Blagoevgrad district

- ▶ Population (2021) — 292,227
- ▶ Territory (sq. km) — 6,449
- ▶ Number of settlements — 274
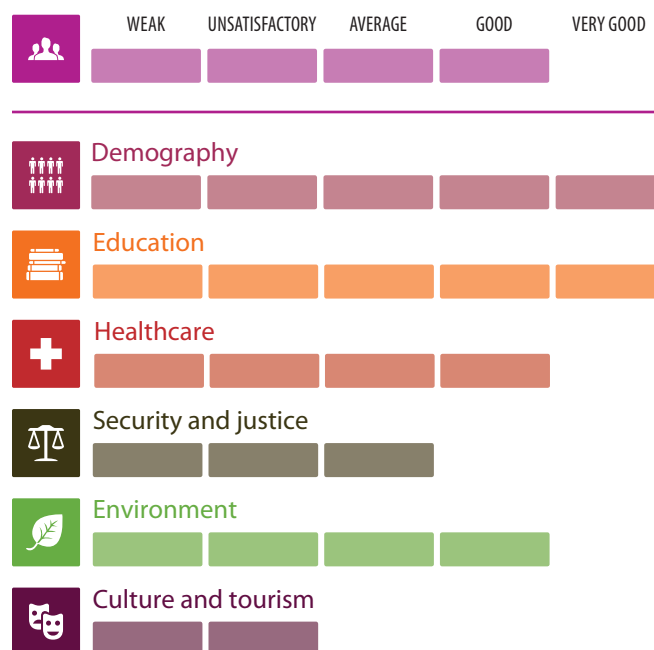- ▶ Share of urban population (%) — 59.8

GDP per capita in Blagoevgrad district continues to grow relatively fast. At the same time, the growth rates of salaries and pensions are close to the respective national averages. In 2022, employment declined and unemployment went up. Blagoevgrad is among the districts with the best quality of road surfaces. Contrary to general trends, Blagoevgrad district's economy is relatively well developed and in 2023 the level of local taxes again remained low. In 2022, the share of own revenues of the district's municipalities again remained extremely low.

Blagoevgrad is among the districts with relatively good results in terms of demographic development. The share of children in kindergartens is high. Students' results for 2023 are below the national average. Healthcare in the district suffers from a shortage of doctors and hospital beds. Crime rates in the district are low and detection rates relatively high, but the delivery of justice remains sluggish. The share of forest area is high. The intensity of cultural life in Blagoevgrad district is traditionally not very high, but tourism is well developed.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

	WEAK	UNSATISFACTORY	AVERAGE	GOOD	VERY GOOD

- Income and living conditions
- Labor market
- Investment and business
- Infrastructure
- Local taxes
- Administration

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

	WEAK	UNSATISFACTORY	AVERAGE	GOOD	VERY GOOD

- Demography
- Education
- Healthcare
- Security and justice
- Environment
- Culture and tourism

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Income and living conditions

GDP per capita in Blagoevgrad district continued to grow relatively fast in 2021 and reached 12,600 BGN. At the same time, the growth rates of salaries and pensions are close to the national averages. The gross annual salary of persons employed in labor or service contract in the district is 12,200 BGN, against 18,700 BGN in the country, and the average pension is 490 BGN, versus 537 BGN nationally.

The relative share of the population living below the national poverty line has been rising, reaching 22.9% and equaling the national average in 2022. The Gini coefficient, which measures the extent of income inequality in the district, has continued to decline for the third consecutive year and in 2022 it stood at 32.1%, compared to 38.4% nationally.

Labor market

The share of the working-age population in Blagoevgrad district continues to decrease, falling to 59.8% in 2022, compared to 58.5% in the country. The economic activity of the population has declined for the third consecutive year, but remains, albeit by a small margin, above the national average – 74.0% in the district, compared to 73.6% in the country in 2022. This decrease has been accompanied by both a drop in employment and a rise in unemployment. The employment rate has risen to 69.9%, but is now lower than the national average (70.4%), while the unemployment rate has reached 9.4%, compared to 5.2% nationally.

The educational structure of the workforce remains relatively unfavorable. In 2022, the share of the population aged 25–64 with university education was 20.4%, compared to 29.8% in the country, while the share of people with primary or lower education was 18.4%, versus 16.0% nationally.

The population replacement rate as a ratio of the people aged 15–19 to those aged 60–64 has decreased and in 2022 it remained below average at 63.2%, versus 65.7% countrywide. This means that for every 100 people who are about to leave the labor market in the next few years, there will be 63 young people joining the workforce.

Investment and business

The number of non-financial enterprises relative to the population in the district remained high in 2021, with 70 companies per 1,000 people, compared to 60 per 1,000 people nationally. The relative volume of investment and production value remains below the national average. FTA acquisition expenditure has increased to 1,800 BGN per capita, while FDI shrank slightly to 1,700 BGN. Production value per capita has reached 19,200 BGN per capita and is around the median value for the

country. Expenditure on research and development is declining and remains relatively low.

