

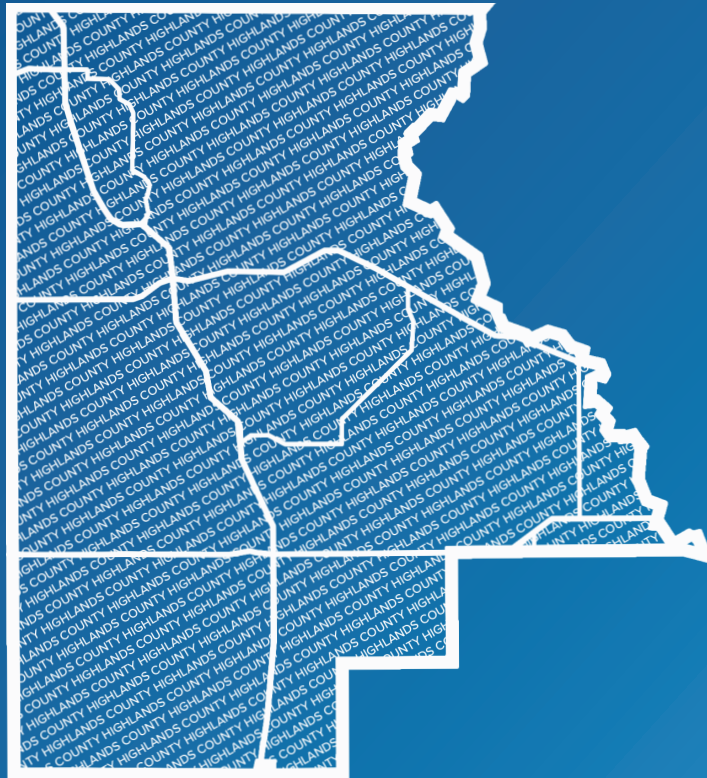
United Community Needs Assessment

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

UNITED
COMMUNITY
NEEDS ASSESSMENT



Highlands 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 900 Highlands County residents to understand and address the community's most pressing challenges.

The UCNA identified needs and assets that impact the lives of Highlands 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

- Highlands County is the 36th most populous county in Florida, with 101,235 residents as of the 2020 census. Between 2010 and 2020, the population in Highlands County grew by 2.5%, much lower than the growth in Florida. By 2030, Highlands County's population is expected to increase by 5%.
- The population of Highlands County is considerably older than that of the State of Florida. The greatest population growth in Highlands County is expected to be in the 65 and over age group (an expected increase to 39% by 2030). With this shift, it can be expected that service and healthcare industries will represent growing sectors of the economy of Highlands County.
- Highlands County is home to a diverse and growing population that is slowly becoming more ethnically and racially mixed. Growth in the number of Hispanic/Latino, Black, and multi-ethnic residents is expected to continue on an upward trend between now and 2030.

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.
- Median household income differences exist within racial and ethnic groups, with Hispanic and Black residents earning less in Highlands 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 that is equal to a living wage is key to improving the happiness and quality of life of County residents. 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 felt that because the population trended older in Highlands County, employers have a difficult time recruiting skilled workers. There was also concern that the majority of jobs available were low paying.

Housing

- Housing costs are a major component of the overall cost of living for individuals and families in Highlands 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.
- 25% of Highlands 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.
- Residents believe that a lack of affordable housing inventory, combined with an influx of new residents and investors, are the primary factors driving up home and rental costs.
- There is concern about the growing rate of homelessness in the community and a lack of adequate supports to meet this need.

Education

- The number of students enrolled in schools served by the School Board of Highlands County (SBHC) has remained fairly stable over the last five years, with the largest increases being seen last year.
- The percentage of students that are kindergarten ready has declined. While kindergarten readiness rates have decreased statewide, the decrease was greater in Highlands County than at the State level.
- The percentages of students achieving proficiency in reading and mathematics have also declined since the COVID-19 pandemic. Decreases in proficiency rates were larger in Highlands County, and the County's proficiency rates are lower than the State on average.



- Graduation rates of high school students have increased by 13% over the last five years and are now only about 5% lower than that of the State. The rates of SBHC high school graduates enrolling in post-high school education in Florida have declined and remain lower than the average rates in Florida.
- Residents were satisfied with the industry certification programs at the high school level, along with post-high school education options overall, though the need for more vocational training programs was cited.
- Residents are most concerned with the lack of quality preschool, summer, and afterschool programs. There were additional concerns about the lack of extracurricular options for children and adolescents.
- Residents are concerned with teacher staffing shortages, especially in K-12. The cost of education programs was cited as a barrier to accessing quality education and additional programming at all levels.

Food Security

- Seven census tracts in Highlands County have been designated food deserts by the USDA, with most of them being in the southeast. 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 decrease in food insecurity rates in both Highlands County and Florida from 2014 to 2019.
- The rate of families receiving income assistance for food has increased since 2019.
- Most residents agree that food insecurity is a problem in their community and disagree that residents have

easy access to affordable healthy food. More than half of respondents agreed that food resources are available for those in need through food banks and food drops. However, some residents raised concerns about the quality of food support provided.

- The primary barrier to accessing resources, especially for children and seniors, has been cited as transportation, with many unable to reach the available resources unless the resources are delivered. The lack of access to technology has also been cited as a barrier for seniors receiving public assistance.

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 residents of Highlands County as it is seen to impact several areas of life, including access to employment, food, education, and healthcare.
- Residents are car-dependent with limited public transportation options available, as there is no fixed route public transportation.
- Residents also discussed the need for more sidewalks and bike paths, and were concerned with traffic safety on US-27.
- Most respondents believe more public transportation options are needed to help low-income residents get to places they need to go.
- 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

- Residents' perceptions about their quality of life vary among Highlands County residents. When asked about their own well-being, a little less than half of the residents considered themselves to be "thriving," while 41% of the residents believed they were "struggling." Over 11% reported that they were "suffering."
- According to the annual County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, Highlands County is ranked 38th out of 67 counties in Florida with respect to health factors and health outcomes. The most common causes of death for residents of Highlands County were heart disease and cancer.
- Overall, the majority of Highlands 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. However, a little more than half of the respondents believe crime to be a major concern.
- About two-thirds of residents agreed that people in their County can easily access technology and activities promoting culture and the arts.
- Residents agree they have suitable access to outdoor leisure and parks and activities but cited a need for other types of recreational and leisure activities, especially for families. 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 have available funds to spend on entertainment and leisure activities.

- Related to diversity issues, in general, 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 community members are civically engaged, that their elected leaders represent their community well, and that people in their County work hard to address local issues.



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

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