RIO GRANDE VALLEY REGIONAL MSA ECONOMIC REPORT

Hidalgo, Cameron, Starr & Willacy Counties

ALLIED CONSULTING GROUP REGIONAL ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

Prepared April 2026
Data Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, IPEDS, TxDOT.

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Executive Summary

The Rio Grande Valley — comprising Hidalgo, Cameron, Starr, and Willacy counties — forms an economically interconnected region. When analyzed as a unified metropolitan area, the region's combined indicators reveal a significant economic engine comparable to recognized MSAs across the United States. With a combined population of 1,479,873, the Rio Grande Valley would rank **#42** among 393 U.S. metropolitan statistical areas — on par with Louisville, Memphis, and Richmond.

REGIONAL POPULATION
1,479,873
Combined 4-county total (2026) · Rank #42 nationally

REGIONAL GDP
$40.9B
Combined county GDP (2026)

LABOR FORCE
657,962
Total civilian labor force (2026)

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE
6.5%
Regional aggregate (2026)

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME
$54,771
Population-weighted average (2026)

POVERTY RATE
26.6%
Regional aggregate (2026)

This report presents comprehensive data across twelve core sections — the case for a unified region, population & demographics, housing, migration, commuting patterns, economic indicators, employment, international trade & border crossings, higher education pipeline, infrastructure assets, regional economic activity, and peer MSA comparison — benchmarking the Rio Grande Valley against national averages and peer metropolitan areas to demonstrate the region's economic position and potential.

1. The Case for a Unified Region

Individually, each county in the Rio Grande Valley is too small to attract the attention of national economic development programs, site selectors, and federal funding formulas that reference MSA-level data. However, when viewed as a single economic region, the Rio Grande Valley is a **top-50 metropolitan area** in the United States.

Individual Counties vs. Combined Region

Area	Population	National MSA Rank
Hidalgo	937,784	#61
Cameron	450,509	#121
Starr	70,057	#388
Willacy	21,523	#394
RGV Region (Combined)	**1,479,873**	**#42**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (2026)

As individual counties, the populations range from 21,523 (Willacy) to 937,784 (Hidalgo). None would rank in the top 60 metros alone. But combined, the Rio Grande Valley's 1,479,873 residents would place it at **#42** nationally — directly alongside established metros such as Louisville, Memphis, and Richmond.

National MSA Ranking

Rank	Metropolitan Area	Population
#37	San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara	1,969,353
#38	Virginia Beach-Chesapeake-Norfolk	1,782,590
#39	Providence-Warwick	1,673,807
#40	Jacksonville	1,645,707
#41	Milwaukee-Waukesha	1,566,361
#42	Raleigh-Cary	1,449,594

Rank	Metropolitan Area	Population
#42	**RGV Region (Combined)**	**1,479,873**
#43	Oklahoma City	1,445,122
#44	Louisville/Jefferson County	1,361,847
#45	Memphis	1,341,606
#46	Richmond	1,327,321
#47	Salt Lake City-Murray	1,261,337

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2026; all 393 U.S. Metropolitan Statistical Areas

Growth Trajectory

The Rio Grande Valley economy has shown resilience and growth. The following table tracks year-over-year GDP and employment growth, demonstrating the region's economic trajectory.

Year	GDP Growth (%)	Employment Growth (%)
2020	-1.9%	-1.6%
2021	+5.9%	+5.2%
2022	+2.5%	+2.4%
2023	+2.6%	+2.4%
2024	+2.3%	+2.3%
2025	+2.3%	+2.0%
2026	+2.3%	+2.1%

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis (GDP); Bureau of Labor Statistics (Employment)

2. Population & Demographics

With a combined population of 1,479,873, the Rio Grande Valley ranks among mid-size metropolitan statistical areas nationwide at **#42** among all U.S. MSAs .

Age Distribution

Age Group	Male	Female	Total
0–4	69,076	68,002	137,078
5–14	65,199	63,387	128,586
15–19	24,948	23,962	48,910
20–24	134,689	128,708	263,397
25–34	89,730	89,888	179,618
35–44	81,585	87,453	169,038
45–54	95,220	95,476	190,696
55–64	41,623	47,300	88,923
65–74	52,651	62,496	115,147
75–84	17,359	25,970	43,329
85+	58,689	56,458	115,147
Total	**730,769**	**749,100**	**1,479,869**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table B01001

Educational Attainment — Region vs. Texas vs. National

Attainment Level	RGV Region	Texas	National
High School Diploma or Higher	69.6%	85.7%	89.4%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	20.0%	33.1%	35.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table B15003

3. Housing

The Rio Grande Valley contains 489,600 housing units, with a vacancy rate of 13.4%. The homeownership rate stands at 67.1%.

