acre.

In sharp contrast, the low-density residential scenario appeared profitable on the surface by generating \$68,500 in property tax revenue. However, it also imposed \$147,300 in

infrastructure and service costs. This created a net annual loss of \$78,700, or approximately negative \$1,800 per acre.

This case illustrates a recurring issue in rural Florida. Development that appears fiscally productive when evaluated solely through tax revenue can impose long-term costs once infrastructure and service demands are accounted for. For counties with limited tax bases, these losses directly constrain the ability to support future development. This does not imply that residential development is undesirable, but rather that its fiscal sustainability depends on density, infrastructure design, and service costs.

Compact Development and More Durable Fiscal Returns

Evidence from other Florida communities shows that fiscal outcomes improve substantially when growth is concentrated in compact, mixed-use, or infill patterns.

Urban3 analyses across Florida consistently show that dense, walkable development generates significantly more revenue per acre than is required to maintain infrastructure, while low-density development often produces net fiscal losses once long-term costs are included (Urban3 & 1000 Friends of Florida, 2024). In several Florida case studies, compact development generated net positive returns of several thousand dollars per acre, while comparable low-density patterns produced negative returns.

These findings are particularly relevant for North Florida counties facing growth pressure near existing towns and employment centers. Infill development typically leverages existing roads, utilities, and public services, reducing marginal costs. Greenfield expansion, by contrast, requires new infrastructure and service provision that often exceeds the additional tax revenue generated.

Case Studies: What Has Worked and What Has Not

Florida's experience with rural and small metro development provides clear examples of both successful and limited outcomes. These cases underscore the importance of aligning capital investment with local capacity, infrastructure readiness, and land use context.

Successful or Partially Successful Investments

Several projects within or adjacent to the Opportunity Florida region demonstrate how coordinated infrastructure, land readiness, and market access can translate into realized economic activity.

In Walton County, mixed-use and compact development patterns in communities such as Seaside, Alys Beach, and Rosemary Beach have generated significantly higher value per acre than surrounding low density development. Urban3 estimates show that these areas produce substantially greater taxable value while requiring less infrastructure per unit of development, supporting both tourism employment and local fiscal sustainability included (Urban3 & 1000 Friends of Florida, 2024). While these communities benefit from coastal amenities, their underlying design principles are relevant to inland town centers seeking to strengthen local cores.

In Jackson County, industrial park investments paired with transportation access have supported manufacturing and logistics activity, though realized employment has been below initial projections in several cases. Projects that included site preparation and utility upgrades were more likely to move forward than those relying on incentives alone, consistent with Florida RAO evaluations emphasizing readiness over nominal incentive levels.

Projects with Limited or Delayed Outcomes

CEFA's RAO project inventory also includes several developments that illustrate the limits of incentive-driven strategies when capacity constraints remain unresolved. Across multiple Opportunity Florida counties, projects with announced capital investments exceeding ten million dollars experienced delays or partial completion due to workforce shortages, housing constraints, or insufficient local infrastructure funding.

For example, manufacturing projects in inland counties with limited rental housing and long commute distances reported difficulty staffing positions even after facilities were constructed. In these cases, employment levels fell short of projections, reducing expected multiplier effects and limiting fiscal returns to local governments. These outcomes are consistent with national evidence showing that labor mobility and housing constraints shape long run adjustment more than initial capital outlays.

Similarly, several logistics and warehousing proposals stalled after initial site selection due to the cost of extending water, sewer, or road infrastructure beyond what fiscally constrained counties could support. While state incentives reduced upfront costs for firms, local governments faced long term service obligations without sufficient revenue offsets, leading to project renegotiation or withdrawal.

Implications for Opportunity Florida Strategy

Taken together, these cases reinforce the central lesson of literature. Place-based development succeeds when investments relax binding local constraints in infrastructure, housing, workforce systems, and institutional capacity. Projects that rely primarily on incentives or job announcements without addressing these constraints are far more likely to underperform or fail.

For Opportunity Florida, this evidence supports a development strategy focused on sequencing investments. Industrial recruitment should follow, not precede, investments in site readiness, housing availability, workforce pipelines, and local fiscal capacity. By grounding grant applications and project prioritization in demonstrated constraints and documented outcomes, Opportunity Florida can present a credible, evidence-based case to state and federal funders.

Linking Infrastructure, Capacity, and Economic Impacts in Analysis

Consistent with best practices in federally funded regional economic assessments, this study employs a two-layer analytical framework that integrates descriptive analysis of regional conditions with formal economic impact modeling. The objective is to assess Opportunity Florida's economic structure, identify binding development constraints, and generate policy-relevant evidence to support strategic investment and funding decisions.

Because IMPLAN does not explicitly account for housing supply, labor mobility, or local institutional capacity, its estimates cannot reflect how investments may relax these constraints over time. As a result, IMPLAN findings are interpreted within the broader diagnostic framework developed in this study, rather than as standalone predictions of growth.

The first layer consists of systematic data collection and descriptive analysis of labor markets, demographics, housing conditions, infrastructure availability, and institutional capacity across the ten counties in Opportunity Florida. Using standardized indicators drawn from sources such as the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW), the American Community Survey (ACS), FCC broadband data, and administrative records, the analysis establishes baseline conditions and identifies spatial variation in workforce availability, housing supply, commuting patterns, broadband access, and socioeconomic stressors. This component is explicitly diagnostic rather than predictive, with the goal of identifying binding constraints such as housing shortages, workforce limitations, or infrastructure gaps that shape regional adjustment and investment feasibility.

The second layer applies economic impact analysis using IMPLAN to quantify the direct, indirect, and induced effects of existing industries and economic activity within the region. IMPLAN is used to measure employment, income, and output linkages across sectors, providing a structured representation of inter-industry relationships and local multiplier effects. Importantly, IMPLAN results are interpreted with respect to the infrastructure and capacity context identified in the descriptive analysis, rather than as standalone estimates of growth potential. This approach aligns with contemporary critiques of impact modeling that caution against treating multipliers as evidence of automatic or unconstrained economic expansion.

In this context, IMPLAN is used to describe the structure of existing economic activity and inter-industry linkages, not to predict behavioral responses or long-run equilibrium outcomes. Integrating these two layers allows the analysis to move beyond static impact estimation toward a capacity-aware interpretation of economic structure. By linking observed multiplier effects to underlying infrastructure, housing, and institutional conditions, the framework supports a more credible assessment of where additional investment is likely to generate durable economic returns and where capacity constraints may limit absorption.

Finally, the methodology explicitly incorporates considerations of institutional capacity and funding readiness, which recent policy-oriented research identifies as critical determinants of development outcomes (Freshwater, 2021; Ajilore, 2025). By standardizing economic and demographic indicators across counties and documenting baseline conditions in a transparent and replicable manner, the project enhances Opportunity Florida’s ability to prioritize investments, coordinate across jurisdictions, and compete effectively for federal and state funding. In this sense, the analytical framework functions not only as an evaluative tool, but also as a foundation for strategic planning and grant readiness.

III – Demographic Analysis

This section presents a comprehensive demographic and socioeconomic profile of Opportunity Florida’s ten rural counties: Calhoun, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty, Wakulla, North Walton, and Washington. The analysis draws on thirty-six indicators organized across eight thematic areas: population composition, family and child welfare, health and disability, education, labor market and industry, housing development, and land use and fiscal capacity, to construct a baseline portrait of where these communities stand and how conditions have shifted over the past two to three decades. Together, these indicators capture not only the economic constraints facing Opportunity Florida counties but also the structural assets and workforce characteristics that inform targeted investment strategy. Where data permits, trends are presented longitudinally to distinguish persistent structural patterns from cyclical variation. Walton County is included in the analysis at the county level throughout; readers should note that county-wide figures largely reflect the coastal Emerald Coast economy, while the three Opportunity Florida communities within Walton County—Freeport, Paxton, and DeFuniak Springs—are located in the rural inland portion of the county and face conditions more consistent with neighboring Opportunity Florida counties.

Table 1. Economic and Demographic Indicators — Opportunity Florida Analysis

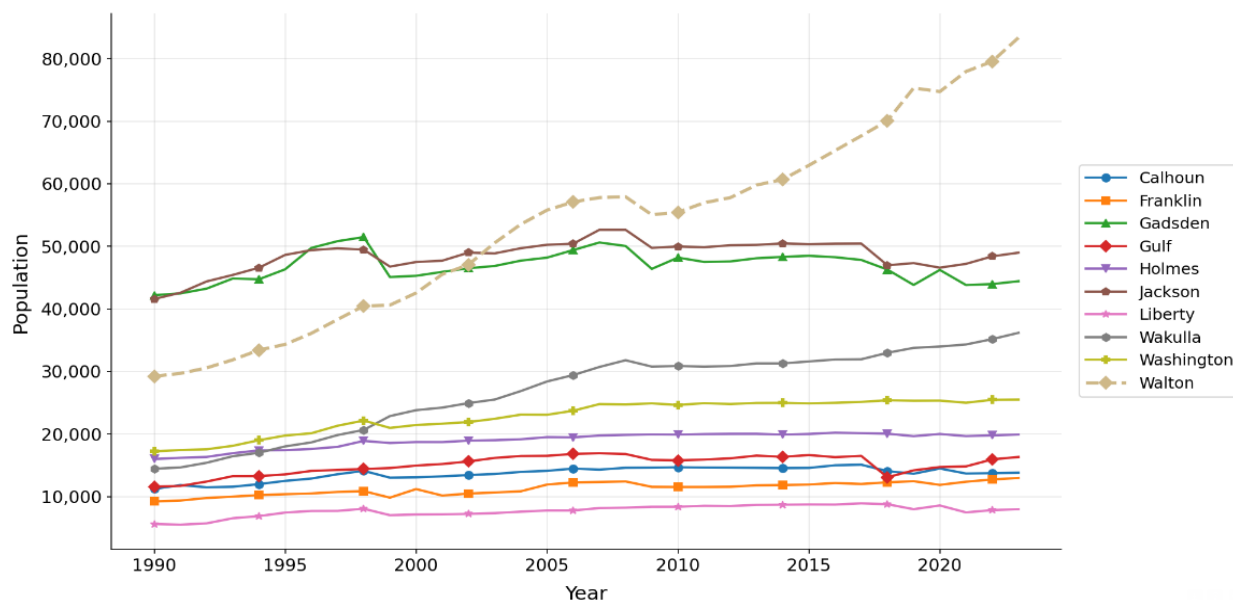
Variable	Description / Scope
Population & Composition	
Demographic Changes	Total population trends by county, 1990–2023
Average Age of Population	Median age by county; aging workforce and dependency ratio implications
Household Size	Share of households by size category, including large-household burden
School Age Population	Children ages 5–17 by county, 2010–2023
Family & Child Welfare	
# of Children in Subsidized Childcare	Children in subsidized center-based care, 2003–2023
Childcare Cost	Weekly center-based childcare costs by county, 2008–2022
# of Single-Parent Households	Share of children living in single-parent homes, 2010–2023
Home Schooled / Unschooled	Number of homeschooled children by county, 2014–2024
Food Stamps / SNAP	Households receiving SNAP/food stamp benefits, 2009–2023
TANF Population	TANF benefits dispersed by county, 2002–2025
Welfare	Broader public assistance participation (combined SNAP, TANF, other)
Health & Disability	
Population on Disability	Share of population with a disability compared to Florida average, 2012–2024
Education	
Education Levels	Bachelor’s degree attainment and share lacking a high school diploma by county, 2010–2024
Poverty & Income	
Poverty Level	Number and share of residents below the federal poverty line, 2009–2023
Average Income / Per Capita Income	County-level per capita income trends, 2010–2023
Number of People Working at Minimum Wage	Share of the workforce at or near the wage floor
Labor Market & Industry	
Employment	Total employed persons by county, 1990–2025
Labor Force	Civilian labor force size and participation rate, 2016–2025
Unemployment	Unemployment rate by county, 1990–2025

Variable	Description / Scope
Average Wage	Average wage by major industry sector, 2001–2024
Industry Sector Information / Trends	Employment and wage trends across major industry sectors
GDP / Real GDP	Real GDP by county or regional aggregate, 2001–2023
Business Formation	New business registrations by year, 1990–2023
Business Failure Rate	Business closures and failure rates by year, 1990–2022
Worker Commute Time	Commute time by county
Broadband Access	Share of households with broadband internet connectivity
Housing Development & Activity	
Housing Permits	Residential building permits issued by county, 1980–2023
Housing Cost / Rent Cost	Monthly rental costs and active rental listing counts, 2016–2025
Housing Inventory	Total housing units available by county, 2016–2025
Housing Value	Assessed residential property value trends, 2008–2024
Land Use & Fiscal Capacity	
Farmland Just Value	Just value of farmland, 2010–2025
Industrial Land Just Value	Just value of industrial land, 2010–2025
Timberland Just Value	Just value of timberland, 2010–2025
All Property Value	Total assessed property value by county, 2010–2024
Value of One Mill of Property Tax	Revenue generated by one mill of property tax per county, 2008–2024
Sales Tax Collections	Annual county-level sales tax revenue, 1999–2025
Millage Rate	Millage rate by county, 2010–2024

Population Growth and Composition

Between 1990 and 2023, the Opportunity Florida region experienced sharply divergent population trajectories. Most interior counties (Calhoun, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty, and Washington counties) remained essentially flat or declined, with several counties ending the period with fewer residents than they had three decades earlier. This stagnation reflects a decades-long pattern of outmigration, limited economic opportunity, and an aging population that has characterized much of rural North Florida.

Counties with access to coastal amenities or proximity to major employment centers followed a different path. Wakulla County grew substantially as Tallahassee’s workforce expanded southward, and Gulf County has seen renewed growth following post-Hurricane Michael recovery investment. These diverging trajectories have compounding effects: population growth generates tax revenue, attracts services, and deepens labor markets, while population stagnation or decline erodes all three.

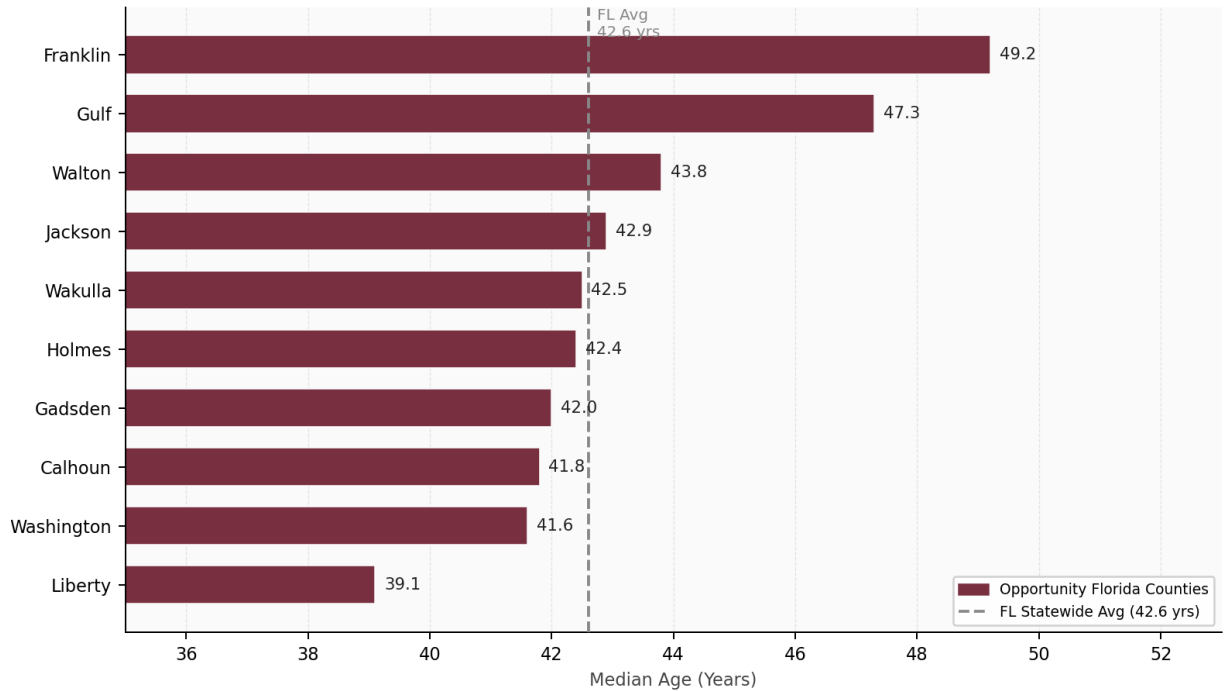


Source: Florida Department of Revenue, Sales Tax Collections Database.

* Demographic distributions provided by IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota.

Figure 2. Total Population (1990–2023)

Household composition across the region reflects persistent differences in economic conditions and demographic structure. The interior counties of Holmes, Gadsden, Liberty, and Washington counties carry the highest shares of large households (five or more people), ranging from roughly 8.8 to 10 percent of all households, as of 2023. Larger households in lower-income counties place more strain on limited budgets, reduce resources per person, and increase demand for affordable multi-bedroom housing that is largely absent from these markets. Coastal and near-coastal, such as Wakulla and Gulf, show smaller average household sizes, consistent with the in-migration of professionals, retirees, and smaller families drawn to amenities rather than economic necessity.

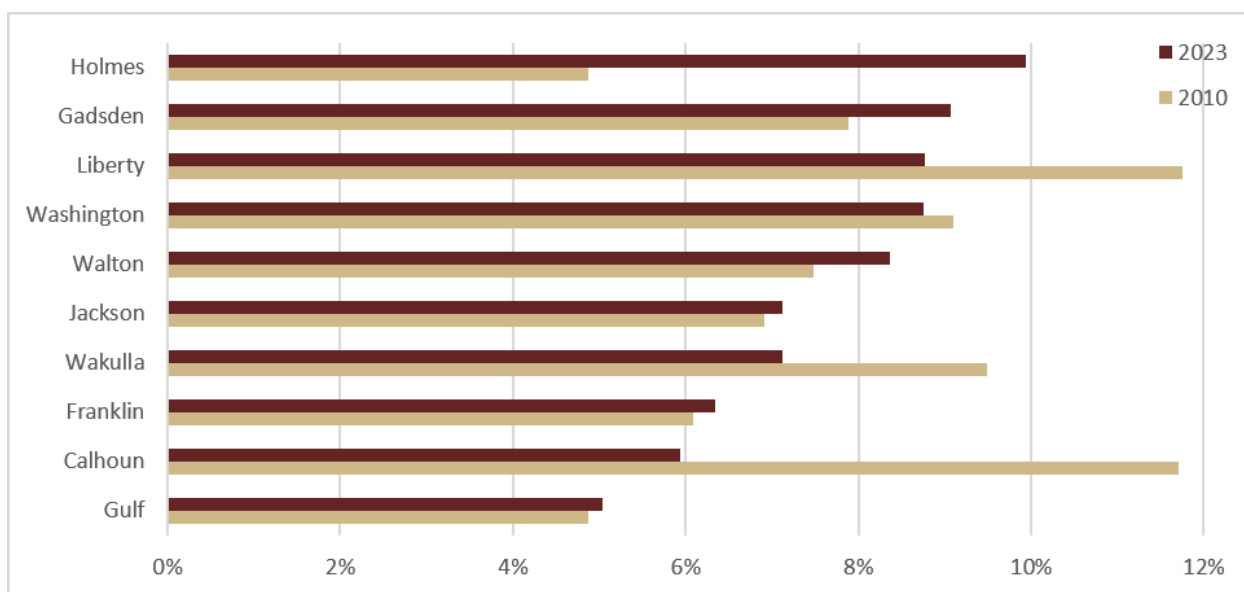


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS).
 Published median age figures do include inmate population in median age. Refer to appendix B for median age without inmate population.

Figure 3. Median Age (2023)

The median age of residents across Opportunity Florida reveals a region that leans older than the statewide average in several counties, with important implications for workforce availability and long-term labor supply. Franklin County has the oldest population in the region at 49.2 years, well above Florida's statewide median of 42.6 years, a pattern consistent with a county that has seen younger working-age residents leave while older retirees and established households remain. Gulf County follows at 47.3 years, also reflecting an aging demographic profile in a coastal-adjacent community with limited local employment options for younger workers. On the other end of the spectrum, Liberty County is the youngest at 39.1 years, followed by Washington (41.6) and Calhoun (41.8) counties, all slightly below the Florida average, suggesting a relatively younger working-age base in the region's most rural interior counties. Most Opportunity Florida counties cluster within a narrow range around the Florida statewide median, but the outliers at both ends tell a meaningful story: counties with the oldest median ages tend to also have the highest outmigration of younger residents, the greatest dependency ratios, and the most constrained pipelines of entry-level workers entering the local labor market.

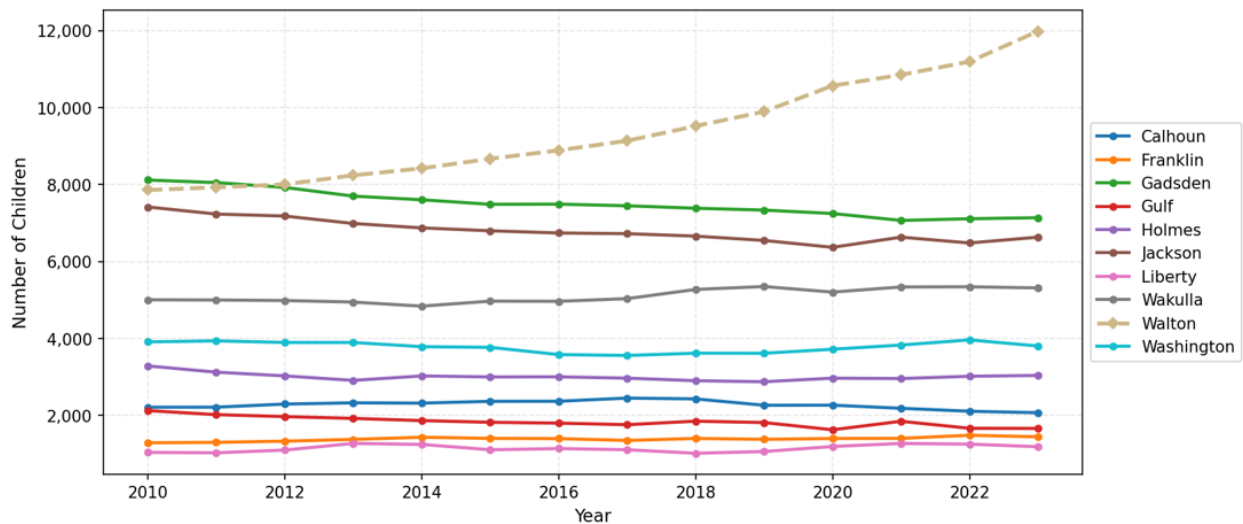
It is important to note that ACS median age estimates include incarcerated persons counted at their facility location, which may meaningfully affect reported figures in counties with large correctional populations relative to their total population. Liberty County, with an estimated 1,749 inmates across its correctional facilities in a total population of approximately 8,400, is the most affected, its reported median age of 39.1 likely understates the civilian population's median age. Calhoun, Gulf, Wakulla, and Washington counties are similarly affected to varying degrees. The adjusted context table in the appendix documents institutional population shares by county for reference.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey; IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota.

