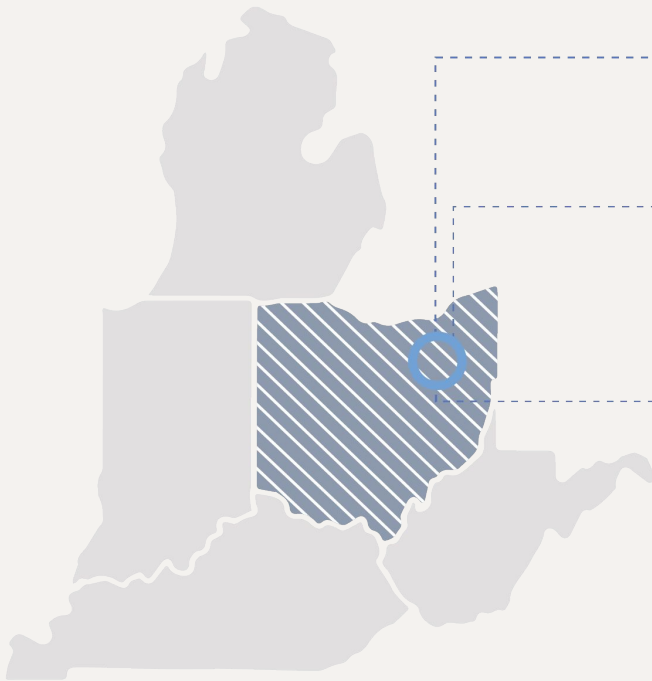

Akron, Ohio

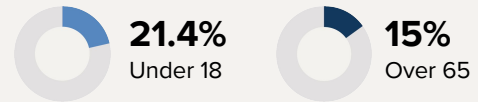
Akron, OH



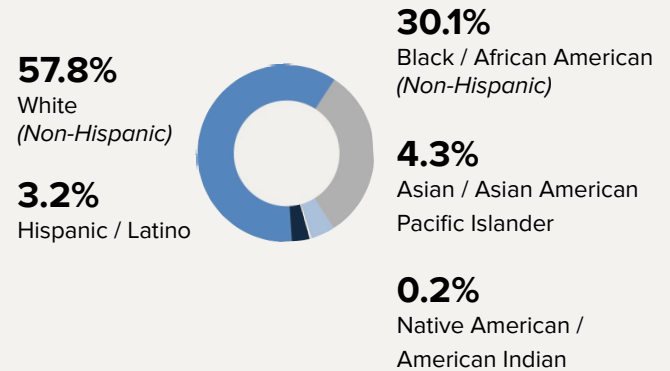
Akron, OH

189,347 (2021 ACS)

Age



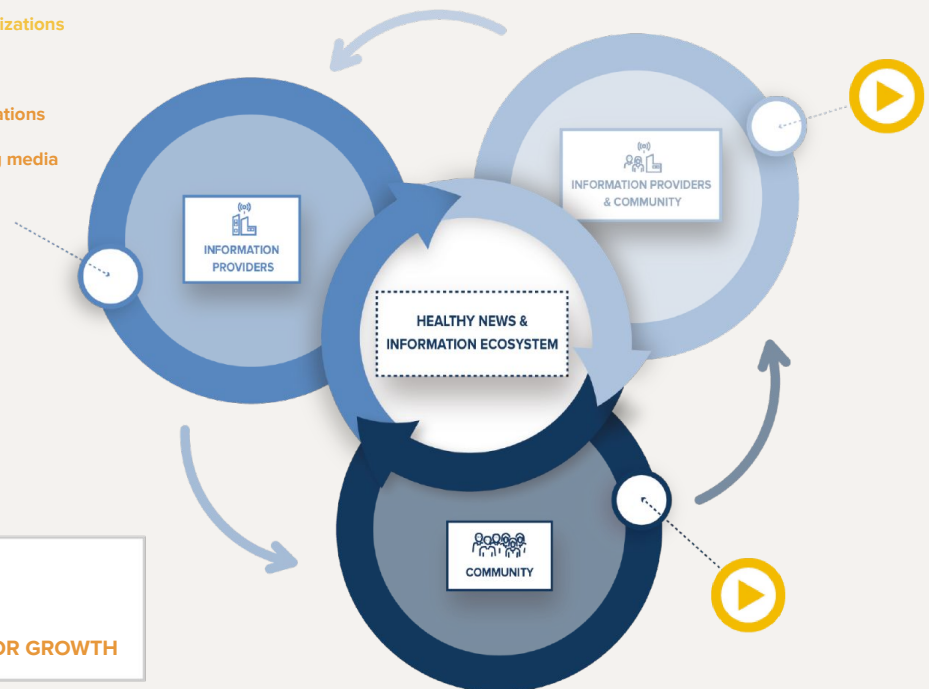
Race



News & Information Ecosystem 2022

- ▶ Number of journalism organizations
- ▼ Types of media
- ▼ Business models of organizations
- ▼ Diversity and BIPOC-serving media
- ▼ Collaboration
- ▼ Journalism funding

