



**TRI-COUNTY
HEAD START**
Berrien • Cass • Van Buren
Ready Children 0-5 • Ready Families • Ready Communities

Community Needs Assessment

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Executive Summary

Since its beginning in 1972, Tri-County Head Start (TCHS) has served over 40,000 children and their families in southwest Michigan. As a Head Start grantee, TCHS conducts a comprehensive Community Needs Assessment (CNA) every five years, corresponding with the organization's 5-Year grant cycle, and updates the CNA annually during the intervening years. The purpose of the CNA is to collect data related to the needs of the community and to assess resources that are available to Head Start eligible children and their families. The CNA is also used to inform the planning process at TCHS, ensuring that the program's offerings are responsive to the needs of children and families in our community.

Key findings and recommendations

To comprehensively assess the needs of the community served by TCHS, the CNA team discussed, analyzed, and prioritized data from multiple secondary sources and from primary sources in the form of community and TCHS family surveys. Using this approach to address the requirements of the Office of Head Start, the team integrated quantitative data with the perspectives and experiences of community members to provide a robust picture of the child development and social service needs in the community. From this process, the team identified the following key community needs and recommendations:

- Access and affordability of early childhood education

The low capacity of childcare providers in the tri-county area and the high cost of many childcare options continues to be a barrier for many families in the community. Responses to our community survey reflect the fact that limited childcare options can have a serious impact on the ability of parents to be employed. TCHS should continue to explore avenues for expansion so that more families in the community can benefit from our programming. TCHS should also continue working with community partners, especially employers, to increase awareness of the broad, positive socioeconomic impact that affordable, accessible childcare can have on our community.

- Access to healthcare, especially prenatal care and education

In the tri-county area, there are fewer healthcare providers (including physicians, non-physician primary care providers, dentists, and mental health providers) per capita than the state of Michigan as a whole. This barrier to general healthcare access is further exacerbated for families living in rural areas who lack reliable transportation. Families with young children or who have Medicaid insurance can have further limited options for providers. Maternal and prenatal health is an area of increased concern, with only one birthing hospital in the area and high rates of births to mothers in vulnerable situations. TCHS should continue and expand its efforts to provide support and education to prenatal mothers and to connect families with access to mental, dental, and primary healthcare community partners.

- Access to transportation, food, and affordable housing

While some transportation resources exist in the tri-county area, families living in rural communities may have very limited options for transportation services to access resources like healthcare and nutrition. Over 5,000 children in the tri-county area experience food insecurity, and the area contains several food desert areas. Finally, many residents of the tri-county area express dissatisfaction with affordable housing, and over 45% of renters in the area are cost burdened or severely cost burdened. TCHS should continue its efforts to support families experiencing hardship in these areas, especially through the food and transportation services that it already provides.

- Building community awareness of TCHS's quality and range of services

Analysis of community needs in the tri-county area reveal multiple unmet needs that could be addressed by services offered by TCHS. Some of these needs, such as the need for increased prenatal support and education could be impacted by resources that are presently available at TCHS, but which are not well known in the community. TCHS should continue strengthening relationships with local partners across the tri-county area to effectively leverage the sense of strong, close-knit communities that many respondents in the community survey expressed.

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Program Overview

Tri-County Head Start has provided services to over 40,000 children and their families in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties in southwest Michigan since 1972. The program currently serves 583 children and their families in Early Head Start and Head Start, offering both home-based and center-based programming.

Service area

TCHS serves families in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties, which are home to about 275,000 residents across 1,665 square miles of land in southwest Michigan¹. During the 2023-2024 school year, TCHS operated 41 classrooms in 20 locations, based in the following cities and towns:

Berrien County:

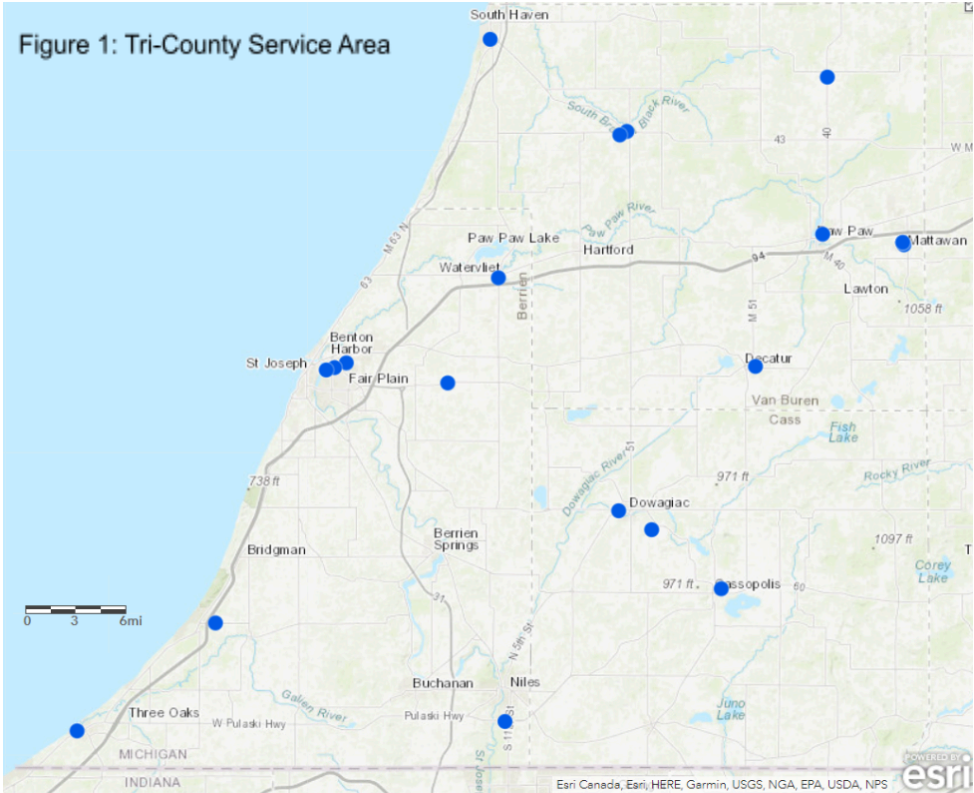
- Benton Harbor
- New Buffalo
- Niles
- Sawyer
- Watervliet

Cass County

- Cassopolis
- Dowagiac

Van Buren County

- Bangor
- Decatur
- Gobles
- Mattawan
- Paw Paw
- South Haven



Head Start and Early Head Start Services

TCHS provides Head Start services to 454 eligible children who are 3-4 years old through center-based services during the traditional school calendar year. Classrooms operate full day (7 hours) Monday through Friday. All TCHS classrooms utilize the HighScope curriculum.

TCHS provides Early Head Start services to 129 pregnant women and children from birth to age 3, and these services are offered through center-based and home-based options during the full

¹ “Berrien County, Michigan - Census Bureau Profile”; “Cass County, Michigan - Census Bureau Profile”; “Van Buren County, Michigan - Census Bureau Profile.”

calendar year. Center-based services operate Monday through Friday for 7.5 hours each day. Home-based services consist of a 90 minute visit to a family’s home once per week (46 total visits annually) and two classroom sessions per month, which allow the children to socialize and experience a classroom setting. All TCHS classrooms utilize the HighScope curriculum, and the home-based program uses the Growing Great Kids curriculum.

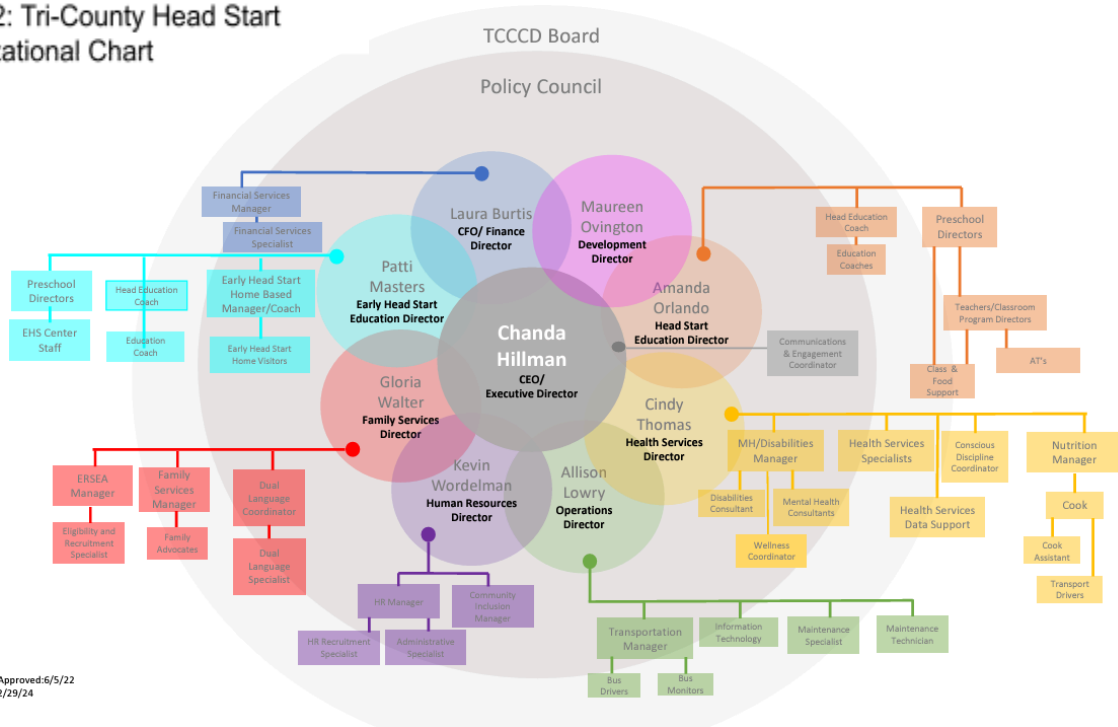
Table 2. Service population

2023-2024 TCHS Seats	Berrien County	Cass County	Van Buren County
Head Start	255	47	152
Early HS (center)	68	24	15
Early HS (home-based)	22	0	0

Tri-County Council for Child Development, Inc.

