

## 6.0 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

### 6.1 Introduction

Economic development is critical in providing opportunities for residents to work and businesses to thrive. A strong economy also helps ensure the stability of the tax base and fiscal health of the municipality. Economic development means job growth and supports businesses that directly contribute to the quality of life for the community. A comprehensive understanding of existing conditions in a community can pave the way for planning policies that support economic growth.

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of certain demographic, economic, and real estate trends that affect Cranston's economy. Since the city's local economy is influenced by the larger region and proximity to Providence, the analysis also compares the city to Providence County, which includes Cranston.

### 6.2 Context/Existing Conditions

Cranston is host to 35,000 jobs (RI LMI 2023) and enjoys a strategic position; it sits at the crossroads of opportunity and accessibility, making it an ideal hub for businesses and entrepreneurs in Rhode Island. The city benefits from a robust highway network, including Interstate 95, Interstate 295, Routes 10, and Routes 37, facilitating efficient regional and national market access.

Cranston's location advantages extend beyond road networks, with the T.F. Green International Airport and AMTRAK nearby in Warwick and Providence. Downtown Providence is just a few minutes away by car, enhancing economic vitality and granting access to a broader workforce, educational institutions, and cultural amenities.

The city's Economic Development Department collaborates with the Cranston Chamber of Commerce and the University of Rhode Island Small Business Development Center (RISBDC) to provide no-cost one-on-one counseling to small business owners. This support network covers various essential business aspects including technical assistance, marketing strategies, resource management, and capital access.

#### 6.2.1 Population Trends

##### Age Distribution

The total population for the City of Cranston was 80,882 in the 2016 5-year ACS and grew to 82,654 people by April 1, 2021, according to the U.S Census Bureau; with a net increase in population of 1,772 persons (+2.2 percent). Both the county and the state grew more over the same time period, at 4.0 percent and 3.6 percent respectively.

The age distribution of Cranston's residents generally resembles that of Providence County and Rhode Island. Likewise, Cranston's median age matches across the state with a median age of 40 years, compared to Providence County's median age of 37.5 years. Showcased in Table 6-1, Cranston has a notable decrease in residents ages 18-24 years and 45-54 years; 18 to 24-year-olds are an important demographic because a portion of this group are just entering the workforce and thus represent an opportunity for income and spending growth, while 45- to 54-year-olds represent part of critical family household and workforce age groups.

The 45- to 54-year-old age cohort may be experiencing lifestyle changes such as empty nesting or retirement, leading them to relocate or downsize, while the decrease in the 18-24 age group might be influenced by factors such as young adults pursuing educational opportunities outside the city, entering the workforce in different regions, or following their parents in relocation. Overall, the median age in Cranston decreased by 0.8 years over that period. Despite the overall decrease in the median age in Cranston, the city still maintains a higher proportion of older adults compared to the

county. The slight skew towards a younger population is evident in the increased proportions of people under 18, 25-34, and 35-44 years, contributing to the lowered median age.

Table 6-1 Population Age Composition						
Age	Cranston		Providence County		Rhode Island	
	2021	2016-2021 % Change	2021	2016-2021 % Change	2021	2016-2021 % Change
Under 18	21%	2%	21%	-2%	19%	-6%
18 to 24	8%	-15%	11%	-9%	10%	-5%
25 to 34	14%	17%	15%	18%	14%	18%
35 to 44	14%	1%	13%	-3%	12%	-8%
45 to 54	12%	-26%	13%	-8%	13%	-12%
55 to 64	16%	28%	13%	25%	14%	22%
65+	16%	13%	15%	19%	17%	25%

