

LIFE

**LOCAL INDICATORS
FOR EXCELLENCE**

John R. Hartman
© 2023

LIFE REPORT

**PORTAGE COUNTY
2022-23**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

02

Executive Summary

03

Considerations

04

The Life Process - Purpose and Structure

05

The Life Process - Phases

06

Calls-To-Action

07

Data Analysis & Sharing

08

Community Context - Community Perspective

09

Community Context - Important Indicators

10

Hunger

11

Housing & Shelter

12

Crime

13

Safety

14

Employment

15

Income

16

Early Childhood Care & Education

17

K-12 Education

18

Post Secondary Education

19

Land, Water, & Air

20

Transportation

21

Preventive Care

22

Physical Health

23

Behavioral Health

24

Priority Area Summary

25

Conclusion

26

Thank You

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The LIFE – Local Indicators for Excellence – Executive Committee is excited to share the 2023 LIFE Report with the Portage County community. The report is a compilation of community input, objective data, and stakeholder prioritization. We hope you will take the time to learn about the process, review the findings, and advocate in support of the calls-to-action.

The path to this report began in April of 2021 with a meeting of representatives from Ascension (which transitioned to Aspirus Health in August 2021), Aspirus Health, Marshfield Clinic Health System, Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin, Portage County Health and Human Services, and United Way of Portage County (LIFE Report Hosting Agent). The LIFE Report process has traditionally been conducted in Portage County every five years, with reports issued in 2017, 2012, and 2007. In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic was still impacting community members and services. The Executive Committee knew the importance of launching the process to better understand the impact of the pandemic and current challenges facing the Portage County community.

In many ways, the steps for this LIFE Report process were similar to previous years' work:

- Conducting a community survey (randomized sample in the general population with focused engagement in populations more likely to be vulnerable);
- Compiling objective secondary data on local health, economic, education, and other sectors;
- Inviting local experts (Steering Committee members) to provide input on the survey results and secondary data;
- Convening the 70+ person Steering Committee of local subject matter experts to identify community priorities based on report indicators;
 - Identifying Calls-to-Action:
 - Behavioral Health
 - Early Childhood Care & Education
 - Housing and Shelter

The Calls to Action identified during this process mirror findings from previous work, especially the continued need to prioritize access and services to address Behavioral Health. The understanding that some community needs remain constant both validates the work we are doing and inspires new approaches.

This report summarizes months of input and effort, with an eye for action. We encourage you to use the report for decision-making, priority setting, program development, monetary allocations, and grant writing. Included in the report are links to the newly released *Portage County Conduit* (PCConduit.org). PC Conduit is a free and easy-to-use publicly-available website that serves as a warehouse for the most current data available on local, state, and national indicators. The PC Conduit site will also contain links to stand-alone reports including the 2023 LIFE Report, the ALICE Report, CAP Services Community Needs Assessment, and other local community-centered documents. We are confident that this new site will provide users with an efficient, up-to-date, one-stop resource in our shared objectives toward community solutions and as we track indicators of our progress in a collaborative effort to alleviate challenges made clear through the LIFE Report.

We realize this is only part of our learning journey. We know that there are more voices to be heard to ensure the best possible outcomes for all. We encourage you to consider the same as you ponder the contents of this report and pursue opportunities to positively impact lives in Portage County.

Executive Committee:

- **Becky Turpin, Marshfield Clinic Health System**
- **Beth Smith, United Way of Portage County**
- **Fred Hebblewhite, United Way of Portage County**
- **Gary Garske, Portage County Health and Human Services**
- **Jenny Riggerbach, Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin**
- **Mae Nachman, United Way of Portage County**
- **Sarah Beversdorf, Aspirus, Inc.**

Sponsors:



United Way
of Portage County



CONSIDERATIONS

As you read through this report, please keep in mind the following:

The LIFE Report does not provide in-depth information about any one issue. Rather, it paints a broad picture of the community from different angles and identifies issues that require investigation in order to learn more about their causes and impact. It does not attempt to compile all existing information, but instead, presents selected key data.

Much of the quantitative data that were reviewed for the LIFE Report process included information gathered in the years 2020 and 2021, during which the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. The pandemic may have affected the trends that are presented in the report.

The report displays overall responses and experiences primarily based on averages. This typically shows the experiences and responses of the majority. However, we know and acknowledge that other groups may have differing experiences and responses. We encourage you to go to PCCConduit.org to explore the data in further detail.

The LIFE Report process included the deployment of a community survey, which produced survey responses that were statistically significant and representative of the County (needed = 379, received = 502). However, compared to the general population, there were slightly more female respondents, slightly more senior respondents, and slightly less 18-34 year old respondents than are reflected in the County.

Since the time that the LIFE Report process was undertaken and the calls-to-action identified, additional data have been released that shed additional insight on the topics presented in the report. In particular, the 2021 ALICE Report was released, with updated information on poverty, the cost of living, and the proportion of the population that lives at or near differing economic thresholds within Portage County.



THE LIFE PROCESS

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

1. To identify community calls-to-action through a needs assessment process that involves community stakeholders and to document the results in the Local Indicators for Excellence (LIFE) Report.
2. To identify community strengths, challenges, and priorities that help guide and mobilize action to improve life in Portage County for all.

STRUCTURE OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The process was structured to review information from multiple sources in the following domains and priority areas. A domain is a broad topical area that encompasses priority areas and is used to help group similar things. A priority area is slightly more specific and can stand on its own as a need or strength within the community. Yet, priority areas can be broken down further into specific issues. Stakeholders could dig deeper into root causes of the issues and select evidence-based programs/strategies to tackle the issue.

BASIC NEEDS

Hunger
&
Housing

COMMUNITY SAFETY

Crime
&
Safety

EDUCATION

Early Childhood,
K-12,
Post-Secondary

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Land,
Water, Air,
Transportation

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Preventive Care,
Physical &
Behavioral Health

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

Employment
&
Income

THE LIFE PROCESS

PHASE I - COLLECT DATA & INFORMATION

- The LIFE Executive Committee contracted with the UW-River Falls Survey Research Center to implement and analyze the LIFE Community Assessment Survey, a survey sent at the beginning of 2022 to a random sample of County residents as well as a focused sample of residents who were low income, renters, or people of color.
- The Executive Committee also contracted with Gromoske Consulting to collect, analyze, and update the indicator data that were used in the last LIFE report (2017) and create data placemats that would be used to facilitate Steering Committee discussions in Phase II.
- Data were organized into six domains and 16 priority areas from a variety of sources including publicly available data, community surveys and assessments, annual reports, and community program data.

