



COMMUNITY PROFILE

Introduction & Background

Having a historical perspective of a city and the surrounding region helps a person to better understand a community and the planning process that goes into making it attractive. The geographic location of Rockford is important for many reasons, as is our location in relationship to other places within the context of the region as a whole. The physical and social characteristics of a city help one to understand how people live, where they work, and how they move from place to place. Understanding Rockford's characteristics including history, development patterns, geography, and weather provide a holistic overview of what makes our city a unique and desirable place to live, work, and raise a family in.

This chapter offers an overview of the city and its residents both historically as well as the existing conditions of the region. This information sets the basis for an understanding of the types of communities present in Rockford as well as the overall sense of what type of place Rockford is for both residents and visitors.

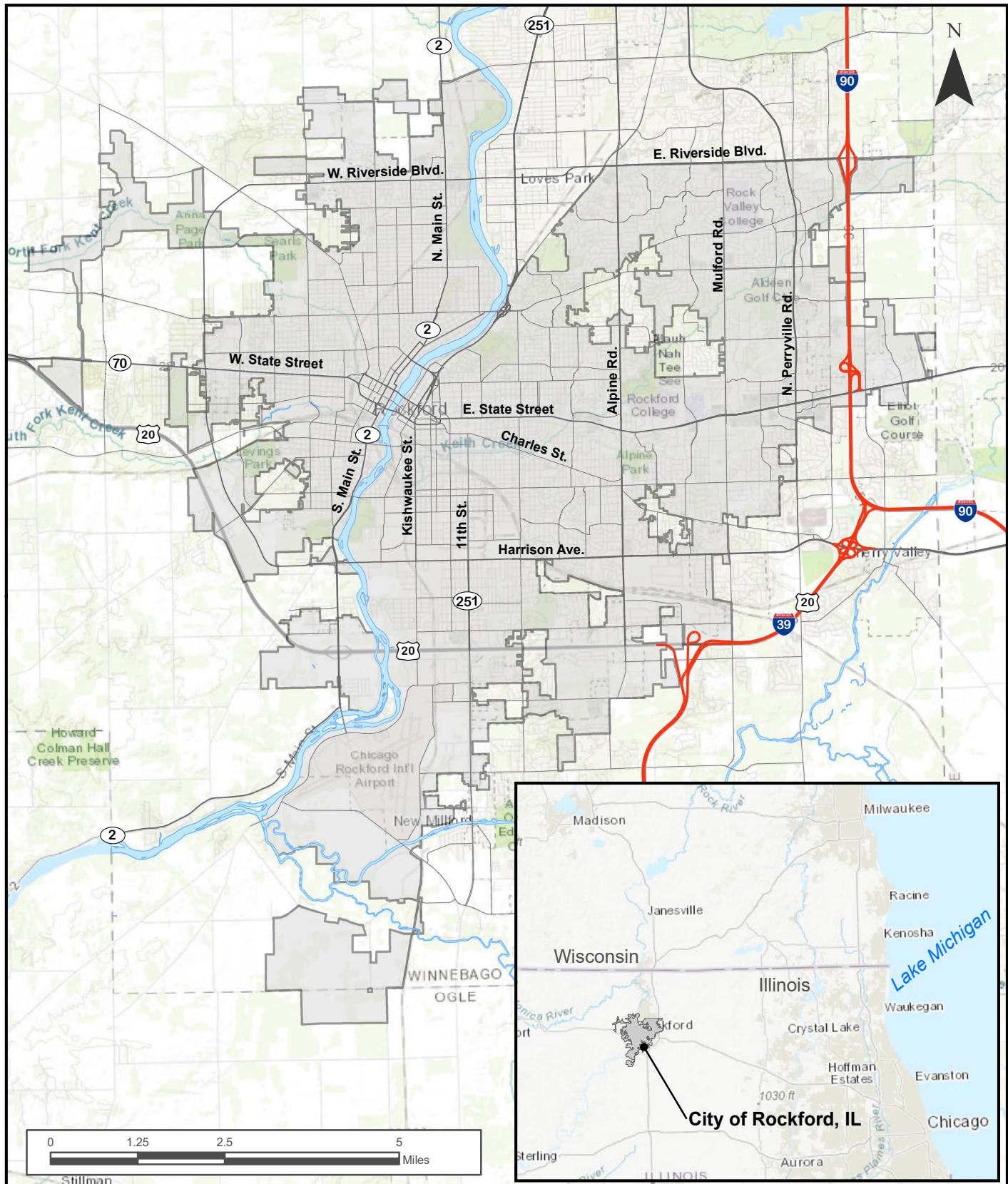
Geography & Location

The City of Rockford is located in northern Illinois along the Rock River, about 90 miles northwest of Chicago. Rockford is closely, and nearly equally, distanced from the Cities of Milwaukee and Madison Wisconsin, Dubuque Iowa, and Chicago Illinois. All of which are about 1.5-2 hours drive. Our close proximity to other large cities, and the ease of travel between them all, contributes to Rockford's competitive market advantage.ⁱ The city encom-

passing the Rock River was no accident. In fact, the Rock River was a prominent feature in northern Illinois during the early settlement period acting as a travel route, food source, and means of fertile crop production. The weather varies from hot and humid in the summer to cold, snowy, and dry in the winter. In general, the State of Illinois is flat and northern Illinois has very little topography.



Historic Photo of Rockford City Hall - 425 E. State



City of Rockford History & Background

Native American History & Pre-Settlement

Before the 1700's, northern Illinois was predominantly populated by the Illinois and Miami Native American tribes. As Europeans pushed further inland, many tribes were forced to relocate and the density of the regions inhabitants gradually increased. What we now commonly refer to as northern Illinois became home to a variety of tribes including the Winnebago (Ho-Chunk), Sauk, Shawnee, Potawatomi, Fox, Kickapoo, and Dakota Sioux. While each tribe had its own culture, values, languages and religion, we know that the tribes of this region flourished due to the climate, natural resources, and the ability to travel easily due to the geography and network of navigable river ways. Northern Illinois also provided inhabitants with plenty of opportunities for both farming and hunting due to the prairies and woodland areas. These same areas also provided them with various plants, trees and animals, which they used for clothing, food, shelter, medicine, and ceremonial purposes. Northern Illinois' many rivers, creeks, and lakes provided an abundance of fish and water fowl, and aided in easier travel and trade in the region.ⁱⁱ

