



WRHSAC Equity Data Project – Western Mass 2023



Equity Project Summary

This report identifies groups experiencing various functional and access needs who may be at higher risk of threats and hazards, as well as specific circumstances that might impact an individual's ability to respond quickly and appropriately before, during, and after an emergency. The data are not exhaustive, are points in time, fluctuate, and have large margins of error in small towns. [Census Bureau Data](#) The aim of this report is to begin identifying trends, vulnerabilities, and strategies that are likely to increase equity in access and outcomes for emergency response information and resources as well as to provide data that can be used to plan for emergencies. Full reports available at [Equity in Emergency Management | WRHSAC](#)

Berkshire County Specific Equity Concerns

According to the Robert Wood Johnson's County Health Rankings, Berkshire residents, as compared to the rest of Massachusetts, are more likely to die prematurely, be unemployed, be a single parent, have children living in poverty, experience income inequity, be victims of violent crime, experience more deaths due to injuries, have more teen births, die of a drug overdose, have a child die, die in a vehicle crash, live in a segregated neighborhood, pay more for childcare, die by suicide, die from firearms, and use tobacco products. Selected data associated with increased risks show that even when the percentages are low, Berkshire County cities and towns with fewer resources have a significant number of individuals likely to need additional or different assistance in emergencies. About 13,000 people live in poverty, 1,900 don't have a vehicle, 8,800 age 65+ live alone, and almost 20,000 are living with one or more disabilities that significantly impact daily living. By 2100, Berkshire temperatures are expected to rise more than 8°F, the highest MA county increase, raising the number of expected heat emergencies, heart attacks, ER visits, etc. and creating another emergency within every emergency response. U.S. Census Fact Finder, Mass Environmental Public Health Tracking, [Emergency Preparedness Planning Tool \(region1hmcc.org\)](#)

Western Mass Hazard Vulnerability Assessments

In the past, the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency, the Western Region Homeland Security Advisory Council, the Public Health Emergency Preparedness Coalitions, and the Health and Medical Coordinating Coalition have conducted Hazard Vulnerability and Threat and Hazard Identification Risk Assessments to identify the most likely threats and how likely they are to occur. The State 2013 & 2018 State Hazard Mitigation Plans also list threats and vulnerabilities to consider. [ocn921510011.pdf](#). ([Massachusetts Integrated State Hazard Mitigation and Climate Adaptation Plan | Mass.gov](#)).

Berkshire County Specific Hazards, Threats, Concerns, and Vulnerabilities

1. **Older Population:** 25% of the population is over 65 with a median age of 46.4 years, one of the highest in Massachusetts. Some Berkshire communities have a majority of their population over 50 years old. Older Adults often need additional assistance in emergencies.
2. **Seasonal Visitors:** Berkshire County has a large population of second homeowners and tens of thousands of seasonal visitors who must be managed in an emergency. Large income disparities also create inequities that are more apparent when resources are scarce.
3. **Broadband and Cell Service Gaps:** Broadband affordability and digital literacy are significant barriers to access. Cell service remains spotty in the hilly valleys, making all communications difficult in emergencies.
4. **Electricity Dependent:** Nearly 1,000 individuals are medically dependent on equipment powered by electricity. The elderly and very young also depend on electricity to maintain a safe temperature range and keep medicines refrigerated, making power outages a significant concern.
5. **Rural Communities** have fewer resources, less infrastructure, and higher costs per capita, making emergency response more challenging.
6. **Critical lack of Housing** for middle income workers as well as lower income individuals, families, and older adults complicates a response.

Town of Cheshire: Selected Population Characteristics Contributing to Inequities in Emergencies

Summary: Cheshire is a small town in Berkshire County with a medium population density. The population is older and has a slightly lower Median Household Income (MHI) than the rest of the county; 77% of the State's. About 25 Cheshire residents depend on electricity for their medical equipment, nearly 650 are living with one or more disabilities, over 200 residents are living in poverty, including 5% of children and 6% of older adults, 240 aged 65 and over live alone, nearly 30 residents have no vehicle and there are 288 children ages 9 and under. Additionally, about 300 residents have cognitive difficulty, 200 hearing difficulty, more than 200 independent living difficulty, and 200 ambulatory difficulties. Younger children, older adults and those living alone, in poverty or with a disability are more at-risk in emergencies and will likely need additional assistance.

	Total Population			Land Area		Children 9 and Under		People 60 – 69 Years Old		People 70+ Years Old		Medicare Electrically Dependent – Zip Code	
	Number of People	Median Age	Median Household Income	Sq. Miles	People Per Sq. Mile	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People.	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	# of Medicare Beneficiaries	# Electrically Dependent
Cheshire	3,239	52.1	\$72,485	26.8	120.8	288	8.9	615	19.0	614	19.0	989	25
Berkshire Co.	127,859	49.4	\$74,176	926.9	137.9	10,734	8.4	21,245	16.6	21,354	16.7	36,666	979
Massachusetts	6,981,974	40.3	\$94,488	7,800.9	895.0	702,092	10.1	885,484	12.7	853,387	12.2	1,423,062	40,208

N/A – Not Available or Unknown

Source: US Census [Cheshire town, Berkshire County, MA - Profile data - Census Reporter](#), [Berkshire County, MA - Profile data - Census Reporter](#)

Source: Electrically Dependent [HHS emPOWER Map](#)

Source: WMHMCC 2019/2020, [Berkshire-County-Vulnerable-Pop-Data.pdf](#); 2023/24, [Emergency Preparedness Planning Tool \(region1hmcc.org\)](#)

	No Vehicle		Below Poverty Level		Less than 9th-Grade Education		Over 65 who live alone		No English Spoken		One Disability		Two Disabilities	
	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population
Cheshire	28	0.9	224	6.9	48	1.5	241	28.5	0	0.0	433	13.4	210	6.5
Berkshire Co.	1,895	1.5	13,063	10.2	2,355	1.8	8,849	27.7	538	0.4	10,392	8.1	9,188	7.2

	Vision Difficulty		Self-Care Difficulty		Independent Living Difficulty		Cognitive Difficulty		Hearing Difficulty		Ambulatory Difficulty	
	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population	Number of People	% of Population
Cheshire	19	0.6	14	0.4	216	6.7	316	9.8	221	6.8	200	6.2
Berkshire Co.	2,929	2.3	3,136	2.5	7,159	5.6	7,832	6.1	5,814	4.5	9,100	7.1

Environmental Justice Areas Source 2022; [Environmental Justice Populations in Massachusetts | Mass.gov](#)

Risk Factors [Berkshire County, MA - Profile data - Census Reporter](#)

Geographic Area	Environmental Justice Area	% Minority Population Other than White Alone	Median Household Income as % of MA Inc.	% Children under 18 Living in Poverty	% Seniors 65+ Living in Poverty
Cheshire	N/A	10.0%	76.7%	5.7%	6.7%
Berkshire Co.	13/32 Towns	14.6%	78.5%	15.5%	8.6%