

2025 COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT



November
2025

Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency
Van Buren County Head Start
Community Assessment



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UPPER CUMBERLAND HUMAN RESOURCE AGENCY
VAN BUREN COUNTY HEAD START
COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency (UCHRA) was established by the Tennessee General Assembly in 1973 to be the delivery system for human resources in the 14 counties in Middle Tennessee: Cannon, Clay, Cumberland, DeKalb, Fentress, Jackson, Macon, Overton, Pickett, Putnam, Smith, **Van Buren**, Warren, and White.

Since 1991, the agency has provided Head Start through its UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start program, serving low-income families in rural Van Buren County. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start employs 15 staff members and is funded to serve 37 children.

SERVICE AREA DEMOGRAPHICS

The total population in the service area – Van Buren County – is 6,686. With a total land area of 273 square miles, the county is very sparsely populated; population density is 22.6 residents per square mile compared to 167.6 residents per square mile in Tennessee.

Residents in Van Buren County are predominantly White, non-Hispanic. More than 95% of residents identify as White; less than 1% of residents are Hispanic/Latino. The primary language of individuals in the service area is English (spoken by nearly 95% of residents). The remaining residents report speaking another Indo-European language (3.8%) or Spanish (1.2%). The median age of county residents (47.4) skews higher than the state median (38.9), and one-quarter of county residents are age 65 or over.

The poverty rate in Van Buren County is 17.0%, compared to 14.0% in the state. Across the service area, there is disparity with regard to poverty rates by race. For example, poverty rates are significantly higher among residents identified as American Indian & Alaska Native and as “two or more races” than among White and Asian individuals. Similarly, the poverty rate among individuals of Hispanic or Latino origin is higher than that of individuals who are White alone. It is important to note that due to small populations, rates for certain population subgroups may represent only a handful of individuals.

In Van Buren County, most children live with their biological, step, or adoptive parents, though more than 10% of children live with a grandparent and more than 10% live with a foster parent. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership note that children may be living with grandparents as a result of custody arrangements (formal and informal). Additionally, the high rate of children living in foster care is likely an intentional strategy by the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services. For safety reasons, TN DCS often places children with foster families in remote, rural communities far from their homes.

NEEDS OF ELIGIBLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO MEET NEEDS

There is great diversity of need in UCHRA's Van Buren County Head Start service area. Some families may have few needs, while other families experience many of the factors that contribute to the cycle of poverty within their communities.

While the high school graduation rate (89.8%) in Van Buren County is on par with the state rate, data shows disparities among student subgroups. Graduation rates are most challenging for students with disabilities (50.0%), which is significantly lower than the state rate for students with disabilities (80.0%).

With regard to health and well-being, the most recent report of County Health Rankings (2023) ranked Van Buren County 82nd for health outcomes and 84th for health factors out of 95 counties in Tennessee. Most recent data indicates that rates of smoking, obesity, and diabetes in the service area are all elevated compared to state rates.

While the majority of adults and children in the service area are covered by health insurance, access to medical care is challenging due to limited medical resources in the county. According to leadership team members, there is only one private physician (available weekly) and one nurse practitioner for all of Van Buren County. There is also one physician available monthly through the county health department.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start has partnerships to provide health services to enrolled children and to maintain access to health services. Once a year, the county health department hosts a dentist from Nashville to conduct children's dental screenings. The Lions Club from nearby Cumberland County visits once a year to conduct vision screenings. Van Buren County Schools conducts hearing screenings onsite.

Like adult health factors, there are strengths and challenges in Van Buren County with regard to infant and maternal health. The rate of live births among women in the county has risen steadily since 2020. More than one-quarter of Van Buren County babies are born to women who received no or late prenatal care, a rate comparable to the state. In Van Buren County, more than half of birthing women have a chronic health condition associated with preterm birth, including pre-pregnancy hypertension and diabetes, smoking, and being underweight or obese before pregnancy.

March of Dimes has designated Van Buren County a maternity care desert – a county without a hospital or birth center offering obstetric care and without any obstetric providers. Expectant mothers must travel approximately 1 hour to give birth in neighboring Cumberland, Putnam, or Warren counties. The drive is even farther for women experiencing high-risk pregnancies, who must travel 2 hours to Chattanooga.

Nutrition is a critical factor for children's healthy development. The food insecurity rate in Van Buren County (18.5) is higher than the statewide rate (14.0). A food desert is defined as a census tract in which a significant number or share of residents is more than 1 mile (urban) or 10 miles (rural) from the nearest food store. Based on this definition, there are no low-income and low-access food deserts in Van Buren County. However, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership reports that the county is home to only one food market. In rural Van Buren County, it can therefore be assumed that some residents are driving up to 10 miles to the nearest food store.

Further, nutrition needs are evident in the participation rates of schools in the Community Eligibility Provision program, which provides free meals to all students as long as 25% of the student population is certified for free meals. At the lone elementary school in Van Buren County, the rate is 71%.

Housing data show that while factors such as median home value and rent are lower in the county when compared to the state, they have risen steadily in recent years. Median home value is significantly lower in Van Buren County (\$119,600) compared to the state (\$232,100). As the most recently available U.S. Census data (2018-2022) does not capture the full impact of inflation on the current value of homes, Zillow data is utilized to supplement Census data and provide a more real-time understanding of increasing housing costs. In September 2024, according to Zillow, the average home value in Van Buren County was \$215,969, up 6.3% from the year prior.

For renters, the housing market is equally challenging. The rental cost burden in the service area is high; nearly half of households in the county are spending 30% or more of their monthly income on rent. From FY2023 to FY2024, fair market rent increased by 15.3%.

Living wage data for Van Buren County provides insight into how much families must earn in order to cover everyday expenses and shows that median household income is far insufficient. Additionally, the living wage for a single-parent household (\$77,294) is far greater than the median household income (\$44,730) due to the cost of childcare. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership notes that most county residents earn far below a living wage.

Employment data shows that labor force participation among Van Buren County residents (47.2%-49.9%) is lower than that of residents statewide (58.0%-65.0%). Specific to Head Start, based on 2023-2024 Program Information Report, 39 of the 46 (85%) families served reported having at least one adult in the household who is employed, in a job training program, or in school. This rate is much higher than the county rate, suggesting that the Head Start program provides a much-needed resource for working families.

Due to its small population and remote location, there are limited social services available to meet families' needs in Van Buren County. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start has been leading the effort to coordinate and deliver much-needed resources to families.

ELIGIBLE CHILDREN AND PREGNANT WOMEN

In Van Buren County, there are an estimated 61 children, under age 5, who are eligible for Head Start or Early Head Start based on family income at or below the federal poverty level. Of these children, an estimated 37 are under age 3 and eligible for Early Head Start; 24 are estimated to be 3-5 years old and eligible for Head Start. An estimated 109 children birth to age 5 in the service area are eligible for Head Start/Early Head Start services based on receipt of public assistance.

During the 2024-2025 school year, students experiencing homelessness made up 17% of public school enrollment in the county. Drawing on this percentage, it can be estimated that there are approximately 76 children under age 5 experiencing homelessness in the service area. Public school enrollment also offers insight into the foster care population. In the 2024-2025 school year, fewer than 10 students enrolled in Van Buren County Schools were identified as being in foster care. Therefore, it can be assumed there are fewer than 10 children under age 5 who are living in foster care in the county.

Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) require at least 10% of program enrollment to be children eligible for services under IDEA (i.e., early intervention and preschool special education). Data from Tennessee's Early Intervention System (TEIS) shows no children ages birth to 3 receiving services in the county.

However, using data on special education from Van Buren County Schools, it can be estimated there are 20 children ages 3-5 with an identified disability in the county.

AGENCIES SERVING ELIGIBLE HEAD START/EARLY HEAD START CHILDREN

There are no licensed child care providers in Van Buren County. Preschool is offered at two locations: UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start and the Early Bird Pre-K program at Spencer Elementary School. Neither program serves infants and toddlers. The combined capacity of these two programs is 90 children.

Licensed capacity does not necessarily reflect the number of children that a program would typically have enrolled, as other factors, such as class size limits and staffing, may impact the number of children served at any given time. When comparing the number of children under five years old in the service area to total licensed capacity, the number of children under 5 (303) far exceeds total licensed capacity (90), representing available capacity for just 30.0% of children under 5. While notable, this does not necessarily reflect unmet need, as children may be served in other locations or settings, such as family, friend, and neighbor care, and not all families with young children will need or want care.

Tennessee home visiting services are coordinated by the Tennessee Department of Health. In Van Buren County, home visiting is implemented by Centerstone Tennessee for families prenatal through children age 3.

FAMILY, STAFF, AND COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Family, staff, and community input are valuable sources of data to guide program options and services and to enhance collaborations among partners. In Fall 2024, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start conducted Family, Staff, and Community Provider surveys as important sources of data to inform this Community Assessment. Surveys are provided in the Appendix.

Family Input

All families enrolled in the Head Start program responded to the survey for a 100% response rate. Key takeaways include:

Program Location and Schedule.

- The location of the Head Start center meets family needs (87.5%)
- The program schedule meets family needs (97.0%)
- Families rely on their own car and/or the school bus to transport children to program: own car (68.9%); school bus (43.8%)
- Satisfaction with program impact and effectiveness (96.9%-100.0%)

Family Challenges & Stressors.

- Work/life balance (37.5%)
- Child care, Dental care (both 31.3%)
- Financial (28.1%)

Access to Services.

- Barriers to access include being uncomfortable asking for help (25.5%) and lack of knowledge of available services (21.9%)

Staff Input

All 14 staff members responded to the survey for a 100% response rate. Key takeaways include:

Personal Stressors for Staff.

- Work/life balance (57.1%)
- Financial (35.7%)
- Mental health, dental care, child care (all 21.4%)

Program Location and Schedule.

- Location is convenient for families (100.0%)
- Schedule is convenient for families (85.7%)

Staff Opinions About Top Stressors for Enrolled Head Start Families.

- Financial, Food Insecurity, Housing, Transportation (all 71.4%)

Community Input

Ten respondents completed the Community Provider Survey, with diverse representation from Van Buren County and beyond.

Outreach strategies.

- Word of mouth and Community events (both 80.0%)
- Social media and Partnerships (both 70.0%)

Community Provider Opinions About Top Stressors for Families.

- Housing (66.7%)
- Food insecurity, Financial, and Drug abuse/Substance abuse in the community (all 55.6%)

REFLECTIONS

As described throughout the Community Assessment report, there is diversity of need coupled with limited resources in the UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start service area. This becomes most evident when reviewing local data. By partnering with local community providers and leveraging its relationship with its parent agency, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start is providing services to those most in need.

Drawing from the data and key findings of the *2024 Community Assessment* and input from leadership team members, the following reflections will be considered to support the program's continued responsiveness to community needs.

Reflection 1: Program Design. The UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start program regularly engages in the best practice of reviewing slot allocations in the context of community-wide trends to explore strategies that support responsiveness to changes in community needs. Further, the program will continue to update and explore community level data to support the ongoing provision of a high-quality program (e.g., Wage and Benefits Comparability Study, Community Assessment, self-assessment, enrollment and waiting list data, and input from the Board and Policy Council).

Reflection 2: Staff Recruitment, Professional Development, and Retention. Continue to enact best practices and innovative recruitment methods to hire qualified staff. The program assists staff who attend college in obtaining benefits such as tuition assistance and stipends through two statewide initiatives aimed at fortifying the early childhood workforce and promoting retention: TECTA (Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance) for tuition assistance and Child Care WAGE\$ Tennessee for salary supplements. The program will also continue to provide volunteer opportunities for parents of enrolled children to help them gain knowledge and experience for possible future employment at the program.

Reflection 3: Community Information, Resources, and Referrals. Continue to leverage the resources of its parent agency to deliver services locally. Examples include referrals for the Relative Caregiver program, on-demand transportation, emergency housing vouchers, and commodities distribution. Results from the 2024 Family Survey found that 20%-25% of families did not know what resources were available or were reluctant to ask for help. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership views this as an opportunity to explore additional outreach opportunities and build trust with families.

In 2023, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start took the lead in forming the Van Buren County Prevention Coalition, composed of community leaders and resource providers to address challenges and gaps in services with regard to substance abuse. The primary goal of the Prevention Coalition is to one day serve as a standalone community resource provider for residents struggling with substance abuse.

Reflection 4: Affordable Housing. Recently updated Head Start Program Performance Standards note that when HS/EHS programs are verifying eligibility, a program may make an adjustment to a family's gross income calculation for the purposes of determining eligibility to account for excessive housing costs. In response, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start has begun using a Housing Cost Tool calculator provided by the National Head Start Association to determine eligibility. The program will continue to monitor data and update its policies to identify and enroll families in need.

Reflection 5: Homelessness. Continue to advocate for, and provide support to, families experiencing homelessness and those on the brink of eviction or homelessness. Ensure that enrollment staff and families are aware of, and understand, the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness and how it impacts eligibility for Head Start services (e.g., “doubled-up” families).

With 17% of public school students experiencing homelessness, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start will continue to strengthen its partnership with the LEA homelessness liaison to identify families and refer siblings to Head Start as appropriate.

Reflection 6. Relationship with Local Education Agency. Van Buren County Schools and the Head Start program are the only two options for preschool services in the county. The program will continue to build on and strengthen the relationship with the school district to enhance information-sharing and referrals.

Reflection 7: Food Insecurity. Nearly one in five county residents faces food insecurity. Data shows 21.1% of county children receive SNAP benefits. Among respondents to the Fall 2024 Family Survey, 15.6% indicated that food insecurity was a stressor for their family. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start will continue to provide food assistance to families in need through a small food pantry onsite stocked with free food items for families and members of the community, as well as coordination of regular commodities distributions led by UCHRA. The program also continues to implement a monthly family nutrition activity, as well as educational home activities about nutrition.

Since 2020, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start has distributed free turkeys and trimmings to all enrolled families at Thanksgiving and Christmas (when possible). Families also receive materials for an educational activity that they can use with their children while preparing the holiday meals. All food items are donated by the community.

Reflection 8: Preventive and Primary Care. Continue to strengthen collaborations with health partners including the Van Buren County Health Department, Mental Health Consultant, Van Buren County Schools, and Lions Club to coordinate events supporting overall health and support services provided in the program. Continue to promote the importance of preventative and primary care through the curriculum and with families; address barriers to maintaining an on-time health schedule and reinforce the importance of follow-up care.

Reflection 9: Transportation. Stay abreast of developing community transportation resources that may be shared with enrolled families. Continue to refer families to local existing public transportation options (e.g., on-demand services) as needed. Grow and continue to utilize strategies to reduce transportation burdens on families, such as continuing to provide school bus transportation between the Head Start center and town of Spencer.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION	10
Agency Overview	10
Head Start Program Summary	10
Community Assessment	11
METHODOLOGY	11
Head Start Program Performance Standards	11
Process and Data Collection Methods	12
Data Analysis: An Equity Perspective	12
Limitations of 2024 Community Assessment	12
OVERVIEW OF SERVICE AREA	13
Geographic Boundaries	13
County and Local Government and Economics	14
Service Area Demographics	15
Poverty	17
Household Composition and Family Characteristics	20
NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES	22
Education	22
Health	24
Nutrition	32
Social and Economic Factors Impacting Well-being	35
EMPLOYMENT, WORKFORCE, AND TRANSPORTATION	41
Labor Force, Industries, and Occupations	41
Employment	43
Education and Training	44
Transportation	45
Work and Training Schedules	47
ELIGIBLE CHILDREN AND PREGNANT WOMEN	47
Child Poverty and Geographic Location	48
Race and Ethnicity of Eligible Children in Poverty	50
Language of Eligible Children	50
Cultural Trends	50
Children Experiencing Homelessness	51
Children in Foster Care	53
Children Receiving Public Assistance	54
Children with Disabilities	55
AGENCIES SERVING HEAD START/EARLY HEAD START ELIGIBLE CHILDREN	57
Child Care Centers and Family Child Care	58
Home Visiting	60
Publicly Funded Preschool	60
FAMILY, STAFF, AND COMMUNITY INSIGHTS	61
Family Input	61
Staff Input	64
Community Input	68
RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES	71
REFLECTIONS	74
LOOKING AHEAD	76
APPENDIX: FAMILY, STAFF, AND COMMUNITY PROVIDER SURVEYS	77

INTRODUCTION



Agency Overview

Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency was established by the Tennessee General Assembly in 1973 to be the delivery system for human resources in the 14 counties in Middle Tennessee: Cannon, Clay, Cumberland, DeKalb, Fentress, Jackson, Macon, Overton, Pickett, Putnam, Smith, **Van Buren**, Warren, and White.

Through a breadth of services, UCHRA supports the region's most vulnerable residents. Services include:

Homemaker Aide/Chore Services to enable elderly and disabled clients remain in their own homes; Adult Protective Service Homemaker Services, which provides basic services to support

vulnerable populations who have been abused, neglected, or exploited to live independently; Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP); and Weatherization Assistance.

Through the Community Service Block Grant Program (CSBG), UCHRA provides vouchers for food, utility, and rental or housing for vulnerable populations. Additional services include public transportation and regional vanpool services, meal services for seniors, court-appointed special advocates (CASA), and community intervention for juvenile offenders.

Head Start Program Summary

Since 1991, Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency (UCHRA) Van Buren County Head Start has served low-income families in the mostly rural, sparsely populated county.

The program offers evidence-based educational practices, including teacher visits to a child's home three times a year and ongoing parental education. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start employs 14 staff and is funded to serve 37 children.

The program provides services in two classrooms in a Van Buren County Schools facility. These classrooms are provided through a no-cost lease as in-kind support from the school district.

Located along Route 30 on the eastern side of the county, the UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start center is 20-minute (or 9 mile) drive from the town of Spencer, where the majority of Head Start families reside. The trip requires travel down a curvy, steep, narrow, and deteriorated mountain road with a small valley before going up another mountain to reach the center. Because of this challenging commute, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start offers a bus to and from the program for families in Spencer.

OUR VISION

To enhance positive transformation for our children, families, staff, and community through partnerships which allow for the entire group to benefit from each other for a thriving society for future growth and generations to succeed.

OUR MISSION

Foster individual development for children, families, and staff to sustain positive transitions into the future.

OUR VALUES

Impossible Dreams; Hand In Hand, Together We Can

Community Assessment

Prior to this comprehensive community assessment, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start completed its last comprehensive community assessment in 2024, with updates each year thereafter. The *2019 Community Assessment* highlighted the needs of children and families in the service area.

The primary purpose of this *2025 Community Assessment* is to provide data and information to support UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start program planning. It is an opportunity for the program to explore the needs of community residents and to look closely at the availability of resources and early learning services for young children and their families.

Throughout this report, highlighted areas of data tables point to data that stands out in comparison to other data (e.g., statewide data). Data table footnotes provide additional detail about comparison points.

METHODOLOGY

Head Start Program Performance Standards

Community assessment is a central aspect of any Head Start or Early Head Start program, serving as a tool for program planning and implementation. Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), Section 1302.11, *Determining community strengths, needs, and resources*, requires that programs complete a community assessment once during each five-year grant period and must review and update the community assessment annually.¹ This *2025 Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency Van Buren County Head Start Community Assessment* provides data and information to describe the strengths, needs, and resources of its Head Start program and service area. Data from the community assessment will be used by the agency, in collaboration with the Governing Board and Policy Council, to determine immediate and longer-term goals and objectives for the program.

Per the HSPPS, Section 1302.11², required data presented in the *2025 Community Assessment* includes:

- 1) The number of eligible infants, toddlers, preschool age children, and expectant mothers, including their geographic location, race, ethnicity, and languages they speak, including:
 - a) Children experiencing homelessness in collaboration with, to the extent possible, McKinney-Vento Local Education Agency Liaisons (42 U.S.C. 11432 (6)(A));
 - b) Children in foster care;
 - c) Children with disabilities, including types of disabilities and relevant services and resources provided to these children by community agencies;
- 2) The education, health, nutrition and social service needs of eligible children and their families, including prevalent social or economic factors that impact their well-being;
- 3) Typical work, school, and training schedules of parents with eligible children;
- 4) Other child-development, child-care centers, and family child care programs that serve eligible children, including home visiting, publicly funded state and local preschools, and the approximate number of eligible children served;
- 5) Resources available in the community to address the needs of eligible children and their families; and

¹ Head Start ECLKC. Head Start Policy and Regulations, 1302.11 Determining community strengths, needs, and resources. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-11-determining-community-strengths-needs-resources>

² Head Start ECLKC. Head Start Policy and Regulations, 1302.11 Determining community strengths, needs, and resources. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-11-determining-community-strengths-needs-resources>

6) Strengths of the community.

Process and Data Collection Methods

The *2025 Community Assessment* was conducted September-November 2025 under the leadership of Elsie Blaylock, Head Start Director, Rita Mayfield, Assistant Mentor-Coach/Education Supervisor/Professional Development Coordinator, Kendra Heard, Family & Community Partnership Specialist, Carrie Swafford, Health and Disability, Nutrition, and Safety Specialist. Data collection methods included:

- Review of program operations, challenges, and observed trends with agency staff;
- Program-level data from UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start;
- Needs assessments and reports gathered from county departments and community agencies;
- Information gathered from publicly available data sources (e.g., U.S. Census, state departments, federal agencies, state and national organizations); and
- Data from surveys of UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start families, staff, and community providers.

Data Analysis: An Equity Perspective

When conducting the *2025 Community Assessment*, Foundations for Families analyzed data from an equity perspective to determine if there are certain types of families that are accessing or could benefit from UCHRA programs, including the Head Start program, more than other families. In doing so, Foundations for Families explored layers of data to uncover disparities among subgroups within the service area and among children and families served. By taking the additional step to identify disparities, UCHRA will be able to target its strategies to address the most pressing needs through its programs. This is a method to continuously improve program implementation while monitoring specific data for trends indicating whether outcomes are improving for the children and families most in need.

Limitations of 2025 Community Assessment

The UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start service area is defined at the county level; therefore, a substantial amount of data at the county level was used to inform the agency's community assessment. State-level data is provided when county-level data is not available, for comparison to county data, or to set the context for Tennessee within the national landscape. School district, city/town, and census tract-level information are provided for key data points and to illustrate unique and specific needs in local communities.

Throughout the report, when relevant or required data points could not be obtained to inform the community assessment, this is indicated in the text. Anecdotal information is provided, where possible, to balance statewide, county, and local data with observations and reflections about the experiences of children and families in the service area.

When examining U.S. Census data tables, the margins of error for data on communities with small populations may be higher than communities with large populations.

OVERVIEW OF SERVICE AREA



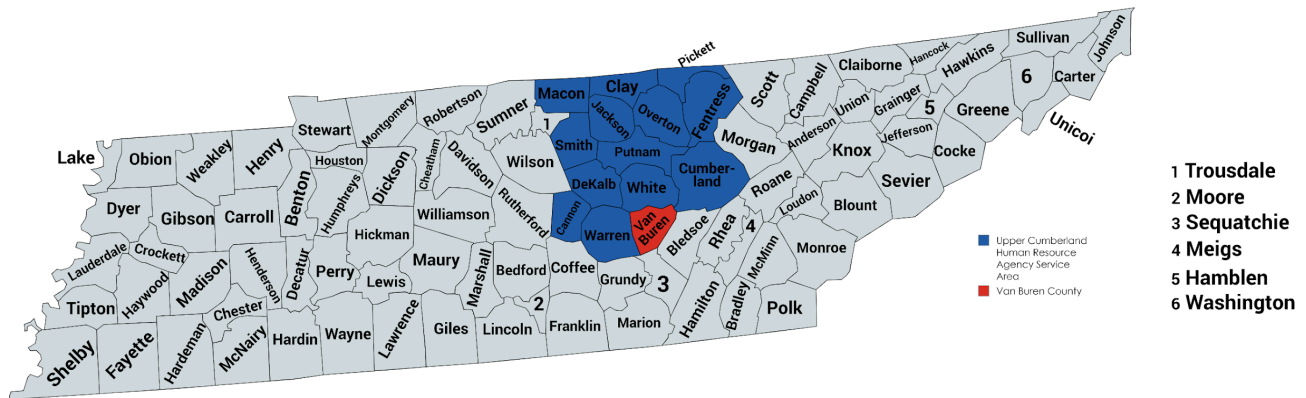
Geographic Boundaries

The UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start service area is Van Buren County, Tennessee. Van Buren County is landlocked and located on the Cumberland Plateau in the central part of the state. It is surrounded by Cumberland, White, Warren, Sequatchie, and Bledsoe counties. The nearest large cities are Nashville, approximately 1.5 hours to the west; Knoxville, 1.5 hours to the east; and Chattanooga, approximately 1.5 hours to the south.

Van Buren County is home to Fall Creek Falls State Park, the largest and most visited state park in Tennessee with more than 1 million visitors annually.³ The park encompasses more than 29,800 acres and features cascades, gorges, waterfalls, streams, and forest. Fall Creek Falls, at 256 feet, is one of the highest waterfalls in the eastern United States.⁴ The park is a source of employment for county residents, as well as an attraction for visitors and wealthy retirees moving into the area, putting a strain on local housing.

Throughout this report, where available, data for Bledsoe County is included for context as this neighboring county offers many resources to residents of Van Buren County. Additionally, where available, data is included for the town of Spencer, the county seat of Van Buren County, where the majority of Head Start families reside.

Figure 1. Map of Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency Service Area⁵

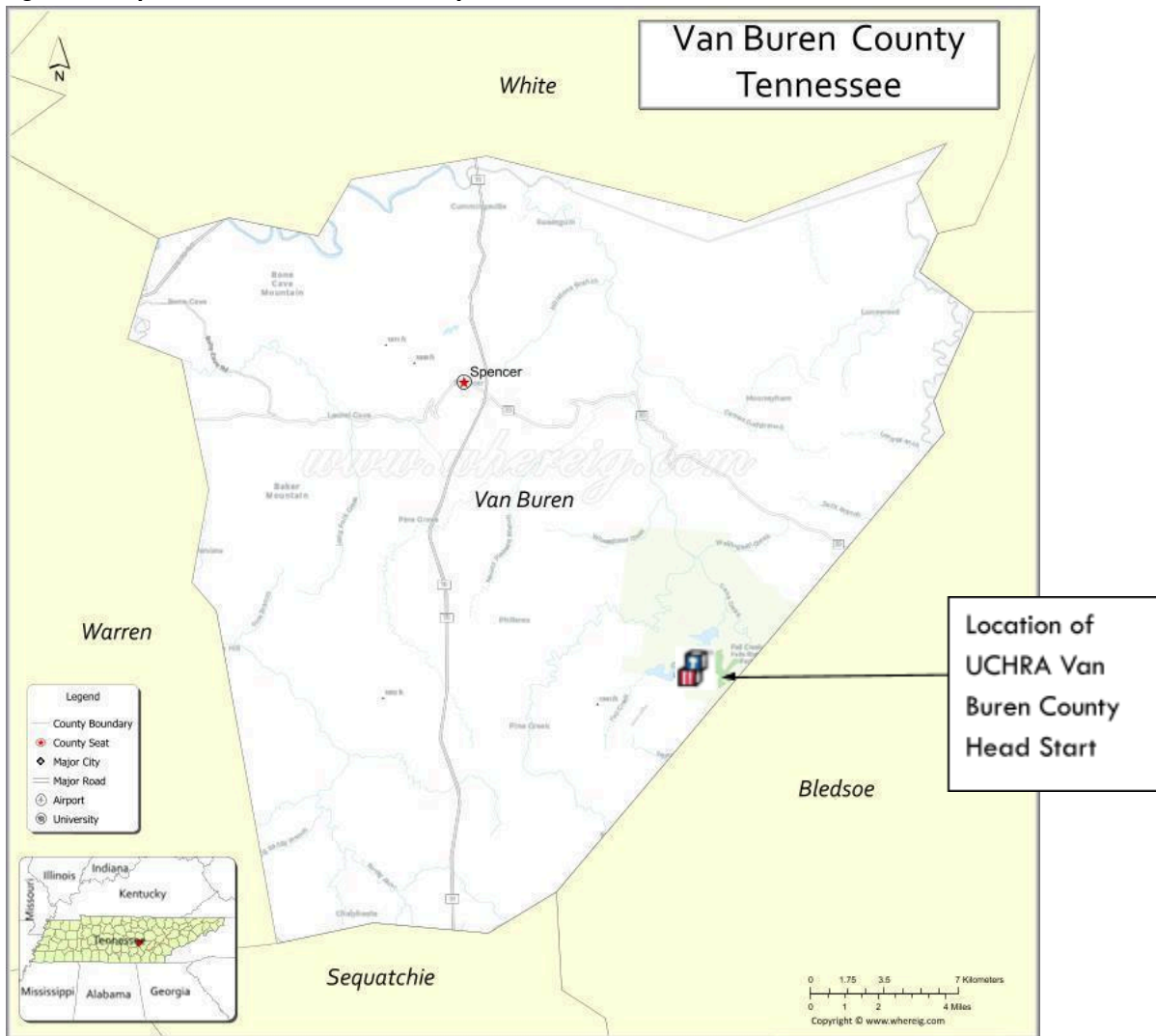


³ Van Buren County. (2024). Welcome to the Official Website of Van Buren County. Retrieved from <https://vanburencountyttn.com/index.html>

⁴ Tennessee State Parks. (2024). Fall Creek Falls State Park. Retrieved from <https://tnstateparks.com/parks/fall-creek-falls>

⁵ Map Chart. (2024). USA Counties Map. Retrieved from <https://mapchart.net/usa-counties.html>

Figure 2. Map of UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start Service Area⁶



County and Local Government and Economics

There are 95 counties in the state of Tennessee. Under the Tennessee Constitution, counties are an extension of the state and are deemed political subdivisions of the state created in the exercise of its sovereign power to carry out the policy of the state. Counties are subject to control by Tennessee's legislature, known as the General Assembly. Although the General Assembly has very broad powers to deal with county government, the state's constitution places some limitations on its discretion regarding counties.

