



McCORMICK COUNTY



Needs and Resources Assessment

February 2023

Prepared by
ISI Consulting

Message from the Executive Director

Per First Steps legislation, every three years each First Steps local partnership must coordinate a collaborative effort which brings the community together to identify and update McCormick's needs and available resources.

McCormick County First Steps has the privilege to partner with Iron Sharpens Iron Consulting to complete our FY 24-26 needs and resources assessment, as well as creating a new strategic plan based on these findings. McCormick County has made progress in certain key areas, but we still have a great NEED for progress with limited RESOURCES! McCormick County First Steps will use the information from this needs and resources assessment to prioritize the needs of our most valuable assets – our children.

•NaToya Cartledge



NaToya Cartledge

Executive Director

McCormick County First Steps

Executive Summary

The McCormick County First Steps responded to the needs of the families and organizations working “collaboratively to ensure that all children start school ready to reach their highest potential with engaged support from their parents, caregivers, and communities.” The Needs Assessment was created to serve as a key reference document for McCormick County First Steps, and other partners implementing data-driven changes to promote school readiness.

The 2023 Needs Assessment was fully funded by the McCormick County First Steps and would not have been possible without the help of key individuals and organizations. It is our hope that the findings from this Needs Assessment will assist leadership in identifying windows of opportunity and stewarding resources.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected as part of this two-month process from January to February, 2023. Detailed analysis of well-being indicators (income and poverty, education, overall-wellbeing, health, teen childbearing, child maltreatment, adverse childhood experiences, affordable housing and food environment) provide insight into trends occurring over the last seven to ten years. In addition, a focus group with four mothers was conducted and four interviews were conducted by phone with educators and content experts to identify root causes of issues that have been identified.

The complexity and nuance of issues surrounding kindergarten readiness and disparities in educational, developmental and health outcomes for children, require systems-thinking and a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Seven individuals met on February 9, 2023, to review the Needs Assessment and determine priorities.

The priorities that emerged from this Needs Assessment include:

- Strengthen existing partnerships. *(Indicator: Number of partners, and number of partnership agreements)*
- Advocate for and promote the importance of Early Childhood Education. *(Indicator: Number of presentations and conversations)*
- Explore and create ways to fundraise for day care and scholarship opportunities. *(Indicator: Existence of plan)*
- Explore alternative ways to engage the WHOLE family. *(Indicator: Number of interventions and activities tested)*

Based on these priorities, the following next steps will be taken.

- Develop a three-year strategic plan based off the Needs Assessment with clear priorities and detailed strategies that can be tracked over time.
- Develop action plans based off each of the identified strategies.
- Select two to three key performance indicators to track regularly to see if progress is being made.

McCORMICK COUNTY



Quantitative Data Analysis



Primary Wellbeing Predictors

Primary wellbeing indicators, or “root cause indicators” are those factors that drive and predict multiple related outcomes in wellbeing. The primary root causes of poor outcomes for children are low income, poverty, undereducation, and lack of opportunity to thrive. These factors are difficult to tease apart in a “chicken or egg” manner, and typically most of these factors exist together, resulting in “deprivation amplification”.

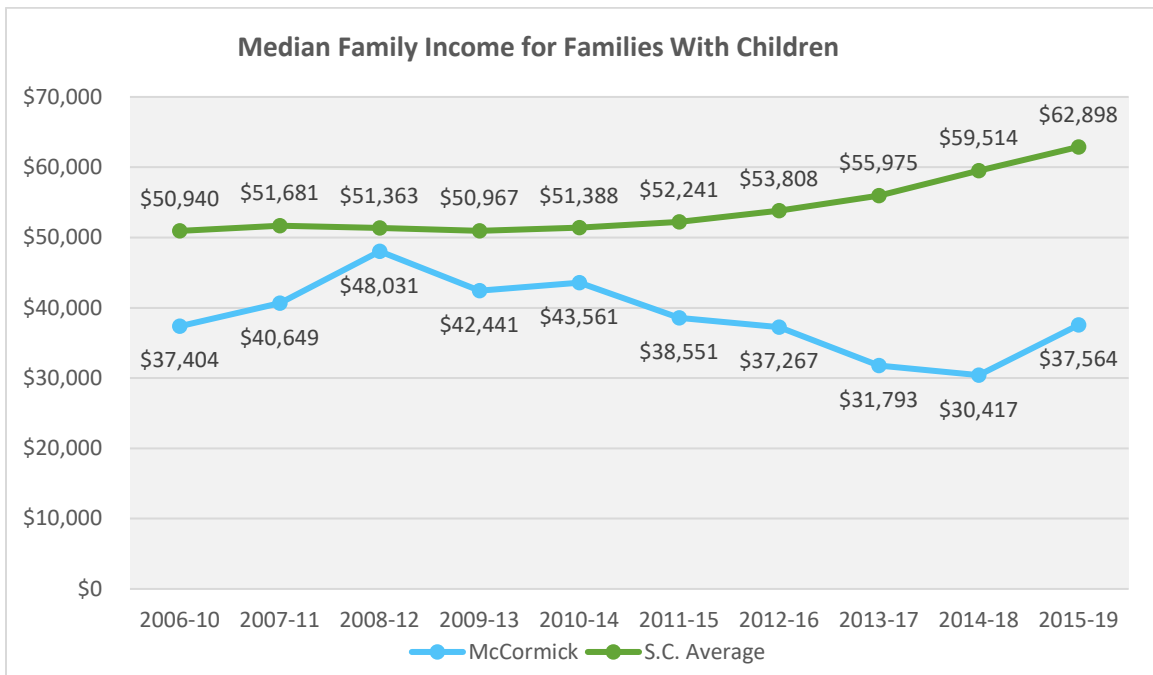
Income and Poverty

Insufficient income, such that wealth cannot be built and transmitted generation to generation, drives poverty. Poverty is a multifaceted concept which may also include social, economic, and political elements. At its most basic, poverty is the scarcity or lack of material possessions or money. However, full understanding of poverty requires consideration of asset poverty, an economic and social condition that is more persistent and prevalent than income poverty. Even when income is sufficient to get by, there is frequently the inability to access and build wealth resources such as homeownership, savings, stocks, and business assets. In this case, assets are unavailable to support basic needs in cases of emergency and are unavailable to pass on to children for intergenerational wealth-building. Children, especially, are vulnerable to the effects of poverty. Children who live in poverty often experience chronic, toxic stress that disrupts the architecture of the developing brain, resulting in lifelong difficulties in learning, memory, and self-regulation, and poor health outcomes in adulthood. Children in poverty are much more likely to experience exposure to violence, chronic neglect, and the accumulated and synergistic burdens of economic hardship, or “deprivation amplification”.

Income

Median family income, that measure where half of the income falls above and half below, is a good reflection of the average income in a place, since it controls for outlier data (very low or very high incomes). The follow graph demonstrates that for families with children in McCormick County, median income is significantly below the South Carolina average. Moreover, the gap has generally widened over the last several years.