PHASE II - INTERPRET DATA & INFORMATION

- The LIFE Executive Committee identified members for the LIFE Steering Committee, with an emphasis on inviting community stakeholders and subject matter experts with a deep understanding of the priority areas.
- Four half-day meetings were held with Steering Committee members to review data from Phase I, with an emphasis on members sharing additional data, experiences, concerns, and assets. After discussion, members were asked to rate each priority area on six characteristics - trend, magnitude of the problem, severity of the problem, preventability of the problem, capacity to address the problem, and community support for the problem. Ratings were aggregated for each priority area.

PHASE III - SELECT CALLS-TO-ACTION

- The Executive Committee hosted a full-day, in-person meeting facilitated by Gromoske Consulting with the Steering Committee to review and discuss findings from Phase II, provide additional knowledge about capacity and community support, select top priority areas based on voting, and determine calls-to-action.



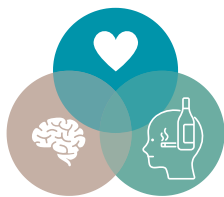
CALLS-TO-ACTION

A call-to-action is a prompt that encourages people to take action about a problem. The LIFE Report Executive Committee along with the Steering Committee, after a year-long process to gather information, review it, and solicit input from stakeholders, identified the following calls-to-action. We ask you to think about these community issues and take action. Be a part of the solution.

The last LIFE report, shared in 2017, identified similar issues to what you'll see below. The 2017 priority areas included mental health, alcohol and other drug use, financial stability, and affordable housing. While progress was made in these areas, more is needed. Due to various factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, progress in addressing these critical issues has been interrupted. In some cases, in order to support the immediate needs of the community. However, there are several examples of accomplishments, including:

- Peace of Mind Portage County website, a comprehensive resource for behavioral health support
- Expansion of CAP Services Mental Health Navigator program to connect clients to mental health resources
- The addition of the Boys & Girls Club of Portage County Great Futures! program to develop social-emotional learning and improve youth mental health

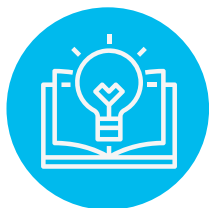
New to the 2022-23 LIFE Report, within each call-to-action, several key action areas have been identified.



BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Key Action Areas:

- Reducing alcohol and other drug use
- Improving youth mental health
- Increasing access and affordability of services
- Implementing prevention initiatives and addressing basic needs as a prevention avenue



EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE & EDUCATION

Key Action Areas:

- Increasing high-quality child care
- Ensuring a skilled childcare workforce
- Increasing accessibility and affordability
- Changing policies to improve identified child care issues



HOUSING & SHELTER

Key Action Areas:

- Increasing affordability, availability, and accessibility
- Ensuring high-quality housing
- Increasing temporary and transitional housing
- Improving government regulations and policies to address issues
- Increasing resident knowledge about housing topics

DATA ANALYSIS & SHARING

What you will find on the following pages are community context data points, summaries of the information that was reviewed, and themes that emerged during the needs assessment process. The pages are not meant to be exhaustive. You can visit PCConduit.org to find additional data.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

These pages illustrate specific data points which help the reader understand significant information related to relevant priority areas.



PRIORITY AREA SUMMARIES

INTRODUCTION TO THE PRIORITY AREA

This section explains what the priority area encompasses and why it is important. It also explains how it relates to Portage County and its residents and puts it in context - it compares Portage County to Wisconsin data, when available.

IMPORTANT INDICATORS

This section highlights quantitative data that stood out to Steering Committee members. We attempt to point out both strengths and weaknesses. All indicators that were reviewed can be found on the PC Conduit website.

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

This section highlights data from the LIFE Community Survey, community reports, and other data sources. It includes themes from Steering Committee meetings and stakeholder conversations.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

These data reflect the results of the 2022 Community Assessment survey

Respondents feel that quality of life in Portage County is "average" to "good"



Over three-quarters of respondents donated to charity in the past year



More than one-third of respondents volunteered in the past year



Respondents believe that diversity is beneficial



Respondents believe that Portage County is an inclusive community



Some respondents have experienced discrimination, most commonly age



Respondents indicated they have access to safe housing



Respondents reported having medical debt compared to 36% about a decade ago



Respondents indicated they have access to internet at home



COMMUNITY CONTEXT

IMPORTANT INDICATORS

These data reflect information that is publicly available

Portage County is the 23rd largest county in WI, with a population of over 70,000 (Census.gov)



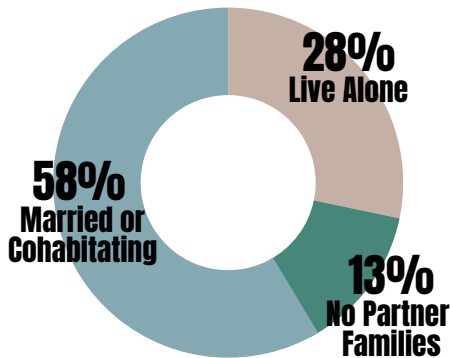
According to the US Census Bureau, Portage County is considered a rural county



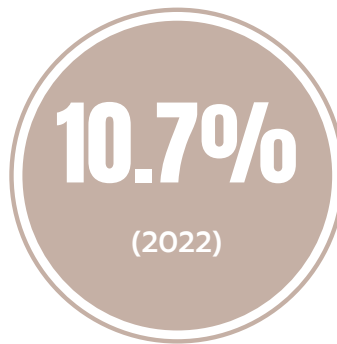
Nearly a third of households live at or below the ALICE survival budget (2021)
This has not changed much since 2018.



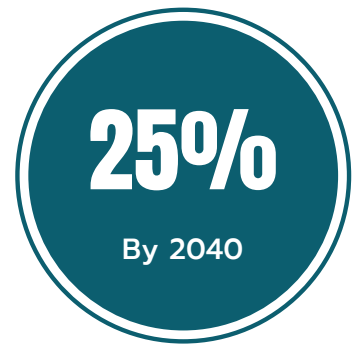
Married and cohabiting couple families make up the bulk of households in the county (ACS)



The percent of the population that are people of color has hovered around 9% since 2016 (ACS)



The percent of the population aged 65 and older is expected to increase to almost 25% by 2040 (PCConduit.org)



In 2021, 1,969 households realized Focus on Energy Savings (WEC Energy Group)



Substantiated child abuse rate in 2020 (per thousand) compared to the WI rate which is 3.2 (per thousand) (PCConduit.org)



Portage County is the 10th fastest growing county in Wisconsin (DWD)



