

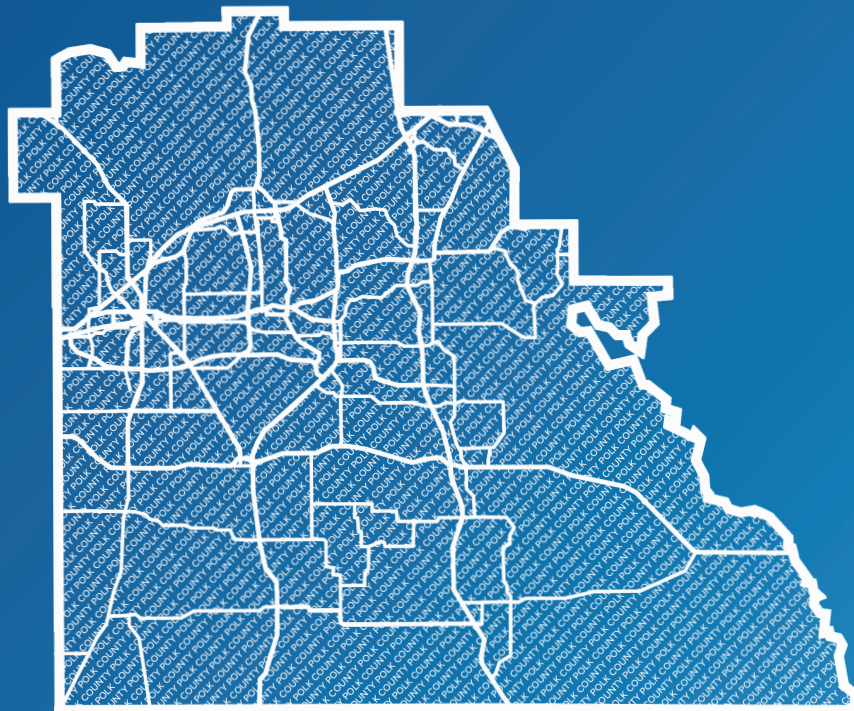
United Community Needs Assessment

An Assessment of Residents' Needs in Polk, Hardee, and Highlands Counties

UNITED
COMMUNITY
NEEDS ASSESSMENT



Polk County Snapshot



About the UCNA

In 2021, GiveWell Community Foundation and United Way of Central Florida began a collaborative effort to assess the needs of residents of Polk, Highlands, and Hardee counties. The region's two major philanthropic organizations worked with an independent research consultant, along with many community partners, to gather reliable data about the challenges facing the tri-county area. The final UCNA report is a compilation of perceived needs of residents obtained through surveys and focus groups, and information gathered from secondary data sources.

Introduction

The United Community Needs Assessment (UCNA) used a community-based participatory approach engaging over 2,100 Polk County residents to understand and address the community's most pressing challenges.

The UCNA identified needs and assets that impact the lives of Polk County residents in six domains: Economic and Employment Opportunities, Housing, Education, Food Security, Transportation/ Infrastructure, and Quality of Life. In addition to those major areas, the UCNA also identified a foundational issue contributing to local needs: economic barriers for residents.

The key points found in this snapshot summarize the central themes from each domain. If you would like to learn more, visit ucneeds.com for the full report and other important information about the UCNA.

Population

- Polk County is the fastest-growing county in Florida and the seventh fastest-growing in the nation, with 725,046 residents as of the 2020 census. Between 2010 and 2020, the population in Polk County grew by 20.4%, and is expected to increase by over 20% by 2030.
- Since the greatest population growth is anticipated among the 18 and under age group (an expected increase to almost 27% in 2030), this underscores the need for education and childcare services.
- Polk County is home to a diverse and growing population that is slowly becoming more ethnically and racially mixed. By 2030, almost half the population is estimated to be made up of minority racial/ethnic groups.

Economic & Employment Opportunities

- When households do not earn a living wage, families are typically forced to make tough decisions and forego certain essentials, substantially impacting the quality of life.
- Given the low wages in many industries and the rising cost of living in Polk County, more than half of the households are below the Federal Poverty Level and ALICE thresholds. The number of families not earning enough to meet basic needs is cause for concern.
- Creating opportunities for residents to earn a wage equal to a living wage is key to improving the happiness and quality of life of County residents. While unemployment

is considerably lower than it has been in years, and the economy is improving after the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the current wages earned by residents have an average wage below the amount needed for self-sufficiency. In addition, several industries in which many residents are employed pay wages below the State average.

- Many young professionals and recent graduates are looking to Tampa and Orlando for employment as wages are higher in those areas.