▲	STRONG
▶	AVERAGE
▼	OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH



Key Elements



Akron has an average number of news organizations per capita, but the majority of providers are based in surrounding areas (especially Cleveland, but also Kent) and are not exclusively focused on Akron itself, resulting in a lack of truly local news coverage.



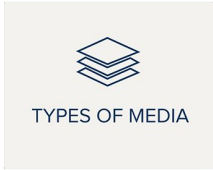
There are no community collaborations in Akron, but its proximity to Cleveland could present opportunities.



Akron Beacon Journal records and reports on the racial demographics of its staff.



Akron is notably lacking in BIPOC-serving media, particularly given its large Black population (30%).



Akron's ecosystem is dominated by television, and almost half of its print publications are former community newspapers that have been absorbed by the Gannett-owned *Akron Beacon Journal* and only exist as community sections of the city's major daily.



Because television and subsidiaries of *Akron Beacon Journal* dominate the landscape, most media are affiliated with a national chain.



There has been low philanthropic investment in the Akron ecosystem on a per capita basis, although this is set to change with the announcement of the launch of the nonprofit Signal Akron.



According to a 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center, residents of the Akron metro area express a relatively high degree of trust in its local media, although interviews with local stakeholders suggest there is opportunity for more robust relationships between local media and community members.

Summary

The Akron metropolitan statistical area is the 85th largest in the United States and is the second smallest among the areas considered in this report.¹ The area consists of Summit and Portage Counties and counts around 700,000 residents. A little more than a quarter of those residents, 189,347 according to 2021 population estimates, live in the city of Akron itself.

Akron is a diverse community, with 58% of residents identifying as white and 30% as Black or African American. Based on data from the 2021 American Communities Survey, the median household income in Akron is \$42,129, about 48% below the national average. The per capita income is similarly lower than the national average, and the poverty rate in Akron (23%) is more than twice the national rate (11.6%). The percentage of Akron’s population with a high school degree roughly matches the national average; however, the percentage of the population with a bachelor’s degree is about 11 percentage points lower. And while the percentage of households with a computer and access to broadband internet is below the national average, the difference is only about three percentage points.

There are opportunities to strengthen Akron’s information ecosystem. *Akron Beacon Journal*, a Gannett-owned newspaper, has suffered from reduced budgets and requisite downsizing since being acquired by Gannett, according to interviews. *Devil Strip*, a community-owned nonprofit, had been filling information gaps, but shut down in 2021 due to financial problems and challenges with the co-op ownership structure. And while there are public media outlets accessible in Akron, they are regional stations. And finally, there is little investment in the ecosystem, as evidenced by the lack of a backbone

Community Indicators	National Average, 2021	Akron, 2021	Comparison
Economics			
Median Household Income	\$69,021	\$42,129	Low
Per Capita Income	\$37,638	\$26,064	Low
Poverty Rate	11.6%	23.0%	High
Education			
High School Degree	88.9%	88.0%	Average
Bachelor's Degree	33.7%	22.0%	Low
Resources & Infrastructure			
Households with Computer	93.1%	90.4%	Average
Broadband Access	87.0%	84.8%	Average
Universities	20	3	
Population per University	32,690	63,116	Weak
Libraries	27	22	
Population per Library	23,693 (cities avg)	8,607	Strong
Community Satisfaction ²	60.9%	56.0%	High
Voter Turnout of most recent election	66%	54.6%	Low
Prior Information Needs Study	Yes/No	No	
Prior Ecosystem Study	Yes/No	No	

1. Census Reporter, Akron OH Metro Area, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US10420-akron-oh-metro-area/>.
 2. Community satisfaction is measured by Share Care in partnership with Boston University, <https://wellbeingindex.sharecare.com/interactive-map/?defaultState=OH>.

institution to support media outlets in efforts like community engagement or collaboration.