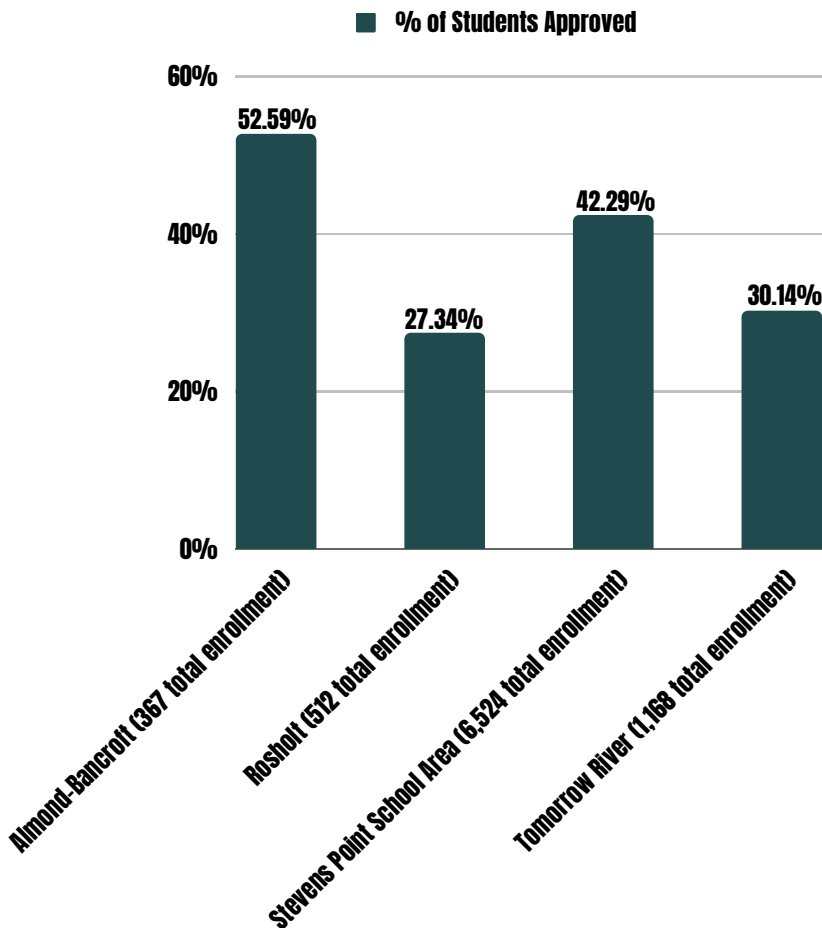
HUNGER

Healthy bodies and minds require nutritious meals at every age. When people don't have enough food or must choose inexpensive, low-nutrition food, it affects their health, productivity, and quality of life. Food insecure households are not necessarily food insecure all of the time. Food insecurity may reflect a household's need to make trade-offs between important basic needs such as housing and medical bills, and purchasing nutritionally adequate foods.

Portage County fares about the same as WI when it comes to food insecurity (PC = 6.8%; WI = 7.2%, 2021)

Percentage of Students Approved for Free or Reduced Meals in 2022

*Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI)



6.0%

2021 Food Insecurity Rate for persons 60+ (Feeding America)

2057

Number of approved requests for food by Emergency Services in 2021

8.2%

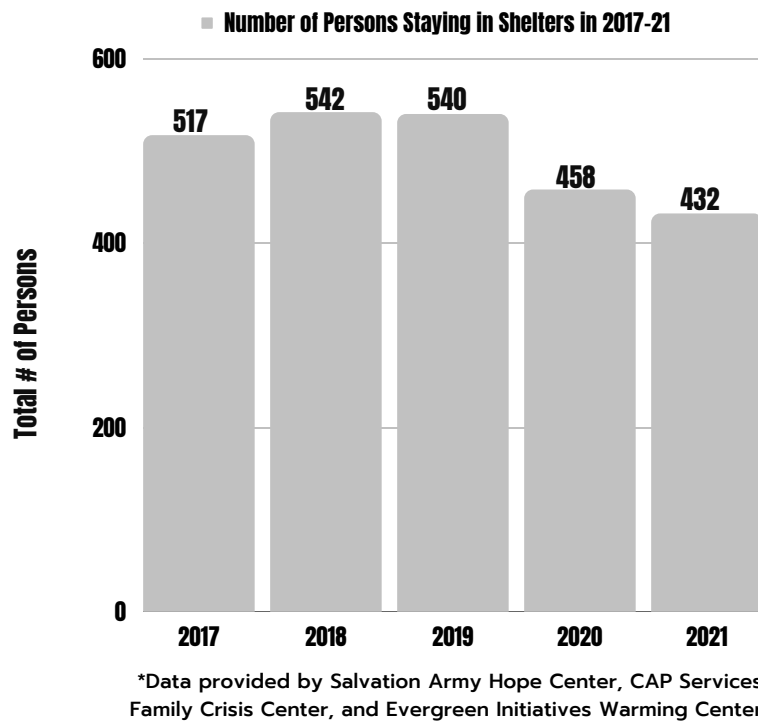
Of children in Portage County were food insecure in 2021 (est. 1,110 children) according to Feeding America

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- According to Feeding America, the 2021 Food Insecurity Rate in Portage County was 6.8%, down from 7.9% in 2020.
- WI Department of Health Services indicated that in 2021, 8,980 Portage County residents received Food Share (a benefit that can help pay for groceries), over an 11% increase from the rate in 2020.
- According to the Community Assessment survey, when asked if they had run out of food in the last 12 months, 14% of respondents indicated they had run out of food (6% in the random sample of respondents and 20% of the focused survey respondents). About 85% of survey respondents who ran out of food indicated they sought assistance from a food pantry or community meal site.

HOUSING & SHELTER

Housing - Having a stable place to live is one of the most basic needs that all people have. Without it, most other things are challenging. Affordable housing is spending no more than 30% of one's income on housing. Portage County is sensitive to the uptick in the number of homeless individuals in the area. Usage of the Evergreen Initiatives Warming Center increased during the 2022-2023 winter season.



44%

The percent of Portage County households spending more than 30% of their income on rent has averaged 44% between 2016-2021

\$18.56

According to the 2022 National Low Income Housing Coalition, a household in WI would need to make \$18.56 per hour (\$38,600 annual income) to afford a two bedroom rental home at HUD's Fair Market Rent

20%

United Ways 2-1-1 indicated that out of all basic needs requests in Portage County in 2021, 20% were for housing assistance

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- Issues cited that contribute to homelessness include: lack of affordable housing, physical and/or mental illness, domestic violence, divorce, unemployment, poverty, and low wages.
- 31% of households in Portage County are renters, compared to a statewide rate of 33%.
- In 2022, the income needed to afford a Fair Market Rent (rent & utilities) 2 bedroom rental was \$33,760 and \$47,480 for a 4 bedroom in Portage County.
- In the 2022 CAP Services Community Needs Assessment, respondents indicated two of their top seven priority issues were the cost of housing and heating, and buying a house.
- The 2017 median home sale price in Portage County was \$162,500, climbing to \$219,500 in 2021, a 35% increase.
- Emergency Services approved 657 requests for housing needs in 2021.
- In 2021 the Keep WI Warm and Cool Fund, administered by Energy Services, provided assistance to 691 individuals and families to ensure their heat and power stayed on.
- During the Pandemic, through the CAP Services administered WERA (Wisconsin Emergency Rental Assistance Program) 652 households in Portage County were provided assistance for rent and utilities amounting to \$2,357,300.
- According to the Community Assessment survey, when asked in the open-ended comments section what change they would make, if they could change anything in Portage County to improve their quality of life over the next 5 years, 13% of respondents commented on the quality, availability, and affordability of housing in Portage County for seniors, low-income, and the homeless population.

