

AIKEN COUNTY



Getting children ready for school.

Aiken County Needs Assessment

February 2023

Prepared by
ISI Consulting



Executive Summary

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

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

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

The complexity and nuance of issues surrounding kindergarten readiness and disparities in educational, developmental and health outcomes for children, require systems-thinking and a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Twenty-one individuals met on February 21, 2023 to review the Needs Assessment and determine priorities.

The priorities that emerged from this Needs Assessment include:

- Increase outreach to focused areas and communities.
- Increase capacity building of parents, grandparents, and caregivers.
- Ensure quality and accessible childcare (interaction, supervision and health and safety).
- Promote overall health and health screenings.

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

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

AIKEN COUNTY



Aiken County Quantitative Data Analysis



Primary Wellbeing Predictors

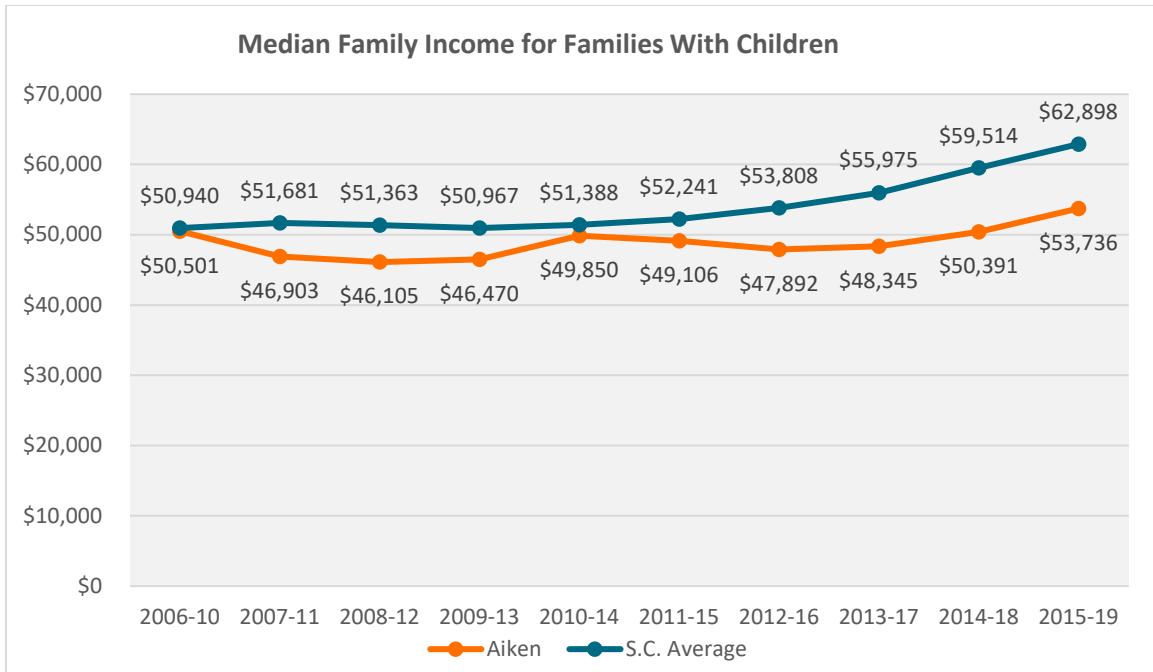
Primary wellbeing indicators, or “root cause indicators” are those factors that drive and predict multiple related outcomes in wellbeing. The primary root causes of poor outcomes for children are low income, poverty, undereducation, and lack of opportunity to thrive. These factors are difficult to tease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

Income and Poverty

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

Income

Median family income, that measure where half of the income falls above and half below, is a good reflection of the average income in a place, since it controls for outlier data (very low or very high incomes). The follow graph demonstrates that for families with children in Aiken County, median income is persistently below the South Carolina average.



U.S. Census and Kids Count Data Center

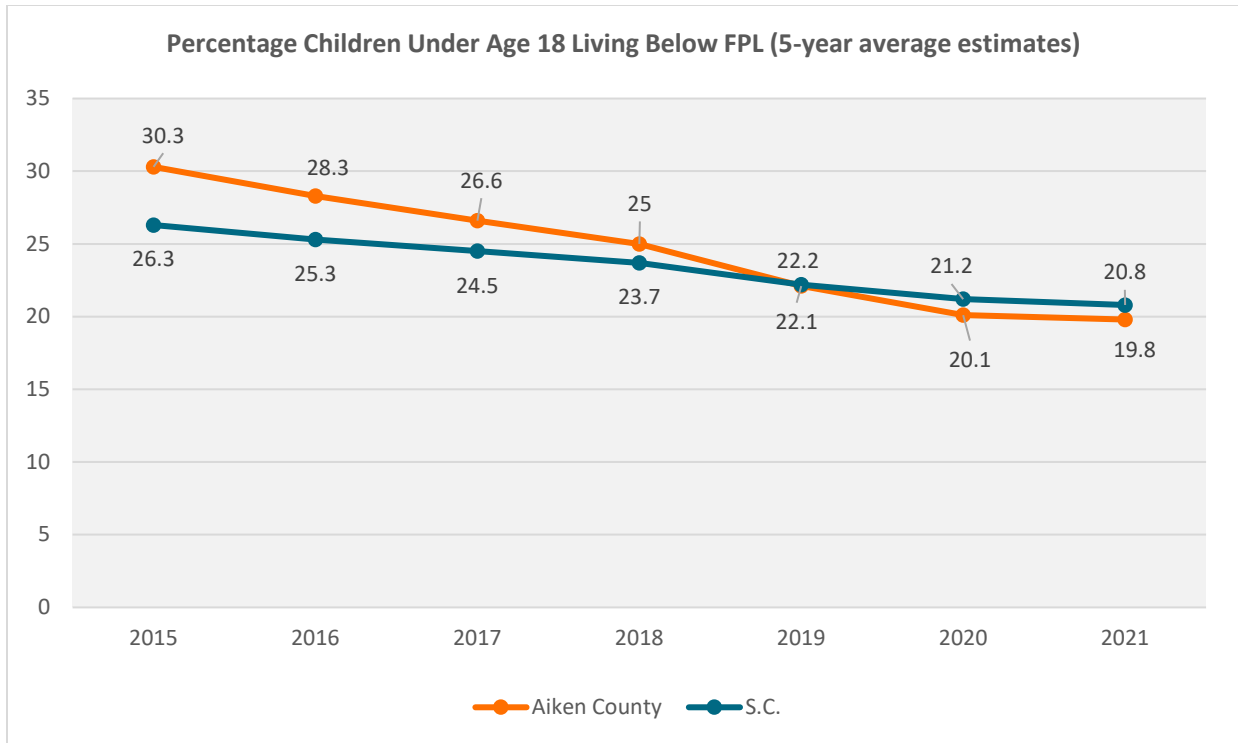
Poverty Rates

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

As of 2021, 21,943 residents of Aiken County (13.3% of the county population) live below Federal Poverty Level (FPL), including 7,094 (19.8%) of the county’s children. Both of these rates are slightly below the state averages of 14.5% for all residents and 20.8% for children.

Children in Poverty

In most geographies, poverty rates for children are higher than poverty rates for the general population. In Aiken County, the poverty rate for children has been near the state average for the last five years.