U.S. Census and Kids Count Data Center

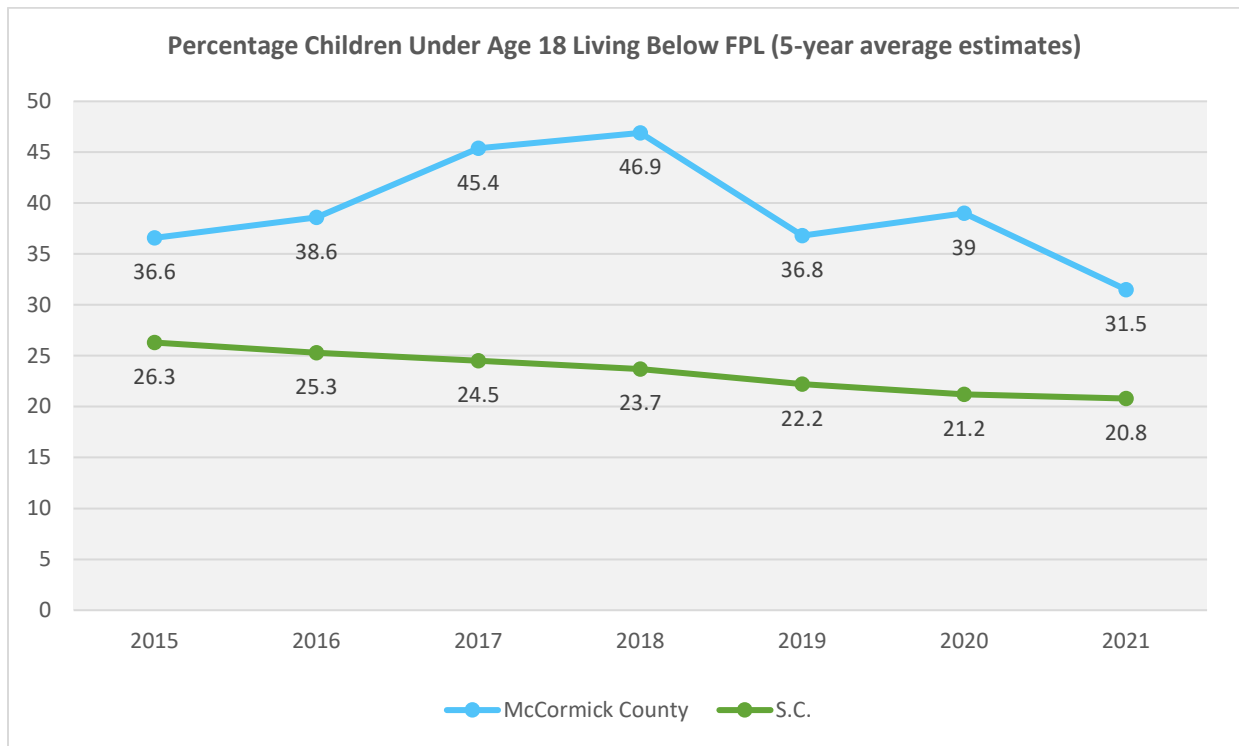
Poverty Rates

Poverty rates can (and should) be examined at several levels: individual poverty, family poverty, household poverty, child poverty, and levels of poverty. Poverty metrics should also be disaggregated by race since Black and Hispanic residents have significantly higher poverty rates.

As of 2021, 1,314 residents of McCormick County (15.4% of the county population) live below Federal Poverty Level (FPL), including 316 (31.5%) of the county's children. Both of these rates are higher than the state averages of 14.5% for all residents and 20.8% for children.

Children in Poverty

In most geographies, poverty rates for children are higher than poverty rates for the general population. In McCormick County, the poverty rate for children has been significantly above the average for the state's children for the last seven years.



Source: U.S. Census S1701

Children Living in Areas of Concentrated Poverty

Aggregated poverty data do not show how poverty is distributed across geographies. In the report *The Enduring Challenge of Concentrated Poverty in America*,¹ the Federal Reserve and the Brookings Institution studied communities where poverty is geographically concentrated at rates of 40% and above, finding that concentrated poverty is nuanced from place to place, and that place matters. There are common themes across all communities struggling with concentrated poverty: lack of human capital development, high rates of unemployment, and inadequate housing.

A large middle class is one of the five predictors of communities with good social and economic mobility. Large disparities in income, or income inequality, means that there is a small middle class in a given community. When children live to adulthood in communities with income inequality, lifetime earnings potential is low, and the cycle of poverty endures. Conversely, the literature shows that multiple benefits derive from mixed income housing developments and income-diverse neighborhoods,² including safer environments, access to more and improved services, good quality housing, and neighborhood amenities. In addition, as low-income neighborhoods become more economically diverse, poverty is alleviated, property values increase, and residents demonstrate an increased tolerance of diversity for neighbors of all incomes.

¹ Federal Reserve and the Brookings Institution. "The Enduring Challenge of Concentrated Poverty in America: Case Studies from Communities Across the U.S." (2008). <http://www.frbsf.org/cpreport/>

² <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/27116/412292-Effects-from-Living-in-Mixed-Income-Communities-for-Low-Income-Families.PDF>

To provide an accurate picture, these data must be disaggregated by race since Black and Hispanic children are significantly more likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty, compared to White children. However, these data disaggregations are not available for McCormick County due to small population sizes.

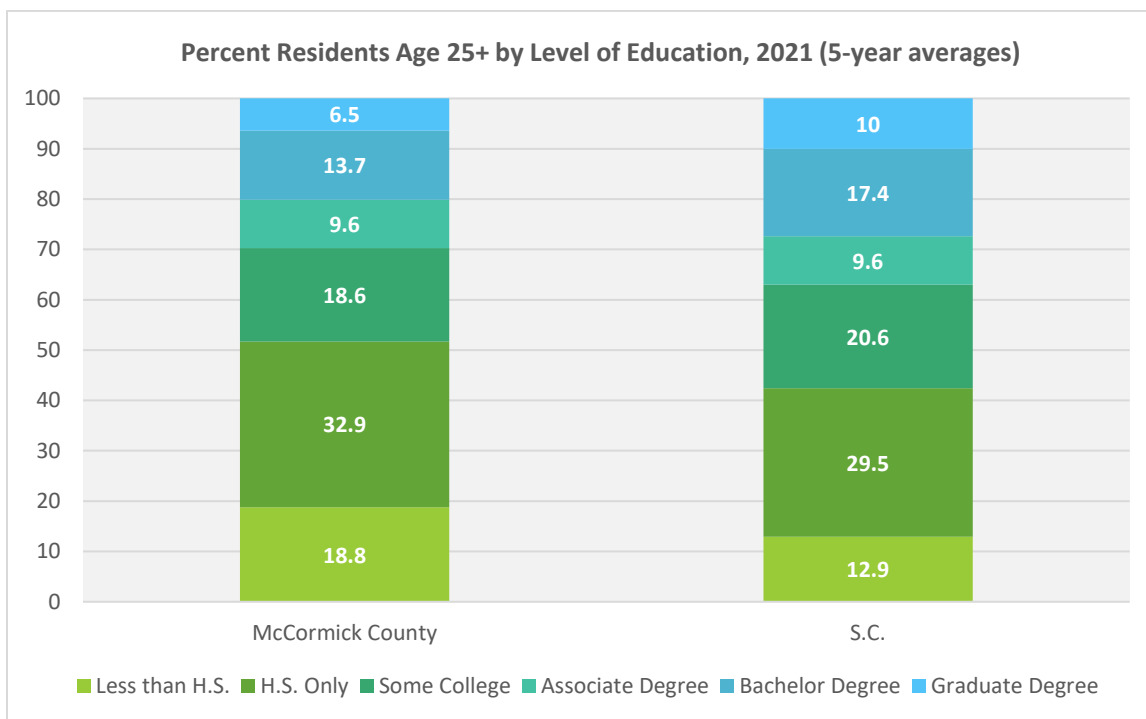
Education

Education has multiple purposes but is always at the foundation of societies characterized by economic wealth, social prosperity, and political stability. Education strengthens democracy by providing citizens the tools that allow them to participate in the governance process. It is an integrative force to foster social cohesion and supports critical thinking, skill development, and life-long knowledge acquisition. Moreover, there is a direct correlation between education attainment and earnings, income, and wealth; the more education an individual has (on average) the higher the income.