Figure 4. Share of Households with 5 or More People (2010 and 2023)

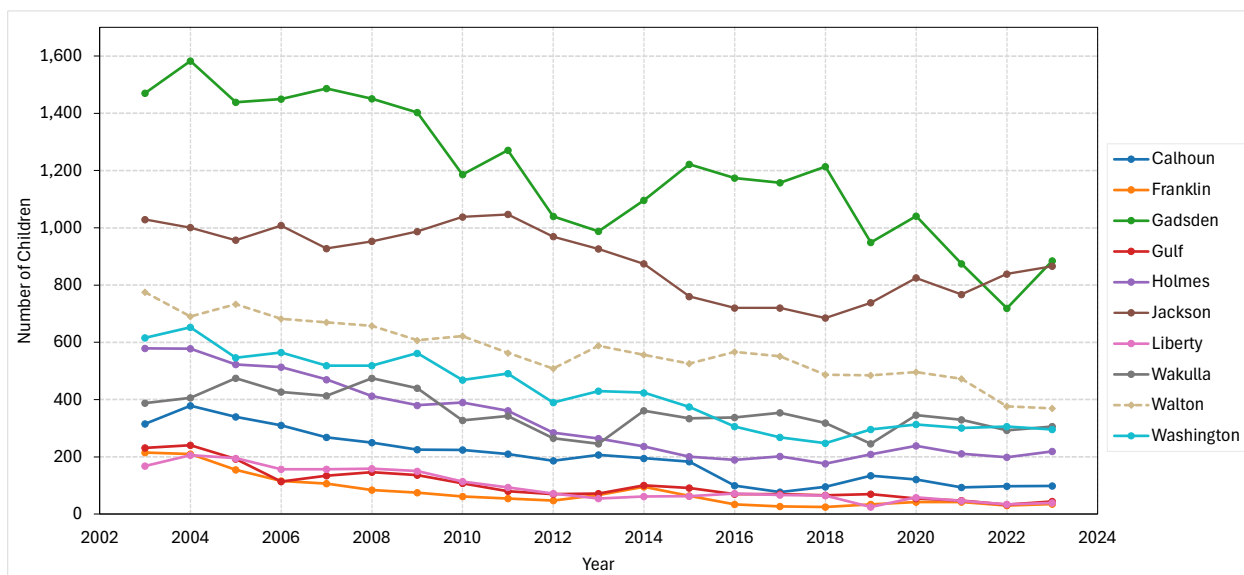
Residential construction activity reinforces this picture. The near absence of new building permits in Holmes, Calhoun, Liberty, and Washington counties through the 2010's and into the 2020's indicates that the housing stock serving these large households is aging and not being replenished. Wakulla and Gulf counties show more active construction, consistent with their population growth. The gap between household need and housing supply in interior counties creates crowding pressures and deters workforce immigration even when jobs are available.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey; IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota.

Figure 5. School-Age Population (Children Ages 5–17)

Trends in the school-age population (children aged 5 to 17 years) show a clear difference across the region, with a few fast-growing coastal counties and several interior counties losing school-age children since 2010. Between 2010 and 2023, Walton County experienced dramatic growth in school-age children, rising from 7,860 to 11,988 students, an increase of about 4,128 children or 53 percent. Several other counties also posted gains: Liberty (+14 percent), Franklin (+12 percent) and Wakulla (+6 percent) counties. By contrast most interior counties saw declines. Gadsden County lost roughly 979 school-age children (~12 percent), Jackson fell by about 786 children (11 percent). Gulf declined by about 464 children (22 percent), and Calhoun and Holmes dropped by about 6 to 8 percent each. Countywide, Walton experienced dramatic growth, rising from 7,860 to 11,988 school-age children, an increase of about 4,128 children or 53 percent, though much of that growth is coastal and may not reflect conditions in Walton’s inland towns.

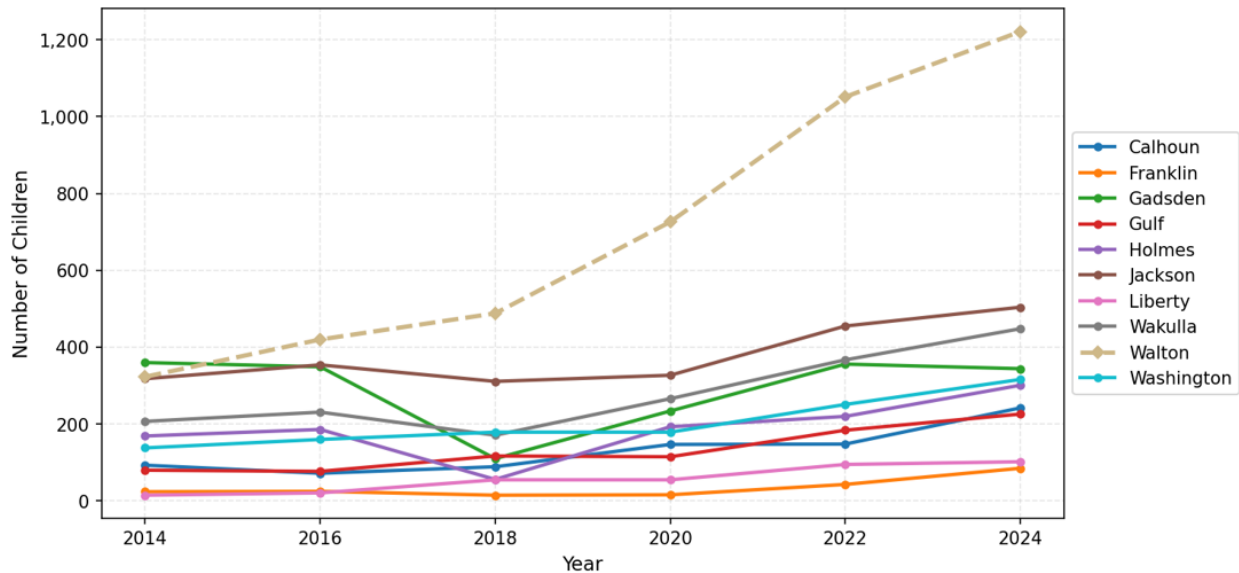


Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, National Database of Childcare Prices (NDCP).

Figure 6. Number of Children in Subsidized Childcare (2003–2023)

Access to subsidized childcare is a critical support for working families, particularly in lower-income rural communities where childcare costs can represent a prohibitive share of household income. Figure 6 tracks enrollment in subsidized childcare programs across Opportunity Florida counties from 2003 to 2023, showing a substantial regional decline of about 45 percent over the period, falling from roughly 5,790 children in 2003 to approximately 3,157 in 2023. Gadsden and Jackson counties consistently record the highest enrollment, together accounting for well over half of all regional subsidized childcare throughout the period. Walton County's enrollment fell from 775 to 369 despite strong overall population growth, suggesting rising incomes shifted families out of eligibility, while Franklin, Gulf, and Liberty counties saw the sharpest proportional declines.

The broad regional decline reflects both tightening eligibility thresholds under Florida's School Readiness program and long-run population losses in interior counties. However, the steeper drops in counties like Calhoun, Franklin, and Liberty counties, where poverty rates remain well above the state average, likely signal shrinking program access rather than reduced need. Low childcare availability is a recognized barrier to workforce participation, especially for single parents. As the region works to attract and retain workers for emerging industries, ensuring an adequate supply of affordable, subsidized childcare will be an important infrastructure consideration.



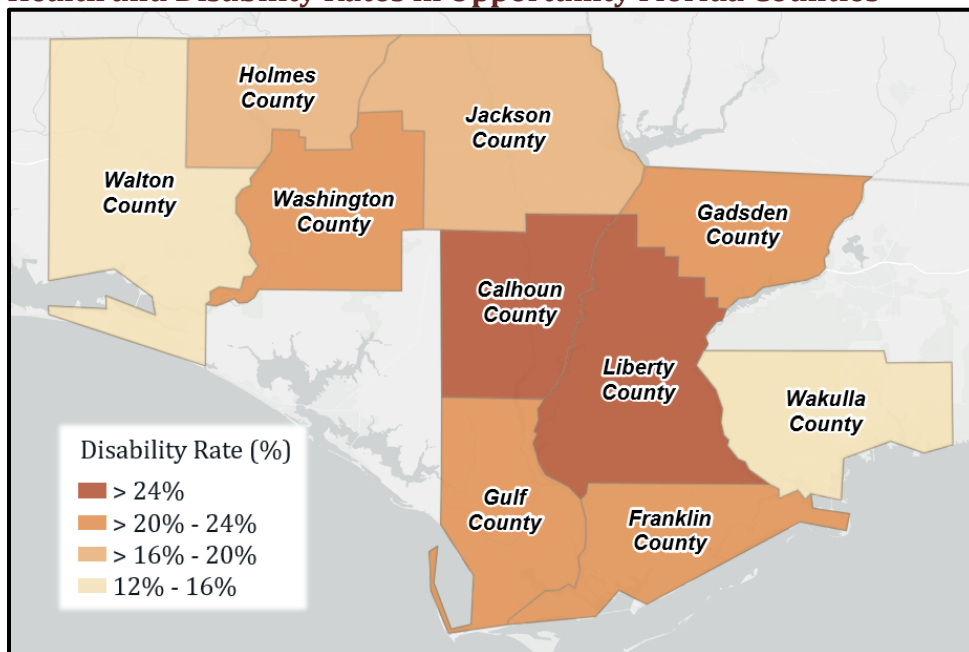
Source: Florida Department of Education (FDOE)

Figure 7. Number of Children Homeschooled (2014–2024)

The number of homeschooled children has risen sharply across all ten Opportunity Florida counties since 2014, accelerating during and after, the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Florida Department of Education data reported biennially, regional homeschooling enrollment grew from approximately 1,727 children in 2014 to 3,789 in 2024, an increase of about 119 percent. Walton County dominates the regional picture, growing from 323 to 1,221 homeschooled children and accounting for roughly one-third of all regional enrollment by 2024, consistent with its broader population growth and influx of higher-income residents. The most striking proportional increases occurred in Liberty (up 580 percent) and Franklin (up 254 percent) counties, though these remain small in absolute terms.

The continued growth through years 2022 and 2024 suggests that many families who shifted to homeschooling during COVID have not returned to traditional school settings. This trend has meaningful implications for public school funding, which in Florida is tied to enrollment counts, and for regional workforce planning as homeschooled children may follow different pathways to employment or higher education. For a region already contending with below-average educational attainment, monitoring this trend alongside traditional school enrollment will be important for understanding the future human capital base of Opportunity Florida.

Health and Disability Rates in Opportunity Florida Counties

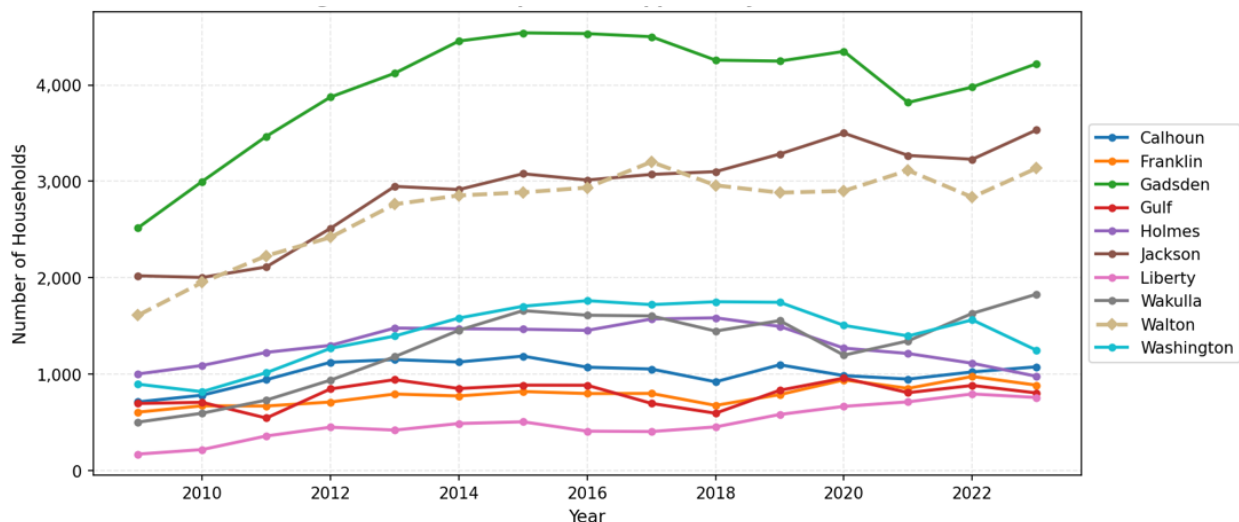


Source: U.S. Census Bureau (ACS); provided by Cornell University, Yang-Tan Institute

Figure 8. Percentage of Population with a Disability (2024)

Figure 8 shows disability rates across Opportunity Florida counties compared to Florida's 12.1 percent average. Interior counties record noticeably higher rates than most coastal counties. Walton County and Wakulla County report 15 percent and 12.6 percent, respectively (Walton County is slightly above the state average; Wakulla County is roughly in line). Calhoun County and Liberty County have the highest rates at about 24.1 percent and 24.8 percent, double the state average. These differences align with broader population and labor-market patterns, where interior counties tend to have older populations and fewer local employment opportunities. Later in the report we outline targeted strategies to help interior counties attract and retain younger and experienced workers.

These population patterns have major economic impact implications. Counties with growing populations and low disability rates, like Walton and Wakulla counties, benefit from more workers and consumers. This, in turn, supports new business growth, infrastructure improvements, and higher tax revenues. Counties with high disability rates and little growth face the opposite situation. Fewer working-age people mean fewer workers, more strain on public services, and less consumer spending to support businesses. This population divide helps partially explain why some Opportunity Florida counties thrive economically while others struggle, as shown in the labor market and industry sections below.

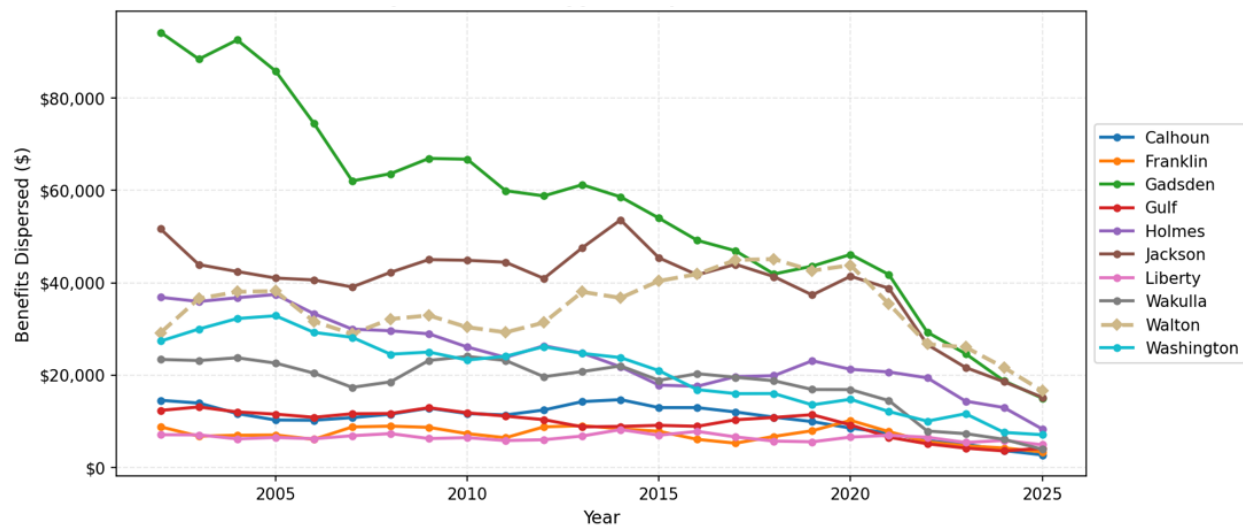


Source: Florida Department of Health, FLHealthCHARTS.

Figure 9. Number of Households Receiving SNAP/Food Stamps (2009–2023)

Figure 9 shows the number of households receiving SNAP benefits across Opportunity Florida counties from years 2009 to 2023. Unlike many economic indicators that show a coastal-interior dichotomy, SNAP enrollment grew substantially across nearly every county in the region over the period. Gadsden County and Jackson County carry the largest caseloads, growing from 2,518 and 2,021 households in 2009, to 4,220 and 3,533 in 2023, respectively. The most striking growth occurred in Liberty County, which saw a 341 percent increase from 172 to 759 households, and Wakulla County, which grew 263 percent, from 504 to 1,830 households. Holmes County was the only county to see a slight decline, dropping marginally from 1,003 to 979 households over the period.

The broad upward trend in SNAP enrollment, even in counties like Walton County and Wakulla County that have experienced strong population and income growth, reflects how deeply food insecurity is embedded in the region. In counties where poverty rates exceed 20 percent, such as Gadsden County, Calhoun County, and Liberty County, SNAP has become a structural feature of household income, rather than a temporary safety net. The continued growth of SNAP caseloads alongside rising per capita incomes in some counties suggests that income gains have not been evenly distributed, and that a substantial share of households across the region remain economically vulnerable.

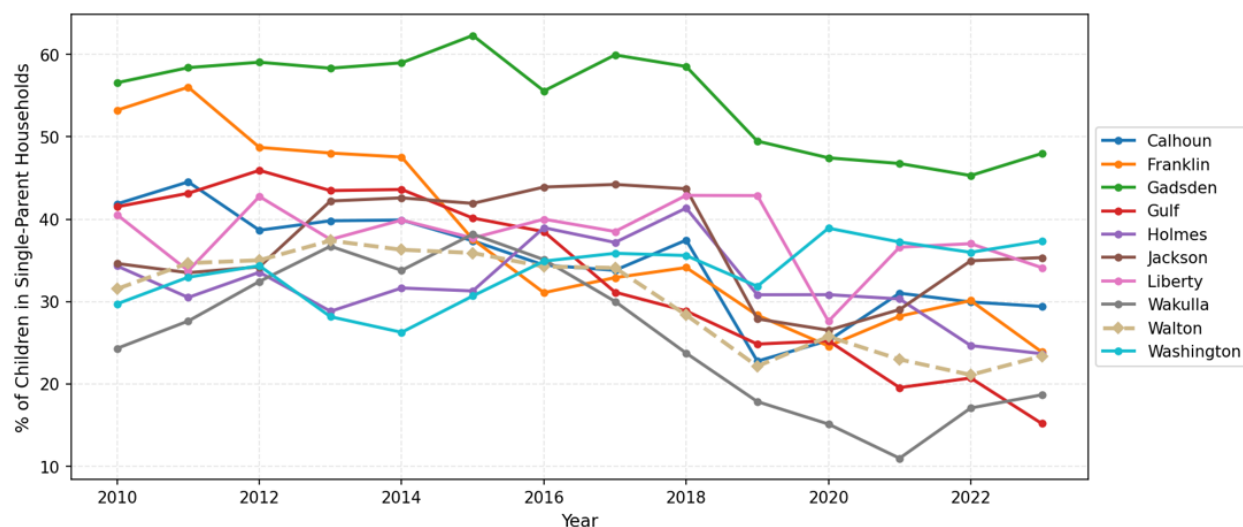


Source: Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF)

Figure 10. TANF Benefits Dispersed (2002–2025)

Figure 10 tracks the total dollar value of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits dispersed across Opportunity Florida counties from years 2002 to 2025. In contrast to SNAP, TANF disbursements declined sharply across the entire region over this period. Gadsden County saw the largest absolute decline, falling from approximately \$1.13 million in 2002 to \$296,000 in 2023, a reduction of 74 percent. Calhoun County, Gulf County, and Wakulla County all saw declines exceeding 60 percent. Walton County was the most stable, declining only 11 percent from \$350,000 to \$313,000, while Liberty County also showed relative resilience, dropping 24 percent over the same time span.

The divergence between rising SNAP enrollment and sharply declining TANF disbursements reflects the broader trajectory of welfare reform in Florida and nationally. Federal and state policy changes over the past two decades have tightened eligibility criteria, imposed work requirements, and set time limits on TANF assistance, effectively shifting the safety net away from direct cash support and toward in-kind benefits like food assistance. For the most distressed interior counties in the region, this shift means that families in poverty have fewer resources to cover non-food expenses such as rent, utilities, and transportation. TANF's decline is not a sign of reduced need, but rather of reduced access to the program itself.



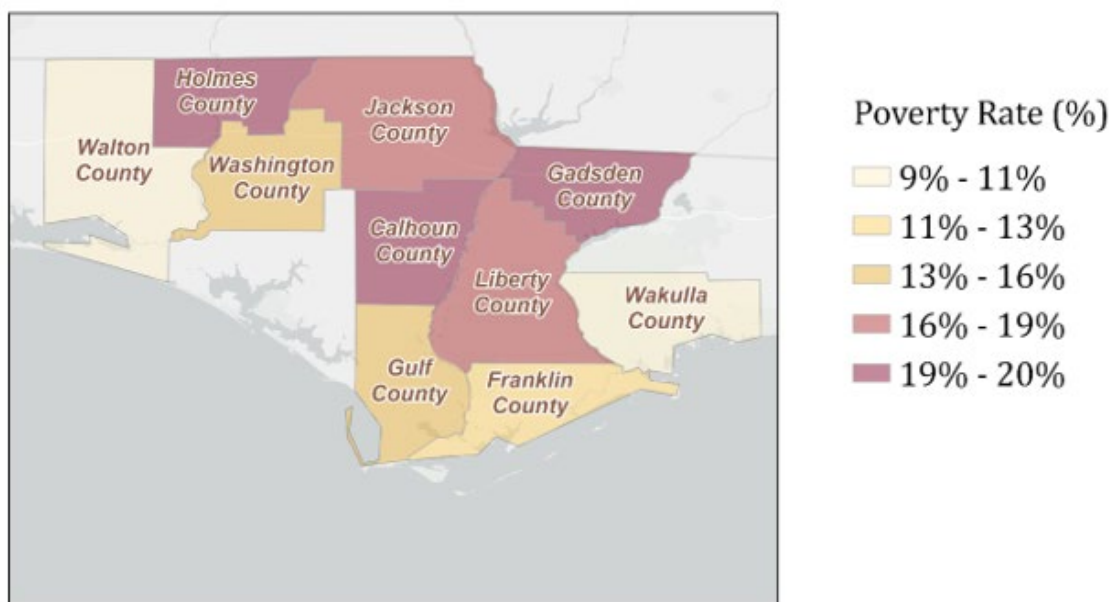
Source: Florida Department of Health, FLHealthCHARTS.

Figure 11. Percentage of Children in Single-Parent Households (2010-2023)

Figure 11 shows the share of children living in single-parent households across Opportunity Florida counties from years 2010 to 2023. Gadsden County stands out as the highest in the region throughout the entire period, with nearly 48 percent of children in single-parent households in 2023, down from a peak of about 62 percent in 2015. Jackson County and Washington County also remain elevated, at approximately 35 and 37 percent, respectively in 2023. By contrast, Gulf County experienced a remarkable decline from 41.5 percent in 2010 to just 15.2 percent by 2023, and Wakulla County fell from 24.3 to 18.7 percent over the same period, reflecting the demographic transformation brought by in-migration and rising household incomes in those counties.

Single-parent household rates matter for regional economic analysis because they correlate strongly with child poverty, reduced workforce availability, and increased demand for public services. In counties like Gadsden County and Liberty County, where high single-parent rates overlap with elevated poverty and declining TANF support, the cumulative burden on families is significant. Children raised in single-parent households face documented disadvantages (in general) in educational attainment and long-run earnings, which in turn affect the future workforce capacity of the region. Addressing these household structural patterns requires more than job creation alone, pointing to the need for coordinated investments in childcare, family support services, and accessible employment in proximity to where these families reside.