Tri-County Council for Child Development, Inc. operates the TCHS Head Start grant, and is governed by a governance model that includes a Board of Directors consisting of community professionals and the Policy Council made up of community partners and TCHS parents representing each center. The organization employs approximately 200 staff members, including Teachers, Bus Drivers, Home Visitors, Family Advocates, and Mental Health Consultants.

Figure 2: Tri-County Head Start Organizational Chart



Methodology

The leadership team of Tri-County Head Start, in collaboration with the TCHS Board of Directors and Policy Council, developed a Community Needs Assessment plan. The plan included developing a CNA team, consisting of members of the staff, Board, Policy Council, and community members. TCHS also partnered with enFocus, a non-profit consulting group based in South Bend, IN, to gather and analyze primary and secondary data, facilitate the CNA team meetings, and assist with report preparation. During the CNA team meetings, team members established a robust picture of the current state of the community served by TCHS through analysis and discussion of the primary and secondary datasets, using their own knowledge and experience of the community to validate the data and place it in a broad context. In the final CNA team meeting, community needs identified through analysis of the data were prioritized, and rapid tactic brainstorming was employed to generate ideas for how TCHS could make an impact on high priority areas. These priorities and tactics will be used to inform the strategic planning process that will create new BROAD goals and SMART objectives for the next 5 year Head Start grant period.

Primary data

Two surveys were created and distributed. The family survey was distributed online to TCHS families in late February and early March 2024 and had 111 respondents. The survey contained 43 questions designed to gauge the needs of TCHS families and the satisfaction of TCHS families with the organization's current offerings and operations. Findings from this survey were also used to inform the 2024 Self Assessment at TCHS. The community survey was distributed online through social media and community partners in late February through late March 2024 and had 89 respondents. The survey contained questions designed to gauge respondent perceptions of community strengths and needs broadly. Subsets of questions within the survey were designed to assess the childcare needs of parents with young children in the community and to gather insights from employers on their understanding of the childcare needs of their employees.

Secondary data

Secondary data from a variety of sources were compiled into a community data report (Appendix page A1), which summarized information and indicators from sources including the U.S. Census Bureau, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Michigan's Great Start to Quality, and County Health Rankings. The report also integrated relevant demographic data on the families served by TCHS.

Service Area Profile

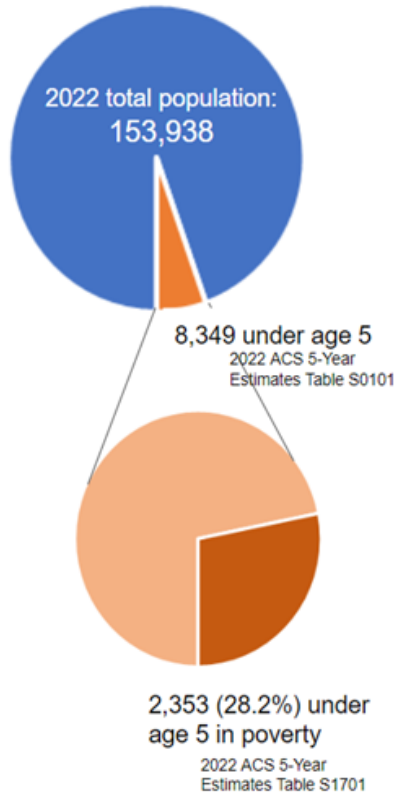
Tri-County Head Start serves families in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties, located in the southwest corner of Michigan, bordering Indiana and Lake Michigan. The following are demographic and socioeconomic profiles of each county.

Berrien County



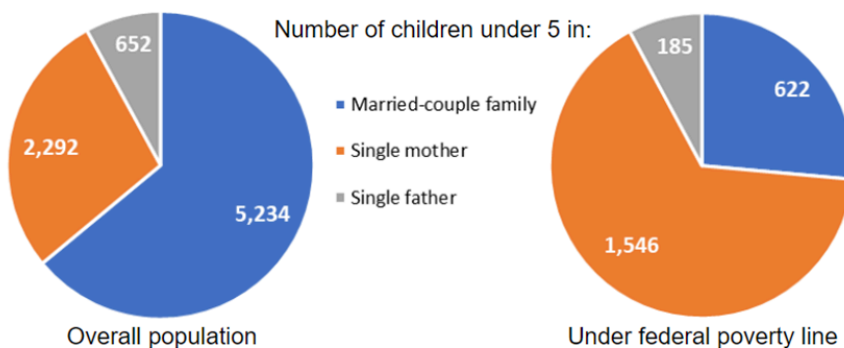
Berrien County comprises 568 square miles of land and is bordered by Lake Michigan to the west, Indiana to the south, Cass County to the east, and Van Buren county to the north. It is considered part of the “Michiana” region, which centers on the city of South Bend, IN. It contains eight small cities: Benton Harbor, Bridgman, Buchanan, Coloma, New Buffalo, Niles, St. Joseph, and Watervliet². Of the 153,938 people who live in Berrien County, 32.9% live in a rural area, which is slightly higher than the Michigan state average (25.4%) (Appendix page A50)³.

Figure 4. Berrien County Population Under Age 5



Between 2012 and 2022, the overall population in Berrien County declined slightly (-2.4%), while the number of residents under age 5 showed a pronounced decline (-18.7%) that is greater than the decrease seen for that segment of the population in Michigan overall (-8.1%) and the United States broadly (-7.8%) (Appendix page A9)⁴. As of 2022, 8,349 children under age 5 lived in Berrien County (5.4% of the total population)⁵. An estimated 2,353 of these children (28.2%) lived in families with income below the federal poverty line (FPL)⁶. Notably, 66% of the children living in poverty lived with a single mother (1,546 children) (Appendix page A11)⁷. TCHS serves 345 children in Berrien County (15% of eligible children, based on poverty status). While counts of children under age 5 experiencing homelessness are not available for Berrien County, the Berrien County Regional Education Service Agency reported that 782 (3.2%) students in grades K-12 in the school district were experiencing homelessness in 2021, a rate 60%

Figure 5. Berrien County Population Under 5 by Household



higher than the Michigan average (Appendix page A33)⁸. During the 2023-2024 school year, TCHS served 40 children who experienced homelessness. In addition to children who are homeless or in poverty, TCHS prioritizes service to children in foster care, serving 8 children in foster care during the

² “Berrien County, Michigan.”

³ “Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.”

⁴ “Berrien County, MI Population by Year, Race, & More.”

⁵ “S0101: AGE AND SEX - Census Bureau Table.”

⁶ “S1701: Poverty Status in the Past ... - Census Bureau Table.”

⁷ “B17006: Poverty Status in the Past ... - Census Bureau Table.”

⁸ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

2023-2024 school year. In 2022, there were 90 children ages birth to five years old in Berrien County who were in out-of-home care as a result of abuse or neglect (Appendix page A30)⁹.

The majority of Berrien County residents are white (72%), with black or African American (14%) and Hispanic/Latino (any race) (6%) being the next largest racial or ethnic groups (Appendix page A10)¹⁰. Specific population centers within the county deviate significantly from this overall composition; in Benton Harbor, where TCHS operates three locations, 83% of residents are black or African American, with white (8%) and Hispanic/Latino (any race) (5%) being the next largest racial or ethnic groups. Overall, in Berrien County greater proportions of students served by TCHS are black or African American, Hispanic/Latino (any race), or multiple races, compared to the overall population (Appendix page A10). For most residents of Berrien County (93.1%), English is the primary language spoken at home, while 3.8% primarily speak Spanish and 3.1% speak another language (Appendix page A4)¹¹. In comparison, a higher percentage of families served by TCHS in Berrien County speak primarily Spanish (7%), while the majority (92%) primarily speak English, and 1% speak other languages (Appendix page A4).

