

Analysis of the Diversity of Kershaw County's Economic Base

1. Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of the economic diversity of Kershaw County, South Carolina, examining the current structure of its economy, identifying sectors of concentration and potential vulnerability, and proposing strategies to promote diversification and enhance economic resilience. The findings indicate that while Kershaw County has experienced significant population growth and increasing overall economic output, its employment base exhibits a moderate level of concentration in the manufacturing, healthcare and social assistance, and retail trade sectors. This concentration, coupled with a high rate of out-commuting, presents potential vulnerabilities to economic shifts. To foster a more robust and adaptable economy, this report recommends targeted recruitment of new industries, enhanced support for existing businesses, promotion of entrepreneurship, and strategic investments in infrastructure.

2. Introduction

Kershaw County, established in 1791 and situated within the Columbia Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), plays a significant role in the regional economy of South Carolina ¹. Understanding the nuances of its economic base, particularly the degree of its diversification, is crucial for ensuring sustained growth and resilience in the face of economic fluctuations. Economic diversification, the process of shifting an economy away from a single income source toward multiple sources from a growing range of sectors, is widely recognized as a cornerstone of long-term economic stability and development ². This report aims to analyze the current state of Kershaw County's economy, evaluate its level of diversification, identify potential areas of vulnerability, and recommend strategic pathways to foster a more balanced and robust economic future. The analysis will draw upon available economic data and reports to provide a comprehensive assessment and inform strategic decision-making for the county's stakeholders.

3. Current State of Kershaw County's Economy

3.1 Population and Growth Trends

Kershaw County has demonstrated a notable pattern of population expansion over the past two decades, outpacing the growth rate of South Carolina as a whole ¹. Between 1999 and 2022, the county's population surged by 37.5%, compared to the state's 35.9% increase, indicating a dynamic and attractive region for residents ¹. This upward

trend has continued, with an estimated population of 74,015 in 2025, reflecting a 2.86% growth in the preceding year and positioning Kershaw County as the 19th largest county in the state ³. However, this growth has not been uniform across the county. The City of Camden, the county seat, has experienced a particularly rapid increase in population, growing at roughly twice the rate of Kershaw County between 2010 and 2020 ¹. This concentration of growth in and around Camden suggests that the city is a primary hub for economic and residential activity within the county. The sustained population growth, fueled by in-migration, has generated significant demand for new housing in the local area, a trend that is expected to persist throughout the 2020s due to ongoing economic development initiatives ¹. The development of new residential communities, such as the Carlyle Development in Camden, is projected to contribute substantially to the local economy through construction activities and the subsequent spending of new residents ¹. The projected annual economic activity from new residents in the Carlyle Development alone is estimated at approximately \$36 million ¹. These population trends underscore the importance of strategic planning to manage growth, ensure adequate infrastructure, and foster broad-based economic opportunities throughout Kershaw County, not just within the concentrated areas.

3.2 Employment Landscape

Despite the robust population growth experienced by Kershaw County, the expansion of local employment opportunities has not kept pace ¹. This disparity has resulted in a significant portion of the county's residents commuting to jobs in neighboring regions, including Columbia, Charlotte, Sumter, and Florence ¹. In fact, only about 27% of employed county residents work at a business located within Kershaw County ¹. This high rate of out-commuting suggests a potential disconnect between the skills of the local workforce and the types of jobs available within the county, or simply a lack of sufficient job opportunities to meet the needs of the growing population. The civilian labor force in Kershaw County stood at 30,234 in 2023, indicating a substantial pool of residents who are either employed or actively seeking employment ⁴. Examining the major employers in the county provides insight into the key sectors driving local employment. In May 2022, INVISTA and Target Distribution Center were among the largest private employers, with 1,000 and 850 employees respectively ⁵. By August 2024, Target Distribution Center had become the largest with 1,200 employees, followed by MUSC Health Kershaw with 746, indicating a growing presence of the healthcare sector as a major employer ⁶. An analysis of employment distribution across different industries reveals a concentration in a few key areas. In 2022, the largest industries by employment in Kershaw County were Manufacturing (4,425 people), Health Care & Social Assistance (3,832 people), and Retail Trade (2,748

people)². This pattern persisted into 2023, with Manufacturing employing 4,221 people, Health Care & Social Assistance 3,911, and Retail Trade 2,766⁷. Notably, the town of Kershaw itself shows a similar concentration, with Manufacturing (181 people), Health Care & Social Assistance (160 people), and Public Administration (102 people) being the largest industries in 2022⁹. This consistent dominance of these three sectors across both the county and its namesake town highlights their significant role in the local employment landscape.