Poverty and Income Trends



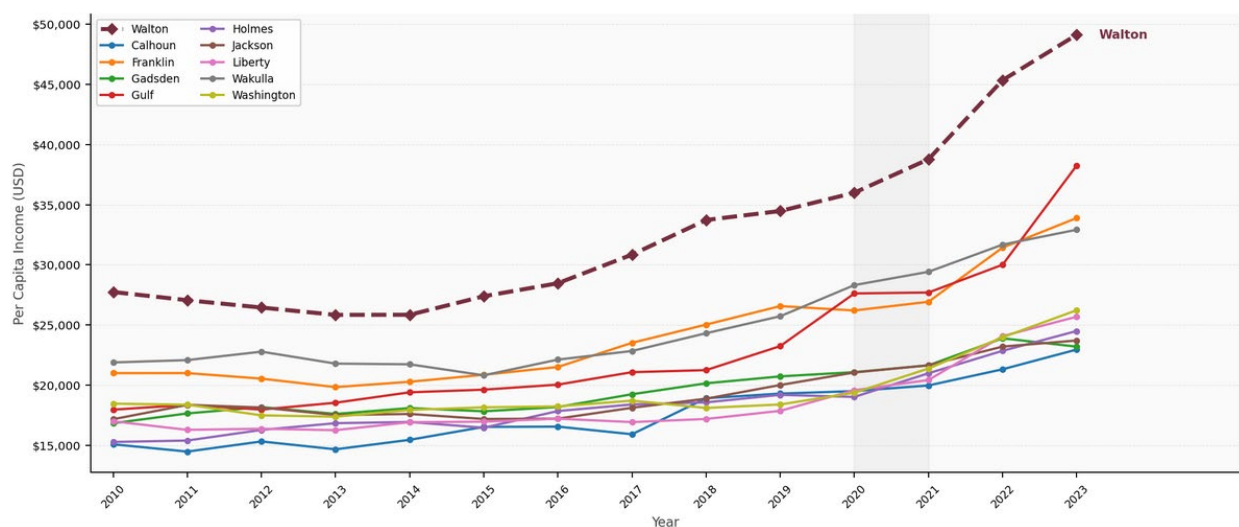
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE)

Figure 12. Poverty Rate (2023)

Figure 12 shows how many people live in poverty across Opportunity Florida counties from years 2009 to 2023. Gadsden and Walton counties have the most people in poverty at about 9,100 each in 2023, followed by Jackson County with 8,618. But these numbers are slightly misleading. Walton County has many people in poverty because it has many people overall. Walton County's poverty rate is just 10.1 percent, below Florida's 12.5 percent average. The poverty rates for North Walton County: Freeport 7.36 percent, Paxton 11.01 percent and DeFuniak Springs 20.2 percent. Converting those percentages to counts and summing them works out to an aggregate North Walton poverty rate of about 13.6 percent, or 2,188 people in poverty out of 16,121 residents (2023 estimates). Wakulla County is similar with 3,501 people in poverty but only a 9.2 percent rate. Interior counties struggle more; Gadsden and Calhoun counties both have poverty rates over 20 percent, even though their total numbers are lower than Walton County. The difference is important. Coastal counties have growing populations, so poverty is less intense. Interior counties have shrinking populations.

Safety net programs reveal how serious poverty is in Opportunity Florida counties. In 2023, over one-quarter of households in Gadsden (25.6 percent) and Liberty (26.2 percent) counties needed food stamps to feed their families. Walton County has just 10.1 percent and Gulf County has 12.4 percent. Calhoun and Jackson counties are at 20.7 percent and 19.1 percent, respectively, suggesting that many working families can't afford food. Food stamp use grew markedly from 2009 to 2023, up 263 percent in Wakulla and 341 percent in Liberty

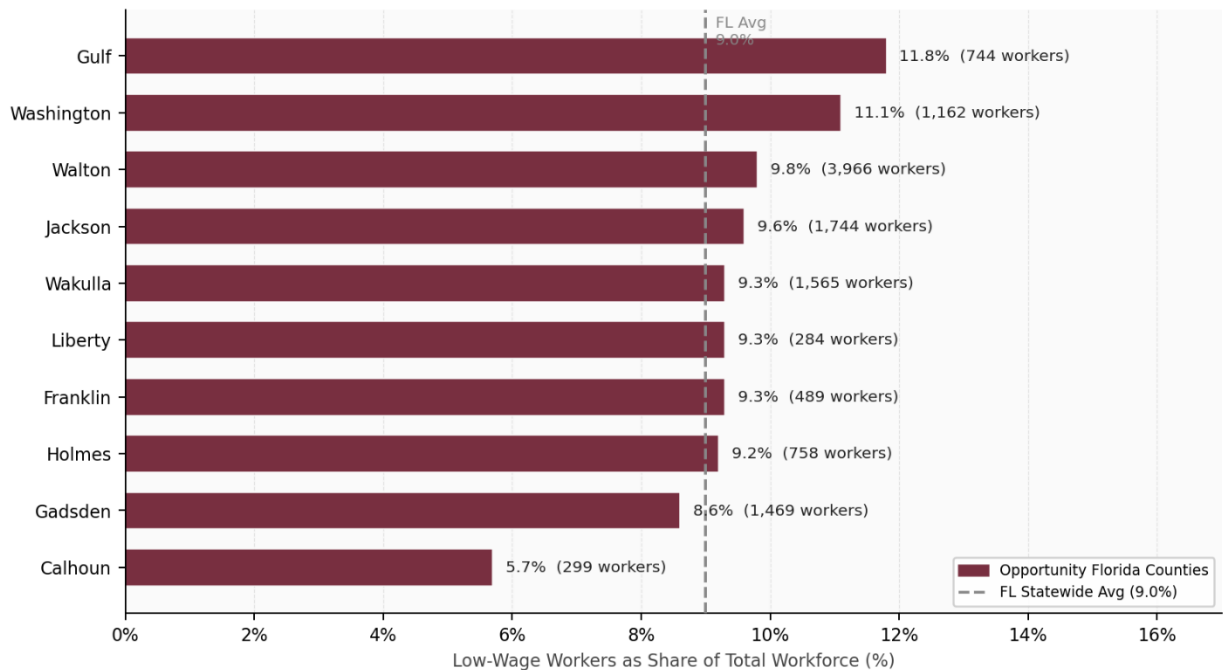
counties. At the same time, cash welfare dropped 70-85 percent across the region because of federal cuts, work requirements, and time limits. This tells an important story. Welfare reform cut cash assistance but didn't reduce poverty. It just shifted poor families more from cash to food stamps. Interior counties still depend most on welfare. Liberty County gets \$0.66 in welfare cash per person compared to \$0.10 in Wakulla County. These programs appear to be aimed towards managing poverty, not solving the real issues like too few jobs, low pay, and lack of training.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey; provided by IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota.

Figure 13. Per Capita Income (2010–2023)

Figure 13 shows income per person across Opportunity Florida counties from years 2010 to 2023. All counties experienced income growth, but significant gaps persist. Walton County leads with 2023 income of \$49,119, nearly 30 percent above Florida's \$38,000 average, reflecting benefits from coastal tourism and affluent people moving in. Gulf County, despite its smaller size, experienced remarkable 113 percent income growth, reaching \$38,258 by 2023. Wakulla and Franklin counties also maintain incomes above \$32,000. Interior agricultural counties are lagging over time. Gadsden, Jackson, and Calhoun counties all report incomes below \$24,000, roughly 60 percent of Walton County's level and well below the state average. While all counties show rising incomes, the gap between coastal and interior counties widened from 2010 to 2023. Walton's income grew 77 percent compared to Gadsden's 38 percent growth. This widening gap reinforces the economic divide seen in poverty and employment patterns across the region.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2019-2023 5-year Estimates.

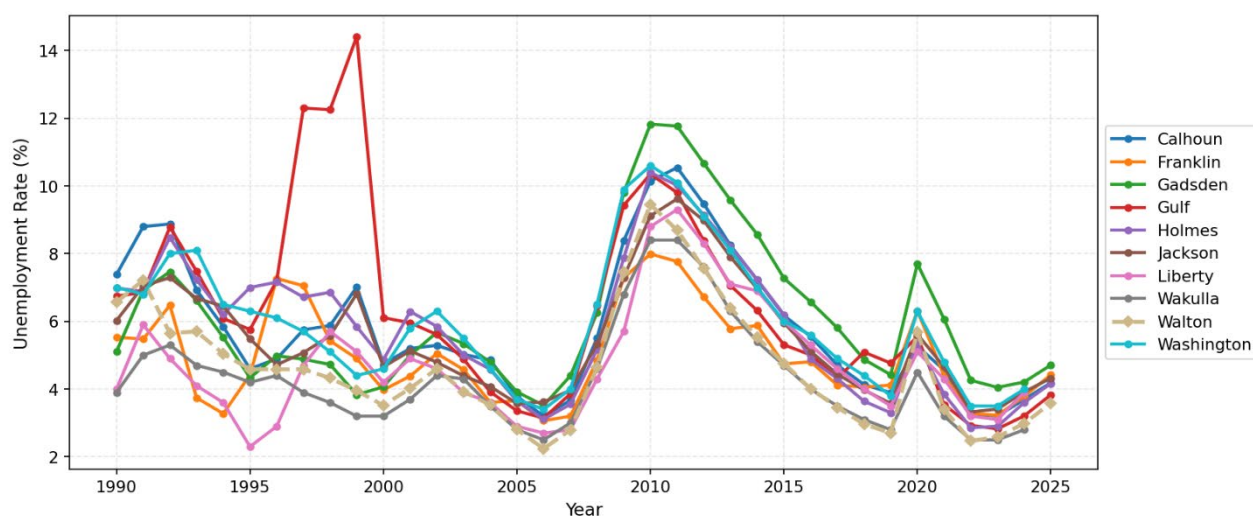
*Threshold earnings below \$15,000 per year. Florida's state minimum wage was \$13.00/hour in 2023 (\$27,040 annually full-time), above the federal minimum of \$7.25/hour. The \$15,000 threshold captures workers earning well below either benchmark, reflecting the most severe end of the low-wage distribution.

Figure 14. Share of Workers Earning Below the Federal Low-Wage (2023)

The share of workers earning below \$15,000 annually, used here as the closest available ACS proxy for severely low-wage work and representing earnings well below both Florida's 2023 state minimum wage of \$12.00 per hour and the federal minimum of \$7.25 per hour, reveals meaningful variation across Opportunity Florida counties and points to where the wage floor is severely binding. Gulf County leads the region at 11.8 percent of its workforce in this category, followed by Washington at 11.1 percent, both exceeding the Florida statewide average of 9.0 percent. Jackson, Walton, Wakulla, Liberty, and Franklin cluster tightly between 9.3 percent and 9.8 percent, sitting at, or above, the state average. Gadsden County, despite its rural designation, performs better than most at 8.6 percent, reflecting the stabilizing influence of state government and corrections employment that provides more consistent wages than the seasonal and service-sector jobs that dominate neighboring counties. Calhoun County records the lowest low-wage share in the region at 5.7 percent, well below the state average, though this should be interpreted with caution given its small labor force of just 5,214 workers (where margins of error are proportionally larger).

Across the region, roughly 13,500 workers earn below the minimum wage threshold, about 8.9 percent of the regional workforce, nearly matching the statewide rate. What the

aggregate figure masks is the sectoral context: in most Opportunity Florida counties, low-wage work is concentrated in retail, food service, agricultural support, and personal care, sectors with limited upward mobility and high part-time and seasonal exposure. For workers in these jobs, the absence of sufficient local employment alternatives means low wages are less a temporary starting point and more a persistent structural condition. Combined with the region's below-average per capita income and elevated poverty rates documented elsewhere in this section, the concentration of minimum-wage and near-minimum-wage workers underscores the depth of the earnings challenge facing Opportunity Florida households.

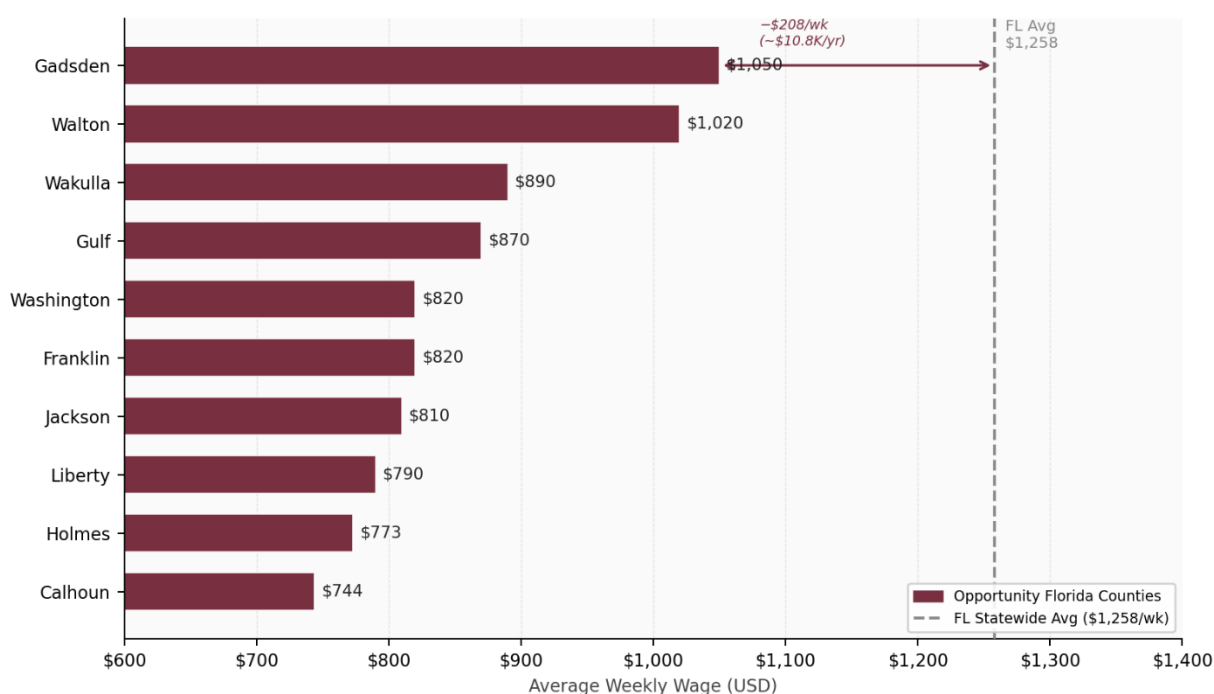


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Figure 15. Unemployment Rate (1990–2025)

Unemployment across Opportunity Florida counties followed the broader national cycle, reaching its peak during the Great Recession, which officially spanned from December 2007 to June 2009, before declining steadily through the mid-2010s and into the pre-pandemic low of 2019. Most counties hit their highest unemployment rates in 2010 or 2011. Gadsden County peaked at 11.8 percent in 2010, representing approximately 2,379 unemployed residents out of a civilian labor force of about 20,100. Washington County and Calhoun County both peaked above 10 percent in the same period. By 2019, unemployment rates had fallen sharply across the region, with Walton County reaching 2.7 percent, Wakulla County 2.8 percent, and most interior counties falling to between 3 and 4 percent. The COVID-19 pandemic produced a brief spike in 2020, though the disruption was notably shorter and less severe than the Great Recession, with most counties recovering by 2021.

As of 2023 and 2024, unemployment rates across the region remain near historic lows, ranging from 2.5 percent in Wakulla County to 4.2 percent in Gadsden County. In absolute terms, Gadsden County and Jackson County carry the largest unemployed populations at roughly 700 and 620 individuals respectively, while Liberty County recorded just 77 unemployed residents in 2023. However, low unemployment rates in some interior counties mask a more concerning trend: labor force contraction. Gadsden County's civilian labor force shrank from about 20,100 in 2010 to 17,500 by 2024, and Calhoun County, Franklin County, and Liberty County all saw similar declines. This suggests that in some areas, falling unemployment reflects workers leaving the labor force rather than finding jobs, a dynamic that cannot be addressed by job creation alone.

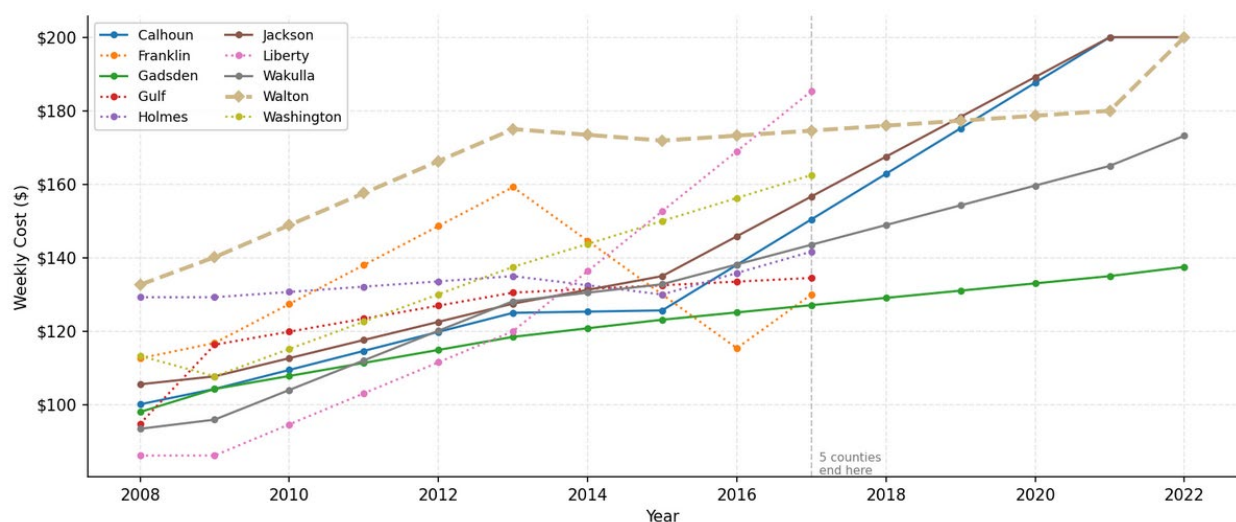


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW); accessed via Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) unsuppressed data

Figure 16. Average Weekly Wage (Q3 2023)

Average weekly wages across Opportunity Florida fall substantially below the Florida statewide average of \$1,258, underscoring the persistent earnings gap between the region's rural economy and the broader state labor market. Gadsden County leads the region at \$1,050 per week, the closest to the statewide benchmark, driven by its concentration of state government employment, corrections facilities, and professional services that command higher wages than the agricultural, retail, and service-sector jobs that dominate other counties. Walton County follows at \$1,020, though that figure 16 reflects the full county average and is pulled upward by the coastal tourism and hospitality economy along the 30A

corridor; wages in the rural inland portions of North Walton County are likely considerably lower. At the bottom of the regional range, Calhoun County records the lowest average weekly wage in the region at \$744, a figure that by some measures ranks among the lowest in the state, followed closely by Holmes at \$773. Even the region's highest-paying county, Gadsden, falls \$208 per week below the Florida average, a gap that compounds to roughly \$10,800 per year in lost earnings for a full-time worker compared to the statewide benchmark. This wage floor dynamic reinforces many of the other patterns seen across the region: lower wages reduce local consumer spending, limit household savings, constrain the local tax base, and contribute to the outmigration of working-age adults seeking better economic opportunities elsewhere.



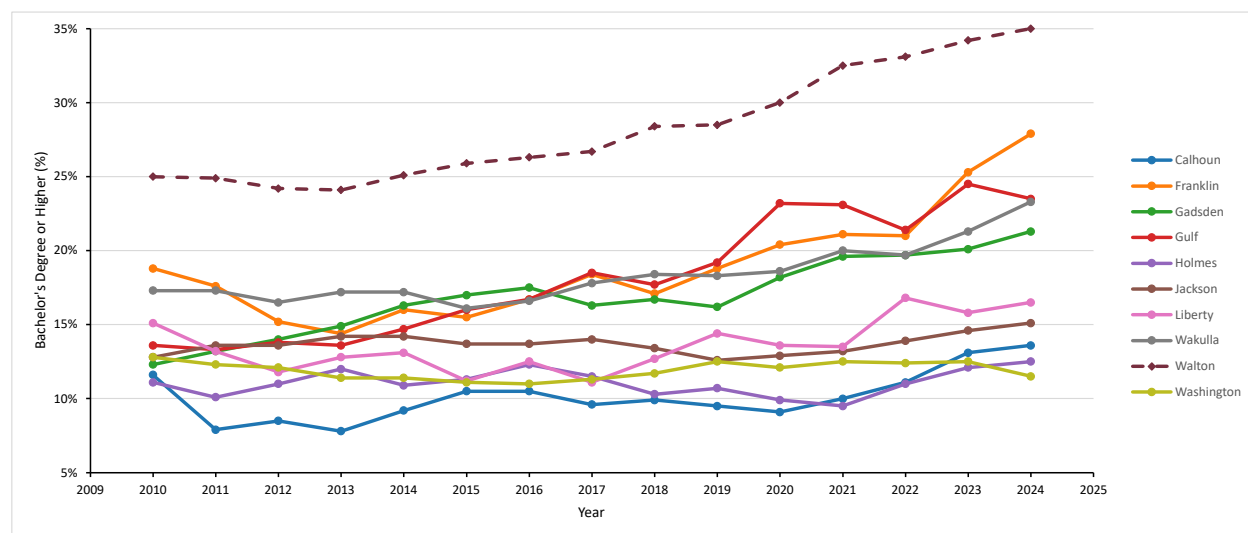
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, National Database of Childcare Prices (NDCP).

Figure 17. Weekly Center-Based Childcare Costs (2008–2022)

Figure 17 shows the weekly median price charged for full-time, center-based childcare across Opportunity Florida counties from 2008 to 2022, broken out by infant, toddler, and preschool age groups. Infant care is consistently the most expensive category across all counties, with Calhoun County, Jackson County, and Walton County all reaching \$200 per week by 2022, an annualized cost of approximately \$10,400 per year. Wakulla County reached \$173 per week for infants, while Gadsden County remained the most affordable at \$137.50 per week. Preschool care is the least costly tier across the region, ranging from roughly \$100 to \$145 per week in the most recent data available, while toddler rates fall between the two. Across all counties and age groups, costs increased substantially from their 2008 baselines, in several cases nearly doubling over the period.

The financial burden of these costs falls heaviest on families in interior counties where incomes are lowest. In Calhoun County, annual infant care costs of \$10,400 represent nearly 49 percent of per capita income, and in Jackson County the same cost amounts to about 45 percent. Liberty County and Washington County face burdens of roughly 40 and 35 percent, respectively. By comparison, the same \$10,400 annual cost in Walton County represents only about 23 percent of per capita income, reflecting that county's much higher earnings. These disparities help explain the sharp decline in subsidized childcare enrollment documented earlier in this section. As center-based costs have risen and subsidy availability has tightened, families in the most economically stressed interior counties are increasingly priced out of formal childcare arrangements, creating barriers to workforce participation that compound the region's broader labor market challenges.

Educational Attainment in Opportunity Florida Counties



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey; retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Figure 18. Share of Population Aged 18 Years and Older with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher (2010–2024)

Education levels vary widely across Opportunity Florida counties and shape job opportunities. As of 2024, Walton County leads with 35 percent of residents holding college degrees, followed by Franklin (27.9 percent) and Gulf (23.5 percent) counties. These counties also constitute the three highest per-capita income counties, which reflects labor market returns to higher education. No county in Opportunity Florida surpasses Florida's statewide bachelor's attainment rate of 35.8 percent. Washington County has the lowest rate at just 11.5 percent, less than one-third of Walton County and far below the state. All counties except Washington County improved from 2010 to 2024, but at very different rates. Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, and Walton grew more than 9 percentage points in college graduates, Wakulla grew 6 percentage points, and the remaining counties experienced moderate growth. Washington County's attainment rate fell by 1.3 percentage points. These education gaps explain the income and poverty differences shown earlier. Counties with more college graduates like Washington, Franklin, and Walton have stronger economies and higher incomes. Counties with less education face skill gaps that limit good jobs and wage growth.

The region's educational foundation shows real strength when viewed over time. Several counties have quietly built a skilled workforce in fields that match local employer needs. Health services, nursing, and public safety are consistently the highest-awarded credentials across the region, driven largely by Northwest Florida State College and Gulf Coast State College, which together serve the bulk of the Opportunity Florida population. Technical and

trades programs at regional institutions, welding, engineering technology, phlebotomy, and other hands-on certificates, produce graduates who feed directly into local manufacturing, construction, and healthcare employers. The Associate in Arts degree remains the most common award region-wide, providing a transfer pathway for students continuing to four-year universities. Where educational attainment is lowest, the consequences are most visible. The counties with the highest share of residents without a high school diploma — Liberty (20.3 percent), Gadsden (18.3 percent), and Calhoun (17.4 percent) — are among the lowest-earning counties in the region. The primary growth opportunity lies in the large share of residents — between (Franklin) 56.5 and (Holmes) 75 percent — who hold a diploma or some college but no four-year degree. Converting that middle tier into credentialed workers, particularly in health, advanced manufacturing, and technical trades where local colleges already have program infrastructure, represents the clearest pathway to closing the regional wage gap. Programs in advanced engineering and higher-level technology remain limited across local institutions, which constrains the region's ability to attract higher-wage employers in those sectors.