CRIME

Acts of violence and the stress from living in unsafe towns, villages, and cities, can affect a person's health and quality of life in the short-term and long-term, whether that person is directly or indirectly affected. The LIFE Report Steering Committee ranked Crime as a lower area of concern in comparison to other more pressing safety needs in the county such as: drinking and driving, increases in drug trafficking, the intersection of drug use, drug exposure in children, and child maltreatment.

Portage County has a slightly higher rate of DUI and drug offense arrests than WI (PC DUI = 3.8, WI = 3.5; PC drug = 4.4, WI = 4.1), but a slightly lower rate of violent crime (PC = 0.8, WI = 1.2).

**Numbers indicate the rate of arrest per 1,000*

211

Total number of juvenile arrests in Portage County in 2021

268

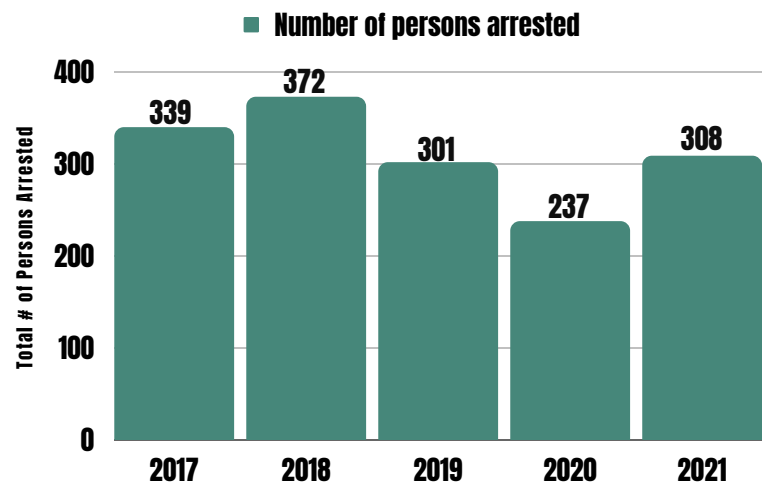
Number of Portage County people arrested for driving under the influence in 2021

58

Reported cases of elder abuse in 2021 down 20% from 72 reported in 2020

**Type of elder abuse- neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse by others*

Number of Persons Arrested for Drug Offenses in Portage County



COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- 79% of Community Assessment survey respondents agree or strongly agree that the crime rate in Portage County is low.
- In 2021, the Department of Justice arrest data indicated that there were 434 arrests for property crimes in Portage County, compared with 427 in 2020, 417 in 2019, and 439 in 2018.
- Portage County violent crime arrests in 2021 were 58, down from the five year average of 70.
- Juveniles arrested for liquor law violations in Portage County rose to 25 in 2021, up from 14 in 2020, a 44% increase.

SAFETY

Having a sense of personal safety and living in a safe town, village, or city can affect a person's health and quality of life. If people feel safe in their community, they are more likely to participate in community activities, commerce, and general societal life. The Community Assessment survey indicated that an overwhelming number of respondents feel safe in Portage County. Effects of having one's personal safety violated can include post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and substance abuse.

Portage County's sexual offense rate is lower than Wisconsin's (PC 75.29 per 100,000 population compared to 89.25 for the state of WI)

18%

of students report being bullied on school property according to the 2021 Youth Risk Behavioral Survey (YRBS)

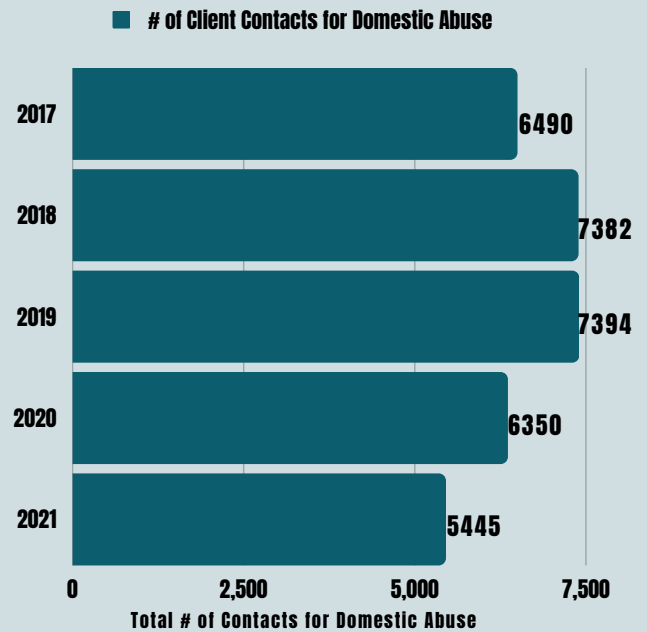
852

number of calls of child abuse and neglect in 2021 (Portage County Health and Human Services)

34.3%

number of child maltreatment calls in 2020 that were screened in, which is higher than WI state average of 33% according to KidCount.org

The number of client contacts completed by the Family Crisis Center over the previous 5 year period averages 6,612 per year. Client contacts include all forms of contact to residential (shelter) and non-residential clients (unsheltered). Contacts are hotline calls and in person services related to supporting the needs of clients affected by Domestic Violence (DV).



COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- Steering Committee members indicated concerns about drug-endangered children and the subsequent rise in child maltreatment substantiations.
- According to the Community Assessment survey, a majority of residents agreed or strongly agreed that the top 5 public safety concerns in Portage County were distracted driving (86%), driving under the influence (83%), illegal drug use (80%), bullying (74%), family violence and property crimes (tied) at 61%.
- According to the Summary Report of the Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) 2021, 18% of students report being bullied on school property and 16.1% of students report being bullied online through text or social media. Female students report much higher rates of both in-person and Cyberbullying than male students.
- Rural respondents to the Community Assessment survey are 8% more likely to indicate that illegal drug use is a problem relative to urban residents.