Van Buren County is governed by a County Mayor and a 10-member elected Board of Commissioners representing five districts. There are 147 public school districts in the state. In Van Buren County, the public school district is Van Buren County Schools.

The land area and population per square mile for Van Buren County and the state are noted in Table 1. At just 22.6 residents per square mile, Van Buren County is a sparsely populated rural community. In contrast to

⁶ Whereig.com. (2024). Van Buren County Map, Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.whereig.com/usa/states/tennessee/counties/van-buren-county-map-tn.html>

the rest of the county, the county seat of Spencer has a population density that is 10 times greater than the county itself.

Table 1. Land Area in Square Miles and Population Per Square Mile by Geographic Area (2020)⁷

Geographic Area	Land Area in Square Miles	Population Per Square Mile
Spencer	6.6	224.1
Van Buren County	273.42	22.6
Bledsoe County	406.43	36.7
Tennessee	41,232.49	167.6

Van Buren County includes one federally designated Opportunity Zone (designed to increase economic development by providing investors with tax benefits) in the northern part of the county. Despite the Opportunity Zone designation, UCHRA Van Buren County Head State leadership reports a lack of growth in business development in the county.

Table 2. Opportunity Zone Census Tracts by County (2024)⁸

Van Buren County
47175925200 (North of Spencer, in the area of Spokelay Road and Hill Road)
Bledsoe County
47007953100 (between CSX Railroad and US 127 By-Pass)

Service Area Demographics

The population in Van Buren County is 6,168 (an increase of 8.2% from 2013-2017)⁹. Among the state’s 78 rural counties, Van Buren County was the 8th fastest growing county from 2022 to 2023, gaining 152 new residents.¹⁰ However, state population growth estimates indicate a potential decrease in county population in the next four years (Table 4).¹¹

Table 3. Population by Geographic Area and Year^{12,13,14}

Geographic Area	2013-2017	2018-2022	% Change
Spencer	1,729	1,469	-15.0%
Van Buren County	5,675	6,182	+8.2%
Bledsoe County	14,413	14,816	+2.7%
Tennessee	6,597,381	6,923,772	+4.7%

Table 4. Tennessee Population Growth Estimates by Geographic Area and Year¹⁵

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). QuickFacts. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/>

⁸ US Department of the Treasury. (2024). Map of Designated Qualified Opportunity Zones. Retrieved from <https://www.cdfifund.gov/opportunity-zones>

⁹ American Community Survey is an ongoing survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. ACS 5-Year Estimates pool together the results of the five previous survey years (2018-2022) that can be compared to the preceding non-overlapping 5-year data estimates (2013-2017).

¹⁰ University of Tennessee Knoxville. Tennessee State Data Center. (2023). 2022 County Population Estimates: Most Metros Swell, Rural Tennessee Counties See Upswing. Retrieved from <https://tnsdc.utk.edu/2023/04/05/2022-county-population-estimates-most-metros-swell-rural-tennessee-counties-see-upswing/>

¹¹ Tennessee Department of Health. General Health Data: Population, (2024). Population Estimates 2024-2028. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/statistics/health-data/population.html>

¹² U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁴ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

¹⁵ Tennessee Department of Health. General Health Data: Population, (2024). Population Estimates 2024-2028. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/statistics/health-data/population.html>

Geographic Area	2024			2026			2028		
	Total	Age 0-17	%	Total	Age 0-17	%	Total	Age 0-17	%
Van Buren County	5,903	1,128	19.1%	5,873	1,101	18.7%	5,836	1,073	18.4%
Bledsoe County	15,679	2,193	14.0%	15,872	2,197	13.8%	16,038	2,191	13.7%
Tennessee	7,125,908	1,560,304	21.9%	7,231,338	1,578,103	21.8%	7,331,859	1,594,964	21.8%

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership note that new residents tend to be retirees, some from out of state, settling in the county for its low cost of living and natural resources (Table 5).

Table 5. Residential Mobility in the Last Year by Geographic Area (2018-2022)¹⁶

Geographic Area	Moved within County		Moved from Different County		Moved from Different State	
	Age 0-17	Age 65+	Age 0-17	Age 65+	Age 0-17	Age 65+
Spencer town	0.0%	8.4%	16.4%	13.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Van Buren County	19.9%	2.5%	21.9%	3.2%	0.0%	17.4%
Bledsoe County	13.1%	3.0%	4.9%	5.1%	0.7%	1.9%
Tennessee	17.2%	6.3%	6.7%	2.7%	5.6%	3.3%

Median age is high in Van Buren County, and similarly high in Spencer, compared to the statewide median. Nearly one in four county residents is over the age of 65.

Table 6. Median Age and Distribution of the Population by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{17,18}

Geographic Area	Median Age	Percent of Population Under Age 5	Percent of Population Over Age 65
Spencer	47.7	3.1%	24.0%
Van Buren County	47.4	5.5%	24.0%
Bledsoe County	44.6	4.3%	19.3%
Tennessee	38.9	5.8%	16.7%

Figure 3. Age Distribution of the Population by Geographic Area (2018-2022)¹⁹

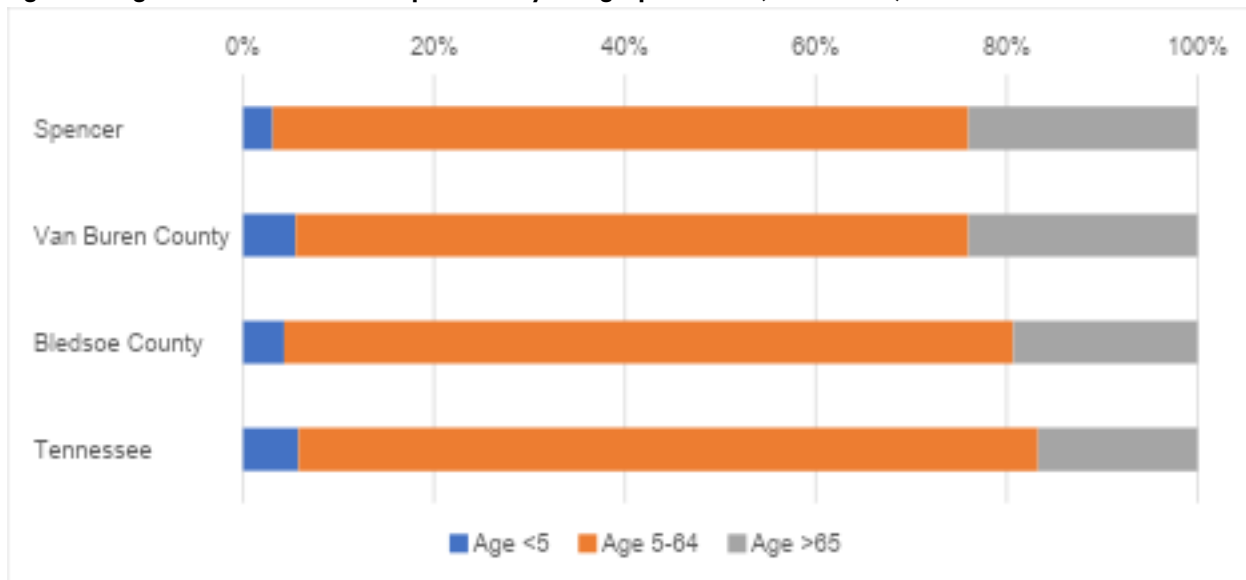


Table 7 describes the population by race in the service area. Table 8 describes ethnicity as a percentage of the population. Residents are predominantly White, non-Hispanic. The most recent data from the U.S. Census show just eight residents who identify as Black or African American, all of whom reside in Spencer, making up less than 0.1% of the county population. Similarly, less than 1% of county residents identify as Hispanic or Latino origin. Neighboring Bledsoe County is more racially and ethnically diverse.

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁸ Values and rates greater than the statewide value and rate are highlighted.

¹⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

Table 7. Population (and Percentage of Population) by Race and Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{20,21}

Geographic Area	White	Black or African American	American Indian and Alaskan Native	Asian	Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander	Some other race	Two or more races
Spencer	1,362 (92.7%)	8 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	99 (6.7%)
Van Buren County	5,882 (95.1%)	8 (0.1%)	26 (0.4%)	14 (0.2%)	0 (0.0%)	25 (0.4%)	227 (3.7%)
Bledsoe County	13,226 (89.3%)	845 (5.7%)	45 (0.3%)	20 (0.1%)	0 (0.0%)	69 (0.5%)	611 (4.1%)
Tennessee	5,182,736 (74.9%)	1,126,815 (16.3%)	14,118 (0.2%)	128,630 (1.9%)	4,684 (0.1%)	139,938 (2.0%)	326,851 (4.7%)

Table 8. Ethnicity as a Percentage of the Population by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{22,23}

Geographic Area	Hispanic or Latino Origin (of any race)	Hispanic or Latino Origin: Mexican	Hispanic or Latino Origin: Puerto Rican	Hispanic or Latino Origin: Cuban	Hispanic or Latino Origin: Other
Spencer	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Van Buren County	0.9%	0.7%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Bledsoe County	3.0%	1.9%	0.6%	0.0%	0.4%
Tennessee	6.0%	3.3%	0.5%	0.2%	1.9%

Poverty



As described in Table 9, the poverty rate in the service area has been decreasing in recent years. In the five-year period from 2018 to 2022, the poverty rate in Van Buren County was 17.0, a decrease of 2.5% from the previous five-year period. The decrease is even more significant in Spencer, where the poverty rate of 13.4 reflects a decrease of 12.7% from the previous five-year period.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership note that decreases in poverty are not necessarily an indication of improved circumstances for families, but rather reflect a trend of local families moving out of the county in search of more affordable housing.

Child poverty data is discussed in detail in the Eligible Children and Pregnant Women section of the report.

Table 9. Poverty Rate by Geographic Area and Year^{24,25}

Geographic Area	2013-2017	2018-2022	Change
Spencer	26.1	13.4	-12.7

²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

²¹ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

²² U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

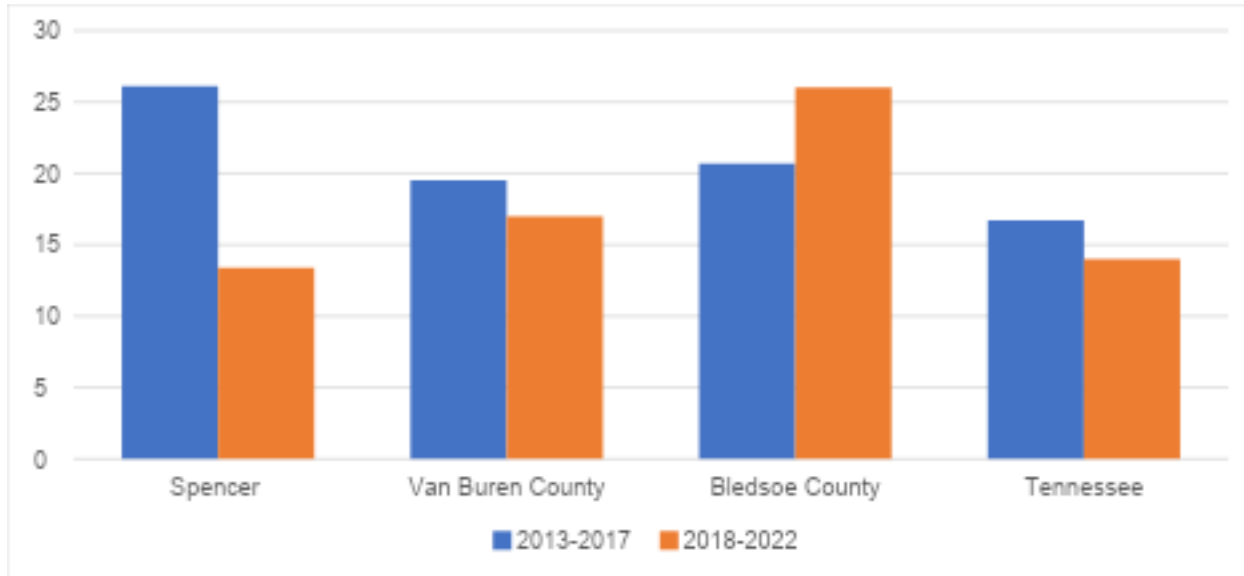
²³ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

²⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

²⁵ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Geographic Area	2013-2017	2018-2022	Change
Van Buren County	19.5	17.0	-2.5
Bledsoe County	20.7	26.0	+5.3
Tennessee	16.7	14.0	-2.7

Figure 4. Poverty Rate by Geographic Area and Year²⁶



Data on percentage multiples of federal poverty guidelines provides a broader picture of poverty and of families on the brink of poverty. For example, in Spencer, 183 residents live below the federal poverty level (FPL). But when expanded to 150% of FPL, this figure more than doubles to 467 residents (Table 10).

Table 10. Population by Geographic Area and Percentage of Federal Poverty Level (2018-2022)²⁷

Geographic Area	Poverty Rate (100% FPL)	125% FPL	150% FPL
Spencer	183 (13.4%)	304	467
Van Buren County	1,012 (17.0%)	1,398	1,783
Bledsoe County	3,549 (26.0%)	4,187	4,788
Tennessee	6,759,549 (14.0%)	1,247,363	1,560,543

Across the service area, there is disparity with regard to poverty rates by race. For example, poverty rates are significantly higher among residents identified as American Indian & Alaska Native and as “two or more races” than among White and Asian individuals (Table 11). Similarly, the poverty rate among individuals of Hispanic or Latino origin is higher than that of individuals who are White alone (Table 12).

It is important to note that when examining U.S. Census data tables, the margins of error for data on communities with small populations may be higher than communities with large populations. This is especially true for Van Buren County, where certain population subgroups may represent only a handful of individuals.

²⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

²⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

Table 11. Number (and Percent) of Individuals Below Poverty Level by Race and Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{28,29}

Geographic Area	White	Black or African American	American Indian & Alaskan Native	Asian	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	Some other race	Two or more races
Spencer	126 (10.0%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	57 (57.6%)
Van Buren County	853 (15.1%)	n/a	26 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	n/a	0 (0.0%)	133 (58.6%)
Bledsoe County	3,045 (24.4%)	126 (26.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	n/a	27 (39.1%)	351 (62.3%)
Tennessee	585,109 (11.5%)	248,593 (22.8%)	3,131 (24.3%)	11,248 (8.9%)	800 (17.8%)	32,761 (23.9%)	61,941 (19.5%)

Table 12. Number (and Percent) of Individuals Below Poverty Level by Ethnicity and Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{30,31}

Geographic Area	Hispanic or Latino Origin	Non-Hispanic or Latino Origin, White Alone
Spencer	4 (100.0%)	126 (10.0%)
Van Buren County	4 (7.1%)	853 (15.1%)
Bledsoe County	213 (48.6%)	2,860 (23.4%)
Tennessee	89,153 (22.1%)	552,364 (11.2%)

Overall in Van Buren County, one in five families with related children under age 5 lives below the Federal Poverty Level. Yet disparities exist with regard to single-parent and two-parent families with young children. In families with a female head of household (no spouse present), the poverty rate (36.7%) is four times greater than for married-couple families (8.8%) (Table 13).

Table 13. Poverty Status of Families in the Past 12 Months by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{32,33}

Geographic Area	All Families with Related Children Under Age 5	Married-couple Families with Related Children Under Age 5	Families with Female Householder, No Spouse Present, with Related Children Under Age 5
Spencer	19.4%	0.0%	24.0%
Van Buren County	20.8%	8.8%	36.7%
Bledsoe County	46.0%	44.5%	72.0%
Tennessee	15.9%	5.0%	44.3%

The Federal Poverty Level is not the only measure of stability for families. Households identified as “ALICE,” Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, earn above the Federal Poverty Level, but not enough to meet a Household Survival Budget, which reflects the bare minimum necessary to live and work (e.g., housing, child care, transportation, taxes).³⁴

A significant shift occurred in the growth of the ALICE population in the state between 2021 and 2023, as the number of Tennessee households living in poverty decreased by 4,982 (to 13% of all households), yet the number of ALICE households increased by 34,214 (remaining at 30% of all households). Specific to Van Buren

²⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

²⁹ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

³⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

³¹ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

³² U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

³³ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

³⁴ United for ALICE. (2024). Research Center – Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://unitedforalice.org/state-overview/Tennessee>

County in 2022, 32% of families were ALICE households (state average 30%) and another 21% were living in poverty (state average 13%).³⁵

Figure 5. Percent of Households by Poverty/ALICE Threshold (2022)³⁶

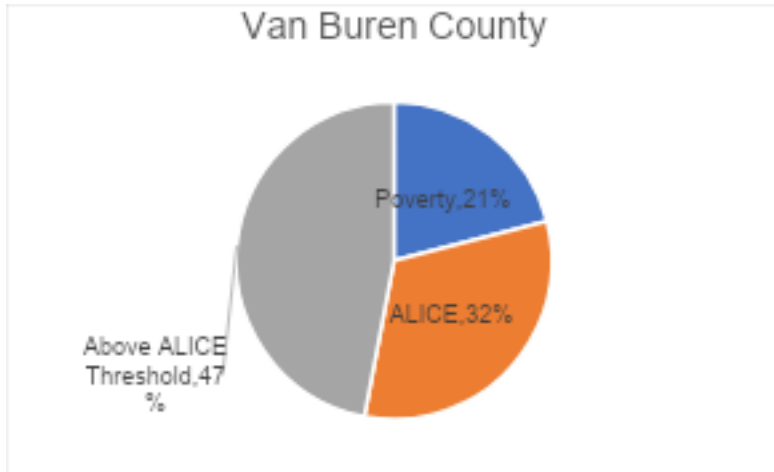


Table 14. Percent of Households Below the ALICE Threshold by Type and Geographic Area (2022)³⁷

Geographic Area	All Households ³⁸	Single or Cohabiting (no children)	Married (with children)	Single-Female-Headed (with children)	Single-Male-Headed (with children)
Van Buren County	32%	49%	24%	79%	87%
Bledsoe County	28%	56%	34%	100%	35%
Tennessee	30%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Household Composition and Family Characteristics

Table 15 describes the percentage of children by relationship to householder. In Van Buren County, most children live with their biological, step, or adoptive parents. In Spencer and Van Buren County, the rate of children living with their grandparents is in line with the state rate (9.4%).

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership noted that the program serves a high number of children in the care of grandparents. There are also multi-generational families where the grandparent is the main caretaker. Program leadership notes that children may be living with grandparents as a result of custody arrangements (formal and informal).

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start refers grandparents caring for children to the Relative Caregiver Program within its parent agency, Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency. Funded by the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, the program offers support services and resources to relatives raising children whose biological parents are no longer able to do so. The program provides monthly support groups and enrichment activities, as well as emergency financial support. Monthly case management is offered to the

³⁵ United for ALICE. (2024). Research Center – Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://unitedforalice.org/state-overview/Tennessee>

³⁶ United for ALICE. (2024). Research Center – Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://unitedforalice.org/county-reports/tennessee>

³⁷ United for ALICE. (2024). Research Center – Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://unitedforalice.org/county-reports/tennessee>

³⁸ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

whole relative family, and caregivers are provided with a manual that lists available resources and services within their own community.

Notably, a significant percentage of children in Van Buren County reside with a foster parent (10.9%). UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership report the high rate of children living in foster care is likely an intentional strategy by the Tennessee Department of Children's Services. For safety reasons, TN DCS often places children with foster families in remote, rural communities far from their homes.

Table 15. Percent of Children (ages 0 to 18-years-old) by Relationship to Householder and Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{39,40}

Geographic Area	Own child (biological, step, or adopted)	Grandchild	Other relatives	Foster child or other unrelated child
Spencer	91.0%	9.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Van Buren County	76.9%	10.5%	1.7%	10.9%
Bledsoe County	77.3%	20.0%	2.2%	0.5%
Tennessee	85.7%	9.4%	2.8%	2.2%

During the 2023-2024 program year, 39% of children enrolled in the UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start lived in families headed by a single parent. (Table 16). Yet, most recent Census data show only 9% of children in the county are living in single-parent households (Table 17). Leadership team members believe that due to lack of affordable housing available to single parents, many of these families are sharing their households with other family members.

As described above, the poverty rate among single-parent families is very high compared to married-couple families. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start is providing critical, comprehensive services to single-parent families.

Table 16. Percent of Single-Parent Families Served by UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start⁴¹

Single-parent families	39.0%
Single-mother families	36.0%
Single-father families	2.2%

Table 17. Percent of Children (0-17) Living in Single Parent Households by Geographic Area (2018-2022)⁴²

Geographic Area	Children Living in Single Parent Households
Van Buren County	9%
Bledsoe County	22%
Tennessee	28%
United States	25%

³⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

⁴⁰ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁴¹ 2023-2024 Program Information Report

⁴² County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2024>

NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



The needs of children and families in communities served by UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start are multi-faceted and interconnected. In an area where there is great diversity of need, some families experience many of the factors that contribute to the cycle of poverty within their communities. Together with other community partners and agencies including its parent agency, Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start strives to meet the evolving needs of the area’s most vulnerable children and families.

Education

In Van Buren County, educational attainment trends toward high school diploma or less; for two out of three residents, the highest educational attainment is high school diploma, some high school with no diploma, or less than 9th grade, significantly higher than the state rate.

Table 18. Education Attainment (Ages 25 and Over) by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{43,44}

Geographic Area	Less Than 9 th Grade	9 th to 12 th Grade, no diploma	High school graduate	Some college, no degree	Associate’s degree	Bachelor’s degree	Advanced degree
Spencer	11.0%	14.8%	52.5%	7.5%	7.6%	4.4%	2.3%
Van Buren County	9.4%	10.0%	47.5%	15.5%	7.3%	5.8%	4.4%
Bledsoe County	7.1%	14.8%	46.0%	16.1%	5.7%	6.4%	4.0%
Tennessee	3.9%	6.8%	31.5%	20.4%	7.7%	18.7%	11.0%

The educational attainment among families served by UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start reflects that of the general population, with 57% reporting an education attainment of high school graduate or GED.

Table 19. Highest Level of Education Attainment of Families Served by UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start (2023-2024)⁴⁵

Education Level	Head Start
Less than high school graduate	1
High school graduate or GED	26
Associate degree, vocational school, or some college	16
Bachelor’s degree or advanced degree	3
Total	46

Public School Achievement. Van Buren County Schools is the public school system for Van Buren County. The district offers one elementary school and one middle/high school on one campus in the town of Spencer. The district served 712 students in the 2024-2025 school year.⁴⁶

While high school graduation rates for all students in Van Buren County are on par with the state rate, data shows disparities among student subgroups. Graduation rates are most challenging for students with

⁴³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

⁴⁴ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁴⁵ 2023-2024 Program Information Report

⁴⁶ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Van Buren County. Retrieved from <https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/district/00880>

disabilities (50.0%), significantly lower than the state rate for students with disabilities (80.0%) and the district rate for all students (89.8%). Drop-out rates are too low to be publicly reported.

Table 20. Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rate by School District and Student Group (2022-2023)^{47,48}

School District	All Students	Economically Disadvantaged	English Learners	Students with Disabilities	Homeless
Van Buren County Schools	89.8	81.8	Data not available	50.0	80.0
Bledsoe County Schools	95.8	95.6	*	95.0	*
Tennessee	90.6	84.0	67.1	80.0	74.9

*data not available for districts with under ten students

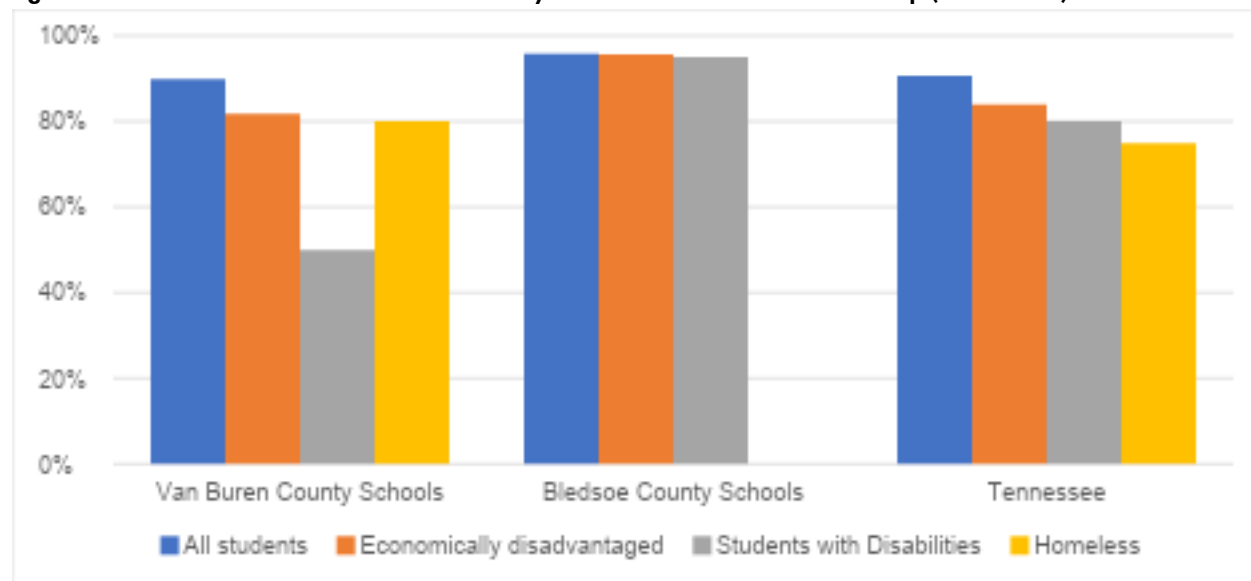
Table 21. Drop Out Rate by School District and Student Group (2021)^{49,50}

School District	All Students	Economically Disadvantaged	English Learners	Students with Disabilities
Van Buren County Schools	*	*	Data not available	*
Bledsoe County Schools	5.4	9.1	**	14.3
Tennessee	6.7	11.4	26.0	10.8

*less than 1%

**fewer than 10 students

Figure 6. Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rate by School District and Student Group (2022-2023)⁵¹



Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) has been the state’s testing program since 1988, and includes assessments in math, English language arts, social studies, and science. The most current data on

⁴⁷ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Data Downloads & Requests: Graduation Cohort Data. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/federal-programs-and-oversight/data/data-downloads.html>

⁴⁸ Rates lower than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁴⁹ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Data Downloads & Requests: Dropout Data. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/federal-programs-and-oversight/data/data-downloads.html>

⁵⁰ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁵¹ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Data Downloads & Requests: Graduation Cohort Data. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/federal-programs-and-oversight/data/data-downloads.html>

student achievement in Van Buren County Schools shows challenges among all students and student subgroups in English Language Arts compared to the state rates.

Math achievement scores for all students are more closely aligned with the state rate, although comparisons of student subgroups show disparities. While math achievement scores for economically disadvantaged students in Van Buren County Schools (33.3%) are higher than the state rate (23.6%), math achievement scores for students with disabilities in the county (8.8%) are half that of the state (17.9%).

Table 22. Percent of Students (Grades 3-5) Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on Tennessee Statewide Assessments by Student Group and Subject (2022-2023)^{52,53}

School District	Subject	All Students	Economically Disadvantaged	English Learners	Students with Disabilities
Van Buren County Schools	English Language Arts	27.5	17.5	Data not available	5.9
	Math	42.5	33.3	Data not available	8.8
Bledsoe County Schools	English Language Arts	41.8	31.1	Data not available	16.3
	Math	34.7	25.2	Data not available	10.9
Tennessee	English Language Arts	40.3	23.3	21.3	14.9
	Math	41.8	23.6	27.5	17.9

In kindergarten, students are assessed for early literacy. In Spring 2024, of the 48 kindergarten students at Spencer Elementary School (the only elementary school in Van Buren County), approximately two-thirds scored below or well below average (Table 23).

Table 23. Number and Percent of Kindergarten Students at Kindergarten Assessment Benchmarks (Spring 2024)⁵⁴

Score	Number of Children	Percent of Children
Well Below Average	20	42%
Below Average	12	25%
Average	15	31%
Above Average	1	2%
Well Above Average	0	0%
Total	48	100%

Health

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, ranks communities across health and wellness factors. The overall rankings in health outcomes represent how healthy counties are within the state. The healthiest county is ranked #1.

Rankings are based on two types of measurements: how long people live and how healthy people feel. The overall rankings in health factors represent what influences the health of a county. They are an estimate of the future health of counties compared to other counties within a state and are based on four factors: health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic, and physical environment.

⁵² Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Data Downloads & Requests: State Assessments. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/federal-programs-and-oversight/data/data-downloads.html>

⁵³ Rates lower than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁵⁴ AimsWebPlus. (2024). Benchmark Comparison Report. Provided by Van Buren County Schools

The most recent report (2023) ranked Van Buren County 82nd for health outcomes and 84th for health factors, out of the 95 counties in Tennessee.