Two additional institutions play important roles in the region's educational landscape that merit recognition. Chipola College in Marianna serves the interior panhandle counties most central to Opportunity Florida's mandate, including Calhoun, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty, and Washington, offering associate degrees, bachelor's degrees in select fields, and workforce certificates aligned with local employer needs. Tallahassee State College extends access to higher education for residents in Gadsden and Wakulla counties on the eastern edge of the region, providing both transfer pathways and applied technical credentials. Together these institutions fill geographic gaps left by Northwest Florida State College and Gulf Coast State College, ensuring that residents across the full breadth of the Opportunity Florida footprint have access to postsecondary education within reasonable commuting distance.

The education story is not just about college attainment rates, it is also about what people study and what the colleges in the area offer. Across Opportunity Florida, a few clear patterns emerge from local program data. Health services and nursing are consistently the top credential areas, particularly at Northwest Florida State College and Gulf Coast State College. Public safety and corrections programs are heavily awarded across Holmes, Walton, and Washington counties, with related certificates among the most common completions. Business administration remains a steady pathway for students transferring to four-year institutions, while hands-on technical credentials, phlebotomy, welding, and engineering technology, are important locally, feeding directly into construction, manufacturing, and healthcare employers. The Associate in Arts degree is the most common award region-wide, functioning primarily as a transfer pathway rather than a direct workforce entry point. On the other end of the spectrum, advanced engineering specializations and higher-level

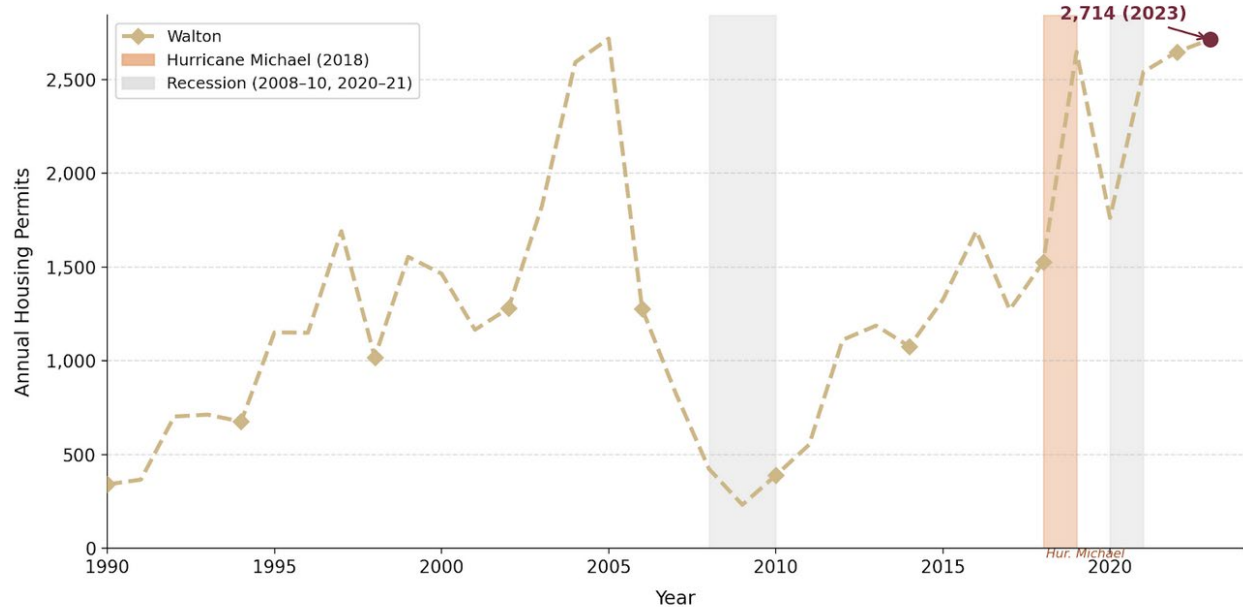
computer science programs are notably rare among regional completions, and that gap has real consequences. Local hiring demand is concentrated in health, public safety, trades, and manufacturing, fields where local institutions are reasonably well aligned, but the limited supply of graduates in higher-tech fields makes it harder for the region to attract employers in those industries, constraining the wage ceiling for workers across the board.

Housing Development and Activity

Housing conditions across Opportunity Florida's counties are a critical determinant of workforce availability, migration patterns, and the long-run viability of economic development investments. Construction activity, rental market depth, and property values tell a consistent story: most of the region faces suppressed construction, thin rental inventory, and limited new residential investment, conditions that constrain workforce attraction and make it difficult for employers to expand employment at scale.

Residential building permit data from 1980 through 2023 reveals stark disparities in construction activity across the region. Among rural Opportunity Florida counties, Wakulla County leads with 421 permits issued in 2022, followed by Gulf County at 299. Interior counties show dramatically lower activity: Holmes County issued just 11 permits in 2022 – an effective halt to new residential construction, while Calhoun, Liberty, and Washington counties combined issued fewer permits than Wakulla County alone. This near-stagnation directly limits housing supply, constrains in-migration, and makes workforce recruitment difficult for employers in these areas.

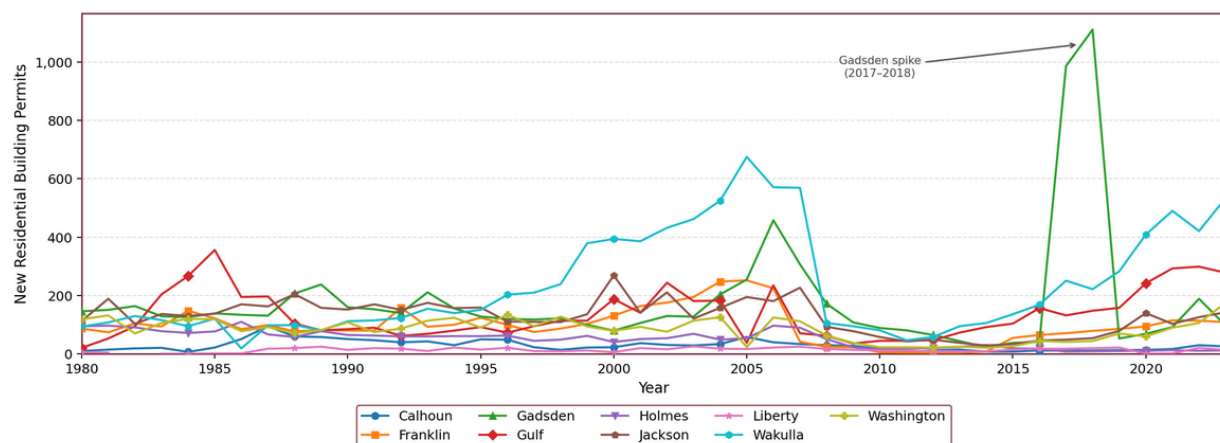
The 2008 recession left a lasting imprint on the region. Coastal-adjacent counties, Wakulla and Gulf, recovered through sustained residential demand. Interior agricultural counties have not recovered, and permit volumes in several cases remain below pre-recession levels, indicating a prolonged period of suppressed construction activity that shows no clear reversal through 2022.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Building Permits Survey; provided by HUD PD&R State of the Cities Data Systems (SOCDS).

Figure 19. Residential Building Permits Issued, Walton County (1990–2023)

Walton County’s construction activity dwarfs all other counties in the region, necessitating separate visualization to observe patterns in the remaining nine counties.

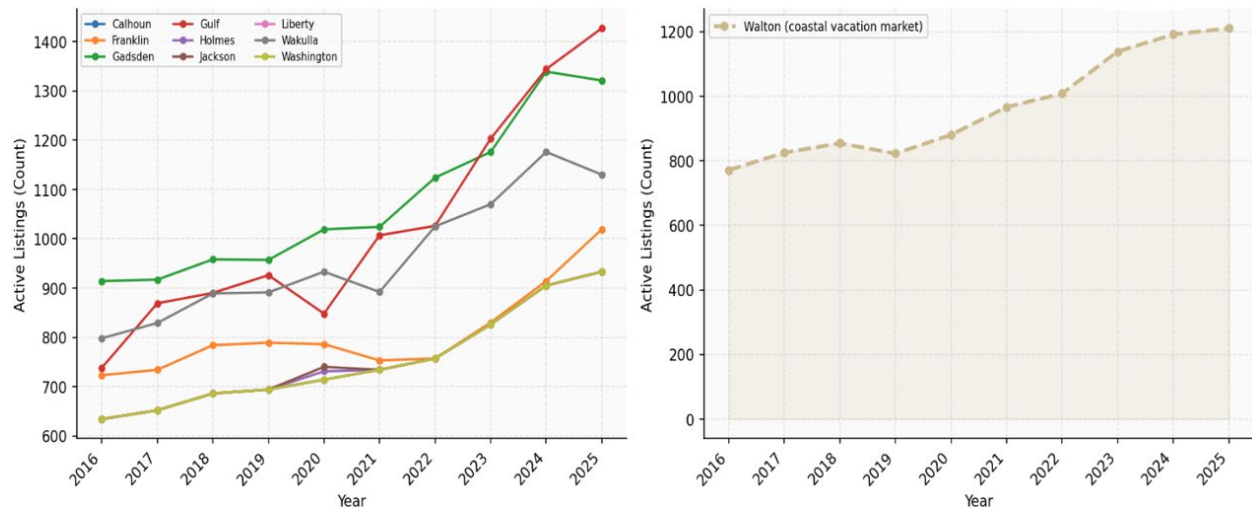


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Building Permits Survey; provided by HUD PD&R State of the Cities Data Systems (SOCDS).

Figure 20. Housing Permits Issued, Excluding Walton County (1980–2023)

Housing permit data reveals dramatic differences in construction activity across the Opportunity Florida region. Walton County issued 2,714 building permits in 2023, nearly five times more than any other county, driven by coastal development and tourism. Due to this exceptional volume, Walton is excluded from Figure 20 to better show trends among the remaining nine counties. Among these counties (Figure 20), Wakulla (534 permits) and Gulf (278 permits) lead in construction activity, though both remain below their peaks before the 2008 recession. Franklin County issued 109 permits in 2023. Interior counties show minimal activity. Holmes issued just 12 permits in 2023, down from 110 in 2006. Calhoun, Liberty, Jackson, and Washington combined issued 358 permits, fewer than Wakulla County alone. The lasting impact of the 2008 recession is clear. Walton and Wakulla counties recovered strongly while interior counties remain depressed, signaling stagnant housing markets and limited investment.

Relating to North Walton County, Freeport, Paxton, and DeFuniak Springs are driving very different housing patterns in Walton County. In 2023 Freeport saw a major building boom, receiving 561 permits in the first eight months and advancing planning approvals for a proposed development of about 6,100 homes and 64 townhomes on roughly 400 acres, while the city has moved permit processing in-house to Planning and Zoning and expects substantial local revenue from that change; Freeport's population grew from 1,787 in 2010 to over 7,800 by early 2026 and more than two dozen major projects are now in approval or construction, including the Freeport Hotel and several business parks. Paxton is much smaller and its permits are often handled by the Walton County Building Division; with an estimated 2023 population of about 621, Paxton saw modest growth of roughly 6.5 percent between 2022 and 2023, has about 254 households and a 76 percent homeownership rate, and shows a median home value near \$151,273, up about 0.3 percent year over year, while the city's 2024 audit attributes recent net position gains mainly to grant revenues rather than building impact fees. DeFuniak Springs' city permits are processed through the county, so annual city totals are not always reported separately, but Walton County authorized 2,883 new private housing structures in 2024, up from 2,714 in 2023, and monthly reports show peaks such as 536 single family permits in May 2024; local permit logs also show active residential work in DeFuniak Springs, the city's population is estimated near 7,315 in 2025 with about 4 percent annual growth, and development permits typically require roughly a two month review.



Source: Realtor.com, Monthly Housing Inventory Database

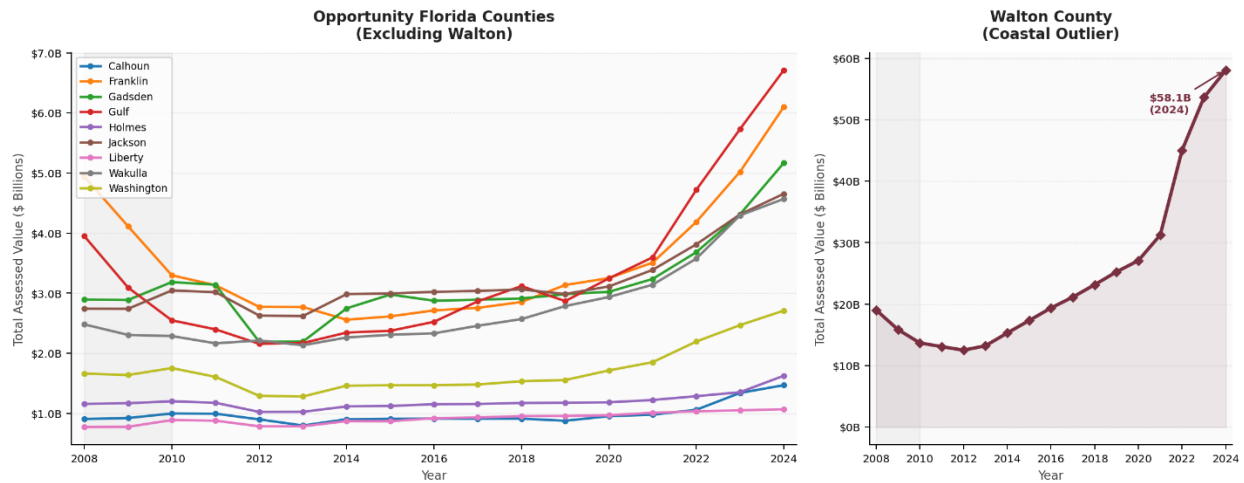
Figure 21. Active Rental Listings, Annual Average (2016–2025)

Active rental listing counts from years 2016 through 2024 document persistently thin rental markets across most of the Opportunity Florida region. Interior counties, including Calhoun, Liberty, and Holmes, show listing counts that remain in the single to low double digits throughout the period. The near-absence of a formal rental market in these counties is a structural barrier to workforce recruitment: workers relocating for employment have limited housing options outside of homeownership, a constraint particularly binding for younger workers, lower-income households, and individuals with limited savings for down payments.

Among counties with somewhat deeper rental markets, Franklin County shows consistently higher per capita rental activity relative to its small population, reflecting coastal character and seasonal demand. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a sharp contraction in available rental inventory beginning in 2020 across all counties, consistent with national rental market tightening. Coastal market pressures that intensified during this period have had indirect effects on rental availability and affordability in adjacent inland communities as households sought less expensive options further from the coast.

Total assessed property values from 2010 through 2024 document divergent fiscal and economic trajectories across the region. Gulf County experienced a substantial appreciation trajectory, particularly following Hurricane Michael recovery and subsequent development activity. Gadsden County also showed notable assessed value growth driven in part by Tallahassee's suburban expansion into its eastern portions. Interior counties including Calhoun, Holmes, and Washington showed more limited appreciation, with some periods of flat or modestly declining valuations. These diverging trajectories have direct implications

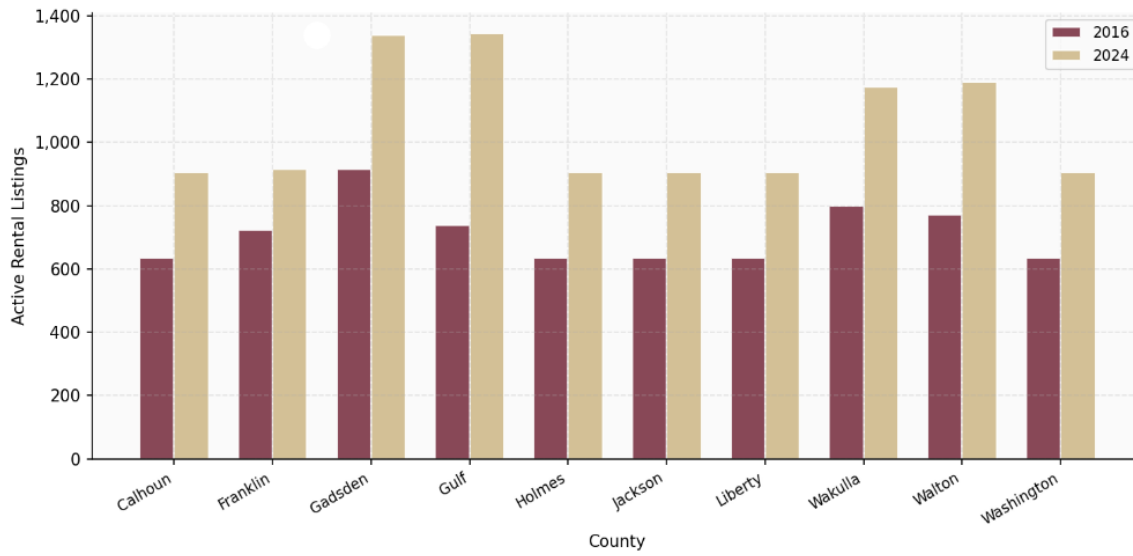
for fiscal capacity and the ability of county governments to fund the infrastructure and services needed to support economic development.



Source: Florida Department of Revenue

Figure 22. Total Assessed Property Value (2008–2024)

A comparison of active rental listings in 2016 and 2024 confirms that the rental housing stock in most interior counties has not meaningfully expanded over the eight-year period. Calhoun, Holmes, and Liberty counties show minimal listings in both years. Washington County showed a modest increase. The absence of a well-developed rental market across interior Opportunity Florida is a long-standing structural constraint that will not resolve through market forces alone given current population and income levels. Addressing the rental housing gap in these communities likely requires targeted programs, including subsidized development, housing rehabilitation, or employer-assisted housing, rather than reliance on organic market supply response.

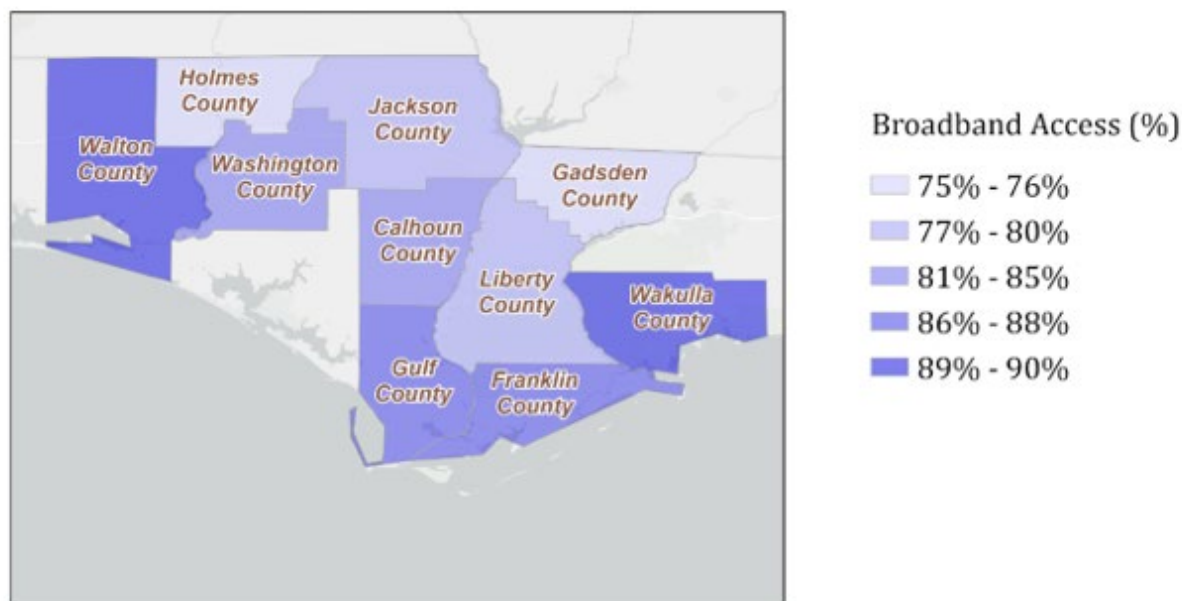


Source: U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Office of Policy Development and Research (PD&R); HUD User API.

Figure 23. Active Rental Listings, Annual Average (2016 and 2024)

Interior counties including Calhoun, Holmes, and Liberty counties had minimal active rental listings in both periods, confirming that the rental housing stock in these areas has not meaningfully expanded. Washington County showed a modest increase. For rural Walton communities specifically, the absence of a well-developed rental market is a structural constraint on workforce attraction that is masked entirely by the county's aggregate figures. Addressing the rental housing gap in Freeport, Paxton, and DeFuniak Springs requires targeted intervention that recognizes their inland character rather than treating them as part of the coastal Walton housing market.

Infrastructure and Connectivity



Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

Figure 24. Percent of Population with Broadband Access (2025)

Digital infrastructure access has improved across Opportunity Florida, with all counties posting broadband gains between 2021 and 2025 as federal and state investment reached rural areas. Coastal counties now approach near-universal connectivity, with Walton County at 90 percent, Wakulla County at 89 percent, and Franklin County at 88 percent, while interior counties have made real strides. Calhoun and Gadsden counties, despite being among the region's lowest-income counties, posted the strongest growth in the region at 25 percent between 2021 and 2025, likely reflecting the impact of targeted federal rural broadband programs and state grants to underserved communities. Holmes County was the notable exception, showing just 6 percent growth and a slight decline from 77 percent to 76 percent between 2024 and 2025, suggesting investment either bypassed the county or faced implementation barriers. A gap between coastal and interior counties remains; Gadsden and Holmes counties sit at 75 percent and 76 percent, respectively, compared to the low 90 percentiles on the coast, and that gap does carry economic implications. Adequate broadband is increasingly a baseline requirement for remote work, digital commerce, and educational access rather than a differentiating advantage, so counties still below 80 percent coverage face a modest but real headwind. It is one slice of a broader infrastructure pie, alongside transportation and workforce development, rather than being a primary driver of the region's employment challenges on its own.

Geographic barriers to employment make infrastructure challenges worse across the region. Total worker commute times, reflecting both the number of workers and average distances, reveal different patterns between coastal and interior counties. Walton County saw a 51 percent increase in total commute minutes between 2010 and 2023, rising from 587,720 to 885,235 minutes, which is roughly a 3.2 percent average annual increase. This is driven by rapid housing growth outpacing local job creation, transforming the county into a bedroom community where people live but commute to jobs in Destin, Fort Walton Beach, and Panama City. Wakulla County showed similar patterns with a 35 percent increase, as new residents commute to state government and professional jobs in Tallahassee. In contrast, Holmes County's 28 percent commute time increase happened despite flat population growth. This likely means that local job losses have forced remaining workers to travel farther for jobs, likely to Panama City or Dothan, Alabama. Meanwhile, Gadsden County's 3 percent decline in total commute time reflects working-age people leaving rather than better local jobs, as poverty and unemployment rates remain high. These commuting patterns show a critical concern. Workers in coastal counties face rising time and transportation costs getting to work. Interior county residents face shrinking local job markets that force either long-distance commuting, leaving the workforce, or moving away. Combined with limited broadband in interior counties, these transportation barriers restrict economic participation and limit remote work as an alternative to commuting.