Source: U.S. Census S1701

Children Living in Areas of Concentrated Poverty

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

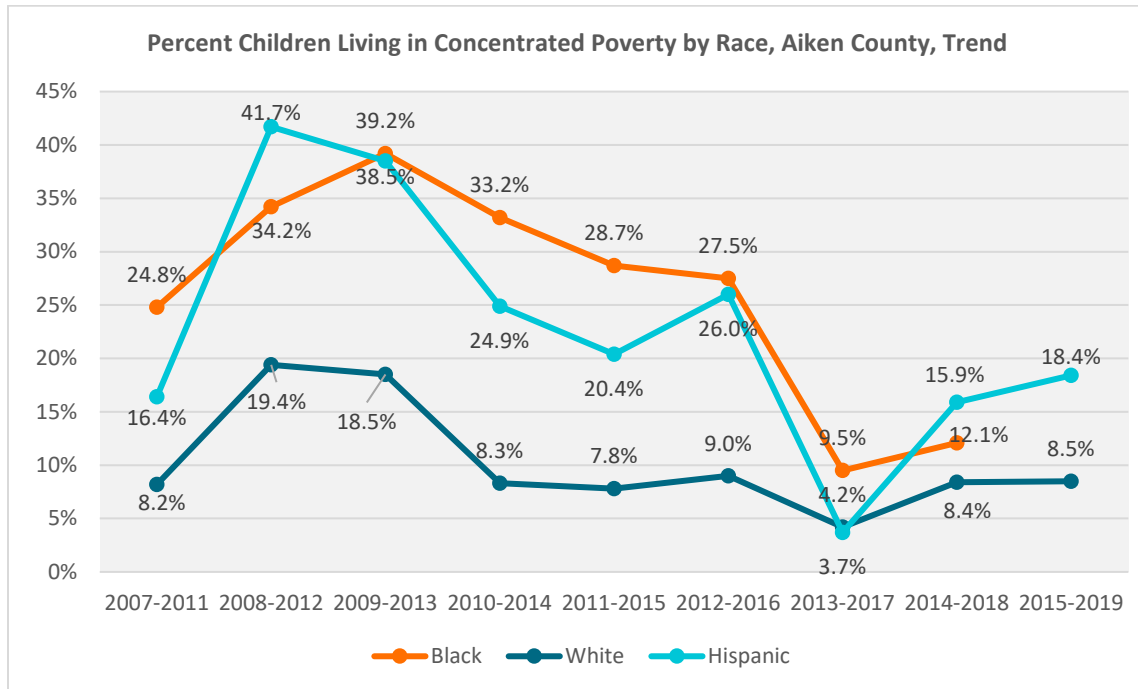
A large middle class is one of the five predictors of communities with good social and economic mobility. Large disparities in income, or income inequality, means that there is a small middle class in a given community. When children live to adulthood in communities with income inequality, lifetime earnings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

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

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

property values increase, and residents demonstrate an increased tolerance of diversity for neighbors of all *incomes*.

To provide an accurate picture, these data must be disaggregated by race. The data reported in the following graph, although variable likely due to small sample sizes, show that in Aiken County, Black and Hispanic children are significantly more likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty, compared to White children.



Source: Kids Count Data Center

Education

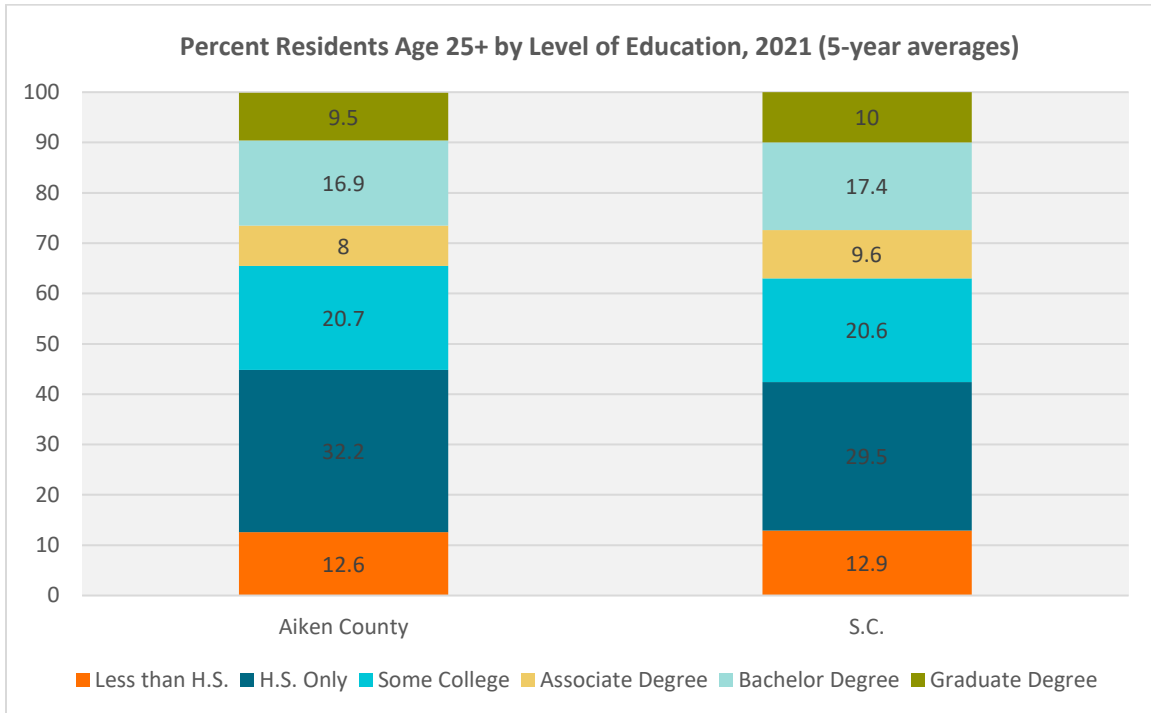
Education has multiple purposes but is always at the foundation of societies characterized by economic wealth, social prosperity, and political stability. Education strengthens democracy by providing citizens the tools that allow them to participate in the governance process. It is an integrative force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

The Children’s Trust of South Carolina ranks Aiken County 22nd³ among the state’s 46 counties for overall education in 2020.

³ [2020 South Carolina Child Well-Being Data Profile \(scchildren.org\)](https://www.scchildren.org/2020-South-Carolina-Child-Well-Being-Data-Profile)