In February 2023, Knight Foundation announced a \$5 million investment in a new nonprofit newsroom, Signal Akron.³ The American Journalism Project will also support this initiative, as will local partners, including Akron Community Foundation, GAR Foundation, Goodyear, the Greater Akron Chamber, Huntington Foundation, United Way of Summit & Medina, the University of Akron Foundation, and Welty Building Construction, bringing the total investment to \$9.5 million. Signal Akron will be part of the Signal Ohio, which launched its first newsroom in Cleveland.

Information Needs

There has not been a comprehensive community information needs assessment conducted in Akron. However, many stakeholders agree that as the number of journalists and outlets dwindles in Akron, there is not enough output or volume of information to meet the community's needs and provide a complete picture of Akron. While the city is not a news desert, it has not been trending in the right direction. The household penetration rate of newspaper circulation in Akron is 15.6%, average among Knight cities.⁴

A critical information need that emerged in the last three years was a lack of information with respect to public health. While in many communities COVID-19 re-established journalism's vital role as an information provider, that role was strained in Akron. Stakeholders often cited a feeling of "powerlessness" during the height of the pandemic, especially amid contentious vaccine debates. At times it seemed that "no matter what we said or did, there was a segment of the population that was either never going to read it or never believe it," said Michael Shearer, editor of *Akron Beacon Journal*, a sentiment that was echoed in interviews with stakeholders in many ecosystems included in this report.

A news and information ecosystem also has broad impacts on other ecosystems within a community. For instance, there are no dedicated reporters to cover the city's business community, and while it may appear there isn't much to report, in a community of this size, the lack of reporting the relevant business news that there is can have ripple effects, including potentially chilled investment in local business.

3. "Knight announces investment in Signal Akron, a new nonprofit news source," February 22, 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/press/releases/knight-announces-investment-in-signal-akron-a-new-nonprofit-news-source/>.

4. Daily average circulation is a composite average based on data from Alliance for Audited Media, which includes the daily average of print, print replica and print nonreplica editions of newspapers, four of which report data for 2019 and two for 2021. Household penetration rate is the average daily circulation divided by the number of households in the Akron-OH MSA, according to the Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey (ACS).

In 2022, new initiatives launched in Akron, paired with the announcement of the launch of the new nonprofit Signal Akron, are signaling exciting changes coming to the Akron news and information ecosystem. City Bureau announced its Documenters program would launch in Akron.⁵ Documenters trains local residents to attend and cover local government meetings, and pays them to write summaries of the meetings. This initiative, which is part of the broader Signal Akron project, will increase transparency into and information about local government.

Information Providers

Akron’s media ecosystem is dominated by regional news, largely due to its proximity to the larger city of Cleveland. *Akron Beacon Journal* is the only legacy media outlet based in the mid-size city of Akron and WAKR’s local news show is the last local broadcast show, as more and more outlets, particularly television and radio outlets, are now based in Cleveland. *Akron Beacon Journal’s* circulation of print, digital replica and digital non-replica circulation declined 2.5% from 2019 to 2021. It saw growth in digital-only subscribers from 2020 to 2022, which editor Michael Shearer attributes to the

Information Providers	Knight Communities Average, 2022	Akron, 2022	Comparison
Number of Organizations (newspapers, television stations, radio stations, and digital)	34	21	
Population per Organization	27,162	9,017	High
Daily Average Circulation (Major Daily)	N/A	45,633	
Penetration rate	15.2%	15.6%	Average
Platform Breakdown⁶			
Newspapers	36.8%	4.8%	Low
Television Stations	31.3%	38.1%	High
Radio Stations	10.9%	14.3%	High
Digital only	18.5%	0.0%	Low
Business Models Breakdown⁷			
Nonprofit	11.2%	0.0%	Low
Public Media	11.5%	19.0%	High
National Broadcast Chain	24.4%	28.6%	High
National Newspaper Chain	6.0%	4.8%	Average
Independent For-Profit	46.4%	42.9%	Low
BIPOC-Serving Media			
African American / Black	1		
Hispanic / Latino	1		
Asian / Asian American	0		
Diversity			
Staff Diversity Transparency		Yes	
Source Diversity Audits		No	
Collaboration		No	
Journalism Funding			
Philanthropic Dollars over the 3 previous years ⁸	\$3,837,794	\$155,200	
Funders	13	3	
Recipients	8	3	
Invested Per Capita	\$5.94	\$0.82	Low

5. “Cleveland and Akron Meetings Now Available on Documenters.org,” City Bureau, December 12, 2019, <https://www.citybureau.org/notebook/2019/12/11/cleveland-and-akron-meetings-now-available-on-documentersorg>

6. The percentage of news outlets that publish on specific platforms in Akron.

7. The percentage of news outlets that have specific business models in Akron.

8. Philanthropic investment is based on the Media Impact Funders and Candid database, which pulls data from organizational 990s. These data include only institutional funders, not individual donors. There is also a lag in the data as a result of both the timing of organizations’ tax filings and the process of tagging grants. While this data is far from perfect, it is the only current data source with respect to philanthropic funding for media.

combination of Gannett's focus in growing digital readership and subscribers as well as the publication's participation in the Table Stakes program. And while its print subscription base is in decline, the decline is the smallest among the Knight cities in this assessment.

