

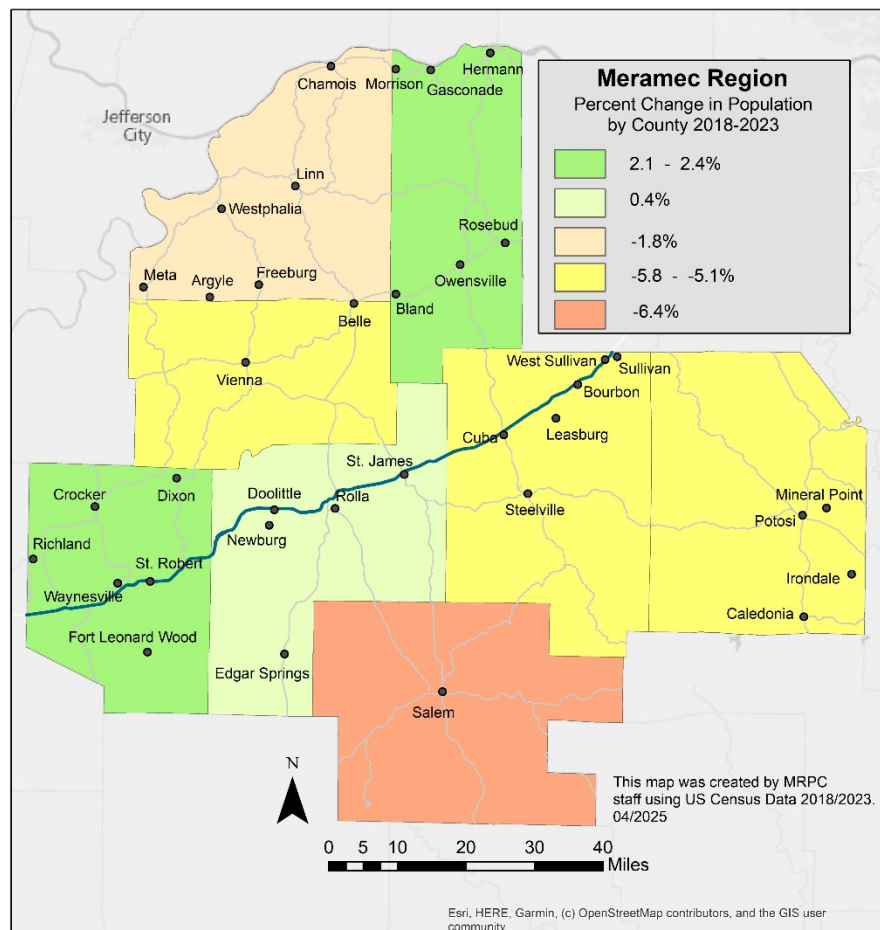
CHAPTER TWO: TRENDS AND CONDITIONS

2.1 Population Characteristics

The Meramec Region consists of eight counties located in the southeast-central parts of Missouri. The area covers over 5,131 square miles and includes 36 municipalities. The region, comprised of Crawford, Dent, Gasconade, Maries, Osage, Phelps, Pulaski, and Washington counties, is marked with gently rolling hills, deep valleys and plateaus. Numerous rivers and streams traverse the region, creating a natural draw for outdoor enthusiasts. Many of the small towns still have major manufacturing plants. Wineries are scattered across the region making it a popular draw for tourists (Meramec Regional Planning Commission). The closest major city is St. Louis, about an hour-and-a-half north-east of the region. Two important institutions in the region are the Missouri University of Science and Technology with approximately 7,200 students located in Rolla (Phelps County) and a major military base, Fort Leonard Wood (Pulaski County), both of which offer many opportunities for businesses and entrepreneurs.

The 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) census reported a population of 196,265. The 2018 ACS census reported 199,344 people. This is a decline of approximately 3,079 people over the last 5 years, or about 1.6%.

It should be noted that due to the pandemic and other issues, there was an undercount by the census bureau in the 2020 Decennial census which could have skewed regional numbers; therefore, this document utilizes 5-year ACS for review purposes. While the region saw an overall decline, three of the eight counties experienced growth (Gasconade, Phelps and Pulaski counties). In comparison, the state of Missouri saw a 1.3% growth in population and the US saw a 2.9% growth in population during the same period.