Source: 2016 and 2021 5-yr ACS

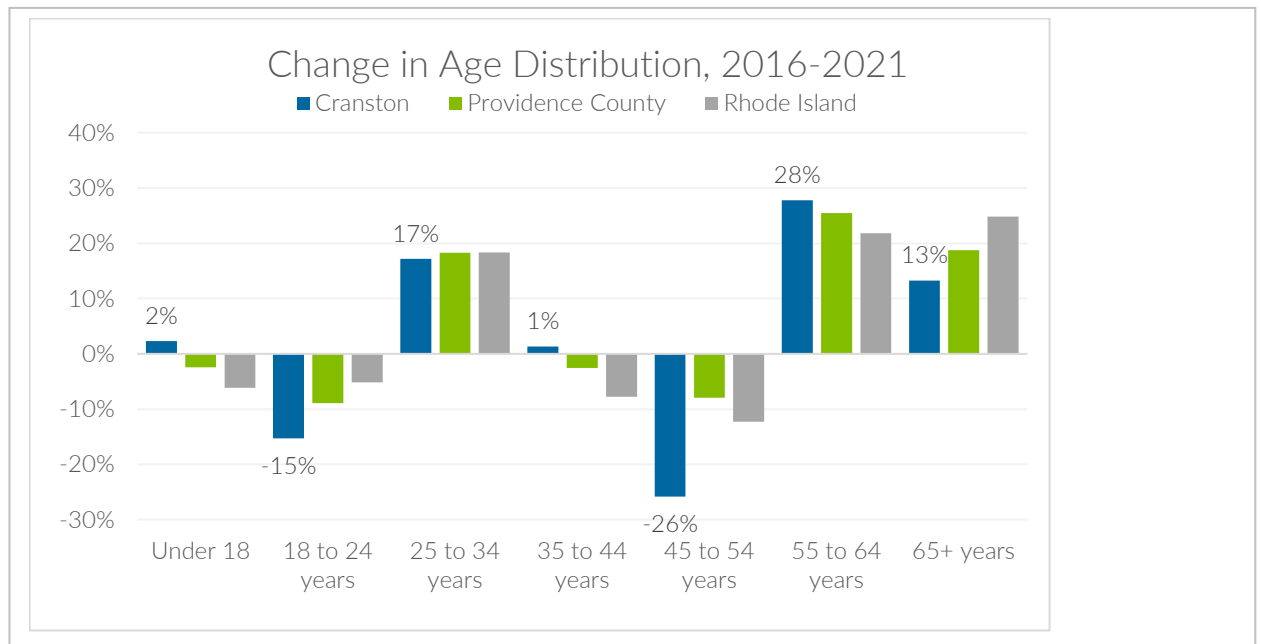


Figure 6-1. Change in Age Distribution  
Source: 2016 and 2021 5-yr ACS

### Educational Attainment

The educational attainment of the resident population is something businesses consider when choosing where to locate. The availability of a suitably skilled workforce is one factor, and for consumer-facing businesses the spending potential of the local population – heavily influenced by income and education – is important, too.

Reportedly 33.9 percent of Cranston residents aged 25 or older have a bachelor’s degree or higher, which is a higher percentage than those in Providence County (30.6%), but lower than the state

(35.3%). Cranston residents are also more likely to have at least a high school diploma than county and state residents. Similar to county and state trends, from 2016 to 2021 the number of residents with a bachelor’s degree or graduate/professional degree increased significantly, with a decrease in residents with only a high school diploma/GED equivalency, as shown in Table 6-2.

	2016	2021	Actual Change	% Change
No High School Diploma	6,231	6,204	-27	-0.4%
H.S. Diploma or GED Equivalency	17,899	16,348	-1,551	-8.7%
Associates or Some College	15,620	16,655	1,035	6.6%
Bachelor’s degree	10,686	12,172	1,486	13.9%
Graduate or Professional Degree	6,871	7,932	1,061	15.4%

Source: 2016 and 2021 5-yr ACS

### Household Income

As mentioned above, many consumer-facing businesses such as retailers and restaurants may strongly consider local median incomes when deciding where to locate, particularly regional or national chains with specific site selection criteria. Cranston’s households are more likely to have higher income than the county (\$65,797) and the state (\$74,489), with a higher median household income of \$77,145. However, it is worth noting that income growth in Cranston was lower than both the county and the state between 2016 and 2021: median income grew by 25.1 percent locally versus 29.9 percent and 27.6 percent respectively. Additionally, the number of households in Cranston making \$100,000 increased by 3,662 households, making up 36.5 percent of the total households. Households making \$200,000+ have an especially significant increase of 99 percent, a higher growth rate than both the county and the state. Figure 6-2 shows the percent change by household income brackets for Cranston, Providence County, and Rhode Island between 2015 and 2020