Table 24. Health Outcomes Ranking (Out of 95 Counties in Tennessee) (2021-2023)⁵⁵

Geographic Area	Health Outcomes Rank			Three-Year Trend
	2021	2022	2023	
Van Buren County	67	83	82	Increasing
Bledsoe County	17	21	15	Fluctuating

Table 25. Health Factors Ranking (Out of 95 Counties in Tennessee) (2021-2023)⁵⁶

Geographic Area	Health Factors Rank			Three-Year Trend
	2021	2022	2023	
Van Buren County	83	85	84	Steady
Bledsoe County	92	90	91	Steady

In the service area, there are high rates of physically and mentally unhealthy days, defined as the average number of physically/mentally unhealthy days reported in the past 30 days.

Table 26. Health Outcomes Data by Geographic Area^{57,58}

Geographic Area	Years of Potential Life Lost (2019-2021) ⁵⁹	% Poor or Fair Health (2021)	Physically Unhealthy Days (2021) ⁶⁰	Mentally Unhealthy Days (2021) ⁶¹
Van Buren County	1,680	23%	5.1	6.4
Bledsoe County	9,000	23%	4.9	5.8
Tennessee	11,000	18%	4.1	5.8
United States	8,000	14%	3.3	4.8

Van Buren County residents may experience challenges with other health-related factors. Rates of smokers, obesity, and adults who are diabetic are described in Table 27. Most recent data reflects that rates are all elevated compared to the state and slightly above neighboring Bledsoe County.

Table 27. Adult Health Factors by Geographic Area (2021)^{62,63}

Geographic Area	% Smokers (Cigarette)	% Obese	% Diabetic
Van Buren County	28%	40%	13%
Bledsoe County	27%	38%	12%
Tennessee	20%	36%	10%
United States	15%	34%	10%

⁵⁵ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/Tennessee?year=2024>

⁵⁶ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/Tennessee?year=2024>

⁵⁷ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2024>

⁵⁸ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁵⁹ Defined as “Years of potential life lost before age 75 per 100,000 population (age-adjusted).”

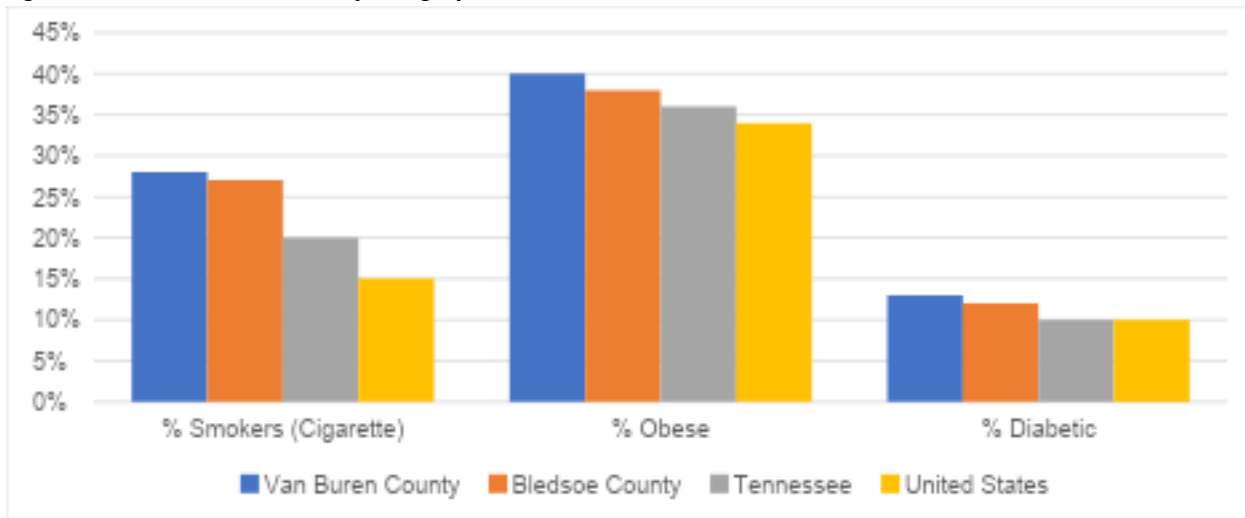
⁶⁰ Average number of physically unhealthy days reported in past 30 days

⁶¹ Average number of mentally unhealthy days reported in past 30 days

⁶² County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2024>

⁶³ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Figure 7. Adult Health Factors by Geographic Area (2021)⁶⁴



Substance Misuse

The state of Tennessee is seeing endemic levels of addiction, overdoses, and death. Despite legislation aimed at reducing the opioid drug supply, the state is ranked third in the nation for prescription drug abuse. In recent years, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation Crime Lab’s Forensic Chemistry Unit has seen a surge of methamphetamine, heroin, and certain opiates in submitted case samples. Additionally, testing has become much more complicated with the increased prevalence of synthetic drugs, counterfeit drugs, fentanyl, carfentanil, and fentanyl analogs.⁶⁵

Table 28. Drug Overdose Mortality Rate per 100,000 Individuals (Ages 15-64) by Geographic Area (2018-2021)⁶⁶

Geographic Area	All Drugs		Opioids	
	Drug Overdose Mortality Rate 2018-2021	Change Since 2014-2017	Drug Overdose Mortality Rate 2018-2021	Change Since 2014-2017
Van Buren County	*	**	*	**
Bledsoe County	33.4	**	*	**
Tennessee	57.7	+24.5	45.1	+21
United States	36.8	+10.8	27.3	+10.2

* Insufficient data: for counties with 10-19 recorded deaths over the four-year period, the crude rate may be unreliable.

** Change cannot be determined because data for the previous time period is insufficient.

While data on the rate of drug overdoses in Van Buren County is masked for privacy reasons due to the low count (Table 28), results from a survey of Tennessee public school students provides context for substance misuse in the state and in Van Buren County. Conducted every two years, the survey focuses on youth alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. The Tennessee Together Student Survey captures youth behaviors, attitudes, and social norms related to substance misuse among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders. Key findings from the 2022-2023 survey of nearly 22,000 students are presented in Table 29.

⁶⁴ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2025). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2025>

⁶⁵ Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. (2024). Opioids. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/tbi/crime-issues/crime-issues/opioids.html>

⁶⁶ NORC. (2024). Opioid Misuse Tool. Retrieved from <https://opioidmisusetool.norc.org/>

Table 29. Tennessee Together Student Survey Key Findings (2022-2023)^{67,68}

Substance Misuse	Reported Use in the Past 30 Days	
	Region 3 (23 counties including Van Buren)	Tennessee
Misusing prescription drugs	3.2%	2.9%
Consuming alcohol	10.6%	11.1%
Vaping ⁶⁹	15.7%	15.3%
Using cigarettes	3.5%	3.8%
Using marijuana	9.1%	9.3%

Further, the rate of excessive drinking and driving deaths with alcohol involvement in the service area are lower than the statewide rate (Table 30).

Table 30. Alcohol Use by Geographic Area^{70,71}

Geographic Area	% Excessive Drinking (2021)	% Driving Deaths with Alcohol Involvement (2107-2021)
Van Buren County	14%	14%
Bledsoe County	15%	43%
Tennessee	17%	24%
United States	18%	26%

Neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) or neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome (NOWS) occurs when a woman uses drugs such as opioids during pregnancy. Since the early 2000s, the incidence of NAS in Tennessee increased by 10-fold, far exceeding the national 3-fold increase over the same time period. In 2013, Tennessee became the first state in the nation to require reporting of NAS for public health surveillance purposes. Providers are required to report all diagnoses of NAS within 30 days. Since 2013, Tennessee had seen annual increases in the number of cases of NAS until 2018, when rates started to fall. In 2020, the last year data was made available, rates had dropped to 10 per 1,000 live births from a peak of 13.5 per 1,000 live births in 2017.⁷²

Healthcare and Clinical Care

As described in Table 31, while the majority of adults and children in the service area are covered by health insurance, the rate of adults and the rate of children with no health insurance in Van Buren County are higher than the state and national rate.

Table 31. Percent of the Population that is Uninsured by Geographic Area (2020)^{73,74}

Geographic Area	Adults (Under Age 65)	Children (Under Age 19)
Van Buren County	18%	7%
Bledsoe County	21%	6%
Tennessee	15%	5%

⁶⁷ Tennessee Department of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services. (2024). 2022-2023 TN Together Student Survey Results. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/substance-abuse-services/prevention/tn-together-student-survey.html>

⁶⁸ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁶⁹ Including nicotine, marijuana, and flavoring only.

⁷⁰ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2024>

⁷¹ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁷² Tennessee Department of Health. (2024). About Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/fhw/neonatal-abstinence-syndrome-/about-nas.html>

⁷³ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2024>

⁷⁴ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

United States	12%	5%
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The ratios of primary care physicians/providers, dentists, and mental health providers to individuals in the service area are described in Table 32. This data, along with insight from UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership, reflects a challenge for county residents, most of whom must travel outside the county for medical and dental care. According to leadership team members, there is only one private physician (available weekly) and one nurse practitioner for all of Van Buren County. There is also one physician available monthly through the county health department.

At the Head Start program, once a year, the county health department hosts a dentist from Nashville to conduct children’s dental screenings. The Lions Club from nearby Cumberland County visits once a year to conduct vision screenings. Van Buren County Schools conducts hearing screenings onsite.

Table 32. Ratio of Health Care Providers by Type and Geographic Area^{75,76}

Geographic Area	Primary Care Provider Ratio (2021)	Primary Care Other Provider Ratio* (2023)	Dentist Ratio (2022)	Mental Health Provider Ratio (2023)
Van Buren County	Data for this measure are not available.	**	6,430:1	6,430:1
Bledsoe County	7,620:1	1,480:1	7,400:1	2,960:1
Tennessee	1,440:1	570:1	1,780:1	530:1
United States	1,330:1	760:1	1,360:1	320:1

* Includes nurse practitioners, physician’s assistants, and clinical nurse specialists.

** There was one primary care provider other than a physician per 6,430 people registered in Van Buren County.

Infant and Maternal Health

Like adult health factors, there are strengths and challenges when exploring infant and maternal health. Disparities exist with regard to health factors and health outcomes, pointing to a need for continued services to young children and their families.

The birth rate in Van Buren County has been increasing in recent years, though it remains below the state rate (Table 33).

Table 33. Number (and Rate of Live Births per 1,000 Population) by Mother’s County of Residence and Year⁷⁷

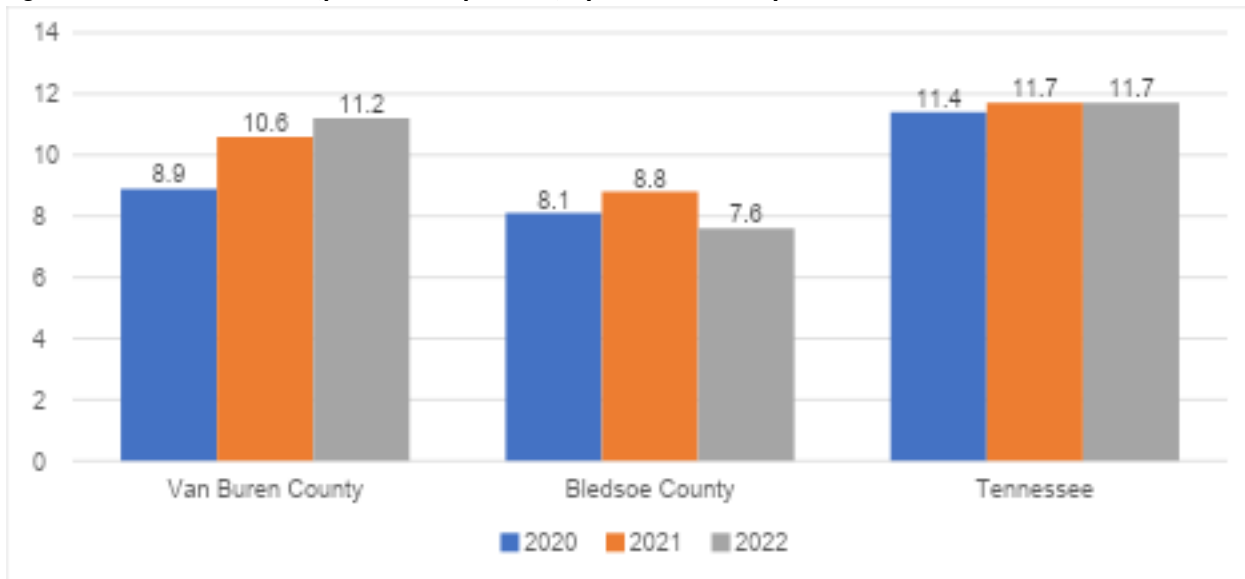
County of Residence	2020	2021	2022	Three-Year Trend
Van Buren County	53 (8.9)	67 (10.6)	72 (11.2)	Increasing
Bledsoe County	124 (8.1)	134 (8.8)	112 (7.6)	Fluctuating
Tennessee	72,685 (11.4)	81,709 (11.7)	82,266 (11.7)	Increasing/Steady

⁷⁵ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2024>

⁷⁶ Ratios greater than the statewide ratio are highlighted.

⁷⁷ Tennessee Department of Health. (2024). General Health Data: Birth Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/statistics/health-data/birth-statistics.html>

Figure 8. Rate of Live Births (per 1,000 Population) by Mother’s County of Residence and Year⁷⁸



March of Dimes, a nonprofit dedicated to the health and well-being of mothers and babies, designates Van Buren County as a maternity care desert – a county without a hospital or birth center offering obstetric care and without any obstetric providers.⁷⁹ According to March of Dimes, the nearest birthing hospital is 26 miles away (Table 34).

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership report that expectant mothers must travel outside the county (approximately 1 hour) to give birth in neighboring Cumberland, Putnam, or Warren counties. Women experiencing high-risk pregnancies must travel 2 hours to Chattanooga.

Table 34. Maternity Care Access (Maternity Care Deserts) by Geographic Area (2023)⁸⁰

Geographic Area	Level of Access	Distance to Birthing Hospital
Van Buren County	Maternity Care Desert	26 miles
Bledsoe County	Maternity Care Desert	29 miles

Prenatal Care. Child health and well-being includes adequate prenatal care. While the majority of babies in the service area are born to women with first trimester prenatal care, more than one-quarter of Van Buren County babies are born to women who received no or late prenatal care. This rate is comparable with Bledsoe County and the state.

Table 35. Percent of Mothers Receiving Adequate Prenatal Care, as a Percentage of Live Births, by Geographic Area (2021)⁸¹

Geographic Area	Percent of Mothers Receiving Adequate Prenatal Care
-----------------	---

⁷⁸ Tennessee Department of Health. (2024). General Health Data: Birth Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/statistics/health-data/birth-statistics.html>

⁷⁹ March of Dimes Peristats. (2024). Maternity Care Desert. Retrieved by <https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/data?top=23&lev=1&stop=641®=37&sreg=37&obj=18&slev=4>

⁸⁰ March of Dimes Peristats. (2024). Where You Live Matters: Maternity Care Access in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/reports/Tennessee/maternity-care-deserts>

⁸¹ Kids Count Data Center. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data?location=TN#TN/2/0/char/0>

Van Buren County	72.7%
Bledsoe County	72.9%
Tennessee	73.9%

Low birth weight (LBW) and premature births. A low birthweight (less than approximately 5.5 pounds) increases the risk of health problems as an infant and later in life. Many factors can increase the likelihood of low birthweight, from environmental factors (exposure to pollution or lead) to health factors (nutrition and stress).

Likewise, preterm birth (before 37 weeks gestation) is a complication that can lead to serious health impacts. Pregnant women with one or more chronic health conditions have a 59% increased likelihood of preterm birth compared to those without any chronic health conditions. In Van Buren County, more than half of birthing women have a chronic health condition associated with preterm birth, including pre-pregnancy hypertension and diabetes, smoking, and being underweight or obese before pregnancy.⁸²

Table 36. Percent of Birthing Women with Chronic Health Conditions by Geographic Area (2023)^{83,84}

Geographic Area	Percent Chronic Health Conditions
Van Buren County	52.0%
Bledsoe County	52.3%
Tennessee	44.2%
United States	37.8%

Table 37. Number of Low Birth Weight and Preterm Births (and Percent of Total Births) by Health Region (2022)^{85, 86}

Health Region	# and Percent of Low Birth Weight	Preterm Births (less than 37 Weeks Gestation)
Upper Cumberland Region (includes Van Buren County)	328 (8.3%)	460 (11.6%)
Southeast Health Region (includes Bledsoe County)	258 (6.9%)	379 (10.2%)
Tennessee	7,366 (9.0%)	9,060 (11.0%)

Teen Pregnancy. Data on teen births is not available because the low counts are suppressed for privacy. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership report the program does not enroll many children of teenage mothers but is prepared to do so through a referral partnership with the local school district.

Table 38. Teen Birth Rate (Ages 15-19), per 1,000, by Geographic Area (2020)^{87,88}

Geographic Area	Number of Teen Births	Teen Birth Rate
Van Buren County	*	*
Bledsoe County	15	57.5

⁸² March of Dimes Peristats. (2024). Where You Live Matters: Maternity Care Access in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/reports/tennessee/maternity-care-deserts>

⁸³ March of Dimes Peristats. (2024). Where You Live Matters: Maternity Care Access in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/reports/Tennessee/maternity-care-deserts>

⁸⁴ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁸⁵ DataTennessee. (2024). Birth Count by County of Residence Viewed Across Year and Low Birth Weight Indicator. Retrieved from https://data.Tennessee.gov/wps/portal/gov/data/view/Tennessee_births

⁸⁶ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁸⁷ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/Tennessee?year=2024>

⁸⁸ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Tennessee	5,678	27.4
United States	--	17

*Count is not displayed according to the Tennessee Department of Health guidelines for release of aggregate data to the public.

Child Health and Well-being

Primary and Preventative Health. Maintaining an up-to-date status on preventative and primary care is essential for children’s healthy development. All children enrolled in UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start for 2023-2024 were up to date on primary and preventative health care at enrollment and at the end of the enrollment year (Table 39). This is remarkable considering families must travel 20 miles or more outside the county for well child exams and immunizations.

Table 39. Percent of UCHRA Van Buren County HS Children Up-to-Date on Age-Appropriate Preventative and Primary Health Care (EPSDT) (2024-2025)⁸⁹

At Enrollment	End of Enrollment Year
52	52

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start maintains a list of health providers and refers families with medical insurance to private medical practices closest to their homes. Those without insurance are referred to the Van Buren County Health Department. For families with no transportation options, the program will transport the child, accompanied by a parent, to medical appointments via the Head Start van.

Children entering kindergarten in Tennessee must be up to date with the following vaccines: Diphtheria-Tetanus-Pertussis vaccine (DTaP), Measles, Mumps, Rubella vaccine (MMR), Hepatitis A Virus vaccine (HAV), Hepatitis B Virus vaccine (HBV), Poliomyelitis vaccine (IPV or OPV), Varicella (chickenpox) vaccine/credible history of disease.

To remain at low risk for a vaccine-preventable disease outbreak, the immunization rate should remain at or above 95%. In the 2022-2023 school year, Van Buren County Schools reported a 91.9% kindergarten immunization compliance rate, categorizing the school district as “needs improvement.”⁹⁰ Though this rate is lower than the state rate and lower than the 95% rate needed to be considered “low risk,” it does reflect an improvement over the 2020-2021 school year when the rate was 84.7%. This low rate was likely a reflection of parents’ concerns and limited access to preventive care during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁸⁹ Program Information Report, 2024-2025

⁹⁰ Tennessee Department of Health. (2024). Tennessee Kindergarten Immunization Compliance Assessment Report 2022-2023 School Year. Retrieved from

<https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/health/documents/cedep-weeklyreports/kindergarten-immunization-compliance/K-Survey-Report-2022-2023.pdf>

Table 40. Kindergarten Immunization Compliance by School District and Year^{91,92,93}

School District	(2020-2021) ⁹⁴	(2022-2023)	Trend
Van Buren County	84.7%	91.9%	Increasing
Bledsoe County	97.2%	92.5%	Decreasing
Tennessee	95.2%	93.5%	Decreasing

Obesity and Chronic Health Conditions. Children who have obesity are at a higher risk of Type 2 Diabetes, breathing problems (such as asthma or sleep apnea), and having obesity as an adult. A child is classified as obese if their body mass index (BMI) is above 95th percentile and overweight if their BMI is between 85th and 94th percentile. Data from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation show Tennessee childhood obesity rates by age group (Table 41).

Table 41. Tennessee Childhood Obesity Statistics (Percentages) by Age Group (2023)⁹⁵

Children Participating in WIC (Age 2-4)	14.6%
Students (10-17 years)	20.9%
High School Students	20.9%

Data from the Tennessee Department of Health for 2021 show that among children aged 2 to 4 enrolled in Tennessee WIC about 1 in 3 (31.9%) were considered to be overweight or obese. In 2021, 19.7% of WIC children had a BMI above the 95th percentile compared to 18.4% in 2020. Data for Van Buren County is suppressed due to low numbers.⁹⁶

In the 2023-2024 program year, the majority of UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start children were considered to be at healthy weight; 12 children were overweight or obese (Table 42). UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start enrolled three children with chronic health conditions, two of whom have autism spectrum disorder (ASD).⁹⁷

Table 42. Number of UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start Children by Weight Categories (2023-2024)⁹⁸

Underweight (less than 5 th percentile BMI)	2
Healthy Weight (5 th to 84 th percentile BMI)	38
Overweight (85 th to 94 th percentile BMI)	7
Obese (at or above 95 th percentile BMI)	5

Updated data on childhood asthma is not readily available. Data on asthma-related emergency department visits provide context for childhood asthma in the service area.

⁹¹ Tennessee Department of Health. (2024). Tennessee Kindergarten Immunization Compliance Assessment Report 2022-2023 School Year. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/health/ceds-weeklyreports.html#k-survey>

⁹² Tennessee Department of Health. (2024). Tennessee Kindergarten Immunization, Compliance Assessment Report 2020-2021 School Year. Retrieved <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/health/documents/annual-reports/K-Survey-Report-2020-2021.pdf>

⁹³ Rates lower than the statewide rate are highlighted.

⁹⁴ The CDC noted a decline in overall vaccination rates as soon as one week after the United States declared a national state of emergency due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The 2020-2021 Kindergarten Immunization Compliance Assessment Report was conducted from November 2020 to February 2021 and affords a unique opportunity to document the impact of the pandemic upon childhood immunization rates in Tennessee.

⁹⁵ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2024). The State of Obesity in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://stateofchildhoodobesity.org/data-by-states/>

⁹⁶ Tennessee Department of Health. (2024). WIC Data and Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/fhw/wic/redirect-wic/data-stats.html>

⁹⁷ 2023-2024 Program Information Report

⁹⁸ Program Information Report, 2022-2023

Table 43. Asthma Related Emergency Department Visits, for All Residents, by Geographic Area (2020)⁹⁹

Geographic Area	Crude Rate per 10,000
Van Buren County	21.1
Bledsoe County	18.1
Tennessee	28.0

Table 44. Asthma Emergency Department Visits, for Children Under 5, by Geographic Area (2016)¹⁰⁰

Geographic Area	Rate per 10,000
Van Buren County	101.7
Bledsoe County	32.5
Tennessee	112.7

Data on child abuse or neglect show improving rates for Van Buren County. In 2022-2023, the county was ranked 64 among all Tennessee counties for child abuse or neglect. This was an improvement over the previous year when the county was ranked 75.

Table 45. Child Victims of Abuse or Neglect Data (per 1,000) by Geographic Area (2022-2023)^{101, 102}

Geographic Area	Rate per 1,000	Rank Out of 95 Counties	Previous Rank
Van Buren County	18.3	64	75
Bledsoe County	18.9	92	80
Tennessee	9.8	--	--

Nutrition

Food Insecurity and Access. Nutrition is a critical factor for children’s healthy development. In 2023, 13.5% of U.S. households were food insecure at least some time during the year, meaning the households had difficulty providing enough food for all their members because of a lack of resources.¹⁰³

The food insecurity rate in Van Buren County (18.5) is higher than the statewide rate (14.0) (Table 46). Additional factors (e.g., cost, transportation) may impact families’ ability to obtain healthy foods.

In the Fall 2024 survey of enrolled families, 15.6% of respondents cited food insecurity as a stressor for their family. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start maintains a food pantry onsite stocked with free food items for families and members of the community. Additionally, since 2020, the program has distributed free turkeys and trimmings to all enrolled families at Thanksgiving and Christmas (when possible). Families also receive materials for an educational activity that they can use with their children while preparing the holiday meals. All food items are donated by the community.

⁹⁹ Tennessee Department of Health. (2024) Asthma ED Visits All Residents. Retrieved from: https://healthdata.tn.gov/Chronic-Disease/Asthma-Related-Emergency-Department-Visits-Crude-R/db46-746t/about_data

¹⁰⁰ Tennessee Department of Health. (2024) Asthma ED Visits. Retrieved from: https://data.tn.gov/t/Public/views/AsthmaEDVisitDash/AsthmaEDVisits?iframeSizedToWindow=true&%3Aembed=y&%3AshowAppBanner=false&%3Adisplay_count=no&%3AshowVizHome=no&%3Atoolbar=yes

¹⁰¹ Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth. (2024). County Profiles of Child Well-Being in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/tccy/data-and-research/county-profiles.html>

¹⁰² Rates greater than the state rate are highlighted.

¹⁰³ USDA. Economic Research Service. (2024). Food Security and Nutrition Assistance. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance/>

Table 46. Food Insecurity Rate by Age Group and Geographic Area (2022)^{104, 105}

Geographic Area	Total Population	Children (0-18)	Seniors (60+)
Van Buren County	18.5%	18.7%	--
Bledsoe County	21.3%	26.5%	--
Tennessee	14.0%	17.9%	8.4%
United States	13.5%	18.5%	8.7%

Table 47. Food Insecurity Among Population (All Ages) by Geographic Area (2022)^{106, 107}

Geographic Area	Food Insecurity Rate	Percent Below SNAP Threshold of 130% Poverty	Average Meal Cost
Van Buren County	18.5%	58%	\$3.75
Bledsoe County	21.3%	62%	\$4.00
Tennessee	14.0%	35%	\$3.97
United States	13.5%	48%	\$3.99

A food desert is defined as a census tract in which a significant number or share of residents is more than 1 mile (urban) or 10 miles (rural) from the nearest food store.¹⁰⁸ Based on this definition, there are no low-income and low-access food deserts in Van Buren County. However, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership report that the county is home to only one food market. In rural Van Buren County, it can therefore be assumed that some residents are driving up to 10 miles to the nearest food store.

Community Eligibility Provision. Data on the free and reduced-lunch rate by school district is not available. Instead, a review of data on school participation rates in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) program provides insight into the nutritional needs of schoolchildren. CEP is a universal meal plan under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) that permits eligible districts and schools to provide meal service to all students at no charge, regardless of economic status.

To be eligible, a district, school, or groups of schools from the same district must have a directly certified identified student percentage of at least 25% by April 1, prior to the first year of implementation. Each school does not have to meet the 25% threshold individually if enrolling a district or groups of school within a district; however, the average directly certified identified student percentage must be at least 25%.¹⁰⁹

Table 48. Identified Student Percentage Certified for Free Meals by School District and School (2024)^{110, 111}

School District	School	Identified Student Percentage
Van Buren County Schools	Spencer Elementary	71%
	Van Buren County High	28%
Bledsoe County Schools	Bledsoe County High	53%
	Bledsoe Middle	58%
	Cecil B. Rigsby Elementary	78%

¹⁰⁴ Feeding America. (2024). Food Insecurity Map. Retrieved from <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>

¹⁰⁵ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

¹⁰⁶ Feeding America. (2024). Food Insecurity Map. Retrieved from <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>

¹⁰⁷ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

¹⁰⁸ USDA. (2024). Food Access Atlas. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas.aspx>

¹⁰⁹ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/health-and-safety/school-nutrition/community-eligibility-provision-cep.html>

¹¹⁰ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/health-and-safety/school-nutrition/community-eligibility-provision-cep.html>

¹¹¹ "Identified students" are students who are certified for free meals without a household application, such as those directly certified through specific federal benefits programs (e.g., the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)). The "identified student percentage" (ISP) is calculated by dividing the total number of identified students by the total number of enrolled students.

School District	School	Identified Student Percentage
	Mary V. Wheeler Elementary	53%
	Pikeville Elementary	64%

WIC and SNAP. Participation in food assistance programs also provides context for the needs of children and families. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides monthly funds to help low-income families and individuals buy food. Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutritious foods, health education, and referrals to health care for low-income pregnant women, mothers, infants, and children up to age 5.