Population density is the number of people per unit of an area, usually per square mile (which may include or exclude bodies of water). Population density is important because it helps governments and organizations plan for housing, transportation, healthcare, and other essential services. It also informs decisions about resource allocation, environmental management, and disaster preparedness in both urban and rural areas. Based on the 2023 ACS Census, the Meramec Region has a low population density of 39.4 persons per square mile compared to the state and national density which is 97.1 and 94.7 respectively. Pulaski County is the most densely populated county within the region with 97.7 persons per square mile, while Maries county has the lowest population densities within the region with 16.0 persons per square mile. Since 2018, a majority of the counties in the region experienced a decline in population density, with the exception of Gasconade, Phelps and Pulaski counties. In general, higher rates of density are concentrated around city centers and county seats within the region. Additionally, I-44 can be a focal point of density which is consistent with other interstate development patterns across the state. Outside of city centers, population density is generally scattered across each county. This could create difficulty in planning for future transportation projects. While many discussions center on needs in urban settings, servicing the rural population is increasingly complicated based on the dispersed population.

Population Density		
County	2018	2023
Crawford	32.6	30.8
Dent	20.5	19.2
Gasconade	28.23	28.4
Maries	16.9	16.0
Osage	22.5	22.1
Phelps	66.5	66.7
Pulaski	95.5	97.7
Washington	32.7	30.8

People/Sq. Mi. Source: US Census

As of the 2023 ACS Census, the region has an average of 90.6% White population, which is an increase since the 2020 Decennial Census, followed by Two or More Races (5.3%), Hispanic/Latino (3.0%) and Black (2.1%). It is worth noting Pulaski County has a much larger minority population than the other seven counties in the region, likely due to the military base, which affects the averages for the region as a whole. Pulaski County should be considered an outlier for the purposes of statistics of the region.

Racial Breakdown by County (Percentage), 2023								
Race	Crawford	Dent	Gasconade	Maries	Osage	Phelps	Pulaski	Washington
White	93.92	92.21	95.47	93.46	97.79	87.15	72.68	92.31
Black	0.60	0.57	0.92	0.17	0.16	2.05	10.45	1.92
American Indian	0.17	0.60	0.23	0.65	0.35	0.36	0.50	0.03
Asian	0.12	0.89	0.10	0.09	0.01	3.48	2.15	0.15
Native Hawaiian /PI	0.23	0.08	0.20	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.64	0.14
Hispanic/Latino	2.30	2.12	1.52	1.90	1.05	2.95	11.49	1.04
Other Race	0.52	0.81	0.02	0.44	0.06	0.71	1.65	0.40
Two + Races	4.44	4.84	3.07	5.19	1.64	6.24	11.93	5.07
Total Population	22,890	14,506	14,774	8,435	13,379	44,948	53,850	23,483

Source: US Census Bureau, 2023 ACS

Since the 2020 Decennial Census, the region has experienced a minor decrease in the population 5-19 and 45 and older. The 20-44 age group experienced a slight increase (0.4%) and the five and under population remained the same. The minor decreases in population generally explain the decreases in the older generation post-COVID. Overall, the region is made up of 52.2% males (mainly due to Pulaski County) and 47.8% females.

Age Breakdown by County (Percentage), 2023									
Age	Crawford	Dent	Gasconade	Maries	Osage	Phelps	Pulaski	Washington	Average
<5	5.7	5.6	5.2	4.5	5.5	5.5	6.6	5.8	5.5
5-19	18.8	19.1	17.4	18.5	20.2	20.8	25.3	19.5	19.9
20-44	28.6	25.1	25.3	26.7	29.1	33.8	42.2	29.5	30
45-64	27.4	28.3	29.4	28.8	27.8	23.8	17.3	28.5	26.4
65+	19.6	21.9	22.8	21.6	17.3	16.1	8.5	16.6	18.1

Source: US Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey

The region matches the state with about 76-77% of the population commuting to work alone in a vehicle. The bigger differences appear in those that carpool and walk to work, where the Meramec Region has higher rates than the state. The region also has an almost three-minute commute time longer than the state average. The use of public transportation, bicycling, and rideshares remain low at less than one percent each.