Table 1: Employment Distribution by Major Industry in Kershaw County (2022-2023)

Industry	Employment (2022)	Employment (2023)	Source(s)
Manufacturing	4,425	4,221	2 2 7 8 , , ,
Health Care & Social Assistance	3,832	3,911	2 2 7 8 , , ,
Retail Trade	2,748	2,766	2 2 7 8 , , ,

This table clearly illustrates the consistent prominence of manufacturing, healthcare, and retail trade as the primary sources of employment in Kershaw County.

3.3 Income and Economic Activity

Data on income levels in Kershaw County provides further context to its economic state. The average per capita income is reported at \$43,110, while the median household income stands at \$64,343³. In 2022, the median household income for the county was \$61,343, reflecting an 8.67% increase from the previous year². However, despite these figures, a poverty rate of 14.07% indicates that a significant portion of the population experiences economic hardship³. The overall economic activity in Kershaw County, as measured by its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), shows a positive trend. In 2023, the GDP for all industries reached \$3,009,354 thousand USD, a substantial increase from \$2,697,642 thousand USD in 2022¹⁰. This growth signifies an expanding economic output within the county. Examining the total annual payroll by industry further illuminates the economic contributions of different sectors. In 2023, Manufacturing had the highest total annual payroll at \$132 million, followed by Health Care and Social Assistance at \$101 million, and Transportation and Warehousing at \$84.3 million⁸. This data aligns with the employment figures, highlighting the

significant economic impact of the manufacturing sector in terms of both job creation and payroll. While the growth in median household income and the increase in GDP are positive indicators, the persistent poverty rate suggests that economic growth may not be benefiting all residents equally. Furthermore, the concentration of both employment and payroll in a few sectors, coupled with the considerable out-commuting, indicates that the local economy may not be fully capturing the economic potential of its growing population. Residents earning income outside the county are likely spending and paying taxes in those other jurisdictions, representing a potential leakage of economic benefits from Kershaw County.

4. Measuring Economic Diversification

4.1 Introduction to Industry Concentration Indices

Industry concentration refers to the degree to which a relatively small number of industries account for a large share of the economic activity in a particular region. A highly concentrated economy can be more susceptible to economic shocks that disproportionately affect those dominant industries. Conversely, a more diversified economy, with a broader distribution of economic activity across numerous sectors, tends to be more stable and resilient. One common tool for measuring industry concentration is the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI). The HHI is calculated by summing the squares of the market shares of each firm in the industry. While typically used to measure market concentration within a specific industry, the concept can be adapted to regional economics by using the share of employment or revenue accounted for by each industry in the region. A higher HHI value indicates a higher level of concentration.

4.2 Applying Concentration Indices to Kershaw County

Directly calculating a comprehensive HHI for Kershaw County would ideally require detailed revenue or employment share data for all industries. The provided information offers employment numbers for the top industries but lacks a complete breakdown across all sectors. Revenue data by industry is also limited. However, using the available employment data for the major sectors can provide a reasonable estimate of the county's industry concentration. Based on the 2023 employment figures⁷, the top three sectors—Manufacturing, Health Care & Social Assistance, and Retail Trade—collectively employ approximately 10,898 individuals out of a total employment of around 29,700. This means that roughly 36.7% of the county's workforce is concentrated in these three industries. While this is not a formal HHI calculation, it indicates a significant portion of the employment base is reliant on a relatively small number of sectors. It is important to note the limitations of using

employment data as a proxy for revenue concentration. An industry with high revenue per employee might have a smaller employment share but a larger overall economic impact. Nevertheless, the employment concentration in Kershaw County suggests a moderate level of diversification, with a substantial portion of the economy tied to these three key sectors.