In FY2024, 282 children received SNAP benefits in Van Buren County, at a rate of 21.1%, ranking 26th out of the state's 95 counties. In FY2023, 101 children (or 28.9%) received WIC benefits.¹¹²

Table 49. SNAP Statistics by Geographic Area (2022-2024)¹¹³

Geographic Area	July 2022		July 2023		July 2024		Three-Year Trend for Individuals
	Individuals	Caseloads	Individuals	Caseloads	Individuals	Caseloads	
Van Buren County	762	383	651	353	732	364	Fluctuating
Bledsoe County	2,359	1,230	2,140	1,126	2,134	1,101	Decreasing
Tennessee	800,684	405,681	721,295	373,005	721,255	354,991	Decreasing

Table 50. Number and Percentage of Children Receiving SNAP by Geographic Area and Year^{114,115}

Geographic Area	2023		2024	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
Van Buren County	307	23.7%	282	21.1%
Bledsoe County	820	38.3%	828	35.7%
Tennessee	352,059	24.0%	--	22.4%

Table 51. Total Tennessee WIC Participants, Average Participation by Year¹¹⁶

FY2020	FY2021	FY2022	FY2023	Four-Year Trend
111,005	112,207	114,799	127,924	Increasing

Table 52. WIC Participation, Percent of Children Under Age Five 5 by Geographic Area (FY2023)^{117,118}

Geographic Area	Number of Children	Percentage of Children
Van Buren County	101	28.9%
Bledsoe County	236	40.2%
Tennessee	---	29.0%

Families First, the state's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, is a workforce development and employment program. The Families First program helps participants reach this goal by

¹¹² Tennessee State Government. (2024). County Profiles of Child Well-Being in Tennessee. Retrieved by <https://www.tn.gov/tccy/data-and-research/county-profiles.html>

¹¹³ Tennessee Department of Human Services. (2024). SNAP – Statistical Information. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/for-families/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/snap-statistical-information.html>

¹¹⁴ Tennessee State Government. (2024). County Profiles of Child Well-Being in Tennessee. Retrieved by <https://www.tn.gov/tccy/data-and-research/county-profiles.html>

¹¹⁵ Rates greater than the state rate are highlighted.

¹¹⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture. Food and Nutrition Service. (2024). Annual State Level Data: Total Participation. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program>

¹¹⁷ Tennessee State Government. (2024). County Profiles of Child Well-Being in Tennessee. Retrieved by <https://www.tn.gov/tccy/data-and-research/county-profiles.html>

¹¹⁸ Rates greater than the state rate are highlighted.

providing temporary cash assistance, transportation, child care assistance, educational supports, job training, employment activities, and other support services.

Table 53. Children Receiving Families First Grants (TANF) (FY2023)^{119, 120}

Geographic Area	Number of Children	Percentage of Children
Van Buren County	6	0.5%
Bledsoe County	65	2.8%
Tennessee	--	1.5%

¹¹⁹ Tennessee State Government. (2024). County Profiles of Child Well-Being in Tennessee. Retrieved by <https://www.tn.gov/tccy/data-and-research/county-profiles.html>

¹²⁰ Rates greater than the state rate are highlighted.

Social and Economic Factors Impacting Well-being

Home Value and Affordability

Median home values are significantly lower in Van Buren County (\$119,600), compared to the state (\$232,100). Owner and rental costs are also lower in the county compared to the state.

Table 54. Median Home Value and Costs by Geographic Area (2018-2022)¹²¹

Geographic Area	Median Home Value ¹²²	Median Owner Costs	Median Rent
Spencer	\$119,600	\$932	\$567
Van Buren County	\$132,700	\$879	\$658
Bledsoe County	\$153,700	\$1,060	\$751
Tennessee	\$232,100	\$1,449	\$1,047

As the most recently available census data (2018-2022) does not capture the full impact of inflation on the current value of homes, Zillow data is utilized to supplement census data and provide a more real-time understanding of increasing housing costs in the service area. In September 2024, Zillow home values in the service area ranged from \$200,263 in Spencer to \$215,969 in the entirety of Van Buren County (Table 55).

Home values in the service area have grown by more than 6% over the previous year, twice as fast as the state.

Table 55. Zillow Home Values Index: Average Home Value (September 2024)^{123, 124}

Geographic Area	Average Home Value	% Change from Previous Year
Spencer	\$200,263	+6.9%
Van Buren County	\$215,969	+6.3%
Bledsoe County	\$226,156	+5.6%
Tennessee	\$321,435	+3.3%

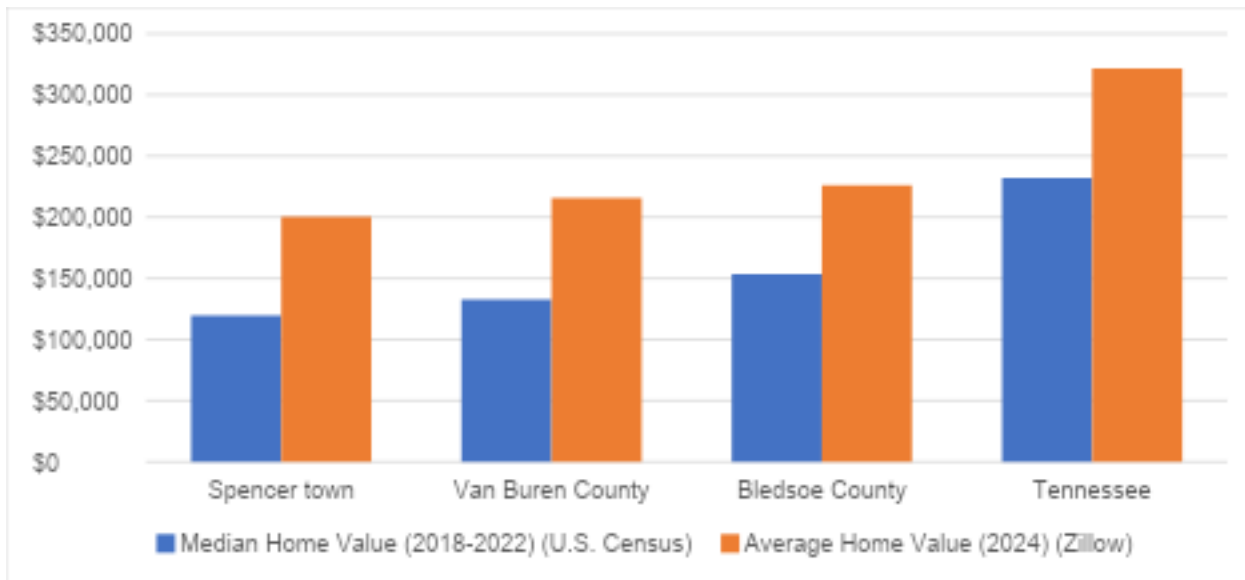
¹²¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹²² Values less than the statewide value are highlighted.

¹²³ Zillow. (2024) Home Values. Retrieved from <https://www.zillow.com/home-values/102001/united-states/>

¹²⁴ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Figure 9. Median Home Value and Average Home Values by Year and Source^{125,126}



Rental vacancy rates in the service area show availability at rates higher than the state rate (Table 56). UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership caution that rental housing may be more limited for low-income families.

Also described in Table 56, the rental cost burden is high in the service area, with nearly half of Van Buren County households spending 30% or more of their monthly income on rent. A high rental cost burden can strain a family’s finances and make it difficult to sustain stable housing and have enough income available to support other expenses (e.g., food, medical care). As rental prices increase, residents may not have options to move into more affordable units as the capacity for available housing is low.

Table 56. Housing Characteristics by Geographic Area (2018-2022)¹²⁷

Geographic Area	Rental Vacancy Rate ¹²⁸	Households Spending 30% or More of Monthly Income on Rent ¹²⁹
Spencer	13.5%	36.9%
Van Buren County	10.7%	48.4%
Bledsoe County	6.8%	38.3%
Tennessee	6.4%	47.9%

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) determines Fair Market Rent (FMR) every year for every metropolitan area or nonmetropolitan county. FMR is generally calculated as the 40th percentile of gross rents for regular, standard-quality units in a local housing market, excluding public housing units, rental units built in the last 2 years, rental units considered substandard in quality, seasonal rentals, and rental units on 10 or more acres.

Data on FMRs in the service area show a 15.3% increase in rent from FY2023 to FY2024 (Table 57).

¹²⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹²⁶ Zillow. (2024) Home Values. Retrieved from <https://www.zillow.com/home-values/102001/united-states/>

¹²⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹²⁸ Rates lower than the statewide rate are highlighted.

¹²⁹ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Table 57. Two-Bedroom Apartment Fair Market Rent by Geographic Area and Year¹³⁰

Geographic Area	FY2022	FY2023 (% change from FY2022)	FY2024 (% change from FY2023)
Van Buren County	\$676	\$747 (+10.5%)	\$861 (+15.3%)
Bledsoe County	\$676	\$747 (+10.5%)	\$861 (+15.3%)

Affordable housing data from the National Low Income Housing Coalition show that one in five residents in the service area rents their home. The hourly wage necessary to afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent is \$16.56, more than twice the Tennessee minimum wage (\$7.25).

Table 58. Affordable Housing Data by Geographic Area (2023)¹³¹

Geographic Area	Percent Renters	Minimum Wage	Two-bedroom Housing Wage	Two-bedroom Fair Market Rent	Work Hours/Week at Minimum Wage for Two-bedroom Housing
Van Buren County	20%	\$7.25	\$16.56	\$861	91
Bledsoe County	19%	\$7.25	\$16.56	\$861	91
Tennessee	33%	\$7.25	\$24.31	\$1,264	134

Many factors impact housing stability and affordability. In Van Buren County, 9% of households are experiencing severe housing problems (overcrowding, high housing costs, lack of kitchen facilities, or lack of plumbing facilities) (Table 59).

Table 59. Percentage of Households with at Least 1 of 4 Housing Problems¹³² by Geographic Area (2016-2020)¹³³

Geographic Area	Percent of Households
Van Buren County	9%
Bledsoe County	12%
Tennessee	13%
United States	17%

In the Fall 2024 survey of enrolled families, 12.5% of respondents indicated housing was a stressor for their family. Further, in the accompanying Community Provider Survey, the majority of respondents (8 out of 10 respondents) believed that families have difficulty finding affordable housing in the community. This strongly aligns with the results of the Staff Survey, in which 10 of 14 respondents believed affordable housing was a top stressor for Head Start families.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership noted that housing is further limited by the conversion of homes into short-term vacation rentals catering to visitors to Fall Creek Falls State Park, one of Tennessee's largest and most visited state parks, located in Van Buren County, 11 miles east of Spencer. A search of vacation rental properties in September 2024 identified 30 listings in Spencer on AirBNB and 74 listings within a 9-mile radius of Spencer on VRBO.^{134,135}

¹³⁰ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2024) Fair Market Rents (40th Percentile Rents). Retrieved from <https://www.huduser.gov/Portal/datasets/fmr.html>

¹³¹ National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2023). Out of Reach. Retrieved from <https://reports.nlihc.org/oor>

¹³² Overcrowding, high housing costs, lack of kitchen facilities, or lack of plumbing facilities

¹³³ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2024>

¹³⁴ Airbnb. (2024). Retrieved from <https://www.airbnb.com/>

¹³⁵ VRBO. (2024). Retrieved from <https://www.vrbo.com/>

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership report that lack of affordable housing is a pressing concern in the service area. In addition to the reduction of housing stock due to conversion to short-term vacation rentals, as mentioned above, housing prices are increasing due to an influx of wealthy retirees moving into the county to take advantage of its bucolic setting and lower cost of living compared to other parts of the state. This has forced many low-income families to “double up” with friends or family to maintain housing. These families are categorized at enrollment as “homeless” based on the McKinney-Vento definition.

As the COVID-19 pandemic made clear, access to broadband internet is critical to meet needs for education, telemedicine, telecommuting, and overall quality of life. In 2017, three years before the onset of the pandemic, the state passed the Tennessee Broadband Accessibility Act to increase broadband access to Tennessee’s unserved citizens. Despite efforts at the state level, broadband internet access in Van Buren County remains lower than the state rate.

Table 60. Percent of Households with Broadband Internet Connection by Geographic Area and Year (2018-2022)^{136, 137}

Geographic Area	Percent of Households with Broadband Internet Connection
Van Buren County	78%
Bledsoe County	79%
Tennessee	86%
United States	88%

Income Inequality

In Van Buren County, the median household income is lower than the state median.

Table 61. Median Household Income by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{138,139}

Geographic Area	Median Household Income
Spencer town	\$41,042
Van Buren County	\$44,730
Bledsoe County	\$51,783
Tennessee	\$64,035

Figure 10. Median Household Income



¹³⁶County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2024>

¹³⁷ Rates lower than the statewide rate are highlighted.

¹³⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹³⁹ Rates lower than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Income inequality is described in Table 62. A higher income inequality ratio indicates greater division between the top and bottom of the income spectrum. In Van Buren County, income inequality is greater than in the state. Earners in the top 80th percentile in Van Buren County make 5.3 times more than those in the 20th percentile.

Table 62. Income Inequality by Geographic Area (2018-2022)¹⁴⁰

Geographic Area	80 th percentile income	20 th percentile income	Income inequality ratio
Van Buren County	\$101,379	\$18,955	5.3
Bledsoe County	\$100,836	\$18,983	5.3
Tennessee	\$125,825	\$27,187	4.6
United States	--	--	4.9

The Living Wage Calculator

The *Living Wage Calculator* was developed by Dr. Amy Glasmeier in 2004 and “estimates are based on the costs of eight components, each of which represents a basic need: childcare, civic engagement, food, health care, housing, internet & mobile, transportation, and other necessities. It also includes relevant income and payroll taxes...In general, it is assumed that families select the lowest cost option that enables them to meet each of these basic needs at a minimum but adequate level. As such, the living wage does not budget for eating out at a restaurant or meals that aren’t prepared at home; leisure time, holidays, or unpaid vacations; or savings, retirement, and other long-term financial investments.”¹⁴¹

Data estimates from the Living Wage Calculator are available for 12 different family compositions based on number of adults and employment status (one adult working, two adults with one adult working outside the home, and two adults with both working outside the home) and number of dependent children (0-3). Data was last updated on February 14, 2024.

Table 63 outlines living wage data for the following households:

- One adult with no children;
- One adult with two children (Family of three);
- Two adults with two children (Family of four), with one adult working outside the home.

In Van Buren County, the living wage for a single adult (no child) is \$18.48 hourly. A single parent with two children needs to earn nearly double that amount, \$37.16 hourly. For a dual parent household with one parent working outside the home, the living wage is slightly less, at \$35.06 hourly; it is assumed that one parent is caring for children in the home, eliminating the child care expense. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership noted that the living wage estimates are out of reach for most families in the county.

Table 63. Living Wage Calculator by Household Type (2024)¹⁴²

Geographic Area	1 adult		1 adult, 2 children		2 adults (1 working), 2 children	
	Hourly	Annual Equivalent ¹⁴³	Hourly	Annual Equivalent	Hourly	Annual Equivalent

¹⁴⁰ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/tennessee?year=2024>

¹⁴¹ Glasmeier, A., & Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (2024). Living Wage Calculator. Retrieved from: <https://livingwage.mit.edu/pages/methodology>

¹⁴² Living Wage Calculator (2024). Dr. Amy K. Glasmeier and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Retrieved from <https://livingwage.mit.edu/>

¹⁴³ Annual Equivalent salary is calculated by multiplying the hourly wage by 2,080 (based on a standard work week for full-time workers of 40 hours a week x 52 weeks a year).

Van Buren County	\$18.48	\$38,438	\$37.16	\$77,294	\$35.06	\$72,925
Bledsoe County	\$18.48	\$38,438	\$37.48	\$77,958	\$35.47	\$73,778
Tennessee	\$20.77	\$43,202	\$41.93	\$87,214	\$37.79	\$78,603

Table 64. Wage Levels for 1 Adult (Working) and 2 Children (Family of 3) by Geographic Area (2024)^{144, 145}

Geographic Area	Living Wage	Median Household Income (2018-2022) ¹⁴⁶	Poverty Wage
Van Buren County	\$37.16	\$21.50	\$12.41
Bledsoe County	\$37.48	\$24.90	\$12.41
Tennessee	\$41.93	\$30.79	\$12.41

Table 65. Wage Levels for 2 Adults (One Working) and 2 Children (Family of 4) by Geographic Area (2024)^{147, 148}

Geographic Area	Living Wage	Median Household Income (2018-2022) ¹⁴⁹	Poverty Wage
Van Buren County	\$35.06	\$21.50	\$15.00
Bledsoe County	\$35.47	\$24.90	\$15.00
Tennessee	\$37.79	\$30.79	\$15.00

¹⁴⁴ Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (2024). Living Wage Calculator. Retrieved from <https://livingwage.mit.edu>

¹⁴⁵ U.S. Census Bureau (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁴⁶ Hourly wage is calculated by dividing the median annual household income by 2,080 (the number of hours worked at 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year).

¹⁴⁷ Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (2024). Living Wage Calculator. Retrieved from <https://livingwage.mit.edu>

¹⁴⁸ U.S. Census Bureau (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁴⁹ Hourly wage is calculated by dividing the median annual household income by 2,080 (the number of hours worked at 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year).

In August 2024, OHS issued a final rule that makes regulatory changes to the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) to “support and stabilize the Head Start workforce and improve the quality of services Head Start programs provide to children and families.” By August 2031, Head Start programs with more than 200 funded slots must:¹⁵⁰

- Establish or update a competitive pay scale for all staff and review this pay structure at least once every five years.
- Demonstrate progress toward pay parity for Head Start education staff by ensuring annual salaries for Head Start educators match those of preschool teachers in public school settings, or at least 90% of public school kindergarten teacher salaries, adjusted for responsibilities, qualifications, experience, and schedule or hours worked.
- Establish a minimum pay floor to ensure all staff receive wages sufficient to cover the basic cost of living in the geographic area.
- Ensure wages are comparable across Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start programs for staff serving in similar positions with similar qualifications and experience.

Small Head Start agencies with 200 or fewer slots are exempt from most of the wage requirements. However, these agencies must still develop or update a pay scale that promotes competitive wages for all staff and make measurable progress toward reducing disparities in wages between Head Start educators and public preschool teachers over time.¹⁵¹

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership noted that though staff wages are not competitive with public school wages, the program strives to supplement wages with bonuses whenever possible. All staff recently received a bonus of \$2,000 from a one-time state grant. When Quality Improvement funds are made available by OHS, the program passes on these funds to staff. COLA funding is also passed on to staff.

Community Safety

Van Buren County is served by the Van Buren County Sheriff’s Office. The most recently available data on crime statistics in the county show fluctuating trends. As crime statistics are reported only by raw incidents, not rates, it is not possible to compare community safety among different communities.

Generally, families report feeling safe in their community. Results of the UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start Fall 2024 Family Survey revealed safety was cited most often as a factor for what is best about the community where families live.

Table 66. Violent Crime Statistics by Geographic Area (2020-2022)^{152, 153}

Geographic Area	2020 Cases	2021 Cases	2022 Cases	Three-Year Trend
Van Buren County	3	8	5	Fluctuating
Bledsoe County	16	25	17	Fluctuating

¹⁵⁰ Federal Register. *Supporting the Head Start Workforce and Consistent Quality Programming*. A rule by the Health and Human Services Department on 08/21/2024. Retrieved from <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/08/21/2024-18279/supporting-the-head-start-workforce-and-consistent-quality-programming>

¹⁵¹ Office of Head Start. Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. (2024). *Wages and Pay Parity*. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/tip-sheet-wages-pay-parity-updated-hspps.pdf>

¹⁵² Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. (2024). *Tennessee Crime Stats*. Retrieved from <https://crimeinsight.tbi.tn.gov/tops>

¹⁵³ Violent Crime consists of murder, non-consensual sex offenses and aggravated assault.

Table 67. Property Crime Statistics by Geographic Area (2020-2022)^{154, 155}

Geographic Area	2020 Cases	2021 Cases	2022 Cases	Three-Year Trend
Van Buren County	10	13	9	Fluctuating
Bledsoe County	29	68	50	Fluctuating

Table 68. Domestic Violence Statistics by Geographic Area (2020-2022)^{156, 157}

Geographic Area	2020 Cases	2021 Cases	2022 Cases	Three-Year Trend of all Victims
Van Buren County	2 (2 cleared) (0 child victims)	18 (14 cleared) (2 child victims)	8 (7 cleared) (2 child victims)	Fluctuating
Bledsoe County	12 cases (7 cleared) (1 child victim)	17 cases (8 cleared) (3 child victims)	8 cases (5 cleared) (1 child victim)	Fluctuating

EMPLOYMENT, WORKFORCE, AND TRANSPORTATION



Labor Force, Industries, and Occupations

In Van Buren and Bledsoe counties as well as the town of Spencer, the percentage of the total population in the labor force is much lower than the statewide rate (Table 69). For households with children under age 6 and all parents in the labor force, Spencer's employment rates are nearly equal to the state level. However, in Van Buren County, this rate is only 49.4%. This further supports data pointing to Van Buren County as a

destination for retirees.

Specific to Head Start, based on 2023-2024 Program Information Report, 39 of the 46 families served (85%) reported having at least one adult in the household being employed, in a job training program, or in school. This rate is almost double the county rate of 49.5%, suggesting that the Head Start program is providing a much-needed resource for working families.

Table 69. Percent of the Population in Labor Force (Age 16+) by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{158,159}

Geographic Area	Population Age 16+	Population Age 16+ (Females only)	Households with Children Under Age 6, All Parents in Family in Labor Force
Spencer	42.5%	39.1%	64.8%
Van Buren County	49.5%	47.2%	49.9%
Bledsoe County	47.7%	36.2%	54.2%
Tennessee	61.9%	58.0%	65.0%

¹⁵⁴ Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. (2024). Tennessee Crime Stats. Retrieved from <https://crimeinsight.tbi.tn.gov/tops>

¹⁵⁵ Property Crime involves intent to obtain money, property, or some other benefit, e.g., robbery, bribery, burglary.

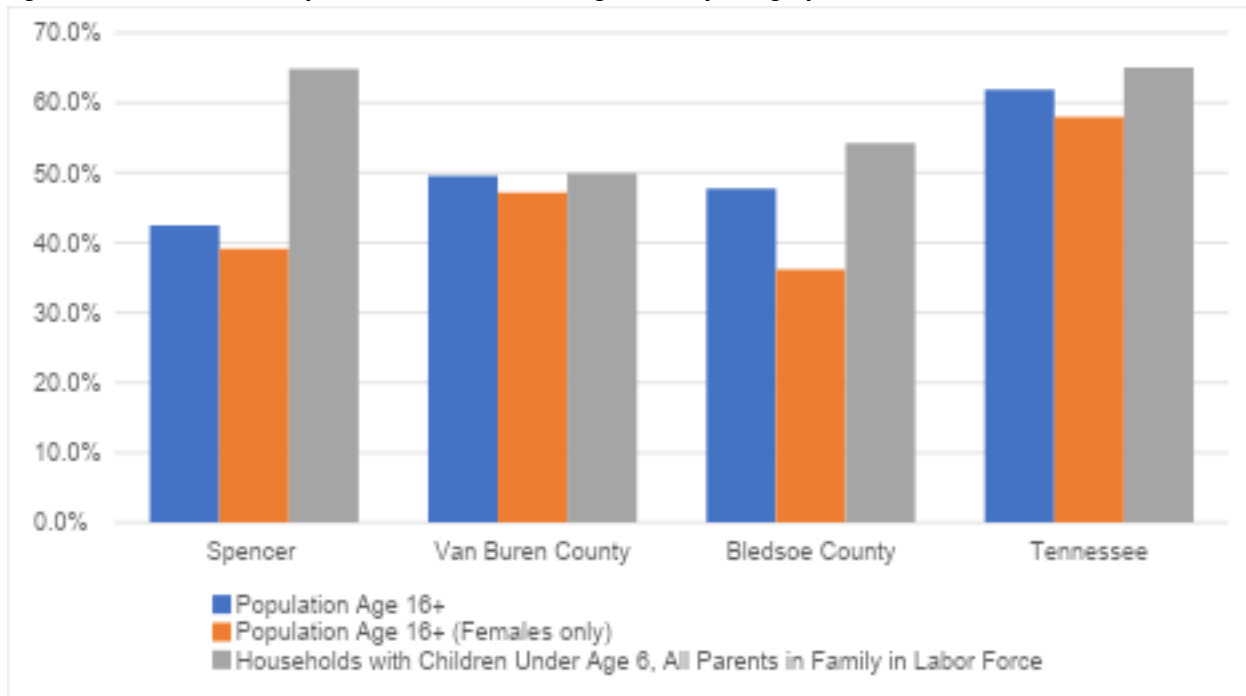
¹⁵⁶ Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. (2024). Tennessee Crime Stats. Retrieved from <https://crimeinsight.tbi.tn.gov/tops>

¹⁵⁷ Domestic Violent involves violent or aggressive behavior within the home or towards a family member, often involving the violent abuse of a spouse or partner.

¹⁵⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁵⁹ Rates lower than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Figure 11. Percent of the Population in Labor Force (Age 16+) by Geographic Area (2018-2022)¹⁶⁰



According to the U.S. Census Bureau, using Census-defined categories of workers, the top type of occupation in the service area and state is “management, business, science, and arts occupations.” This is followed by “sales and office occupations.”

Table 70. Percentage of the Employed Workforce (Age 16+) by Occupation and Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{161,162}

Occupation	Spencer	Van Buren County	Bledsoe County	Tennessee
Management, business, science, and arts occupations	20.1%	33.7%	24%	37.7%
Service occupations	30.2%	23.9%	20.6%	15.8%
Sales and office occupations	11.8%	9.2%	16.0%	21.2%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	8.4%	10.0%	23.1%	8.6%
Production, transportation, and material moving occupations	29.5%	23.2%	16.3%	16.7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

¹⁶⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁶¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁶² Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted. The top three occupations are in bold text.

The top industry in Van Buren County is manufacturing, followed by public administration (Table 71).

Table 71. Percent of Employed Individuals (Age 16+) and Percentage of the Employed Workforce by Industry and Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{163,164}

Industry	Spencer	Van Buren County	Bledsoe County	Tennessee
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	3.0%	5.6%	9.3%	0.9%
Construction	6.9%	8.1%	11.2%	6.8%
Manufacturing	26.1%	23.6%	15.3%	12.9%
Wholesale trade	3.0%	0.7%	0.4%	2.4%
Retail trade	11.4%	6.3%	8.5%	11.7%
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities	0.9%	3.6%	4.9%	7.0%
Information	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	1.6%
Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing	2.4%	1.9%	4.3%	6.1%
Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services	5.6%	8.0%	14.6%	10.3%
Educational services, and health care and social assistance	24.2%	18.3%	14.0%	22.3%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services	8.3%	8.9%	6.4%	9.2%
Other services, except public administration	0.4%	0.9%	5.2%	4.8%
Public administration	7.7%	14.0%	5.6%	4.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Employment

According to the most up-to-date data on unemployment, trends point to higher rates of unemployment in Van Buren County than the statewide rate, as highlighted in Table 72. While employment rates in the state have been relatively stable in the past two years, the rate for Van Buren County has fluctuated, spiking to a rate of 5.7% unemployment in October 2023.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership report that families enrolled in Head Start typically work for the local school district, Fall Creek Falls State Park, or the local senior living facility; many also travel outside the county into Bledsoe County to work for the state prison.

Table 72. Unemployment Rate by Geographic Area and Month (2023-2024)^{165, 166}

Geographic Area	Jan. 2023	April 2023	July 2023	Oct. 2023	Jan. 2024	April 2024	July 2024
Van Buren County	3.8	3.7	5.0	5.7	4.5	3.4	4.2
Bledsoe County	6.0	4.7	6.0	5.2	5.3	3.9	5.5
Tennessee	3.6	2.7	3.5	3.4	3.5	2.7	3.6

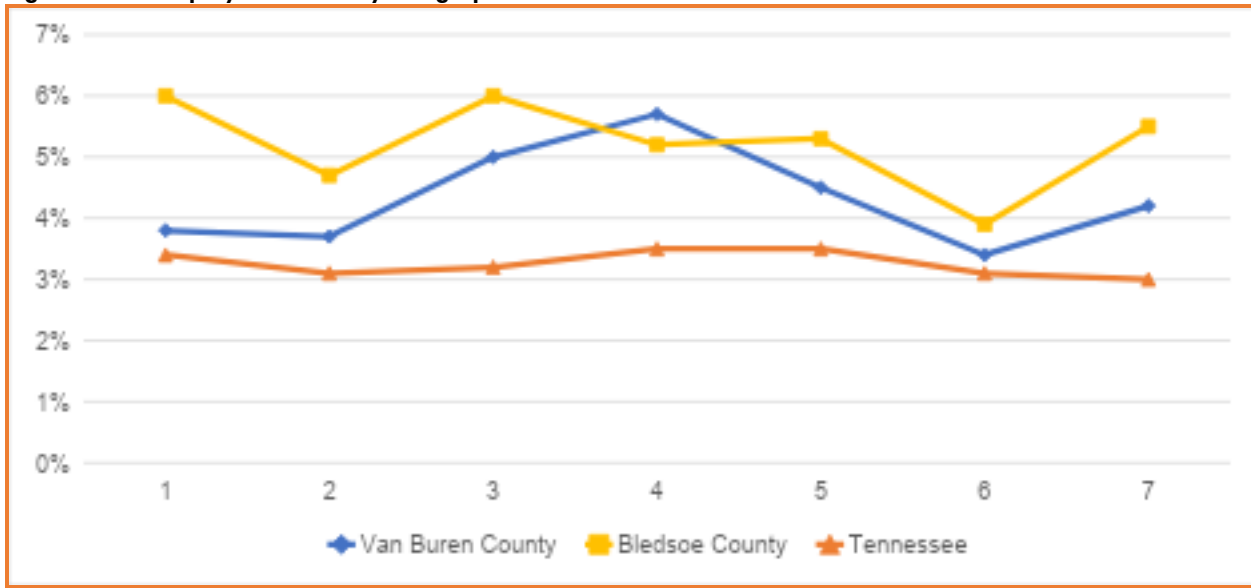
¹⁶³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁶⁴ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted. The top three industries are in bold text.