The Children's Trust of South Carolina ranks McCormick County 45th among the state's 46 counties for overall education in 2020.

Education Attainment

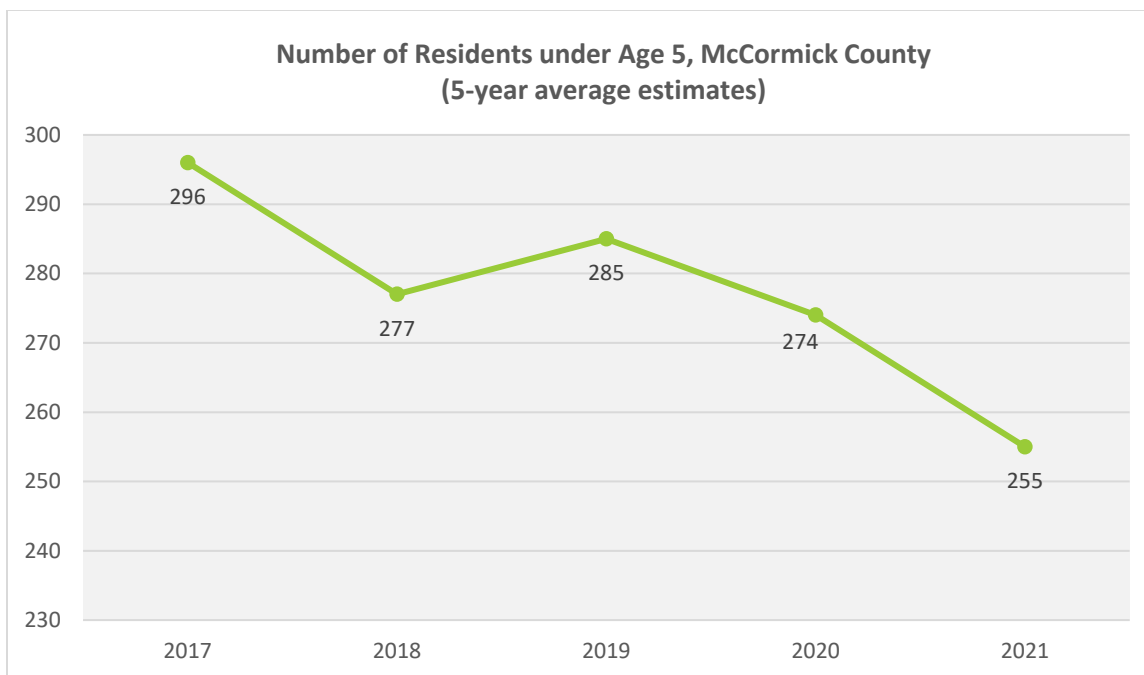
The future demands higher education attainment of the local workforce if our cities and counties are to be economically competitive. Obtaining a post-secondary credential of some kind is critical to opportunity and positive life outcomes. Compared to the state average, residents of McCormick County have lower education attainment at the post-secondary level. Also, a markedly higher percentage of residents in McCormick County failed to graduate from high school.



Source: U.S. Census S1501

Daycares

According to SC Department of Social Services, there are 3 licensed or registered childcare facilities in McCormick County – McCormick Elementary School, McCormick Head Start, and Victoria Durant family childcare home. These include licensed and approved childcare centers, registered faith-based centers, licensed group childcare homes, licensed or registered family childcare homes. *The total capacity of these centers is 177 children.*



Source: US Census DP05

School Readiness

School readiness is a comprehensive connection between children’s readiness for school, families’ readiness to support their children’s learning, and schools’ readiness for children. Children are ready for school when they possess the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success as they enter school and for later learning. This requires age-appropriate physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Children's School Readiness is affected by the early care and learning experiences they receive. Research in brain development emphasizes that early learning (especially from birth to five) directly influences a child's ability to succeed in school. These studies have contributed to a growing awareness of the importance of quality early education, pre-kindergarten, and K-4 experiences as predictors of school readiness. Communities do well when they ensure that children have widespread access to these programs, and especially programs like Head Start, targeted to children most at risk. Children's readiness for successful transition into kindergarten is best viewed as a community responsibility.

Compared to the state average, McCormick County School District performs far better for overall readiness to learn in terms of foundational skills and behaviors that prepare students for instruction. Moreover, McCormick County School District students perform better in all subdomains of this measure—language and literacy, mathematics, social foundation, and physical wellbeing—compared to the state average.

| Percentage of Students enrolling in Kindergarten and Demonstrating Readiness to Learn, 2021-2022 by District | | | | | |
|--|---------|-----------------------|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| | Overall | Language and Literacy | Mathematics | Social Foundation | Physical Wellbeing |
| McCormick County School District | 65.5 | 48.3 | 31.0 | 93.1 | 82.8 |
| S.C. Average | 36.0 | 29.8 | 28.1 | 52.2 | 51.5 |

Source: SC DOE School Report Cards

Academic Achievement

South Carolina Department of Education monitors academic achievement across the spectrum of grades and via a variety of instruments. The SC Ready assessments for English Language Arts (reading and writing) and Mathematics are administered in grades 3,4,5,6,7, and 8. Academic performance in the elementary years is predictive of ongoing achievement, graduation from high school, and enrollment in post-secondary education.

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is a crucial marker in a child's educational development. Failure to read proficiently is linked to higher rates of school dropout, which suppresses individual earning potential as well as the nation's competitive-ness and general productivity. Currently, 87% of McCormick County third graders are below standards in reading. Over time, McCormick County students haven't fared as well on this measure compared to the state average.

| Percentage of 3 rd Graders Testing Below Standards in English / Language Arts (on SC READY) | | | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | 2015-2016 | 2016-2017 | 2017-2018 | 2018-2019 | 2020-2021 |
| McCormick | 81.2 | 81.0 | 84.1 | 79.0 | 86.7 |
| S.C. | 56.3 | 57.9 | 54.9 | 50.2 | 56.7 |

Source: Kids Count Data Center

Mathematical performance at the 8th grade is also a critical metric. If a child has received relevant mathematics training and performed well by eighth grade, that child will have a higher likelihood of going to college and will likely be more successful in high school, college, and careers beyond. Almost 75% of McCormick County eighth grade students fall below standards in math, markedly above the state average. McCormick County does not fare well on this metric over time, compared to the state average.