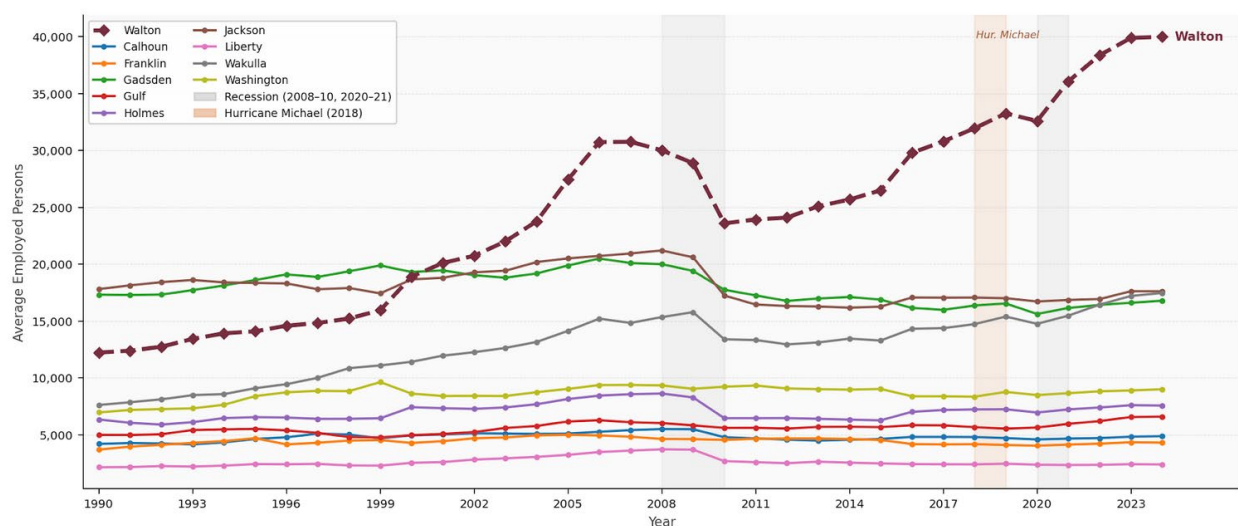
Labor Market and Industry Trends

The labor market structure of Opportunity Florida counties is fundamental to understanding both current economic conditions and future development prospects. This section analyzes civilian employment, labor force participation, industry sector wage trends, and average wages across the region from 2016 through the mid-2020s. A consistent interpretive challenge in this section is Walton County, whose county-level labor market indicators reflect the coastal tourism and hospitality economy rather than the rural communities of Freeport, Paxton, and DeFuniak Springs. Where patterns in the Walton County data diverge substantially from other counties, this divergence should be understood as reflecting the coastal economy rather than conditions in rural Walton County.

Property-level land use data from the Florida Department of Revenue's Notice of Ad Valorem (NAL) file provides a quantitative basis for treating North Walton as a distinct economic sub-region. Of North Walton's approximately \$8.4 billion in total just value, only 57 percent is classified as residential, compared to 87 percent for Walton County as a whole, reflecting the absence of the high-demand coastal vacation and second-home market that dominates South Walton's property base. Government and public-sector land uses account for 13 percent of North Walton's just value, the second-largest category, consistent with the corrections, state

government, and municipal employment that anchors the inland economy. Commercial property represents just 8 percent and industrial property a mere 2 percent, confirming that North Walton's private-sector economic base is thin relative to its population. Agricultural and timberland uses together account for an additional 18 percent, reflecting the rural land use context that surrounds DeFuniak Springs, Freeport, and Paxton. This composition, heavy government employment, limited commercial and industrial activity, and a significant agricultural land base, aligns North Walton far more closely with the interior Opportunity Florida counties than with the coastal tourism economy reflected in county-level Walton data.

Annual average employment counts from years 1990 through 2024 reflect the uneven character of regional economic recovery. Jackson County and Gadsden County maintain the largest employed populations among interior counties, reflecting their more substantial industrial and service sector bases. Several counties, including Calhoun, Holmes, and Liberty, show flat to modestly declining employment over the period. In these counties, low unemployment rates can be misleading: workers exiting the labor force entirely, rather than finding employment, often account for much of the apparent improvement. Labor force contraction limits the available workforce regardless of employer incentives and cannot be addressed by job announcements alone.



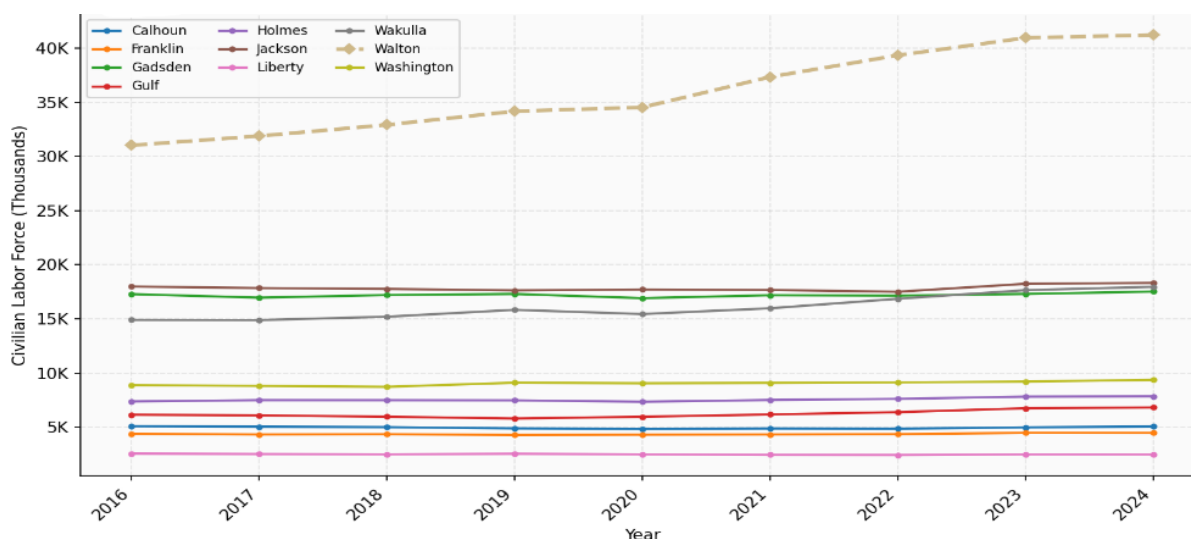
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS)

*Walton County shown with dashed line

Figure 25. Annual Average Employed Persons (1990-2024)

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact was heterogeneous across the region. Tourism-dependent coastal areas, including coastal Walton, experienced acute short-term disruptions followed by rapid recovery. Interior counties with larger shares of agriculture, manufacturing, and government employment showed more muted disruptions but slower subsequent recovery trajectories.

Civilian labor force trends from years 2016 to 2024 highlight a concerning divergence across the region. Analyzing both average annual employment and the total civilian labor force is essential, as the relationship between the two reveals whether a shrinking unemployment rate is due to job growth or simply a result of residents leaving the workforce. Gadsden County's civilian labor force declined modestly from its 2016 level, consistent with the outmigration of working-age adults. Calhoun, Franklin, and Liberty counties also showed labor force contraction, suggesting that persistent employment challenges are leading working-age residents to leave the region or exit the labor force entirely. Counties with genuine population growth -- including Wakulla and Gulf -- show corresponding labor force expansion, though the pace of that growth differs substantially by county.

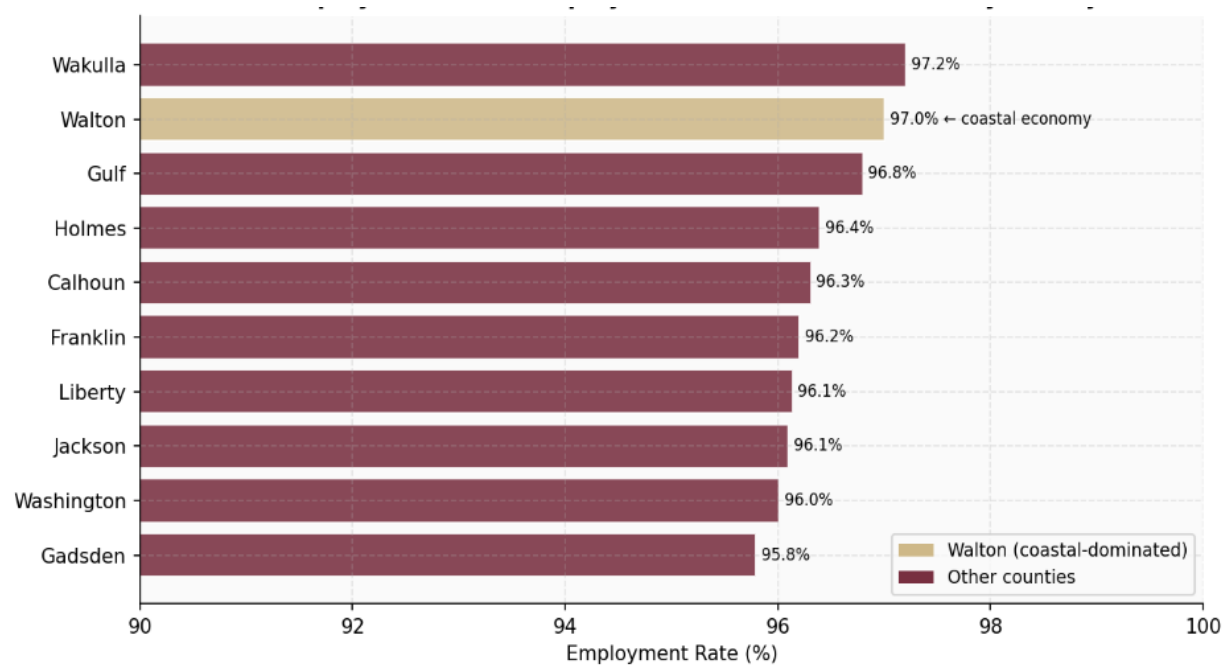


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Figure 26. Annual Average Civilian Labor Force (2016–2024)

Among interior counties, Gadsden County's civilian labor force declined modestly from its 2016 level, consistent with the outmigration of working-age adults. Calhoun County, Franklin County, and Liberty County also showed labor force contraction, suggesting that persistent employment challenges are leading working-age residents to either leave the region or exit the labor force entirely. Figure 26 presents employment rates for 2024 by county. While most counties show employment rates above 95 percent reflecting the tight

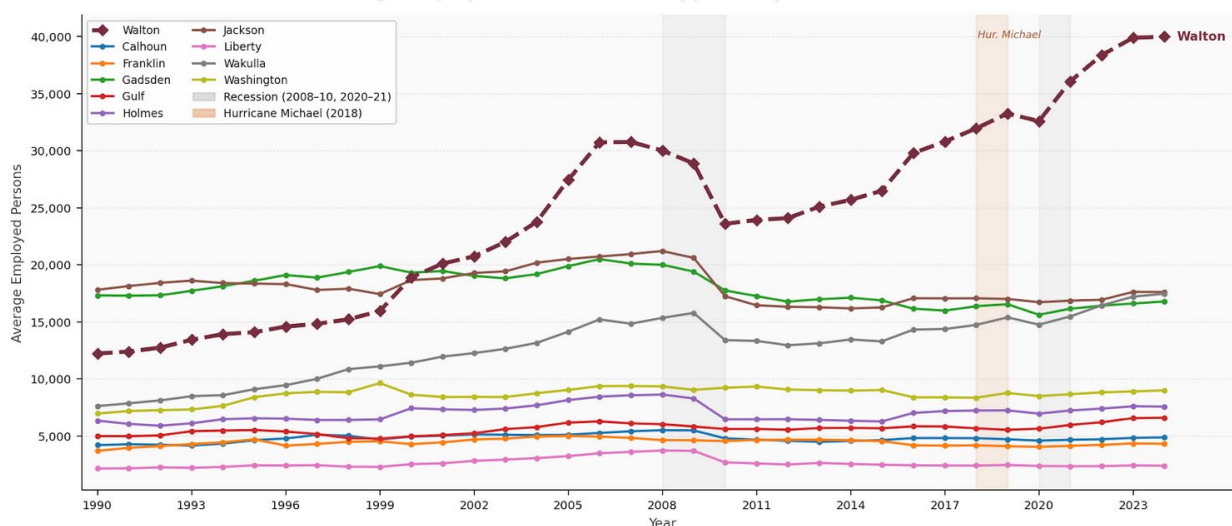
post-pandemic national labor market, the absolute size and trajectory of labor force participation is a more meaningful long-run indicator of economic health.



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Figure 27. Employment Rate (2024)

Industry sector wage trends from years 1990 through 2023 document how the composition and compensation of regional employment have evolved over more than three decades. Mining and extraction industries have consistently commanded the highest average wages in the regional economy, though they employ relatively few workers. Advanced manufacturing, in chemicals, metals, machinery, and electronics, similarly sustains above-average wages but has not grown substantially in employment terms. The services sector has grown significantly in both employment and absolute wage levels since the 1990’s, though average wages remain below those of manufacturing and finance. Agriculture continues to represent the lowest-wage sector, despite its significant physical presence across interior counties.



Source: Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation / Department of Economic Opportunity, Industry Sector Employment Data

Figure 28. Employment Across Industry Sector (1990-2023)

Employment across Opportunity Florida's major industry sectors reflects a regional economy shaped by public services, trade, and hospitality rather than manufacturing or high-wage professional industries. Wholesale and Retail Trade has consistently been the largest employment sector throughout the period, though its workforce has remained relatively flat since the mid-1990s, hovering between 160 and 215 workers. Services in health, legal, education, and social services have grown steadily and now rival retail as the region's second-largest employment base, a pattern consistent with an aging population and expanding public sector demand. Public Administration has seen the sharpest proportional growth of any sector, rising from near zero in 1990 to 365 by 2023, reflecting the expansion of corrections, state government, and municipal employment that anchors several county economies. Services tied to hotels, personal services, and business support peaked around 2008–2010 before declining, suggesting the region has not fully captured the tourism employment growth seen in coastal Florida. Manufacturing employment across both sub-sectors has remained modest and largely flat, reinforcing that Opportunity Florida counties have not attracted significant industrial activity over the past three decades. Agriculture and Transportation, while smaller in absolute terms, have shown steady if unspectacular growth and represent stable components of the rural employment base.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the broadest measure of economic output, capturing the total value of goods and services produced within a county's borders each year. Real GDP, expressed in chained 2017 dollars, adjusts for inflation and allows for meaningful comparisons of economic output across time. For the Opportunity Florida region, real GDP

data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) spans 2001 through 2023 and provides a two-decade picture of economic growth, recession-related contractions, and post-pandemic recovery.

The region's combined real GDP grew from \$6.2 billion in 2001 to \$11.0 billion in 2023, a gain of 79 percent over the period. This growth, however, has been concentrated in Walton County, which expanded from \$1.4 billion to \$4.7 billion, a 240 percent increase driven by the sustained expansion of the coastal tourism economy. As a result, Walton's share of the region's total output grew from 23 percent in 2001 to 43 percent in 2023, fundamentally reshaping the regional economic landscape. While north Walton and the City of Freeport are formal members of the Opportunity Florida partnership, the massive GDP growth in the south of the county often masks the more stagnant trends in the region's interior. The rural counties that originally comprised the core of Opportunity Florida's economic base now account for a declining share of aggregate regional output.

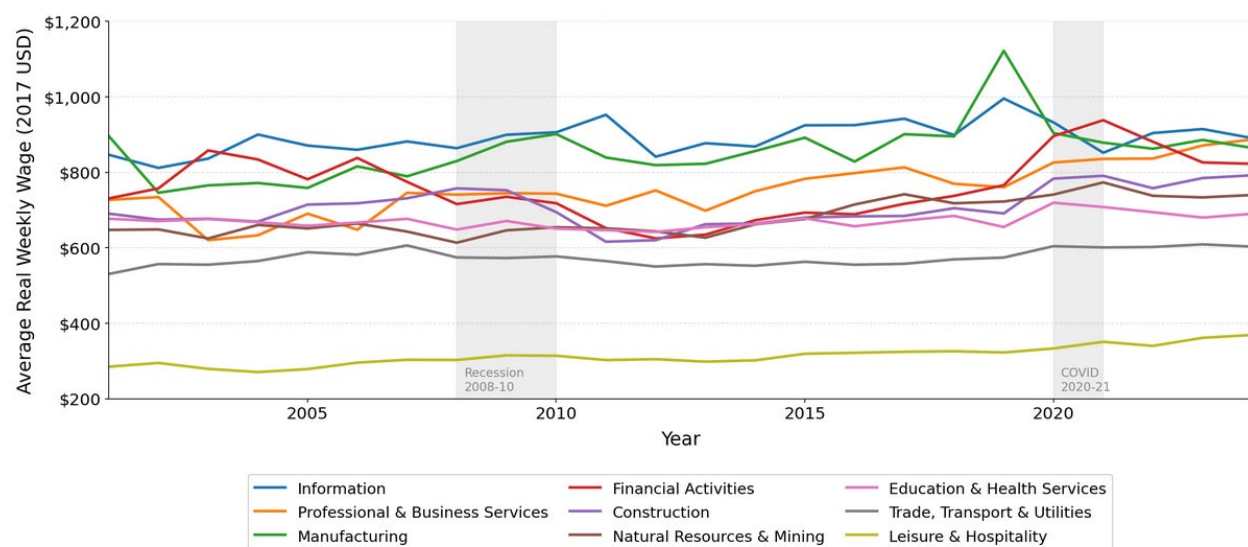


Figure 29. Average Real Weekly Wage by Sector - Rural Counties (2001–2024)

Average real weekly wages by industry sector reveal a persistent and structurally significant wage hierarchy across the nine rural Opportunity Florida counties. Drawing on Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) data from 2001 through 2024, expressed in chained 2017 dollars to remove inflationary effects, Figure 29 documents how compensation has evolved across the region's major private-sector industry groups over more than two decades.

Information sector workers command the highest average real weekly wages in the region, reaching approximately \$1,032 in 2024, followed by Professional and Business Services at \$914 and Financial Activities at \$845. These sectors, however, account for a relatively small share of total employment across the rural interior counties, i.e., their above-average wages have limited reach in the local economy. Manufacturing wages have remained largely flat in real terms over the full period, ending 2024 at approximately \$871 per week, nearly identical to their 2001 level of \$872 after inflation adjustment. This stagnation reflects both the limited growth of manufacturing employment in the region and the absence of the higher-value production that has driven wage gains in more competitive manufacturing clusters on a national scale.

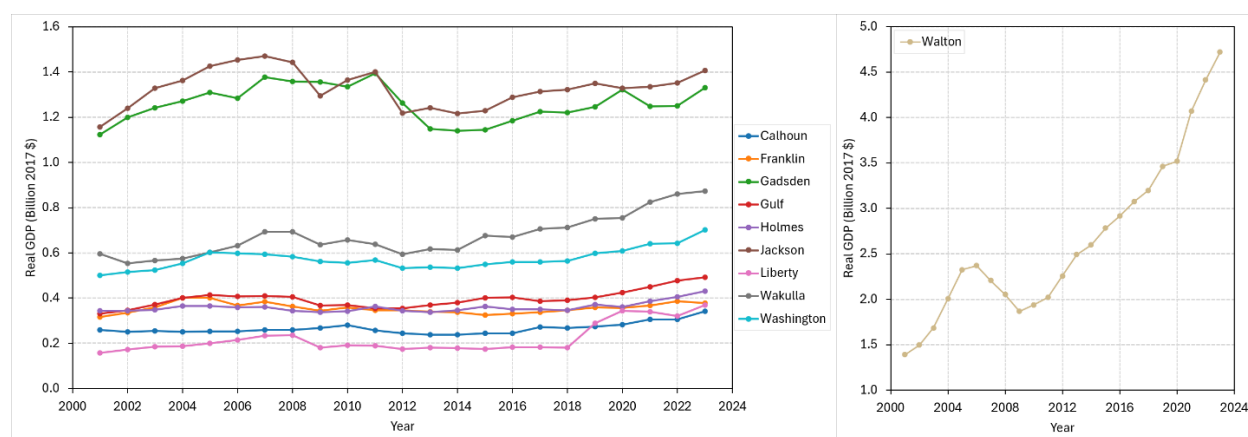
The most consequential finding for regional economic development policy is the persistently low wage floor in Leisure and Hospitality, a sector that employs a substantial share of workers in coastal-adjacent communities. Average real weekly wages in Leisure and Hospitality held near \$300 to \$390 throughout the study period, reaching approximately \$391 in 2024. Annualized, this translates to roughly \$20,300 per year, a figure that falls below the federal poverty threshold for a family of three and well below Florida's median household income. Trade, Transportation and Utilities, another large employment category across the region, averaged \$611 per week in 2024, also well below the Florida statewide average of approximately \$1,258. The concentration of regional employment in these two below-average wage sectors is a structural driver of the income gaps and poverty rates documented elsewhere in this report.

Across most sectors, real wage growth between years 2001 and 2024 has been modest at best. Construction wages grew from approximately \$695 to \$809 per week in real terms, a gain of 16 percent over 23 years. Education and Health Services, one of the fastest-growing employment sectors in the region, rose from \$667 to \$721 per week, a gain of just 8 percent in real terms despite significant workforce expansion. The Great Recession produced visible but temporary wage compression across most sectors from 2008 to 2010, and the COVID-19 period introduced additional volatility in 2020 and 2021, though most sectors had recovered to pre-pandemic wage levels by 2022.

Walton County's wage structure differs substantially from the rural interior and should be interpreted separately. The county's coastal tourism and real estate economy supports higher average wages in Leisure and Hospitality and construction-related trades than the rural counties, though these county-level averages again mask conditions in the North Walton communities of DeFuniak Springs, Freeport, and Paxton, where the wage base more closely resembles the interior county pattern. County-level QCEW wage figures for Walton

should not be used as benchmarks for rural North Walton workforce planning or employer recruitment.

Taken together, the wage data confirm a regional labor market where most workers are concentrated in sectors offering below-average and largely stagnant real compensation. The sectors that offer the strongest wages, Information, Finance, and Professional Services, remain thin in employment terms across the rural interior. Strengthening wage levels through skills upgrading, sectoral training programs, and attraction of higher-value employers within established industries represents a more near-term achievable pathway than wholesale industry transformation.



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA)

Figure 30. Real GDP, Chained 2017 Dollars (2001-2023)

Among the nine rural counties, Jackson and Gadsden are the largest economies, with 2023 GDP of \$1.4 billion and \$1.3 billion, respectively. Both counties benefit from diversified economic bases: Jackson County with agriculture, healthcare, and the correctional sector; Gadsden County with manufacturing, agriculture, and proximity to the Tallahassee metropolitan area. Wakulla County (\$0.87 billion) and Washington County (\$0.70 billion) round out the mid-tier rural economies, while Calhoun (\$0.34 billion) and Liberty (\$0.37 billion) remain the smallest in the region.

Liberty County presents a notable pattern worth flagging; after modest GDP growth through 2018, output jumped sharply from \$0.18 billion in 2018 to \$0.29 billion in 2019 and further to \$0.34 billion in 2020, representing an 88 percent increase in just two years. This anomalous surge warrants further investigation, as it likely reflects the intensive economic activity following Hurricane Michael, including timber salvage operations and disaster

recovery spending, rather than broad-based economic growth in this sparsely populated county of approximately 8,400 residents. While such spikes suggest a temporary boost in local output, they often mask the long-term challenges of rebuilding a rural economy after a major climate event.