The Early Years of Settlement

Settlement of the region began in 1834 as two different groups developed both the east and west sides of the Rock River. On the west bank, Germanicus Kent and Thatcher Blake, with his slave Lewis Lemon, founded Kentville. On the east bank of the river, Daniel Shaw Haight made his settlement known as Haightville. With the location of these settlements equidistance between Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River, the combined settlement became known as "Midway." In 1836, Winnebago County was formed by taking a portion of the then Jo Davies and LaSalle Counties and combining them. Midway was named as the Winnebago County seat at that time.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1837, the area was renamed Rockford. The City of Rockford got its name from a combination of the major river that runs through the city's center, the Rock River, and a shallow spot that the original settlers of this area used to cross the river, a ford. Additionally, a post office was established in 1837 with Daniel Shaw Haight as the first postmaster. In 1839, the settlement was incorporated as a village. In 1840, the first weekly newspaper began circulation and by 1877, Rockford had a successful daily newspaper.^{iv}

Continued Growth, Settlers & Origins

The settlement really began to grow by the 1850's. In 1851, the Rockford Water Power Company was organized and shortly after, a dam was constructed across the Rock River in order to produce a lot of cheap power. The Rockford dam would lead to the region becoming one of the largest manufacturing centers in the United States while being surrounded by agricultural fields and natural areas for miles. Large numbers of Irish-born immigrants arrived in the 1850's, and a few Swedish immigrants had made Rockford their home by 1852. After the Civil War, Swedish immigrants began to come in large numbers and quickly became the largest ethnic group in the city. They settled primarily on the east side, and in areas along 7th Street and Kishwaukee Avenue. At that time, the Swedish Language was as common as English in Rockford right up until the late 1920's. Other significant ethnic groups that had a presence in early Rockford were the Italians (after 1880), Poles and Lithuanians (after 1900), Laotians, Vietnamese, and Hispanics (after 1970). While one of the founders of the city, Lewis Lemon, was an African American, this population of the city was very small until after the first World War, after which people from the South, particularly Arkansas and Mississippi, arrived in the city.^v