Housing Occupancy Status

Status	Units	% of Total
Owner-Occupied	284,316	58.1%
Renter-Occupied	139,610	28.5%
Vacant	65,674	13.4%
Total Units	**489,600**	**100.0%**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Tables B25001-B25003

Housing Metrics — Region vs. Texas vs. National

Metric	RGV Region	Texas	National
Homeownership Rate	67.1%	62.6%	65.0%
Vacancy Rate	13.4%	9.6%	10.4%
Median Home Value	$135,572	$292,915	$341,284
Median Gross Rent	$991	$1,463	$1,473

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Tables B25001-B25077

4. Migration & Geographic Mobility

In the past year, 90.7% of regional residents remained in the same house, indicating relatively stable residential patterns. 9.3% of residents moved during the year.

Mobility Status	Persons	Share
Same house (non-movers)	1,244,132	90.7%
Moved within same county	88,228	6.4%
Moved from different county, same state	19,387	1.4%
Moved from different state	9,801	0.7%
Moved from abroad	9,422	0.7%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table B07001

5. Commuting Patterns

Commuting patterns reveal the interconnected nature of the Rio Grande Valley labor market. The region's workforce relies heavily on personal vehicles, consistent with the metro area's geographic footprint and infrastructure.

Commuting Mode Share

Mode of Transportation	Workers	Share
Drove Alone	411,126	76.3%
Carpool	56,974	10.6%
Work From Home	45,623	8.5%
Other	14,884	2.8%
Walked	7,830	1.5%
Public Transit	1,620	0.3%
Bicycle	723	0.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table B08301

Workforce Mobility — Cross-County Commuting Flows

The table below shows how workers move across the Rio Grande Valley's four counties, demonstrating the interconnected nature of the regional labor market. Of the 381,280 workers tracked, **52,429 (13.8%)** commute across county lines — evidence that the region functions as a single, integrated labor market.

Residence (Home)	Works in Cameron	Works in Hidalgo	Works in Starr	Works in Willacy	Total
Cameron	103,697	20,332	327	902	**125,258**
Hidalgo	17,198	215,213	2,064	554	**235,029**
Starr	1,271	6,492	8,608	46	**16,417**
Willacy	1,631	1,536	76	1,333	**4,576**

6. Economic Indicators

The combined GDP of the Rio Grande Valley underscores the region's economic significance. When viewed as a unified area, the Rio Grande Valley economy is substantial and growing.

Regional GDP Trend

Year	Regional GDP	Year-over-Year Growth
2019	$35.0B	—
	$34.4B	-1.9%
2021	$36.4B	+5.9%
	$37.3B	+2.5%
2023	$38.3B	+2.6%
	$39.2B	+2.3%
2025	$40.0B	+2.3%
	$40.9B	+2.3%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, CAGDP1

GDP Per Capita — Region vs. Peer MSAs

GDP per capita provides a measure of economic productivity relative to population size. While the Rio Grande Valley's aggregate GDP is competitive, per-capita output reveals significant room for growth — and the transformative potential of targeted investment.

Region	GDP Per Capita
Rio Grande Valley (Combined)	**$27,664**
Memphis	$58,540
Louisville/Jefferson County	$69,810
Richmond	$78,202
New Orleans-Metairie	$77,677

Region	GDP Per Capita
U.S. National Average	*~$65,000*

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis (GDP); Census Bureau ACS (Population). Note: This report covers Hidalgo, Cameron, Starr, and Willacy counties. Prior reports using a broader geography that included Webb County (Laredo) showed higher GDP per capita (~$30,228).

Income & Poverty — Region vs. Texas vs. National

Metric	RGV Region	Texas	National
Median Household Income	$54,771	$83,366	$85,821
Per Capita Income	$23,706	$43,104	$47,303
Poverty Rate	26.6%	13.8%	12.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Tables B19013, B17001

7. Employment & Labor Market

The Rio Grande Valley labor market encompasses a combined labor force of 657,962 workers with a regional unemployment rate of 6.5%.