4.3 Interpretation of Diversification Metrics

Based on the available employment data, Kershaw County's economy exhibits a moderate level of industry concentration. The fact that over a third of the employment is concentrated in just three sectors—manufacturing, healthcare, and retail trade—suggests that the county could be vulnerable to economic downturns specifically affecting these industries. While a certain degree of specialization is natural and can be a source of strength, an over-reliance on a few sectors can limit economic resilience. Ideally, a more diversified economy would have a more even distribution of employment and economic activity across a wider array of industries. Comparing this level of concentration to benchmarks for regional economies would provide a more definitive assessment, but generally, a lower concentration is indicative of a more diversified and potentially more stable economy.

5. Identifying Economic Concentrations and Vulnerabilities

5.1 Top Industries in Kershaw County

As established in the previous sections, the top industries in Kershaw County, based on employment, are consistently Manufacturing, Health Care & Social Assistance, and Retail Trade. Manufacturing also stands out due to its highest total annual payroll, indicating its significant economic output. These sectors form the core of Kershaw County's current economic base.

5.2 Analysis of Potential Vulnerabilities

5.2.1 Manufacturing

The manufacturing sector, while a major employer in Kershaw County, faces several potential vulnerabilities. Cybersecurity threats are a growing concern for manufacturers in South Carolina, with the sector being a frequent target of cyberattacks¹¹. A successful cyberattack could severely disrupt production, leading to significant financial losses and potential supply chain issues. While the recent trend of reshoring manufacturing to the U.S. has presented opportunities, reliance on complex global supply chains still leaves manufacturers vulnerable to international disruptions¹³. Furthermore, the ongoing advancement of technology and automation poses a long-term vulnerability to manufacturing employment¹⁴. While automation can

increase efficiency, it can also lead to job displacement if the workforce is not adequately trained for new roles or if new job creation in other sectors does not offset these losses. The historical experience in the Carolinas shows that manufacturing employment has been susceptible to technological disruptions and changing consumer demands ¹⁴. Therefore, while manufacturing is a current strength, Kershaw County needs to be mindful of these potential vulnerabilities and proactively plan for a future where the manufacturing landscape may evolve.

5.2.2 Healthcare & Social Assistance

The Healthcare & Social Assistance sector, another major employer in Kershaw County, is also facing its own set of vulnerabilities. With the increasing digitization of healthcare records and systems, the sector has become a prime target for cyberattacks and data breaches ¹⁵. Incidents like the Change Healthcare breach, which affected millions of Americans, highlight the significant risks associated with cybersecurity in healthcare ¹⁷. These breaches can lead to the compromise of sensitive patient information, disruption of healthcare services, and substantial financial and reputational damage. For Kershaw County, with MUSC Health Kershaw being a significant employer, ensuring robust cybersecurity measures and preparedness for potential cyber incidents is critical to protect both the institution and the community it serves. Public health crises, such as infectious disease outbreaks or the opioid epidemic, can also strain the resources of the healthcare sector, although these are not strictly economic vulnerabilities, they can impact the workforce and overall community well-being ¹⁸.

5.2.3 Retail Trade

The Retail Trade sector in Kershaw County is vulnerable to several factors. As a sector that handles large volumes of consumer data, it is a frequent target for fraud and data breaches ²⁰. Often, employees in retail may prioritize customer service over data security, potentially creating vulnerabilities in systems and processes ²⁰. The sector also faces pressures from regulatory compliance and labor-related issues ²¹. Additionally, the retail landscape is constantly evolving, with increasing competition from e-commerce and shifts in consumer spending habits. These factors can impact the profitability and stability of local retail businesses. While retail provides numerous employment opportunities, its vulnerability to these various pressures necessitates strategies to support its resilience and adaptation to the changing market.

5.3 Overall Economic Vulnerabilities

Beyond the vulnerabilities specific to the dominant industries, Kershaw County's significant reliance on out-commuting presents an overarching economic vulnerability

¹. With only about 27% of employed residents working within the county, a large portion of the workforce is dependent on the economic health of neighboring regions. If these adjacent areas experience economic downturns or job losses, a substantial number of Kershaw County residents could be negatively impacted, even if the local industries remain stable. This reliance on external job markets also means that a significant portion of the income earned by Kershaw County residents is likely spent and taxed outside the county, hindering the potential for local economic growth and development. This pattern underscores the need to attract more businesses and create more job opportunities within Kershaw County to retain its workforce and capture a greater share of its economic potential.