Education Attainment

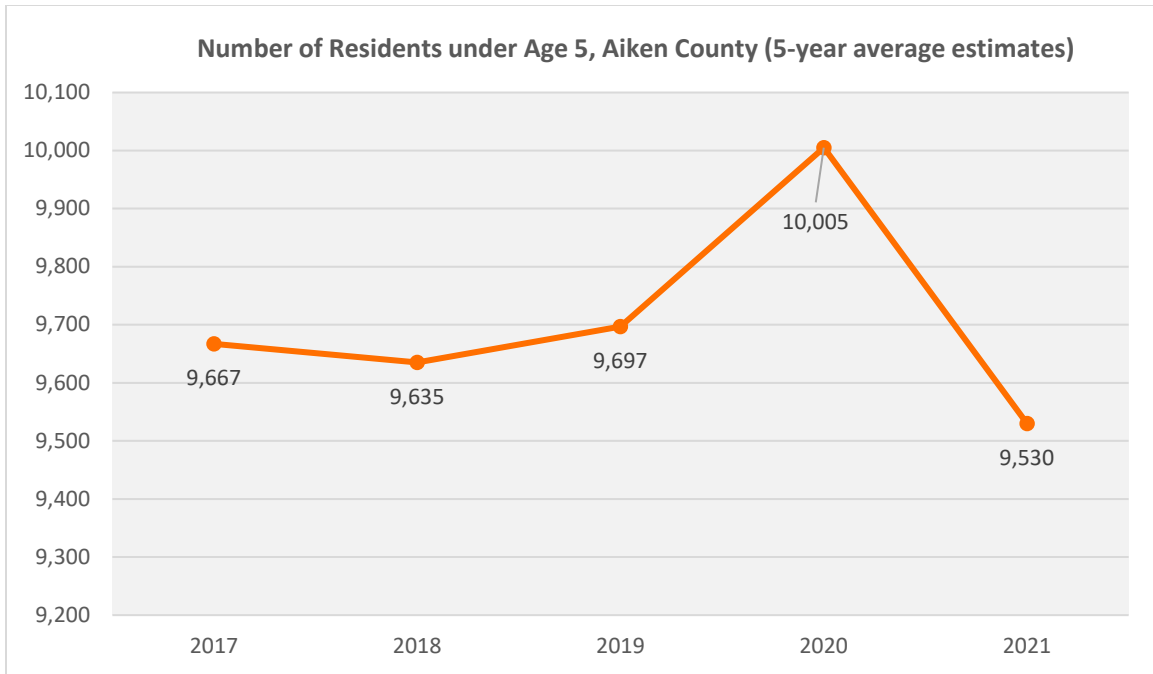
The future demands higher education attainment of the local workforce if our cities and counties are to be economically competitive. Obtaining a post-secondary credential of some kind is critical to opportunity and positive life outcomes. Residents of Aiken County have approximately the same higher education attainment at the post-secondary level.



Source: U.S. Census S1501

Daycares

According to SC Department of Social Services, there are 57 licensed or registered childcare facilities in Aiken County. These include licensed and approved childcare centers, registered faith-based centers, licensed group child care homes, licensed or registered family child care homes. The total capacity of these centers is 5,810 children.



Source: US Census DP05

School Readiness

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

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

Compared to the state average, Aiken County Public Schools falls below the state average for overall readiness to learn in terms of foundational skills and behaviors that prepare students for instruction. However, on one sub-domain of this measure – physical wellbeing – Aiken County students perform slightly better than the state average.

Percentage of Students enrolling in Kindergarten and Demonstrating Readiness to Learn, 2021-2022 by District					
	Overall	Language and Literacy	Mathematics	Social Foundation	Physical Wellbeing
Aiken County Public Schools	35.5	23.6	23.4	50.5	51.9
S.C. Average	36.0	29.8	28.1	52.2	51.5

Source: SC DOE School Report Cards

Academic Achievement

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

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is a crucial marker in a child's educational development. Failure to read proficiently is linked to higher rates of school dropout, which suppresses individual earning potential as well as the nation's competitive-ness and general productivity. Currently, 58.5% of Aiken County third graders are below standards in reading. Generally, Aiken County students don't fare as well on this measure compared to the state average.

Percentage of 3 rd Graders Testing Below Standards in English / Language Arts (on SC READY)					
	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2020-2021
Aiken	58.7	58.7	59.5	48.9	58.5
S.C.	56.3	57.9	54.9	50.2	56.7

Source: Kids Count Data Center

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

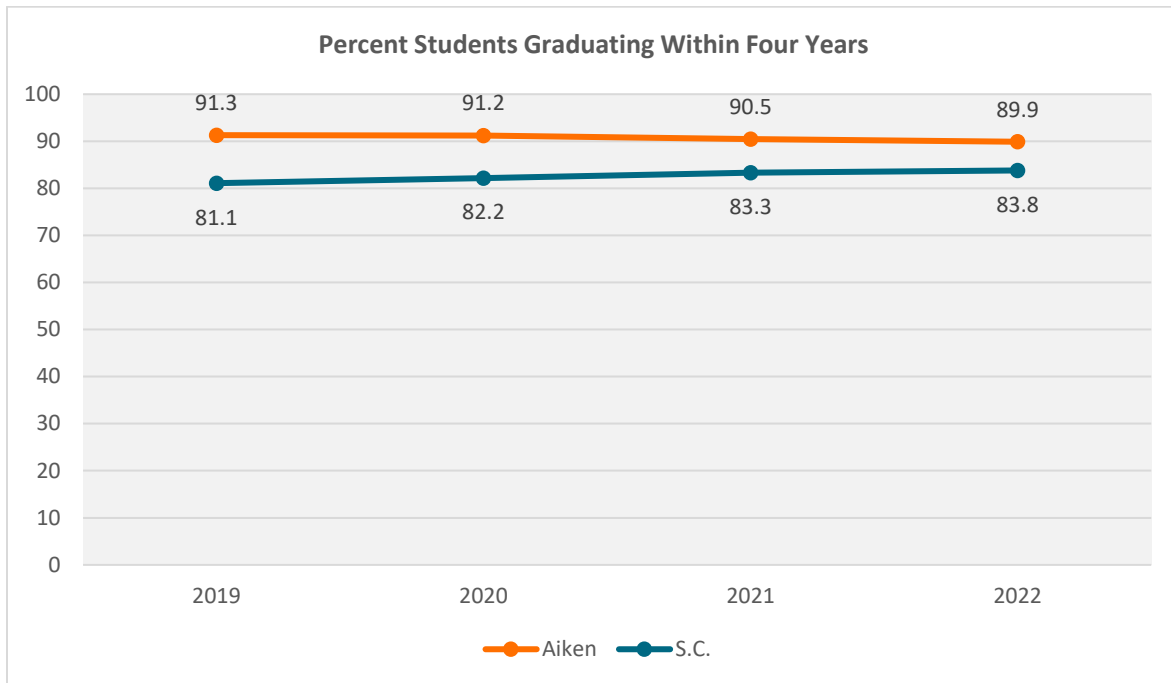
Percentage of 8 th Graders Testing Below Standards in Math (on SC READY)					
	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2020-2021
Aiken	79.0	74.0	70.3	66.5	74.9
S.C.	67.6	65.5	63.4	63.4	69.3

Source: Kids Count Data Center

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

On-Time Graduation

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



Source: SC DOE Report Cards

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

Drop out and Teen Idleness

The 2020 South Carolina Child Well-Being Data Profile, produced by the Children’s Trust of South Carolina,⁴ ranks Aiken County as 22nd of the state’s 46 counties for dropout (#1 is best). The latest data

⁴ 2020 South Carolina Child Well-Being Data Profiles. <https://scchildren.org/resources/kids-count-south-carolina/child-well-being-data-county-profiles/>

show that there were 2% dropouts of the total enrollment for grades 9-12 in Aiken County in 2018-2019. The state average is 1.9%.

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

The percentage of teens who are not enrolled in school and not high school has improved in Aiken County and now essentially equates to the state average.

Percent Teens age 16-19 Not Enrolled in School and Not a High School Graduate									
	2007-2011	2008-2012	2009-2013	2010-2014	2011-2015	2012-2016	2013-2017	2014-2018	2015-2019
Aiken	7.3	7.5	10.0	6.6	5.9	5.1	5.0	3.0	3.8
S.C.	6.8	6.0	5.8	5.4	5.0	4.4	4.1	3.9	4.0

Source: Kids Count Data Center

The percentage of “idle” teens in Aiken County shows a similar improving trend and is also currently at the state average.