Commuting Data (Percentage), 2023		
Transportation Method	MRPC Region	Missouri
Workers 16 years and over	87,025	2,938,053
Car, Truck, or Van, - drove alone	77.6	76.4
Car, Truck, or Van - Carpooled	11.6	8.0
Public Transportation	0.2	0.9
Walked	3.7	1.8
Bicycle	0.2	0.2
Taxi, Motorcycle, or Other	0.9	1.1
Worked from Home	5.9	11.6
Mean Travel Time to Work (Minutes)	26.6	23.7

Source: US Census Bureau, 2023 ACS

The educational level of the residents of the Meramec Region has increased significantly in the last few decades. The percentage of individuals with at least a high school diploma increased between 2018 and 2023 (84.7% to 88.4%). The percentage of individuals 25 years and older with some college to a professional degree also increased. Currently, Phelps and Pulaski Counties have the highest percentage of college graduates 25 years of age and older, 38% and 40.7%, respectively.

According to 2023 American Community Survey, 7.8% of the Meramec Region families are living in poverty. This figure is down from 10.1% in 2018 and correlates to the increase in household income. Washington and Dent counties have historically led the region in percentage of population in poverty; however, Crawford and Washington counties have the highest rates of poverty in 2023.

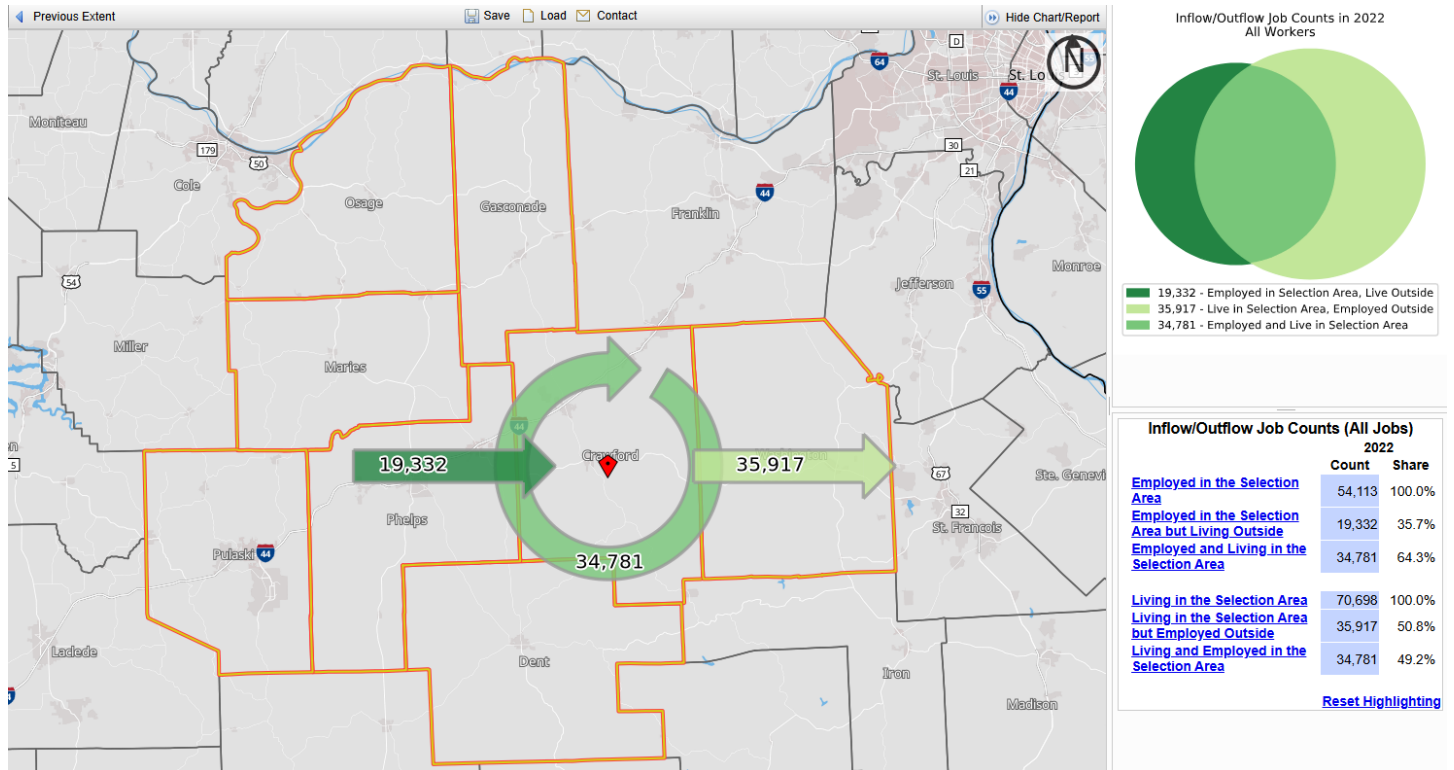
County	2018 Median Household Income	2023 Median Household Income	% Change
Crawford	\$38,036	\$56,345	48.1%
Dent	\$39,916	\$54,306	36.1%
Gasconade	\$53,439	\$65,096	21.8%
Maries	\$44,436	\$61,359	38.1%
Osage	\$62,087	\$75,355	21.4%
Phelps	\$42,846	\$55,427	29.4%
Pulaski	\$51,665	\$66,435	28.6%
Washington	\$39,621	\$51,886	31.0%
Regional Average	\$46,506	\$60,776	30.7%
Missouri	\$53,560	\$68,920	28.7%
2018 & 2023 American Community Survey			