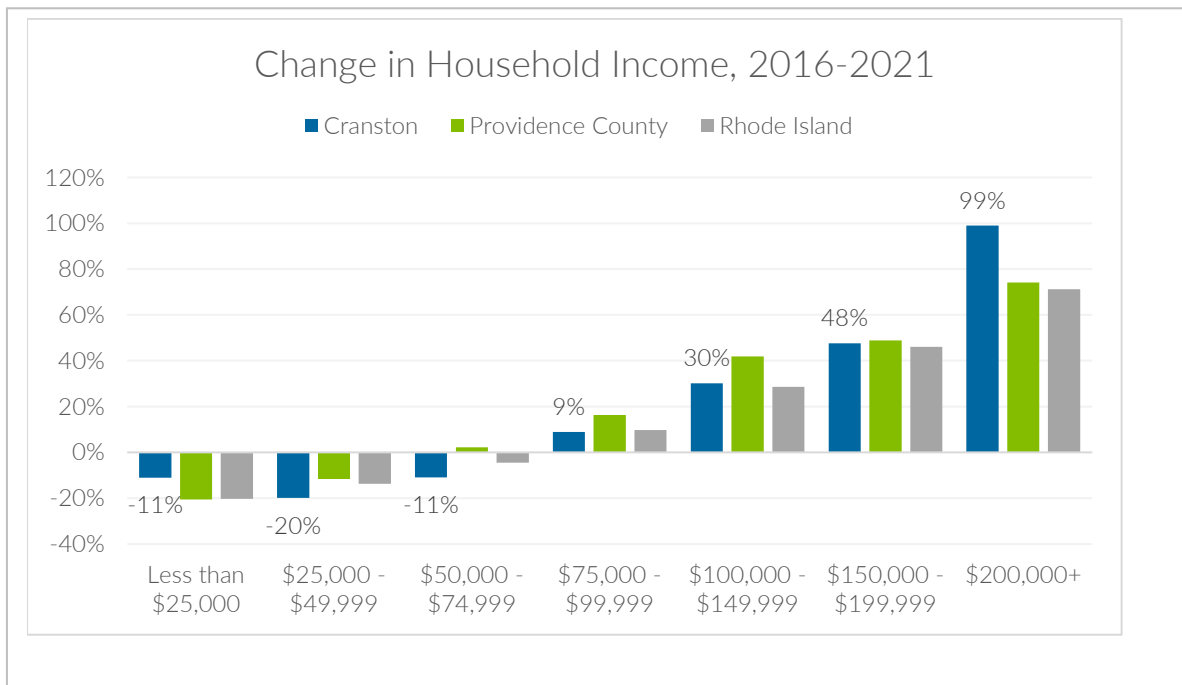


Figure 6-2. Change in Household Income  
Source: 2016 and 2021 5-yr ACS

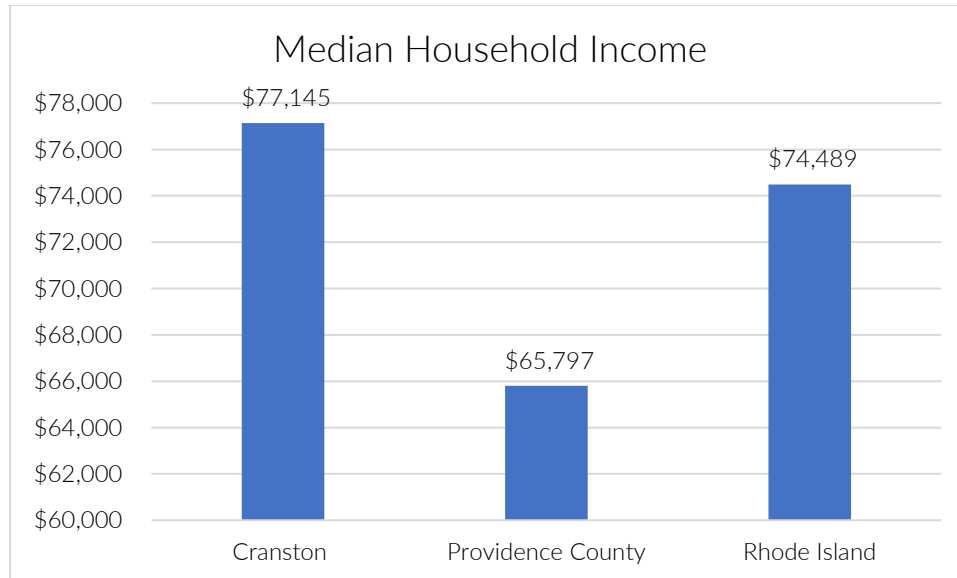


Figure 6-3. Median Household Income  
Source: 2021 5-yr ACS

### 6.2.2 Labor Force

Two measures commonly examined when considering the engagement of workers in the local economy are labor-force participation and unemployment rates. The labor-force participation rate measures the percentage of the population aged 16 and over who are either employed or actively looking for employment. If the participation rate is low, it indicates the labor market may have some flexibility. In contrast, if the participation rate is already high, there might be limited flexibility, and employers could have fewer options when seeking to hire. Similarly, a notably low unemployment rate signals a robust labor market, which is positive for workers but could pose challenges for businesses in terms of hiring and growth.

According to the RIDLT, in 2022 Cranston had a labor force of 42,547, with 1,344 residents unemployed and an unemployment rate of 3.2 percent. Table 6-3 shows the 2022 annual average labor force and unemployment statistics of Cranston and Rhode Island. Figure 6-4 illustrates a relatively stable labor-force population from 2012-2023, with a visible increase in unemployment in 2020 during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cranston's labor-force participation rates have fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels, following county and state trends. Local and regional unemployment rates are at 3.2 percent; this is well within the range of what economists consider to be "full employment," which indicates that people who are actively looking for jobs have found them. This can lead to increased wages as employers compete for talent, but it is an indicator that there is very little slack in the labor market and hiring is likely a challenge. This highlights the need for strategic measures to address Cranston's potential challenges in hiring, foster workforce development, and sustain economic growth in a competitive environment with low unemployment rates.