Percent Teens age 16-19 Not Attending School and Not Working									
	2007-2011	2008-2012	2009-2013	2010-2014	2011-2015	2012-2016	2013-2017	2014-2018	2015-2019
Aiken	9.5	10.9	13.3	10.8	10.5	10.1	8.7	6.9	6.8
S.C.	9.1	9.1	9.3	8.7	8.5	7.8	7.1	6.9	6.9

Source: Kids Count Data Center

Opportunity

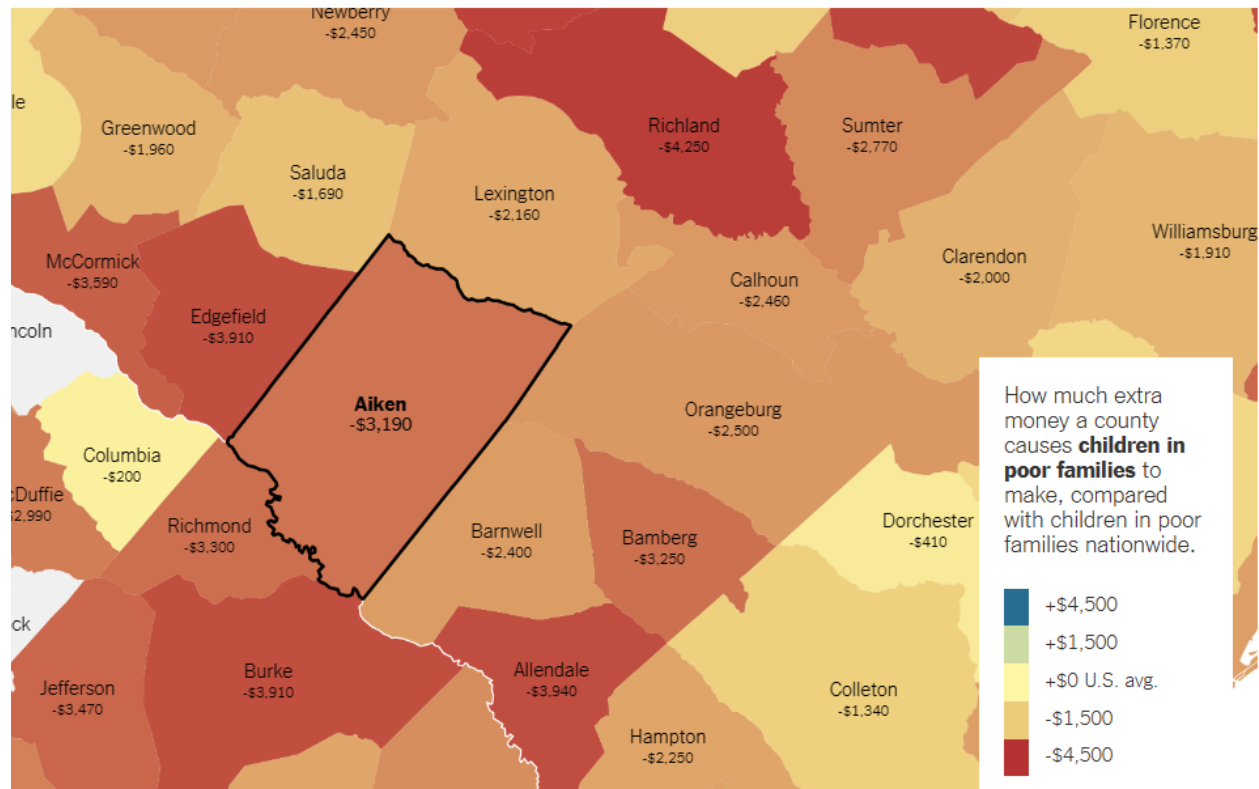
Where a child grows up in the US has a major impact on his or her financial future. Economic mobility has significant relevance for communities of color since they tend to have the lowest income and fewest opportunities to move up on the economic ladder. In their recent Equality of Opportunity Project¹⁸,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

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

The latest calculations and comparisons of the 2,478 counties in the U.S. show that South Carolina counties rank among the lowest in the country for chances of upward mobility for poor children. Aiken

County is considered to be “extremely bad” in helping poor children up the income ladder. Aiken County ranks 123rd worst out of 2,478 U.S. counties, better than about only 5% of counties for opportunity for poor children to break out of poverty.

If a child in a poor family were to grow up in Aiken County, instead of an average place, he or she would make \$3,190 (or 12%) less at age 26.