Rockford University

The Rockford Female Seminary was chartered in 1847, converted to Rockford College in 1892, and became fully coeducational in 1958. On July 1st, 2013 the college was renamed a final time to Rockford University, the name we are familiar with today. One of Rockford College's most notable graduates was Jane Adams (1881), who was the founder of Chicago's Hull House and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1930.^{vi}



Rockford Seminary School - 1890

Industry, Manufacturing, & the Early Economy

The Rock River not only offered a convenient and safe place to cross near today's downtown Rockford, but also allowed for the construction of the Rockford Dam. This

development provided electricity from the water-power supplied by the dam that was constructed in the mid-19th century. This ultimately led to the development of Rockford as a manufacturing and industrial epicenter located in the middle of an agricultural area. The region's farming machinery manufacturing business began in the 1850's when John H. Manny developed a combined reaper and mower. The furniture and carpentry industry in Rockford was a result of the influx of Swedish carpenters who arrived with the extension of the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad to the Rock River in 1852. Rockford's early economy was based on manufacturing, as it is today, including machining, tools, screws and fasteners, hardware, and automotive parts, to name a few. In fact, the city's early nickname was Screw City, for the amount of fasteners the city produced that were used world-wide.^{vii}

By the 1880's, Rockford had established itself as a major furniture industry. By utilizing the talents of Swedish craftsman that had moved to the area, Rockford became the second largest furniture manufacturing center in the United States in the early to middle part of the 20th century. Rockford was a bit, unique, however in that the furniture companies here were co-operatives. This was a different approach to business which put a significant portion of control, and also creativity, into the hands of the laborers and craftsman. The city's agricultural industry was already in a decline by the first World War, and the furniture industry was severely affected by the Great Depression and the second World War. Due to these events, by the end of the 1960's both the furniture and farm implement industries had been wiped out.^{viii}

Population, Socio-Demographic Profile & Trends

The demographic characteristics of the city's population have continued to change since 1990, some in ways that were anticipated and others that were not. The following pages outline some of the changes that have occurred.

Population Growth

Rockford's total population generally aligned with expectations of the projections in the 2020 Comprehensive Plan. However, while the previous plan anticipated a population increase from 152,871 in 2010 to 163,730 in 2020, actual numbers showed a slightly smaller increase in population from 1990 to 2010, followed by a slight decline by 2020, according to the U.S. Census. The 2020 U.S. Census population for Rockford was 148,655. Recent estimates show a slight but continued increase.

Census data for the past 30 years, shows overall population growth in both the urbanized and rural areas in Winnebago County. However, Rockford's population as a percentage of the county total has been slowly declining. While this drop has not been significant, decreasing from 55 percent in 1990 to 52 percent in 2020, the City of Loves Park, in contrast, has seen a three-percent increase in population over the last 30 years. The Village of Machesney Park and the remainder of Winnebago County has seen a smaller population increase of one percent. However, the City of Rockford has more capacity for new growth due to its size, location, and amenities.