	Labor Force	Labor Force Participation	Labor Force, Employed	Labor Force, Unemployed	Unemployment Rate
Cranston	42,547	96.8%	41,203	1,344	3.2%
Rhode Island	569,455	96.8%	551,220	18,235	3.2%

Source: RIDLT, 2023

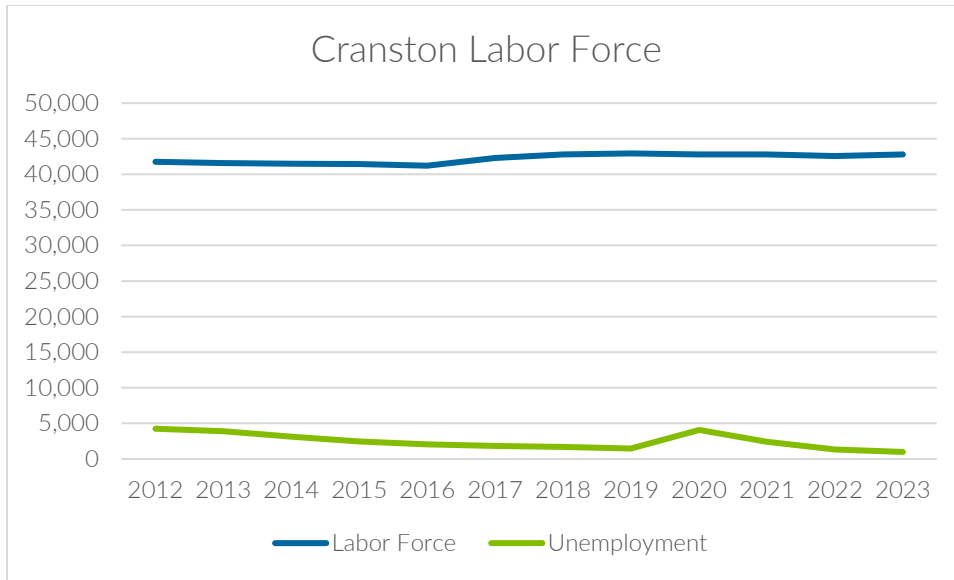


Figure 6-4. Cranston Labor Force  
Source: RIDLT, 2023

### 6.2.3 Local Employment

#### Commuting Patterns

Commuting patterns have important implications for economic development. Changes in the daytime population related to the inflow and outflow of workers and residents impact the viability and types of retail and other amenities in a community. Furthermore, the sources and destinations of workers can suggest opportunities for filling gaps in Cranston workforce housing stock or to attract industries that align with locally available skills. The data alone does not determine the viability of these opportunities without additional context.



Figure 6-5. Commuting Inflow-Outflow.  
Source: US Census LEHD, OnTheMap 2021

Overall, Cranston is a labor reservoir, with 3,824 more people leaving the city to head to work than entering on a given day.

Commuting patterns for Cranston as a work destination and where Cranston residents are employed are displayed below in Figure 6-6. The most common work destinations for Cranston residents are Cranston itself, Providence, and Warwick. Reportedly 6,702 people both live and work in Cranston (18.7 percent of all local workers), while reportedly 5,601 people travel from Providence to Cranston to go to work, followed by 3,753 people from Warwick.

Where Cranston Workers Live				Where Cranston Residents are Employed			
		Count of Workers	Share			Count of Workers	Share
Cranston, RI		6,702	18.7%	Providence, RI		9,297	23.4%
Providence, RI		5,601	15.6%	Cranston, RI		6,702	16.9%
Warwick, RI		3,753	10.4%	Warwick, RI		4,528	11.4%
Pawtucket, RI		1,508	4.2%	Johnston, RI		1,638	4.1%
Coventry, RI		1,501	4.2%	East Providence, RI		1,441	3.6%
Johnston, RI		1,305	3.6%	North Kingstown, RI		1,158	2.9%
West Warwick, RI		1,225	3.4%	Pawtucket, RI		1,041	2.6%
North Providence, RI		1,127	3.1%	Lincoln, RI		918	2.3%
East Providence, RI		1,066	3.0%	Smithfield, RI		818	2.1%
North Kingstown, RI		735	2.0%	Boston, MA		657	1.7%
Other		11,409	31.8%	Other		11,558	29.1%
Total		35,932	100.0%	Total		39,756	100.0%

Figure 6-6. Commuting Patterns for Workers in Cranston and Cranston Residents  
 Source: US Census LEH; OnTheMap, 2021

Out of all Cranston’s working residents, 23.4 percent commute to Providence as the major regional employment hub, followed by Cranston (16.9 percent of Cranston’s labor force commutes within Cranston), and reportedly 4,528 residents, or 11.4 percent, commute to Warwick. The data indicates that Cranston is a preferred residential location for individuals working in neighboring communities, particularly Providence and Warwick. Furthermore, the commuting patterns highlight Cranston’s integral role in the broader regional economy.