Median household incomes in the region increased an average of 30.7% from 2018 to 2023 and experienced significant wage growth at a faster rate than the state. However, the median household income for the region continues to fall below both the state and national averages. For example, Osage County only saw a 21.4% average wage growth during that period while Crawford had a booming 48.1% wage growth. The region also has 69,295 total housing units with 63.6% owner-occupied. The average household size in the Meramec Region is 2.47 people as compared to 2.36 for Missouri. Pulaski County has the highest average household size with 2.68 followed by Washington and Osage Counties with 2.54 people each.

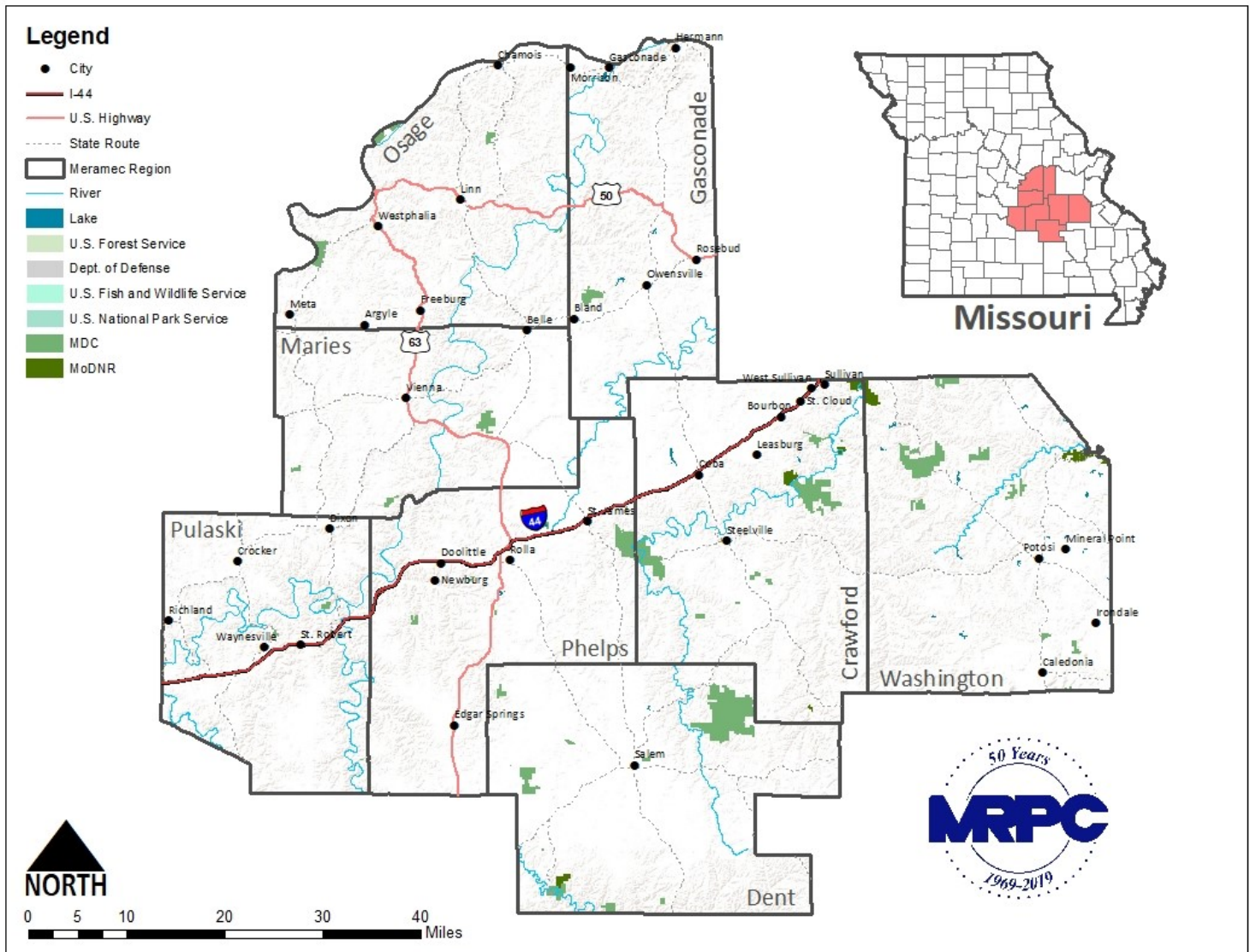
The following table provides an overview of household car availability for each county in the region. While a majority of households have access to two or more vehicles, a range of 0.9 – 2.7% has no vehicle availability at all within the Meramec Region. This range has significantly decreased in the last five to ten years as more households have multiple vehicles available.

	Meramec Region Household Car Availability (2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates)			
	Crawford	Dent	Gasconade	Maries
Total Households:	9,409	5,898	6,980	3,505
No vehicle available	175	65	185	50
1 vehicle available	1,278	662	591	608
2 vehicles available	3,650	2,415	2,169	1,033
3 + vehicles available	4,306	2,756	4,035	1,814
	Osage	Phelps	Pulaski	Washington
Total Households:	6,539	18,527	20,686	8,945
No vehicle available	153	501	185	265
1 vehicle available	663	4,079	3,731	1,274
2 vehicles available	1,815	7,212	9,370	2,645