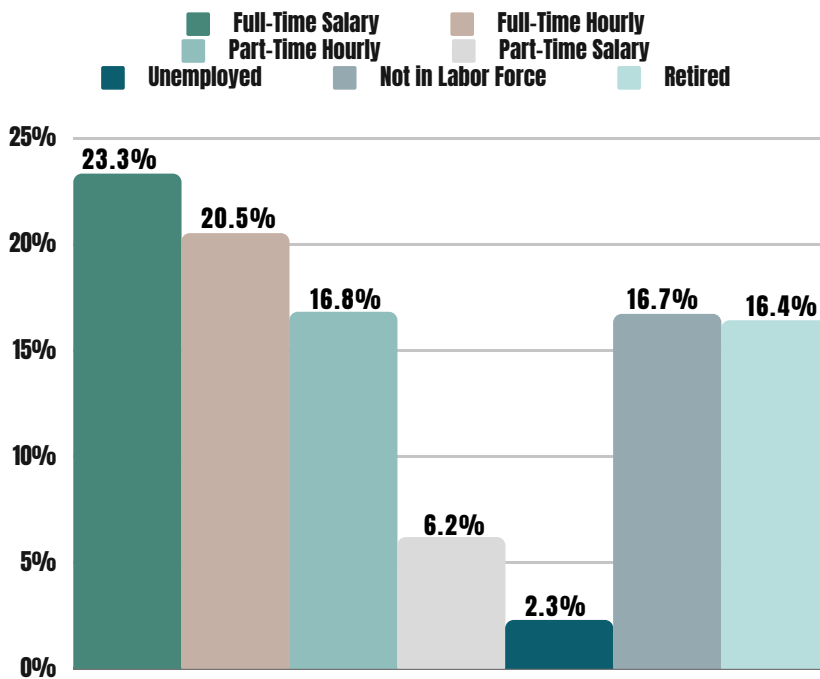
EMPLOYMENT

Employment and thriving economic conditions provide income and benefits for those living in the community. Without them, residents may face many challenges - hunger, housing, and physical and mental health issues. Those who are not in the labor force may be discouraged workers, marginally attached workers, or those who are part-time for economic reasons. To be classified as unemployed, one has to be actively searching for employment or waiting to be recalled from a temporary layoff. Those not in the labor force do not have a job and are not looking for one.

Portage County is expected to see an almost 10% drop in its primary working age population (ages 20-64) by 2040.

**Source 2017 LIFE Report*

**Labor Status, Population 16 and Over in Portage County in 2021
(United For ALICE)**



ALICE

Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed

Households with income above the Federal Poverty Level but below the basic cost of living.

For more information on ALICE visit: UnitedForALICE.org

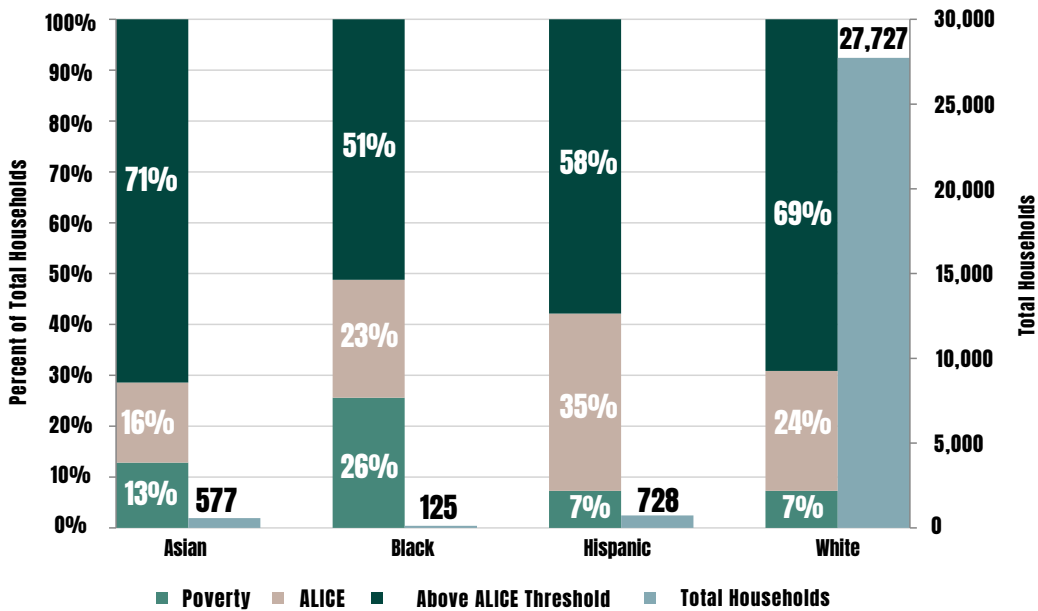
COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- Steering Committee members indicated concerns about workers' barriers in accessing childcare as well as having transportation. Without these, people who want to work may not be able to.
- Community survey respondents indicated these three top reasons for leaving jobs:
 - 20% indicated not enough hours
 - 19% indicated low wages
 - 4% indicated lack of flexible work
- According to JobCenterofWisconsin.com, the unemployment rate in Portage County returned to a pre-pandemic level of 3.5%, lower than Wisconsin's rate of 4% in 2021.
- From 2017-2021, 66.9% of the population age 16+ in Portage County were in the Civilian Labor Force, compared with the national rate of 63.1%.
- Occupations that are expected to increase the most in Portage County by 2028 - Leisure and Hospitality 16.5%, Professional and Business Services 10.7%, and Education and Health Services 9.4%, according to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.

INCOME

Income provides economic resources that influence people's choices about things like food, housing, and medical care. Without income, residents may face many challenges that decrease quality and length of life. A significant number of community members struggle to find employment which offers a living wage. Half of Community Assessment survey respondents felt living wages were not paid in the County and almost half had difficulty covering household expenses. Approximately 31% of households in the county are at or below the ALICE (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed) threshold. ALICE is a measure of households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level but below the cost of household basics. Of the 31%, 11% are at or below the Federal Poverty Level and 20% earn income above the poverty level but below the cost of living in Portage County.

**Household Financial Status by Race/Ethnicity in Portage County, 2021
(United for ALICE)**



DATA

- 39% of Community Assessment survey respondents indicated they do not have an emergency fund set aside to cover 3-months of expenses, compared with 60% of survey respondents in 2017, an improvement of 35%.
- According to the American Community Survey 1-year estimates, Median Household income in Portage County in 2020 was \$60,316 up from \$56,358 in 2019, a 7% increase, but still behind the WI median income of \$63,293.
- The 2021 ALICE Household Survival Budget in Portage County for a family of 4, 2 adults, 1 Pre-K child, and 1 infant, is \$64,716 which would require \$32.36 in hourly wages to cover basic necessities.