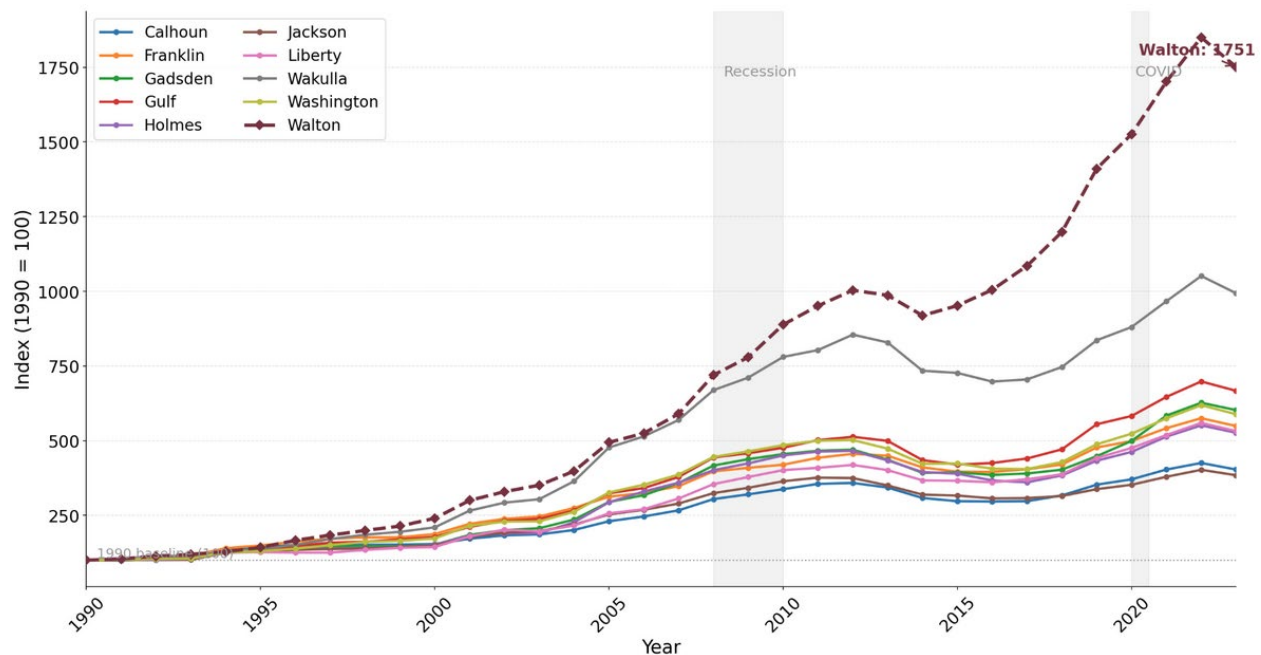
The Great Recession produced a clear contraction across all counties from 2008 to 2010. Rural counties were not spared: Jackson County's GDP declined from \$1.47 billion in 2007 to \$1.36 billion in 2010; Gadsden contracted from \$1.38 billion to \$1.33 billion over the same period. Recovery was uneven, coastal Walton County rebounded quickly and surpassed pre-recession output by 2012, while several inland counties (Gadsden, Jackson, Liberty) did not return to 2007 GDP levels until well into the mid-2010s.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 caused only a brief GDP contraction for most counties, as federal relief spending and strong housing demand cushioned the blow. Post-pandemic recovery from 2020 to 2023 was led by Walton County (+34 percent), which benefited from an acceleration in coastal real estate activity and remote-work-driven in-migration. Rural counties posted more modest recoveries in the range of 6 to 21 percent, consistent with their more limited exposure to the high-demand residential and tourism sectors that drove Walton's growth. By 2023, all ten counties had surpassed their 2020 GDP levels, though the structural gap between Walton and the rural interior continues to widen.

Taken together, the GDP data confirm a region experiencing significant economic polarization. Walton County's tourism-driven growth has generated substantial aggregate output, but the benefits of that growth are not broadly shared across the region's rural counties. The nine rural counties that constitute the heart of Opportunity Florida's mandate remain modestly sized economies, and in several counties, particularly Calhoun, Liberty, and Holmes, real per-capita output growth has been minimal over the past two decades. Targeted investment in infrastructure, workforce development, and business formation in these communities is essential to closing the output gap and building more broadly shared economic prosperity.

Business formation and failure rates provide a window into the entrepreneurial vitality and economic resilience of a region. New business formation signals confidence in local market conditions, while high failure rates may indicate structural barriers, limited consumer demand, thin access to capital, workforce shortages, or unfavorable regulatory conditions, that make it difficult for enterprises to survive. For rural economies like the Opportunity Florida counties, where large employers are scarce, small businesses represent a critical source of employment and locally retained income.

Every county recorded net growth over this period, though the pace varied considerably. The region expanded from approximately 6,800 active businesses in 1990 to over 58,000 in 2023, with Walton County accounting for nearly 40 percent of that total. Walton's count grew from 1,271 to 22,258 businesses — a 1,651 percent increase — driven by sustained expansion in hospitality, real estate, and retail tied to coastal tourism. Among the nine rural counties, Wakulla grew the fastest in relative terms (+894 percent), while Jackson County, the region's largest rural economy, saw the most modest growth at 284 percent.



Source: Walls & Associates; based on data from Dun & Bradstreet (D&B).

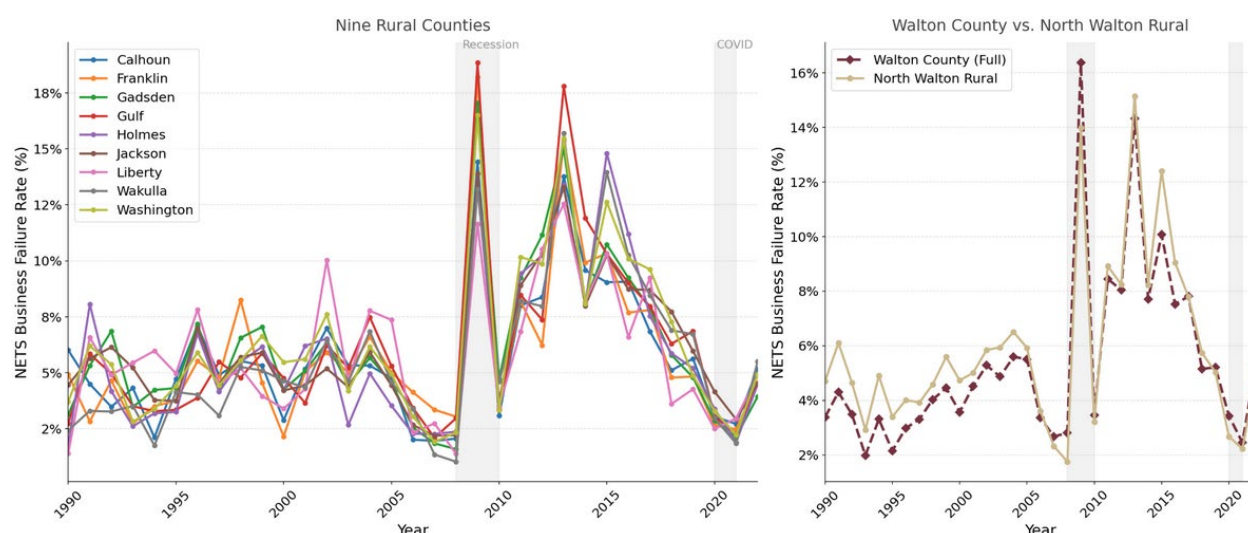
Figure 31. Active Business Stock Growth (1990–2023)

The Great Recession left a visible mark across all counties. Business counts peaked around 2007–2008 before contracting through 2010, and for several inland counties the decline continued into 2013 or 2014. Walton recovered quickly, surpassing its pre-recession count by 2011, while Jackson, Gadsden, and Washington did not return to 2008 levels until 2017–2019. The COVID-19 pandemic produced a briefer and shallower dip, with most counties rebounding strongly in 2021 and 2022.

These patterns point to a growing gap between Walton County's expanding coastal economy and the rural interior. Rural counties have built larger business bases than they had three decades ago, but growth has been slower, more vulnerable to economic downturns, and concentrated in sectors, retail, agriculture, and government services, that tend to offer lower

wages and limited advancement. Strengthening the rural business base will likely require targeted support in areas such as capital access, broadband, and workforce development.

This analysis draws on the National Establishment Time-Series (NETS) database, which tracks firm-level business activity and provides a more comprehensive measure of business failures than the U.S. Census Bureau's Business Dynamics Statistics (BDS). NETS captures small and informal business closures that Census BDS often misses, resulting in failure counts that are typically three to seven times higher than Census figures. For consistency and to avoid undercounting, NETS-derived failure rates, expressed as the share of active businesses that closed each year, are used throughout this analysis.



Source: Walls & Associates; based on data from Dun & Bradstreet (D&B).

Figure 32. Business Failure Rate (1990-2022)

Across the Opportunity Florida region, average annual failure rates from 1990 to 2022 ranged from 5.4 percent (Walton) to 6.3 percent (Washington). While these rates may appear elevated in isolation, they should be interpreted in the context of national small-business dynamics, where annual closure rates in the range of 5 to 8 percent are common across rural counties with small active-business populations. What is more telling than average rates is the temporal pattern of failures, which closely mirrors national and regional economic cycles.

The most pronounced shock to business survival across all Opportunity Florida counties was the Great Recession. In 2009, NETS failure rates spiked to between 14 and 19 percent region-wide, with Franklin County recording the highest peak at 18.2 percent and Gulf County close behind at 18.9 percent. These coastal-economy counties, heavily dependent on tourism and discretionary consumer spending, were particularly vulnerable to the collapse in demand

that followed the 2008 financial crisis. Jackson, Gadsden, and Washington counties, more dependent on agriculture and manufacturing, also experienced sharp recession-era spikes, peaking near 14 to 17 percent in 2009. Recovery was gradual: for most counties, failure rates did not return to pre-recession levels until 2014 or 2015.

Several inland counties (Holmes, Wakulla, and Liberty) experienced a secondary peak in 2013, suggesting a delayed and more persistent recession impact in areas without coastal tourism to anchor economic recovery. This pattern is consistent with research showing that rural inland counties often recover more slowly from macroeconomic shocks due to lower business density, reduced access to credit, and fewer alternative employment options that would otherwise stabilize consumer spending.

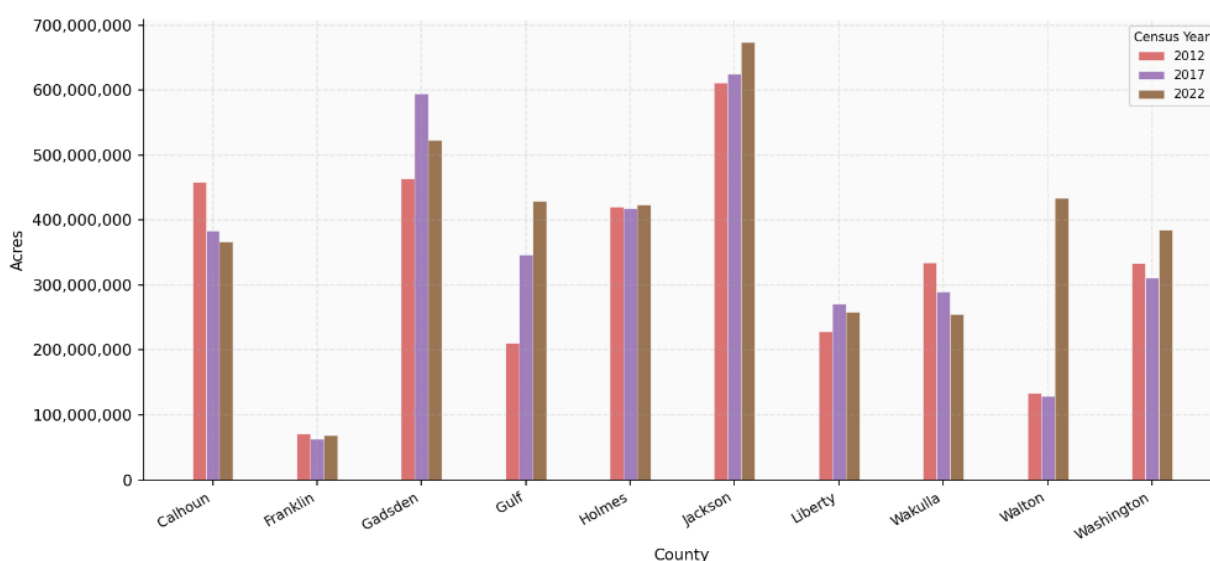
The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 produced a counterintuitive dip in recorded failures across all counties. This pattern, observed nationally, reflects the stabilizing effect of federal relief programs, particularly the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loans, which temporarily sustained businesses that might otherwise have closed. As relief programs wound down, failure rates rebounded in 2021 and 2022 across the region, with Washington, Gadsden, and Calhoun counties seeing notable increases.

The right panel of the figure compares Walton County's overall failure rate with that of the North Walton Rural area, encompassing the inland communities of DeFuniak Springs, Freeport, and Paxton. North Walton Rural tracked a NETS average annual failure rate of 5.9 percent over the study period, closely paralleling Walton County's overall average of 5.4 percent. However, North Walton's peak failure rate of 15.1 percent occurred in 2013, four years after the countywide peak, suggesting that the rural inland area experienced a more prolonged period of business stress following the recession, while coastal South Walton recovered more rapidly on the strength of tourism-related activity. This divergence underscores the economic heterogeneity within Walton County and reinforces the need to treat the North Walton rural area as a distinct economic sub-region when designing economic development interventions.

Land Use and Fiscal Capacity

The ability of Opportunity Florida counties to fund infrastructure, attract investment, and sustain public services is fundamentally shaped by fiscal capacity, the revenue-generating potential of the local property tax base. This section examines land use patterns including agricultural, industrial, and timber land holdings alongside assessed property values and millage rates. For most of the region, fiscal capacity is a binding constraint: the counties most in need of infrastructure investment are typically the least equipped to fund it from local revenues alone.

Agriculture remains a significant component of land use across several Opportunity Florida counties, particularly in interior areas where row crops, livestock operations, and timber production have historically defined the economic landscape. Figure 33 presents farmland acreage by county across agricultural census years from years 1997 through 2022. Jackson County maintains the largest farmland acreage among the ten counties, consistent with its position as one of North Florida's most significant agricultural producers. Gadsden County also maintains a substantial farmland base, though it has experienced agricultural land conversion pressures as development demand has expanded from Tallahassee.



Source: Florida Department of Revenue

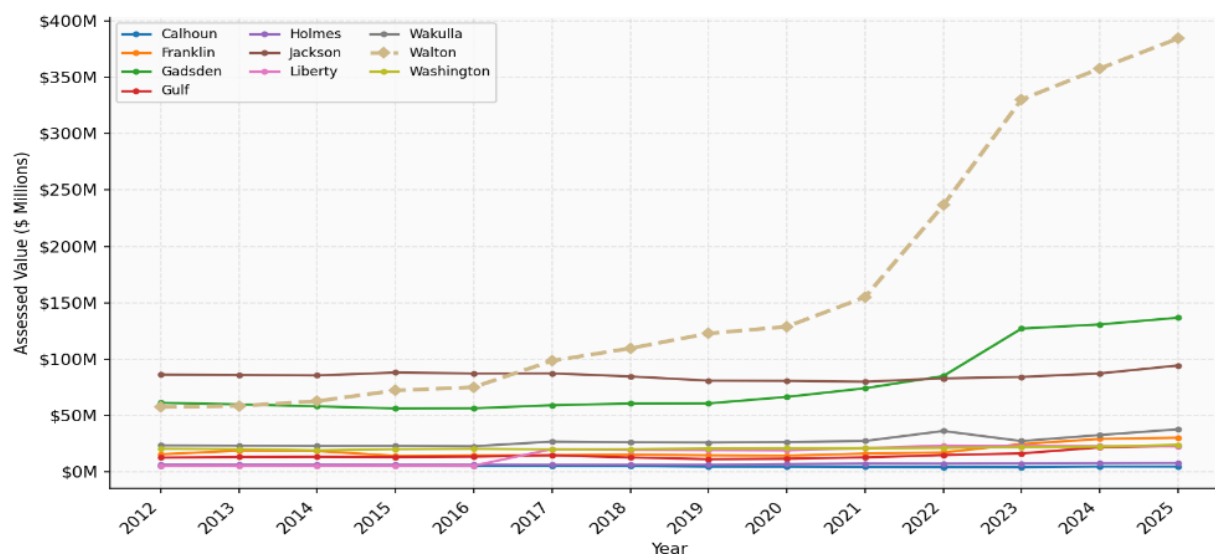
Figure 33. Farmland Acreage (2012, 2017, 2022)

Within Walton County, inland communities including DeFuniak Springs, Freeport, and Paxton are surrounded by a predominantly agricultural and timber landscape, representing a land use context closer to Jackson County or Holmes County than to the coastal resort corridor. The agricultural land base around these communities represents both an economic

asset and a long-run land use planning consideration as residential development pressure from the coast moves inland. The conversion of agricultural land near Freeport, in particular, has accelerated in recent years as residential development has followed population growth, creating planning challenges familiar to other rapidly growing rural Florida communities.

From a fiscal perspective, agricultural lands assessed at agricultural use values contribute modestly to county tax bases relative to commercial and residential development. The transition from agricultural to residential use can generate significant assessed value increases but may also impose long-run infrastructure costs that exceed the additional tax revenue generated — a dynamic documented extensively in the Florida land use literature cited in the Literature Review section of this report.

Assessed industrial property values provide an indicator of the physical capital base available to support manufacturing, logistics, and other capital-intensive economic activities. Gadsden County maintains the largest industrial assessed value base among interior counties, consistent with its proximity to Tallahassee and its established industrial park and manufacturing presence. Jackson County shows moderate and relatively stable industrial values, reflecting its established manufacturing and processing sector. Counties including Calhoun, Liberty, Franklin, and Holmes show limited industrial assessed value, constraining both fiscal capacity and available inventory of sites for industrial recruitment.



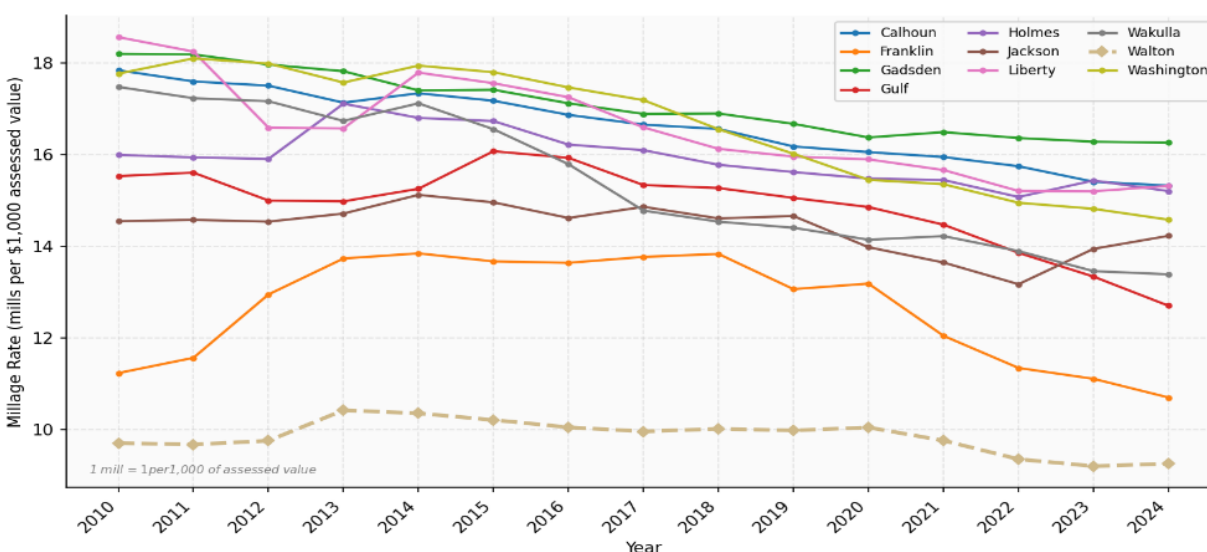
Source: Florida Department of Revenue

Figure 34. Assessed Industrial Property Value (2012–2025)

Gadsden County maintains the largest industrial assessed value base among interior counties, consistent with its proximity to Tallahassee and its established industrial park and

manufacturing presence. Jackson County shows moderate and relatively stable industrial values, reflecting its established manufacturing and processing sector. Counties including Calhoun, Liberty, Franklin, and Holmes show limited industrial assessed value, constraining both fiscal capacity and available sites for industrial recruitment. Timberland represents a significant land use category across Liberty, Holmes, and Washington counties, providing managed land use and periodic economic activity, though timber revenue cycles and corporate ownership patterns limit its contribution to local fiscal capacity.

Property tax millage rates have generally declined across Opportunity Florida counties from 2010 to 2024, reflecting rising assessed values, local government fiscal discipline, and state-mandated limitations. Interior counties, including Calhoun, Liberty, Holmes, and Gadsden, have consistently maintained the highest millage rates in the region, reflecting the need to extract more revenue per dollar of assessed value to fund basic government services. The result is that property owners in the most economically challenged counties pay higher effective tax rates on properties that are also worth substantially less – a structural disadvantage that compounds other development challenges.



Source: Florida Department of Revenue

Figure 35. Property Tax Millage Rates (2010–2024)

Interior counties including Calhoun, Liberty, Holmes, and Gadsden have consistently maintained higher millage rates than coastal counties, reflecting the need to extract more revenue per dollar of assessed value to fund basic government services. The result is that property owners in the most economically challenged counties pay higher effective tax rates on properties that are also worth less, a structural disadvantage that compounds other development challenges. Declining millage rates in counties with stagnant assessed value

bases can signal fiscal stress: the inability to generate sufficient revenue to fund needed infrastructure even at elevated rates.

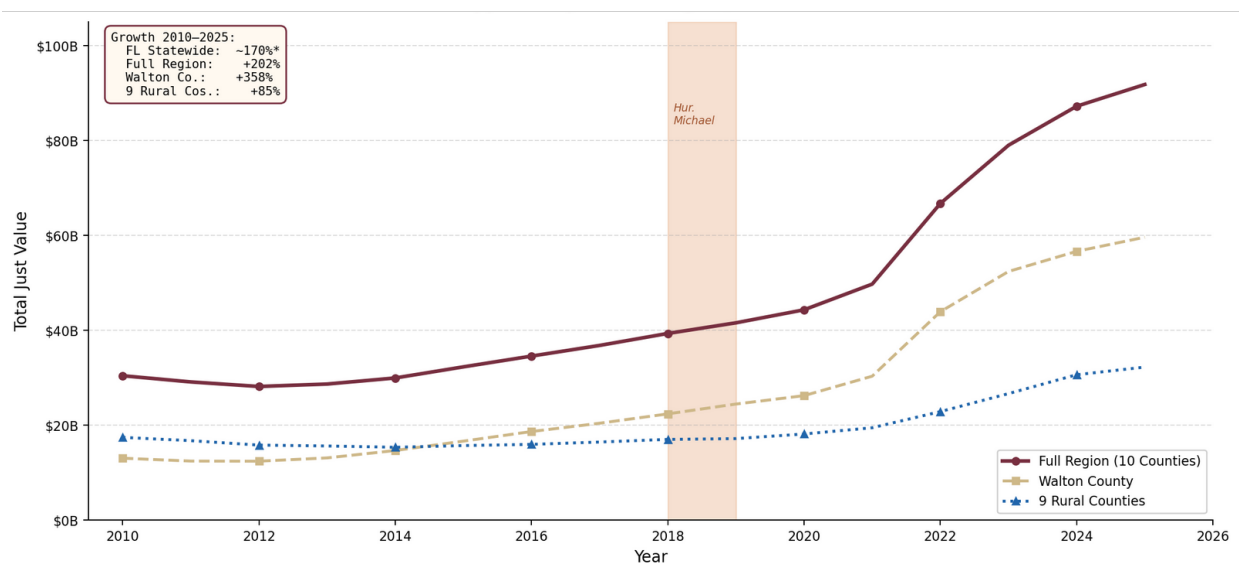
In counties where assessed property value growth has been flat or slow, declining millage rates can signal fiscal stress rather than fiscal health: revenues are shrinking even when the nominal rate stays constant. For counties where millage rates have held steady or declined modestly alongside stagnant property values, the practical result is a constrained revenue base that limits capital investment in roads, water and sewer infrastructure, and industrial site preparation, the very investments most needed to attract new employers.

When benchmarked against Florida's statewide average total millage rate of approximately 18 to 19 mills, the Opportunity Florida counties present a mixed picture. The nine rural counties carried an average combined rate of 16.35 mills in 2010, declining to 14.19 mills by 2024 as rising property values expanded the tax base and allowed modest rate relief. Despite that trend, most rural counties remain in the 14 to 16 mill range and continue to levy at rates that approach or exceed the statewide average, reflecting the limited commercial and industrial property wealth available to spread the cost of local government. Walton County is an outlier at just 9.25 mills in 2024, well below the statewide average, because its substantial coastal property wealth generates sufficient revenue at a substantially lower levy.

Across Opportunity Florida, using North Walton County data in place of full Walton County to reflect the program's rural target area, the region's aggregate just value reached \$40.6 billion in 2025. North Walton County accounts for \$8.4 billion of that total, representing 21 percent of the regional aggregate. The nine rural counties excluding Walton grew from \$17.4 billion in 2010 to \$32.2 billion in 2025, an increase of 85 percent that reflects post-recession recovery and sustained real estate appreciation across the region, a 202 percent increase that outpaces inflation and reflects both post-recession recovery and a sustained period of real estate appreciation driven by in-migration and coastal demand.