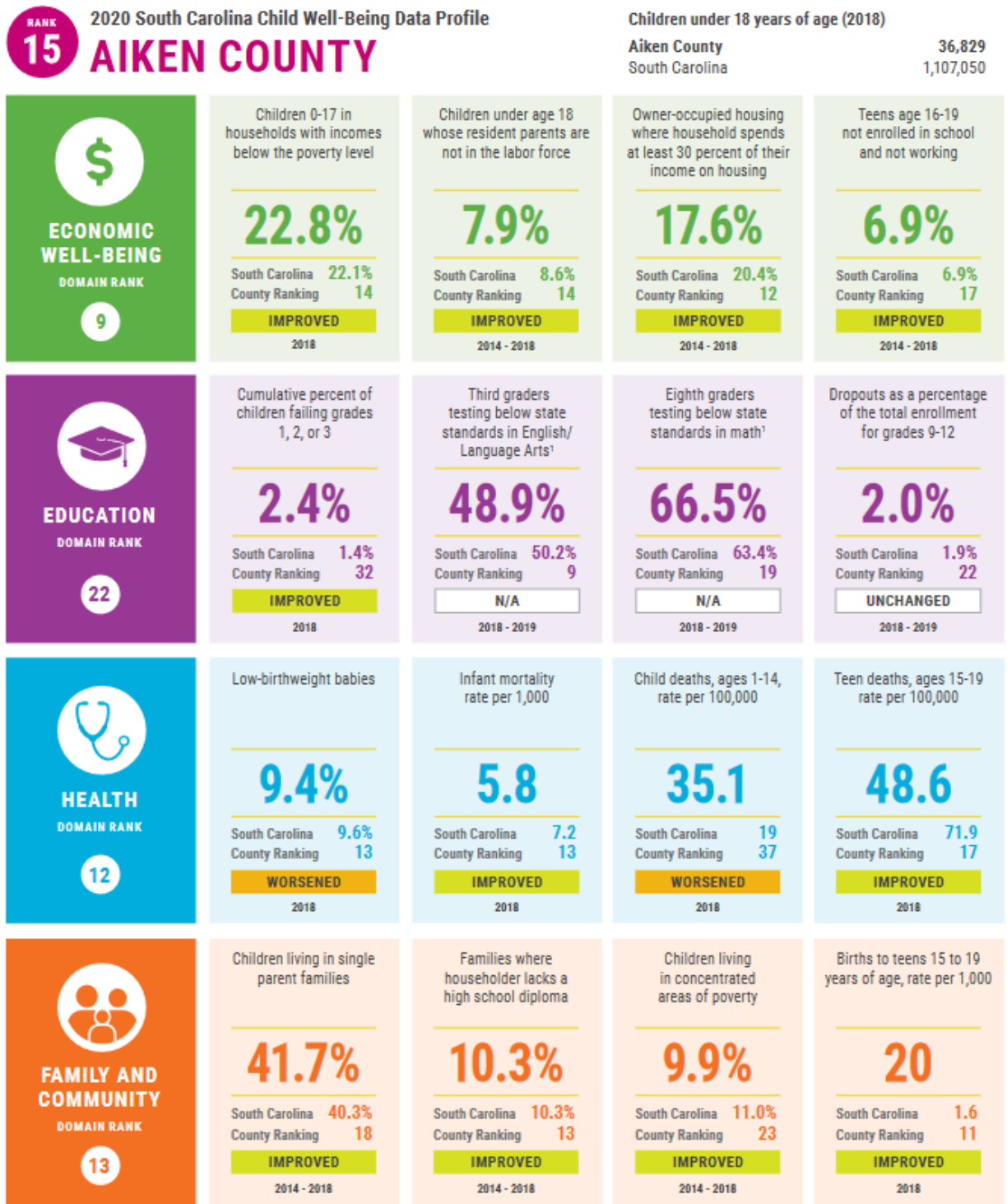


Source: The Upshot⁵

⁵ The Upshot. The best and worst places to grow up. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/03/upshot/the-best-and-worst-places-to-grow-up-how-your-area-compares.html>

Overall Wellbeing

For overall wellbeing for children, Aiken County ranks 15th best of the state's 46 counties.



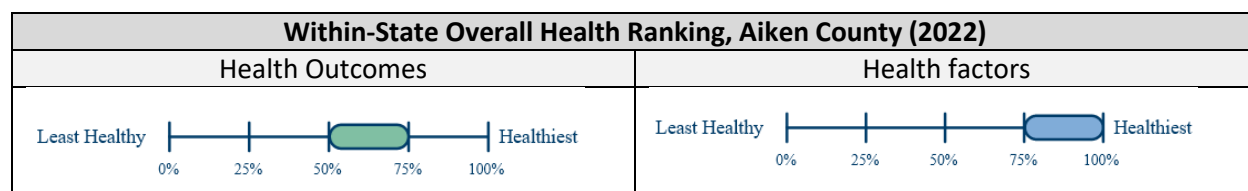
Source: Children's trust of SC

Other Wellbeing Indicators

Overall Health

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

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



Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps

Infant Mortality

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

Because numbers of child deaths within the first year of life are relatively low, especially for sparsely populated geographies, multiple year averages are often used to measure infant mortality. For the combined 2017-2019 period, 49 babies died in their first year of life in Aiken County, equating to an infant mortality rate of 8.8 per 1,000 live births, higher than the state average rate.

It should be noted that there is a significant racial inequity in this measure. Black infants in the U.S. are more than twice as likely to die as White infants – 10.8 per 1,000 Black babies, compared to 4.6 per 1,000 White babies. This racial inequity is wider than in 1850 and in one year constitutes 4,000 inequitable deaths of Black babies. Education and income do not mitigate this inequity – a Black woman with an advanced degree is more likely to lose her baby in its first year of life than a White woman with less than an eighth-grade education. Disaggregated trend data for infant mortality in Aiken County and the state averages can be found in the following table. In most cases, infant mortality is more than twice as high for Black babies compared to White babies.

Infant Mortality Rate, * by Race (combined year averages)							
		2012-2014	2013-2015	2014-2016	2015-2017	2016-2018	2017-2019
Aiken County	Total	7.0	5.7	5.6	7.7	8.2	8.8
	White	5.7	4.5	4.1	5.7	6.6	6.4
	Black	9.8	7.2	8.7	11.4	11.1	13.3
S.C.	Total	7.0	6.8	6.8	6.8	6.9	6.8
	White	5.0	4.9	4.9	5.0	5.0	4.7
	Black	10.7	10.9	10.6	10.5	10.6	11.0

*per 1,000 live births

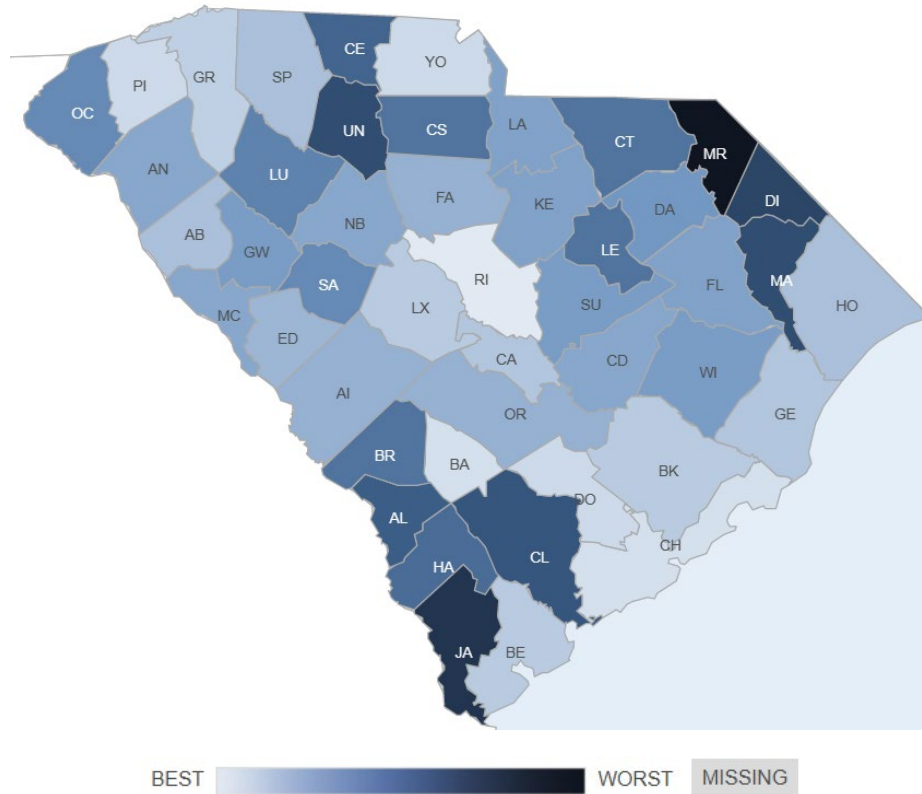
Source: SC DHEC and Kids Count Data Center

Teen Childbearing

Births to teens have substantial implications for educational and socioeconomic outcomes for the teen mother. Parenthood is the leading reason that teen girls drop out of school. More than 50% of teen mothers never graduate from high school, whereas approximately 90% of teen who do not give birth will graduate from high school. Additionally, less than 2% of teen moms earn a college degree by age 30. Because many teen mothers live in poverty, care for both mother and child can be publicly funded for years, including assistance programs for food, medical care and childcare. In addition, daughters of teen mothers are more likely to become teen mothers themselves, creating cyclical poverty over generations.⁶

For the combined years 2014-2020, there were 26 teen births per 1,000 females in Aiken County age 15-19. Disaggregated by race, this equates to a rate of 29 for Black teens, a rate of 36 for Hispanic teens, and a rate of 23 for White teens. Aiken County has a higher rate of overall teen childbearing than the state average of 23 per 1,000 and the national average of 19 per 1,000.

⁶ Fact Forward: <https://www.factforward.org/news/high-costs-teen-pregnancy>



Teen childbearing has decreased substantially in South Carolina, mirroring the national trend.

