POVERTY SOLUTIONS
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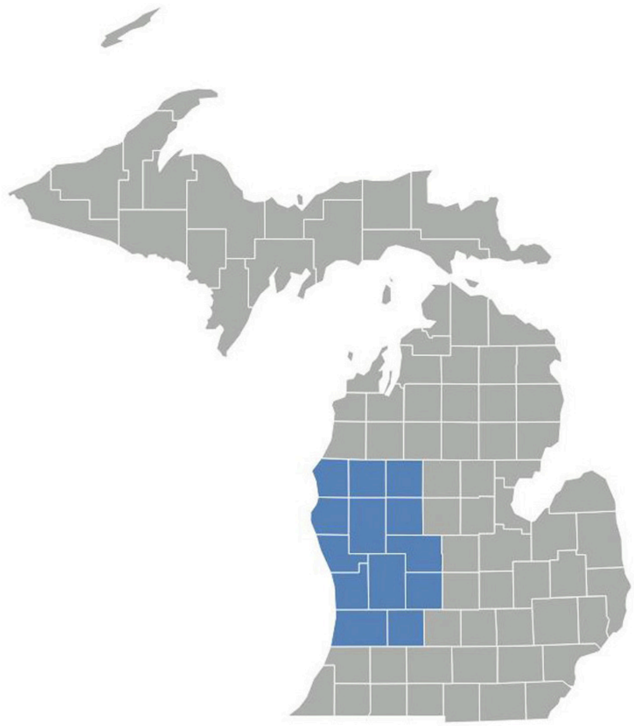
FACT SHEET

Michigan Poverty & Well Being Map: West Region

The West Region includes: Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kent, Lake, Mason, Mecosta, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newaygo, Oceana, Osceola, and Ottawa counties. Learn more about the map at poverty.umich.edu.

West Michigan Region Should Invest in Addressing Housing and Transportation Costs in Lake County

With a regional median household income of $77,561 and a poverty rate of 10.8%, economic indicators in Michigan's West Region are stronger than the state overall. However, these strengths are not universal across the region, and some counties lag behind both regional and statewide measures. Lake County has the highest child poverty rate in the state at 36.1%, a median household income of just $48,557, and 51.5% of households are Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE), meaning more than half of all households cannot afford necessities even when employed and making enough to be above the poverty line. Achieving regional equity and shared prosperity will require targeted investments to raise incomes and expand economic opportunity in Lake County and other rural counties across the region.



While Kent County and the Grand Rapids metro area have experienced high demand and rising housing costs, the housing cost burden, or the percent of households paying more than 30% of their income on housing costs, is significantly lower in Kent County (29.6%) than in rural counties like Lake County (38%), despite lower housing costs outside of Kent County. The median monthly housing costs in Lake County are about 36% lower than in Kent County, suggesting that low income is a bigger driver of housing cost burden than high housing prices.[1] Housing costs cannot be driven below a certain floor even if supply increases, meaning that raising incomes is necessary to reduce the cost burden in counties like Lake County, rather than expanding housing supply alone.

	State	Region
Population	10,077,761	1,643,515
Median Household Income	$72,336	$77,561
Children in Poverty	17.7%	13.1%
Population in Poverty	13.4%	10.8%
ALICE	26.3%	26.7%
ALICE + Poverty	39.7%	37.4%
Households Receiving Food Stamps / SNAP	13.5%	11.1%
Housing Cost Burdened	32.7%	29.1%
Adults Without Insurance	7.1%	7.0%
Single- Parent Households	30.6%	25.7%

The low wages available in Lake County's private sector help explain why so many residents struggle to cover even modest housing and transportation costs. Across all private-sector industries, the average Lake County worker earns $682 per week, compared to $1,194 per week in Kent County, meaning Lake County private-sector workers earn roughly 57 cents for every dollar earned by their Kent County counterparts.

Transportation costs add further strain on top of these income constraints and are especially severe in a county where residents have no viable alternative to car ownership. Lake County households spend an average of $16,668 annually on transportation and drive an average of 26,333 vehicle miles per year, 41% more than the average 18,681 miles driven by Kent County households, despite the median income in Lake County being roughly $32,000 lower than Kent County's median income.[2] Lake County has very limited public transportation available, and jobs are not accessible without a personal vehicle. Housing and transportation costs combined account for 64% of a typical Lake County household's income, significantly higher than the 45% considered affordable and leaving just 36% for food, healthcare, childcare, and all other necessities.[3] In Kent County, that same combined housing and transportation cost burden totals 42% of income. The lack of transit and high transportation costs also cut off Lake County residents from higher-wage employment in neighboring counties, keeping workers in Lake County's low-wage local economy rather than connecting them to manufacturing and healthcare jobs in Kent and Muskegon counties.

Closing these gaps will require investment in workforce development and transportation infrastructure targeting West Michigan's most distressed rural counties. Because low income is the more fundamental driver of housing cost burden in Lake County, the most direct path to improving affordability runs through raising wages and expanding access to better-paying work. Workforce development investments through West Shore Educational Service District and community college partnerships could expand access to the credentials that West Michigan employers increasingly demand, particularly in manufacturing and healthcare, where wages are substantially higher than in Lake County's dominant sectors. The West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission, which serves Lake, Mason, Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana counties, is well-positioned to advocate for expanded rural transit options, including models in which vehicles respond to individual requests, better suited to low-density areas than traditional fixed-route service. Improved transit access would reduce the transportation cost burden on households while also connecting residents to higher-wage jobs in surrounding counties that are currently out of reach without a personal vehicle. The barriers are significant: low population density makes transit operation costly, recruiting employers to rural areas is difficult, and Lake County's limited tax base cannot address these challenges without external support. With over half of Lake County households unable to meet their basic needs and a regional economy showing early signs of slowing, targeted investment in the region's most vulnerable counties is not only warranted but overdue.

References

1 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates; U.S. Census Bureau. Median Monthly Housing Costs (Dollars), 2024. Prepared by Social Explorer. https://www.socialexplorer.com/reports/socialexplorer/en/report/4ff4d1a4-70af-11f1-9248-638b1f50dcc5

2 H+T Map and Index, Center for Neighborhood Technology, https://htaindex.cnt.org/map/

3 *Ibid*