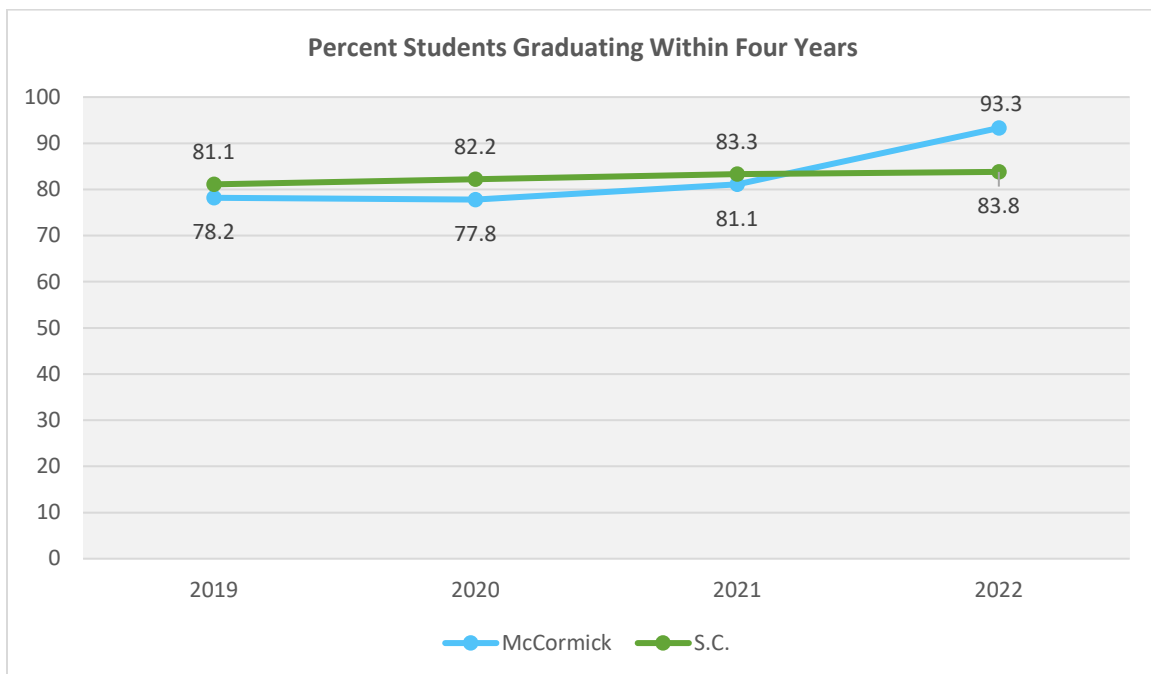
| Percentage of 8th Graders Testing Below Standards in Math (on SC READY) | | | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | 2015-2016 | 2016-2017 | 2017-2018 | 2018-2019 | 2020-2021 |
| McCormick | 88.1 | 88.3 | 93.1 | 82.9 | 74.5 |
| S.C. | 67.6 | 65.5 | 63.4 | 63.4 | 69.3 |

Source: Kids Count Data Center

These data and many other academic achievement data, disaggregated for each school district across the state, can be found in the SC Department of Education School Report Cards.

On-Time Graduation

Students who graduate on time – earning a standard high school diploma in four years – are more likely to continue their education at the post-secondary level. Historically, McCormick County School District has fallen below the state average for four-year graduation rate. Currently, however, McCormick County has a higher four-year graduation rate compared to the state average.



Source: SC DOE Report Cards

Generally, when time graduation rates are disaggregated by student demographic, Whites and non-economically disadvantaged students graduate on-time at higher rates, compared to economically disadvantaged, Black, and Hispanic students.

Dropouts and Teen Idleness

The 2020 South Carolina Child Well-Being Data Profile, produced by the Children’s Trust of South Carolina,³ ranks McCormick County as 45th of the state’s 46 counties for dropout (#1 is best). The latest data show that there were 5.2% dropouts of the total enrollment for grades 9-12 in McCormick County in 2018-2019. The state average is 1.9%.

Because capturing dropouts is often difficult at the school and district levels, the U.S. Census offers two alternate measures: percent teens not enrolled in school and not a high school graduate, and an “idleness” measure for teenagers – residents ages 16-19 who are not enrolled in school and not working. These may be a more accurate measure of dropout. Because numbers are small, especially in rural counties, 5-year rolling averages are used for this measure.

The percentage of teens in McCormick County who are not enrolled in school and not high school graduates has been high but variable since 2007 and is currently three times the state average.

| Percent Teens age 16-19 Not Enrolled in School and Not a High School Graduate | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | 2007-2011 | 2008-2012 | 2009-2013 | 2010-2014 | 2011-2015 | 2012-2016 | 2013-2017 | 2014-2018 | 2015-2019 |
| McCormick | 10.9 | 22.2 | 28.7 | 14.2 | 12.2 | 15.5 | 11.6 | 13.4 | 12.3 |
| S.C. | 6.8 | 6.0 | 5.8 | 5.4 | 5.0 | 4.4 | 4.1 | 3.9 | 4.0 |

Source: Kids Count Data Center

The percentage of “idle” teens in McCormick County shows a similar trend and is also currently significantly higher than the state average.

| Percent Teens age 16-19 Not Attending School and Not Working | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | 2007-2011 | 2008-2012 | 2009-2013 | 2010-2014 | 2011-2015 | 2012-2016 | 2013-2017 | 2014-2018 | 2015-2019 |
| McCormick | 9.6 | 18.3 | 23.3 | 16.0 | 14.1 | 17.0 | 13.2 | 13.4 | 9.4 |
| S.C. | 9.1 | 9.1 | 9.3 | 8.7 | 8.5 | 7.8 | 7.1 | 6.9 | 6.9 |

Source: Kids Count Data Center

³ 2020 South Carolina Child Well-Being Data Profiles. <https://scchildren.org/resources/kids-count-south-carolina/child-well-being-data-county-profiles/>

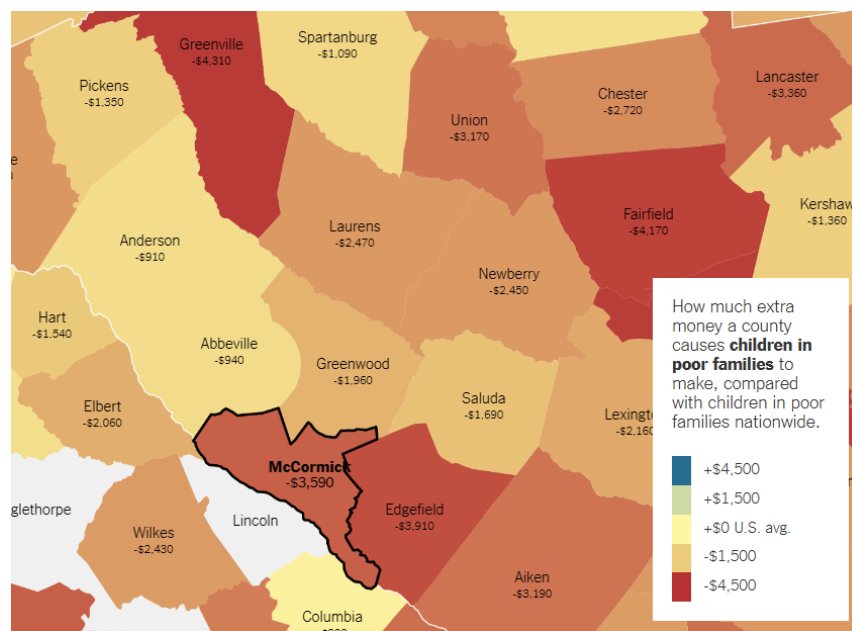
Opportunity

Where a child grows up in the US has a major impact on his or her financial future. Economic mobility has significant relevance for communities of color since they tend to have the lowest income and fewest opportunities to move up on the economic ladder. In their recent Equality of Opportunity Project¹⁸, three Harvard economists used “big data” to map upward mobility across the country. The results showed wide variation among the nation's cities and counties in intergenerational mobility, leading the researchers to conclude that some areas provide significantly more opportunity for children to move out of poverty, and other areas offer children few opportunities for escape. Where children are raised has a significant impact on their chances of moving up economically. The research found that communities with high levels of upward mobility tend to have five characteristics:

- lower levels of residential segregation by race
- a larger middle class (lower levels of income inequality)
- stronger families and more two-parent households
- greater social capital
- higher quality public schools

The latest calculations and comparisons of the 2,478 counties in the U.S. show that South Carolina counties rank among the lowest in the country for chances of upward mobility for poor children. McCormick County is considered to be “extremely bad” in helping poor children up the income ladder. McCormick County ranks 73rd worst out of 2,478 U.S. counties, better than about only 3% of counties for opportunity for poor children to break out of poverty.

If a child in a poor family were to grow up in McCormick County, instead of an average place, he or she would make \$3,590 (or 14%) less at age 26.