Rockford Population Growth	Number				Percent Change			
	1990	2000	2010	2020	1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020	1990-2020
Rockford	139,426	150,115	152,871	148,655	8%	2%	-3%	7%
Loves Park	15,462	20,044	23,996	23,397	30%	20%	-2%	51%
Machesney Park	19,033	20,759	23,499	22,950	9%	11%	-2%	21%
Winnebago County (remaining)	78,992	87,500	92,662	90,348	11%	6%	-2%	14%
Winnebago County (total)	252,913	278,418	295,266	285,350	10%	6%	-3%	13%
% City of Rockford	55%	54%	52%	52%				

1990 Census of Population: Social and Economic Characteristics. Illinois: 1990, Part 1
DP-1. Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics. Illinois: 2000
U.S. Census 2010, DEC SF1 Summary File P8 RACE
U.S. Census. 2020 Redistricting Data (PL 94-171) (P1 Race)

Racial and Ethnic Composition

Rockford's minority population increased by nearly 170 percent between 1990 and 2020, growing from an estimated 26,408 in 1990 to 70,986 in 2020. In 1990 the minority population was just under 19 percent and grew to just over 48 percent by 2020. The majority of residents (52 percent) in the city were White in 2020. The second largest racial group in the city is Black or African American alone, comprising 23 percent of the population. The remainder of the city's population is comprised of: 10.5 percent Two or More Races, 3.5 percent Asian, 10 percent Some Other Race, 0.4 percent American Indian or Alaska

Native, and 0.02 percent Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.

From 1990 to 2020, the Hispanic or Latino population grew from 5,210, or about 4 percent of the total population to 29,583, or 20 percent of the total population in 2020. This equates to over a 450% increase in this population alone within the City of Rockford, according to the U.S. Census estimates.

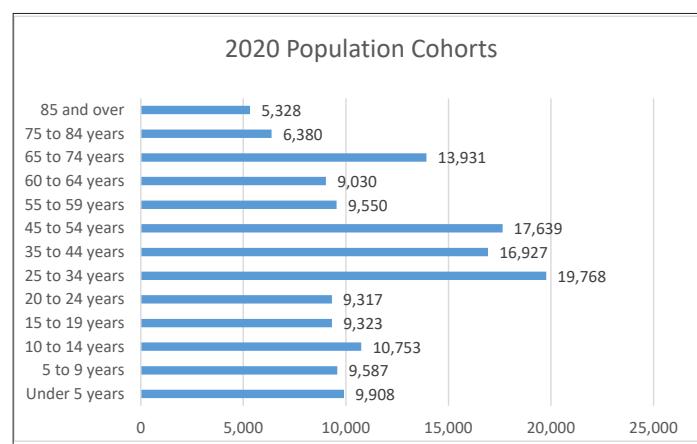
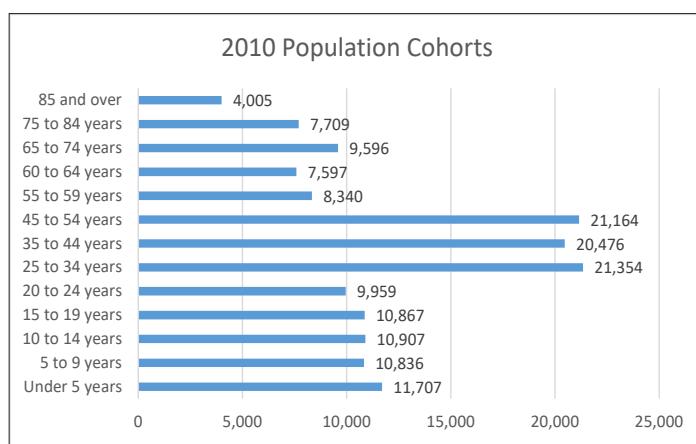
RACE	Number				Percent Change			
	1990	2000	2010	2020	1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020	1990-2020
White alone	113,018	109,303	99,517	77,669	-3%	-9%	-22%	-31%
Black or African American alone	20,697	26,072	31,359	34,240	26%	20%	9%	65%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	429	474	614	1136	10%	30%	85%	165%
Asian alone	2,405	3,301	4,443	5,213	37%	35%	17%	117%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	24	67	41	44	179%	-39%	7%	83%
Some other race alone	2,853	7,200	11,413	14,750	152%	59%	29%	417%
Two or more races	-	3,698	5,484	15,603	-	48%	185%	
Total Minority	26,408	40,812	53,354	70,986	55%	31%	33%	169%
Total Population	139,426	150,115	152,871	148,655	8%	2%	-3%	7%
Percent Minority, %	19%	27%	35%	48%	-	-	-	-

