



2024

Benchmarking Central Ohio

Executive Summary

Benchmarking Central Ohio is the eighth edition of a series of reports that The Columbus Foundation began commissioning in 2007 to measure the Columbus metropolitan region's change and growth, identify regional strengths and challenges, and inform community priorities. We have remained committed to providing this information out of the care we have for our community, and for the need to establish strategies for community improvement based on the best and most complete data sets possible.

The 2024 report, compiled by local firm Scioto Analysis, does not tell us as a community what to do or how to interpret the enclosed data points. Rather, the report is designed to help foster an informed dialogue about the central Ohio region's health and vitality, economic competitiveness, and quality of life. There are decisions to be made when considering the findings of this report, whether we rank high or low on any particular measure. For instance, is being among the top five in gender pay equity (3.03, pg. 44) acceptable when women in central Ohio still only earn 83 cents for every dollar men make? Or, is 0.29 dwelling units per acre (1.07, pg. 21) an efficient enough use of land to support our housing needs or our vision for a multi-modal transportation system? If we as a community are uncomfortable with some of the statistics in this report, then we must also consider what must be done to improve those numbers, if not our ranking among peer regions, in the years to come.

Ironically, the key to making sense of all this data is to remember that while this report is full of numbers, these aren't *just* numbers. They symbolize the jobs that put food on tables (2.08-2.09, pgs. 34-35) and the childcare centers and schools to which families entrust their children (4.01-4.04, pgs. 57-60). Some of these indicators carry within them the hopes and dreams of a refugee (1.08, pg. 22) who is finally starting their own business (2.05-2.06, pgs. 31-32) after fleeing their homeland and stepping off a plane in Columbus (5.18, pg. 84). Only when we remember the lives and the stories these numbers represent are we able to see the connections between the many things that, in aggregate, make up this region we call home.

This edition of the *Benchmarking Central Ohio* report helps illustrate the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our region, as it is the first benchmarking report released since 2019. We can also use this report to consider how much more we can do together for future generations with the assets and strengths our region possesses. For example, we can choose how best to use our remaining 1.29 million acres of cultivated cropland (5.01, pg. 67), just as we might also ask how else our nationally renowned library system (4.05, pg. 61) could be better supported to help our communities to thrive. It would then be our collective task of determining how to further leverage those assets.

Report highlights:

- *Housing affordability:* Unlike some regions, the interventions and investments we make in central Ohio can still make a measurable difference.
- *Public health:* The Columbus metropolitan region has some of the poorest health outcomes among other regions measured in the report, calling into question the underlying factors affecting population health.
- *Population growth:* Central Ohio's growth has remained steady, if not at the same pace as many peer regions, a reality we should neither take for granted nor fail to utilize to generate opportunities for people, families, businesses, and communities. Meanwhile, immigrants and refugees continue to be a driving force behind our population stability and growth.
- *Workforce:* With the second highest share of people in prime working age, and one of the lowest unemployment rates, central Ohio has one of the most engaged workforces among regional peers.
- *Poverty:* Despite recent declines in poverty, central Ohio's poverty rate remains higher than most peer regions, while the Black poverty rate is still two times as high as the rate for the entire region.
- *Transportation:* Our region's auto-centric transportation infrastructure, while currently producing shorter commute times for some, places limits on our mobility options, and is thus ripe for improvements to transit, pedestrian, and bicycle infrastructure.
- *Volunteerism:* Central Ohio residents are more generous with their time and effort to serve their community than in most other peer regions.

As you navigate the report and reference it in your work, consider not just where the Columbus metropolitan region appears in the rankings, but how the region is trending, since the direction we're heading may be more important than where we are today. Be sure to pay attention to the text color of the regional rankings for each indicator, which may point to patterns that are uniquely affecting regions like ours. Use the indices in this report to learn more about the nonprofits, public agencies, institutions, and corporations that work on each of these aspects of our region, and consider what level of support, engagement, or accountability is needed to make them better at building a central Ohio that works for everyone.

There is truly so much that goes into strengthening and improving the community for the benefit of all. As The Columbus Foundation closes out its 80th year of commitment to that end, we hope this report helps to further empower your own commitment to making Columbus and central Ohio a more connected and inclusive region.