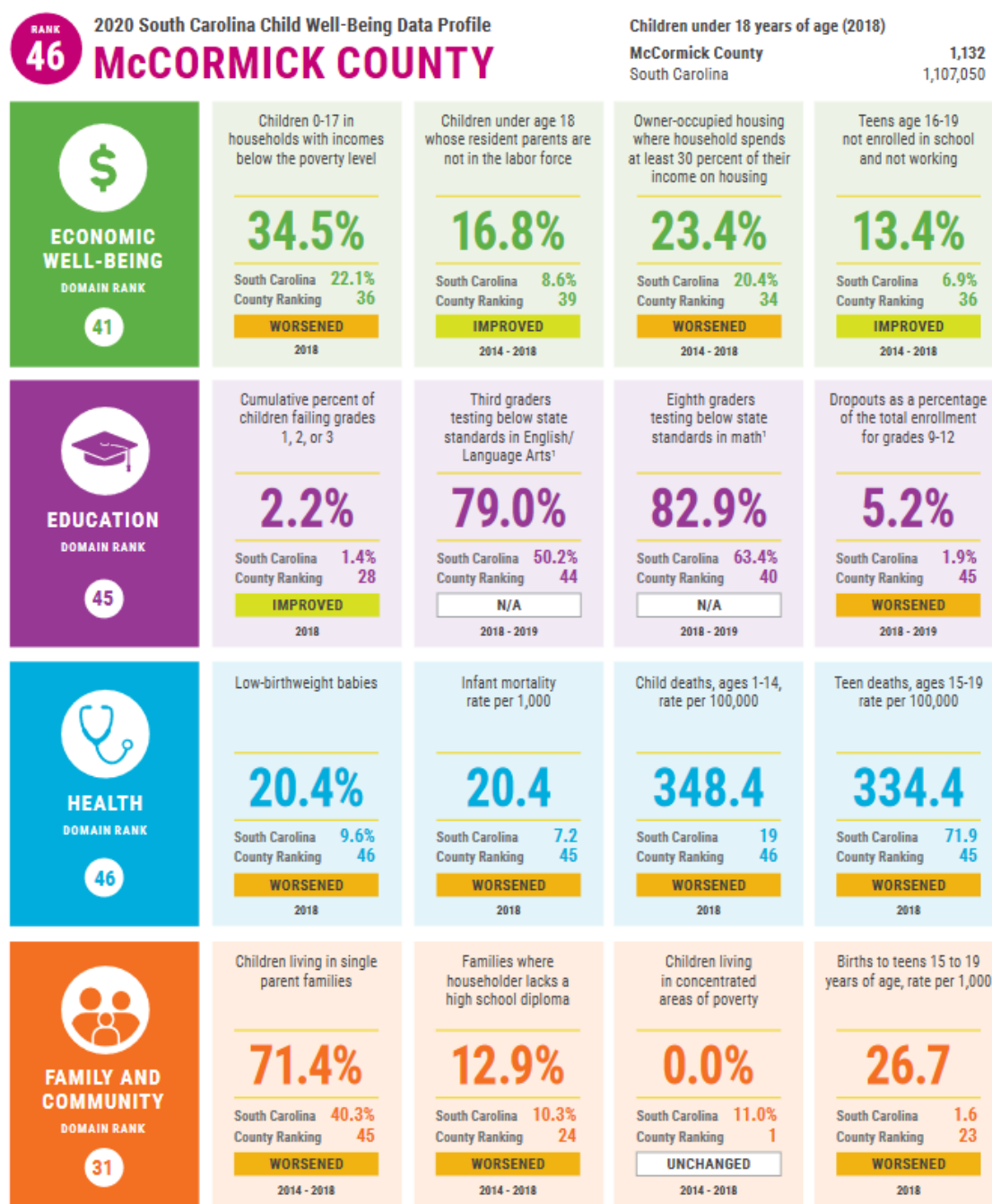


Source: The Upshot⁴

⁴ The Upshot. The best and worst places to grow up. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/03/upshot/the-best-and-worst-places-to-grow-up-how-your-area-compares.html>

Overall Wellbeing

For overall wellbeing for children, McCormick County ranks last of the state's 46 counties.



Source: Children's trust of SC

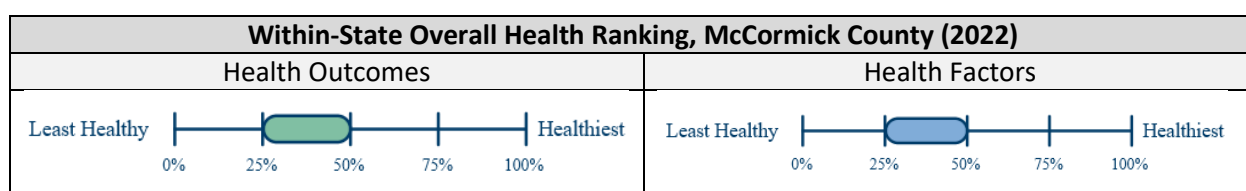
Other Wellbeing Indicators

Overall Health

Where health-promoting factors do not exist, the cost to the community is high. Social and economic factors are the strongest determinants of health outcomes. If people do not have access to safe places to live and be active, to healthy food, to clean air and water, and to preventive care and treatment, they will not be healthy. When community conditions are not health-promoting, there is a lower quality of life for everyone.

McCormick County is ranked in the lower middle range of counties in South Carolina for health outcomes.

These outcomes include length of life / premature death and various quality of life measures. McCormick County is also ranked in the lower middle range of counties in South Carolina for health factors. These factors include various health behaviors, clinical care factors, social and economic factors, and measures of the physical environment.



Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps

Teen Childbearing

Births to teens have substantial implications for educational and socioeconomic outcomes for the teen mother. Parenthood is the leading reason that teen girls drop out of school. More than 50% of teen mothers never graduate from high school, whereas approximately 90% of teen who do not give birth will graduate from high school. Additionally, less than 2% of teen moms earn a college degree by age 30. Because many teen mothers live in poverty, care for both mother and child can be publicly funded for years, including assistance programs for food, medical care and childcare. In addition, daughters of teen mothers are more likely to become teen mothers themselves, creating cyclical poverty over generations.⁵

For the combined years 2014-2020, there were 28 teen births per 1,000 females in McCormick County age 15-19. Disaggregated by race, this equates to a rate of 27 for Black teens and a rate of 31 for White teens. McCormick County has a higher rate of teen childbearing than the state average of 23 per 1,000 and the national average of 19 per 1,000.

⁵ Fact Forward: <https://www.factforward.org/news/high-costs-teen-pregnancy>



Health Insurance

In McCormick County, 1.5% of the residents under age 19 are uninsured (neither public or private insurance) in 2021. This equates to only 16 children and youth.

Infant mortality is a good measure of population health since it reflects the economic and social conditions that impact health in a community. The United States has the highest maternal and infant mortality rates among comparable developed countries. The current (2022) infant mortality rate in the United States is 5.547 deaths per 1,000 live births. South Carolina is among the states in the US with the highest infant mortality rates, 6.64 per 1,000 live births in 2020, constituting 370 infant deaths in that year.

Because numbers of child deaths within the first year of life are relatively low, especially for sparsely populated geographies like McCormick County, multiple year averages are often used to measure infant mortality. For the combined 2017-2019 period, only two babies died in their first year of life in McCormick County, equating to an infant mortality rate of 12.3 per 1,000 live births, higher than the state average rate. Note: care should be taken in interpreting small numbers in McCormick County along with corresponding rates.