ETHNICITY	Number				Percent Change			
	1990	2000	2010	2020	1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020	1990-2020
Not Hispanic or Latino	134,216	134,837	128,786	119,072	0%	-4%	-8%	-11%
Hispanic or Latino	5,210	15,278	24,085	29,583	193%	58%	23%	468%
Total	139,426	150,115	152,871	148,655	8%	2%	-3%	7%
% Hispanic or Latino	4%	10%	16%	20%	-	-	-	-

1990 Census of Population: Social and Economic Characteristics. Illinois: 1990, Part 1
 DP-1. Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics. Illinois: 2000
 U.S. Census 2010, DEC SF1 Summary File P8 RACE
 U.S. Census. 2020 Redistricting Data (PL 94-171) (P1 Race)

Age Distribution

The median age of Rockford's population has also increased over the last 20 years. The median age in 2010 was 35.8 and in 2020 it was 37.8. During the same time period the population under the age of 15 has decreased slightly from 21.6 percent in 2010 to 20.5 percent in 2020. In 2020, those under 5-years-old made up 6.7 percent of the population. Those between 25 and 34 years old made up the largest age groups in the city at 13.4 percent of the total population. These two age groups also made up the largest portions of the population in 2010. The 65 to 74 year old age group saw the largest population increase from 2010 to 2020 from 9,596 (6.2 percent), to 13,931 (9.4 percent).



U.S. Census 2010 and 2020 ACS 5-year Demographic Estimates. DPO5

Households

While Rockford's population has increased by 5.5 percent between 2000 and 2019, the number of households has stayed relatively stable. The number of households grew from roughly 59,158 in 2000 to 59,551 in 2019, an increase of 0.7 percent. Household size also stayed stable from 1990 to 2019, with a median household size of 2.5 people in 1990 and 2010, and 2.4 in 2019. In 2019, 64.4 percent of all Rockford households contained only one or two persons, while 22.0 percent of households contained four or more persons. According to new data from the U.S. Census Bureau's ACS 5-years estimate (2016-2020), the total number of households has increased to 62,011.

Households	2000		2010		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Rockford	59,158	55%	59,827	53%	59,551	52%
Loves Park	8,144	8%	9,392	8%	9,738	9%
Machesney Park	7,756	7%	8,798	8%	8,969	8%
Winnebago County (remaining)	32,922	31%	34,449	31%	36,521	32%
Winnebago County (total)	107,980	-	112,466	-	114,779	-

Families	2000			2010			2019		
	Total Households	Single Parent Households (female only)	Percent	Total Households	Single Parent Households	Percent	Total Households	Single Parent Households	Percent
City of Rockford	59,158	5,803	10%	59,827	8,291	14%	59,551	6,501	11%

Note: The 2000 U.S. Census ONLY included the number of female single-parent families

Households Below Poverty	1990		2000		2010		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Population below poverty level	18,127	13%	26,791	18%	33,312	24%	31,942	22%
Under 18 years below poverty level	7,078	20%	13,276	35%	14,484	40%	12,181	34%

The City of Rockford's single-parent households made up 9.8 percent of total households in 2000, 13.9 percent of total households in 2010, and then dropped to 10.9 percent of total households in 2019. For the most part, these households are located throughout the city without any noticeable concentrations.

While the number of households in Rockford has been stable over the last 20 years, the City of Loves Park and Village of Machesney Park have seen substantial increases in the number of households (19.6 percent and 15.6 percent, respectively) over the last 20 years. Similar to Rockford, the number of households in other areas of Winnebago County has remained stable over the last 20 years.