Akron receives signals from one NPR⁹ and two PBS affiliates; however, they are not dedicated to serving Akron specifically. Ideastream serves Northeast Ohio with multiple radio and television signals, with the signal that serves Akron based in Kent, about 15 miles away. The other NPR affiliate is based in Youngstown, which is about 50 miles away. Ideastream owns a Cleveland-based PBS station that serves Akron, but its primary PBS station is PBS Western Reserve. PBS Western Reserve is based in Kent, but the WEAO signal is licensed to Akron and serves the Cleveland-Akron-Canton television market. The presence of local broadcast media that is based elsewhere and not dedicated to Akron is evident in the presence of national television broadcasters serving the Akron market as well.

In late 2021, the community-owned nonprofit news magazine *Devil Strip* laid off all its employees and closed. There are currently no nonprofit news organizations serving Akron, with the exception of regional public media. However, this will soon change as, noted previously, in February 2023, Signal Ohio announced that Signal Akron will be its second newsroom, launching with the support of Knight Foundation, the American Journalism Project, and other local funders.

BIPOC-Serving Media

Akron has a large Black population (30%), more than twice the percentage of the United States as a whole, but the *Reporter* is the only news organization that specifically serves this population. *Reporter* first launched in 1969. It covers local news, sports, and entertainment. While it has a digital presence, it remains a primarily print publication that relies on print advertising for revenue.

9. WKSU, based in Kent, and WCPN, based in Cleveland, merged in February 2022.

News Outlets Based in Akron

	Independent	National Chain	Nonprofit/University	Public Media
Digital only		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cuyahoga Falls New Press Nordonia Hills News Leader Stow Sentry Suburbanite Tallmadge Express 		
Print and digital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Akron Beacon Journal Hudson Hub Times 		
Radio		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WNIR 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WKSU WYSU
Television		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WEWS WJW WKYC WOIO WQHS WVPX 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WEAO WVIZ

Diversity

The murder of George Floyd in 2020 sparked conversations and initiatives around racism across America, and news organizations were no exception. In August of the same year, *Akron Beacon Journal* pledged to put effort into ensuring its staff was representative of the diverse population of Akron, as did the Gannett company overall.¹⁰

In 2021, *Akron Beacon Journal* began to record and publish its staff demographic information.¹¹ According to this survey, the *Beacon Journal's* staff was 73% white in 2021 and only 5% of staff were Black. The percentage of nonwhite staff was actually down slightly from 2020, a fact that Shearer attributed to “internal company changes” and subsequently the “loss” of two journalists.

Editorially, the publication launched a [series focused on Black-owned businesses](#) in the city and continued the coverage throughout 2022 following public interest in the series. In Akron, the police killing of Jayland Walker in 2022 sparked citywide protests and calls to action, which were covered by *Akron Beacon Journal* and other local news outlets.

Collaborations

This research surfaced no strong patterns of collaboration among Akron’s news organizations, but some smaller projects have occurred in recent years. In one example, *Akron Beacon Journal* worked with Report for America in 2022 to [highlight racial inequity and the Akron Innerbelt](#). The paper has also worked with entities like *Devil Strip* and WKSU on reporting on housing in the city. *Akron Beacon Journal* also has a partnership with the ABC station based in Cleveland, WEWS, which has two reporters working out of the *Beacon Journal* offices. In other ecosystems, the presence of a backbone institution has proven to be vital to kickstart and maintain collaborations, and there is currently no such backbone institution in Akron.

Reporter is one of hundreds of Ohio newspapers digitized through [the Ohio Memory](#) project, a collaboration between the Ohio History Connection and the State Library of Ohio.

10. Michael Shearer, “Why a Diverse Newsroom Is Critical To Accurately Telling Our Community’s Stories,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/opinion/columns/2020/08/20/editor-why-diverse-newsroom-is-critical-to-accurately-telling-our-communitys-quos-stories/113394420/>.

11. Michael Shearer, “Why We’re Focused on Diversity and Accurately Telling the Stories of All Citizens,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/opinion/columns/2021/09/01/akron-beacon-journal-reports-staff-diversity-coverage/5617507001/>.