**Employment by Industry**

Based on EMSI 2023 estimates, which are based on QCEW 2022 Q3- 2023 Q2 data reports, (shown in table 6-4, below), Cranston businesses had 30,224 private jobs in 2023, which is a 10 percent increase from the 29,920 jobs reported for 2013. The largest industry by employment in the city is retail trade, with 5,260 jobs. Retail trade grew by 10.6 percent or 504 jobs. Health care & social assistance and manufacturing are also significant industries, respectively employing 4,534 and 3,484 people.

Health care & social assistance and manufacturing, the second and third largest, have shrunk (2.8 and 4.6 percent, respectively) since 2013. The other top industry, “Accommodation and Food Services,” experienced an increase of 3.6 percent or 114 jobs over the last decade.

“Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services” as well as “Professional, Scientific and Technical Services” have seen large percentage increases in employment since 2013, though each has a lower total employment count compared to the top industries. In 2013, information was ranked as Cranston’s 16th largest industry; however, over the past decade, it has experienced a significant decline, losing 1,748 jobs, which accounts for an 88 percent reduction in the “Information” workforce in the city. Currently, the industry employs only 236 workers. Despite the declining share of the workforce, “Information” provides the highest mean annual income per worker.

Table 6-4 Employment by Industry for Private-Sector Jobs Based on 2-digit NAICS Codes							
NAICS	Description	2013 Jobs	2023 Jobs	2013 - 2023 Change	2013 - 2023 % Change	2023 Location Quotient	Avg. Annual Earnings Per Job
44-45	Retail Trade	4,757	5,260	504	11%	1.67	\$45,177
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	4,665	4,534	-131	-3%	0.85	\$60,867
31-33	Manufacturing	3,651	3,484	-167	-5%	1.32	\$78,664
72	Accommodation and Food Services	3,214	3,329	114	4%	0.99	\$30,674
56	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	1,837	2,823	986	54%	1.34	\$49,190
54	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	2,064	2,750	686	33%	1.19	\$107,917
81	Other Services (except Public Administration)	1,509	1,874	365	24%	1.23	\$48,342
23	Construction	1,412	1,450	38	3%	0.83	\$82,604
42	Wholesale Trade	1,660	1,421	-239	-14%	1.31	\$96,421
48-49	Transportation and Warehousing	692	873	181	26%	0.93	\$60,960
52	Finance and Insurance	844	846	2	0%	0.46	\$122,873
53	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	435	457	22	5%	0.86	\$75,695
61	Educational Services	459	365	-94	-21%	0.18	\$52,945
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	228	288	59	26%	0.48	\$34,257
51	Information	1,984	236	-1,748	-88%	0.61	\$125,338
55	Management of Companies and Enterprises	466	140	-326	-70%	0.20	\$180,380
11	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	19	71	52	268%	0.50	\$49,768
22	Utilities	<10	33	Insf. Data	0%	0.34	\$161,427
21	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	15	12	-3	-19%	0.94	\$78,695
	<b>Total</b>	<b>29,920</b>	<b>30,244</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>1%</b>		

Source: EMSI Industry Report (Private Jobs,) Lightcast 2023.3 datarun

## Location Quotients

Location quotients (LQs) are statistical measures of a region's industrial specialization relative to a larger geographic unit. For example, the discussion below provides LQs that compare the Cranston economy to the larger Rhode Island economy. For the purposes of the following discussion, if the ratio falls between 0.80 and 1.20, then the proportion of jobs is considered consistent in both geographies. If the ratio is less than 0.80, then the identified industry sector is considered to be less concentrated in the local economy. Conversely, a ratio greater than 1.20 can show a specialty within the local economy as compared to the larger geography, offering insights into the existing or potential export economy.

Location quotient can be useful in identifying opportunities for certain sectors to gain a larger share of the employment base or to indicate when a community may be heavily reliant on one or two industrial sectors. In some cases, a high location quotient may indicate a specialty area in the local economy. Figure 6-7 below illustrates the relationship between the location quotient and employment changes, highlighting stronger and emerging industries or weaker and declining industries.