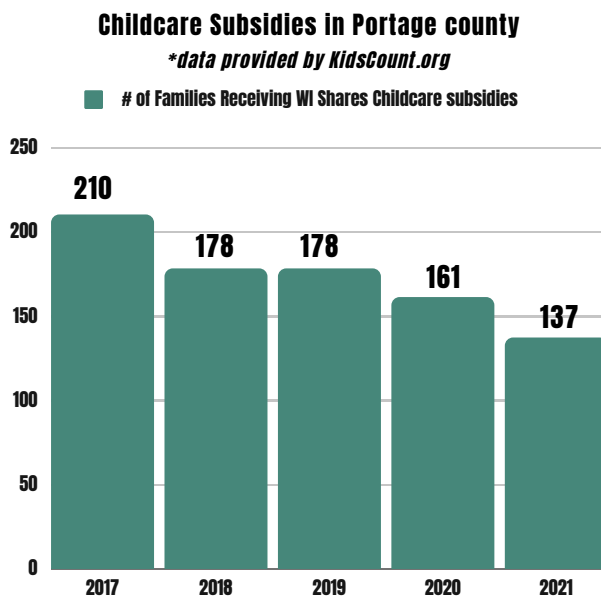
COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- While the COVID-19 pandemic brought employment shifts, health struggles, and school/business closures in 2021, it also spurred unprecedented public assistance through pandemic relief measures. In 2019, 10,084 households in Portage County were below the ALICE Threshold; by 2021 that number had changed to 9,469.
- 56% of Community Assessment survey respondents felt living wages were not paid in the county and 46% indicated they had difficulty covering expenses.
- About 14% of residents indicated that they do not have access to internet services at home. The primary reason being the cost of internet services.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE & EDUCATION

Early childhood care and education that is affordable and accessible can increase parents' participation in education and work. High-quality care also benefits children's development. Currently, there are approximately 200 slots for childcare unavailable due to staffing challenges at local childcare providers.

In Portage County, the number of children receiving childcare subsidies from the State has dropped every year since 2016, suggesting that more of the cost-burden is falling on families, which furthers the need to ensure care is affordable.



DATA

- According to a Wisconsin Early Care and Education Workforce Study (WECE) conducted in 2020 and 2021, the Impact of COVID 19 on enrollment in childcare programs in WI, group programs saw a 22% decline in enrollments and family providers saw a 17% decline.
- Turnover and retention of childcare staff is an increasing concern. According to the WECE's Workforce study noted above, workforce respondents indicated that within the next two years, 28% of Center-Based Teachers plan to leave the early childhood education (ECE) field, and in the next 5 years, 50% plan to move out of the field; whereas, family providers indicated that in the next 2 years, 18% were planning to make a change and within 5 years 37% indicated they would be leaving the field.
- Center-based teachers work an average of 34 hours per week and family providers work about 60 hours per week. Median hourly wages for family providers are about \$7.46 and for all ECE teachers an average of \$12.99 in WI. The average wage for a childcare lead teacher in Portage County is about, on average, \$13.66 per hour (with certifications).

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

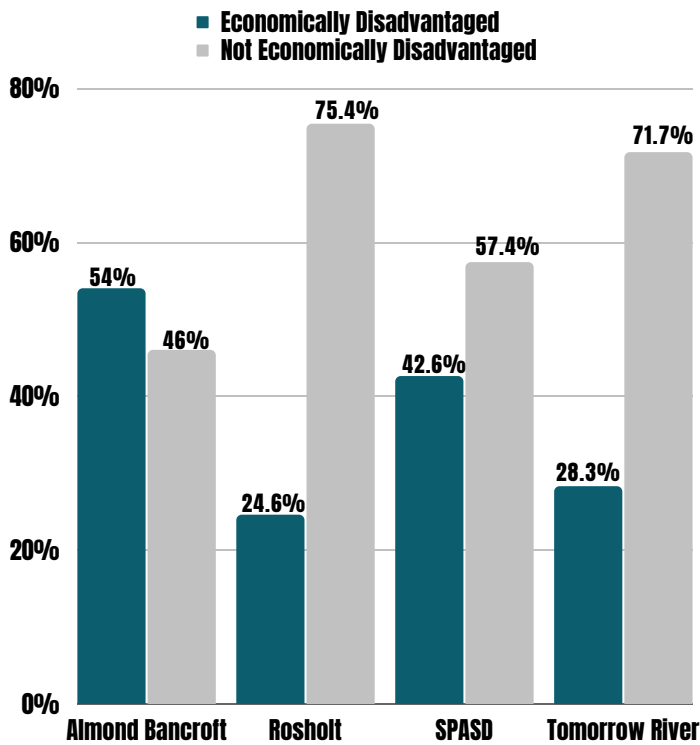
- 93% of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that support for child development is readily available in Portage County.
- In 2021, the average weekly cost of center based care for an infant is \$223 per week, and for regulated family care for an infant it would be \$179 per week according to ChildCaring.org.
- In the Community Assessment survey, 80% of respondents felt childcare was available but over half (60%) felt childcare was not affordable.
- Steering Committee members discussed the low wages for childcare workers and the current number of staff shortages. There are currently over 200 unfilled childcare slots due to staffing challenges. They discussed the lack of before and afterschool care and its impact on the community's workforce. Members were concerned about costs going up and subsidies going down.
- In 2021, Portage County had an inventory of 1,819 regulated childcare slots compared with 1,961 in 2020 according to KidsCount.org.
- Affordable care is defined by the federal government as spending no more than 7% of yearly income on childcare. Unfortunately, in Portage County, families spend an average of 19.4% of their income on childcare.
- 62% of Zip Codes in Portage County are designated as Childcare deserts (defined as any zip code with at least 30 children under the age of 5 years where there are 3 or more children under the age of 5 years for every 1 childcare spot) according to the Department of Children and Families.

K-12 EDUCATION

Strong academic performance during K-12 is associated with high school completion. More education is linked to better health outcomes, employment, and higher earnings. Steering committee members shared that greater numbers of students had unmet basic needs (food, housing) and social and emotional issues which directly impacts student's ability to achieve academic success.

On average, Portage County performs better than WI in all areas of the Wisconsin Forward Exam (PCConduit.org).