North Walton County accounts for 65 percent of the region's total just value (\$59.6 billion of \$91.8 billion as of 2025). Of that \$59.6 billion, approximately \$8.4 billion, or 14 percent, is attributable to North Walton County, the rural inland communities of DeFuniak Springs, Freeport, and Paxton that constitute Opportunity Florida's target area within the county. The remaining 86 percent of Walton's assessed wealth is concentrated in the coastal South Walton corridor. Since 2010, Walton's just value has grown 358 percent from \$13.0 billion to \$59.6 billion, a trajectory that far exceeds every other county in the region. This exceptional appreciation is rooted in the coastal tourism economy of South Walton, where high-demand vacation and second-home real estate commands premium prices. Land use

data illustrates this dynamic clearly: 87 percent of Walton County's just value is concentrated in the residential category, reflecting the dominance of single-family homes and vacation properties along the Emerald Coast, compared to just 57 percent in North Walton where governmental, agricultural, and timberland uses make up a substantially larger share of the property base.



Source: Florida Department of Revenue, Ad Valorem Assessment Data (county-level 2010–2025). Florida Statewide growth rate estimated from FDOR 2025 figure vs. ~\$2.0T baseline (2010).

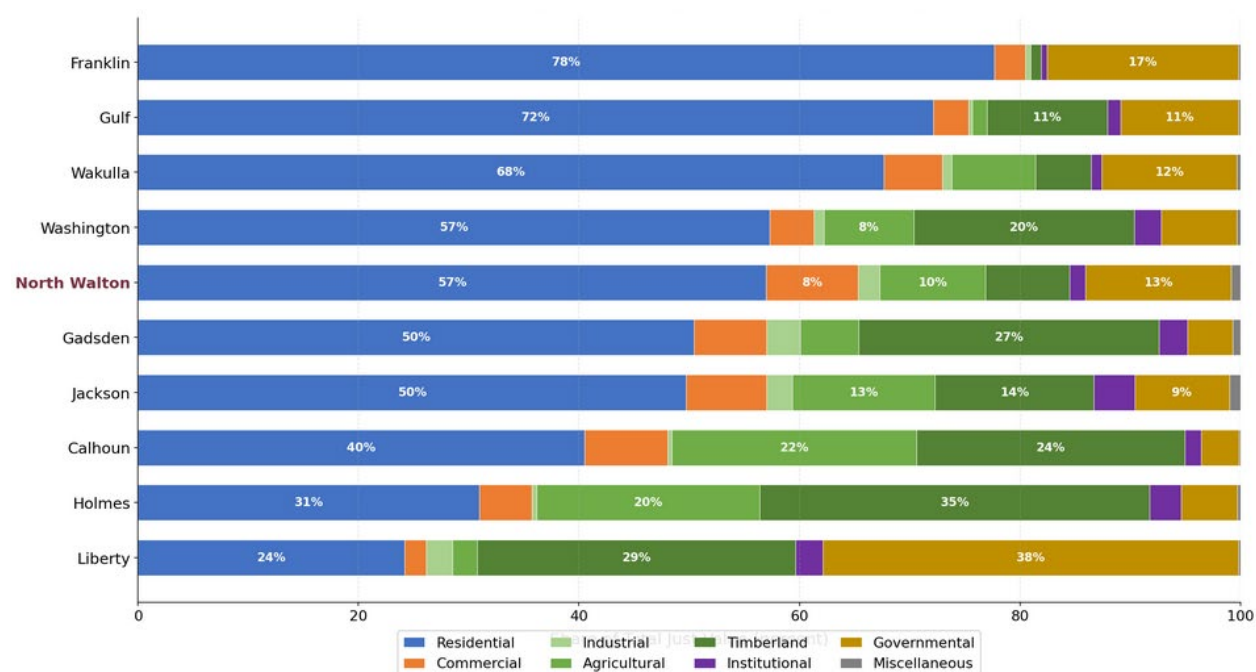
Figure 36. Total Just Value (2010–2025)

Coastal-adjacent counties have also seen strong appreciation. Gulf County grew 179 percent (from \$2.4 billion to \$6.8 billion) and Wakulla County grew 116 percent (from \$2.1 billion to \$4.5 billion), both benefiting from coastal and near-coastal residential demand. Franklin County, home to Apalachicola and a growing ecotourism base, grew 87 percent to \$6.0 billion. By contrast, the most-inland counties, Calhoun and Liberty, have seen far more modest appreciation of 20 and 19 percent respectively, reflecting limited residential demand and economies that remain heavily dependent on agriculture, timberland, and public-sector employment.

For context, Florida's statewide total just value reached approximately \$5.4 trillion in 2025, according to the Florida Department of Revenue. The entire Opportunity Florida region's aggregate just value of roughly \$92 billion in 2024 represents less than 2 percent of that statewide total, despite spanning ten counties across a significant portion of the Florida panhandle. Within that already modest regional share, Walton County's coastal corridor accounts for the majority of assessed wealth, meaning the nine interior counties that define Opportunity Florida's core mandate collectively represent a fraction of a fraction of Florida's

overall property tax base, a fiscal reality that underscores why external investment is foundational rather than supplemental to the region's economic development strategy.

The land use composition chart reinforces the rural-coastal divide within the region. In Holmes County, 56 percent of just value is tied to agricultural and timberland uses, the highest concentration in the region. Calhoun County follows at 47 percent. Jackson, Washington, and Gadsden counties also carry significant agricultural and timberland shares (27–33 percent), consistent with their economies centered on row crop agriculture, cattle ranching, and pine timber production. This composition means that property tax revenues in the interior counties are more sensitive to commodity price fluctuations and land market conditions than to the residential demand dynamics that have propelled coastal counties' valuations.



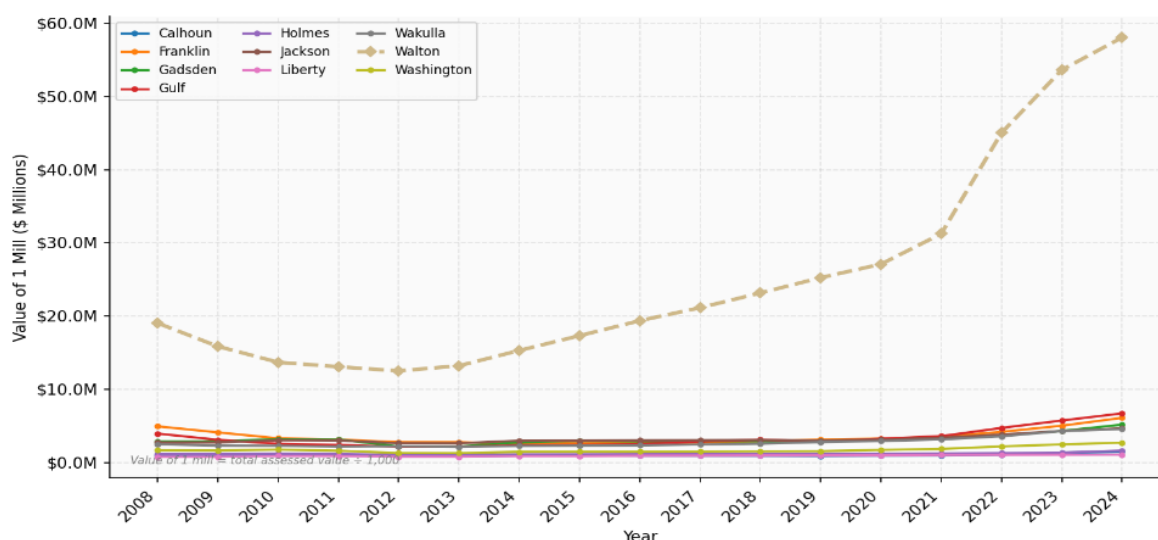
Source: Florida Department of Revenue

Figure 37. Land Use Composition of Just Value by County (2025)

An important distinction exists within Walton County between its coastal southern portion and the rural North Walton communities of DeFuniak Springs, Freeport, and Paxton. The majority of Walton's assessed valuation is concentrated along the coast; the North Walton rural area, which encompasses the county's agricultural lands and inland residential communities, contributes a proportionally smaller share of total just value. This geographic disparity within Walton itself underscores that the county's fiscal strength and property

wealth are largely a function of its coastal tourism economy rather than broadly distributed economic activity.

The value of one mill of property tax, total assessed value divided by one thousand, provides a direct measure of fiscal capacity: the revenue generated by a single mill of tax rate. For interior counties with limited assessed value growth, even maximum legal millage rates cannot produce the revenue needed to fund adequate infrastructure. This fiscal math is a primary reason why external grant funding, state and federal, is not supplemental to Opportunity Florida's strategy but essential to it.



Source: Florida Department of Revenue

Figure 38. Estimated Value of One Mill (2008–2024)

Counties with growing assessed value bases have gained fiscal room to maneuver. Counties with flat or slowly growing bases face compounding constraints: aging infrastructure, limited capital budgets, and an inability to offer the site readiness and utility access that business recruitment requires. The fiscal capacity indicators documented here help explain why counties like Calhoun, Liberty, and Holmes consistently lag in infrastructure readiness despite active efforts to attract investment, the underlying tax base cannot support the capital outlays that competitive site development requires.

Table 2. Summary of Key Land Use and Fiscal Capacity Indicators

County	Millage Rate (2024)	Industrial Value (2025)	Farmland (2022)	Fiscal Capacity Note
Calhoun	15.3 mills	\$4.3M	77,986 ac.	Very limited
Franklin	10.7 mills	\$30.0M	Limited	Coastal-moderate
Gadsden	16.3 mills	\$136.6M	29,032 ac.	Growing
Gulf	12.7 mills	\$22.9M	Limited	Post-hurricane growth
Holmes	15.2 mills	\$7.6M	Moderate	Very limited
Jackson	14.2 mills	\$94.2M	Largest	Moderate
Liberty	15.3 mills	\$22.3M	Limited	Very limited
Wakulla	13.4 mills	\$37.5M	Limited	Moderate
Walton	9.3 mills	\$384.7M	Limited	High - coastal driven
Washington	14.6 mills	\$23.7M	Moderate	Limited growth

The land use and fiscal capacity data converge on a consistent finding: the counties most in need of economic development investment are also the least equipped to fund it from their own resources. Interior counties carry the highest millage rates, generate the least revenue per mill, and have the fewest fiscal resources available for infrastructure or employer recruitment. The sustained multi-source investment strategy that Opportunity Florida pursues through state and federal grant programs is precisely calibrated to address this gap, providing the external capital that fiscally constrained local governments cannot generate on their own.

Table 3. Sales Tax Collections (2000–2023)

County	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2023	% Change 2000–2023
Jackson	\$3.9M	\$5.1M	\$5.1M	\$5.5M	\$6.9M	\$8.4M	+119%
Gadsden	\$1.8M	\$2.4M	\$3.1M	\$3.5M	\$4.4M	\$5.5M	+221%
Franklin	—	—	\$1.2M	\$1.6M	\$1.9M	\$3.5M	+570%*
Wakulla	\$0.8M	\$1.1M	\$1.4M	\$1.6M	\$2.1M	\$3.4M	+363%
Gulf	\$0.3M	\$0.5M	\$0.9M	\$1.3M	\$1.8M	\$3.2M	+976%
Washington	\$1.0M	\$1.4M	\$1.2M	\$1.4M	\$2.5M	\$3.2M	+251%
Holmes	\$0.5M	\$0.7M	\$0.6M	\$0.8M	\$0.9M	\$1.6M	+209%
Calhoun	\$0.5M	\$0.6M	\$0.9M	\$0.9M	\$1.1M	\$1.3M	+163%
Liberty	\$0.1M	\$0.2M	\$0.2M	\$0.3M	\$0.5M	\$0.6M	+371%
Walton	\$6.5M	\$10.5M	\$11.1M	\$25.9M	\$22.6M	\$40.0M	+632%

Source: Florida Department of Revenue, Sales Tax Collections Database.

* Franklin County data begins in 2008; % change calculated from 2008 baseline. — indicates no data reported.

Sales tax collections offer a direct window into the commercial vitality of each county, reflecting the volume of taxable retail, tourism, and service-sector activity that local governments can draw on for revenue. Across the nine rural Opportunity Florida counties, Jackson and Gadsden have consistently held the strongest positions, collecting \$8.4 million and \$5.5 million, respectively, in 2023, driven by their roles as regional commercial centers with county seats, larger retail corridors, and higher population bases. Gulf County stands out as the region's most dynamic growth story. Collections have risen nearly tenfold since 1999, a 976 percent increase, reflecting the county's steady expansion of tourism and commercial activity along the Gulf Coast. Wakulla, Franklin, and Washington counties each crossed the \$3 million threshold by 2023, with Franklin in particular showing rapid growth since 2008 when its reporting began. At the lower end, Liberty County collected just \$599,000 in 2023, the smallest commercial tax base in the region, followed by Calhoun and Holmes, both of which have seen modest but steady gains over the past two decades.

Walton County's sales tax base is in a different category entirely. At \$40 million in 2023, roughly 4.8 times larger than the next highest county, Walton's collections reflect the outsized role of coastal tourism and high-end retail concentrated along the Emerald Coast. Collections grew 632 percent between 1999 and 2023, with particularly sharp acceleration after 2013 as the South Walton tourist economy matured. The 2020 dip was brief; Walton rebounded strongly through 2021 and 2022, reaching a peak of \$39.2 million before stabilizing. For the rural interior counties, the contrast with Walton illustrates the structural

fiscal challenge: lower commercial activity means lower self-generated revenue, greater dependence on state transfers and federal grants, and less flexibility to fund local infrastructure and services without outside support.

IV – Economic Impact Analysis

During Fall 2025 and Winter 2026, the FSU CEFA research team collected data related to commercial businesses and including sales/revenues and employment associated with economic development in the Opportunity Florida region. After the final data was collected, the FSU CEFA research team compiled the data into the following input data categories:

- Sales/Revenues by County
- Employment (Jobs)

Economic Model and Analysis

The next step in this research study was to conduct the economic impact analysis. FSU CEFA used a well-established analytical tool known as the Impact Analysis for Planning, or IMPLAN®² model. IMPLAN is a widely accepted integrated input-output model that is used extensively by state and local government agencies to measure proposed legislative and other program and policy economic impacts across the private and public sectors. There are several advantages to using IMPLAN:

- It is calibrated to local conditions using a relatively large amount of local, county, and state of Florida specific data;
- It is based on a strong theoretical foundation, and;
- It uses a well-researched and accepted applied economics impact assessment methodology supported by many years of use across all regions of the U.S.

The economic impact model used for this analysis was specifically developed for the counties of Florida, and includes 544 sectors, 25 institutional sectors, and most recent dataset³ – year 2024 data. IMPLAN's principal advantage is that it may be used to estimate direct, indirect, and induced economic impacts for any static (point-in-time) economic stimulus. IMPLAN uses an economic multiplier approach to estimating impacts. Consistent with standard practice, the direct impacts, as well as the indirect and induced impacts, are calculated for the Opportunity Florida market area. There is a direct effect that comes from the increase in revenues associated with the change in sales. Next, there is an indirect effect that comes from retailers and others paying their suppliers and employees. Finally, an induced effect comes from the increase in wealth experienced by suppliers and employees of retailers and others who spend their increased revenues in the local economy. This study evaluates the Opportunity Florida's broader economic impacts, measured in terms of economic output,

² IMPLAN is a regional economic analysis software application that is designed to estimate the impact or ripple effect (specifically backward linkages) of a given economic activity within a specific geographic area through the implementation of its Input-Output model. [Economic Impact Analysis for Planning | IMPLAN](#)

³ Florida 2024 data was released at the end of December 2025, and used in this study.

local jobs, and income. Calculations are provided for two categories of impacts: a) Construction (or Temporary) impacts; and b) Permanent impacts associated with the ongoing operation of the commercial activities. The total economic impact of the Opportunity Florida region is the summation of the one-time economic impacts associated with the economic development associated with Opportunity Florida in terms of commercial business activities. These Opportunity Florida-related economic activities will generate the following:

- **Direct Impacts:** Relate to (a) the short-term business activity associated with project construction, and (b) the ongoing business activity associated with the businesses associated with the project.
- **Indirect Impacts:** Will result when local firms directly impacted by the project in turn purchase materials, supplies, or services from other firms.

Induced Impacts. Relate to the consumption and spending of employees of firms that are directly or indirectly affected by the project. These would include all of the goods and services normally associated with household consumption (i.e., housing, retail purchases, local services, etc.).

Economic Impact Results

The total economic impacts of the Opportunity Florida region are shown in Table 4 and are estimated to be a total of 145,148 total jobs, \$7.68 (or \$7.7) billion in income or wages and about \$25.48 (or about \$26) billion in total economic output.

Table 4. Economic Impact Analysis Results for the Opportunity Florida Region

Opportunity Florida	Economic Output (Sales/Revenues)	Employment	Income
Economic Measure			
Opportunity Florida	\$25,478,750,403	145,148	\$7,678,836,272
Grand Total	\$25,478,750,403	145,148	\$7,678,836,272

*** in 2026\$**

IMPLAN calculates both the direct impact of a change in economic activity and the indirect and induced impacts as described in the methodology section. Tables 4 and 5 show the total direct, indirect, and induced effects of the expected economic impacts (based on the latest

NETS data⁴) for Opportunity Florida, and the projected state and local, and federal taxes. The FSU CEFA research team estimates that state, local and federal taxes generated by the additional economic activity to be approximately \$2.8 billion.

Table 5. Economic Impact Results for the Opportunity Florida Region

Economic Impacts Total	Direct	Indirect	Induced	Total
Output	\$18,165,056,908	\$4,630,227,865	\$2,683,465,630	\$25,478,750,403
Jobs	103,670	27,211	14,267	145,148
Income	\$5,818,359,056	\$1,243,348,085	\$617,129,131	\$7,678,836,272

* in 2026 \$

Table 6. State and Local, and Federal Taxes, for the Opportunity Florida Region

Opportunity Florida	Opportunity Florida	Grand Total
Economic Measure		
State & Local Taxes	\$733,921,649	\$733,921,649
Federal Taxes	\$2,067,600,411	\$2,067,600,411
Grand Total	\$2,801,522,060	\$2,801,522,060

⁴ As mentioned previously in the report narrative, the NETS data (inputs used to the IMPLAN model) provided business data on individual businesses (including sole proprietorships) with business description, location, sales/revenues, employment, among other data (in \$2023). The economic impact results were provided in inflation-adjusted \$2026. It should be noted that the employment results do not reflect only FTE's. In addition, the research team compared the NETS results with the entire Opportunity Florida region as a cross check, and found that the entire 10 county (as a whole) region in IMPLAN tracked very closely with the Opp FL economic impact results based on NETS.

V - Conclusions

The FSU Center for Economic Forecasting and Analysis (CEFA) conducted an economic analysis study of the ten rural counties comprising Opportunity Florida, a designated Rural Area of Opportunity (RAO) spanning Florida's Panhandle region. The counties included are: Calhoun, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty, Wakulla, Walton, and Washington. Established under Florida statute §288.0656 through the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI), the RAO designation reflects longstanding economic disparities in these communities and unlocks targeted incentives aimed at fostering wage growth, job creation, and stronger local tax bases. This report documents the direct, indirect, induced, and total economic impacts of the region across employment, income, and sales, while developing a comprehensive framework of economic development activity at the local level.

The economic analysis draws on labor market data, demographic indicators, housing market conditions, and socioeconomic measures to provide a holistic picture of the region's economic landscape. Key data sources include the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW), the American Community Survey (ACS), and real GDP estimates, among others. Where possible, the analysis distinguishes between coastal and interior geographies and treats North Walton county as a separate sub-region to avoid masking structural differences beneath county-level aggregates.

The demographic and economic data documented across this report reveals a region defined by persistent and, in many cases, widening divergence. A set of mutually reinforcing patterns emerges from the analysis of population, health, education, income, labor markets, housing, fiscal capacity, and economic output that together explain why the Opportunity Florida counties were designated as a Rural Area of Opportunity and why that designation remains fully warranted.

The region's population trajectory has bifurcated sharply. Walton County's coastal communities have absorbed sustained in-migration, adding more than 30,000 residents since 2010 and reflecting the demographic profile of a growth region: younger households, rising incomes, and expanding labor force participation. The rural interior counties tell a different story. Calhoun, Gadsden, Jackson, and Liberty counties have experienced flat or declining populations, driven by working-age outmigration that simultaneously erodes the labor supply available to local employers and the consumer base that sustains small businesses. Liberty County, with approximately 8,400 residents, exemplifies the structural fragility of the region's smallest economies, where a single major employer disruption carries outsized consequences for population stability and fiscal health.

Educational attainment and health outcomes track closely with these population dynamics. Interior counties record the region's highest rates of adults without a high school diploma. Liberty County's share approaches one in five and the highest disability rates, which constrain labor force participation independent of broader employment conditions. Persistent family and child welfare challenges compound these disadvantages: SNAP utilization rates of one in four households in Gadsden and Liberty counties reflect structural poverty, not temporary economic disruption. High rates of food insecurity, elevated child poverty, and limited childcare infrastructure create conditions in which human capital formation is impaired from early childhood. These deficits actively limit the workforce available to prospective employers, reduce local consumer spending power, and increase the share of county budgets devoted to social services at the direct expense of the capital investment needed to support economic development.

The income, poverty, and labor market data confirm what the population trends suggest. The income gap between Walton County (average annual wages approximately \$49,000) and Holmes County (approximately \$24,000) is not narrowing; it widened between 2010 and 2025 as coastal appreciation drove Walton incomes up 77 percent while interior county income growth lagged at 38 to 50 percent over the same period. Labor market conditions reinforce this picture. Employment in the interior counties is concentrated in retail, government services, agriculture, and corrections — sectors that offer limited wage premiums and constrained career advancement. In several counties, declining labor force participation among working-age adults means that low headline unemployment rates overstate genuine labor market health: workers who have exited the labor force entirely are not counted as unemployed, but their absence represents both a social cost and a binding constraint on regional growth potential. Gadsden County's declining total commute minutes, despite persistent poverty and unemployment, reflects working-age residents leaving rather than finding better local jobs.

The business formation and failure data add further texture. Every county expanded its active business base between 1990 and 2023, but growth was concentrated in lower-wage sectors and proved more vulnerable to economic shocks than Walton County's tourism-driven expansion. Business failure rates spiked to between 14 and 19 percent across the region during the Great Recession, with rural inland counties requiring until 2014 or 2015 to return to pre-recession levels, a near-decade of elevated business stress with lasting consequences for local employment and tax revenue. The North Walton rural area's failure rate peak occurred four years after the countywide peak, a pattern that underscores the need to continue to view inland North Walton County (DeFuniak Springs, Freeport, and Paxton) as a distinct economic sub-region rather than a beneficiary of the coastal tourism recovery it did not share. Real GDP data tell a consistent story: Walton County's share of the region's

aggregate output grew from 23 percent in 2001 to 43 percent in 2023, meaning the rural counties that define Opportunity Florida's core mandate now account for a declining share of the region's total economic activity.

Housing development patterns mirror the economic divide with striking clarity. Walton County issued nearly 2,650 construction permits in a recent single year; Holmes County issued 11. The rental housing market across the interior counties is effectively absent. Calhoun, Holmes, and Liberty counties show minimal active listings and no meaningful expansion of rental stock between 2016 and 2024, a structural constraint on workforce attraction that market forces alone cannot resolve at current income and population levels. Broadband infrastructure has improved across the region through targeted federal investment, but a meaningful gap persists between coastal counties approaching 90 percent coverage and interior counties still near 75 to 76 percent, a headwind to remote work adoption, digital commerce, and educational access that will compound other workforce development challenges if left unaddressed.

Housing and infrastructure conditions compound these challenges. During this study time period, interior counties such as Calhoun, Holmes, and Liberty have seen little to no expansion of rental housing stock, creating a structural barrier to workforce attraction that market forces alone are unlikely to resolve. Broadband coverage gaps between coastal counties are near 90 percent while interior counties hover near 75 to 76 percent, which further limit economic competitiveness. Meanwhile, interior counties carry the region's highest property tax millage rates on their lowest assessed value bases, leaving them without the local fiscal resources needed to fund the roads, utilities, and industrial site development that business recruitment requires. External funding channeled through Opportunity Florida is therefore not supplemental to the regional economic development strategy, but foundational.