Educational Attainment

While gains have been made in the disparity of educational attainment across the community, more work remains to be done to continue to close the gap. Overall, the educational attainment of Rockford's population has increased in the last few decades. In 2000, 78 percent of the population over the age of 25 was a high school graduate or higher (including equivalency). Over the years this number has steadily increased from a low of 75 percent in 1990 up to 84 percent in 2019. While the percent of the population with a high school diploma has increased pretty significantly, the number of college graduates has increased at a much slower pace. Increasing by 1 percent every 10 years starting at 19 percent in 1990, and reaching 22 percent by 2019.

Despite these gains, Rockford still lags behind Illinois and the nation in the number of high school and college graduates in recent years. When looking at the 2020 U.S. Census ACS 5-year average, Illinois has just under 90 percent of the 25+ population with a high school degree or higher, and 35.5 percent of Illinois has a bachelor's degree or higher when looking at the

population 25 years and older. At the national level, just over 90 percent of the population 25 years and older has at least a high school education while those 25 and older with at least a bachelor's degree rose to just under 38 percent.

Educational Attainment	1990		2000		2010		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Less than 9th grade	7,981	-	7,384	8%	7,326	7%	5,827	6%
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	14,669	-	14,014	15%	12,411	12%	9,935	10%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	33,483	-	30,000	31%	32,764	33%	29,774	31%
Some college, no degree	20,724	-	20,281	21%	19,753	20%	22,347	23%
Associates degree	4,933	-	5,448	6%	7,386	7%	7,783	8%
Bachelor's degree	12,191	-	12,196	13%	13,074	13%	13,289	14%
Graduate or professional degree	5,145	-	6,864	7%	7,527	8%	8,480	9%
High school graduate or higher	76,713	75%	-	78%	80,494	80%	81,673	84%
Bachelor's degree or higher	17,573	19%	-	20%	20,650	21%	21,769	22%
Population 25 years and over	89,742	-	96,187	-	100,241	-	97,435	-

*1990 Census of Population: Social and Economic Characteristics, Illinois: 1990, Part 1
U.S. Decennial Census 2000 DP1, DP3 & SF1. Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics, Illinois
U.S. Census 2010, DEC SF1 Summary File P8 RACE
U.S. Census. 2019 ACS 5-year Estimates, DP02*

Economic Characteristics

According to the U.S. Census, Rockford's employment rate has stayed relatively stable since 1990. While there have been events to cause larger increases or decreases over the years, the rate always seems to stabilize back out over time. Unemployment rates were 6.1 percent in 1990, 4.7 percent in 2000, 7.3 percent in 2010, and 6.6 percent in 2019.

In 2019, median unemployment rates by census tract ranged from a low 0.0 percent (geography with very few households) to a high of 35.8 percent, with a median unemployment rate of 7.0 percent for the entire city. Generally regions around the perimeter of the city have higher unemployment rates, especially in the west and southwest portions of the city.

Median household income increased by just under 15 percent between 2010 (\$38,573) and 2019 (\$44,252). While these gains appear to be a positive factor, the fact remains that Rockford did not increase at the same rate as Illinois and national figures. In 2010, Rockford's median household income was only 69.2 percent of the state median household income (\$55,735) and 74.3 percent of the national level (\$51,914). By 2019, these figures had dropped to 67.2 percent (\$65,886) and 70.4 percent (\$62,843), respectively. Generally, people earning below the median income are concentrated in downtown and southwest Rockford. Households earning above the median income are located outside downtown Rockford, particularly in the northern and southern portions of Rockford.

Unemployment Rates in Rockford	1990		2000		2010		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Unemployed	4,247	6%	5,380	5%	8,576	7%	7,582	7%
Median Household Income	2019				Vacancy Rate	2010		2019
Rockford	\$44,252				Homeowner vacancy rate	1%		2%
Illinois	\$65,886				Rental vacancy rate	4%		7%
United States	\$62,843							

*1990 Census of Population: Social and Economic Characteristics, Illinois: 1990, Part 1
U.S. Decennial Census 2000 DP1, DP3 & SF1. Profiles of General Demographic Characteristics, Illinois
U.S. Census 2010, DEC SF1 Summary File P8 RACE
U.S. Census. 2019 ACS 5-year Estimates, DP02*

In 2010, manufacturing accounted for 20.4 percent of jobs in Rockford and by 2019 had only increased slightly to 21.9 percent. The local economy is still heavily dependent on manufacturing compared to the nation where only 10.1 percent of the workforce is in manufacturing. The Rockford Public School District (RPS205), UW Health, Mercy Health, OSF Healthcare, and Collins Aerospace are some of the top manufacturing companies in our city that employ Rockford residents.

