

# United Community Needs Assessment

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

UNITED  
COMMUNITY  
NEEDS ASSESSMENT



## Hardee 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 nearly 700 Hardee County residents to understand and address the community's most pressing challenges.

The UCNA identified needs and assets that impact the lives of Hardee 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](http://ucneeds.com) for the full report and other important information about the UCNA.

## Population

- Hardee County is the 52nd most populous county in Florida, with 25,327 residents as of the 2020 census. Between 2010 and 2020, the population in Hardee County decreased by approximately 2,400 residents. The decreasing population in Hardee is the opposite of the trend in the State, which saw a growth of 14.5%. It is not known if the population decline reported is due to the confirmed undercount that occurred in Florida during the last census.
- The population of Hardee County is considerably younger than that of the State of Florida. The population distribution with respect to age will remain fairly stable through 2030.
- Hardee County is home to a very diverse population of residents. Growth in the number of Hispanic/Latino residents and a decrease in the number of Black residents is expected to contribute to the County's changing demographics.

## 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. The impacts are greater in households with children and seniors.
- Median household income differences exist within racial and ethnic groups, with Hispanic and Black residents earning less in Hardee County.
- Almost two-thirds of households are below the Federal Poverty Level and ALICE (Asset Limited, Income

Constrained, Employed) 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 County residents' happiness and quality of life. Unemployment rates increased during the pandemic to a high of 10% in July 2020. While the trend has begun to reverse, the current wages earned by residents have an average wage below the amount needed for self-sufficiency. In addition, in all industries but one, residents are paid wages below that of the State average.
- Many residents were concerned that the majority of jobs available were either low-paying or required physical labor. Outside of the Education sector, recent graduates and skilled workers are difficult to attract.

## Housing

- Housing costs are a major component of the overall cost of living for individuals and families in Hardee County. The availability of affordable housing options impacts the quality of life of lower-income families. Many residents agreed that it was difficult for people in their communities to rent or buy a home.
- 22% of Hardee County residents qualify as "housing cost-burdened," those who are paying more than 30% of their monthly income on rent or mortgage. A larger percentage of renters are considered housing cost-burdened than owners.
- There is greater concern among residents about the rising costs of rent. Residents commented that the more affordable homes for rent are overpriced and poorly maintained in many places.
- There is concern about the growing rate of homelessness in the community and a lack of adequate supports to meet this need. Over 85% believed that homeless shelters are needed in Hardee County.
- As a smaller county with an agricultural base, residents believe that opportunities for housing development from outside investors in Hardee County are limited.

## Education

- The number of students enrolling in Hardee County Schools (HCS) has decreased by 5% since 2017-18. The student population is 62% Hispanic.
- The percentage of students that are kindergarten ready has declined. This is concerning in that the "kindergarten readiness" rates in Hardee County were already lower than that of the State.



- The percentage of students achieving proficiency in reading has remained stable in Hardee County over the last five years, though the proficiency rates in math have dropped. Decreases in proficiency rates were larger in Florida than in Hardee County. However, the County's proficiency rates are lower than the State on average.
- Graduation rates of high school students have increased by 16% over the last five years and are now comparable with that of the State. The rates of HCS high school graduates enrolling in post-high school education in Florida have declined and remain lower than the average rates in Florida.
- Over 80% of residents believed that children's basic needs are being met in the County. For the most part, two-thirds of residents believed preschool, summer, and aftercare programs are available.
- Two-thirds of survey respondents believed high school adequately prepares youth for college and vocational school. Still, in the open-ended responses, many expressed concerns that students are unprepared.

## Food Security

- Three census tracts in Hardee 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 is from 2019, which showed food insecurity rates decreased in Florida, but increased in Hardee County from 2014 to 2019.
- The rate of families receiving income assistance for food has increased since 2019.

- More residents agreed than disagreed that people in their County have enough to eat daily. More than half of the respondents agreed that food resources are available for those in need through food banks and food drops. Some residents raised concerns about the quality of food support provided.
- Most residents agreed that children have access to free meals when not in school and know where to find help if they do not have enough to eat.

## Transportation/Infrastructure

- 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 Hardee County residents as it impacts several areas of life, including access to employment, food, education, and healthcare.
- Residents are car-dependent with limited public transportation options available.
- Residents also discussed the need for more sidewalks and bike paths, though generally, they felt safe walking and driving.
- An overwhelming number of respondents (90%) believe more public transportation options are needed to help low-income residents get to places they need to go, and 73% agreed that people in their community would be willing to fund more transportation options.
- Most residents agree that while there is access to the internet and cell phone service, it can be unreliable and slow in many areas and unaffordable for low-income residents. Concerns around internet service were greater than concerns about cell phone service.





## Quality of Life

- According to the annual County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, Hardee County is ranked 33rd out of 67 counties in Florida concerning health outcomes and 62nd for health factors. The most common causes of death for residents of Hardee County were heart disease and cancer.
- Most Hardee County residents are generally happy with where they live, believe their communities are well-maintained, and believe their community is a good place to raise children. A little less than half of respondents believe crime to be a major concern.
- About two-thirds of residents agreed that people in their County can access technology and activities promoting culture and the arts.
- Residents agree they have suitable access to outdoor leisure and parks and activities. Over 80% of respondents agreed that people in their County would like to see available land developed into public spaces.
- Only half of the respondents believed that residents in their County had available funds to spend on entertainment and leisure activities.
- Related to diversity issues, in general, over two-thirds of residents believed that people in their community were accepting of others from different ethnicities, races, religions, and lifestyles.
- About two-thirds of residents agreed that members of the government were easy to contact and their community leaders listened. Many residents believe that police keep their County safe.



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

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Learn about GiveWell Community Foundation at [givevcf.org](https://givevcf.org)

Learn about United Way of Central Florida at [uwcf.org](https://uwcf.org)