Figure 6. TCHS Students in Berrien County

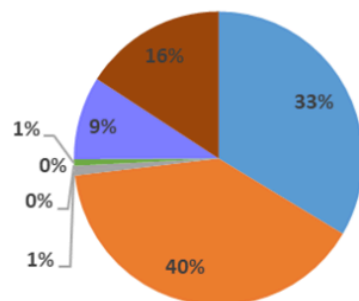
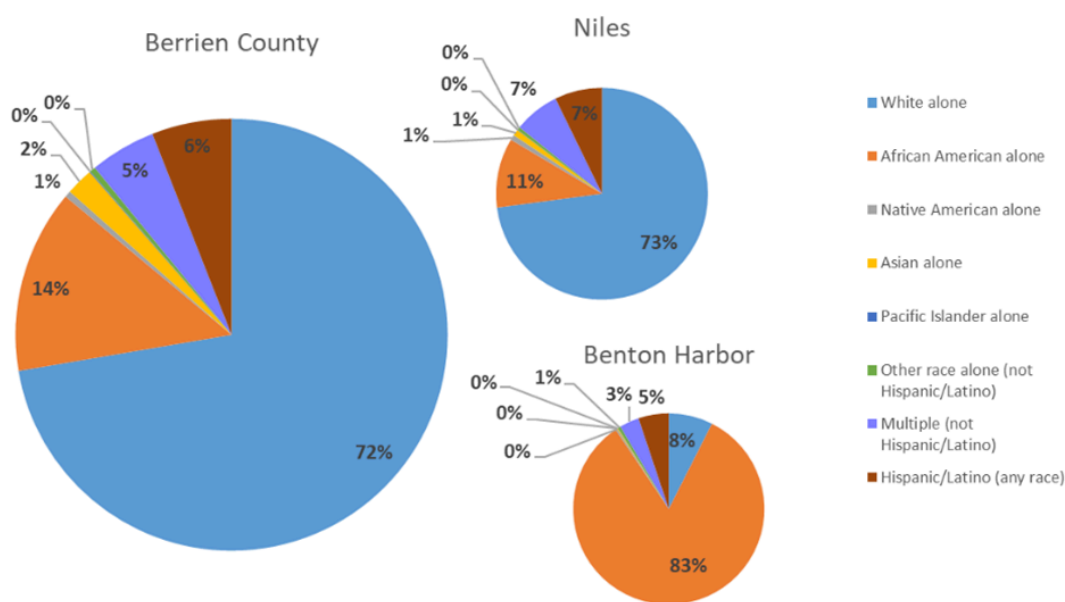


Figure 7. Race/Ethnicity in Berrien County



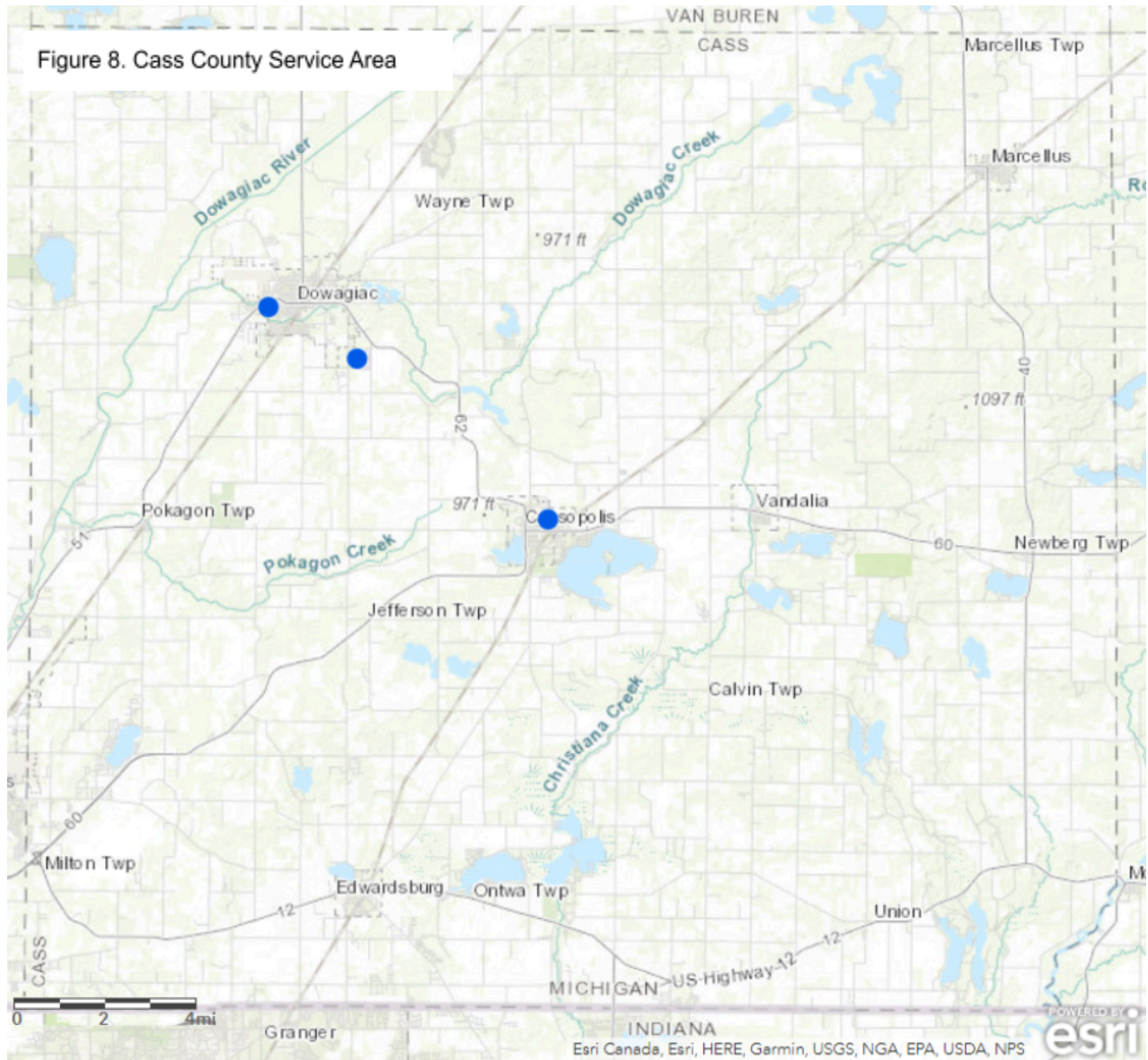
*Charts are scaled to reflect relative population sizes
2020 Decennial Census Data

⁹ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

¹⁰ “P8: RACE - Census Bureau Table.”

¹¹ “B16001: Language Spoken at Home by ... - Census Bureau Table.”

Cass County



Cass County comprises 490 square miles of land in southwest Michigan, bordering Berrien County to the west, Indiana to the south, St. Joseph County (MI) to the east, Kalamazoo County (MI) to the northeast, and Van Buren County to the north. Like Berrien County, Cass County is considered part of the region known as “Michiana,” which centers on the city of South Bend, IN. Dowagiac is the lone city in Cass County, which is also home to the villages of Cassopolis, Edwardsburg, Marcellus, and Vandalia¹². Cass County is predominantly rural, with 71% of its 49,155 residents living in a rural area (Appendix page A50)¹³.

¹² “Cass County, Michigan.”

¹³ “Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.”

Between 2012 and 2022, the population of Cass County was fairly stable, decreasing by less than 1%. However, the population of children under 5 in the county decreased by 9.6% during that time (Appendix page A13)¹⁴. In 2022, 2,449 residents of Cass County were children under age 5 (5% of the total population)¹⁵. An estimated 747 (30.5%) of these children were living in families with income below the federal poverty line¹⁶, and 65% of those in poverty (489 children) lived in families headed by a single mother (Appendix page A15)¹⁷. While Berrien and Van Buren counties have seen the number of children in poverty decrease, in Cass County the number of children under age 5 living in poverty has increased by 8.4% between 2015 and 2022, despite there being fewer children under 5 overall (Appendix page A13)¹⁸. TCHS serves 71 children in Cass County (9.5% of eligible children, based on poverty status). While counts of children under age 5 experiencing homelessness are not available for Cass County, the Heritage Southwest Intermediate School District reported that 258 (4.1%) students in grades K-12 in the school district were experiencing homelessness in 2021, a rate 105% higher than the Michigan average (Appendix page A33)¹⁹. During the 2023-2024 school year, TCHS served 19 children who experienced homelessness. In addition to children who are homeless or in poverty, TCHS prioritizes service to children in foster care, and served one child in foster care during the 2023-2024 school year. In 2022, there were 36 children in Cass County who were in out-of-home care as a result of abuse or neglect (Appendix page A30)²⁰.