It should be noted that there is a significant racial inequity in this measure. Black infants in the U.S. are more than twice as likely to die as White infants – 10.8 per 1,000 Black babies, compared to 4.6 per 1,000 White babies. This racial inequity is wider than in 1850 and in one year constitutes 4,000 inequitable deaths of Black babies. Education and income do not mitigate this inequity – a Black woman with an advanced degree is more likely to lose her baby in its first year of life than a White woman with less than an eighth-grade education. Disaggregated trend data for infant mortality in McCormick County and the state averages can be found in the following table. Infant mortality is more than twice as high for Black babies compared to White babies across South Carolina, and the inequity is even greater in McCormick County since no White babies have died there since 2012.

| Infant Mortality Rate, * by Race (combined year averages) | | | | | | | |
|---|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| | | 2012-2014 | 2013-2015 | 2014-2016 | 2015-2017 | 2016-2018 | 2017-2019 |
| McCormick County | Total | 16.5 | 16.4 | 10.3 | 5.9 | 6.1 | 12.3 |
| | White | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Black | 25.9 | 25.6 | 16.4 | 8.8 | 10.0 | 21.3 |
| S.C. | Total | 7.0 | 6.8 | 6.8 | 6.8 | 6.9 | 6.8 |
| | White | 5.0 | 4.9 | 4.9 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 4.7 |
| | Black | 10.7 | 10.9 | 10.6 | 10.5 | 10.6 | 11.0 |

*per 1,000 live births

Source: SC DHEC and Kids Count Data Center

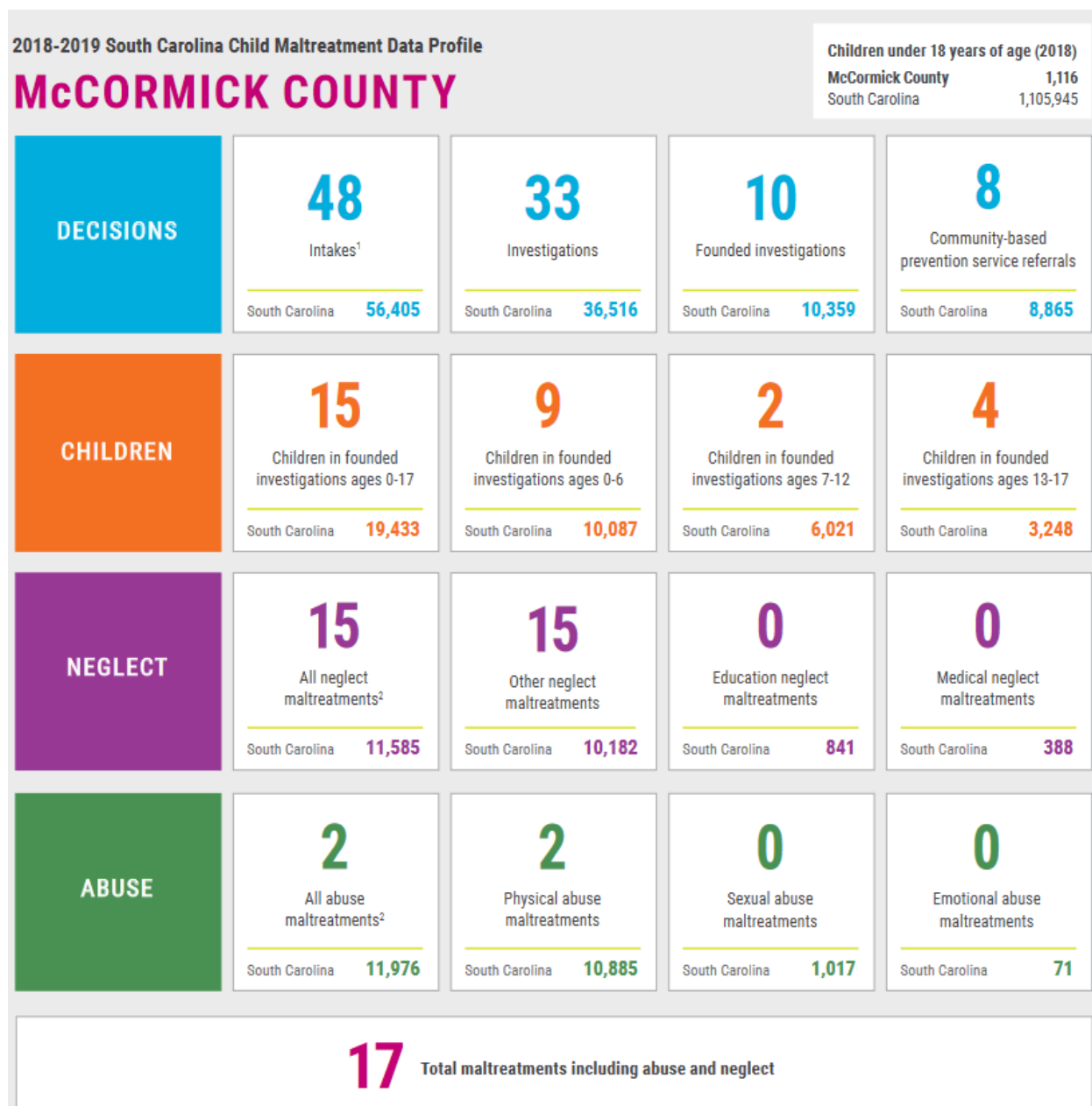
Child Maltreatment

Child maltreatment is abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in addition to all forms of neglect, negligence, and exploitation of children. It is difficult to obtain valid and reliable comparative statistics on child abuse and neglect even though it cuts across all communities in South Carolina. The data reported in the following table are offered as static information without inference. These are founded investigations; that is, the determination following an investigation by a child protection worker is that, based on available information, it is more likely than not that child abuse or neglect did occur. These investigations are not “unique”; that is, they may include multiple investigations for the same children.

| Total Number of founded Investigations for Child Abuse and Neglect by SC Fiscal Year | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
| McCormick | 7 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 16 | 10 | 10 | 15 | 8 | 7 |

Source: Kids Count Data Center

For more detailed 2018-2019 data regarding child maltreatment in McCormick County, see the following table, provided by the Children's Trust of South Carolina, for each county.



Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur in a child's life prior to the age of 18. Researchers have recently discovered a dangerous biological syndrome caused by abuse and neglect and other ACEs during childhood. The toxic stress that characterizes childhood adversity can trigger hormones that cause damage to the brains and bodies of children, putting them at a greater risk as adults for disease, homelessness, incarceration, and early death. Further, childhood adversity often harms a child's brain and its development, which can result in long-term negative health and social outcomes.

The latest data show⁶ that 62% of South Carolina adults report having experienced at least one ACE, and 59% of McCormick County adults also report having experienced at least one ACE. The primary ACEs for McCormick County are:

- Emotional abuse – 30%
- Household substance abuse – 29%
- Domestic violence – 24%

Children of Color experience higher rates of ACEs. In South Carolina, 59% of White children have experienced at least one ACE, while 65% of Black children and 67% of Hispanic children have experienced at least one ACE.