% of Economically Disadvantaged Students by Portage County School District 2021/22



DATA

- According to WI's Department of Public Instruction (DPI)'s WISEDASH Dashboard, the percent of children in PC that were proficient or above on the Forward Exam in math dropped after the pandemic from 44% in 2016/2017, 45% in 2018/2019, and 34% in 2020/2021 (proficient and advanced) while English scores were steady 2016/2017 - 51%, 2018/2019 - 54%, and 56% in 2020/2021.
- The high school completion rate in Portage County has remained fairly constant in the 90's, 91.6% in 2020 and has remained slightly above the WI rate in 2020 of 89.5%.
- Student to licensed staff ratio in Portage County in 2021 was 11.97 compared with the state ratio of 11.91, nearly even.

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- Steering Committee members were concerned about the loss of teaching staff and fewer people wanting to become teachers. Members shared that greater numbers of students had unmet basic needs (food, housing) and social and emotional issues.
- 80% of community survey respondents felt public education prepared students well for future life.
- Total educational cost per pupil in Portage County is \$13,554, (WI state rate is \$11,930) and total revenue per pupil being \$14,413, (WI state rate is \$14,737) according to Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
- According to the YRBS Survey conducted in 2021, a question asked students about whether a parent or other adult in their home lost their job during the pandemic even for a short time, and the second question asked students to report the number of people who they know that died or got very sick from COVID-19 ("very sick" was defined as having to spend time in the hospital). Having to cope with these family stressors, can significantly impair a student's ability to learn.
 - Overall, 23.9% of students reported that a parent lost their job during the COVID-19 pandemic, while 31.9% of the Hispanic/Latinx students were most likely to report that a parent lost their job.
 - 54.1% of all students reported that they know at least one person who died or got very sick from COVID-19; Female students (57.7%), Asian students (67.3%), and Hispanic/Latinx students (62.5%) all being more likely to report knowing someone who got sick or died.

POST SECONDARY EDUCATION

Higher education is associated with greater work and economic opportunities, less stress, healthier lifestyles, and improved health outcomes. Portage County is the home of both UW-Stevens Point (UWSP) and Mid-State Technical College. Although the mission of each is distinct, both focus on transforming the lives of students and our community through access to high-quality education. Leaders from both institutions meet with business leaders on a regular basis to discuss ways their programs can support employment needs and economic growth.

Most graduates from both Mid-State and UWSP stay in the area.

90.6%

of UWSP graduates were employed after graduation in 2020.

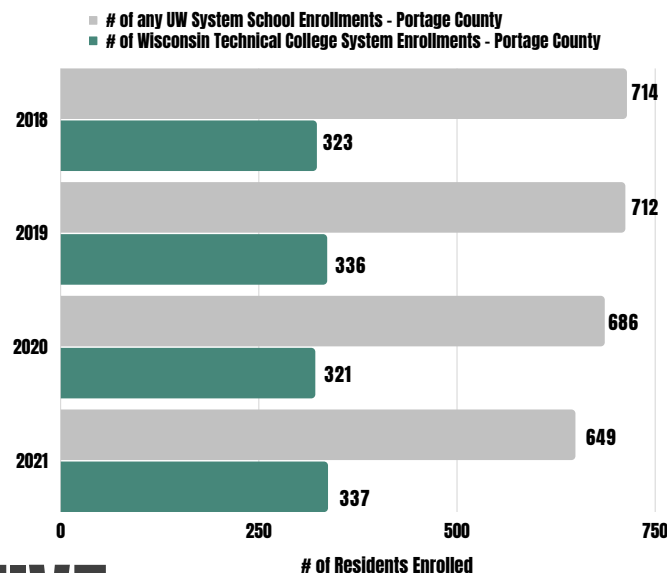
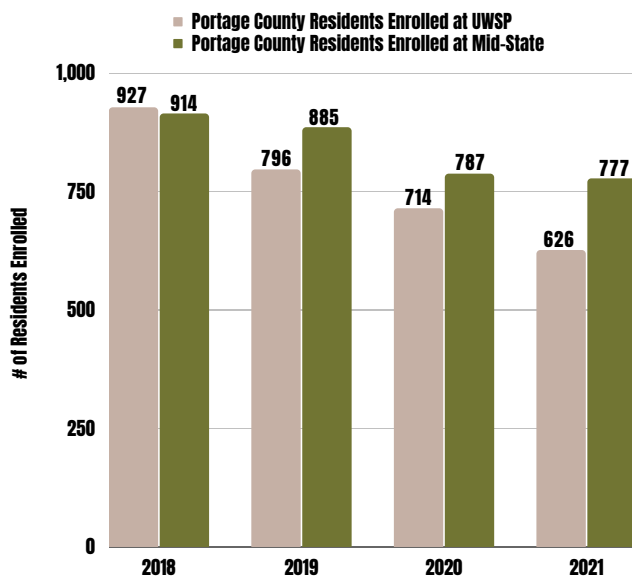
6YR

graduation rate at UWSP and Mid-State has declined and is lower than their WI counterparts. In 2018, UWSP was at 62%, 2019 was 60%, and in 2021 they were at 55%. The Mid-State rate was 43% in 2018, 46% in 2019, and 37% in 2021.

92%

of Mid-State graduates were employed within 1 year of graduation in 2021.

Higher Ed. Enrollments



COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- The creation of the Mid-State Wayne Bushman AMETA Center: Advance Manufacturing, Engineering, Technology, and Apprenticeship will create more educational and workforce opportunities for local students; help meet industry demand for skilled workers, and create new economic opportunity and jobs in Wisconsin. Over 125 industry partners are coming together and investing to make this new center possible here in Portage County.
- About one third or 35% of Community Assessment survey respondents felt higher education was affordable.
- Steering committee members discussed the current job market which may lead people to seek out jobs rather than education. More adults are seeking certificates and other non-degree programs.
- The percent of high school completers in Portage County who enrolled in post-secondary education declined from 65% in 2016 to 55% in 2020 according to WiseDash.DPI.WI.gov.