¹⁶⁵ FRED Economic Research. (2024). Unemployment. Retrieved from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/>

¹⁶⁶ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Figure 12. Unemployment Rate by Geographic Area and Month¹⁶⁷



Education and Training

Tennessee’s colleges and universities are divided into three regions: East, Middle, and West. There are three universities that are considered “East TN Institutions,” along with six community colleges and eight colleges of applied technology. Of the “Middle TN Institutions” there are six universities, four community colleges, and 12 colleges of applied technology.¹⁶⁸ While there are no 2-year or 4-year colleges in Van Buren County or nearby Bledsoe County, some of the East TN and Middle TN institutions may be accessible for residents.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership report that staff travel to Tennessee Technological University in Putnam County or College of Applied Technology in Roane County. Others may travel to Chattanooga State Community College in Hamilton County or Motlow State Community College in White County. These campuses are approximately 1 to 1.5 hours from the Head Start center.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start assists staff who attend college in obtaining benefits such as tuition assistance and stipends through two statewide initiatives aimed at fortifying the early childhood workforce and promoting retention:

- TECTA (Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance). This project, funded by the Tennessee Department of Human Resources and Tennessee State University, offers tuition assistance to staff pursuing a degree in early childhood education.¹⁶⁹
- Child Care WAGE\$ Tennessee. Funded by the Tennessee Department of Education, this program provides salary supplements to early childhood educators working toward a college degree.¹⁷⁰

Leadership team members are not aware of any enrolled Head Start families currently attending college.

¹⁶⁷ FRED Economic Research. (2024). Unemployment. Retrieved from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/>

¹⁶⁸ Tennessee Higher Education Commission (2024). Tennessee Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/thecc/learn-about/tennessee-s-colleges-and-universities.html>

¹⁶⁹ tecta. (2024). Promoting Professionalism and High Quality in Child Care in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://tecta.info/>

¹⁷⁰ Child Care WAGE\$ Tennessee. (2024). We give salary supplements to early childhood educators. Retrieved from <https://www.tnwages.org/>

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start strives to “grow from within” by fostering volunteer opportunities for parents of enrolled children as a pathway toward potential employment. The result has been a successful pipeline for new staff. The last three hires into the program have been parents of enrolled children. Once on board, staff are offered support as they pursue their education and gain experience. Notably, all four members of the leadership are parents of current or former Head Start children.

Workforce Training

A number of workforce development programs are available to residents of Van Buren County.

- Upper Cumberland Workforce Development Board¹⁷¹ provides Adult, Youth, and Dislocated Worker Training; Adult Education (GED prep classes); Vocational Rehabilitation for people with disabilities; and workforce training for individuals age 55+, SNAP recipients, and disabled veterans.
- Van Buren County High School¹⁷² Career and Technical Education Program offers students education on the economic and business principles involved in the sale and supply of agricultural products across industry sectors to prepare them for advanced business courses at postsecondary institutions.
- Empower Upper Cumberland (Empower UC)¹⁷³, under the leadership of UCHRA and Upper Cumberland Workforce Development Board, assists eligible families (based on income, or eligible for public benefits such as Medicaid, Families First, SNAP, housing assistance, or free or reduced lunch) with assistance from a “Navigator” to meet their educational and employment goals as well as offering financial incentives for overcoming barriers.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start works closely with Empower UC to refer families to the workforce program. Empower visits the Head Start program to sign up parents. Once enrolled in Empower, families receive support including assistance with utilities and job assistance (e.g., training and career planning), as well as monthly stipends if they stay on track toward completing their goals. According to UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership, the largest barrier to participation is completing the paperwork.

Transportation

Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency (UCHRA), Van Buren County Head Start’s parent agency, provides public transportation services within its 14-county service area, including Van Buren County. Options include:

- Door-to-door public transportation. Residents of Van Buren County are directed to the White County UCHRA office to arrange travel. There are no limitations on the types of trips taken, however passengers are advised to make their arrangements at least three days in advance. Pickup times may be adjusted based on availability.
- Job Access Program. Provides transportation to and from employment for qualified low-income individuals (TANF recipients or at or below 150% federal poverty level). Service is free for the first nine months.

¹⁷¹ Workforce Connections. (2024) Our Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.ucwork.org/programs>

¹⁷² Van Buren County High School (2024). Van Buren County CTE. Retrieved from: <https://www.vanburenschools.org/o/vbhs/page/career-technical-education>

¹⁷³ Workforce Connections. (2024) Our Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.ucwork.org/programs>

- **Ride to Recovery.** Provides 90 days of transportation to those who are in early recovery for travel to recovery support services; treatment, meetings, mental health or probation appointments, and other recovery-related activities.¹⁷⁴

Southeast Tennessee Human Resource Agency (SETHRA)¹⁷⁵ provides public transportation services to the counties of **Bledsoe**, Bradley, Grundy, Marion, McMinn, Meigs, Polk, Rhea and Sequatchie.

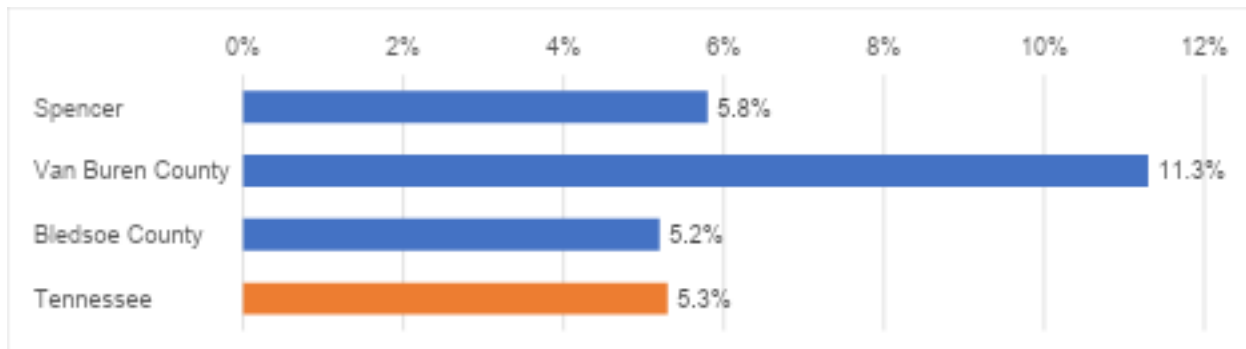
Additionally, TennCare, the state’s Medicaid program, provides free rides to recipients who do not have access to transportation for non-emergency medical appointments.¹⁷⁶

Access to Vehicles. As described in Table 73, the percentage of households with no vehicle in Van Buren County is nearly twice as high as the state rate. Households without a vehicle or with one vehicle for two working parents have to rely more heavily on alternative transportation or limited public transportation. Many families that have a vehicle may also struggle to afford the cost of maintaining a reliable vehicle (e.g., repairs/maintenance, insurance, and fuel).

Table 73. Households with No Vehicle Available by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{177,178}

Geographic Area	Percentage
Spencer	5.8%
Van Buren County	11.3%
Bledsoe County	5.2%
Tennessee	5.3%

Figure 13. Households with No Vehicle Available



Most residents in the service area commute to work in a personal vehicle or carpool (Table 74). Commute times are 28.4 minutes for residents of Spencer and 31.3 minutes for residents of the county as a whole. (Table 75). Commute times are higher than the state value, an indication that Van Buren County residents are traveling farther from home to find employment.

This is evidenced in Table 76, which outlines the percentage of residents who work inside and outside the county; 68.4% of Van Buren County residents work outside the county compared to only 24.4% of Tennessee

¹⁷⁴ UCHRA Public Transportation. (2024). UCHRA Public Transportation Services. Retrieved from <https://ucpublictransit.com/services/>

¹⁷⁵ SETHRA Transit. (2024). Ride Guide. Retrieved from <https://www.sethratransit.org/about>

¹⁷⁶ Division of TennCare. (2024). Transportation. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/tenncare/members-applicants/non-emergency-medical-transportation-benefit.html>

¹⁷⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁷⁸ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

residents who work outside their county of residence. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership note that it is not uncommon for county residents to drive more than hour to a neighboring county for work.

Table 74. Transportation to Work by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{179,180}

Geographic Area	Car, truck, or van – drove alone	Car, truck, or van – carpooled	Public transportation	Walked	Other means	Worked from home
Spencer	83.0%	15.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%
Van Buren County	84.7%	8.7%	0.0%	3.5%	0.2%	3.0%
Bledsoe County	78.2%	13.9%	0.4%	2.2%	0.0%	5.2%
Tennessee	78.8%	8.5%	0.5%	1.2%	1.3%	9.7%

Table 75. Mean Travel Time to Work by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{181, 182}

Geographic Area	Minutes
Spencer	28.4
Van Buren County	31.3
Bledsoe County	34.8
Tennessee	25.5

Table 76. Percentage of Workers (Age 16 and Over) Working in or Outside County of Residence^{183,184}

Geographic Area	Work in County of Residence (in state)	Work outside county of residence	Work outside state of residence
Spencer town	40.9%	59.1%	0.0%
Van Buren County	31.0%	68.4%	0.7%
Bledsoe County	39.4%	59.5%	1.1%
Tennessee	72.2%	24.4%	3.4%

Work and Training Schedules

While specific work and training schedules of families in the service area are not readily available, the top industries suggest a variety of schedules. With a mix of service occupations, manufacturing jobs, and education options, it can be reasonably assumed that some individuals work traditional business hours while others may have second- or third-shift employment.

ELIGIBLE CHILDREN AND PREGNANT WOMEN



Children must meet an age requirement to participate in Head Start. The age requirement is 3 to 5 years old, and at least 10% of program enrollment must be children eligible for services under IDEA (children with disabilities).

¹⁷⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁸⁰ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

¹⁸¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁸² Values greater than the statewide value are highlighted.

¹⁸³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁸⁴ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Children are eligible to receive Head Start services if they meet one or more of the following eligibility requirements: their family has an income at or below the federal poverty level, the family receives public assistance (i.e., TANF, SSI, SNAP), the child is experiencing homelessness, and/or the child is in foster care.

Table 77 provides estimated numbers of children in the service area by primary eligibility type for Head Start and Early Head Start. Primary eligibility captures only one factor by which a child is eligible for services, and many children have needs that fall into multiple categories. The number of children eligible for Head Start/Early Head Start and currently unserved is described more fully in the Agencies Serving Eligible Children section of the report.

Table 77. Estimated Number of Children and Pregnant Women in Service Area Eligible for Head Start or Early Head Start Services¹⁸⁵

Eligibility Criteria	Birth to Age 3 Years	Age 3-5 Years	Birth to Age 5
Income-eligible children	37	24	61
Income-eligible pregnant women	14 women	---	14 women
Children experiencing homelessness	46	30	76
Children in foster care	<6	<4	<10
Children receiving public assistance	65	44	109
Children with disabilities ¹⁸⁶	0	20	20

Child Poverty and Geographic Location

When examining U.S. Census data tables, it is important to note that the margins of error for data on communities with small populations such as Van Buren County may be higher than communities with large populations.

As reported by the Census, the poverty rate for young children (birth to age 5) in Van Buren County is 20.1%, slightly below the state rate of 21.4%. There are an estimated 303 children under age 5 living in the county. Among these 303 children, there are an estimated 61 children living in poverty with a margin of error of +/-35 (meaning there could be 26 to 96 children under age 5 living in poverty). Based on the estimated 61 children under age 5 living in poverty, an estimated 37 children under age 3 are income-eligible for participation in Early Head Start and 24 children, age 3-5, are income-eligible for Head Start.

The true number of children eligible for Head Start/Early Head Start may be lower than data suggest due to the presence of a Mennonite community that straddles Van Buren and Bledsoe counties. Fall Creek Mennonite Community is home to approximately 55 families. Members of this religious community typically have large families. According to UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership, Mennonite families choose to homeschool their children.

Table 78. Child Poverty and Young Children Living in Poverty by Geographic Area (2018-2022)¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ The source for each of the data points in this table is described in the tables that follow.

¹⁸⁶ Children with disabilities is not a category of eligibility. At least 10% of program enrollment must be children eligible for services under IDEA (children with disabilities).

¹⁸⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

Geographic Area	Poverty Rate for Children < Age 5	Number of Children < Age 5	Number of Children < Age 3 Living in Poverty ¹⁸⁸	Number of Children 3-5 Living in Poverty ¹⁸⁹	Number of Children < Age 5 Living in Poverty
Spencer	8.9%	45	2	2	4
Van Buren County	20.1%	303	37	24	61
Bledsoe County	53.2%	631	202	134	336
Tennessee	21.4%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

In Spencer and the rest of Van Buren County, the number of income-eligible children has decreased by 40.2%-94.5% from 2013-2017 to 2018-2020. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership caution that this decrease is likely a reflection of low-income families moving away from the area in search of affordable housing, and not necessarily a reflection of improving circumstances for families.

Table 79. Number of Children Birth to Age 5 Living in Poverty by Geographic Area and Year^{190,191}

Geographic Area	2013-2017	2018-2022	% Change
Spencer	73	4	-94.5%
Van Buren County	102	61	-40.2%
Bledsoe County	165	336	+50.9%
Tennessee	110,295	84,127	-23.7%

In 2022, there were 72 babies (live births) born to women from Van Buren County. The number of pregnant women who would be income-eligible for Early Head Start can be estimated by applying the most recent county poverty rate for children birth to age 5 to the number of live births annually (Table 80). There are an estimated 14 pregnant women in the service area who are eligible for Early Head Start.

Table 80. Estimated Number of Income-Eligible Pregnant Women by Geographic Area

Geographic Area	Poverty Rate for Children <5 Years Old (2018-2022) ¹⁹²	Number of Live Births per Year (2022) ¹⁹³	Number of Income-Eligible Pregnant Women ¹⁹⁴
Van Buren County	20.1%	72	14
Bledsoe County	53.2%	112	60
Tennessee	21.4%	82,266	17,605

In August 2024, updated Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) were published. HSPPS now note that when Head Start/Early Head Start programs are verifying eligibility, a program may make an adjustment to a family's gross income calculation for the purposes of determining eligibility to account for excessive housing costs. If a program determines that a family spends more than 30 percent of their total gross income on housing costs, they may reduce the total gross income by the amount spent on housing costs that exceeds more than 30 percent.

Data presented throughout this report suggests there are families within the service area who are living above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) who would qualify for income-eligible enrollment based on the new housing

¹⁸⁸ Calculated by estimating 3/5 of the number of children birth to age 5 living in poverty.

¹⁸⁹ Calculated by estimating 2/5 of the number of children birth to age 5 living in poverty.

¹⁹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁹¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁹² U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁹³ Tennessee Department of Health. (2024). General Health Data: Birth Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/statistics/health-data/birth-statistics.html>

¹⁹⁴ Calculated by applying the poverty rate for children under age 5 in the service area to the number of live births per year.

cost provision. As described in the Poverty section, in Van Buren County, 23% of residents are living below 125% FPL and 29% are below 150% FPL. Individuals who are living above FPL but below 150% make up 12% (771 individuals) of the county population who may be living on the brink of poverty.

Rental cost data show that nearly half of all households in the service area are rent burdened (spending 30% or more of their monthly income on rent). This also suggests families in the service area may use this adjustment to gross income in order to verify eligibility for their child’s enrollment in HS/EHS.

In response to the updated standards, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start has begun using a Housing Cost Tool calculator developed by the National Head Start Association to determine eligibility. The tool factors in rent/mortgage and utility costs to determine the impact of housing costs against the poverty level. It is available at <https://nhsa.org/resource/housing-cost-tool/>.

Race and Ethnicity of Eligible Children in Poverty

Data for the number of young children living in poverty by race is not readily accessible from public sources. As described in the Overview of Service Area section, within the service area, there continue to be disparities with regard to poverty rate and race.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start continues to serve a population of children that is racially and ethnically representative of the general population. During the 2023-2024 program year, among non-Hispanic children, 94% were identified as White, followed by 4% Black and 2% Other. Six percent of children identified as Hispanic/Latino.¹⁹⁵

Language of Eligible Children

The primary language of individuals in the UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start service area is English. In the town of Spencer, 100% of residents speak English at home. Within the broader county, 94.8% of residents speak English at home. The remaining residents (3.8%) report speaking another Indo-European language and 1.2% report speaking Spanish.

This reflects the observations of UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership who say that the program has served speakers of Gujarati, a language spoken in India and Pakistan. Data from UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start’s 2023-2024 Program Information Report indicates one family as speaking a Middle Eastern & South Asian language at home. The program relies on remote interpretation services when needed.

Table 81. Language Spoken at Home (Age 5 and Over) by Geographic Area and Percentage of Population (2018-2022)^{196,197}

Geographic Area	English	Spanish	Other Indo-European	Asian and Pacific Island	Other
Spencer	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Van Buren County	94.8%	1.2%	3.8%	0.0%	0.2%
Bledsoe County	97.1%	1.7%	1.0%	0.1%	0.1%
Tennessee	92.5%	4.3%	1.3%	1.1%	0.9%

¹⁹⁵ 2023-2024 Program Information Report

¹⁹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁹⁷ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

Cultural Trends

The foreign-born population in Van Buren County is very low, just 14 residents that make up 0.2% of the population; all are U.S. citizens.

Table 82. Foreign-Born Population by Geographic Area (2018-2022)^{198,199}

Geographic Area	Number and Percent Foreign-Born	Number and Percent of Foreign-Born Population that is non-US Citizen
Spencer	0 (0.0%)	n/a
Van Buren County	14 (0.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Bledsoe County	315 (2.1%)	206 (65.4%)
Tennessee	375,702 (5.4%)	219,459 (58.4%)

Children Experiencing Homelessness

Annually, across the country and in Tennessee, Continuums of Care (CoCs) conduct a Point in Time (PIT) count of individuals in sheltered (in emergency shelter and transitional housing) one night in January, as well as unsheltered every other year, to provide a snapshot of a community's homeless population and potential service gaps.

Table 83 reflects the statewide count of homelessness by household type. From 2022 to 2023, data shows decreases across different household types, with the biggest decrease (-31%) among households with at least one adult and one child.

Table 83. Tennessee Point-in Time Count of Homelessness Data by Year²⁰⁰

Household Type/Persons	2021	2022	2023	% Change (2022-2023)
Number of households without children	Not reported	7,294	7,195	-1%
Households with at least one adult and one child	Not reported	736	507	-31%
Households with only children	Not reported	11	17	+55%
Total homeless persons	6,823	10,567	9,215	-13%

Upper Cumberland Homeless Advocacy for Rural Tennessee is the CoC serving Van Buren County and 17 other counties. PIT data for this CoC includes households experiencing homelessness across the entire 18-county area. PIT counts specific to Van Buren County are not available.

Table 84. Point-in-Time Count of Households Experiencing Homelessness by Continuum of Care and Household Type (2023)²⁰¹

Continuum of Care	Shelter Type	Households without children	Households with at least one adult and one child
Upper Cumberland Homeless Advocacy for Rural Tennessee (18 counties including Van Buren County)	Emergency Shelter	114	23
	Transitional Housing	16	0
	Unsheltered	318	16
	Total	448	39
Chattanooga/Southeast Tennessee CoC (11 counties including Bledsoe County)	Emergency Shelter	164	30
	Transitional Housing	1	0

¹⁹⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

¹⁹⁹ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

²⁰⁰ HUD Exchange. (2024). CoC Homeless Population and Subpopulations Report. Retrieved from <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports/>

²⁰¹ HUD Exchange. (2024). CoC Homeless Populations and Subpopulations Reports. Retrieved from https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports/?filter_Year=2023&filter_Scope=CoC&filter_State=TN&filter_CoC=TN-500&program=CoC&group=PopSub

Continuum of Care	Shelter Type	Households without children	Households with at least one adult and one child
	Unsheltered	1,263	2
	Total	1,428	32
Tennessee	Emergency Shelter	2,661	337
	Transitional Housing	730	72
	Unsheltered	3,804	98
	Total	7,195	507

Table 85 provides data on homeless youth by primary nighttime residence. In 2023, statewide, more than three-quarters of public school students experiencing homelessness are living “doubled-up” (e.g., living with another family).

Table 85. Percentage of Homeless Children/Youth Enrolled in Tennessee Public Schools by Primary Nighttime Residence (2021-2022)²⁰²

Geographic Area	Primary Nighttime Residence	Three-Year Percentage Change
Doubled up (e.g., living with another family)	77.2%	-4.58%
Hotels/motels	14.0%	+3.82%
Shelters, transitional housing	4.9%	-0.33%
Unsheltered (e.g., cars, parks, campgrounds)	3.9%	+1.09%

County level data on students experiencing homelessness is available by school district. In the 2022-2023 school year, one-quarter of students in Van Buren County Schools were experiencing homelessness, more than 10 times the rate of students statewide (Table 86). The school district has opened a Family Resource Center not far from the school campus with shower and laundry facilities, as well as clothes/shoes, personal hygiene supplies, and food.²⁰³

The school district homelessness liaison is a member of the UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start’s Health and Mental Health Services Advisory Committee and Van Buren County Prevention Coalition. The Coalition is a committee of community leaders founded one year ago by UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start to address challenges and help coordinate services for residents facing substance abuse.

Table 86. Homeless Student Enrollment by School District (2022-2023)²⁰⁴

School District	Percent Homeless	Total Student Enrollment	Estimated number of Homeless Students ²⁰⁵
Van Buren County Schools	25%	744	186
Bledsoe County Schools	2%	1,565	31
Tennessee	2%	973,983	19,480

The number of children eligible for Head Start based on homelessness status can be estimated from school district data.

²⁰² National Center for Homeless Education. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://profiles.nche.seiservices.com/StateProfile.aspx?StateID=50>

²⁰³ Van Buren County Schools. (2024). Family Resources. Retrieved from <https://www.vanburenschools.org/o/van-buren-county-schools/page/family-resources>

²⁰⁴ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Find A School District. Retrieved from <https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/districts>

²⁰⁵ Calculated by multiplying the percentage of homeless students by total student enrollment.

Table 87. Estimated Number of Children < Age 5 Experiencing Homelessness by School District Enrollment (2022-2023)²⁰⁶

School District	Number of Children < Age 5 ²⁰⁷	Percent Experiencing Homelessness by School District	Estimated # Children < Age 5 Experiencing Homelessness
Van Buren County Schools	303	25%	76
Bledsoe County Schools	631	2%	13

In PY 2023-2024, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start served 18 children who were experiencing homelessness (49% of funded enrollment). Leadership report that sharing a home with another family or “doubled-up” is the most prevalent living situation among Head Start families identified as homeless.

Homelessness is determined at enrollment, with staff asking where the family lives and who else lives in the home. When these families are identified, the program refers them to homeless resources through the parent agency, Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency. If needed, UCHRA arranges for emergency housing.

To further support families experiencing homelessness, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start maintains an on-site “lending house” that is stocked with donated clothing and household items, and also a food pantry that is accessible to Head Start families, as well as members of the community who may access these resources free of charge.

Table 88. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start Homelessness Data (2023-2024)²⁰⁸

	Head Start
Total number of families experiencing homelessness that were served during the enrollment year	15
Total number of children experiencing homelessness that were served during the enrollment year	18
Total number of families experiencing homelessness that acquired housing during the enrollment year	1

Children in Foster Care

In 2020, Tennessee had the highest Foster Care Instability rate in the nation. Foster Care Instability is defined as the percentage of children in foster care with three or more placements within 12 months. Children in foster care who experience instability are more likely to develop behavioral issues such as difficulty forming attachments and low self-esteem. Since 2016, around 31% of children in Tennessee’s foster care system have experienced this instability, compared to only 15% in the United States. In 2020, 33.7% of children in Tennessee’s foster care system were placed three or more times in a year, the highest in the nation.²⁰⁹

Statewide in 2021, approximately one-third of children in foster care were birth to age 5 (Table 89). In Van Buren County the rate of children birth to age 20 in state custody was 16.6 per 1,000 in 2023, three times the state rate (Table 90). Yet, public school enrollment for 2022-2023 shows fewer than 10 students in foster care in Van Buren County Schools (Table 91).

²⁰⁶ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Find A School District. Retrieved from <https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/districts>

²⁰⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

²⁰⁸ 2023-2024 Program Information Report

²⁰⁹ Tennessee Department of Health. (2023). The State of Health in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/health/program-areas/state-health-plan/2023-State-of-Health-Annual-Report-Revised-June-2023.pdf>

Table 89. Number and Rate of Children in Foster Care by Age in Tennessee (2021)²¹⁰

Geographic Area	Number	Rate
Under 1	565	6%
1-5	2,460	27%
6-10	1,795	19%
11-15	2,428	26%
16-20	1,978	21%
Total	9,226	100%

Table 90. Number and Rate (per 1,000) of Children (Birth to Age 20) in State Custody by Geographic Area (2023)^{211,212}

Geographic Area	Number	Rate ²¹³
Van Buren County	24	16.6
Bledsoe County	19	8.0
Tennessee	8,864	5.2

Table 91. Number and Percent of Public School Students in Foster Care (Pre-K to Grade 12) by School District (2022-2023)²¹⁴

School District	Number/Percent Foster Care	Total Student Enrollment	Estimated number of Foster Care Students ²¹⁵
Van Buren County Schools	<10 students	744	<10 students
Bledsoe County Schools	<1%	1,565	<16 students
Tennessee	<1%	973,983	<9,740

Table 92. Estimated Number of Children < Age 5 in Foster Care by Geographic Area (2022-2023)

Geographic Area	Number of Children < Age 5 ²¹⁶	Percent in Foster Care ²¹⁷	Estimated # Children < 5 in Foster Care
Van Buren County	303	<10 students	<10
Bledsoe County	631	<1%	<6
Tennessee	393,301	<1%	<3,933

Using data from Van Buren County Schools, it is estimated there are fewer than 10 children in foster care in the county who would be eligible for Head Start/Early Head Start. Assuming an equal distribution of ages, it can be estimated that fewer than four children are aged 3-5 and eligible for Head Start and fewer than six children are birth to 3 and eligible for Early Head Start.

Table 93. Estimated Number of Children Age < 5 in Foster Care by Geographic Area (2022-2023)

Geographic Area	Estimated # Children < 5 in Foster Care	Estimated Number of Children Age 0-3 ²¹⁸	Estimated # Foster Care Children Age 0-5
Van Buren County	<10	<6	<4
Clinton County	<6	<4	<2
Tennessee	<3,933	<2,360	<1,573

In PY2023-2024, UCRHA Van Buren County Head Start served two children in foster care. The program reports that DCS and the Department of Human Services (DHS) occasionally refer children to Head Start, but it is infrequent.

²¹⁰ Kids Count Data Center. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data?location=TN#TN/2/0/char/0>

²¹¹ Kids Count Data Center. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data?location=TN#TN/2/0/char/0>

²¹² Number of young population (dependent and delinquent) under age 20 who remain in state custody at the end of a given fiscal year (July-June).

²¹³ Rates greater than the statewide rate are highlighted.

²¹⁴ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Report Card. Retrieved from <https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/>

²¹⁵ Calculated by multiplying the percentage of homeless students by total student enrollment.

²¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

²¹⁷ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). Find A School District. Retrieved from <https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/districts>

²¹⁸ Calculated by multiplying the number of foster care children age 0-5 by 3/5.

Table 94. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start Foster Care Statistics (2023-2024)²¹⁹

Total number of enrolled children who were in foster care at any point during the program year	2
Total number of enrolled children in foster care who were referred by a child welfare agency	0

Children Receiving Public Assistance

Enrollment in Head Start and Early Head Start based on public assistance is dependent on receipt of TANF, SSI, or SNAP benefits.

The number of children birth to age five living in households that receive public assistance can be estimated by applying the percent of children (0-18) living in households that receive public assistance to the number of children birth to age five in the service area (Table 95). The number of Head Start eligible children in the service area based on receipt of public assistance is 44; for Early Head Start it is 65.

Table 95. Estimated Number of Children Birth to Age 5 Eligible for Head Start/Early Head Start Based on Receipt of Public Assistance by Geographic Area (2018-2022)²²⁰

Geographic Area	Percent of Children (0-18) Receiving Public Assistance ²²¹	Number of Children Birth to Age 5	Number of Children Living in Households Receiving Public Assistance		
			Ages 0-3 ²²²	Ages 3-5 ²²³	Ages 0-5 ²²⁴
Spencer	48.4%	45	13	9	22
Van Buren County	35.9%	303	65	44	109
Bledsoe County	43.7%	631	166	110	276
Tennessee	25.9%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

In PY2023-2024, UCRHA Van Buren County Head Start served 25 children whose primary eligibility was receipt of SNAP.²²⁵

Children with Disabilities

Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) require that at least 10% of program enrollment be children eligible for services under IDEA (i.e., early intervention and preschool special education).

Tennessee's Early Intervention System (TEIS) is Tennessee's Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities (Part C of IDEA). Part C of IDEA is a federal grant program that assists states in operating a comprehensive statewide program of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities, ages birth through two (2) years and their families. Table 96 reflects the number of children <3 years old participating in TEIS, and the rate (per 1,000 population of same age group).

²¹⁹ Program Information Report, 2022-2023

²²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

²²¹ Rates greater than the countywide rate are highlighted.