Utilization of EU funds has continued to increase, now exceeding the national average. By 30 June 2023, payments made in Blagoevgrad district to beneficiaries under EU operational programs reached 4,100 BGN/person, placing it third in the country after Gabrovo and Sofia (capital city). The largest recipient in the district is Bansko municipality.

Infrastructure

Due to the district's geographic location at the country's periphery and the relatively large proportion of mountainous terrain, the density of its road and railroad network is low. For the same reason, its share of highways and first-class roads in the country's road network is small. Nevertheless, Blagoevgrad remains among the districts with the best road quality, second only to Sliven district as regards the share of road surfaces in good condition – 64% in 2022, compared to 41% in the country.

The relative share of households with internet access in Blagoevgrad district in 2022 again remained below the national average.

Local taxes

Contrary to general nationwide trends, the district is relatively well developed economically, while in 2023 the level of local taxes again remained quite low. Within the district, Blagoevgrad municipality levies the highest local taxes. Rates in Satovcha municipality are among the lowest not only on a district but also on a national scale.

Administration

The share of own revenues in the total revenues of the municipalities in Blagoevgrad district continued to decline in 2022, remaining extremely low at 19.4% on average, compared to 29.0% nationally. Similarly, the coverage of municipal expenditures with local revenues also remained low at 59.9%, versus 84.2% nationally.

In 2023, both the development of e-government and the provision of one-stop shop services in Blagoevgrad's municipalities placed the district below the national average.

The AIP transparency rating of the local administration in Blagoevgrad's municipalities is also below the national average – 61.2% in the district, versus 70.3% nationally.

🏛 SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT ▪▪▪▪

🏛 Demography ▪▪▪▪▪▪

In regard to demographic indicators, Blagoevgrad has achieved relatively good results, although similar to all other districts in the country, the trend towards fast population aging is in evidence here as well.

In 2022, the natural population growth rate in the district was –7.5‰, against the national average of –9.7‰. The district continues to attract new residents and its net migration rate is positive, albeit a bare 0.3‰.

Population aging in the district again remained below the national average in 2022. The ratio of the age dependency of the people aged 65+ to those aged 0–14 reached 148.1%, compared to 165.9% in the country, and to those aged 15–64 it was 33.8%, versus 37.7% nationwide.

A relatively small share of the population lives in urban settlements – 59.8%, against the national average of 73.6%. At the same time, the population density in the district's urban settlements remains relatively high at 2,166 persons/sq. km, versus 1,404 persons/sq. km on average in the country.

📚 Education ▪▪▪▪▪▪

Blagoevgrad is among the districts with the highest share of children attending kindergarten (second only to Smolyan district) and in 2022 it was 92.6%, compared to the national average of 87.3%.

Blagoevgrad is also among the districts with the highest rate of enrolment in 5th–7th grade – 94.5% in 2022, compared to 90.7% countrywide. The share of school year repeaters remains considerably lower than the respective national average. The alignment between vocational education and the profile of the economy is relatively weak.

In 2023, students' achievement in Blagoevgrad district again remained close to but below the national averages. The district's average score in the NEA in mathematics at the end of 7th grade was 33.3 p., compared to 35.3 p. in the country. For its part, the average result in the State matriculation exam in Bulgarian language and literature was "Good" 3.84, versus 3.93 nationally. The share of "fail" (below 3.00) grades was 16.6%, against 17.9% nationwide.

The number of university students as a share of the total population has been on the decline, reaching 28.5 per 1,000 people, against 33.2 per 1,000 people in the country.

➕ Healthcare ▪▪▪▪▪

The percentage of people with health insurance in Blagoevgrad district is 93%, against 93.5% nationally for 2022. The healthcare system in the district keeps suffering from shortages of medical staff – both GPs and specialist physicians – and of hospital beds. The number of beds in the local general hospitals is 3.8 per 1,000 people, compared to 5.9 beds per 1,000 people as the national average.

The number of patients treated in the local hospitals remains relatively low but having in mind the shortage of doctors and beds in the local general hospitals, the assumption is that the local people seeks medical care in other districts. Infant mortality rates remain among the lowest in the country – 2.9‰, versus 4.8‰ nationwide in 2022. Life expectancy in the district continues to decline but remains relatively high at 74.0 years, compared to 71.9 nationwide.

⚖️ Security and justice ▪▪▪▪

The workloads of Blagoevgrad district's criminal judges in 2022 again remained relatively low – below 9 cases a month per one criminal judge, compared to over 10 cases nationally. Nevertheless, delivery of justice is not speedy enough. The share of pending cases is 14%, compared to 12% as the national average.