Employment by Industry in Rockford (2019)	Number	Percent
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	155	0%
Construction	2,753	4%
Manufacturing	13,867	22%
Wholesale trade	1,304	2%
Retail trade	7,291	12%
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities	3,409	5%
Information	890	1%
Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing	2,076	3%
Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services	6,571	10%
Educational services	3,666	6%
Health care and social assistance	10,082	16%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services	6,321	10%
Other services, except public administration	3,258	5%
Public administration	1,440	2%
Civilian employed population 16 years and over	63,083	-

2019 ACS 5-year Estimate S2407 Industry by Class of Worker for Civilian Population

Housing

Renter-occupied units have increased from 39.5 percent in 2010 to 45.8 percent in 2019. In contrast, owner-occupied units have decreased from 60.5 percent in 2010 to 54.2 percent in 2019. The number of vacant housing units has also decreased from 13 percent to 10.4 percent between 2010 and 2019.

The homeowner vacancy rate has increased from 1.3 percent in 2010 to 1.9 percent in 2019. The rental vacancy rate has also seen an increase from 4.2 percent in 2010 to 7.0 percent in 2019. Causes for higher vacancy could be attributed to Rockford's substantially large supply of older housing, areas of higher poverty and unemployment, and the movement of people out of the city or to other cities and states. Whatever the root causes, these numbers point to a trend the city would like to better understand in order to improve the issue.

Housing Occupancy	2010		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Occupied housing units	59,827	87%	59,551	90%
Vacant housing units	8,930	13%	6,918	10%
Total housing units	68,757	-	66,469	-

Summary

- Rockford's total population was similar in 2000 and 2010, then decreased by about 4,200 between 2010 and 2019.
- At the same time, the city's minority population increased substantially, with growing diversity among all minorities.
- The population is aging, with the median age increasing from 35.8 years in 2010 to 37.8 years in 2020.
- While the population has changed in the last 10 years, the number of households has remained relatively stable.
- Rockford has seen a decrease in single-parent families from 59,827 in 2010 to 59,551 in 2019.
- The population 25 years and older with high school diplomas increased from 80 percent in 2010 to 84 percent in 2019, while the percentage of those with a bachelor's degree or higher, went from 21 percent in 2010 to 22 percent by 2019.
- Rockford's percentage of households who earned \$50,000 to \$99,999 remained at around 40 percent in both 2010 and 2019.
- Owner-occupied units have decreased from 60.5 percent in 2010 to 54.2 percent in 2019.
- The number of vacant housing units has decreased from 13 percent in 2010 to 10.4 percent in 2019. For a more detailed discussion of current housing conditions, please refer to the Housing Chapter.

While the City of Rockford may be growing its municipal boundary, it is not keeping pace with growth in areas such a population and housing units as compared to other areas of Winnebago County. When population and household totals are viewed in light of Rockford's substantial increase in geographic area, the city's population has become less dense overall. This

is somewhat expected, though, as the city grows outward it incorporates areas that are less dense being that they're more rural. The City of Rockford's population density was 3,485 people per square mile in 1980, 2,680 people per square mile in 2000, 2,502 people per square mile in 2010, and the people per square mile was 2,250 in 2020. As the density of a city decreases you generally see implications in terms of the increase in cost of city services, environmental expenses, response time of emergency personal, and overall increases in maintenance fees.