Unemployment Rate — Region vs. Texas vs. National

Year	RGV Region	Texas	National
2019	6.5%	3.5%	3.7%
2020	10.4%	7.7%	8.1%
2021	6.9%	5.6%	5.4%
2022	6.3%	3.9%	3.7%
2023	5.7%	4.0%	3.6%
2024	5.9%	4.1%	4.0%
2025	6.5%	4.1%	4.3%
2026	6.5%	N/A	N/A

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics

Regional Labor Force (2026)

Metric	Value
Total Labor Force	657,962
Employed	615,011
Unemployed	42,951
Unemployment Rate	6.5%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, LAUS

Top Employment Sectors

Rank	Industry Sector	Avg Annual Employment
1	Health Care and Social Assistance	129,467
2	Retail Trade	55,052
3	Accommodation and Food Services	44,912
4	Administrative and Support Services	25,979
5	Transportation and Warehousing	12,721
6	Construction	11,783
7	Wholesale Trade	11,663
8	Finance and Insurance	9,915
9	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	9,673
10	Manufacturing	8,586
11	Educational Services	7,732
12	Other Services (except Public Administration)	7,621

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

Industry Specialization (Location Quotients)

Location quotients (LQ) measure the relative concentration of each industry in the region compared to the national average. An LQ above 1.0 indicates the industry is more concentrated locally than nationally — revealing the region's competitive advantages.

Industry Sector	Location Quotient	vs. National Average
Health Care and Social Assistance	2.29	Highly Concentrated
Retail Trade	1.33	Above Average
Accommodation and Food Services	1.21	Above Average
Administrative and Support Services	1.04	Above Average
Educational Services	0.93	Below Average

Industry Sector	Location Quotient	vs. National Average
Transportation and Warehousing	0.74	Below Average
Wholesale Trade	0.72	Below Average
Other Services (except Public Administration)	0.63	Below Average
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	0.62	Below Average
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	0.61	Below Average
Utilities	0.60	Below Average
Finance and Insurance	0.59	Below Average
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	0.58	Below Average
Construction	0.56	Below Average
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	0.53	Below Average

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, QCEW; author calculations. Note: Location quotients are computed against the national average, which is the standard methodology for identifying regional specialization. Manufacturing (LQ ~0.58) appears underrepresented relative to the national average; this reflects the region's actual economic structure, where healthcare, retail trade, and government services dominate employment — a pattern common in border metropolitan areas.

8. International Trade & Border Crossings

The Rio Grande Valley's location on the U.S.-Mexico border makes international trade a critical component of its economy. The region's ports of entry — including Brownsville, Hidalgo, Progreso, Roma, and Rio Grande City — handle millions of commercial trucks, passenger vehicles, and pedestrian crossings annually, connecting the region to global supply chains.

Border Crossing Volumes by Year

Year	Trucks	Personal Vehicles	Pedestrians
2020	1,067,915	7,110,094	3,730,955
2021	1,171,048	8,445,389	4,061,709
2022	1,148,146	11,158,750	5,317,704
2023	1,166,476	11,969,923	6,513,750
2024	1,170,676	12,419,057	6,586,093
2025	1,169,857	11,554,713	6,231,800

Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Border Crossing/Entry Data

Crossings by Port (Latest Year)

Port of Entry	Bridges / Crossings	Trucks	Personal Vehicles	Pedestrians
Rio Grande City	Starr-Camargo Bridge; Los Ebanos Ferry	31,353	500,867	92,910
Brownsville	Gateway International Bridge; Brownsville & Matamoros Express Bridge; Veterans International Bridge at Los Tomates; Free Trade International Bridge	306,858	4,801,912	2,273,737
Roma		50,339	896,365	215,668

Port of Entry	Bridges / Crossings	Trucks	Personal Vehicles	Pedestrians
	Roma-Ciudad Miguel Alemán International Bridge; Lake Falcon Dam International Crossing			
Progreso	Progreso International Bridge; Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge	62,123	1,328,823	1,020,916
Hidalgo	McAllen-Hidalgo International Bridge; Anzalduas International Bridge; Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge	719,184	4,026,746	2,628,569

Sources: Bureau of Transportation Statistics (crossing volumes); Texas Department of Transportation (bridges). Bridges are grouped by the nearest BTS port of entry.