Local Journalism Support Organizations

While there are some entities that support the news and information ecosystem broadly, including Knight Foundation and Akron Community Foundation, there is recognition across sectors that the city is lacking local journalism support organizations. There are some family foundations active in Akron and northeast Ohio that have concentrated media giving in public media.

The Akron Community Foundation and GAR Foundation have both committed to supporting the Signal Akron newsroom and have the potential to become core support organizations for the news and information ecosystem.

Information Providers and Community

According to the 2019 Pew Research Center Local News Survey, Akron residents and their relationships to local media are average when compared to other Knight cities, meaning there is opportunity for deeper engagement among providers and community but that the distance between the two isn't so vast as to not be bridgeable.

About half of Akron residents (49%) agree that local news sources cover the area where they live, although this percentage has likely remained static or decreased in the past three years with local media's regional focus and the closure of *Devil Strip*. And more than half of residents believe that local news includes people like them in their stories. More residents of Akron say that local journalists are in touch with their community, that local news covers stories thoroughly and that local media is transparent about their

Information Providers & Community*	Knight Communities Average	Akron	Comparison
% Who say local journalists are in touch with the community	63%	69%	High
% Who have spoken with a journalist	21%	20%	Average
% Who say their local news source mostly covers the area where they live	51%	49%	Average
Financial Support			
% Who pay for local news in the past year	14%	18%	High
% Who say their local news:			
Reports news accurately	71%	72%	Average
Keeps an eye on local political leaders	66%	61%	Low
Provides news that they use daily	67%	67%	Average
Covers news stories thoroughly	65%	76%	High
Are transparent about their reporting	62%	73%	High
Deals fairly with all sides	62%	64%	Average
Includes people like you in their stories	58%	58%	Average

*Data from 2019 Pew Research Center Local News Survey

reporting than the average of the Knight cities analyzed in this assessment. The only area in which it is lower is regarding political oversight.

In general, a side effect of a limited local news ecosystem is a lack of nuance in coverage, which can result in a lack of community cohesion. With the slow erosion of the staff of *Akron Beacon Journal* due to cost cutting measures at the corporate level and the loss of other publications, like *Devil Strip*, many non-media organizations have tried to step up their information sharing capacity to fill the void.

For example, Summit Live 365 creates a free calendar for local arts and culture activities. And the community program-focused GAR Foundation produces its own blogs and newsletter with the goal of producing useful information for community members. Christine Amer Mayer, president of GAR Foundation, says that while these efforts are appreciated and needed, it is difficult to replicate the substance and nuance that a journalism institution can provide. Even as other sources have popped up to address information gaps that exist in Akron, they don't have the market share or mindshare that a news organization would.

Case Study: Devil Strip

Founded in 2014 and shuttered in 2021, the nonprofit Akron Devil Strip had a co-op model that faced financial challenges. The community-owned publication attempted to fill the gaps in local news with deeper reporting on issues like the houseless community, small business and a heavy emphasis on arts and culture reporting. Reporters were also engaged in Akron's twenty-four neighborhoods, creating opportunities for residents to build relationships in some communities where skepticism of the media was strong.

With the closure of *Devil Strip* in the context of Akron's broader media environment, there's a significant loss in the community and exploration of things that make the city vibrant. Beyond meeting information needs, having various sources for news, arts and culture through local outlets has an aspirational quality for communities, often becoming a point of civic pride. *Devil Strip* "changed the excitement for a lot of community members," said Floco Torres, an Akron-based musician and entrepreneur who was the magazine's audience development director. "We had something to be proud of, it showed examples of what to be proud of in the community. Now we don't have that, so what will fill it?"

Opportunities

- **Local backbone journalism institution:** Strong ecosystems often have a local backbone institution, and a backbone institution could help support collaboration across organizations and foster deeper community engagement and relationship building.
- **Nonprofit news:** This gap in nonprofit news is notable in Akron. Nonprofit news organizations—as well as public media—can cover stories and communities that don't always make sense economically, such as deep investigative reporting or culture reporting. Nonprofits also often conduct deep community engagement work that does not have an immediate payoff in terms of subscriptions or revenue. In February 2023, Signal Ohio announced that it would launch its second nonprofit newsroom in Akron, with support from Knight Foundation, the American Journalism Project and local partners including Akron Community Foundation, GAR Foundation, Goodyear, the Greater Akron Chamber, Huntington Foundation, United Way of Summit & Medina, the University of Akron Foundation and Welty Building Construction.