

INFRASTRUCTURE WORKFORCE FACT SHEET: ILLINOIS

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B | Brookings Metro

Additional data, findings, and recommendations are available in the main report, [Seizing the U.S. infrastructure opportunity: Investing in current and future workers](#).

This fact sheet explores major infrastructure workforce needs in Illinois, with an emphasis on the transportation and energy sectors—the two main employers for this workforce. To help leaders better understand the current landscape of actors and actions involved in these issues, the fact sheet briefly summarizes: levels of infrastructure employment; challenges in hiring, training, and retention; and opportunities for innovation that invest in current and future workforce development.

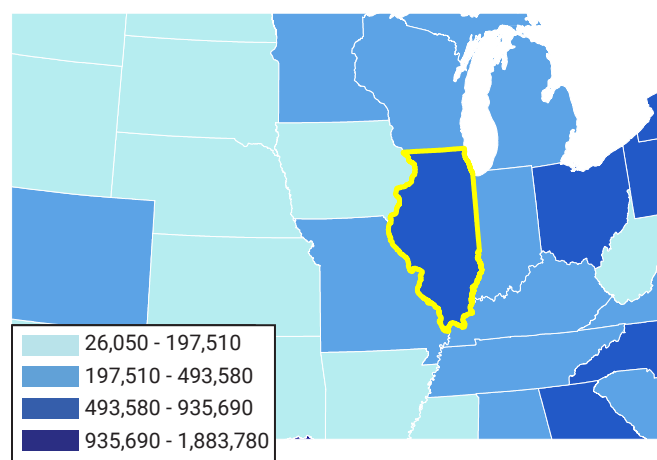
Ultimately, leaders involved in infrastructure construction, operation, and maintenance need to collaborate with those involved in workforce development (and vice versa). On the infrastructure side, these leaders include the Illinois Department of

Transportation and Environmental Protection Agency (including the Office of Energy) at the state level, as well as numerous local entities. On the workforce side, leaders include the Illinois Department of Labor, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, the Illinois Workforce Innovation Board, and the Illinois Workforce Partnership, as well as educational institutions, labor groups, community-based organizations, and others. Major employers include Metra, the Chicago Transit Authority, Ameren Illinois, and ComEd (a subsidiary of Exelon), among others.

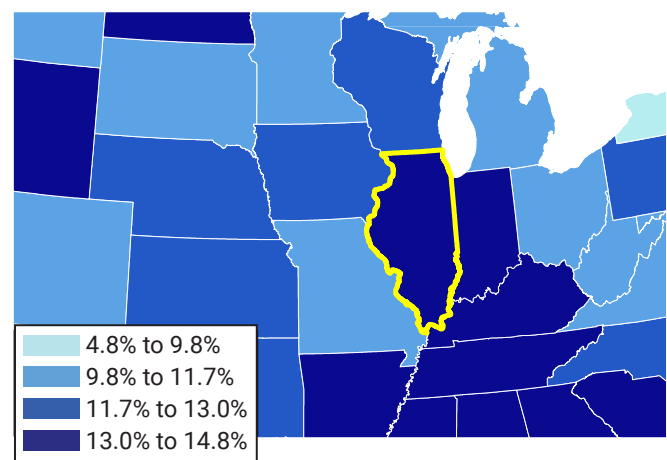
LEVELS OF INFRASTRUCTURE EMPLOYMENT

Illinois employs 750,000 infrastructure workers, representing 13.4% of its entire workforce. This total ranks fifth nationally, slightly ahead of Pennsylvania and Ohio and closely behind New York. Their share of the workforce ranks 11th, on par with neighboring states such as Indiana and Kentucky, which have enormous trade and logistics facilities.

Total infrastructure employment, 2021



Infrastructure share of total employment, 2021



SOURCE: Brookings analysis of BLS Occupational Employment Statistics

Similar to most states, the largest infrastructure occupations include those involved in trade and logistics, such as material movers and truck drivers. Other sizable occupations include those involved in the skilled trades and other infrastructure design and operation activities, such as electricians and civil engineers. As the main report describes, this means that investments in on-the-job training and work-based learning opportunities are crucial to support this workforce.

CHALLENGES IN HIRING, TRAINING, AND RETENTION

Employers and workers in Illinois face a variety of challenges in filling these jobs:

- **Infrastructure funding and financing shortfalls**—partially exacerbated by the [state’s pension crisis](#)—are having ripple effects across Illinois, such as hurting the ability to stay ahead of needed projects and address needed hires. This is particularly true across its [various air, rail, and roadway projects](#).
- Funding challenges and workforce needs have escalated during the pandemic, signaling enormous gaps despite an infusion of new federal infrastructure funding. For example, [recent estimates](#) show that Illinois is still missing one in nine jobs since the pandemic started, including in the construction industry.
- Transit systems are facing acute staffing shortages, including about 1,000 vacant positions at the [Chicago Transit Authority](#) and the need to hire as many as 700 bus drivers and 200 train operators. The challenge of declining ridership, decreased revenues, and staffing shortages is also impacting [Metra’s operations](#).
- **Longer-term shifts away from manufacturing** and toward knowledge and service industries is also “hollowing out” middle-wage jobs according to recent statewide assessments, with struggles to connect workers to “quality” jobs in clean energy and other infrastructure careers.
- **Other industry and geographic factors at play**—including declines in unionized positions, the concentration of jobs in urban areas, and an aging workforce with lower labor participation rates—are leading to inequitable access to opportunities and a general drain in talent.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION

Several ongoing or emerging efforts are advancing infrastructure workforce development and offer guidance for other potential actions in years to come:

- The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity has launched several programs and investments around work-based learning. Many are bundled under the [“Illinois Works”](#) effort, which aims to expand racial and economic equity in construction careers, including an Apprenticeship Initiative, Pre-Apprenticeship Program, and Bid Credit Program.
- Various partnerships between educational institutions and infrastructure employers have emerged in recent years, aimed at accelerating training. For instance, the Chicago Transit Authority has partnered with [Olive-Harvey College](#) to prepare workers for bus operator positions. In addition, Illinois Tollway has coordinated with the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership to launch [ConstructionWorks](#), an effort to support transportation careers.
- The Illinois Department of Transportation has launched a [Highway Construction Careers Training Program](#) to help disadvantaged, underrepresented workers gain needed skills and experience.
- The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency has invested in [energy curriculum programs](#) aimed at upper elementary and middle school students, in addition to distributing \$2 million annually to the [Illinois Green Economy Network](#), which is focused on workforce development issues.
- Several other state plans and legislation—including the [Climate and Equitable Jobs Act](#)—are further accelerating clean energy careers and coinciding with [other industry efforts](#).