Latest Year Summary

Crossing Type	Annual Volume
Trucks	1,169,857
Personal Vehicles	11,554,713
Pedestrians	6,231,800
Personal Vehicle Passengers	23,186,266

Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics (2025)

9. Higher Education Pipeline

A robust higher education system is essential for workforce development and economic growth. The Rio Grande Valley is home to several institutions that produce a steady pipeline of skilled graduates — from certificates and associate degrees to doctoral-level credentials.

The region's major institutions collectively enroll **58,345** students, generating a significant talent pipeline for the regional economy.

Degree Completions by Institution & Level

Institution	Certificates	Associate's	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral	Total
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley	128	0	9,848	3,782	162	**13,920**
South Texas College	2,586	7,840	912	0	0	**11,338**
Texas Southmost College	330	1,638	0	0	0	**1,968**
Texas State Technical College	2,184	3,394	0	0	0	**5,578**

Source: IPEDS Completions Survey

Completions by Degree Level

Degree Level	Completions	Share of Total
Associate's	12,872	39.2%
Bachelor's	10,760	32.8%
Certificates	5,228	15.9%
Doctoral	162	0.5%
Master's	3,782	11.5%

Source: IPEDS Completions Survey

Institution Detail

Institution	Enrollment	Completions
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley	27,495	13,920
South Texas College	18,544	11,338
Texas Southmost College	4,263	1,968
Texas State Technical College	8,043	5,578

Source: IPEDS, National Center for Education Statistics. Note: Texas A&M University Higher Education Center at McAllen does not report separately in IPEDS; its data is aggregated under the Texas A&M University system.

10. Infrastructure Assets

The Rio Grande Valley's border crossing infrastructure is a critical competitive asset. The region maintains multiple international bridges and crossings that support commercial trade, passenger traffic, and pedestrian movement between the United States and Mexico.

International Crossings by Type

Crossing Type	Count
Dam Bridge	1
Toll Bridge	11
Toll Ferry	1

Source: Texas Department of Transportation

Crossing Capabilities

Capability	Number of Crossings
Commercial	9
Passenger	13
Pedestrian	11

Source: Texas Department of Transportation

Border Crossing Inventory

Crossing Name	Type	Operator	Capabilities
Lake Falcon Dam International Crossing	Dam Bridge	USCBP	Passenger
Roma-Ciudad Miguel Alemán International Bridge	Toll Bridge	Starr County	Commercial, Passenger, Pedestrian
Starr-Camargo Bridge	Toll Bridge	Starr-Comargo Bridge Company	Commercial, Passenger, Pedestrian

Crossing Name	Type	Operator	Capabilities
Los Ebanos Ferry	Toll Ferry	USCBP	Passenger, Pedestrian
Anzalduas International Bridge	Toll Bridge	Anzalduas International Bridge Board	Commercial, Passenger, Pedestrian
McAllen-Hidalgo International Bridge	Toll Bridge	City of McAllen	Commercial, Passenger, Pedestrian
Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge	Toll Bridge	City of Pharr	Commercial, Passenger, Pedestrian
Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge	Toll Bridge	Donna-Mercedes Bridge Company	Passenger, Pedestrian
Progreso International Bridge	Toll Bridge	B&P Bridge Co.	Commercial, Passenger, Pedestrian
Free Trade International Bridge	Toll Bridge	Cameron County Intl. Bridge System	Commercial, Passenger, Pedestrian
Brownsville & Matamoros Express Bridge	Toll Bridge	Brownsville Matamoros Bridge Company	Commercial, Passenger
Gateway International Bridge	Toll Bridge	Cameron County International Bridge System	Passenger, Pedestrian
Veterans International Bridge at Los Tomates	Toll Bridge	Cameron County International Bridge System	Commercial, Passenger, Pedestrian

Source: Texas Department of Transportation, Border Crossings Dataset

Of the 13 crossings in the region, **9** support commercial traffic — a critical asset for international logistics and the nearshoring trend driving increased U.S.-Mexico trade.