Health insurance

Health insurance coverage is a strong indicator of access to health care (as is provider availability) and the likelihood of receiving quality care. Rates of health insurance coverage in a community speak not only to the health status of that community, but also to the economic status of the community and the distribution of well-paying jobs. Further, when health insurance coverage is low, costs to society are often high since the uninsured frequently seek treatment in emergency departments for non-emergent conditions and often do not get timely treatment for chronic illnesses, resulting in higher costs and lost worker productivity.

In Aiken County, 4.1% of the residents under age 19 are uninsured (neither public or private insurance) in 2021. This equates to 1,579 children and youth.

Child Maltreatment

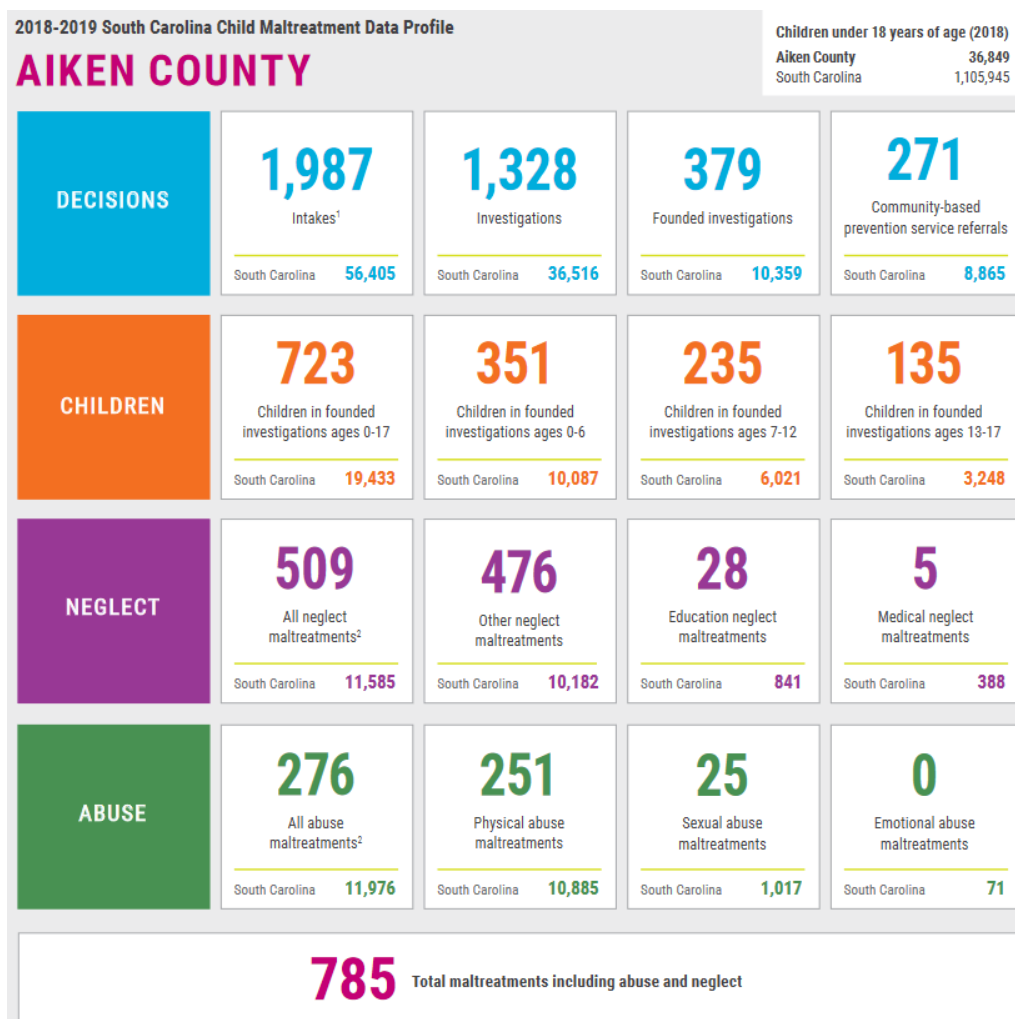
Child maltreatment is abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in addition to all forms of neglect, negligence, and exploitation of children. It is difficult to obtain valid and reliable comparative statistics on child abuse and neglect even though it cuts across all communities in South Carolina. The data reported in the following table are

offered as static information without inference. These are founded investigations; that is, the determination following an investigation by a child protection worker is that, based on available information, it is more likely than not that child abuse or neglect did occur. These investigations are not “unique”; that is, they may include multiple investigations for the same children.

Total Number of founded Investigations for Child Abuse and Neglect by SC Fiscal Year										
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Aiken	194	169	174	232	248	258	267	393	387	298

Source: Kids Count Data Center

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



Source: Children’s Trust of South Carolina

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur in a child’s life prior to the age of 18. Researchers have recently discovered a dangerous biological syndrome caused by abuse and neglect and other ACEs during childhood. The toxic stress that characterizes childhood adversity can trigger hormones that cause damage to the brains and bodies of children, putting them at a greater risk as adults for disease, homelessness, incarceration, and early death. Further, childhood adversity often harms a child’s brain and its development, which can result in long-term negative health and social outcomes. The latest data show⁷ that 62% of South Carolina adults report having experienced at least one ACE, and also 62% of Aiken County adults also report having experienced at least one ACE. The primary ACEs for Aiken County are:

- Parental divorce / separation – 32%
- Household substance abuse – 31%
- Emotional abuse – 30%

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

Affordable Housing

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the generally accepted definition of affordable housing is that for which the occupants are paying no more than 30% of gross income for housing costs, including utilities. In South Carolina, almost 20% of residents are not in affordable housing situations, spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs. Aiken County residents fare better than the state average at 16.5% not in affordable housing situations, and the trend suggests that housing affordability is improving in Aiken County, mirroring the state trend.

Percent of Housing Units Where Householders Spend at Least 30% of Income on Housing									
	2007-11	2008-12	2009-13	2010-14	2011-15	2012-16	2013-17	2014-18	2015-19
Aiken	21.6	20.7	20.4	19.6	19.4	19.0	18.7	17.6	16.5
S.C.	25.5	25.1	24.8	24.2	23.1	21.9	21.1	20.4	19.6

Source: Kids Count Data Center

Food Environment

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

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

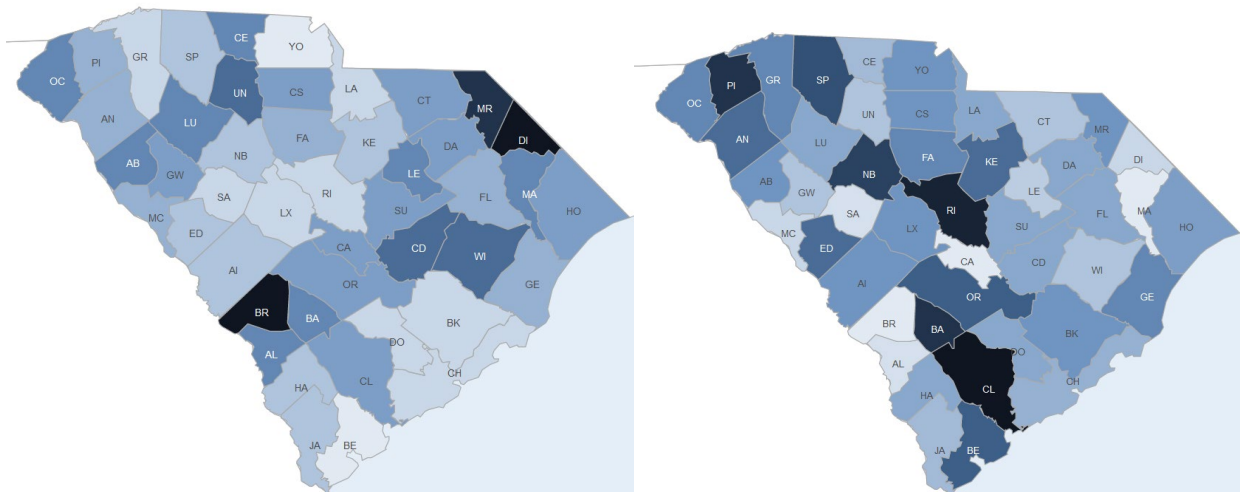
⁷ Children’s Trust of South Carolina <https://scchildren.org/resources/adverse-childhood-experiences/ace-data-county-profiles/>