Cranston has several industries that are specializations relative to Rhode Island. Retail trade leads in this category, with an LQ of 1.67, meaning that jobs in this industry are nearly 1.7 times as common in Cranston as in Rhode Island. Garden City shopping center significantly contributes to retail trade in Cranston, serving as a key hub of commercial activity. While a robust retail sector is beneficial for economic vitality, the city should strategically assess its overall composition to ensure long-term resilience. The pandemic has accelerated shifts in consumer behavior, with increased reliance on e-commerce. As the city navigates these changes, it becomes crucial to strategically reassess its economic specialization, exploring opportunities for resilience and adaptation.

Other industries experiencing a local competitive advantage include Manufacturing, Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services," "Wholesale "Trade," and "Other Services." "Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation" is a weak but emerging sector that grew by 26% over the last decade and could continue to see growth in Cranston. To foster economic growth, Cranston might explore opportunities in emerging sectors like "Science, Technology, and Professional services." The majority of larger industries in Cranston are growing, and well-established industries are also experiencing solid growth.



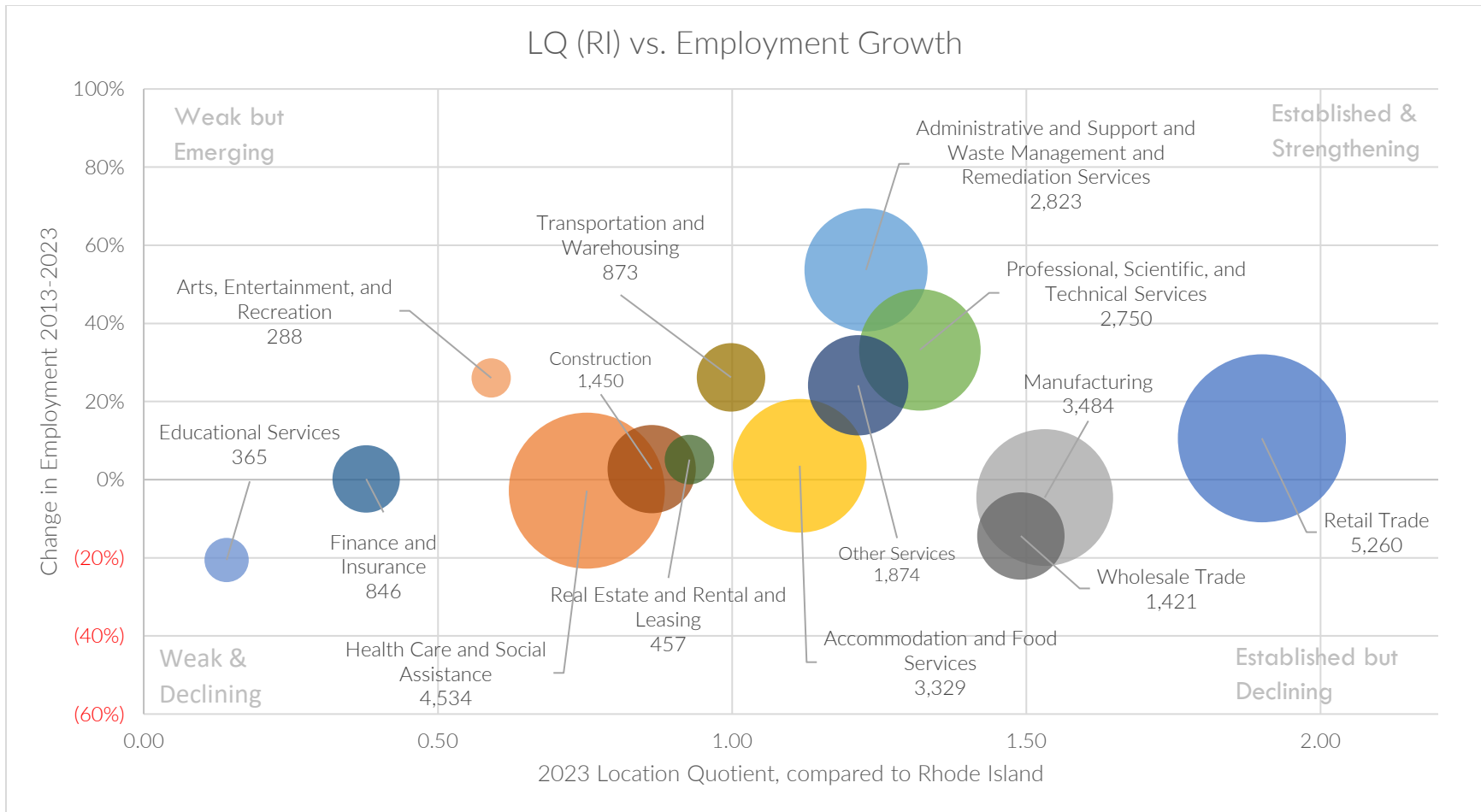


Figure 6-7. Change in Employment vs. Location Quotient (Compared to RI)  
 Source: Lightcast Industry Report, 2023.3 datarun

#### 6.2.4 Largest Private-Sector Employers & Real Estate Market<sup>1</sup>

The largest employers in Cranston reflect the retail, manufacturing, and government-focused industries that operate in the city. According to the State Department of Labor from the City of Cranston's FY2022 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report, the largest private employer in Cranston is Thielsch Engineering, employing 436 people. Table 6-5 shows a full listing of the top eleven largest employers in Cranston.