²²² Estimated at 3/5 the Number of Children Living in Households Receiving Public Assistance birth to 5.

²²³ Estimated at 2/5 the Number of Children Living in Households Receiving Public Assistance birth to 5.

²²⁴ Estimated by applying the percent of children 0-18 living in households receiving public assistance to the population of children birth to 5

²²⁵ 2023-2024 Program Information Report

Table 96. Number (and Rate per 1,000) of Children Age < 3 Served by Tennessee Early Intervention by Geographic Area and Year²²⁶

Geographic Area	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Five-Year Trend
Van Buren County	8 (40.0)	8 (39.0)	7 (34.1)	2 (10.2)	0 (0.0)	Decreasing
Bledsoe County	12 (32.5)	6 (17.8)	10 (29.7)	14 (43.2)	4 (12.0)	Fluctuating
Tennessee	6,800 (27.9)	7,656 (31.2)	8,323 (33.9)	8,754 (35.9)	8,995 (37.6)	Increasing

Preschool (ages 3-5) special education services are managed by local school districts. To better understand the levels of young children with disabilities in the service area, school district data can provide contextual data. As described in Table 97, Van Buren County Schools serves a percentage of students, ages 3-21, with an identified disability at a greater rate than the statewide rate. In order to estimate the number of public school Pre-K students with a disability in the service area, the number of students in the school district with a disability is distributed evenly across ages 3 to 21 and then calculated for ages 3 to 5.

Table 97. Estimated Number of Children Ages 3-5 with Disabilities Receiving Special Education Services by School District (2022-2023)²²⁷

School District	Number and Percent of Students (Ages 3-21) with Disabilities ²²⁸	Estimated Number of Children Ages 3-5 with Disabilities ²²⁹
Van Buren County Schools	127 (9.3%)	20
Bledsoe County Schools	380 (16.6%)	60
Tennessee	8.0%	---

Table 98. Estimated Number of Children Age < 5 with an Identified Disability (Receiving Early Intervention Services and Preschool Special Education) by Geographic Area

Geographic Area	Estimated Number of Children Age <3 Served by Tennessee Early Intervention (2022)	Estimated Number of Children Ages 3-5 Receiving Special Education Services (2022-2023)	Estimated Number of Total Children 0-5 With a Disability
Van Buren County	0	20	20
Bledsoe County	4	60	64

In PY 2023-2024, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start served four children with an identified disability (11.0% of enrollment); two had speech or language impairment, and two had autism.

Table 99. Number and Percent of Children Served by UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start with a Disability (2023-2024)²³⁰

Number	Percent of Funded Enrollment
4	11.0%

The program's relationship with Van Buren County Schools has been improving since the appointment of a new director of schools in 2023. Referrals to the school district take about 60 days for an assessment, and staffing is limited for the number of students who have needs. For example, the school district shares one speech-language pathologist who must travel between Van Buren County and two other counties.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the early identification of developmental delays and disabilities in young children was highly impacted in many early

²²⁶ Kids Count Data Center. (2024). Tennessee early child intervention in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/8303-tennessee-early-child-intervention?loc=44&loct=2#detailed/5/any/false/1095,2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36/any/16877,16878>

²²⁷ Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth. (2024). County Profiles of Child Well-Being in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/tccy/data-and-research/county-profiles.html>

²²⁸ Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth. (2024). County Profiles of Child Well-Being in Tennessee. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/tccy/data-and-research/county-profiles.html>

²²⁹ Estimated by assuming an even distribution of children.

²³⁰ 2023-2024 Program Information Report

childhood programs. Some of the impacts on early identification and service delivery included reduced resources, poor service delivery coordination, communication challenges, and families struggling to meet basic needs.²³¹ Research also shows delays in language development among children born during the pandemic, and some of this may be caused by less language engagement than is typical for young children. Data show that the number of words a 2-year-old heard before the pandemic was significantly more than what a 2-year-old in 2020 and 2021 would hear. These differences were most pronounced for children in low-income households.²³²

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership are proud that during the height of the pandemic, the program remained operational. When the building was forced to shut down, services were offered remotely. Staff offered lessons and activities virtually, and delivered meals weekly (breakfast, lunch, and snack) along with educational packets to children's homes.

²³¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). CDC's Act Early Response to COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/CDCs-act-early-response-to-COVID-19.html>

²³² Education Week. 2024. Babies are Saying Less Since the Pandemic: Why That's Concerning. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/babies-are-saying-less-since-the-pandemic-why-thats-concerning/2022/04>



AGENCIES SERVING HEAD START/EARLY HEAD START ELIGIBLE CHILDREN

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start is the only Head Start program serving Van Buren County. There are no Early Head Start services in the county. Nearby, Sequatchie Valley Head Start serves Bledsoe, Grundy, Marion, Rhea, and Sequatchie counties. Also in Bledsoe County, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start is provided by Telamon.

In 2022, the Tennessee Child Care Task Force (CCTF) issued a strategic action plan for increasing the availability of high quality, affordable, and accessible child care in this state, for building partnerships between government and the business sector, and to identify resources across state government departments that could be streamlined, coordinated, and more effectively utilized to address child care challenges.

Key findings of the report include:

- There are a large number (likely in the several thousands) of unregulated child care providers that operate lawfully, caring for four or fewer unrelated children. These providers receive no monitoring or regulatory oversight from any Tennessee agency, so it is unknown how many of these providers exist and whether they are providing care that is safe, healthy, and educationally rich.
- There is an early care and education workforce and pipeline shortage that prevents programs from meeting full enrollment, and also prevents the expansion of early learning programs.
- Tennessee early learning programs are struggling with hiring educators because the profession is not appealing to professionals who can earn more in other entry level positions.
- The early care and educator sector experiences high turnover and challenges in supporting the professional preparation of educators equipped to provide high quality care and learning.
- Child care workers have typically earned between \$11 - \$13.86/hour – wages well below the income threshold needed to sustain a family without assistance.²³³

The typical annual cost of child care for an infant in Tennessee is around \$12,000. On average, child care providers in Tennessee earn just \$27,470 a year; this can make it a challenge to recruit and retain this workforce, leading to supply issues.²³⁴

²³³ Tennessee Department of Human Services and Public Consulting Group LLC. (December 2022). Tennessee Child Care Task Force Final Report. Retrieved from https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/human-services/documents/TN%20CCTF%20Final%20Report_12.15.22.pdf

²³⁴ First Five Years Fund. (2024). Tennessee. Retrieved <https://www.ffyf.org/states/tennessee/>

Child Care Centers and Family Child Care

Child care providers in the state are licensed through the Tennessee Department of Human Services. Child care programs are required to be licensed if caring for five or more unrelated children for three or more hours a day.²³⁵ Preschool or school age child care programs are regulated by the Department of Education.²³⁶

There are no licensed child care providers in Van Buren County. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership believe many young children are cared for by friends and family in unregulated home settings.

In Van Buren County, preschool is offered at two locations: UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start and the Early Bird Pre-K program at Spencer Elementary School. Neither program serves infants and toddlers.

Table 100. Number and Capacity of Licensed Child Care Centers/Preschools by Geographic Area (October 2024)²³⁷

Geographic Area	Licensed Centers/ Preschools	Capacity	Accepts Infants/ Toddlers
	Spencer Elementary Early Bird Preschool	50	No
	Van Buren County Head Start	40	No
Van Buren County Total	2 programs	90	0%
	Cecil B Rigsby Elementary Preschool	20	No
	Creative Steps Daycare	15	Yes
	Bledsoe Head Start (Sequatchie Valley Head Start)	62	Yes
	Little Warriors Daycare	22	Yes
	M.V. Wheeler Elementary Preschool	20	No
	Pikeville Elementary Preschool	80	No
	Telamon Summer City Migrant Head Start	99	Yes
Bledsoe County Total	7 programs	318	42.9%

Child Care Payment Assistance/Smart Steps is Tennessee’s child care subsidy program. Eligible families include those with income below the 85th percentile of State Median Income and who work, are enrolled in a post-secondary education program, or a combination of both, for an average of 30 hours or more a week. Participants in the Teen Parent program and parents in the Families First (TANF) program are also eligible.

Because Spencer Elementary Early Bird Preschool and UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start are free, public programs in Van Buren County, child care subsidy is not applicable (Tables 101 and 102).

Table 101. Number of Children (Ages 6 Weeks to Kindergarten) Receiving Child Care Subsidy by Geographic Area and Year²³⁸

Geographic Area	2021	2022	2023	Three-Year Trend
Van Buren County	2	0	0	Decreasing
Bledsoe County	5	3	5	Fluctuating

²³⁵ Tennessee Department of Human Services. (2024). How to become a licensed child care provider. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/for-families/child-care-services/how-to-become-a-licensed-child-care-provider.html>

²³⁶ Tennessee Department of Human Services. (2024). Program and Facilities Exempt from Licensing Requirements. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/for-families/child-care-services/how-to-become-a-licensed-child-care-provider.html>

²³⁷ Tennessee Department of Human Services. (2024). Child Care Locator. Retrieved from https://onedhs.tn.gov/csp?id=tn_cc_prv_maps%20

²³⁸ Kids Count Data Center. (2024). Child Care Benefits. Retrieved from:

<https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/8800-childcare-benefits?loc=44&loct=5#detailed/5/6420-6514/false/2545,1095,2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869/any/17639>

Tennessee’s Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) is called the Star-Quality Child Care Program. Participation is voluntary. The program rates providers on a scale of 1 to 3 stars. The more stars a program has, the better the quality it offers children.²³⁹

In Van Buren County, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start is rated 3 stars, meaning it has achieved the highest quality standards. Spencer Elementary Early Bird Preschool does not participate in the Star-Quality Child Care Program and is not rated (Table 102).

Table 102. Number and Capacity of Licensed Child Care Centers/Preschools by Geographic Area (October 2024)²⁴⁰

Geographic Area	Licensed Centers/ Preschools	Accepts Child Care Payment Assistance	Star Quality Rating
	Spencer Elementary Early Bird Preschool	N/A	No star rating
	Van Buren County Head Start	N/A	3
Van Buren County Total	2 programs	N/A	50%
	Cecil B Rigsby Elementary Preschool	N/A	No star rating
	Creative Steps Daycare	Yes	3
	Bledsoe Head Start (Sequatchie Valley Head Start)	N/A	3
	Little Warriors Daycare	No	No star rating
	M.V. Wheeler Elementary Preschool	N/A	No star rating
	Pikeville Elementary Preschool	N/A	No star rating
	Telamon Summer City Migrant Head Start	N/A	3
Bledsoe County Total	7 programs	33.3%	42.9%

When comparing the number of children under age 5 in Van Buren County to total licensed child care/preschool capacity, the number of children under age 5 far exceeds total licensed capacity. Specifically, the capacity (90 licensed slots) is lower than the total number of children birth to age 5 in the service area (303 children), representing available capacity for just 30.0% of children under 5. The true capacity is likely less, since capacity in the county is limited to preschool-age children. While notable, this does not necessarily reflect unmet need, as children may be served in other locations or settings, such as family, or friend and neighbor care, and not all families with young children will need or want care.

Table 103. Number of Children Birth to Age 5 Compared to Capacity of Licensed Child Care/Preschools by Geographic Area (October 2024)

Geographic Area	Capacity of Child Care/Preschool Programs ²⁴¹	Number of Children <5 Years Old ²⁴²	Number of Children <5 Years Old Living in Poverty ²⁴³
Van Buren County	90	303	61
Bledsoe County	318	631	336

A 2109 Tennessee child care study by the advocacy group Tennesseans for Quality Early Education found that “access, affordability and quality are the primary factors that drag down the system. Two-thirds of parents said they have trouble accessing care at all, exacerbated by the fact that 48 percent of Tennesseans live in a child care ‘desert’ – an area that has three times as many children as licensed child care slots. Two-thirds of parents say affordability of care is a big challenge. The cost of two children in center-based care is nearly

²³⁹ KidCentraTN. (2024). Child Care Star Rating System. Retrieved from

<https://www.kidcentraltn.com/content/kidcentral/support/child-care/child-care-star-rating-system.html/>

²⁴⁰ Tennessee Department of Human Services. (2024). Child Care Locator. Retrieved from https://onedhs.tn.gov/csp?id=tn_cc_prv_maps%20

²⁴¹ Tennessee Department of Human Services. (2024). Child Care Locator. Retrieved from https://onedhs.tn.gov/csp?id=tn_cc_prv_maps%20

²⁴² U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

²⁴³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>

\$16,000 annually – 21 percent of the median income of a Tennessee married family and 60.4 percent of families living in poverty. Another 50 percent cite finding suitable quality as an issue.”²⁴⁴

The Center for American Progress defines a child care desert as “any census tract with more than 50 children under the age of 5 that contains either no child care providers or so few options that there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.”²⁴⁵ Under this definition, Spencer and Van Buren County are considered a child care desert, with unmet need of 222 child care slots.

Table 104. Child Care Need: Child Care Desert Mapping (2023)²⁴⁶

	Spencer, Van Buren County	Pikeville, Bledsoe County
Population	4,378	11,854
DHS Capacity	40	176
DOE Total Enrollment	210	296
DOE Enrollment 6 and Under	50	296
Child Care Need (estimate)	312	843
Unmet Need	222	371

Home Visiting

The Tennessee Department of Health governs Evidence Based Home Visiting (EBHV) programs in all 95 counties via service contracts with local community-based agencies and county and regional health departments. Priority populations for EBHV enrollment include low-income families, teen mothers, history of child abuse and neglect, history of substance abuse, users of tobacco, low student achievement, children with developmental delays, and military families. During State FY2023, Tennessee’s EBHV programs served 3,218 families.²⁴⁷

Table 105. Evidence Based Home Visiting Programs by Geographic Area (SY2023)^{248,249}

Geographic Area	Program Name	Implementing Agency	Eligibility Criteria	Numbers of Families Served
Van Buren County	Healthy Families Tennessee	Centerstone Tennessee ²⁵⁰	Families prenatally to age 3; each HFA site can determine their criteria for eligibility.	Not available
Bledsoe County	Healthy Families Tennessee	Nurture the Next ²⁵¹	Families prenatally to age 3; each HFA site can determine their criteria for eligibility.	More than 600 families served in 2023; over 230 families were non-English speaking.

²⁴⁴ Tennesseans for Quality Early Education. (2024). Want to Grow Tennessee’s Economy? Fix the Child Care Crisis. Retrieved from <https://tqee.org/child-care-study/>

²⁴⁵ Tennessee Department of Human Services. (2024). TDHS Child Care Desert Map. Retrieved from <https://tnchildcarehelpdesk.sworpswebapp.sworps.utk.edu/child-care-desert-map/>

²⁴⁶ Tennessee Department of Human Services. (2024). TDHS Child Care Desert Map. Retrieved from <https://tnchildcarehelpdesk.sworpswebapp.sworps.utk.edu/child-care-desert-map/>

²⁴⁷ Tennessee Department of Health. (2023). Tennessee Evidence Based Home Visiting: FY2023 Annual Report. Retrieved from https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/health/documents/2023%20Home%20Visiting%20Annual%20Report_FINAL.pdf

²⁴⁸ Tennessee Department of Health. (2023). Tennessee Evidence Based Home Visiting: FY2023 Annual Report. Retrieved from https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/health/documents/2023%20Home%20Visiting%20Annual%20Report_FINAL.pdf

²⁴⁹ Tennessee Department of Health. (2024). Programs and Referrals. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/fhw/tdh-ebhv/ebhv-programs-referrals.html>

²⁵⁰ Centerstone. (2024). Early Childhood Services. Retrieved from <https://centerstone.org/programs/early-childhood-services/>

²⁵¹ Nurture the Next. (2024). In Home Supports for Parents. Retrieved from <https://www.nurturethenext.org/in-home-support-for-parents>

Publicly Funded Preschool

Voluntary Pre-K provides Tennessee’s three- and four-year-old children—with an emphasis on four-year-olds who are at-risk—an opportunity to develop school readiness skills (pre-academic and social skills).²⁵²

Table 106. Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K Facts (2023-2024)²⁵³

Number of classrooms	941
Number of locations	138 school districts in 94 of 95 counties
Number income-eligible children enrolled	16,185
Statewide utilization rate	86%
Statewide capacity	93%

Table 107. Public Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) Class Capacity by School District and Year²⁵⁴

School District	Classroom Allocation (Number of Classrooms)			Capacity ²⁵⁵
	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2024-2025
Van Buren County Schools	2	2	2	40 students
Bledsoe County Schools	4	4	4	80 students

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership note that with just two options for preschool services in the county, the Head Start program works collaboratively with Spencer Elementary Early Bird Preschool to recruit and enroll eligible children. If the school district determines that a child’s or family’s needs are better met by Head Start, the district will refer them to UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start and vice versa.

Recruitment remains a challenge every year, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic, more families have chosen to homeschool. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start recruiting efforts include door-to-door canvassing, flyers, and social media.

FAMILY, STAFF, AND COMMUNITY INSIGHTS



Family, staff, and community input are valuable sources of data to guide program options and services and to enhance collaborations among partners. In Fall 2024, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start conducted Family, Staff, and Community Provider surveys as important sources of data to inform this Community Assessment. Responses to the surveys were collected between September 20 and October 4, 2024. Surveys are provided in the Appendix.

Family Input

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start implemented a Family Survey to gather information from parents and guardians about their experiences and ideas related to the Head Start program. The survey was available

²⁵² Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). 2023024 VPK Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/early-learning/voluntary-pre-k.html>

²⁵³ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). 2023024 VPK Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/early-learning/voluntary-pre-k.html>

²⁵⁴ Tennessee Department of Education. (2024). VPK Classroom Allocation. Retrieved from https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/early-learning/pre-k/VPK_Classroom_Allocations.pdf

²⁵⁵ Each VPK Classroom is intended to serve 20 students (maximum) with and without disabilities; this figure assumes each classroom may have 20 students enrolled.

electronically. The overall response rate (100.0%) showed strong engagement and included all 33 enrolled families, as reported by UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start.

Demographics. All but one respondent indicated their race/ethnicity as White; the other recipient identifies as multi-racial. All reported that they are most comfortable speaking English. Respondents generally mirror the demographic makeup of the Head Start program.

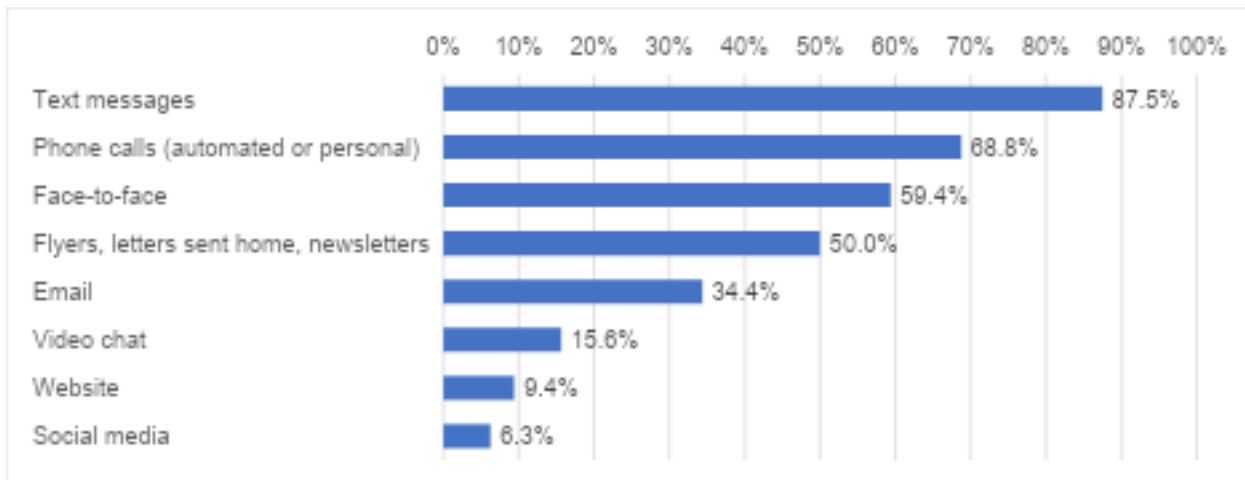
Family Composition. The majority of respondents (88.0%) are the biological, step, or adoptive parent of the enrolled child(ren). Two respondents serve as guardians.

Employment. More than half of parents/caregivers who responded were working (53.1%), either full time or part time. In contrast, 40.6% are unemployed. One respondent is in school full time.

Communication. The majority of families (87.5%) selected text messaging as their preferred method of communication from the program. This was followed by more traditional communication methods (phone calls - automated or personal (68.8%), face-to-face (59.4%), and flyers/letters sent home (50.0%).

Asked about their social media preferences, 93.8% said they use Facebook most often. This was followed by TikTok (31.3%) and Snapchat (21.9%).

Figure 14. Family Survey: Communication Preferences



Transportation and Program Location/Schedule. When asked how they generally bring their child to and from the program, nearly 70% indicated they travel in their own car and 43.8% rely on the school bus offered by UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start (Respondents could select multiple responses to this question.)

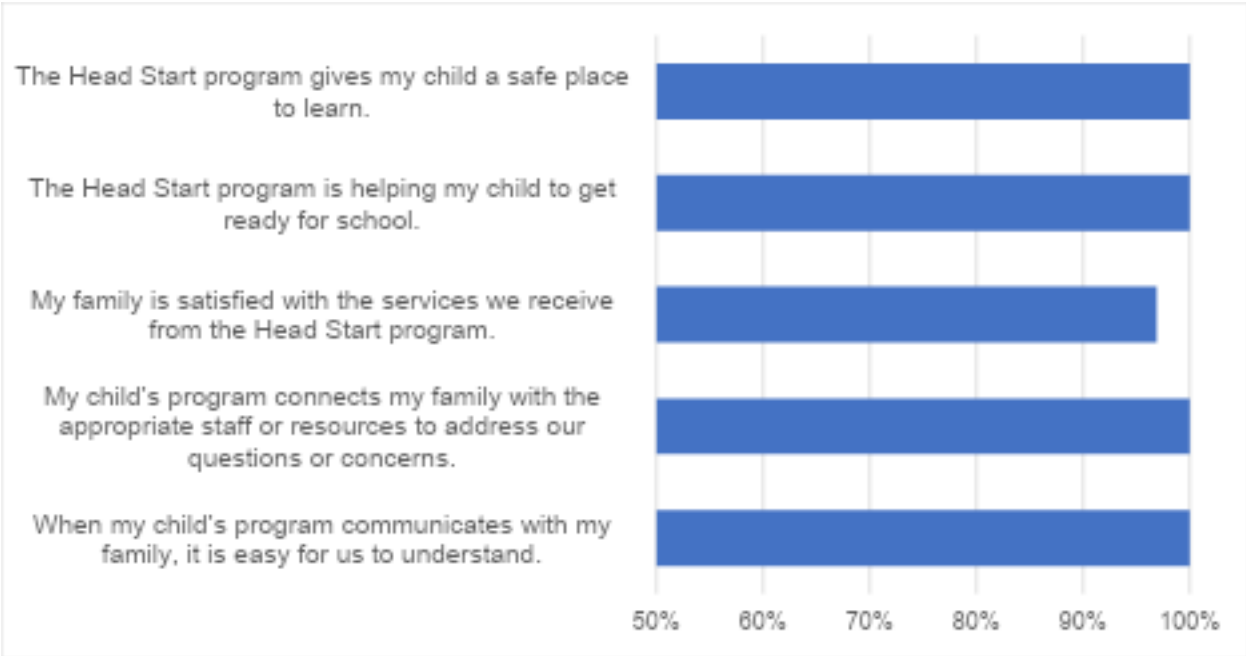
While transportation can be a barrier in the service area, 87.5% of family respondents reported that the location of the Head Start center meets their needs. All but one respondent indicated that the program offers a schedule that meets their family's needs. Asked about whether the program schedule could better meet families' needs, one respondent requested later hours/after care and four respondents requested transportation. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start provides school bus transportation between the center and the town of Spencer, but not to other parts of the county.

Diversity. All but one respondent indicated that they agree or strongly agree that the program's staff reflect their family's language and culture. Similarly, all but one respondent agreed or strongly agreed that

perspectives, including their own, are actively sought and valued during decision-making processes. When asked if the program's culture and values are inclusive of their family and people from diverse backgrounds, all but two respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

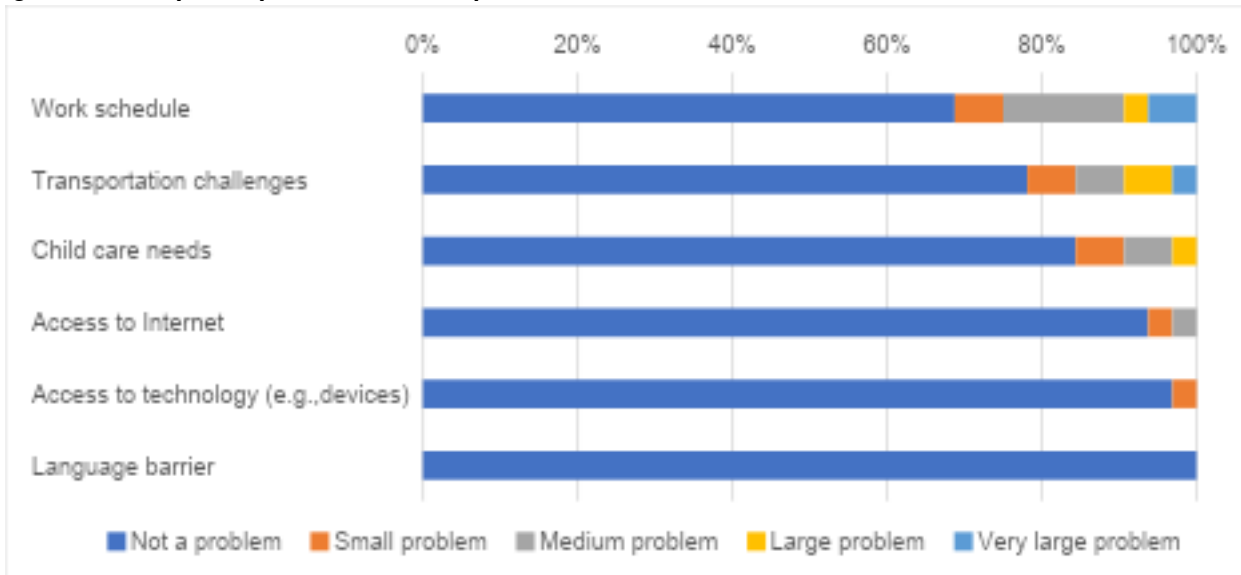
Meeting Family Needs, Satisfaction with Services. Satisfaction with UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start is extremely high; nearly all respondents agree with statements about the program's impact and effectiveness.

Figure 15. Family Survey: Satisfaction With Services



Barriers to Participation. Families experience some barriers to participating in UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start, such as Policy Council, parenting curriculum, home visits and parent-teacher meetings. The most frequently encountered barriers are their work schedule and transportation challenges (Figure 16).

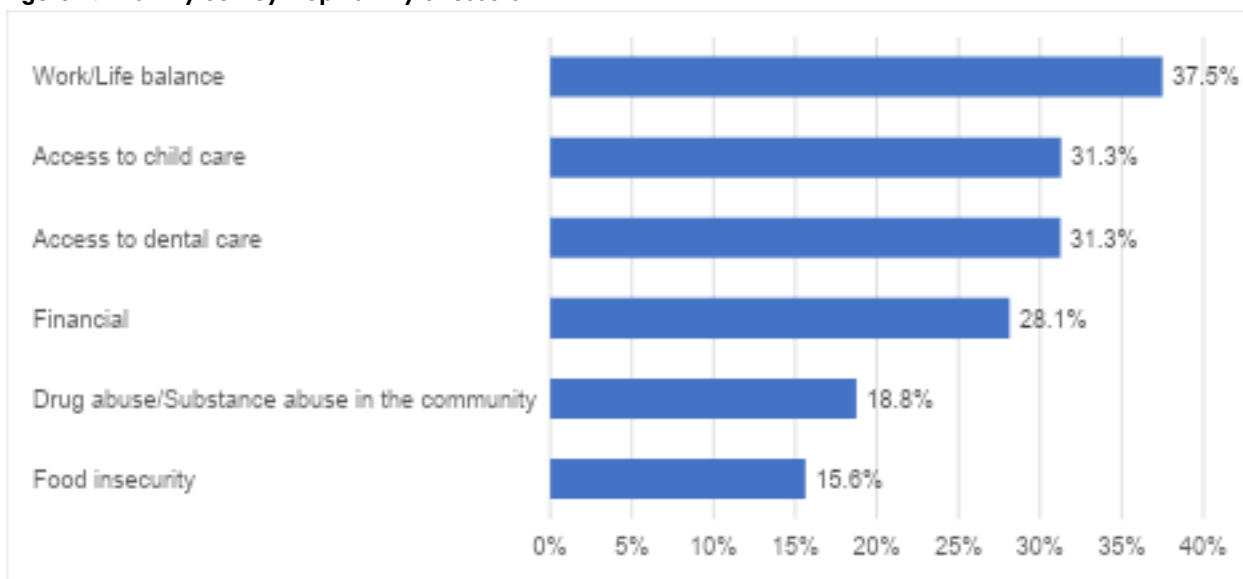
Figure 16. Family Survey: Barriers to Participation



Family Stressors. Families with fewer resources can face many stressors that can affect their relationships, mental and physical health, and overall quality of life. The biggest stressors reported by the families surveyed were work/life balance (37.5%), access to child care (31.3%), and financial (28.1%) (Figure 17).