6. Strategies for Promoting Economic Diversification

6.1 Targeting New Industries for Recruitment

To reduce its reliance on the current dominant sectors and build a more diversified economy, Kershaw County should actively target new industries for recruitment. The City of Camden's Comprehensive Plan has identified several potential target industries, including wood products, transportation equipment, plastics and rubber products, food processing, insurance carriers, and computer systems design and related services ²². These sectors represent a mix of building upon existing manufacturing strengths and venturing into higher-growth areas like insurance and technology. Furthermore, aligning with the Central SC Alliance's ten targeted sectors for the region, which include advanced manufacturing, automotive, aerospace, agribusiness, biotechnology, distribution, energy, financial services, IT, and tourism, could enhance the county's recruitment efforts by leveraging regional momentum and resources ²². Kershaw County possesses several assets that can be leveraged to attract these target industries. The Kershaw County Economic Development Office (KCEDO) actively recruits new industry and can offer financial and tax incentive packages to make the county more attractive ²³. The presence of "The Campus," a collaborative initiative involving Central Carolina Technical College and the Woolard Technology Center, provides a valuable pipeline of skilled workforce, which is a significant draw for businesses ²⁴. Additionally, the appealing small-town lifestyle, coupled with its proximity to Columbia, offers a high quality of life that can attract both businesses and their employees ²⁴. The county's location with access to transportation infrastructure, including proximity to the port of Charleston, major cities, and an international airport, is another key advantage for industries with logistical needs ²⁴. By strategically promoting these assets and tailoring incentive packages to the needs of target industries, Kershaw County can successfully attract

new businesses and diversify its economic base.

6.2 Supporting the Growth of Existing Industries

While attracting new industries is crucial, supporting the growth and resilience of existing businesses is equally important for long-term economic diversification. The KCEDO plays a vital role in retaining and assisting the expansion of local companies by providing ongoing support and resources²³. "The Campus" also serves as a valuable resource for both new and expanding businesses, offering economic development support and training space²⁴. To further support existing industries, Kershaw County should invest in programs that focus on workforce development and skills upgrading. By partnering with Central Carolina Technical College and other educational institutions, the county can ensure that the local workforce possesses the skills needed to meet the evolving demands of existing industries and adapt to technological advancements²⁴. Encouraging innovation and the adoption of new technologies within local businesses can also enhance their competitiveness and resilience. This could be facilitated through partnerships with research institutions or the provision of resources and training in areas such as digital transformation and advanced manufacturing techniques. By fostering a supportive environment for existing businesses to grow and innovate, Kershaw County can strengthen its current economic base and encourage further diversification from within.

6.3 Fostering Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development

Promoting entrepreneurship and supporting the development of small businesses is a vital strategy for creating a more diverse and dynamic economy in Kershaw County. Small businesses often drive innovation, fill niche markets, and contribute significantly to local job creation²². The City of Camden's Comprehensive Plan recognizes the importance of fostering a climate of entrepreneurial activity and small business success²². "The Campus" provides a forum for business advocacy and networking opportunities, which can be particularly beneficial for startups and small businesses²⁴. The Kershaw County Chamber of Commerce, a partner in "The Campus," likely offers additional resources and support for local businesses²⁴. To further cultivate entrepreneurship, Kershaw County could implement initiatives such as mentorship programs that connect experienced business owners with aspiring entrepreneurs. Facilitating access to funding through local grants, loan programs, or connections to investors can also be crucial for the success of new ventures. Additionally, streamlining the permitting and regulatory processes for small businesses at the local government level can reduce barriers to entry and encourage more entrepreneurial activity. Efforts to revitalize downtown areas, as mentioned in Vision Kershaw 2030²⁵, can also create attractive environments for small retail and service businesses to

thrive. By creating a supportive ecosystem for entrepreneurs and small businesses, Kershaw County can foster a more diverse and resilient local economy.