Company	Industry Sector	Employment Range
Thielsch Engineering	54	436
Taco, Inc.	31	421
The Stop & Shop Co., Inc.	44	352
Tasca Motor Group	44	330
Access Point RI	62	300
Walmart	44	298
Swarovski Consumer Goods Ltd.	44	254
The Cedars	62	176
Cadence	31	176
Citizens Bank	52	36
Honeywell Safety Products	31	-

Source: Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training (Private Jobs), 2022

Reflecting employment trends from Lightcast, retail is the largest market within Cranston with a little above 600 retail properties according to Moody's Analytics REIS, seen in Table 6-6. In the past decade, the number of commercial buildings continued to increase with an additional 27 retail properties. Office properties have the most recent average year built (1976) but have not had any recent construction, with the most recent office property type built in 2007.

	Number of Properties	Average SF	Average Year Built	Rent /SF
Office	126	7,547	1976	14.62
Retail	609	7,085	1958	20.74
Warehouse /Distribution	45	12,636	1955	6.49
Flex/R&D	17	20,236	1971	7.13
Industrial	132	14,765	1963	-

Source: Moody's Analytics REIS, 2023

#### 6.2.5 Property Tax Rates

The fiscal implications of tax rates are an important consideration that businesses—and even individuals—evaluate when making choices about where to locate. While low property taxes can help attract businesses and residents, limited funding can result in insufficient provision of public

<sup>1</sup> According to the State Department of Labor from the City of Cranston's FY2022 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report, the largest employer in Cranston is the State of Rhode Island, employing 5,500 people. The city may wish to consider how to leverage and public sector employment as an opportunity.

services, inhibiting a municipality's ability to remain competitive with its neighboring communities. In most communities, property taxes represent a sizable majority of municipal revenues.

The difference between its residential and commercial/industrial tax rates is similar to other adjacent communities, and both rates are comparable to those of neighboring towns and cities, with East Providence and Warwick having higher residential rates. The commercial tax rate is the second lowest compared to surrounding towns and cities but is significantly lower than the tax rate in Providence. These rates could serve as an appealing incentive for prospective businesses considering settling in Cranston.

Municipality	Real Estate	Commercial	Personal Property
<b>Cranston</b>	<b>\$18.51 (13.61)*</b>	<b>\$27.77 (20.42)*</b>	<b>\$27.77 (28.25)*</b>
Providence	\$17.80	\$35.40	\$53.40
East Providence	\$21.86	\$26.89	\$56.33
Pawtucket	\$16.58	\$29.02	\$52.09
Warwick	\$18.73	\$28.10	\$37.46

Source: RI Division of Municipal Finance, FY2023 (\*reflects most recent tax ordinance as of August 2024)

### 6.2.6 Commercial/Industrial Districts & Corridors

The COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for commercial districts across the country due to the impact of quarantines, lockdowns, and a continued rise in the use of online shopping and online platforms for ordering goods, services, food, and beverage. These challenges have led to small business closures, altered consumer behavior with a preference for online shopping, and potential declines in community vibrancy. Recognizing and addressing these issues is vital for economic recovery, small business support, adapting to changing market dynamics, and preparing for future crises.

Cranston has a limited inventory of office buildings, with office tenants mainly occupying space in retail centers and residential home-to-office conversions. Additionally, it is recommended to explore adaptive reuse opportunities for old and underutilized warehouses.

Four village centers in Cranston include Pawtuxet Village, Knightsville, Rolfe Square, and Garden City Center.

#### **The Garden City Center**

Garden City Center, positioned between Highway 2 and Midway Road, is a prominent retail hub catering to the wider Cranston and Providence region, characterized by a significant presence of high-end retail establishments. Situated on the border with Providence, Garden City Center plays a central role in hosting a diverse array of retail outlets and shops for the city, with consistently high occupancy rates. With over 100 tenants, this commercial space includes national chains, office tenants, restaurants, grocers, and various miscellaneous services.

