

Blagoevgrad District

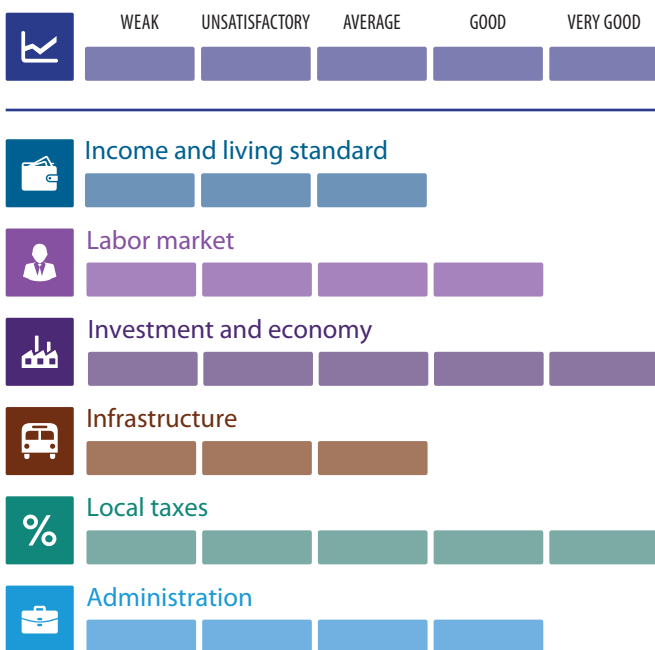
▶ Population (2020)	301,916
▶ Territory (sq. km)	6,449.5
▶ Number of settlements	274
▶ Share of urban population (%)	60.3



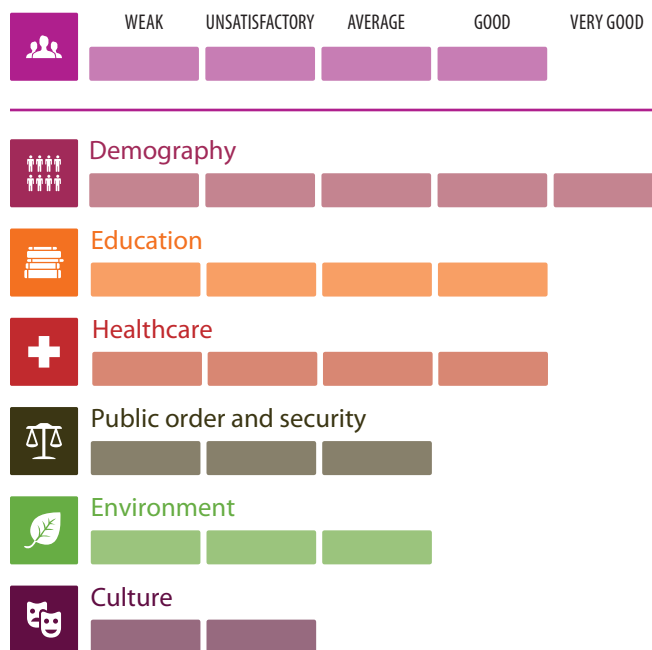
The economic development of Blagoevgrad district is very good. In 2019 GDP per capita continued its growth, although it remained significantly lower than the national average. Salaries and income levels have also been rising. Economic activity remains relatively high, but in 2020 employment rates fell and unemployment rates rose. The number of non-financial enterprises relative to the population has continued to rise and remains the third highest in the country. Blagoevgrad is among the districts with the best road surface quality. Contrary to general nationwide trends, the district is relatively well developed economically, and

in 2021 the level of local taxes again remained quite low. Blagoevgrad has performed relatively well in terms of demographic indicators and is one of the districts with the highest rate of enrolment in 5th–8th grade. Healthcare suffers from a shortage of doctors – both GPs and specialist physicians – and of hospital beds. The crime rate remains relatively low and detection rates relatively high. Blagoevgrad still ranks among the districts with the lowest volumes of CO2 emissions. The intensity of the cultural life is traditionally not very high compared to that of other districts, and in 2020 it shrank even further due to the pandemic and the reduced number of visits to public places.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Income and living standard

GDP per capita in Blagoevgrad district has continued to grow and in 2019 it reached 10,300 BGN, though it remains considerably lower than the national average of 17,200 BGN/person. Both salaries and incomes also rose and the average annual income per household member even exceeded the national average, albeit by a small margin. In 2019 the average annual gross salary of employed people was 9,800 BGN, compared to 15,200 BGN in the country as a whole. Yet although GDP, salaries and incomes went up, poverty levels in Blagoevgrad district remained close to the national average. In 2019, the relative share of people living under the national poverty line fell to 23.9%, versus 22.6% on a national scale, while those living in material deprivation made up 19.6% of the total population, compared to the national average of 19.9%.