Figure 9. Cass County Population Under Age 5

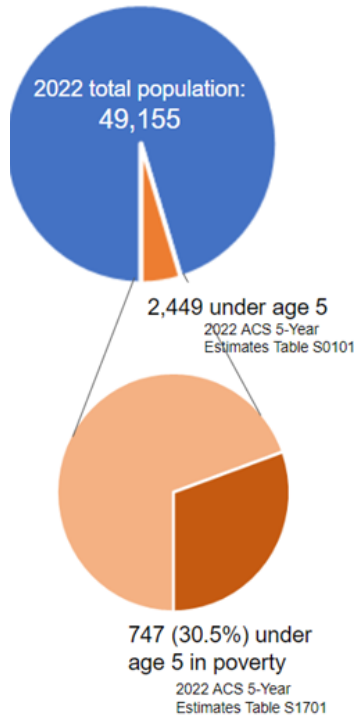
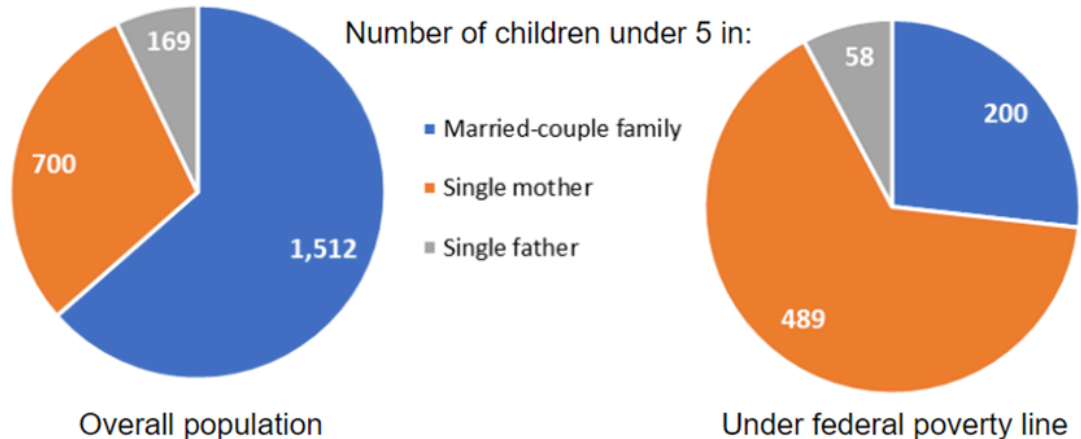


Figure 10. Cass County Population Under 5 by Household



¹⁴ “Cass County, MI Population by Year, Race, & More.”

¹⁵ “S0101: AGE AND SEX - Census Bureau Table.”

¹⁶ “S1701: Poverty Status in the Past ... - Census Bureau Table.”

¹⁷ “B17006: Poverty Status in the Past ... - Census Bureau Table.”

¹⁸ “S1701: Poverty Status in the Past ... - Census Bureau Table.”

¹⁹ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

²⁰ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

The majority of Cass County residents are white (84%), with multiple races (not Hispanic/Latino) (5%), black or African American (4%), and Hispanic/Latino (any race) (4%) being the next largest racial or ethnic groups (Appendix page A14)²¹. TCHS serves a larger proportion of students in those minority racial and ethnic groups than the overall population. Most residents of Cass County speak English as their primary language at home (96.1%). 1.8% of residents primarily speak Spanish at home, while 2.1% speak other languages (Appendix page A4)²². Among families served by TCHS in Cass County, 99% primarily speak English, while 1% primarily speak Spanish (Appendix page A4).

Figure 11. TCHS Students in Cass County

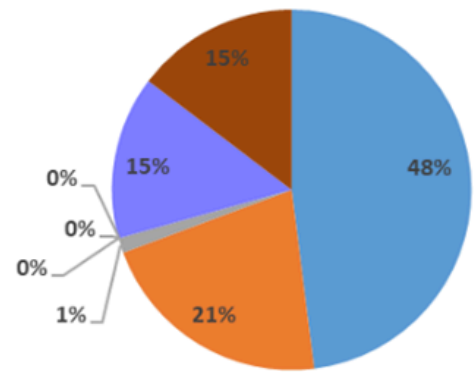
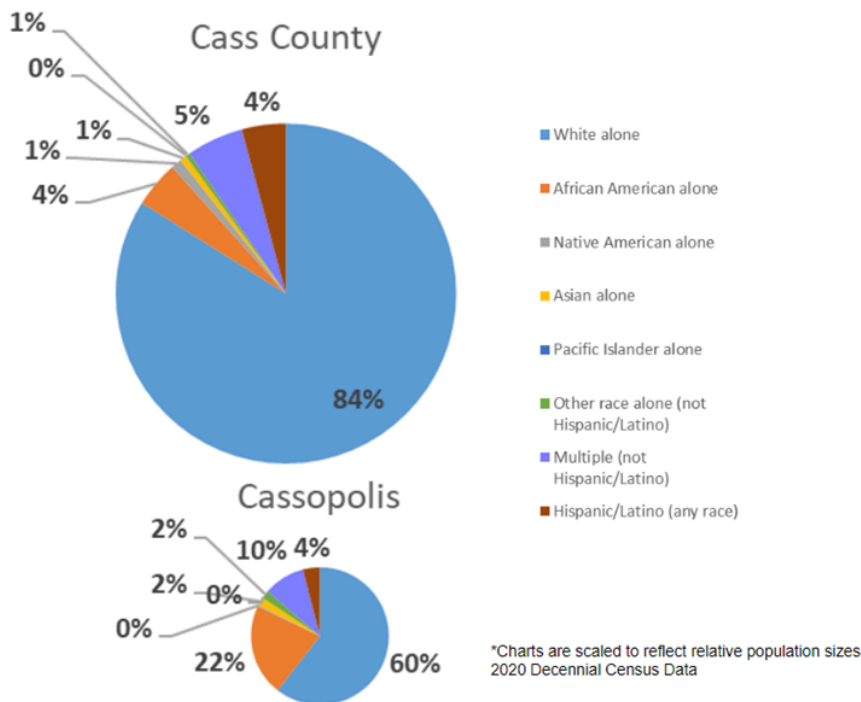


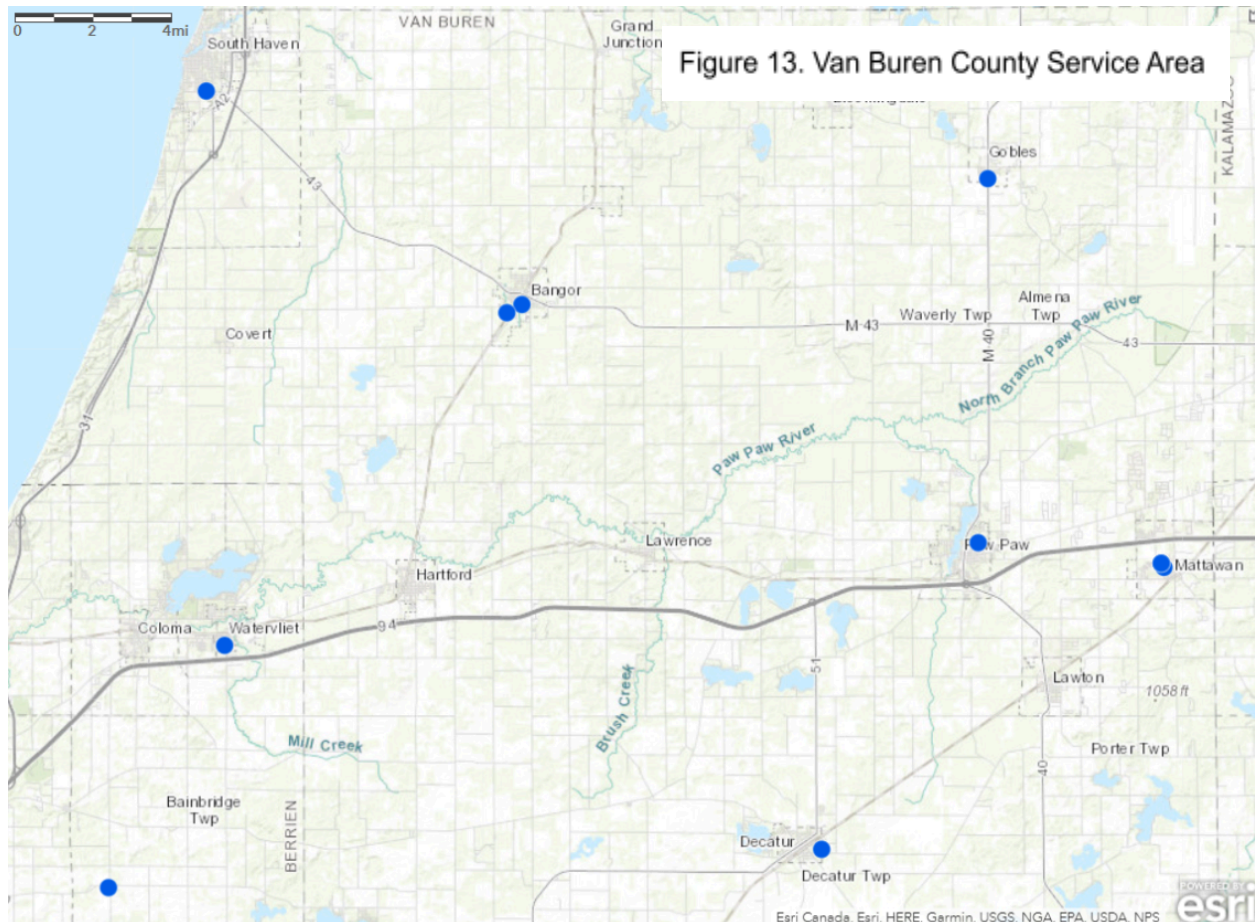
Figure 12. Race/Ethnicity in Cass County



²¹ "P8: RACE - Census Bureau Table."