Growth Projections

Scenario Overview

Population projections are ways to estimate what the population could look like at a future date based on past and expected trends. Population projections were generated from 2019 out to the year 2040 to estimate what the population could be in Winnebago County annually. The three projections used were a baseline of no additional growth from current trends, a one percent annual increase in population from current trends, and a one percent annual decrease in population from current trends. The baseline projection uses the current population estimates for 2019 to determine the growth over the time-frame of 2019 to 2040. The positive growth scenario took the baseline population and increased it by one percent to show what a quickly growing region could look like. Using the negative growth scenario the baseline population was decreased by one percent annually to determine what the population growth would look like if it grew at a very slow rate. When looking at population projections, Winnebago County is only projected to grow by approximately 10,000 to 11,000 people over the next 20 years based on current and projected trends.

Baseline Scenario

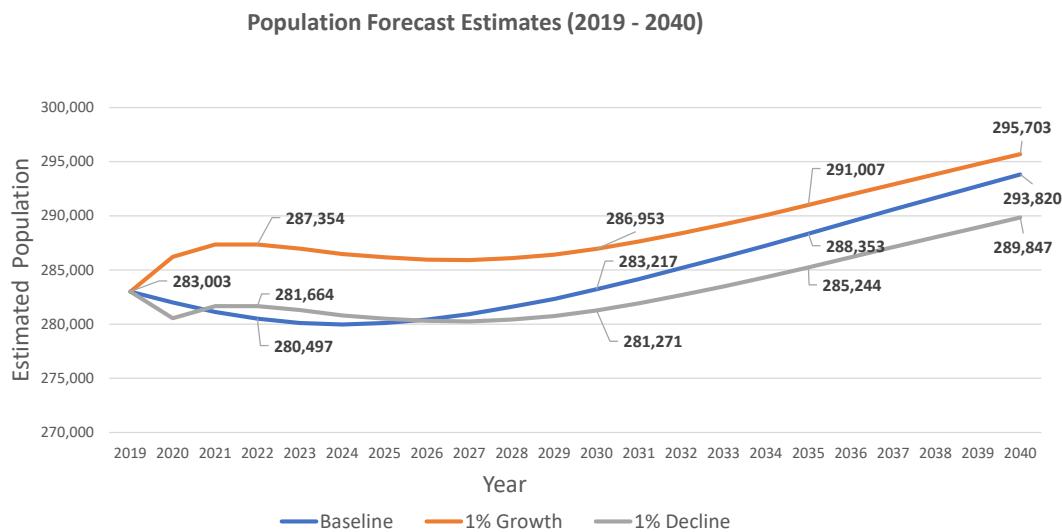
If Winnebago County continued to grow at its current rate, the population would initially dip during 2019 and 2024, then steadily increase from 2024 to 2040. The population would grow from 283,003 in 2019 to 293,820 (an increase of 10,817) by 2040.

Positive Growth Scenario

If Winnebago County's population increased by one percent (+1%) per year, population would increase initially during 2019 to 2022, then dip down during 2022 to 2027, followed by a steady increase from 2027 to 2040. The population would grow from 283,003 in 2019 to 295,703 (an increase of 12,700) in 2040.

Negative Growth Scenario

If Winnebago County saw a one percent (-1%) decrease in population growth annually, the growth rate would slow down very quickly and be represented by a population decrease for a few years followed by fluctuating population levels until about year 2026/2027. The population rate would then start to turn positive after 2027, then steadily increase from 2027 to 2040. The population would grow from 283,003 in 2019 to 289,847 (an increase of 6,844) in 2040.



Chapter Endnotes

- i <https://www.britannica.com/place/Rockford>
- ii <https://tinkercottagemuseum.wordpress.com/2017/11/30/native-american-tribes-of-the-rockford-area/>
- iii <http://genealogytrails.com/ill/winnebago/rockfordtoday.html>
- iv <https://www.britannica.com/place/Rockford>
- v <https://www.gorockford.com/about/history/>
- vi <https://www.gorockford.com/about/history/>
- vii <https://www.britannica.com/place/Rockford>
- viii <https://www.gorockford.com/about/history/>