Labor market

After a 3-year steady increase, in 2020 economic activity in the district slackened, though still remaining considerably above the national average – 78.8%, compared to 73.7% in the country. Moreover, alongside this decline Blagoevgrad district experienced a drop in employment accompanied by a rise in unemployment. The employment rate fell by nearly 4 p.p. to 71.5%, though remaining above the national average of 68.5%. The unemployment rate rose sharply to 7.3%, and for the first time in four years exceeded the national average of 5.2%.

The challenges still facing the local labor market are the educational structure of the workforce and population ageing. In 2020, the share of people with a university degree among those aged 25–64 decreased to 21.1%, against the national average of 29.2%. The proportion of people with primary or lower education was 17.9%, compared to the national average of 16.9%. The population replacement rate as a ratio of the people aged 15–19 to those aged 60–64 has continued its slow decrease to reach 63.1%, versus 67.1% 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 economy

The number of non-financial enterprises relative to the population in the district continued to rise and in 2019 it remained the third highest in the country, after those in the capital and Burgas district. It reached 72 per 1,000 persons, against the national average of 61 per 1,000 persons. At the same time, however, FTA acquisition expenditures stayed relatively low at 1,800 BGN/person, while the national average was 3,200 BGN/person. Production value per capita in the district followed a similar trend, with 18,700 BGN/person, against the national

average of 28,000 BGN/person. FDI stocks underwent a more dynamic development as they rose faster than the national average, reaching 1,700 EUR/person by the end of 2019.

There was also a serious increase in the utilization of EU funds. By 15 June 2021, payments made in Blagoevgrad district to beneficiaries under EU operational programs reached 3,400 BGN/person, placing it third in the country after Sofia (capital city) and Gabrovo. The top place in the region was held by the 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, the share of highways and first-class roads in the district'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 – 70% in 2019, compared to 41% for the country.

The relative share of households with broadband internet access in Blagoevgrad district again remained below the national average in 2020. The share of households connected to a gas supply was lower than the national average – 2.7%, versus 3.1% respectively.

Local taxes

Contrary to general nationwide trends, the district is relatively well developed economically, and in 2021 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

Cadastral map coverage in Blagoevgrad has risen sharply over the past few years and in 2019, with 98.5% of covered territory against the national average of 91.4%, the district came second in the country, preceded only by Sofia (capital city).

In 2021 the provision of one-stop shop services in the district's municipalities improved even further and remained above the national average. At the same time, it has been lagging behind as regards the provision of e-services. The active transparency ratings of the local administration have also shown a slow rise and remain below the national average. Within the district, the municipalities with the best transparency ratings are those of the city of Blagoevgrad and of Gurmen.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Demography

In terms of demographic indicators, Blagoevgrad has achieved relatively good results, although similar to all other districts in the country, the trend towards fast population ageing is in evidence here as well. In 2020 and after a two-year rise, the natural population growth rate in the district fell sharply, though at -7.6‰ it again remained higher than the national average of -9.5‰. The district continued to attract new residents and its net migration rate reached 2.5‰.

The rate of population ageing in the district has increased but in 2020 it again remained below the national average. The ratio of the age dependency of people aged 65+ to those aged 0-14 reached 136.1%, compared to 150.6% in the country, and to those aged 15-64 it was 30.8%, versus 34.1% nationwide.

A relatively small share of the population lives in urban areas - 60.3%, against the national average of 72.9%. At the same time, the population density in the district's settlements remains high at 2,264 persons/sq. km, versus 1,506 persons/sq. km on average for the country.

Education

Blagoevgrad is among the districts with the highest rate of enrolment of schoolchildren in 5th-8th grade - 92.4% in 2020, compared to 86.6% countrywide. The shares of school year repeaters and that of dropouts from primary and secondary education remain considerably lower than the national averages. The number of teachers relative to primary and secondary school students has dropped slightly but it still remains close to the national average.

In 2021, student performance in Blagoevgrad district also remained close to the national average. The district's average score in the external examination in mathematics at the end of 7th grade reached 37.1 points, compared to 37.9 points in the country. For their part, results in the State matriculation exams in Bulgarian language and literature fell slightly to 4.19, versus 4.21 nationally. The share of "fail" (below 3.00) grades was 6%, against 7% nationwide.

In line with the nationwide trend over the past few years, the number of university students as a share of the total population has been on the decline, reaching 29 per 1,000 persons, against 32 per 1,000 persons in the country.

Healthcare

The share of people with health insurance in Blagoevgrad district fell slightly in 2020 but was again above the national average. At the same time, the healthcare system in the region keeps suffering from shortages of medical staff - GPs, as well as specialist physicians - and of hospital beds. The number of beds in the local general hospitals has continued to rise in the past few years but it remains low: 4.13 beds per 1,000 persons, compared to 5.52 beds per 1,000 persons as the national average.