²² "B16001: Language Spoken at Home by ... - Census Bureau Table."

Van Buren County



Van Buren County comprises 608 square miles of land in southwest Michigan, bordering Lake Michigan to the west, Berrien County to the southwest, Cass County to the south, St. Joseph County to the southeast, Kalamazoo County (MI) to the east, and Allegan County (MI) to the North. It is home to four small cities, Bangor, Gobles, Hartford, and South Haven, and villages which include Paw Paw, Decatur, and Mattawan²³. Van Buren County is predominantly rural, with 71% of its 71,271 residents living in a rural area (Appendix page A50)²⁴.

²³ “Van Buren County, Michigan.”

²⁴ “Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.”

Between 2012 and 2022, the population of Van Buren county was stable. However, the number of children under age 5 in the county decreased 13.3% during that time²⁵. In 2022, 4,365 children under age 5 lived in Van Buren County (6% of the overall population)²⁶. An estimated 1,075 (24.6%) lived in families with income below the federal poverty line²⁷, and 68% of those in poverty (730 children) lived in families headed by a single mother (Appendix page A19)²⁸. TCHS serves 167 children in Van Buren County (16% of eligible children, based on poverty status). While counts of children under age 5 experiencing homelessness are not available for Van Buren County, the Van Buren Intermediate School District reported that 511 (3.3%) students in grades K-12 in the school district were experiencing homelessness in 2021, a rate 65% higher than the Michigan average (Appendix page A33)²⁹. During the 2023-2024 school year, TCHS served 29 children in Van Buren County who were experiencing homelessness. In addition to children who are homeless or in poverty, TCHS prioritizes service to children in foster care and served six children in foster care during the 2023-2024 school year. In 2022, there were 36 children in Van Buren County who were in out-of-home care as a result of abuse or neglect (Appendix page A30)³⁰.

Figure 14. Van Buren County Population Under Age 5

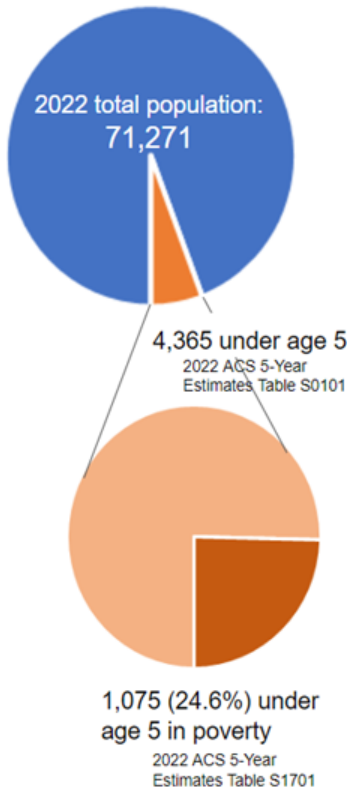
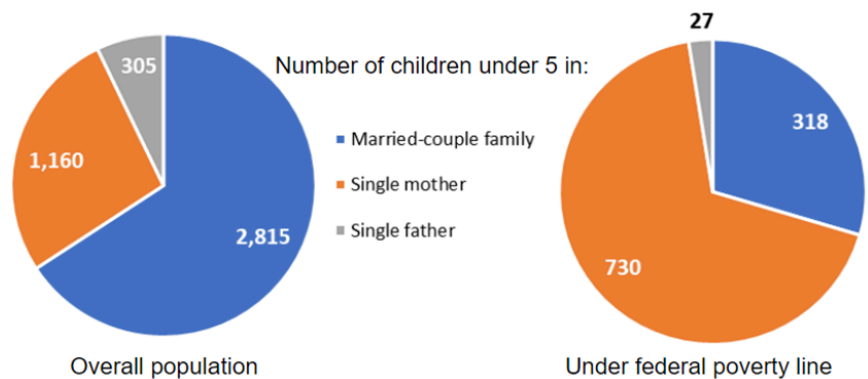


Figure 15. Van Buren County Population Under 5 by Household



²⁵ "Van Buren County, MI Population by Year, Race, & More."

²⁶ "S0101: AGE AND SEX - Census Bureau Table."

²⁷ "S1701: Poverty Status in the Past ... - Census Bureau Table."

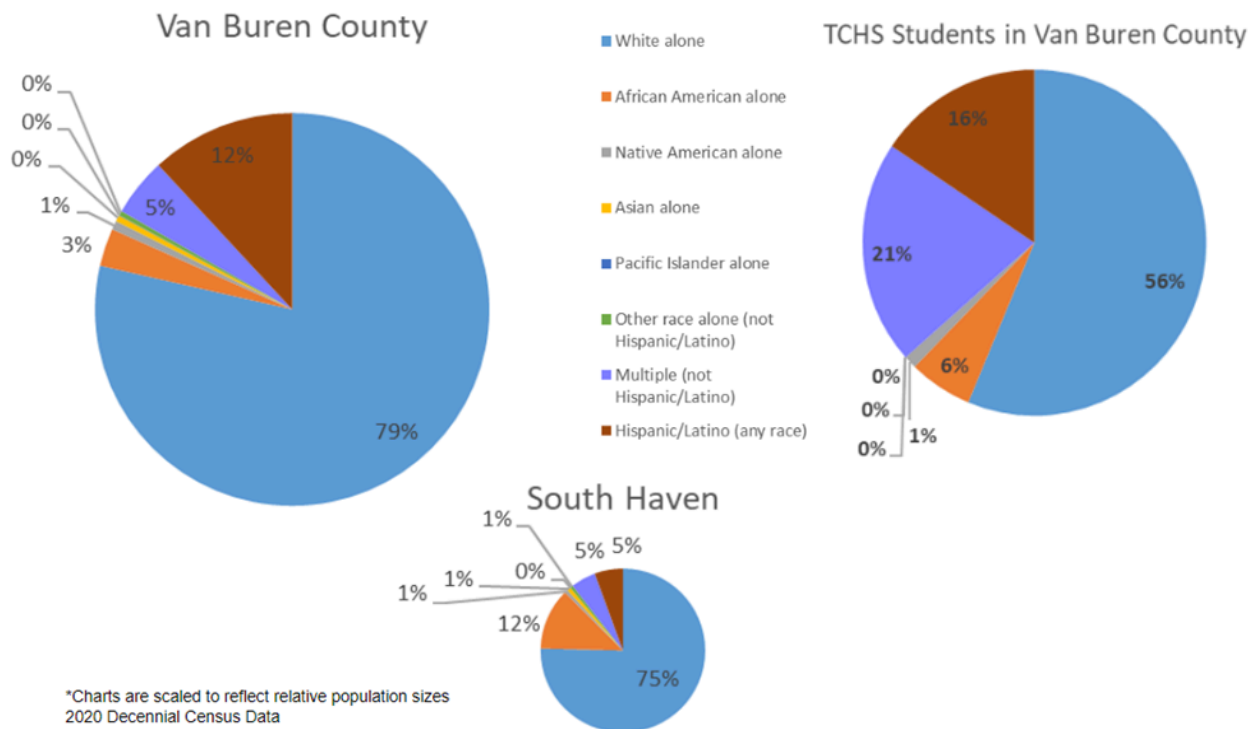
²⁸ "B17006: Poverty Status in the Past ... - Census Bureau Table."

²⁹ "Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center."

³⁰ "Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center."

Most residents of Van Buren County are white (79%), and the next largest racial or ethnic group is Hispanic/Latino (any race), accounting for 12% of the population, followed by multiple races (not Hispanic/Latino) (5%) (Appendix page A18)³¹. In Van Buren County, a greater percentage of students served by TCHS are Hispanic/Latino, multiple races (not Hispanic/Latino), or black or African American than the overall population (Appendix page A18). While most residents of Van Buren County speak English as their primary language at home (90.3%), 8.2% of residents primarily speak Spanish at home, which is a higher proportion than in Berrien and Cass counties (Appendix page A4)³². Currently, 97% of TCHS families in Van Buren county primarily speak English, while 3% speak Spanish (Appendix page A4).

Figure 16. Race/Ethnicity in Van Buren County



³¹ "P8: RACE - Census Bureau Table."

³² "B16001: Language Spoken at Home by ... - Census Bureau Table."

Social Service Needs and Resources

Community resources and strengths

Residents of the tri-county area enjoy many opportunities for year-round outdoor recreation including beaches, parks, rivers, lakes, and trails. While living in a largely rural area creates challenges, many community survey respondents identified supportive, close-knit small town communities as a strength of the tri-county area. For Head Start eligible families specifically, other strengths in the community include strong Great Start Collaborative, Great Start Family Coalition, Head Start, and Great Start to Readiness programs. At TCHS, 41% of staff are current or former Head Start parents, demonstrating one of the ways that the organization is able to elevate families in the region.