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership noted that while families work a variety of jobs and shifts, commute times are often an hour or more, impacting work/life balance. Additionally, there is no licensed child care in the county (as detailed in the Agencies Serving Eligible Head Start/Early Head Start Children section).

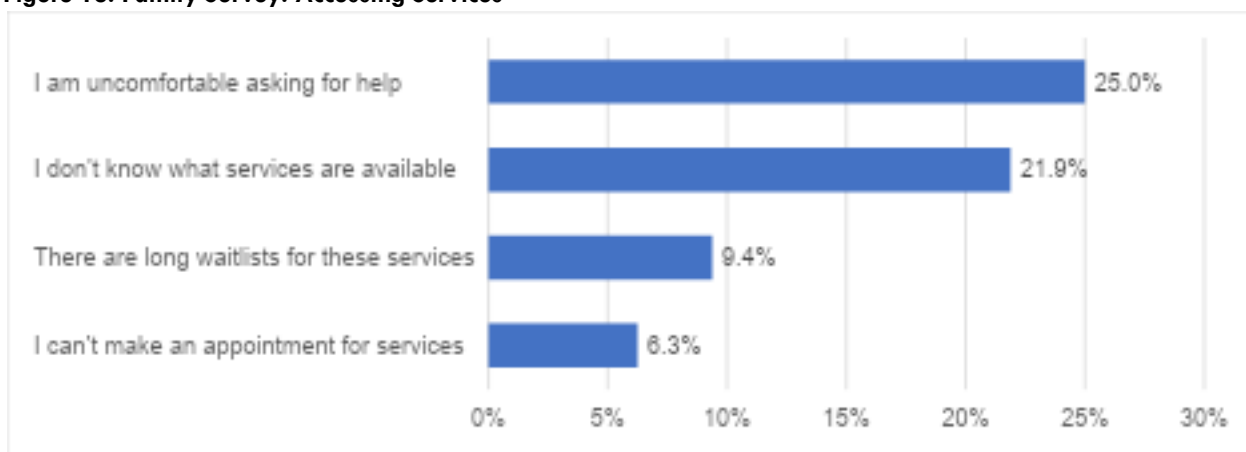
Figure 17. Family Survey: Top Family Stressors



Access to Services. When asked to identify any services that families need or want that they are not able to find or access in their community, the majority (59.4%) indicated they have all the services they need/want. For the remaining respondents, the top services they need or want are affordable housing and child care (both 12.5%), followed by mental health services and food assistance (9.4%).

Families that have difficulty getting help for specific needs reported that their biggest challenge was being uncomfortable asking for help (25.0%), followed by not knowing what services are available (21.9%) (Figure 18). UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start provides information on resources at every family event and maintains a resource guide updated yearly on its website. Leadership reports that they have heard from families who admit their pride has gotten in the way of asking for help. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership view this as an opportunity to explore additional outreach opportunities and build trust with families.

Figure 18. Family Survey: Accessing Services



Attitudes about UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start. In open-ended responses, the majority of respondents expressed their gratitude for the program and how beneficial it has been for their children and families.

Staff Input

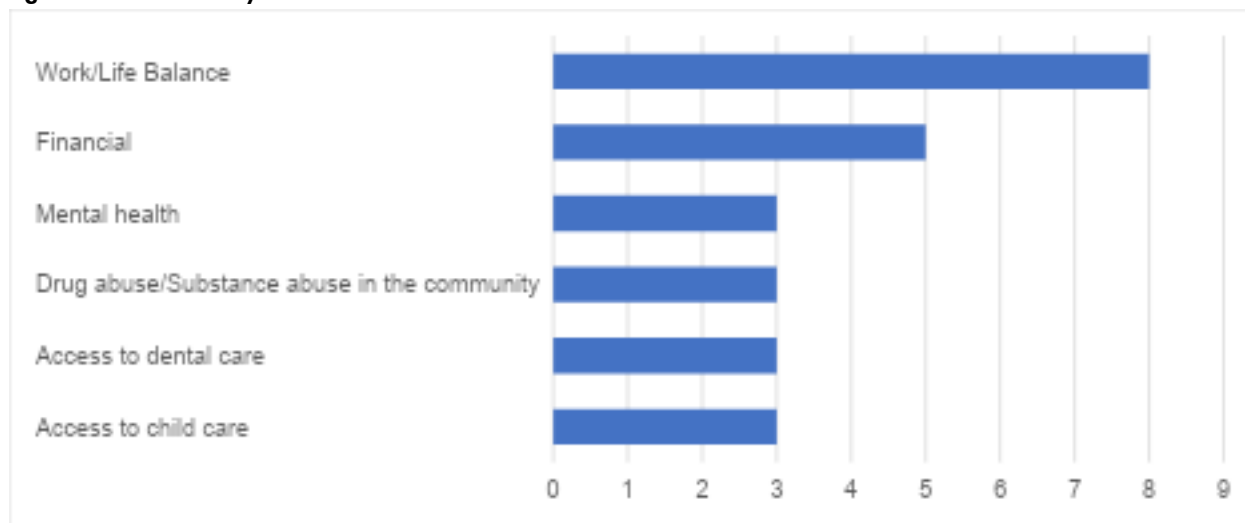
As part of its 2025 Community Assessment, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start also conducted a Staff Survey. All 15 staff members responded to the survey, a 100% response rate. Due to the small number of staff, percentages cited throughout this section should be taken with caution (e.g., 21.4% equals three respondents). Where applicable, results are presented in raw numbers rather than percentages to avoid misinterpretation.

Of 15 staff members, half are instructional staff (teachers/teaching assistants); three are management/administrative; two are family services; and two are facilities staff (e.g., bus driver).

Demographics. Reflective of the Family Survey and Census data for the county, the majority of staff identify their race/ethnicity as White (14 of 15). One staff member identifies as Hispanic/Latino. All staff report speaking English at home. This is also reflective of the Family Survey and aligns with Census data. The majority (14 of 15) staff members live in Van Buren County. The remaining staff member commutes from White County.

Personal Stressors for Staff. When staff were asked to indicate the stressors faced by their own families, the top two responses relate to personal well-being: work/life balance (8 staff) and financial (5 staff). A smaller number (3 staff) cited access to child care, access to dental care, drug abuse/substance abuse in the community, and mental health. Staff could select multiple stressors; not all staff selected the same combinations of stressors.

Figure 19. Staff Survey: Personal Stressors

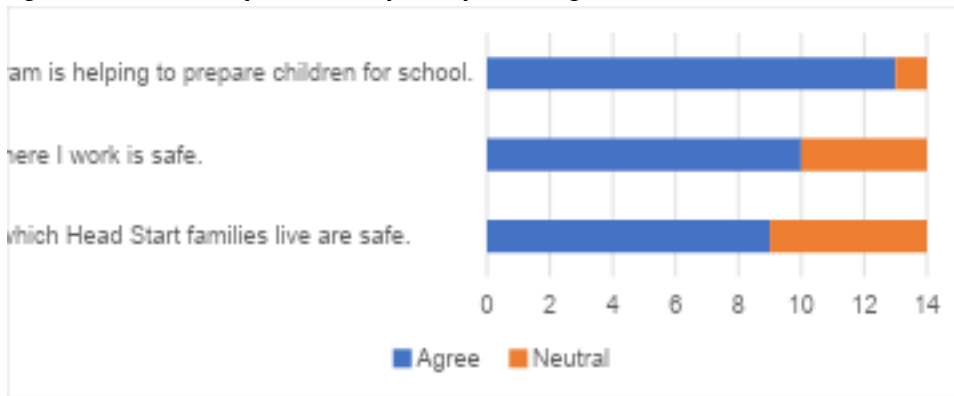


Transportation and Program Location/Schedule. The majority of staff (9) believe that vehicle reliability is a challenge that impacts children’s attendance. This was followed by lack of vehicle (7 staff) and limited routes and stops along public transportation (6 staff).

All staff believe the center location meets the needs of families. When asked if the program schedule (days and hours) meets the needs of families, two staff members selected “no.” When asked how the schedule could do to better meet families’ needs, three staff members suggested later hours/after care. Additionally, summer program and transportation were each cited once.

Community Safety and Program Effectiveness. Staff were asked if they agreed or disagreed with statements about community safety for Head Start families and for themselves, as well as the effectiveness of the Head Start program. Although no one disagreed with the statements, results were mixed with a number of respondents selecting neutral (Figure 20).

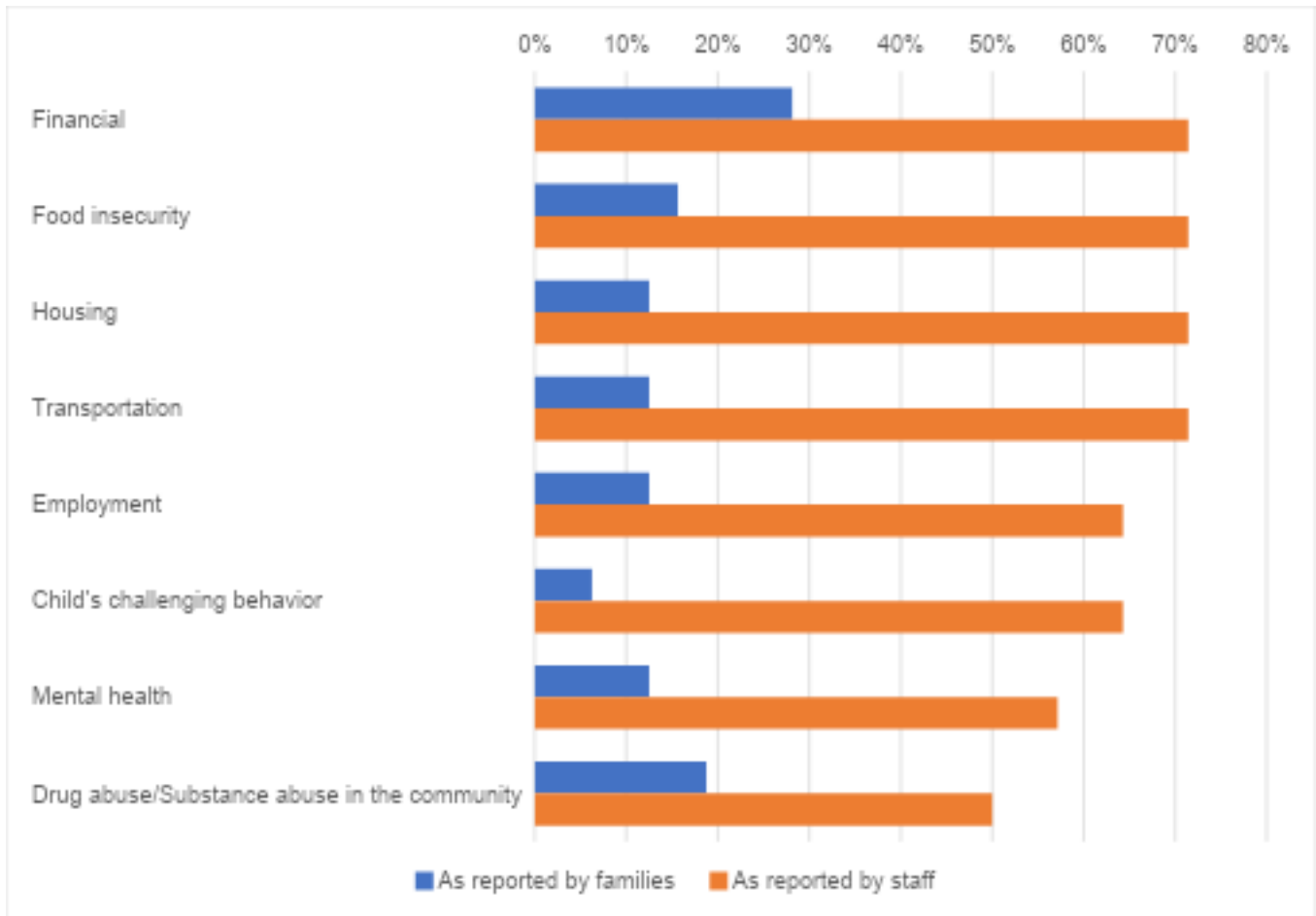
Figure 20. Staff Survey: Community Safety and Program Effectiveness



Staff Opinions About Families. With 100% response rates from the Staff and Family surveys, a comparative analysis of both surveys can provide a full picture of the family experience. To understand how staff view families' needs and concerns, questions in the Staff Survey mirror several asked in the Family survey. Families were asked to identify *their own* personal stressors and the services they most need or want; staff were asked the same questions about the families they serve. It is important to note that although half of staff respondents engage with families on a daily basis, other staff respondents serve in roles with less direct contact with families.

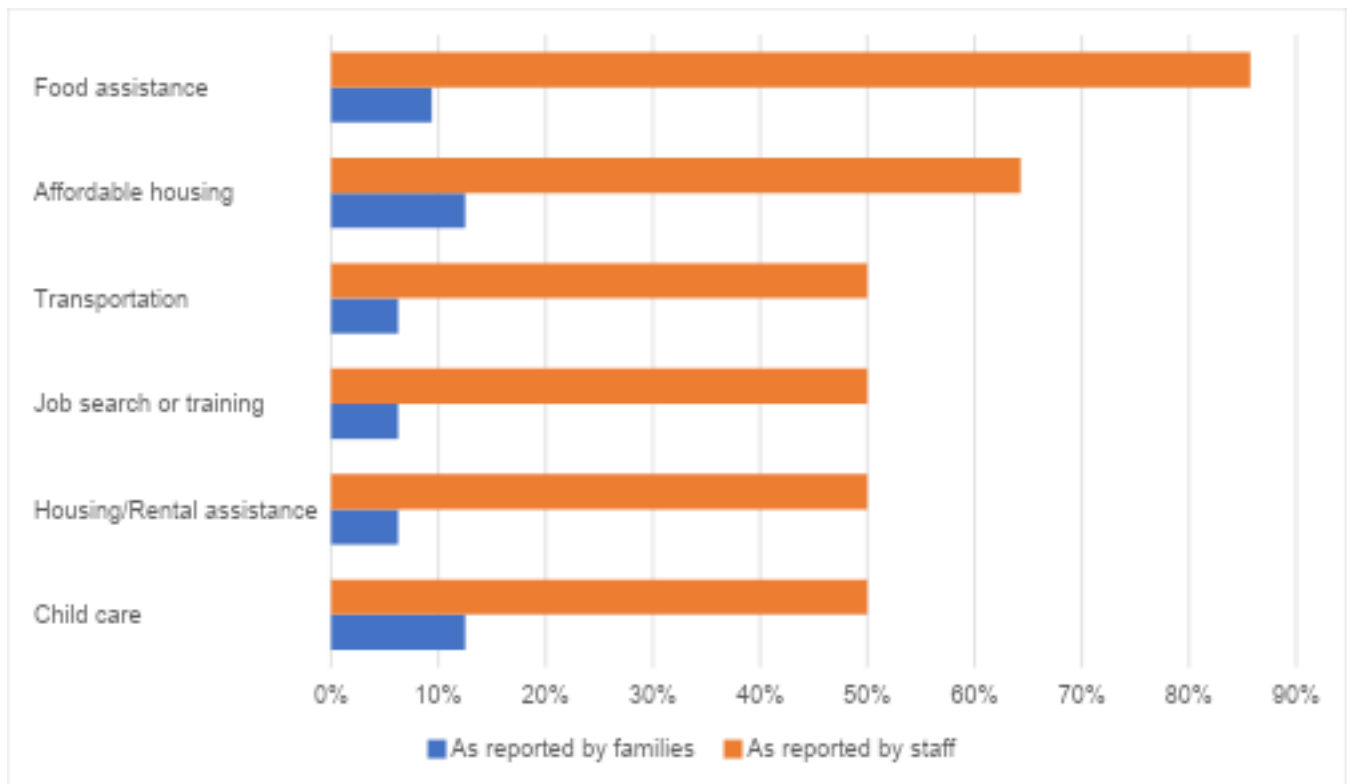
In a side-by-side comparison of stressors, it is clear that the concerns staff have about families' experiences do not always align with how families view their own personal challenges. It is important to note that due to the small number of staff, 50% of staff respondents equate to seven staff members. (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Side-by-Side Comparison of HS/EHS Family Stressors as Reported by Staff and by Families



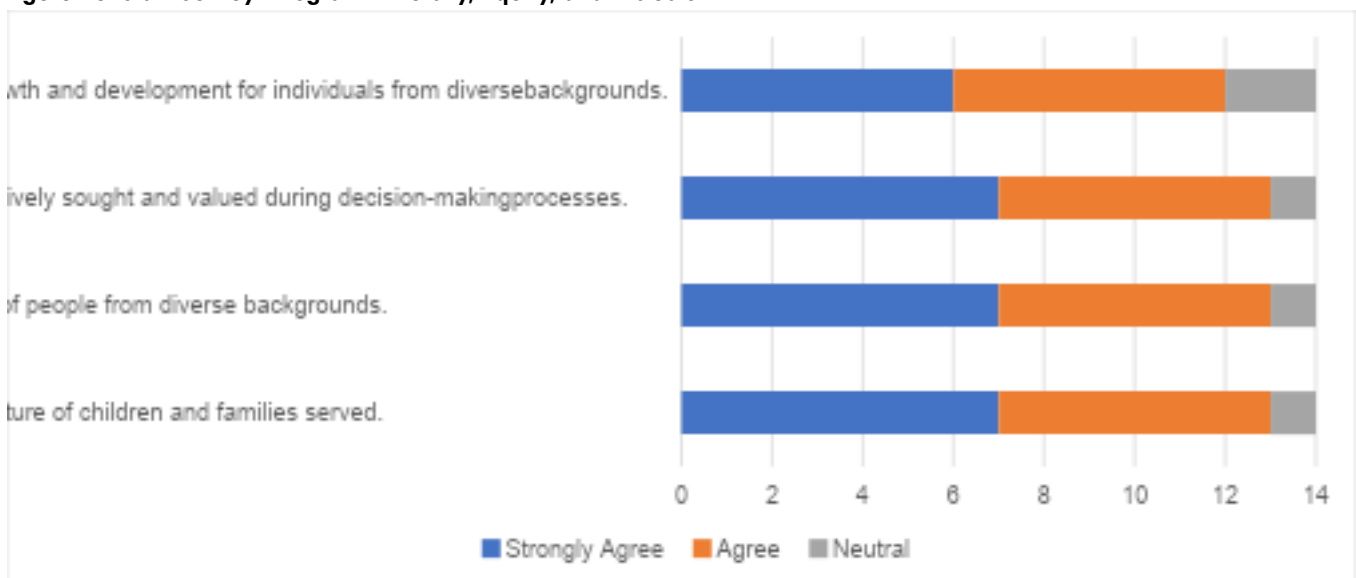
Staff were also asked to identify the services that families most need or want. In a side-by-side comparison of family needs or wants, it also becomes clear that staff concerns about family needs or wants differ from how families view themselves (Figure 22). Notably, the majority of staff cited food assistance as a resource families most need or want, but less than 10% of families indicated this was a concern. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership note that the program routinely provides food assistance to families, filling this gap. Again, it is important to note that due to the small number of staff, 50% of staff respondents equate to seven staff members.

Figure 22. Side-by-Side Comparison of HS Family Needs and Wants as Reported by Staff and by Families



Diversity. Similar to respondents to the Family Survey, staff were asked their opinions on UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start’s inclusiveness. While the majority agreed with statements about the program’s efforts and openness and no one disagreed, a few respondents indicated they were neutral (Figure 23).

Figure 23. Staff Survey: Program Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion



Program Improvement. Staff were asked for their ideas on how UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start could better meet the needs of families. The largest group of respondents (7 staff) suggested establishing new or

improved partnerships with community agencies. This was followed by improving referrals to community service providers (5 staff) and improving communication with parents (4 staff).

Community Input

A Community Provider Survey gathered information from community agencies about their experiences supporting the service area population and their ideas for improved collaboration and coordination. Ten respondents completed the Community Provider Survey, with diverse representation from Van Buren County and beyond. Due to the small number of respondents, percentages cited throughout this section should be taken with caution (e.g., 30.0% equals three respondents). Where applicable, results are presented in raw numbers rather than percentages to avoid misinterpretation.

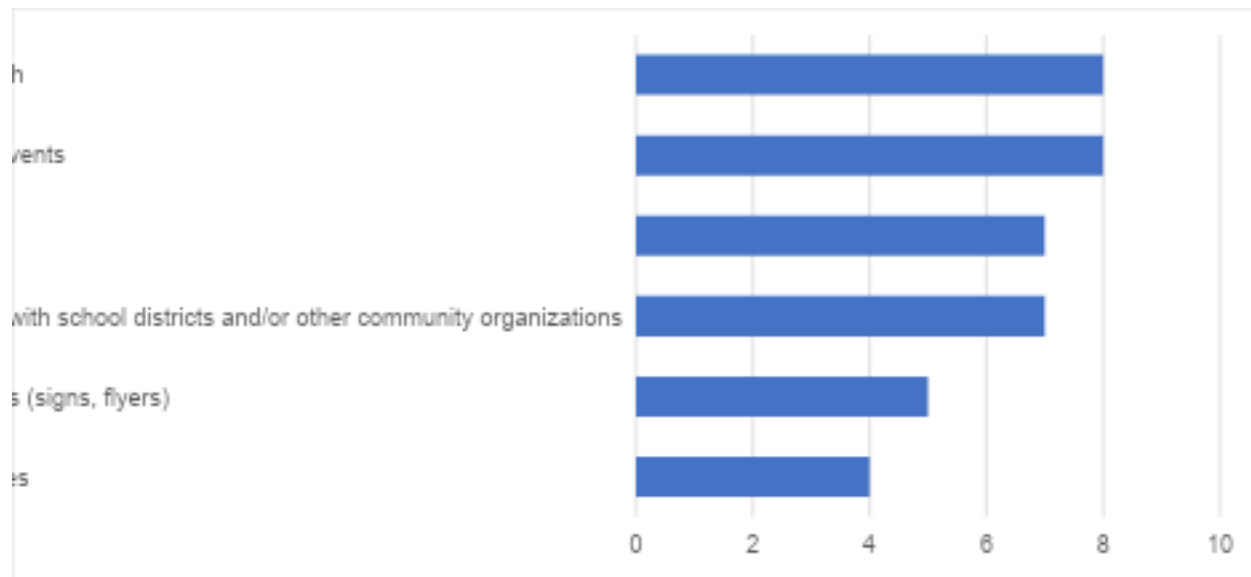
Agencies responding to the survey provide an array of services such as education, job search or training, health, mental health, dental care, veterans services, and law enforcement. Seven respondents are current partners with UCRHA Van Buren County Head Start, and three of these partners have worked with UCHRA for more than 5 years.

Community Snapshot. Reflecting on what they think is best about the community where their agency provides services, the top response was parks and playgrounds (5 respondents), followed by neighborhood relationships, safety, and services offered by community organizations (4 respondents each).

Communication and Outreach. Respondents were asked to identify the most effective ways to communicate with families they currently serve. Seven out of ten respondents cited face-to-face communication as the most effective method of communication, followed by phone calls or text messages (6 respondents each) and social media (5 respondents).

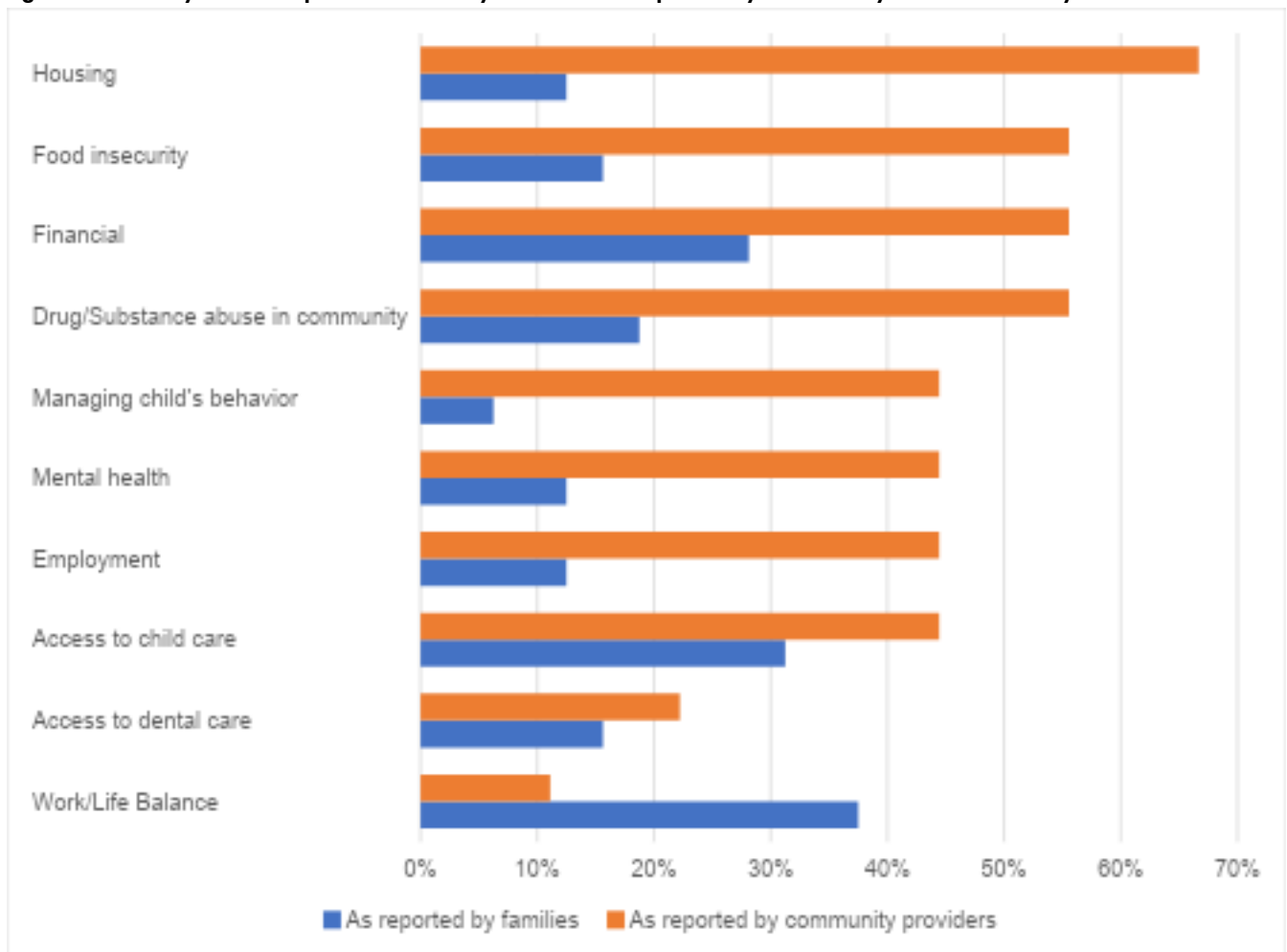
Asked to share their strategies for reaching/recruiting potential clients/families, Community Providers most often relied on community events and word of mouth (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Community Provider Survey: Outreach Strategies



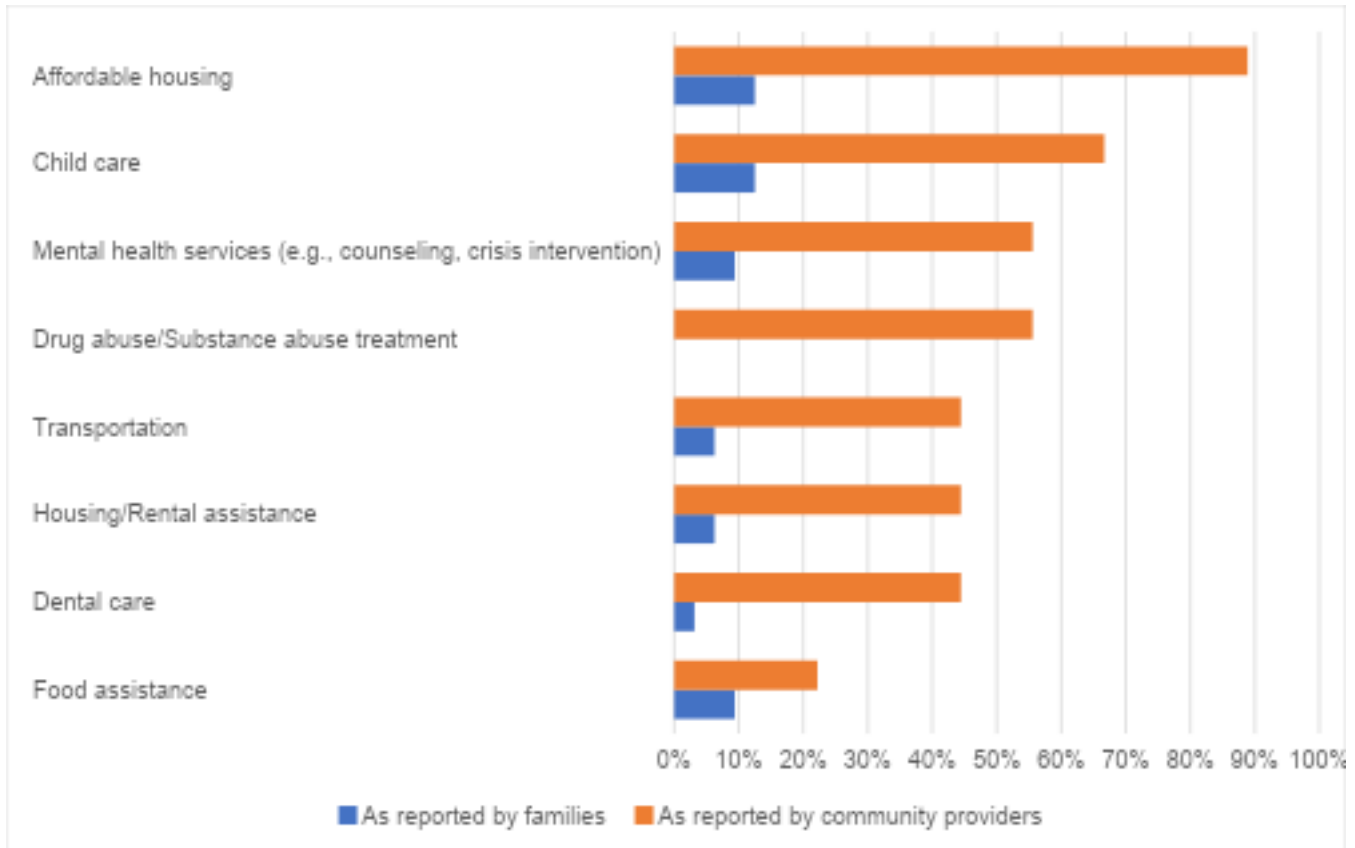
Community Provider Opinions About Families. Similar to the Staff Survey, community providers were asked a number of questions about their opinions of the families they serve. Asked about stressors that families face, community provider respondents indicated a higher level of concerns than families themselves. It is important to note that the providers surveyed support a wide range of families/clients. Their responses reflect their experiences working with families across sectors and beyond Head Start. Nine community providers responded to this question. Due to the low number of community provider respondents, percentages should be taken with caution (e.g., 66.7% equals six respondents) (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Side-by-Side Comparison of Family Stressors as Reported by Community Providers and by HS Families



Community providers were asked to identify the services that low-income families most need or want that they may not be able to find or access in the community. Again, it is important to note that these responses reflect providers' experiences serving families beyond Head Start. A side-by-side comparison is still a valuable tool to evaluate the perspectives of those who provide services to the low-income population of Van Buren County (Figure 26).