The number of patients treated in the local hospitals remains quite low but having in mind the shortage of physicians and beds in the local general hospitals, the assumption is that the local population seeks medical care in other districts. Infant mortality rates are among the lowest in the country - 3.0‰, versus 5.1‰ nationwide for 2020.

Public order and security

Court workloads in Blagoevgrad district remained lower than the national average in 2020 - 6.9 cases a month per judge, compared to 8.6 nationally. Nevertheless, delivery of justice was not speedy enough. The share of pending cases rose to 15%, compared to 11% as the national average.

The crime rate in the district remained low in 2020, and detection rates - relatively high. Registered crimes against the person and property in Blagoevgrad district amounted to 7.3 per 1,000 persons, with 9.9 per 1,000 persons as the national figure. 58.2% of those crimes were cleared, against 52.1% on average for the whole country.

Environment

The amount of household waste generated in the district is relatively low - an annual of 304 kg/person, against 409 kg/person on a national scale. However, Blagoevgrad is among the districts where only a very small part of this waste is handed over for treatment and recycling - 15%, against 71% as the national average.

A relatively large part of the district's population lives in settlements with a public sewerage network - 82.9% versus 76.4% countrywide. However, connectivity to waste water treatment plants is low - 32.8% in 2019, against the national average of 64.6%. Blagoevgrad still ranks among the districts with the lowest carbon dioxide emissions.

Culture

The intensity of Blagoevgrad district's cultural life is traditionally not very high compared to other districts, and in 2020, due to the pandemic and the reduced number of visits to public places, it shrank even further. Cinema visits dropped by 74% to 114 per 1,000 persons, while nationwide they fell by 71% to 190 per 1,000 persons. A similar drop was recorded for museum visits, which were down to 203 per 1,000 persons, compared to 322 per 1,000 persons nationwide. However, numbers for library visits did not follow the nationwide trend and went up, even though they did not reach the average figures relative to the population in the country.

Key indicators for the district of Blagoevgrad

Indicators of economic development	2018	2019	2020	National average
GDP per capita (BGN, current prices)	9,736	10,329	n.a.	17,170
Average annual income per household member (BGN)	5,193	6,079	n.a.	6,013
Average annual gross salary per employed person (BGN)	9,024	9,810	n.a.	15,209
Share of the population living below the national poverty line (%)	26.0	23.9	n.a.	22.6
Employment rate of the population aged 15–64 (%)	71.0	75.2	71.5	68.5
Unemployment rate of the population over 15 years of age (%)	4.8	4.1	7.3	5.2
Share of the population aged 25–64 with primary or lower education (%)	19.2	19.9	17.9	16.9
Share of the population aged 25–64 with higher education (%)	20.7	21.8	21.1	29.2
Production value (BGN/person)	18,422	18,679	n.a.	28,027
Expenditure on the acquisition of fixed tangible assets (BGN/person)	1,768	1,765	n.a.	3,155
Cumulative foreign direct investment in non-financial enterprises (EUR/person)	1,636	1,745	n.a.	3,655
Share of households with Internet (%)	71.4	71.1	75.8	78.9
Share of roads in good condition (%)	62.5	69.6	n.a.	41.4
Road network density (km/100 sq. km territory)	11.0	11.1	11.1	17.9
AIP active transparency rating of local government bodies (%)*	65.0	68.3	69.0	73.2

Indicators of social development	2018	2019	2020	National average
Rate of natural increase (‰)	–4.5	–4.1	–7.6	–9.5
Net migration rate (‰)	–4.5	–3.9	2.5	4.4
Average grade in the State matriculation exam in Bulgarian language and literature**	4.06	4.24	4.19	4.21
Average grade in the National external exam in mathematics after 7th grade (points)**	35.0	34.4	37.1	37.9
Net enrolment of the population in 5th–8th grade (%)	91.8	92.4	92.4	86.5
Number of teachers in primary and secondary schools per 1,000 students	82	90	88	87
Share of population with health insurance (%)	88.8	90.6	89.6	88.7
Population per one GP (number of people)	1,732	1,701	1,755	1,727
Registered crimes against the person and property per 1,000 people	9.3	8.4	7.3	9.9
Workloads of criminal judges in office (cases/month)	9.2	8.3	6.9	8.6
Share of population living in settlements with public sewerage networks (%)	82.2	82.9	n.a.	76.4
Generated household waste per capita (kg/person/year)	304	n.a.	n.a.	409
Share of household waste handed over for treatment and recycling (%)	15.2	n.a.	n.a.	70.9
Visits to cinemas per 1,000 persons	363	443	114	190
Visits to museums per 1,000 persons	423	457	203	322

* The data for 2021 are included in the 2021 study. The same also applies for the previous years.

** The data refer to the 2020–2021 academic year while the matriculation exam was held in 2021. The same also applies for the previous years.