Childcare availability

Affordable, high-quality childcare continues to be a need in the tri-county area. Of 27 respondents with childcare needs in our community survey, **22 (81%) reported that a lack of childcare had had a negative impact on their ability to be employed or to meet the obligations of their employment** (Appendix page A80). Most reported having been late to work (18 respondents; 67%) or having missed a day of work (20 respondents; 74%) due to problems with childcare availability, and smaller numbers of respondents reported facing more severe consequences such as being disciplined at work (6 respondents; 22%) or being fired or let go (3 respondents; 11%). While only seven employers responded to our community survey, it is telling that most of those respondents were unsure about what investment they would be willing to make to provide a childcare benefit to their employees (Appendix pages A91-94), though about half were interested in providing such a benefit (Appendix page A90). These data highlight a need for improved awareness among employers about the childcare needs of their employees, their options for helping to meet those needs, and the advantages that providing such supports could accrue for their businesses.

A large, bold, blue graphic of the number '81%' is positioned to the right of the text. The numbers are significantly larger than the percentage symbol, which is also blue. The graphic is centered vertically relative to the text it represents.

of survey respondents had negative employment experiences resulting from childcare issues

In the three counties of the tri-county area, 66.8%, 73.0%, and 67.7% of children ages birth to five in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties, respectively, had all parents in the labor force, compared to 67.0% in Michigan overall (Appendix page A37)³³. In spite of these figures, 57.1%, 71.1%, and 70.5% of children ages three and four in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties, respectively, are not enrolled in a preschool program, exceeding the Michigan rate of 55.7% (Appendix page A30)³⁴.

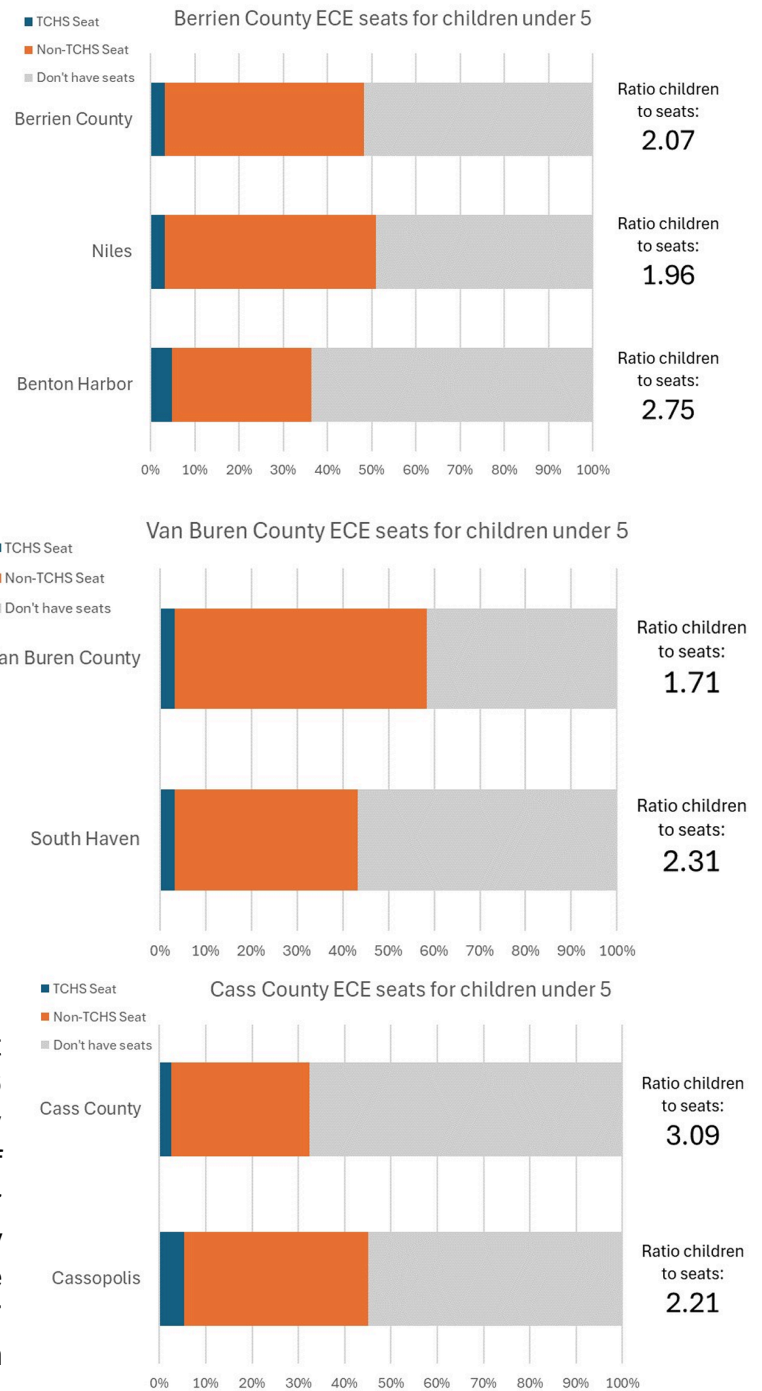
³³ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

³⁴ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

In addition to Tri-County Head Start and the Great Start Readiness Program, Michigan’s state-funded universal preschool for four year olds, there are many fee-for-service options for childcare and preschool. Most early childhood education (ECE) seats in each county are provided in center-based facilities, but there are also providers offering group home and family home based options (Appendix page A134)³⁵. Taking into account these options for childcare for children under 5, the tri-county area has low childcare capacity (greater than 1.5 children per childcare seat), with certain areas qualifying as childcare deserts (greater than 3 children per childcare seat). **In Berrien County the number of children under age 5 per childcare seat is 2.07, in Cass County the number of children per seat is 3.09, and in Van Buren County the number of children per seat is 1.71** (Figure 17) (Appendix page A6)³⁶. Of survey respondents who registered opinions on barriers to childcare access, 77% (20 out of 26) indicated that lack of availability is a major barrier (Appendix page A79).

Childcare capacity for select groups, such as children in poverty and infants, is even lower, highlighting a pronounced need for families and children meeting these criteria. In Berrien County, the number of children under age 5 in poverty per Head Start or Early Head Start seat is 9.0. In Cass County there are 11.6 children per seat, and in Van Buren County there are 7.1 children per seat³⁷. A study of infant care capacity in Michigan (care for children under 3 years of age) found especially low capacity of seats for children in this age range. In Berrien County there were 4.27 children under age 3 per childcare seat, in

Figure 17: Tri-county ECE/childcare capacity

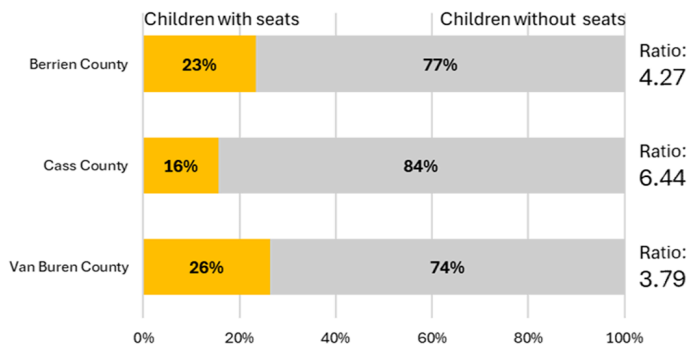


³⁵ “Great Start to Quality Monthly Data.”

³⁶ “Great Start to Quality Monthly Data”; “S0101: AGE AND SEX - Census Bureau Table.”

³⁷ “S1701: Poverty Status in the Past ... - Census Bureau Table.”

Figure 18: Tri-county Infant/Toddler (ages 0-2.9) availability



Cass County there were 6.44 children per seat, and in Van Buren County there were 3.79 children per seat (Figure 18) (Appendix page A7)³⁸.

Aside from low capacity, the cost of childcare is a significant barrier to accessibility, and 77% (20 out of 26) community survey respondents with opinions on childcare identified high costs as a major barrier (Appendix

In Berrien County, a family with two children will pay

46%

of median household income for childcare, on average.

page A79). In the tri-county area, the **average cost of childcare for a family with two children as percent of median household income ranges from 37% in Cass County to 46% in Berrien County**, a range which is similar to the Michigan state average of 41%, but which exceeds the national average of 27% (Appendix page 40)³⁹. In all cases, the cost of childcare far exceeds the affordability threshold of 7% of a household's income, set by the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

Education

Each county in the tri-county area is served by its own intermediate school district (ISD) or regional education service agency (RESA): Berrien RESA in Berrien County, Heritage Southwest ISD in Cass County, and Van Buren ISD in Van Buren County. Based on an algorithm accounting for student test scores, these school districts are well funded, compared to school districts across Michigan and the United States (Appendix page A38)⁴⁰. Opportunities for secondary education in the area include Southwestern Michigan College, Lake Michigan College, and Andrews University, along with extension courses offered by Western Michigan University, and Ferris State University.