#### **Plainfield Pike**

Plainfield Pike was a focus in the economic development policies in Cranston’s 2010 masterplan, as a developing strip commercial corridor. Near Highway 295, this commercial strip is centered around the Walmart Supercenter, but has several auto-focused businesses along the pike.

### **Knightsville**

Around this urban center, there is a concentration of restaurants and automotive-focused services. Recently, Knightsville was highlighted as the city’s restaurant district for economic development, calling for new sidewalks, roads, and lighting. Itri Square hosts festivals for local vendors, food trucks, and entertainment.

### **Pawtuxet Village**

As one of New England’s oldest communities, the Pawtuxet Village is located in both Warwick and Cranston. With a seasonal farmer’s market and several small businesses such as antique shops and clothing stores, Broad Street has a concentration of commercial activity and restaurants that service the Pawtuxet neighborhood and visitors.

### **Rolfe Square**

Rolfe Square is another town center with a concentration of restaurants, nonprofits, and smaller-scale commercial businesses, such as beauty supply stores, spas, and barbershops. As phase one of a renovation plan across Cranston, business has picked up in Rolfe Square. Additionally, it is near Cranston High School East and Cranston City Hall, where several local employees work. Development in Rolfe Square is ongoing as New English Brewery Iron Stag Brewing plans to open in 2023.

## **6.3 Current Initiatives**

### *6.3.1 Policies and Regulations*

The City of Cranston has a tax incentive program for new or expansion construction of facilities located on industrial or commercially zoned properties. These tax incentives have different five-year increments depending on the construction cost.

Cranston established the Cranston Revolving Loan Fund (RLF)<sup>2</sup> as a fixed asset loan program that offers low-interest loans to new and existing businesses within the City of Cranston. This fund includes equipment, finance renovations, job training, and working capital. So far, the fund has distributed over \$4 million to companies in Cranston, with over 18,000 jobs created. The average loan amount has been \$110,000 and 70 percent of RLF loans have been to smaller companies (25 employees or fewer).

Cranston’s Economic Development Department is working with the University of Rhode Island Small Business Development Center and the Cranston Chamber of Commerce to develop one-on-one counseling for small business owners. Assistance includes technical business planning, capital access, marketing strategies, e-commerce, how to purchase or sell a business, and managing personnel and resources.

## **6.4 Issues and Opportunities**

### *6.4.1 Issues*

There was a notable decrease in certain age groups (i.e.,18-24 and 45-54), which may affect the labor force and economic growth. Cranston should continue efforts to improve educational attainment and

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <file:///C:/Users/riordanj/OneDrive%20-%20WESTON%20&%20SAMPSON%20ENGINEERS.%20Inc/Downloads/Revolving%20Loan%20Fund%20Program.pdf> (Reviewed on February 6, 2024)

retain and attract recent graduates. The significant outflow of workers from Cranston to neighboring areas may indicate that some residents are seeking employment opportunities outside of the city, potentially impacting local businesses.

Some influential industries in Cranston are shrinking, such as manufacturing and healthcare & social assistance.

#### 6.4.2 Opportunities

Cranston's proximity to Providence and Warwick enhances the value of local commercial and industrial real estate. These regional employment hubs have seen consistent growth in the preceding decade.

Additionally, Cranston has access to the entirety of New England through its highway connections and proximity to both Amtrak and MBTA lines through the Providence station, which can also be accessed by bus from Cranston. Residents and employees are connected to employment and population centers such as Providence, Warwick, Boston, and New Haven.

With a large variety of village centers, small business development is encouraged and seems to populate corridors outside of the Garden City Center. Cranston has refocused on economic development initiatives, the business community, and revitalizing village hubs. Effective promotion and communication strategies are crucial for highlighting the diverse commercial districts and villages within Cranston. Leveraging platforms, community events, and online channels can play a vital role in showcasing areas like Plainfield Pike, Knightsville, Pawtuxet Village, and Rolfe Square. By disseminating information about the unique offerings, festivals, and business developments in these districts, the city can attract attention and support for local businesses, fostering a sense of community engagement.

Despite low unemployment rates, there is potential to focus on workforce development programs to ensure residents have the skills required for the evolving job market, especially in growing manufacturing industries. Since more residents in Cranston commute out than in, businesses located in Cranston could have opportunities to find workers within the local population, lessening or eliminating their commute.

Cranston has a heavily retail-based economy. Recognizing the impact of e-commerce on traditional commercial districts and considering strategies to adapt, such as mixed-use development or unique in-person events and festivals, should be prioritized. Continuing to address infrastructure issues in commercial districts could encourage more visitors from the surrounding area.

According to the State Department of Labor from the City of Cranston's FY2022 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report, the largest employer in Cranston is the State of Rhode Island, employing 5,500 people. The city may wish to consider how to leverage and public sector employment as an opportunity.