Table 26. Side-by-Side Comparison of Family Needs/Wants as Reported by Community Providers and by HS Families



RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Families with fewer resources can face many stressors that affect their relationships, mental and physical health, and overall quality of life. In rural, sparsely populated Van Buren County, there are limited social service resources available to families. Available resources are often shared with or accessed in neighboring counties. For example, the speech-language pathologist serving Van Buren County Schools divides their time with two other counties. This can lead to longer wait times or additional travel to get to needed resources.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start serves a critical role in supporting vulnerable populations. The program provides vital assistance and connections to residents to navigate and access available community resources. The program maintains a resource guide, updated yearly, that is available on its website.



Social Services. To meet needs and fill in gaps in services, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start has formed strong formal and informal partnerships with organizations both inside and outside the county. Additionally, the program leverages its parent agency, Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency, to help provide comprehensive services to individuals, children, and families, and connect them with resources to support well-being and self-sufficiency. UCHRA services include the Relative Caregiver Program, public transportation, emergency housing vouchers, commodities distribution, LIHEAP, food assistance, and Empower workforce program. The Head Start program and UCHRA share a Governing Body.



Substance Abuse. Recognizing the impact that substance abuse was having on the community, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start spearheaded the formation of the Van Buren County Prevention Coalition in 2023. The Prevention Coalition meets monthly to serve as a resource for individuals with substance abuse challenges (e.g., seeking treatment, release from prison).

Coalition members include mental health and health providers, substance abuse recovery providers, American Legion, Ag Extension office, as well as the county health department, sheriff's department, and school district. The Coalition is led by Rita Mayfield, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start's Assistant Mentor-Coach/Education Supervisor/Professional Development Coordinator.

The coalition recently received a \$10,000 grant from the state to support its work and hopes to eventually hire staff and establish an office location where residents can go to seek assistance for recovery.



Education. Community education resources – early education, K-12, and higher education – provide a continuum of education support from birth through adulthood. Having resources available to support child development and student achievement enhances the overall economic welfare of a community. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start has been strengthening its partnership with the local LEA, Van Buren County Schools. The school district serves as the program's largest in-kind donor – leasing a facility free of charge to the program to operate Head Start.

In Van Buren County, access to high quality early learning is extremely limited. With just two options for preschool services in the county, the Head Start program works collaboratively with Spencer Elementary School Early Bird Preschool to recruit and enroll eligible children. If the school district determines that a child's or family's needs are better met by Head Start, the district will refer them to UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start and vice versa.

Further, Rita Mayfield and Elsie Blaylock, Head Start Director, are co-chairs for the county Imagination Library, the local affiliate of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which provides free books to children ages

birth to five. Previously funded fully by the Tennessee Governor’s Early Literacy Foundation, the program is now 50% funded through local donations. Under the leadership of Ms. Blaylock and Mrs. Mayfield, the county program has raised \$8,000. Additionally, enrollment of eligible children has increased from one of the lowest rates in the state to more than 50%; all Head Start children are enrolled.



Affordable Housing. As stated throughout this Community Assessment, there is a significant and growing need in the community for affordable housing. Short-term vacation rentals and the influx of retirees from outside the county are putting stress on an already tight housing market for low-income families. Van Buren County is home to only two affordable housing complexes. The Sparta Housing Authority based in neighboring White County operates a public housing complex in Spencer. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership noted that the waitlist for this complex is approximately 2 years. A private owner also operates an affordable housing complex in Spencer. It is likely that there is a wait list for this complex as well. Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency provides emergency housing vouchers to help families stay in their homes.



Homelessness. In PY 2024-2025, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start served 18 children who were experiencing homelessness (49% of funded enrollment). Homelessness is determined at enrollment, with staff asking where the family lives and who else lives in the home. When these families are identified, the program refers them to homeless resources through its parent agency, Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency. If needed, UCHRA arranges for emergency housing.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start maintains an on-site “lending house” that is stocked with donated clothing and household items, and also a food pantry that is accessible to Head Start families, as well as members of the community who may access these resources free of charge.

Similarly, a Family Resource Center operated by the school district offers access to shower and laundry facilities, as well as clothes/shoes, personal hygiene supplies, and food for students and their families. Van Buren County Schools serves a homeless population that is 25% of student enrollment.



Family Support and Well-being. Many children who reside with a grandparent do so as a result of custody arrangements (formal and informal). UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership noted that the program serves a high number of children in the care of grandparents.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start refers grandparents to the Relative Caregiver Program within its parent agency, Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency. Funded by the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, the program offers support services and resources to relatives raising children whose biological parents are no longer able to do so. The program provides monthly support groups and enrichment activities, as well as emergency financial support. Monthly case management is offered to the whole relative family, and caregivers are provided with a manual that lists available resources and services within their own community.




Health Services. Health, mental health, oral health, and nutrition services are critical to meeting the health needs of individuals, children, and families. In general, these services are limited in Van Buren County. According to leadership team members, there is only one private physician (available weekly) and one nurse practitioner for all of Van Buren County. There is also one physician available monthly through the county health department. As such, many residents must travel outside the county for health care.

UCRHA Van Buren County Head Start plays a critical role in filling the gap in health services for young children. Among children served by the Head Start program in 2024-2025, all were up to date on primary and preventative health care at enrollment and at the end of the enrollment year.

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start maintains a list of health providers and refers families with medical insurance to private medical practices closest to their homes. Those without insurance are referred to the Van Buren County Health Department. For families with no transportation options, the program will transport the child, accompanied by a parent, to medical appointments via the Head Start van.

Additionally, the program leverages partnerships with local public health and private organizations to bring health care screening to the program. Once a year, the county health department hosts a dentist from Nashville to conduct children’s dental screenings. The Lions Club from nearby Cumberland County visits once a year to conduct vision screenings. Van Buren County Schools conducts hearing screenings onsite.

Mental health support is provided by the program’s Mental Health Consultant, who visits the program once monthly for classroom observations and offers staff and family training twice yearly. He is also available to support staff and families as needed.

 **Food Assistance.** Food insecurity rates in Van Buren County (18.5) are higher than the statewide rate (14.0). Though the USDA does not designate Van Buren County as a low-income, low-access food desert, the county is home to only one food market. As mentioned above, the Head Start program’s food pantry and the school district’s Family Resource Center serve families in need. Additionally, Chattanooga Food Bank coordinates a food distribution in the county on the third Thursday of every month. Families are notified of these events through flyers as well as a shared Google Calendar maintained by UCRHA Van Buren County Head Start.

REFLECTIONS



As described throughout the Community Assessment report, there is diversity of need coupled with limited resources in the UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start service area. This becomes most evident when reviewing local data. By partnering with local community providers and leveraging its relationship with its parent agency, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start is providing services to those most in need.

Drawing from the data and key findings of the *2025 Community Assessment* and input from leadership team members, the following reflections will be considered to support the program’s continued responsiveness to community needs.

Reflection 1: Program Design. The UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start program regularly engages in the best practice of reviewing slot allocations in the context of community-wide trends to explore strategies that support responsiveness to changes in community needs. Further, the program will continue to update and explore community level data to support the ongoing provision of a high-quality program (e.g., Wage and

Benefits Comparability Study, Community Assessment, self-assessment, enrollment and waiting list data, and input from the Board and Policy Council).

Reflection 2: Staff Recruitment, Professional Development, and Retention. Continue to enact best practices and innovative recruitment methods to hire qualified staff. The program assists staff who attend college in obtaining benefits such as tuition assistance and stipends through two statewide initiatives aimed at fortifying the early childhood workforce and promoting retention: TECTA (Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance) for tuition assistance and Child Care WAGE\$ Tennessee for salary supplements. The program will also continue to provide volunteer opportunities for parents of enrolled children to help them gain knowledge and experience for possible future employment at the program.

Reflection 3: Community Information, Resources, and Referrals. Continue to leverage the resources of its parent agency to deliver services locally. Examples include referrals for the Relative Caregiver program, on-demand transportation, emergency housing vouchers, and commodities distribution. Results from the 2024 Family Survey found that 20%-25% of families did not know what resources were available or were reluctant to ask for help. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start leadership views this as an opportunity to explore additional outreach opportunities and build trust with families.

In 2023, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start took the lead in forming the Van Buren County Prevention Coalition, composed of community leaders and resource providers to address challenges and gaps in services with regard to substance abuse. The primary goal of the Prevention Coalition is to one day serve as a standalone community resource provider for residents struggling with substance abuse.

Reflection 4: Affordable Housing. Recently updated Head Start Program Performance Standards note that when HS/EHS programs are verifying eligibility, a program may make an adjustment to a family's gross income calculation for the purposes of determining eligibility to account for excessive housing costs. In response, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start has begun using a Housing Cost Tool calculator provided by the National Head Start Association to determine eligibility. The program will continue to monitor data and update its policies to identify and enroll families in need.

Reflection 5: Homelessness. Continue to advocate for, and provide support to, families experiencing homelessness and those on the brink of eviction or homelessness. Ensure that enrollment staff and families are aware of, and understand, the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness and how it impacts eligibility for Head Start services (e.g., "doubled-up" families).

With 25% of public school students experiencing homelessness, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start will continue to strengthen its partnership with the LEA homelessness liaison to identify families and refer siblings to Head Start as appropriate.

Reflection 6. Relationship with Local Education Agency. Van Buren County Schools and the Head Start program are the only two options for preschool services in the county. The program will continue to build on and strengthen the relationship with the school district to enhance information-sharing and referrals.

Reflection 7: Food Insecurity. Nearly one in five county residents faces food insecurity. Data shows 21.1% of county children receive SNAP benefits. Among respondents to the Fall 2024 Family Survey, 15.6% indicated that food insecurity was a stressor for their family. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start will continue to provide food assistance to families in need through a small food pantry onsite stocked with free food items for

families and members of the community, as well as coordination of regular commodities distributions led by UCHRA. The program also continues to implement a monthly family nutrition activity, as well as educational home activities about nutrition.

Since 2020, UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start has distributed free turkeys and trimmings to all enrolled families at Thanksgiving and Christmas (when possible). Families also receive materials for an educational activity that they can use with their children while preparing the holiday meals. All food items are donated by the community.

Reflection 8: Preventive and Primary Care. Continue to strengthen collaborations with health partners including the Van Buren County Health Department, Mental Health Consultant, Van Buren County Schools, and Lions Club to coordinate events supporting overall health and support services provided in the program. Continue to promote the importance of preventative and primary care through the curriculum and with families; address barriers to maintaining an on-time health schedule and reinforce the importance of follow-up care.

Reflection 9: Transportation. Stay abreast of developing community transportation resources that may be shared with enrolled families. Continue to refer families to local existing public transportation options (e.g., on-demand services) as needed. Grow and continue to utilize strategies to reduce transportation burdens on families, such as continuing to provide school bus transportation between the Head Start center and town of Spencer.

LOOKING AHEAD

UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start will use the data from this *2025 Community Assessment* to support program planning in the agency's continued efforts to meet community needs, in partnership with community resource providers.

The HSPPS requirements to annually review and update the Community Assessment provide UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start with an opportunity to continuously reflect upon data and respond to community trends. With Community Assessment data as a driving factor for understanding and meeting community needs, the program will continue its mission to empower families and educate children in the early years to lead to healthier, more successful adults and stronger, more productive communities.

APPENDIX: FAMILY, STAFF, AND COMMUNITY PROVIDER SURVEYS

Head Start Family Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete the family survey. Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency Van Buren County Head Start is interested in your opinions about Head Start services provided by our agency. Sharing your ideas and experiences will help us to ensure services meet your needs.

The survey will take about 10 minutes to complete and is confidential. The deadline to complete this survey is **Friday, October 10**.

Instructions: Please read each statement about your child(ren)'s Head Start program and respond with the current school year in mind. If your family has more than one child enrolled in the program, please complete the survey only once. If more than one member of the same household would like to provide responses to the survey, you may complete multiple surveys.

We value feedback from our families and would like to hear from you.

Your Child(ren)'s Head Start Program

1. How many children do you have enrolled in UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start?
 - One
 - Two
 - Three or more

Demographics

2. What is your relationship to the child(ren) enrolled in the Head Start program? (Select one option.)
 - Parent (Biological/Step/Adoptive)
 - Guardian
 - Foster Parent
 - Extended Family Member (e.g., grandparent, aunt, uncle)
 - Other (Please specify): _____
3. What is your family's race/ethnic group? (Select all that apply.)
 - American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - Asian
 - Black or African American
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - White
 - Multi-Racial
 - Other (Please specify): _____

4. Do you work, attend school, or participate in training? (Select all that apply.)
- Work full-time
 - Work part-time
 - In school full-time
 - In school part-time
 - Participate in a job training program (e.g., nurse aid, child care, carpentry, electrician)
 - Unemployed
 - Other (Please specify): _____

Communication

5. What language are you most comfortable communicating in? (Select one option.)
- English
 - Spanish
 - Other (Please specify): _____
6. What are the ways you prefer the program communicate with you about your child's education? (Select all that apply.)
- Email
 - Face-to-face
 - Flyers, letters sent home, newsletters
 - Phone calls (automated or personal)
 - Social media
 - Text messages
 - Video chat (e.g., Facetime, Zoom, Google Meet, Teams)
 - Website
 - Other (Please specify): _____
7. If you use social media, what platforms do you use most often? (Select all that apply.)
- Facebook
 - Instagram
 - LinkedIn
 - Snapchat
 - TikTok
 - WhatsApp
 - X (Twitter)
 - YouTube
 - Other (Please specify): _____

Transportation

8. How do you regularly transport your child to and from the program? (Select all that apply.)
- Car pool with another family
 - My own car
 - Neighbor/relative car
 - Public transportation
 - School bus
 - Other (Please specify): _____

Diversity

9. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start is committed to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure services meet your needs. Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements about your child(ren)'s Head Start program.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I believe the program's staff reflect my family's language and culture.					
I believe the program's culture and values are inclusive of my family and people from diverse backgrounds.					
I believe diverse perspectives, including my own, are actively sought and valued during decision-making processes.					

Satisfaction with Head Start Program

10. Does the location of the Head Start center meet your family's needs?
- Yes
 - No
11. If the location of the Head Start center DOES NOT meet your family's needs, tell us why.
12. Does the program offer a schedule of services that meets your family's needs?
- Yes
 - No

13. If the program schedule DOES NOT meet your family's needs, what would better meet your needs? (Select all that apply.)

- Earlier hours
- Later hours/After care
- Summer program
- Transportation
- Other (Please specify): _____

14. Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements about your child(ren)'s Head Start program.

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
When my child's program communicates with my family, it is easy for us to understand.			
My child's program connects my family with the appropriate staff or resources to address our questions or concerns.			
My family is satisfied with the services we receive from the Head Start program.			
The Head Start program is helping my child to get ready for school.			
The Head Start program gives my child a safe place to learn.			

Barriers

15. How big of a problem are the following issues for becoming involved with your child’s Head Start program, such as Policy Council, fatherhood activities, parenting curriculum, home visits, parent-teacher meetings?

	Not a problem	Small problem	Medium problem	Large problem	Very large problem
Access to Internet					
Access to technology (e.g., devices)					
Child care needs					
Language barrier					
Transportation challenges					
Work schedule					
Other (Please specify):					

Your Community

16. What do you think is best about the community your family lives in? (Select all that apply.)

- Availability of jobs
- Affordable child care
- Diversity
- Housing affordability
- Job training
- Immigrant friendly
- Neighborhood parks and playgrounds
- Neighborhood relationships
- Public transportation
- Quality of schools and universities
- Quality of health care services
- Safety
- Services offered by community organizations
- Services offered by local government (e.g., SNAP, WIC)
- Other (Please specify): _____

Your Family

17. What are your family's biggest stressors? (Select all that apply.)

- Access to child care
- Access to dental care
- Access to medical care
- Community violence
- COVID-19
- Domestic violence
- Drug abuse/Substance abuse in the community
- Educational/job training
- Employment
- Financial
- Food insecurity
- Getting support/help from K-12 schools or school districts
- Housing
- Immigration issues (e.g., citizenship)
- Marital/personal
- Mental health
- My child's behavior
- My child's disabilities
- Transportation
- Work/Life Balance
- Other (Please specify): _____

18. Are there services that you or your family needs or wants that you're not able to find or access?

(Select all that apply.)

- Affordable housing
- Child care
- Dental care
- Drug treatment/Substance abuse treatment
- Education (e.g., computer, literacy, language, High School Diploma/GED, degree programs)
- Foster care
- Food assistance
- Health care
- Housing/rental assistance
- Immigration services (e.g., assistance with forms, case evaluation, referral)
- Job search or training
- Legal aid and assistance (e.g., immigration, family, criminal, tenant relations)
- Mental health services (e.g., counseling, crisis intervention)
- Parenting
- Senior services
- Transportation
- We have access to all the services our family needs/wants
- Other (Please specify): _____

19. If you have had difficulty finding or getting access to services you selected in the previous question, please indicate why. (Select all that apply.)

- I can't make an appointment for services
- I don't know what services are available
- Language barriers
- I am uncomfortable asking for help
- My immigration status
- There are long waitlists for these services
- Not applicable
- Other (Please specify): _____

20. Please use the space below to provide any additional feedback, ideas, or suggestions you have related to how the Head Start program can best meet your family's needs.

Head Start Staff Survey

Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency Van Buren County Head Start is in the process of gathering information for its community needs assessment. Your feedback as a Head Start team member is important. Sharing your ideas and experiences will help us to ensure we are providing services that meet children and families' needs.

The survey will take about 10 minutes to complete and is confidential.

The deadline to complete this survey is **Friday, October 10**. Thank you for your participation!

Your Job

1. What category of staff best aligns with your current position?
 - Management and Administrative Staff (e.g., Management, Content Specialist, Center Director)
 - Family Services Staff (e.g. Family Advocate)
 - Instructional staff (e.g., Teacher, Teacher Assistant)
 - Facilities staff (e.g., Cook, Bus Driver, Maintenance)
 - Other (please specify): _____

Demographics

2. What is your race/ethnic group? (Select all that apply.)
 - American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - Asian
 - Black or African American
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - White
 - Multi-Racial
 - Other (please specify): _____
3. What language(s) is spoken in your home? (Select all that apply.)
 - English
 - Spanish
 - Other (please specify): _____
4. Where do you live? (Select one option.)
 - Bledsoe County
 - Cumberland County
 - Grundy County
 - Sequatchie County
 - Van Buren County
 - Warren County
 - White County
 - Other (please specify): _____

Personal Characteristics

5. What are your family's biggest personal stressors? (Select all that apply.)

- Access to child care
- Access to dental care
- Access to medical care
- Community violence
- COVID-19
- Domestic violence
- Drug abuse/Substance abuse in the community
- Educational/job training
- Employment
- Financial
- Food insecurity
- Getting support/help from K-12 schools or school districts
- Housing
- Immigration issues (e.g., citizenship)
- Marital/personal
- Mental health
- My child's behavior
- My child's disabilities
- Transportation
- Work/Life Balance
- Other (please specify): _____

Head Start Program and Family Characteristics

6. Do you think the location of the Head Start center meets families' needs?

- Yes
- No

7. If you do not think the location of the Head Start center meets families' needs, please explain.

8. Do you think the program schedule (days and number of hours per day) offered by the Head Start program meets families' needs?

- Yes
- No

9. If you do not think the program schedules meet families' needs, how do you think we could better meet families' schedule needs? (Select all that apply.)

- Earlier hours
- Later hours/After care
- Summer program
- Transportation
- Other (please specify): _____

10. Are there any transportation challenges that impact children's attendance at the program? (Select all that apply.)

- Lack of vehicle
- Vehicle reliability
- Limited hours for public transportation
- Limited routes and stops along public transportation
- Other (please specify): _____

11. Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Head Start program.

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The communities in which <u>Head Start families live</u> are safe.			
The neighborhood <u>where I work</u> is safe.			
The Head Start program is helping to prepare children for school.			

12. What do you believe are Head Start families' biggest stressors? (Select all that apply.)

- Access to child care
- Access to dental care
- Access to medical care
- Community violence
- COVID-19
- Domestic violence
- Drug abuse/Substance abuse in the community
- Educational/job training
- Employment
- Financial
- Food insecurity
- Getting support/help from K-12 schools or school districts
- Housing
- Immigration issues (e.g., citizenship)
- Marital/personal
- Mental health
- How to manage their child's challenging behavior
- How to support and provide care for a child with disabilities
- Transportation
- Work/Life Balance
- Other (Please specify): _____

13. What services do you believe Head Start families most need or want? (Select all that apply.)

- Affordable housing
- Child care
- Dental care
- Drug abuse/Substance abuse treatment
- Education (e.g., computer, literacy, language, High School Diploma/GED, degree programs)
- Foster care
- Food assistance
- Health care
- Housing/Rental assistance
- Immigration services (e.g., assistance with forms, case evaluation, referral)
- Job search or training
- Legal aid and assistance (e.g., immigration, family, criminal, tenant relations)
- Mental health services (e.g., counseling, crisis intervention)
- Parenting
- Senior services
- Transportation
- Other (please specify): _____

Diversity

14. UCHRA Van Buren County Head Start is committed to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure services meet the needs of children and families. Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Head Start program.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I believe the program’s staff reflect the language and culture of children and families served.					
I believe the program’s culture and values are inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds.					
I believe diverse perspectives, including my own, are actively sought and valued during decision-making processes.					
The program provides equal opportunities for career growth and development for individuals from diverse backgrounds.					

15. Please use the space below to provide any additional feedback, ideas, or suggestions you have related to how the Head Start program can best promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

16. How do you think the Head Start program can do a better job to meet families’ needs? (Select all that apply.)

- Improve communication with parents
- Improve referrals to community service providers
- Establish new or improved partnerships with community agencies
- Offer more and/or greater variety of services or training opportunities
- Provide a greater degree of case management support
- Other (please specify): _____

17. Please use the space below for other comments and to provide any additional feedback, ideas, or suggestion you have related to how the Head Start program can best meet children and families’ needs.

Community Provider Survey

Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency Van Buren County Head Start is in the process of gathering information for its community needs assessment that will inform the agency's Head Start program.

Your feedback as a community resource provider is important. Sharing your ideas and experiences will help us to ensure we are providing services that meet children and families' needs.

The survey will take about 10 minutes to complete and is confidential.

The deadline to complete this survey is **Friday, October 10**. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Kendra Heard at (931) 260-0358 or kheard@uchra.com. Thank you for your participation!

Your Organization

1. Where does your agency provide services? (Select all that apply.)

- Bledsoe County
- Cumberland County
- Grundy County
- Sequatchie County
- Van Buren County
- Warren County
- White County
- Tennessee (statewide)
- Other (Please specify): _____

2. What type of services does your agency provide? (Select all that apply.)

- Child care
- Dental care
- Domestic/Intimate Partner violence
- Drug abuse/Substance abuse treatment
- Education (e.g., computer, literacy, language, High School Diploma/GED, degree programs)
- Foster care
- Food assistance
- Health (e.g., vision, hearing, vaccination, health care)
- Housing/Rental assistance
- Immigration services (e.g., assistance with forms, case evaluation, referral)
- Job search or training
- Legal aid and assistance (e.g., immigration, family, criminal, tenant relations)
- Mental health services (e.g., counseling, crisis intervention)
- Parenting
- Senior services
- Transportation
- Other (Please specify): _____

Your Community

3. In your experience, what are the best ways to communicate with families that you currently serve? (Select all that apply.)
- Email
 - Face-to-face
 - Flyers, letters sent home, newsletters
 - Phone calls (automated or personal)
 - Social media
 - Text messages
 - Video chat (e.g., Facetime, Zoom, Google Meet, Teams)
 - Website
 - Other (Please specify): _____
4. What are your strategies for reaching/recruiting potential clients/families? (Select all that apply.)
- Advertising on radio/tv
 - Print materials (signs, flyers)
 - Community events
 - Door-to-door recruiting
 - Partnerships with school districts and/or other community organizations
 - Social media
 - Text messages
 - Word of mouth
 - Other (Please specify): _____
5. What do you think is best about the community where your agency provides services? (Select all that apply.)
- Availability of jobs
 - Affordable child care
 - Diversity
 - Housing affordability
 - Immigrant friendly
 - Job training
 - Neighborhood relationships
 - Parks and playgrounds
 - Quality of schools and universities
 - Quality of health care services
 - Safety
 - Services offered by community organizations
 - Services offered by local government (e.g., SNAP, WIC)
 - Transportation
 - Other (Please specify): _____

Barriers and Meeting Needs

6. In your opinion, what are some of the barriers low-income families face to accessing resources in the community? (Select all that apply.)
- Availability of needed services
 - Affordability of needed services
 - Access to technology (e.g., devices)
 - Access to Internet/Wi-Fi
 - Citizenship
 - Fear/reluctance to access services
 - Language
 - Lack of bilingual staff at point of service
 - Limited knowledge of what resources are available
 - Other (Please specify): _____
7. Are there services you think low-income families may not be able to currently find or access in the community? (Select all that apply.)
- Affordable housing
 - Child care
 - Dental care
 - Drug abuse/Substance abuse treatment
 - Education (e.g., computer, literacy, language, High School Diploma/GED, degree programs)
 - Foster care
 - Food assistance
 - Health care
 - Housing/Rental assistance
 - Immigration services (e.g., assistance with forms, case evaluation, referral)
 - Job search or training
 - Legal aid and assistance (e.g., immigration, family, criminal, tenant relations)
 - Mental health services (e.g., counseling, crisis intervention)
 - Parenting
 - Senior services
 - Transportation
 - Other (Please specify): _____

8. In the community your agency serves, what do you believe are families' biggest stressors?
(Select all that apply.)

- Access to child care
- Access to dental care
- Access to medical care
- Community violence
- COVID-19
- Domestic violence
- Drug abuse/Substance abuse in the community
- Educational/job training
- Employment
- Financial
- Food insecurity
- Getting support/help from K-12 schools or school districts
- Housing
- How to manage their child's challenging behavior
- How to support and provide care for a child with disabilities
- Immigration issues (e.g., citizenship)
- Marital/personal
- Mental health
- Transportation
- Work/Life Balance
- Other (Please specify): _____

Your Agency

9. What do you believe are your agency's strengths when working with low-income families?
(Select all that apply.)

- Ability to connect families with resources
- Established relationships with families
- Staff experience and expertise
- Other (Please specify): _____

10. Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statement about your program.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Our staff reflects the language and culture of families we serve.					

11. Please use the space below for other comments to provide ideas about how Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency Van Buren County Head Start could partner with your agency to better meet the needs of low-income children and families.

12. How long have you been a partner with Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency Van Buren County Head Start?

- We are not a current partner
- We are not a current partner, but are interested in partnering
- We are not a current partner, but have partnered in the past
- Less than 2 years
- 2 to 5 years
- More than 5 years

13. If you would like us to contact you regarding your ideas please provide your contact information (Optional)

- Name: _____
- Job Title: _____
- Organization: _____
- Email address: _____
- Phone: _____