Several educational attainment outcomes among residents in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties lag behind the Michigan state average. While the percentage of adults over age 25 who have earned a high school diploma or equivalent credential is similar to Michigan and national averages (Appendix page A39)⁴¹, the percent of recent ninth-grade students who graduate high school in four years is much lower. In Michigan broadly, 83.1% of ninth-graders graduate in four years, while in Berrien County 63.6% graduate in four years and in Van Buren county 74.1% graduate in four years. Cass County is similar to the measure for Michigan

³⁸ "Child Care Mapping Project."

³⁹ "Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center."

⁴⁰ "Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps."

⁴¹ "Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps."

overall, with 84.6% of ninth-graders graduating in four years (appendix page A39)⁴². The percentage of adults ages 25-44 with some post-secondary education (which includes technical/vocational training, community college, and four year college enrollment) lags behind the Michigan average (68.6%) in all three counties. In Berrien County, 66.7% of adults in that age range have completed some postsecondary education, 61.4% in Cass County, and 57.9% in Van Buren County (Appendix page A39)⁴³. The percentages of eleventh-grade students in each of the three counties deemed not ready for college, based on SAT scores in reading/writing and math, are higher than the state of Michigan average, suggesting that the trend of lower educational attainment by tri-county residents could continue (Appendix page A38)⁴⁴. These trends also underscore the need for high quality early childhood education to lay a foundation for future academic success.

Learning disabilities

Children with disabilities in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties have access to services through each county school district or RESA. At TCHS, we refer children for screenings and coordinate with service providers. This includes service providers working with children in our classrooms, and some children who spend half of the day in a TCHS classroom and the other half of the day in a special education classroom, with coordinated transportation provided. Head Start programs must reserve at least 10% of their slots for children with an IEP or IFSP. In the 2023-2024 school year 15.8% of the children (92 children total) enrolled had an IEP or IFSP.

15.8%
of students enrolled in TCHS in
2023-2024 had an IEP or IFSP

In each county, the percentage of children from birth to five years old who are enrolled in special education are 3.8%, 3.1%, and 6.8% in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties, respectively, compared to an overall rate of 5.2% at the state level in Michigan (Appendix page A35)⁴⁵. This corresponds to 840 total children in the three counties. In each county, children between birth through age two who have developmental delays or disabilities are served by Michigan's Early On system through the county's ISD or RESA. In 2022, 527 children in the tri-county area received Early On services, accounting for a higher percentage of children in that age range than the Michigan average (Appendix page A34)⁴⁶.

⁴² "Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps."

⁴³ "Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps."

⁴⁴ "Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center."

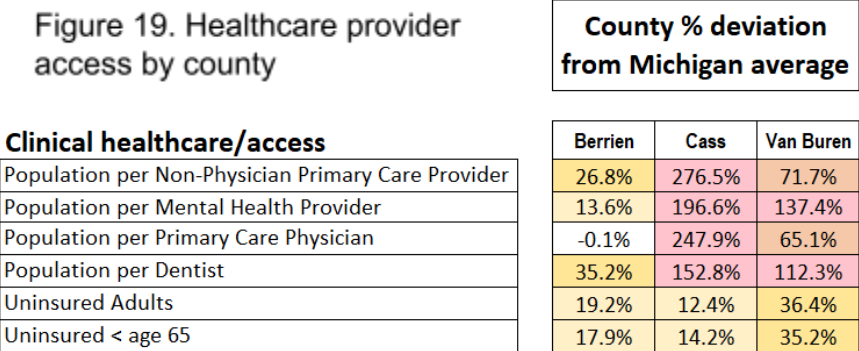
⁴⁵ "Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center."

⁴⁶ "Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center."

Healthcare

Healthcare access

In the majority of the tri-county area, access to healthcare providers is very limited, relative to the state of Michigan as a whole. This need is particularly pronounced in Cass County, where there are at least twice as many residents per provider for primary care physicians, dentists, mental health providers, and non-physician primary care providers as in Michigan broadly (Appendix page A43)⁴⁷. Van Buren County has similar shortages of each type of provider, though the deficit is less pronounced. In Berrien County, the supply of healthcare providers is nearer to the Michigan state average, and the supply of primary care physicians specifically is the same as the Michigan average (Figure 19) (Appendix page A43)⁴⁸.



More than half of the respondents on our community survey indicated that they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with access to mental health care in particular, a greater level of dissatisfaction than for general healthcare or dental care (Appendix page A67). This may reflect a growing awareness of the need for mental health care, especially with the steady increasing trend in the average number of poor mental health days for adults in the tri-county area, the state of Michigan, and nation-wide (Appendix page A44)⁴⁹. TCHS supports families with mental health needs by providing referrals to counseling centers and other mental health providers in each of the three counties in the TCHS service area. While the overall availability of healthcare providers in the tri-county area is low, it should be noted that the lower number of providers who treat young children or who accept Medicaid insurance coverage means that access for children and low income individuals and families is even more limited.

The three counties have similar rates of fully immunized children (ages 19-35 months) as Michigan overall (69.8%) with 69.3%, 66.6%, and 74.5% of children fully immunized in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties, respectively (Appendix page A33)⁵⁰. During the 2023-2024 school year at TCHS, 99% of children were up-to-date on their immunizations.

⁴⁷ “Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.”
⁴⁸ “Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.”
⁴⁹ “Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.”
⁵⁰ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

Maternal and prenatal care

A relative lack of maternal and prenatal care is of particular concern for the families and expectant mothers served by TCHS. In the tri-county area there is only one birthing hospital, and greater percentages of mothers in the area have inadequate, delayed, or no prenatal care, relative to the state of Michigan on average. From 2019 to 2021, an average of 928 mothers in the three counties received less than adequate prenatal care (Appendix page A29)⁵¹. This reveals an unmet need that could be addressed, in part, by the support and education provided to prenatal mothers by TCHS home visitors.

The numbers of births to mothers in vulnerable situations or to mothers who engaged in unhealthy behaviors during pregnancy further highlight a population that could greatly benefit from prenatal education and services offered by TCHS. In 2021, more than half of all births in the tri-county area (accounting for 1,369 births) were to unwed mothers, who have an increased risk of living in poverty (Appendix page A28)⁵². All three counties also exceed the Michigan average in the percentage of births to mothers with no high school diploma or GED: from 2019 to 2021 an average of 393 births per year were to mothers lacking this basic educational attainment (Appendix page A28)⁵³. During the years 2016-2020 in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties, 26.1, 23.8, and 24.9 births per 1,000, respectively, were to teenage mothers, compared to 17.0 births per 1,000 to teenage mothers in Michigan as a whole (Appendix page A33)⁵⁴. In 2021, over 22% of births (272 births) in Cass and Van Buren counties were to mothers who had smoked during pregnancy, a rate over 70% higher than the overall rate in Michigan (Appendix page A28)⁵⁵.

Figure 20. Prenatal and maternal indicators by county

Prenatal and maternal indicators	County % deviation from Michigan average		
	Berrien	Cass	Van Buren
Births to mothers who smoked during pregnancy	27.5%	72.5%	71.8%
Births to mothers with no diploma or GED	41.0%	54.0%	59.0%
Sexual Activity -- Teen births	53.3%	39.6%	46.1%
Births with late or no prenatal care	8.3%	15.0%	26.7%
Births to unwed mothers	11.1%	23.2%	1.7%
Births with less than adequate prenatal care	12.7%	15.2%	6.7%
Length of Life -- Infant Mortality per 1,000	4.6%	28.4%	-38.4%
Low Birthweights	-5.6%	-13.9%	-21.3%