The number of crimes in the district remained relatively low in 2022, and detection rates – relatively high. Registered crimes against the person and property in Blagoevgrad district amounted to 8.9 per 1,000 people, with 11.6 per 1,000 people as the national figure. 57% of those crimes were cleared, against 49% on average for the whole country.

🌿 Environment ▪▪▪▪▪

The amount of household waste generated in the district continues to be relatively low – an annual of 360 kg/person in 2021, against 445 kg/person on a national scale. The share of waste handed over for treatment and recycling has gone up considerably but remains low – 41%, against 74% as the national average.

A relatively large share of the district's people lives in settlements with a public sewerage network – 83.7%, versus 74.8% countrywide. However, in 2021 connectivity to waste water treatment plants was low – 37.4%, against the national average of 66.8%.

By 30 June 2023, the relative volume of installed RES capacities in Blagoevgrad district was above the national average. The share of forest areas is high – 51.5%, compared to 33.4% nationally, and that of degraded land low – 0.11%, versus 0.43% nationally in 2022.

🎭 Culture and tourism ▪▪

The intensity of cultural life in Blagoevgrad district is traditionally not very high in a national context and this is evident from the data for 2022. Cinema visits increased, reaching 333 per 1,000 people, against 590 per 1,000 people nationwide. The number of museum visits rose to 454 per 1,000 people, against 619 per 1,000 people nationwide. Numbers for library visits stood at 619 per 1,000 people, compared to 584 per 1,000 people nationwide. The share of people employed in the culture, sport and entertainment sector is half the national average.

At the same time, the district performs relatively well on tourism-related indicators. The number of beds in accommodation facilities increased to 70.7 per 1,000 people, versus 54.9 per 1,000 people in the country, and the number of overnight stays to 4,799 per 1,000 people, compared to 3,739 per 1,000 people countrywide.

Key indicators for the district of Blagoevgrad

Economic Development Indicators	2020	2021	2022	National average
Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (BGN, current prices)	10,381	12,629	n.a.	**20,212**
Average gross annual salary of people employed in a labor or service contract (BGN)	10,881	12,226	n.a.	**18,733**
Share of people living below the national poverty line (%)	25.1	19.1	22.9	**22.9**
Share of the working-age population (%)	61.1	61.0	59.8	**58.5**
Average annual employment rate of the population aged 15–64 (%)	71.5	69.1	69.9	**70.4**
Average annual unemployment rate of the population aged 15+ (%)	11.4	9.1	9.4	**5.2**
Relative share of the population aged 25–64 with primary or lower education (%)	17.9	18.8	18.4	**16.0**
Relative share of the population aged 25–64 with higher education (%)	21.1	21.0	20.4	**29.8**
Production value per capita (BGN)	17,251	19,181	n.a.	**31,242**
Expenditures on the acquisition of fixed tangible assets per capita (BGN)	1,509	1,795	n.a.	**3,097**
Foreign direct investment in non-financial enterprises per capita (cumulative) (EUR)	1,715	1,693	n.a.	**4,098**
Share of households with broadband internet access (%)	75.8	80.6	84.8	**87.3**
Share of road surfaces in good condition (%)	64.1	65.6	63.9	**41.1**
Coverage of municipal expenditures with local revenues (%)	67.4	61.3	59.9	**84.2**
Active Transparency Rating of local government bodies (%)*	69.0	61.3	61.2	**70.3**

Social Development Indicators	2020	2021	2022	National average
Natural population growth rate (‰)	n.a.	n.a.	−7.5	**−9.7**
Net migration rate (‰)	n.a.	n.a.	0.3	**4.2**
Average grade in the State matriculation exam in Bulgarian language and literature**	4.19	3.91	3.84	**3.93**
Average grade in the National external assessment in mathematics after 7th grade (points)**	37.1	35.0	33.3	**35.3**
Net enrolment rate of the population (5th to 7th grade) (%)	92.4	92.9	94.5	**90.7**
Average life expectancy (years)***	75.5	74.3	74.0	**71.9**
Share of people with health insurance (%)	89.6	90.2	93.0	**93.5**
Population per one GP (persons)	1,755	1,775	1,742	**1,678**
Crimes against the person and property per 1,000 population	7.3	7.3	8.9	**11.6**
Share of pending criminal cases (%)	15.2	15.1	14.0	**11.6**
Share of the population living in settlements with a public sewerage network (%)	83.3	83.7	n.a.	**74.8**
Generated household waste per capita of serviced population (kg/person/year)	324	360	n.a.	**445**
Share of household waste handed over for treatment and recycling (%)	6.7	41.2	n.a.	**74.0**
Visits to cinemas (number/1,000 population)	114	258	333	**590**
Overnight stays in accommodation facilities (number/1,000 population)	2,955	3,047	4,799	**3,739**

* The 2022 data are included in the 2023 study. The same is valid for the previous years.

** The data refer to the 2022-23 academic year, while the State matriculation exams took place in 2023. The same is valid for the previous years.

*** Data are for three-year periods and are updated annually.