3 + vehicles available	3,908	6,735	7,400	4,761

The following map provides an overview of residents of the region and their commuting patterns in and out of the area. As of 2022 (most recent data set), 19,332 workers flowed into the region for work, while another 34,781 remained in the eight counties. More residents (35,917) than those that stay in the region leave to work in areas outside the county boundaries annually.



Three federal highways pass through the region: Interstate 44, U.S. 63 and U.S. 50. Interstate 44 bisects the region in a northeast to southwest direction and serves as the major highway between St. Louis and Springfield with Rolla being about the half-way point. U.S. 63 connects Vienna and Rolla with Jefferson City, and U.S. 50 runs east and west through Gasconade and Osage counties. A majority of the remaining highways in the region are maintained by MoDOT. Several Meramec communities also have airports: Rolla National Airport located at Vichy; Sullivan Airport; Washington County Airport in Potosi; Salem Airport; Cuba Airport; Hermann Airport; Waynesville-St. Robert Regional Airport in Fort Leonard Wood, and State Technical College Airport in Linn.



Four railways serve the region. Burlington Northern operates the most miles of track in the region. That rail line follows the general route of I-44 through Crawford and Phelps counties. The rail service in the region is not as prevalent as it once was; however, Amtrak crosses the Meramec Region and stops at its very northeast point at Hermann. Navigable water transportation is provided at three locations in the region, all on the Missouri River, Hermann, Gasconade and Chamois.