⁵¹ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

⁵² “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

⁵³ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

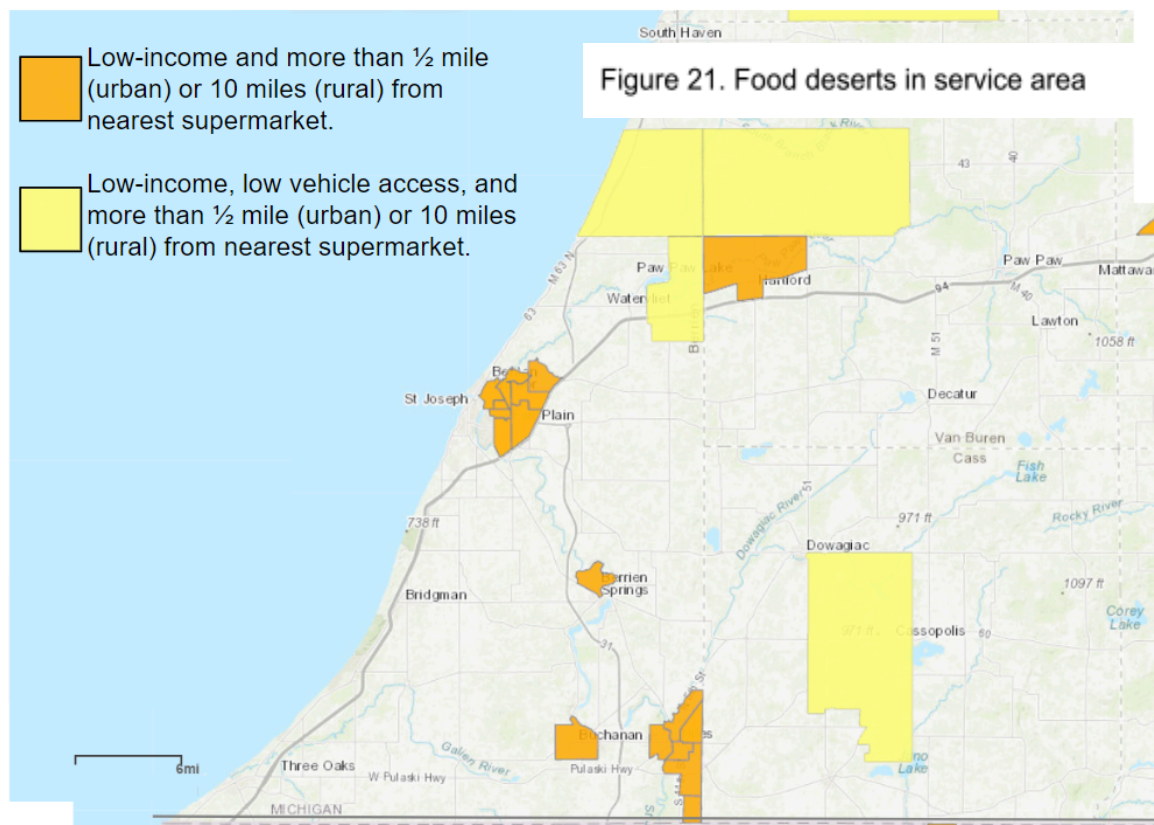
⁵⁴ “Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.”

⁵⁵ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

Nutrition

Among TCHS family survey respondents, assistance with food access was the most commonly requested resource: of families that requested assistance, 35% requested assistance with food (Appendix pages A117-118). The tri-county area has several food desert areas, focused in particular around the cities of Benton Harbor and Niles, both of which are in Berrien County, as well as in several more rural areas (Figure 21)⁵⁶. Due to the predominantly rural nature of the tri-county area, families without reliable access to transportation have difficulty accessing food even in areas that do not have the food desert designation. Overall the level of food insecurity in the tri-county area is near the Michigan average. The population of people with food insecurity, as of 2021, included 5,130 children (15.2%) in Berrien County, 1,270 children (11.8%) in Cass County, and 1,940 children (10.9%) in Van Buren County (Appendix page A31)⁵⁷.

5,130
children in the tri-county area
experienced **food insecurity** in 2021



In the tri-county area, children and families can receive financial assistance with food through programs including WIC, FAP, and the federal free or reduced-lunch program. Enrollment in these programs is higher than the overall rate of enrollment in Michigan (Table X) (Appendix

⁵⁶ “USDA ERS - Food Environment Atlas.”

⁵⁷ “Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.”

pages A35-36)⁵⁸. All three counties are served by the Feeding America West Michigan (FAWM) food bank, which provides food through local agencies in each county; there are 74, 21, and 22 FAWM partner agencies in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties, respectively⁵⁹. Additional resources exist in some areas; notably, the Be Healthy Berrien initiative in Berrien County brings together multiple collaborators to decrease obesity rates and increase access to nutritious foods and exercise opportunities⁶⁰.

Table 2. Children receiving food assistance

	Michigan	Berrien	Cass	Van Buren
Children ages birth to 4 receiving WIC program benefits (2022)	48.7%	48.1%	49.9%	55.4%
Children ages birth to 5 receiving Food Assistance Program (FAP) benefits (2023)	26.3%	29.3%	25.6%	26.9%
Students receiving free or reduced-priced lunch (2022)	53.3%	60.0%	55.4%	56.0%

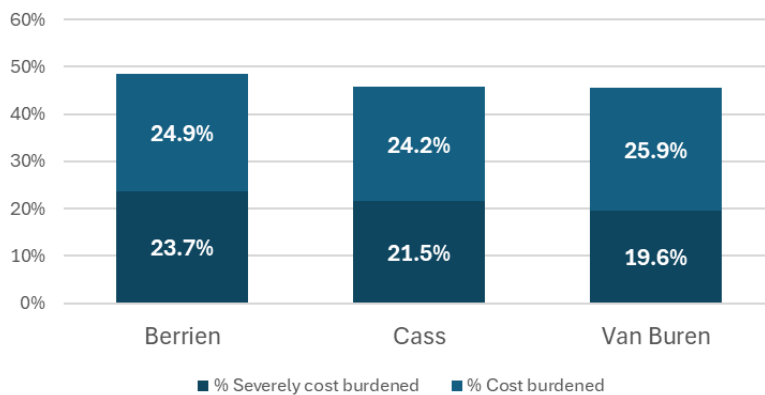
Housing, Transportation, Communication, and Family Schedules

Among residents who responded to our community survey, 70.8% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the availability of affordable housing in the tri-county area (Appendix page A66). In 2022 in all three counties, greater than 45% of renters were cost burdened (spending more than 30% of household income on housing), including around 1 in 5 who were severely cost burdened (spending more than 50% of household income on housing)⁶¹. Resources for families experiencing a housing crisis include family shelters in Benton Harbor (Berrien County) and Decatur (Van Buren County), Michigan’s Housing Assistance Resource Agency (HARA), the

Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency (locations in Van Buren and Cass counties) and the McKinney-Vento Liaison Supervisors in each of the three counties’ school districts.

Due to the rural nature of the tri-county area, families lacking reliable transportation experience significant challenges. While options for transportation exist in

Figure 22. Tri-county renter cost burden



⁵⁸ Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center.

⁵⁹ Find Your Local Food Bank | Feeding America.

⁶⁰ Be Healthy Berrien – Berrien County Michigan Health Information.

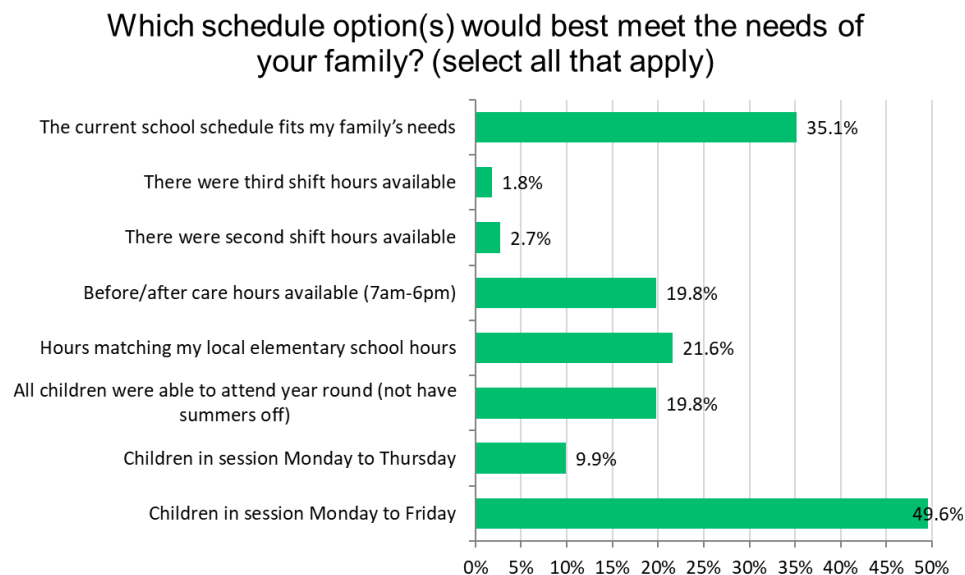
⁶¹ Home | Michigan Housing Data Portal.”

most or all areas, many of these options, especially in rural areas, require advanced planning and coordination to arrange service (Appendix page A54)⁶². TCHS offers limited bussing services to assist families with their transportation needs.

When community survey respondents were asked what means of communication would be most likely to result in them following up to learn more about an organization, 83.7% indicated that hearing about the organization from family or friends would be effective (Appendix page A59). In Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties 80.3%, 84.7%, and 85.7% of households, respectively, had broadband internet access during the period 2017-2021, lagging behind Michigan state (86.4%) and national (87%) averages, though an increasing trend suggests that more household may now have access (Appendix age A42)⁶³. Further, expanded public internet access opportunities developed during the COVID-19 pandemic have also reduced barriers to internet access.

Based on responses to the TCHS family survey, many families in the tri-county area need childcare Monday through Friday throughout the year (Appendix page A108). While the needs of many families are met by operating hours that match those of local schools, about 20% of families expressed a need for before and after care hours (i.e. care starting at 7 AM and/or concluding at 6 PM) (Appendix page A108).

Figure 23. Family scheduling needs



⁶² "My Way There: Transportation Options for Southwest Michigan - My Way There - Transportation Options for Southwest Michigan."

⁶³ "Michigan | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps."

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Appendix

See CNA Report Appendix 06.2024 [PDF](#).

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