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

Food Environment, 2019		
	Aiken County	S.C.
Food insecurity:	10%	11%
Limited access to healthy foods	9%	10%

Food Insecurity Map

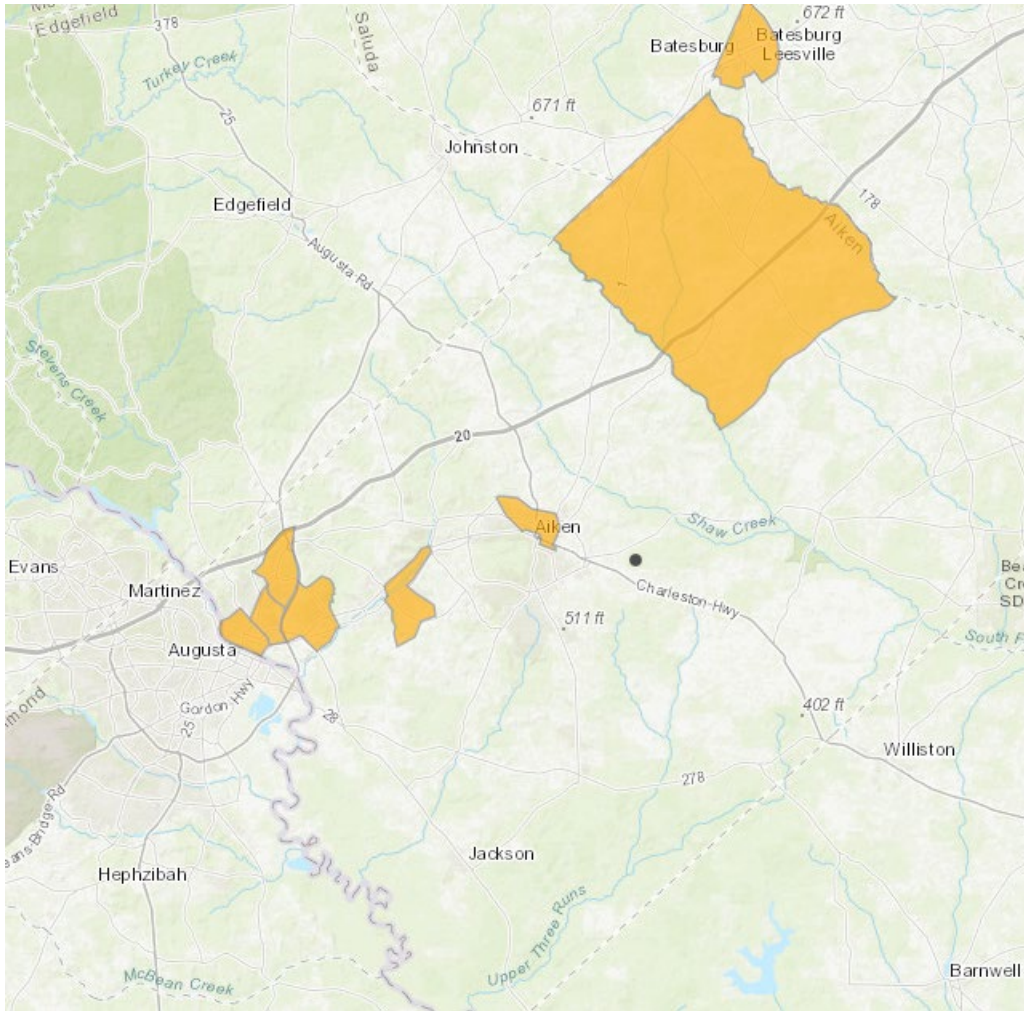
Limited Food Access Map



BEST  WORST

Food Deserts

Certain communities, particularly lower-income or minority communities, often lack supermarkets or other sources of healthy and affordable foods. Food deserts, a component measure of food insecurity, is defined as at least 500 people and / or at least 33% of a census tract's population residing more than a mile from a supermarket or large grocery store (more than 10 miles for rural census tracts). The following map show portions of Aiken County, in orange, that are classified as food deserts.



Source: SC DHEC

AIKEN COUNTY



Getting children ready for school.

Aiken County Qualitative Data Analysis



CONSULTING

Focus Group Report

Executive Summary

On Monday, January 30, 2023, ISI Consulting hosted a focus group from 11:30 AM to 12:30 PM at the Freeman Learning Center in partnership with Aiken County First Steps. Elizabeth Carpenter of ISI Consulting met with parents currently participating in a First Steps program to ascertain their thoughts and opinions on the work of Aiken County First Steps as well as to identify windows of opportunity for improvements to early childhood development in Aiken County. A total of eight mothers and two Aiken County First Steps employees participated in the focus group voluntarily. The eight mothers were paid \$30.00 cash per person for their time.

The major findings from this focus group were as follows:

Quality daycares are inaccessible.

All focus group participants agreed that they had problems finding quality childcare in Aiken County. “They’re horrible,” remarked one participant. Another said, “I’m going to say they are babysitting. At the end of the day, don’t put development on the sign, if that is not what you are working on with my child.” One mother disagreed with those sentiments, stating she had found a childcare care facility that she and her child loved; however she further informed the group that she can only send her child to said childcare program for three half-days a week due the cost. The focus group also found agreement that the good childcare opportunities price out a lot of families with their cost, leaving subpar places to choose from that have openings or accept ABC vouchers. The increased cost of living is making this problem worse for some mothers who are noticing increasing prices to childcare. “Everybody is dealing with the increase in gas, but no one is getting paid more. They have been saying they were going to raise the minimum wage for a while now, but they haven’t,” shared on participant.

Members of the focus group with older children noted that this problem with childcare was not as bad with their previous children. With mothers having gaps of two years to over 15 years between kids, these moms identified the increased expectations of kindergarteners and staffing shortages as key problems lowering the quality of daycare centers. Parents with larger gaps between children reported their younger child being responsible for knowing more than their previous kids did by age five. This means it is more important that the people working with children aged birth-to-five are trained to do so. The majority of moms, regardless of children’s birth order, also reported staffing shortages at childcare facilities. They believe this is due to the low salaries which further pushes away good candidates from these jobs. Thus, Aiken County is left having understaffed daycares operated by underqualified and underpaid employees.

Aiken County needs more child-centric resources.