6.4 Developing a More Resilient and Adaptable Economy

Building a resilient and adaptable economy requires a holistic approach that goes beyond simply diversifying the industrial base. It involves continuous monitoring of the economic landscape to identify emerging trends and potential risks, and proactively adapting strategies accordingly. Investing in infrastructure that supports a diverse range of industries is essential. This includes not only traditional infrastructure like roads and utilities but also digital infrastructure, such as high-speed internet access, which is increasingly crucial for businesses across all sectors. Exploring opportunities to strengthen linkages and collaborations between different industries within the county can also enhance resilience. For example, encouraging local businesses to source goods and services from other Kershaw County companies can create a more interconnected and self-sustaining local economy. Addressing the issue of significant out-commuting is another key aspect of building a more resilient economy. Strategies could include promoting remote work opportunities for residents by ensuring robust digital infrastructure, and actively working to attract more businesses that can employ the local workforce, thereby reducing reliance on jobs outside the county. By taking a comprehensive approach to economic development that focuses on diversification, infrastructure investment, inter-industry collaboration, and addressing out-commuting, Kershaw County can build a more resilient and adaptable economy for the future.

7. Building a Resilient and Adaptable Economy

Diversification serves as a fundamental pillar in constructing a resilient and adaptable economy for Kershaw County. By expanding the range of industries present, the county can mitigate the risks associated with over-reliance on a few key sectors. This strategic shift requires a long-term vision and meticulous strategic planning, as emphasized by the goals outlined in Vision Kershaw 2030 ²⁵. This initiative underscores the importance of considering economic growth in conjunction with effective land use and the development of high-quality infrastructure, all of which contribute to a more robust and sustainable economic ecosystem. Education and workforce training are also critical components in fostering an adaptable workforce capable of navigating and contributing to a changing economic landscape. "The Campus" initiative, with its focus on providing a pipeline of talent through collaborations between educational institutions and the business community, plays a vital role in this aspect ²⁴. Ultimately, the creation of a truly resilient and adaptable

economy in Kershaw County necessitates strong collaboration between the local government, existing and prospective businesses, and educational institutions. By working together, these stakeholders can create an environment conducive to innovation, growth, and long-term economic stability.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of Kershaw County's economic base reveals a region experiencing significant population growth and overall economic expansion. However, the employment landscape exhibits a moderate concentration in the manufacturing, healthcare and social assistance, and retail trade sectors, coupled with a considerable rate of out-commuting. These factors present potential vulnerabilities to economic shifts. To foster a more diverse, resilient, and prosperous economic future, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Recommendation 1:** Implement a proactive and targeted industry recruitment strategy. Focus on attracting sectors identified as having regional growth potential and those that complement existing strengths, as outlined in the Camden Comprehensive Plan and by the Central SC Alliance. This includes industries like insurance carriers, computer systems design, advanced manufacturing, and logistics.
- **Recommendation 2:** Enhance support for cybersecurity measures within the dominant manufacturing and healthcare sectors. Given the increasing threats in these areas, providing resources, training, and facilitating partnerships with cybersecurity experts can help mitigate significant vulnerabilities.
- **Recommendation 3:** Strengthen programs and resources aimed at fostering entrepreneurship and supporting small business development. Leverage the existing infrastructure of "The Campus" and the Chamber of Commerce to provide mentorship, access to funding information, and streamlined regulatory processes for startups and small businesses.
- **Recommendation 4:** Invest strategically in robust digital infrastructure across Kershaw County. Reliable and high-speed internet access is increasingly essential for attracting technology-focused businesses, supporting remote work opportunities for residents, and enabling the growth of existing industries.
- **Recommendation 5:** Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the out-commuting patterns of Kershaw County residents. Understanding the skills, industries, and locations where residents are employed outside the county can provide valuable insights for targeting recruitment efforts for similar businesses within Kershaw County, thereby reducing reliance on external job markets.

By diligently pursuing these recommendations, Kershaw County can strategically diversify its economic base, enhance its resilience to economic shocks, and create a more prosperous and sustainable future for its residents. This will require ongoing collaboration, strategic planning, and a commitment to fostering a dynamic and adaptable economic environment.

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