BEA's First Local Area Personal Income Statistics

By Ralph Rodriguez

In April 1975, the nation was emerging from a 16-month-long recession—at the time, the worst since the Great Depression. Ongoing bouts of inflation and the lingering effects of an energy crisis left no part of the country unaffected. Amidst the economic malaise of this time, the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) via the Survey of Current Business published, for the first time, county and metropolitan area personal income estimates from 1959 to 1973. These measures were the first of their kind to capture the income earned across areas large and small, and rural and urban, revealing in finer detail the economic landscape of America.

County and metropolitan area personal income—“the current income received by residents in an area by all sources,” as defined in its inaugural publication—provided decisionmakers and researchers in the public and private sectors with a new and more complete way to track economic well-being across time and make comparisons among counties and metropolitan areas. It served to strengthen the framework used in analysis for government and business planning, the allocation of federal and local funding, theoretical and applied academic research, and more.
BEA's dedicated professionals continue to build on these statistics nearly a half-century since the first local area income measures were developed. BEA's regional products have grown to include gross domestic product by county and metropolitan area, as well as inflation-adjusted measures for metropolitan area personal income. We hope you enjoy this look back at the first-ever local area estimates in our reprint of “County and Metropolitan Area Personal Income” from the April 1975 issue of the Survey.