Housing

- Housing costs are a major component of the overall cost of living for individuals and families in Polk County. The availability of affordable housing options impacts the quality of life of lower-income families. Most residents are very concerned with the rapid increase in costs associated with renting and homeownership over the past two years.
- 30% of Polk County residents qualify as "housing cost-burdened," those who are paying more than 30% of their monthly income on rent or mortgage. A significantly higher percentage of renters are considered housing cost-burdened than owners.
- Residents believe that a lack of affordable housing inventory, combined with an influx of new residents and investors, continues to drive up home and rental costs.
- There is concern about the growing rate of those experiencing homelessness in the community and a lack of adequate supports to meet their need.

Education

- The number of students enrolling in Polk County Public Schools (PCPS) has increased over the last five years, with the largest increases being seen last year. The Hispanic student population increased by 5% during that time.
- The percentage of students that are kindergarten ready has declined. While kindergarten readiness rates have decreased statewide, the decrease was greater in Polk County than at the State level. This is concerning because the kindergarten readiness rates in Polk County were already lower than that of the State.
- The percentages of students achieving proficiency in reading and mathematics have also declined since before the COVID-19 pandemic. Decreases in proficiency rates were larger in Polk County, and Polk County's proficiency rates are lower than the State on average.
- Graduation rates of high school students have remained stable over the last five years and are slightly lower than



that of the State. The rates of PCPS high school graduates enrolling in post-high school education in Florida have declined and remain lower than the average rates in Florida.

- Residents were positive about the availability of K-12 school choice options and industry certification programs at the high school level, along with post-high school education options overall.
- Residents are concerned with the lack of quality preschool and afterschool programs. Residents are concerned with teacher staffing shortages, especially in early childhood programs. The cost of education programs and lack of transportation were cited as barriers to accessing quality education and additional programming at all levels.

Food Security

- Several census tracts in Polk County have been designated food deserts by the USDA. It is likely that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing prices, and stagnant wages will soon exacerbate this issue.
- The most recent data available concerning food insecurity estimates is from 2019, which showed a steady decrease in food insecurity rates in both Polk County and Florida from 2014 to 2019.
- While the rate of families receiving income assistance for food has remained stable, the number of families in need of assistance has increased.
- Most residents agree that food insecurity is a problem in their community, but they recognize that their community leaders have been working hard to address the issue.

Residents noted that coordination between resources and publicizing of resources could be improved.

- The primary barrier to accessing resources has been cited as transportation, with many unable to reach the available resources during limited operating hours due to a lack of affordable transportation options.

Transportation/Infrastructure

- Roadway and pedestrian safety are a significant concern. Polk County was ranked fourth in Florida with regard to the average annual traffic fatality rate, sixth in average annual traffic fatalities, 10th in average annual serious injuries, and 12th in average annual pedestrian/bike fatalities and serious injuries.
- A lack of access to affordable, reliable transportation can limit a person's ability to access basic needs for their family. Transportation issues have been cited as a primary concern among Polk County residents as it impacts several areas of life, including access to employment, food, education, and healthcare.
- Residents have concerns about the recent population growth and development in Polk County and the strain it will put on the transportation system. Residents are already concerned about traffic congestion and road maintenance.
- Most residents believe more public transportation options are needed to help low-income residents get to place they need to go.
- Most residents agree that while there is access to the internet, it can be unreliable in many areas and unaffordable for low-income residents.



Quality of Life

- Residents' perceptions about their quality of life vary among Polk County residents. When asked about their own well-being, a little more than half of the residents considered themselves "thriving," while the majority of the remaining residents believed they were "struggling."
- With regards to overall mental health, Polk County residents experience similar challenges overall as residents statewide. The rate of hospitalizations for mental health has increased for residents in the 19-21 age group and is higher for Hispanic and Black residents. Access to mental health care is a challenge in Polk County. To illustrate, ratios of mental health providers to residents are lower in Polk than in Florida, and some residents are not receiving the services they need.
- Two-thirds of residents in Polk County reported experiencing at least one adverse childhood event before age 18, which puts them at risk for poorer health outcomes. Threat and risk assessments have increased at schools in the area.
- Overall, the majority of Polk County residents are generally happy with where they live, believe their communities to be well-maintained, and believe their community is a good place to raise children, though a third of respondents believe crime to be a major concern.
- Residents also agree they have suitable access to outdoor leisure and parks and activities promoting culture and the arts and that there is a high community engagement among residents. Residents were less positive that members of their community have access to recreational opportunities due to the cost.

- Related to diversity issues, in general, residents believed that people in their community are accepting of others from different ethnicities, races, religions, and lifestyles, though only half of residents agreed that residents from different socioeconomic backgrounds are treated the same.
- The community was consistently split on their views regarding civic engagement in their community. Half believe that residents are civically engaged, that their elected leaders represent their community well, and that diversity and inclusion efforts are a priority.



Scan the QR code above to view the full report and other important UCNA information.

Learn about GiveWell Community Foundation at givecf.org.

Learn about United Way of Central Florida at uwcf.org.