Affordable Housing

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the generally accepted definition of affordable housing is that for which the occupants are paying no more than 30% of gross income for housing costs, including utilities. In South Carolina, almost 20% of residents are not in affordable housing situations, spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs. A greater percentage of McCormick County residents are in unaffordable housing situations at 21%. McCormick County does not fare well on this measure over time, compared to the state average; however, housing affordability has improved in McCormick County by almost 10 percentage points since 2007.

| Percent of Housing Units Where Householders Spend at Least 30% of Income on Housing | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2007-11 | 2008-12 | 2009-13 | 2010-14 | 2011-15 | 2012-16 | 2013-17 | 2014-18 | 2015-19 |
| McCormick | 30.8 | 31.4 | 26.0 | 24.9 | 23.0 | 22.7 | 22.6 | 23.4 | 21.0 |
| S.C. | 25.5 | 25.1 | 24.8 | 24.2 | 23.1 | 21.9 | 21.1 | 20.4 | 19.6 |

Source: Kids Count Data Center

⁶ Children's Trust of South Carolina <https://scchildren.org/resources/adverse-childhood-experiences/ace-data-county-profiles/>

Food Environment

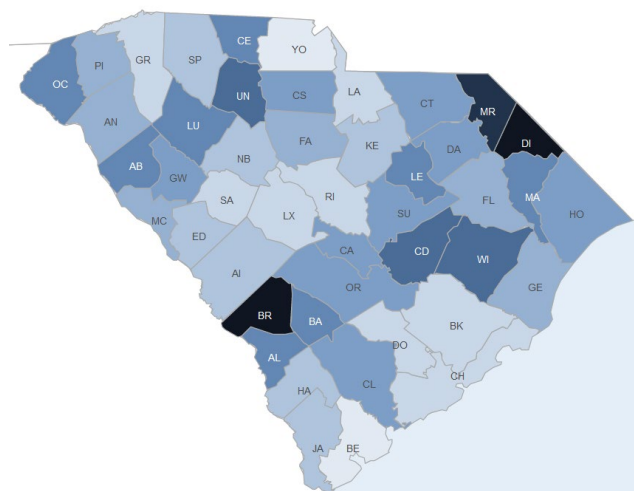
There are two basic measures that comprise the Food Environment measure:

- **Limited access to healthy foods:** the percentage of the population that is low income and does not live close to a grocery store.
- **Food insecurity:** the percentage of the population that did not have access to a reliable source of food during the past year.

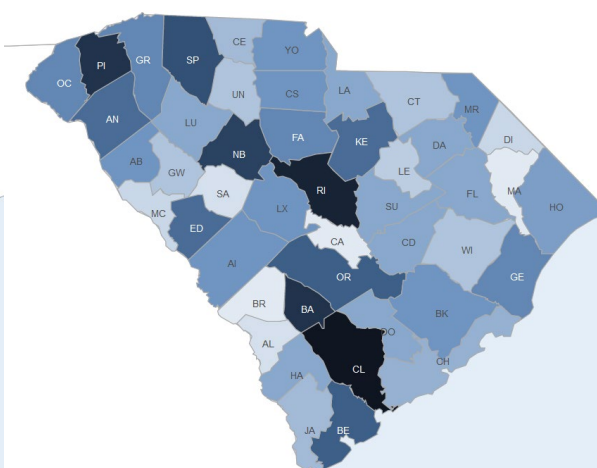
Although the data are not disaggregated by race, low-income people and People of Color are generally the most at-risk populations for food insecurity and limited access to healthy foods. Compared to the South Carolina averages, McCormick County fares better on access to healthy foods and equates to the average for food insecurity.

| Food Environment, 2019 | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------|
| | McCormick | S.C. |
| Food insecurity: | 11% | 11% |
| Limited access to healthy foods | 2% | 10% |

Food Insecurity Map



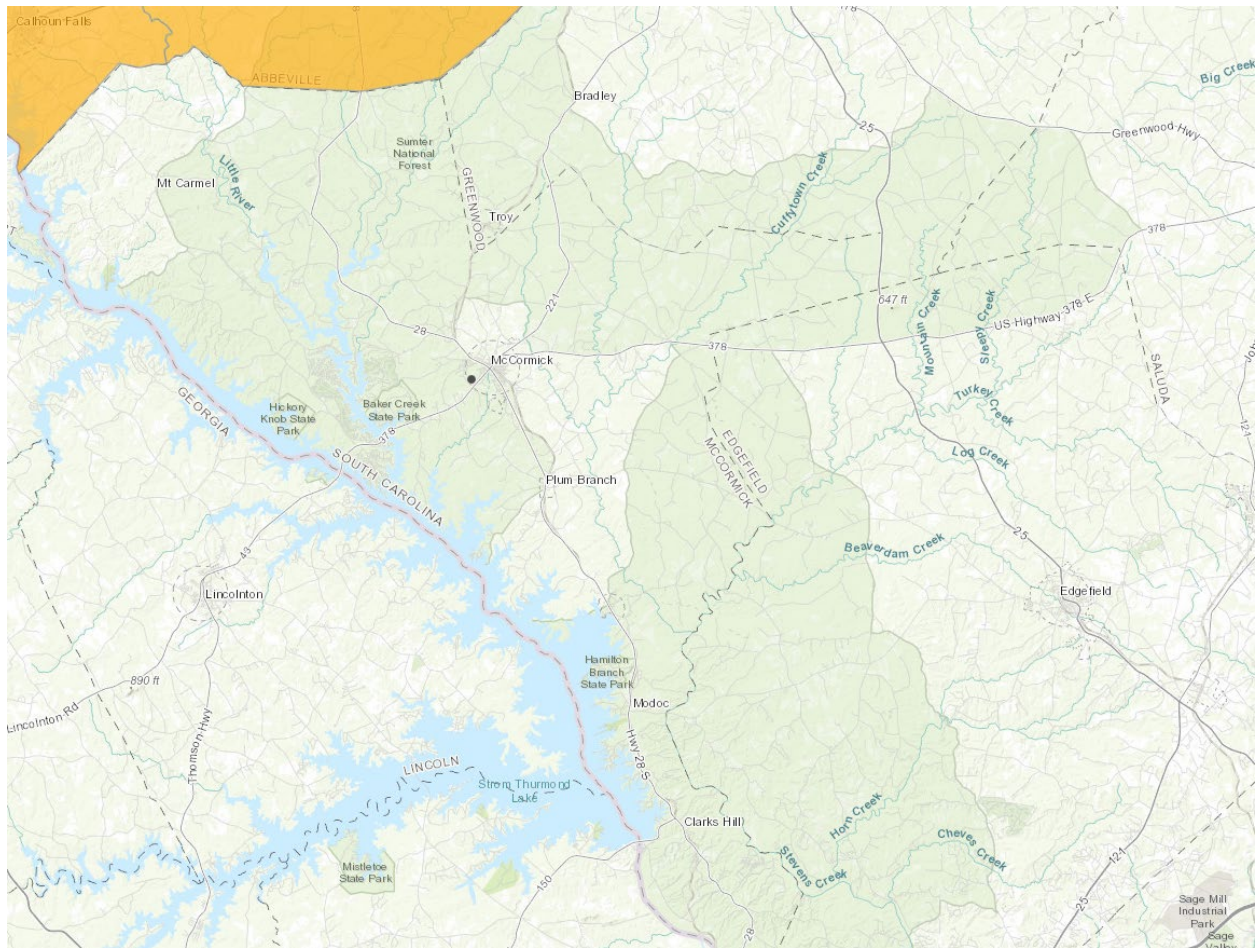
Limited Food Access Map



BEST  WORST

Food Deserts

Certain communities, particularly lower-income or minority communities, often lack supermarkets or other sources of healthy and affordable foods. Food deserts, a component measure of food insecurity, is defined as at least 500 people and / or at least 33% of a census tract's population residing more than a mile from a supermarket or large grocery store (more than 10 miles for rural census tracts). The following map shows no portions of McCormick County as food deserts.



Source: SC DHEC

McCORMICK COUNTY



Qualitative Data Analysis



Parent Focus Group Report

Executive Summary

On Monday, January 9, 2023, ISI Consulting hosted a focus group from 3:30 PM to 4:30 PM at the McCormick County Council on Aging. The focus group was held in partnership with McCormick County First Steps as part of an ongoing community needs assessment. Elizabeth Carpenter of ISI Consulting met with parents who were clients of McCormick County First Steps to ascertain their thoughts and opinions on the work of McCormick County First Steps as well as to identify windows of opportunity for organizational and programmatic improvements. A total of four mothers were interviewed and paid \$20.00 for their time and participation.