The land use and fiscal capacity data document the binding constraint that underlies all of the above. Interior counties carry the region's highest property tax millage rates on its lowest assessed value bases. Calhoun, Liberty, and Holmes counties have seen property appreciation of only 19 to 20 percent since 2010, compared to Walton County's 358 percent, and a significant share of those bases, 47 to 56 percent in Calhoun and Holmes counties, is tied to agricultural and timberland use categories that generate modest per-acre tax revenue and are sensitive to commodity price cycles rather than residential demand. The fiscal arithmetic is straightforward: these counties cannot generate from local revenues the capital investment in roads, utilities, industrial sites, and workforce infrastructure that business recruitment requires. External funding in state and federal grant programs channeled

through Opportunity Florida is not supplemental to the regional economic development strategy but foundational to it.

The total economic impacts of the Opportunity Florida region are shown in the following table, and are estimated to be a total of 145,148 total jobs, \$7.7 billion in income or wages and about \$25.5 billion in total economic output. The FSU CEFA research team also estimates that state, local and federal taxes generated by the additional economic activity to be approximately \$2.8 billion.

Opportunity Florida	Economic Output (Sales/Revenues)	Employment	Income
Economic Measure			
Opportunity Florida	\$25,478,750,403	145,148	\$7,678,836,272
Grand Total	\$25,478,750,403	145,148	\$7,678,836,272

*** in 2026\$**

The data presented in the demographic analysis supports a clear and consistent conclusion: the Opportunity Florida counties are not a homogeneous region, and they cannot be handled as one for purposes of economic development policy. Walton County's coastal economy is a growth success by any standard measure, though North Walton's rural communities share many of the structural challenges facing the interior counties and are easily masked by county-level⁵ aggregates. Gulf County and Wakulla County represent moderate success cases. Counties with growing populations, improving fiscal positions, and economies evolving beyond their legacy agricultural and government-sector bases may offer transferable lessons for more constrained neighbors.

Reversing the trajectory of the region's most challenged counties: Holmes, Calhoun, Liberty, and Gadsden counties, will require sustained, coordinated investment across multiple domains simultaneously: educational access and attainment, healthcare infrastructure and disability support, broadband and transportation connectivity, site-ready industrial capacity, workforce housing development, and small business capital access. No single intervention will be sufficient because the constraints are mutually reinforcing: low educational attainment limits the workforce that employers require; thin housing stock constrains the ability to attract workers from outside; weak fiscal capacity prevents the infrastructure investment that makes sites competitive; and limited business density reduces the consumer base that new ventures need to survive.

⁵ It should be noted that economic data is primarily compiled and available at a county-specific level.

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Appendix A – Top Employers and Top Sales/Revenues by County

Top Employers and Top Sales Generators by County

Source: National Establishment Time-Series (NETS) Database, 2023.

Calhoun County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
CORRECTIONS FLORIDA DEPARTMENT	CALHOUN CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTE	BLOUNTSTOWN	Prison, government	329
TALLAHASSEE MEM HEALTHCARE INC	BLOUNTSTOWN FAMILY PRACTICE	BLOUNTSTOWN	General medical and surgical hospitals	203
LANDMARK HEALTHCARE INC	LANDMARK HLTH REHABILITATION CTR	BLOUNTSTOWN	Skilled nursing care facilities	158
OGLESBY PLANTS INTL INC	N/A	ALTHA	Nursery stock, growing of	125
P H C BLOUNTSTOWN INC	PARTHNON HALTHCARE BLOUNTSTOWN	BLOUNTSTOWN	Nursing home, except skilled and intermediate care facility	104

Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
TALLAHASSEE MEM HEALTHCARE INC	BLOUNTSTOWN	General medical and surgical hospitals	\$22,265,683
FLOWERS BAKERIES LLC	BLOUNTSTOWN	Bread, cake, and related products	\$20,437,200
WSP USA INC	BLOUNTSTOWN	Management consulting services	\$14,205,900
BLOUNTSTOWN RHBLTATION CTR LLC	BLOUNTSTOWN	Convalescent home with continuous nursing care	\$12,844,455
REGIONS BANK	BLOUNTSTOWN	State commercial banks	\$11,651,100

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
Exploratory Oil Well Permit Denial	Clearwater Land and Minerals	N/A	0	Sept 2025
FPL Solar Energy Centers (3 sites)	Florida Power & Light	N/A	N/A	June 2023
Calhoun-Liberty Hospital	Public sector	\$47M	N/A	Dec 2025

Franklin County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
HOMELAND SECURITY US DEPT	N/A	CARRABELLE	National security, Federal government	113
ENVIRNMNTAL PRTECTION FLA DEPT	CIRCUMNAVGTNL SALTWTER PADDLNG	CARRABELLE	Air, water, and solid waste management, State government	100
FRANKLIN COUNTY OF	FRANKLIN COUNTY SHERIFFS OFF	EASTPOINT	Sheriffs' office	81
CORRECTIONS FLORIDA DEPARTMENT	N/A	EASTPOINT	Wildlife conservation agencies	74
CORRECTIONS FLORIDA DEPARTMENT	FRANKLIN WORK CAMP	APALACHICOLA	Penitentiary, government	63

Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
TJ PRITCHARD FMLY HOLDINGS LLC	EASTPOINT	Investment holding companies, except banks	\$25,000,000
CVS PHARMACY INC	APALACHICOLA	Drug stores and proprietary stores	\$13,631,800
BARBERS SEAFOOD INCORPORATED	EASTPOINT	Seafoods	\$12,000,000
LEAVINS SEAFOOD INC	APALACHICOLA	Seafoods	\$9,865,332
LYNNS QUALITY OYSTERS	EASTPOINT	Seafoods	\$8,104,223

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
Aviation & Power Plant Training Program	Apalachicola Regional Airport / Triumph	\$250K	Training outcomes	Dec 2025
Triumph Gulf Coast Early Project Pipeline	Triumph Gulf Coast	Varies	Varies	2024-2025

Gadsden County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
CHILDREN & FAMILIES FLA DEPT	FLORIDA STATE HOSPITAL	CHATTAHOOCHEE	Psychiatric hospitals	2,000
SCHOOL BOARD GADSDEN COUNTY	N/A	QUINCY	Public elementary and secondary schools	644
TMS ENTERPRISES LLC	PLANT 2	HAVANA	Printed circuit boards	500
ENVIRNMNTAL PRTECTION FLA DEPT	MINE SAFETY & HEALTH	HAVANA	Air, water, and solid waste management, State government	450
COASTAL PLYWOOD LLC	COASTAL PLYWOOD COMPANY	HAVANA	Hardwood veneer and plywood	354

Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
TRULIEVE INC	QUINCY	Cannabis store	\$375,909,479
CHILDREN & FAMILIES FLA DEPT	CHATTAHOOCHEE	Psychiatric hospitals	\$231,772,000
PILOT TRAVEL CENTERS LLC	MIDWAY	Truck stops	\$79,984,800
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA	QUINCY	University	\$76,662,900
SUPERVALU INC	QUINCY	Grocery stores	\$71,510,400

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
WillScot Hammock Creek Campus	WillScot Mobile Offices	N/A	N/A	Apr 2025
Gulf to Gadsden Freight Logistics Zone	Public / regional partnership	N/A	N/A	Jan 2026

Gulf County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
HERNDON OIL CORPORATION	SHELL FOOD MART	PORT SAINT JOE	Filling stations, gasoline	353
GULF COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT	N/A	PORT SAINT JOE	Public combined elementary and secondary school	300
HALLMARK PINE RIDGE LLC	N/A	PORT SAINT JOE	Real estate agents and managers	252
WHITE SANDS INV PARTNERS LLC	N/A	PORT SAINT JOE	Investors, nec	250
GAC CONTRACTORS INC	N/A	PORT SAINT JOE	Athletic and recreation facilities construction	219

Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
HERNDON OIL CORPORATION	PORT SAINT JOE	Filling stations, gasoline	\$70,600,000
GAC CONTRACTORS INC	PORT SAINT JOE	Athletic and recreation facilities construction	\$40,572,778
CELLCO PARTNERSHIP	PORT SAINT JOE	Cellular telephone services	\$28,212,500
DEWBERRY COMPANIES INC	PORT SAINT JOE	Consulting engineer	\$20,691,429
GULF COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT	PORT SAINT JOE	Public combined elementary and secondary school	\$16,950,000

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
Skyborne Technology SKY Hangar	Skyborne Technology (UAV Corp)	\$105M (LOIs)	N/A	Dec 2025
Gulf County Floating Dry Dock Proposal Revival	Gulf County / Gulf County EDC	Proposal stage	TBD	May 2025
Gulf County School District Digital Tools Initiative	Gulf County School District / Triumph	\$6.9M	6,000 certifications	Oct 2025
Gulf County Airport Public-Private Partnership	Gulf County + St. Joe Co.	N/A	N/A	Aug 2023
Triumph Gulf Coast Early Project Pipeline	Triumph Gulf Coast	Varies	Varies	2024-2025

Holmes County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
REGENCY HLTH CARE CTR OF BNFAF	BONIFAY NURSING HOME	BONIFAY	Convalescent home with continuous nursing care	160
HOLMES COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT	BONIFAY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	BONIFAY	Public elementary school	146
JUDICARY CRTS OF THE STATE FLA	FOURTEENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT	BONIFAY	State courts	84
HOLMES COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT	HOLMES COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL	BONIFAY	Public senior high school	73
HOLMES COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT	BETHLEHEM HIGH SCHOOL	BONIFAY	Public elementary school	68

Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
SOVERIGN HALTHCARE BONIFAY LLC	BONIFAY	Nursing and Personal Care Facilities	\$16,591,003
WEST FLORIDA ELC COOP ASSN INC	BONIFAY	Electric Services	\$15,973,200
REGIONS BANK	BONIFAY	Commercial Banks	\$12,710,300
DECTORS MEMORIAL HOSPITAL	BONIFAY	Hospitals	\$11,877,637
FIRST FEDERAL BANK	BONIFAY	Savings Institutions	\$8,262,849

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
Busy Bee Travel Center	Busy Bee	N/A	~100	Dec 2025

Jackson County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
VETERANS AFFAIRS US DEPT	N/A	MARIANNA	Administration of veterans' affairs, Federal government	1,470
CORRECTIONS FLORIDA DEPARTMENT	APALACHEE CORRECTIONAL INST	SNEADS	Prison, government	493
JACKSON COUNTY HOSPITAL DST	JACKSON HOSPITAL	MARIANNA	Hospital, affiliated with AMA residency	327
PRISONS FEDERAL BUREAU OF	FCI MARIANNA	MARIANNA	Prison, government	327
GEO GROUP INC	N/A	GRACEVILLE	Real estate investment trusts	211

Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
ANDERSON COLUMBIA CO INC	MARIANNA	General contractor, highway and street construction	\$85,404,780
AMERICAN GEN LF ACCIDENT INSUR	MARIANNA	Insurance agents, nec	\$45,513,600
HARRISON GYPSUM LLC	MARIANNA	Gypsum mining	\$43,913,270
JACKSON COUNTY HOSPITAL DST	MARIANNA	Hospital, affiliated with AMA residency	\$43,341,958
FLORIDA POWER & LIGHT COMPANY	SNEADS	Generation, electric power	\$41,841,900

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
PackEx USA Beverage Manufacturing Facility	PackEx USA	>\$50M	75	Dec 2025
Pulse Industries Linear Accelerator Facility	Pulse Industries	\$10-15M (est.)	Hundreds	Feb 2025
FPL Solar Energy Centers (3 sites)	Florida Power & Light	N/A	N/A	June 2023

Liberty County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
TWIN OAKS JUVENILE DEV INC	APALACHCOLA FREST YUTH ACADEMY	HOSFORD	Juvenile correctional home	164
COUNTY OF LIBERTY	N/A	BRISTOL	Executive offices, County government	130
GEORGIA-PACIFIC LLC	GEORGIA-PACIFIC	HOSFORD	Paper mills	117
CORRECTIONS FLORIDA DEPARTMENT	DEPARTMENT OF PRISON	BRISTOL	Prison, government	105
NORTH FLORIDA LUMBER CO INC	N/A	BRISTOL	Lumber: rough, sawed, or planed	99

Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
GEORGIA-PACIFIC LLC	HOSFORD	Paper mills	\$25,108,200
NORTH FLORIDA LUMBER CO INC	BRISTOL	Lumber: rough, sawed, or planed	\$16,931,211
TWIN OAKS JUVENILE DEV INC	HOSFORD	Juvenile correctional home	\$9,665,792
R & S EXCAVATION INC	HOSFORD	Excavation work	\$5,254,263
CHILDRENS CMPRHENSIVE SVCS INC	BRISTOL	Child related social services	\$5,186,500

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
Calhoun-Liberty Hospital	Public sector	\$47M	N/A	Dec 2025

Wakulla County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
ST MARKS POWDER INC	ST MARKS POWDR A GEN DYNAMICS	CRAWFORDVILLE	Industrial organic chemicals, nec	340
WAKULLA COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD	N/A	CRAWFORDVILLE	Public elementary school	200
GENERAL DYNMICS ORD TCTCAL SYS	N/A	CRAWFORDVILLE	Ammunition, except for small arms, nec	167
DOS OF EDEN SPRINGS LLC	EDEN SPRNG NURSING & REHAB CTR	CRAWFORDVILLE	Convalescent home with continuous nursing care	160
CSG SYSTEMS INC	CSG	CRAWFORDVILLE	Data processing service	135

Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
ST MARKS POWDER INC	CRAWFORDVILLE	Industrial organic chemicals, nec	\$126,854,000
GENERAL DYNMICS ORD TCTCAL SYS	CRAWFORDVILLE	Ammunition, except for small arms, nec	\$62,307,700
RESIDENTIAL ELEVATORS INC	CRAWFORDVILLE	Elevators	\$36,008,830
AMERIGAS PROPANE LP	CRAWFORDVILLE	Propane gas, bottled	\$19,434,500
WINN-DIXIE STORES INC	CRAWFORDVILLE	Grocery stores, chain	\$14,757,600

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
Point Blank Enterprises Expansion	Point Blank Enterprises	\$21.5M	300	Oct 2025
TSC WEI Campus Healthcare & Teacher Workforce Training	Tallahassee State College / Triumph	\$10M	3,695 certifications	Oct 2025
AirLife Florida 1 Air Base Launch	Air Methods	N/A	N/A	Sept 2025
CSG Systems Call Center Closure	CSG Systems	N/A	-100	July 2025

North Walton County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
LCI II INC	CHAUTQUA OFFCES PSYCHTHRAPY EV	DEFUNIAK SPRINGS	Residential care	1,398
WALTON COUNTY OF	BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONER	DEFUNIAK SPRINGS	Legislative bodies, County government	383
WALTON COUNTY OF	DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS	DEFUNIAK SPRINGS	Air, water, and solid waste management	256
WALTON COUNTY OF	SHERIFFS DEPARTMENT	DEFUNIAK SPRINGS	Law enforcement statistics center, government	176
PROFESSIONAL PRODUCTS INC	EZY WRAP	DEFUNIAK SPRINGS	Orthopedic appliances	170

Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
CELLCO PARTNERSHIP (VERIZON)	DEFUNIAK SPRINGS	Cellular telephone services	\$72,224,000
C W ROBERTS CONTRACTING INC	FREEPORT	General contractor, highway and street construction	\$34,691,629
CRESTWOOD EQUITY PARTNERS LP	DEFUNIAK SPRINGS	Liquefied petroleum gas dealers	\$34,097,000
CHEVRON CORPORATION	FREEPORT	Filling stations, gasoline	\$26,699,400
PROFESSIONAL PRODUCTS INC	DEFUNIAK SPRINGS	Orthopedic appliances	\$25,613,801

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
<i>No recent projects identified in source data.</i>				

Washington County

Top Employers by Number of Employees (2023)

Company	Trade Name	City	Industry	Employees
ATLANTA DOVE	N/A	EBRO	Aircraft engines and engine parts	505
WESTPOINT HOME INC	HOME FASHION SOURCE	CHIPLEY	Broadwoven fabric mills, cotton	495
TRANSPORTATION FLORIDA DEPT	DISTRICT 3	CHIPLEY	Regulation, administration of transportation, State govt	315
LITTLE FLOWER CATHOLIC SCHOOL	ST JOSEPH THE WORKER	CHIPLEY	Catholic Church	291
ACADIAN CYPRESS HARDWOODS INC	N/A	CHIPLEY	Lumber products	210

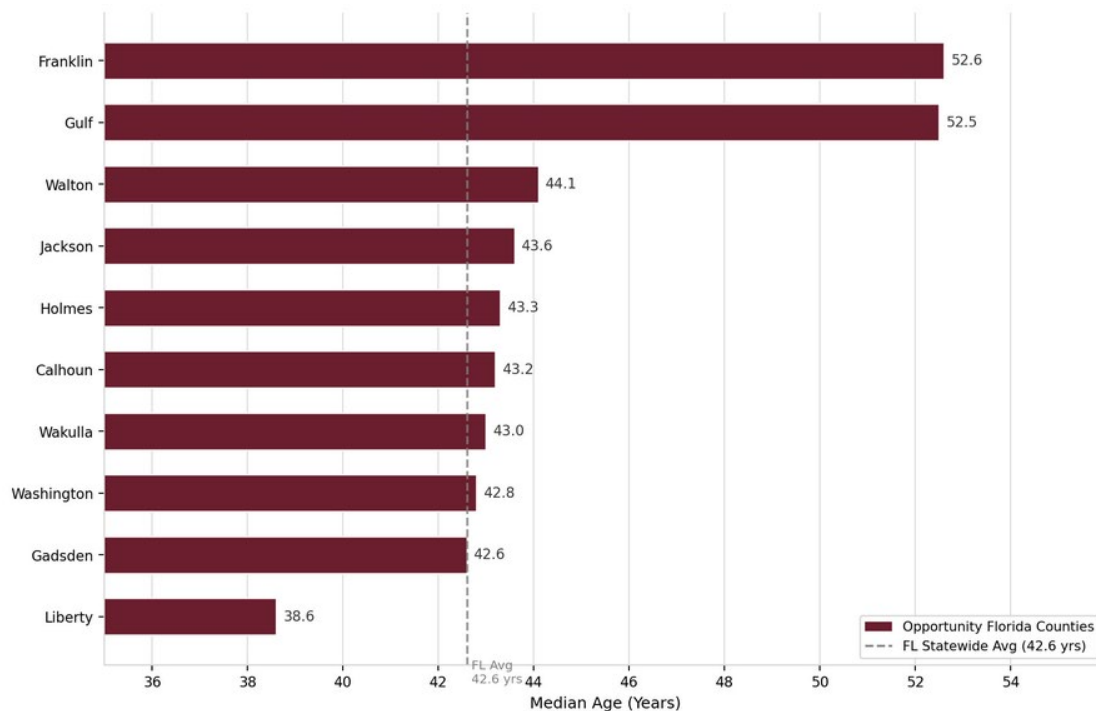
Top Sales Generators (2023)

Company	City	Industry	Sales (2023)
ATLANTA DOVE	EBRO	Aircraft engines and engine parts	\$1,340,000,000
WESTPOINT HOME INC	CHIPLEY	Broadwoven fabric mills, cotton	\$132,126,923
CELLCO PARTNERSHIP	CHIPLEY	Cellular telephone services	\$72,224,000
ACADIAN CYPRESS HARDWOODS INC	CHIPLEY	Lumber products	\$47,513,760
FRITO-LAY NORTH AMERICA INC	CHIPLEY	Snack foods	\$40,622,400

Recent Economic Development Projects (2023-2026)

Project Name	Firm / Investor	Investment	Jobs	Date
Washington County Industrial Park Upgrades	Washington County	\$9M	Indirect	Dec 2025
FPL Solar Energy Center	Florida Power & Light	N/A	N/A	June 2023

Appendix B – Institutional Population and Median Age Context



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Estimates.
Figure does not include inmate population in median age.

Figure B1. Median Age Adjusted for Institutional Population

Published median age figures from the American Community Survey reflect all persons counted at their location on Census Day, including incarcerated individuals housed at correctional facilities within each county. In rural counties with large correctional populations relative to their total population, this methodology can meaningfully distort the reported median age, understating or overstating the true age profile of the civilian resident population.

To address this concern, Figure B1 presents adjusted median age estimates for all ten Opportunity Florida counties. Adjustments were made by removing the estimated incarcerated population from each county's age distribution using inmate population counts from the Prison Policy Initiative's Prison Gerrymandering Project and age distribution statistics published by the Florida Department of Corrections. These adjusted estimates are approximate and should be interpreted with caution, as inmate age distributions vary by facility and over time.

The adjustment has the most notable effect in Gulf and Franklin counties, where the presence of large correctional facilities relative to total population results in adjusted median ages of 52.5 and 52.6 years respectively, compared to published figures of 47.3 and 49.2. Liberty County, despite having one of the highest inmate shares in the region at 22.9 percent, sees a modest downward adjustment to 38.6 years, suggesting the inmate population there skews slightly younger than the civilian population rather than older. Across most other counties the adjustment is relatively small, generally under 1.5 years, indicating that the published figures are reasonably representative of the civilian age profile for those areas.

Appendix C – Meeting Summary: Kelis Wong and Jeff Hendry – Jan. 14th Discussion

The following is a summary of a meeting held on January 14, 2026, between Kelis Wong, Senior Researcher at the FSU Center for Economic Forecasting and Analysis (CEFA), and Jeff Hendry, Director of the FSU Institute of Government. The discussion focused on rural economic development challenges and opportunities relevant to the Opportunity Florida region.

Participants:

Kelis Wong, CEFA Senior Researcher (kw25c@fsu.edu)

Jeff Hendry, Director, FSU Institute of Government (jhendry@iog.fsu.edu)

Key Hurdles

- **Workforce:** A persistent mismatch between available jobs and worker skills, with a need to upskill displaced older workers and build stronger training pipelines for younger cohorts.
- **Future-oriented skills:** Limited local capacity to identify, anticipate, and train for skills aligned with emerging and growth industries.
- **Housing shortages:** A severe housing deficit, particularly in multi-family housing, which constrains labor mobility and firm attraction.
- **Project visibility:** Insufficient communication and coordination with the public, as well as with state and federal officials, regarding ongoing and pipeline projects.
- **Local political resistance:** Resistance to growth in some county commissions and city councils, limiting development momentum.
- **Employment concentration:** Heavy reliance on state and local government employment and the prison system as primary employment anchors.

Comparative Advantages

- **Logistics and distribution:** Strong regional capabilities through rail, trucking, and port access, including St. Joe and Panama City, with proximity to Mobile.
- **Aviation assets:** Local airports (e.g., Marianna and Franklin) with runways capable of supporting freight operations, currently underutilized beyond private aviation.
- **Defense proximity:** Close proximity to multiple military bases and established relationships with federal defense agencies; however, local entrepreneurial capacity to supply defense contracts remains underdeveloped.
- **Agricultural base:** An established agricultural sector with significant upside from adopting technology to improve productivity in crops and livestock.

Assessment of Opportunity Florida

- Site cataloging: Opportunity Florida has taken an important and appropriate step by proactively identifying and cataloging developable sites, reducing search costs for site selectors and private investors.
- Leadership strength: Leadership was highlighted as a key strength, particularly the depth of local relationships and institutional knowledge held by Opportunity Florida staff.

Industries with High Potential in the Panhandle

The following industries were identified as having strong near-term potential in the Opportunity Florida region:

- Timber processing: Recent job losses driven by international competition, particularly from Brazil; highlighted as having a severe negative impact on several Opportunity Florida communities. Recovery and modernization represent a significant opportunity.
 - Construction: Including temporary and subdivision-related projects, driven by broader regional growth.
 - Advanced manufacturing and aviation services: Boat repair, shipbuilding, aircraft-related activities, and aviation maintenance and repair operations.
 - Drones and related technologies: Emerging sector aligned with existing aviation infrastructure and defense relationships.
 - Cold storage: Demand driven by agricultural production and food distribution needs in the region.
 - Food processing and distribution: Leverages existing agricultural base and logistics access.
 - Warehousing, logistics, and staging: Supported by rail, port, and highway infrastructure.
- Eco-tourism: Natural assets offer a differentiated tourism offering beyond coastal recreation.