11. Regional Economic Activity

Beyond aggregate statistics, the Rio Grande Valley's economic vitality is reflected in the activity of its airports, maritime port, and retail sector — each generating jobs, output, and tax revenue that underpin the regional economy.

Airport Activity

The region's three commercial airports collectively handled **1,417,388** passenger enplanements in 2024.

Airport	Code	2024 Enplanements
McAllen International	MFE	625,670
Valley International (Harlingen)	HRL	603,561
Brownsville/SPI International	BRO	188,157
RGV Total		**1,417,388**

Enplanement Trends

Year	Total Enplanements
2021	1,000,783
2022	1,089,031
2023	1,226,336
2024	1,417,388

Source: FAA Air Carrier Activity Information System (ACAIS)

Maritime Port Activity

The region's maritime ports handled a combined **13,251,209** short tons of cargo in 2022, with 7,759,343 tons in foreign trade.

Port	National Rank	Total Tons	Domestic	Foreign	Imports	Exports
Port of Harlingen Authority, TX	#123	1,990,780	1,990,780	0	0	0
Brownsville, TX	#41	11,260,429	3,501,086	7,759,343	6,647,633	1,111,710

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Navigation Data Center (CY 2022)

Retail Trade

The Rio Grande Valley's retail sector generated **$22,998.6 billion** in receipts (2022 Economic Census), reflecting the region's role as a major consumer market.

County	Retail Receipts ($ Millions)
Cameron	$6,879.7
Hidalgo	$15,359.5
Starr	$633.3
Willacy	$126.0
RGV Total	**$22,998.6**

Retail Trade Growth

Year	Total Receipts ($ Millions)
2017	$15,097.6
2022	$22,998.6

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Economic Census (NAICS 44-45: Retail Trade). Note: The Economic Census is conducted every five years; 2017 and 2022 are the most recent available.

12. Peer MSA Comparison

Comparing the combined Rio Grande Valley region to established MSAs of similar size provides context for the region's economic standing. The peer MSAs selected — Memphis, Louisville, Richmond, and New Orleans — represent comparable regional economies that rank near the Rio Grande Valley's #42 position nationally .

Region	Population	GDP	Median HH Income	Poverty Rate
Rio Grande Valley (Combined)	**1,479,873**	**$40.9B**	**$54,771**	**26.6%**
Memphis, TN-MS-AR	1,341,606	$78.5B	$64,743	16.3%
Louisville/Jefferson County, KY-IN	1,361,847	$95.1B	$71,737	12.3%
Richmond, VA	1,327,321	$103.8B	$84,405	10.0%
New Orleans-Metairie, LA	988,763	$76.8B	$62,271	18.3%

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau ACS; Bureau of Economic Analysis

Data Sources & Methodology

Population & Demographics: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (base year 2023)

Housing: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Tables B25001-B25077

Migration: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table B07001

Commuting: ACS Tables B08301/B08303

GDP: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, CAGDP1

Income: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, CAINC1; Census ACS B19013

Employment: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS)

Industry: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW)

National Rankings: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS population for all 393 Metropolitan Statistical Areas

National Benchmarks: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS National-Level Estimates; BLS National Employment Statistics

Border Crossings: Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Border Crossing/Entry Data (Socrata API)

Higher Education: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) via Urban Institute API

Infrastructure: Texas Department of Transportation, Border Crossings Feature Service

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Methodology Note: Regional totals are computed by summing county-level counts (population, employment, housing units, GDP). Rates (unemployment, poverty, vacancy) are recomputed from summed numerators and denominators. Median values (household income, home value) are approximated using population-weighted averages of county medians. Location quotients compare regional industry concentration against national QCEW employment data. National averages are sourced from the same Census ACS and BLS datasets at the national geography level.

2026 Projections: All figures are presented as 2026 estimates. Where the latest available data predates 2026, values have been projected forward using compound annual growth rates (CAGR) derived from observed multi-year trends. Time series data (GDP, employment) uses CAGR from the full observed period. Point-in-time metrics (income, housing values) use sector-appropriate growth rates applied to the most recent actual data. Unemployment rates are projected using linear trend extrapolation. Projected categories: GDP (2023 2026); Employment/Unemployment (2025 2026); Population (2023 2026); Income (2023 2026); Housing values (2023 2026); National benchmarks (2023 2026); Texas benchmarks (2023 2026).

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