The major findings from this focus group were as follows:

Parents have no major complaints about McCormick County First Steps.

Participants did not have much to complain about when it came to McCormick County First Steps. The individuals present felt that McCormick County First Steps is helpful and had nothing bad to say about the organization. The only constructive feedback provided was that some parents wish First Steps would give more notice before showing up at their house, but that they do like the fact that First Steps will come to them. The parents really appreciated the services provided to them and were grateful to be receiving help, especially in the form of the daycare vouchers. The daycare voucher program was expressed more than any other. Overall, the parents are happy with McCormick County First Steps and seemed hesitant to ask for anything else.

Parents want more organized activities to do with their children.

When prompted, participants mentioned they wanted more things to do with their children. The parents wanted organized enrichment for their children as opposed to having to plan things out themselves. As it stands, they must go to Greenwood to do anything fun or enriching for their child. Jumping Jacks, the indoor inflatable park, was given as an example of a fun activity they have to drive to Greenwood to do. Participants thought it would be a good idea if First Steps hosted events or activities within the county that parents can take their children too, such as a picnic in the park, to keep the children stimulated outside of daycare.

Parents need more spaces available at the local daycares.

A concern mentioned in the focus group was the number of openings at the local daycares. Participants shared that there are parents who want to participate in the voucher program offered by First Steps but cannot because their child is on the waitlist to get into one of the daycares. All the mothers interviewed were happy with the daycares in the county and wanted to see more opportunities for others to send their children to daycare as well. There were no mentions that the value of the voucher was not enough, only that there were not enough spaces locally to fill the need of parents who wish to use the voucher program.

First Steps can reach more parents through social media.

When asked about increasing awareness of McCormick County First Steps as an organization, the participants unanimously agreed that social media is the best way to reach out to people in 2023. Facebook in particular was mentioned as the best social media site to use for outreach to parents and guardians in McCormick County. Other outreach methods were seen as outdated that yield little results.

Key Informant Interviews Report

Executive Summary

ISI Consulting conducted four key informant interviews with select personnel identified by McCormick County First Steps. Participants were interviewed over the phone to provide their perspective as part of the needs assessment for McCormick County First Steps. Key informants were selected for their knowledge of and proximity to early childhood education within McCormick County. Interviews were manually transcribed by the interviewer, and all participants were informed that their name and other identifying information would not be attached to anything they shared.

The major findings from these interviews were as follows:

The cost of living is affecting McCormick County families.

The key informants indicated that the rising cost of living is impacting families in McCormick County. This is further exacerbated by the low wages and lack of opportunity in the area. One informant said that they were, “not sure how [McCormick County families] are surviving.” This is because there are not many job opportunities in the area, and the ones that are there do not pay well, according to the interviewees. “I’ve always been concerned in McCormick with the lack of employment opportunities. There is not a lot of industry. There is only one grocery store,” remarked an informant. Another informant said, “the greatest need in McCormick County is jobs for the parents to have stable incomes.... I think in a poor community where there are not many jobs, especially good stable jobs, it’s hard for parents to devote as much time to their children.” This concern brought up by the informants were mentioned as part of the larger issue of the lack of resources in McCormick County.

There is a lack of resources in McCormick County.

The key informants agreed that due to the rural nature of McCormick County, there were less resources available to the community. This identified “lack of resources” included everything from doctors’ offices, a hospital, job opportunities, day care centers, things to do, and educational opportunities. There is just less in McCormick. As to why this may be the case, an informant said it is “not that we’ve hit rock bottom, but McCormick has been a small non-growing community for a while now. There is a status quo. The people here are generally not younger families; they are retired. They aren’t reliant on the school system or having a job. Our ecosystem is already set up.” However, the impact is still felt by the families that do live in McCormick County. “We have to go to Aiken for the child advocacy center,” said one informant.

The informants were aware that McCormick being rural affects the number of resources available to the community, but not everyone can easily travel out of county to do something, they pointed out. Access to transportation is an issue in McCormick that is stressed by the lack of resources nearby.

Young children lack social skills.

Looking over the past three years, key informants noted that children's social skills had taken a hit as a result of the pandemic and consequent increase in technology usage. One informant said, "I'm seeing more prevalence of isolation and lack of socialization, more instances of ADD and ADHD. The world during COVID became a closed off space." A different informant noted, "Children already were spending too much time on devices pre pandemic. More time on a screen is less time getting experience being with other people in person. There is a decrease in empathy with the children." All informants noted how children were having more behavioral problems going into school than they saw in earlier years. They believed it was due to over reliance on technology and less socialization due to COVID restrictions.

McCormick County First Steps does a good job but has room to grow.

Every key informant had a good opinion of McCormick County First Steps. As one informant put it, "I think they do a good job given the resources they have." The informants felt the organization performed its duties and was well-received within the county. One mentioned that McCormick County First Steps does a good job maintaining their relationship with the community and is sure to attend local meetings.

However, the informants did identify some windows of opportunity that McCormick County First Steps could use to grow. **Suggestions were as follows:**

- More communication from First Steps to the community AND their partners
- Build an early childhood learning center
- Make all pre-K teachers have a four-year degree and increase their pay
- Increase the amount of outreach into McCormick
- Increase the numbers of families served

Community Engagement Session

After a formal presentation of the quantitative and qualitative data by ISI Consulting on February 9, 2023, seven McCormick County First Steps team members and partners from DHEC, the Durant Family Daycare, and the McCormick Rotary Club discussed the findings and its implications. Small groups were formed and participants completed a worksheet to identify gaps and areas of needed focus for the local First Steps. ISI Consulting facilitated the conversations between the small group to reach shared agreement.



The priorities that emerged from this Needs Assessment include:

Strengthen existing partnerships.

(Indicator: Number of partners, and number of partnership agreements).

Participants discussed that the McCormick County First Steps has a limited budget and resources and will need to collaborate with others for transportation, recreation, and community resources.

Advocate for and promote the importance of Early Childhood Education.

(Indicator: Number of presentations and conversations).

Leadership discussed that the majority of the population is of retirement age and the bulk of the resources go to the elderly. McCormick County First Steps will need to stress the importance of kindergarten readiness, early childhood education and careers with the entire community for others “to connect the dots” and see how everything is connected.

Explore and create ways to fundraise for day care and scholarship opportunities.

(Indicator: Existence of plan)

The qualitative data showed an overwhelming need for a day care. Leadership would like an analysis done to truly understand how many children are in need of a day care in the community and then to creatively find a way to raise the funds for this to be a viable option. So many small children are being raised by their aging grandparents and screens.

Explore alternative ways to engage the WHOLE family.

(Indicator: Number of interventions and activities tested)

Participants shared how frustrating previous attempts have been in engaging the entire family. Minimal to no attendance at events is going to require McCormick County First Steps to think creatively in how to engage the entire family. McCormick County First Steps recognizes that several barriers (limited accountability, child abuse, poverty) exist and need to find ways to promote hope and encouragement for families with small children.

**McCormick
County
Asset Map**

BabyNet

**McCormick
County
Library**

**McCormick
County DSS**

**McCormick
School of
Early
Learning**

**Backpack
Ministry of
McCormick
County**

**McCormick
County
School
District**

**McCormick
County Food
Bank**

**Paul Dennis
Center**

**Durant
Family
Daycare**

**McCormick
Cornerstone**

**McCormick
County First
Steps**

**Uptown
Family
Practice**

**McCormick
County DHEC**

**McCormick
Mental
Health**

**McCormick
Count
HeadStart**

**Walsch
Dental**

McCORMICK COUNTY



Getting children ready for school.

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