Participants of the focus group all reported wanting more resources in Aiken County for their children. As one mother said, “We should not have to be driving to Augusta for everything.” When asked to rank the resources of Aiken County, not a single participant ranked them above a two. Everyone said either a zero, one, or two. This was due to the lack of things available or known about. The types of resources parents were looking for varied, but all fell into either health or recreational services. While parents were mostly happy with the pediatric services, other health services—such as Urgent Care—were found to be lacking. Most of the conversation focused on recreational opportunities. “There is nothing for kids here,”

remarked one mother. Another said, “Aiken is good for retirement. As far as raising a family, I don’t know.” Things like child-friendly parks, a children’s museum, summer camps, and after school programs were all mentioned on a wish list for Aiken County.

Aiken County First Steps is doing a good job but can focus on outreach more.

None of the focus group participants had anything negative to say about Aiken County First Steps. As one mother said, “I have to give it to them. They do a lot.” All the participants were extremely grateful for the services they received from First Steps and appreciated the work it does for them and their children. When prompted for any suggestions for improvements, several mothers said that First Steps could do more outreach to families not currently enrolled in the program, or in the First Steps circle. In fact, several mothers participating in the focus group were in First Steps when they were a child, and one participant was a grandmother whose child received services from First Steps, and now that *child’s* child is coming up through the program. Some of the mothers have noticed a generational connection to who receives services from First Steps, and think more outreach can address that issue.

Key Informant Interviews Report

Executive Summary

ISI Consulting conducted three key informant interviews with content experts identified by Aiken County First Steps. Key informants were selected for their knowledge of and proximity to early childhood education or development within the county. The informants included people working with organizations that directly have contact with children under the age of five within Aiken County. The participants were interviewed over the phone to obtain their perspective as part of the Community Needs Assessment of Aiken County and ranged from 25 to 45 minutes. Interviews were manually transcribed by the interviewer, and all participants were informed that their name and other identifying information would not be attached to anything they shared.

The major findings from these interviews were as follows:

The child's environment is a key indicator of their wellbeing.

Each key informant had their own viewpoint of early childhood development, but all three interviewees indicated the rates of adverse childhood experiences were high in Aiken County. "We have pretty significant child abuse rates here," one informant told ISI Consulting. That was not the only adverse experience, decrease in family income, internal family violence and abuse, family instability, parents changing jobs frequently, family mental and physical health, drug abuse in the family, homelessness, and gang violence were all mentioned by informants as negative trends they are seeing impacting children aged birth-to-five in Aiken County.

These experiences stick with the child. "You are seeing the role [these adverse childhood experiences] play on the mental health of children and their cognitive development," said an interviewee. According to one informant, these problems were only worsened as a result of the pandemic. With "children in general, and the mental health and stability of families, we are clearly seeing the toll that covid and isolation has caused," they said. This led all informants to the next major finding: Parents need resources and services too in order to help the child.

Parents need resources and attention.

The informants all believed that the best way to reach children aged birth-to-five was to help the parents as well. A lot of resources are directed to children, when their parents are the ones most responsible for ensuring that the child has its needs met. One informant summarized it as:

"If you shift focus to the parents. And can prepare the parents and make them better prepared. It is going to transition to the kids. Maybe the focus is too much on the kids, when we start to teach the parents and put a focused, concerted effort on the parents. It is going to leech into how they prepare their children. There is too much focus on the child and not enough on the parent raising the child."

The informants shared varying reasons for why parents need to be the focus of services. Some parents are unengaged, and leave child raising to the grandparents or technology, some parents are simply uninformed and unprepared, while other parents have their own traumas that they are passing down to their children. What is important to the informants is that parents receive the resources they need to

carry out their duties as parents to the best of their abilities. Most of the informants acknowledged this would be difficult to do as it requires prevention efforts as opposed to reactive ones. This can cause problems as “a neglectful family never sees themselves as neglectful,” and so are less likely to reach out for help or accept services. However, the informants believe this is the best way moving forward to address a root cause of early childhood development delays in Aiken County.

There needs to be more affordable housing opportunities.

Informants noted there are growing concerns around affordable housing in Aiken County. The increasing rate of homelessness was brought up in conjunction with the housing problems. The key problems were said to be the increase of rent prices paired with the lack of affordable housing units in the county. One key informant summed it up as:

“Single parent families are especially struggling with housing. We have a housing shortage in Aiken, and so many of the landlords over the last few months have asked people to move out, so they can fix up the house. Then they are selling it rather than renting it out again. So many people don’t have housing. Today was a day where someone [came] to my office to look for housing. The housing authority has waiting lists... I see the housing issue as something that is here to stay.”

As the informants pointed out, the child’s environment is important to their development, that includes safe and stable housing to live in.

Aiken County First Steps is seen as a community convener.

When asked to describe what Aiken County First Steps does best, and where they should direct their efforts over the next two years, the informants painted similar pictures. They believe First Steps is situated to act as the community resource for early childhood development referrals and resource connections. One informant described it as, “I thought [of Aiken County First Steps] as the convener. First Steps was not supposed to be the provider of services. It was to be a convener of and a facilitator of services across the early childhood piece.” One informant noted that this role will be very important in the coming years within South Carolina:

“I am really concerned because DSS said as of January 2024, they will no longer refer families for child abuse that do not qualify for an education. They won’t be referred anywhere. For almost 10 years now there was a referral mechanism to see if those families wanted to receive help. That is going away across the state in 2024. For that birth-to-five population, they are even more hampered because there is no universal education component [for detection and referrals.]”

Two of the informants shouted out Marcia Nash, the Executive Director of Aiken County First Steps, for the work she has done so far with forming and building relationships within the community, and all three informants look forward to see in what ways Aiken County First Steps can bring more players together in Aiken County.

Community Engagement Session

After a formal presentation of the quantitative and qualitative data by ISI Consulting on February 21, 2023, 21 Aiken County First Steps team members and partners discussed the findings and its implications. Small groups were formed, and participants completed a worksheet to identify gaps and areas of needed focus for the local First Steps. ISI Consulting facilitated the conversations between the small group to reach shared agreement.



The priorities that emerged from this Needs Assessment include:

Increase outreach to focused areas and communities.

Participants discussed the need to reach out to focused areas and communities that need services from Aiken County First Steps but currently not accessing their services. Focused efforts can be made with the Hispanic population, families living in poverty, rural communities, and the Midland Valley area. Potential strategies could be partnering with local churches and mobile outreach of services.

Increase capacity building of parents, grandparents and caregivers.

Capacity building can include but not be limited to: parenting classes, teaching basic care, literacy classes and other topics. Participants believe that providing trainings and capacity building with the caregiver will in turn support children and their educational outcomes.

Ensure quality and accessible childcare (interaction, supervision and health and safety).

Some of the childcare workers taking care of children in Aiken County may or may not know how their role is connected to the long-term outcomes of a child. Participants believe that providing training to childcare workers and other strategies will increase the quality provided. A high-quality childcare is rated by three variables, including: interaction, supervision and health and safety. IN addition, more childcare facilitates need to be accessible throughout the county.

Promote overall health and health screenings.

Participants shared that access to care remains a top issue for families in Aiken County and the importance of early health screenings. The importance of health screenings and preventative health measures can also be integrated in the parent and caregiving capacity building workshops. The group believed that it may be possible to partner with other organizations and advocate for more health screenings to take place in the school setting due to accessibility and transportation challenges. In addition, participants noted the importance of addressing food insecurity.

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