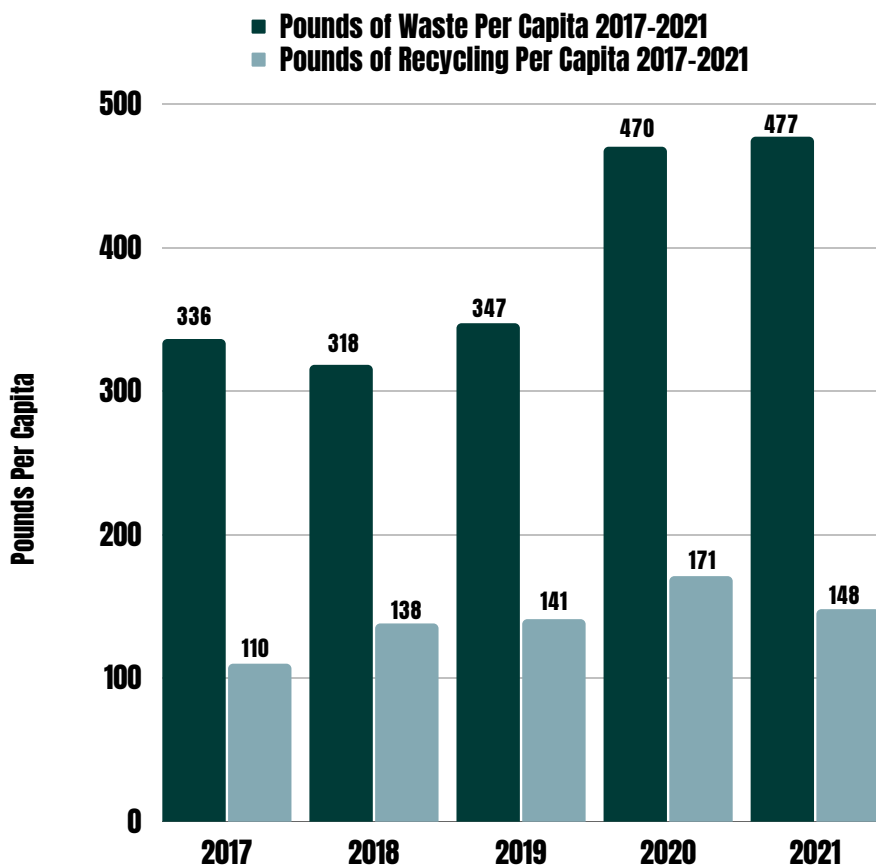
LAND, WATER, & AIR

Safety of drinking water prevents illness, birth defects, and death. Clean air is a requirement for health - poor air quality can increase asthma rates and cause lung cancer. Ensuring land is well-managed can also affect health. Portage County land use has remained consistent since 2017.

According to the 2017 Portage County Well Water Quality Project, water in the county, on average, is well balanced and aesthetically pleasing.

Pounds of Waste in Portage County Annually

**data provided by Portage County Solid Waste Department*



56%

According to the 2023 County Health Profile, 56% of tests for radon in Portage County were above recommended levels compared to 41% for WI

22%

Nitrates were detected in 22% of private wells

73%

of residents who have private wells indicated not getting them tested annually, according to the Community Assessment survey

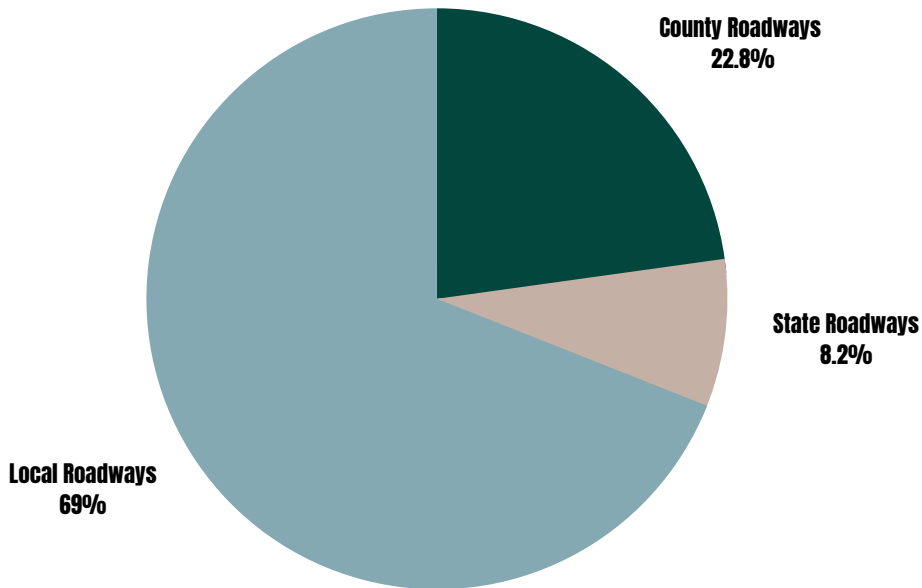
COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- According to the Community Assessment survey, 41% of residents indicated that they disposed of special wastes properly.
- 86% of water bodies in Portage County are considered healthy, the remainder are under restoration or considered impaired according to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.
- Radon is an issue for homes in Rosholt, Custer, Amherst Junction, and Amherst according to the Department of Health Services.
- According to the Community Assessment survey, 70% of private well owners didn't know they should test their wells annually.
- More than 90% of LIFE Survey respondents "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that they were satisfied with area parks and recreation. With 30 city and 28 county parks, Portage County offers a wide range of recreational options including the Green Circle and Tomorrow River trails and many other picturesque hiking and biking paths.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation, whether by foot, bike, or vehicle, is essential to people's daily lives. People of Portage County conduct business, go to work, go to appointments and recreate using a variety of transportation modes, such as walking, biking, taking public transportation and driving vehicles. Portage County Aging & Disability Resource Center (ADRC) transportation services have merged with Stevens Point municipal transportation services. The consolidated program offers a variety of transportation services for residents in Portage County.

Miles of Roads in Portage County in 2021



DATA

- It is estimated that 86% of workers in Portage County use a car, truck, or van to get to work according to the EPH Data Tracker.
- In 2020, less than 1% of workers used public transportation to get to work. The rate has remained fairly consistent over the last five years (EPH Date Tracker).
- There are 1905 miles of roads in Portage County (Portage County HWY Commission).
- Driving on roads that need repair cost the average Wisconsin motorist an estimated \$733/year, up from \$637/year in 2017 (TripNet.org).

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- Steering Committee members discussed the costs associated with vehicle ownership, increasing gas prices, the transportation needs of rural areas with no public transit, and the needs of the elderly for medical appointments.
- The average one-way commute time for all travel modes in Portage County is 19 minutes according to the EPH Data Tracker.
- According to the Portage County Highway Department, 81% of roads are in good to excellent condition.
- About 15% of Community Assessment survey respondents indicate they felt road conditions could be improved.
- According to the City of Stevens Point Community Development department, the city bus system had 91,726 total ridership in 2021. Just under 29% were from UWSP.
 - Additionally, Paratransit had 9,825 riders, ADRC bus had 866 riders, and Volunteer Driver Program had 2,566.

PREVENTIVE CARE

Preventive care is a joint effort between individuals and health care systems - each has a role to play. Receiving appropriate preventive care at the right time can help protect and improve health. Preventative care includes early prenatal care, childhood immunizations, oral care, routine annual healthcare for adults, among other important interactions between individuals and the healthcare community.

73% of Portage County children have received the recommended immunization series by age two, compared to 69% of Wisconsin children.

2012-22

According to the community survey, between 2012 and 2022, the proportion of Portage County residents without health coverage decreased from 16% to 8%

47

(per 100,000)

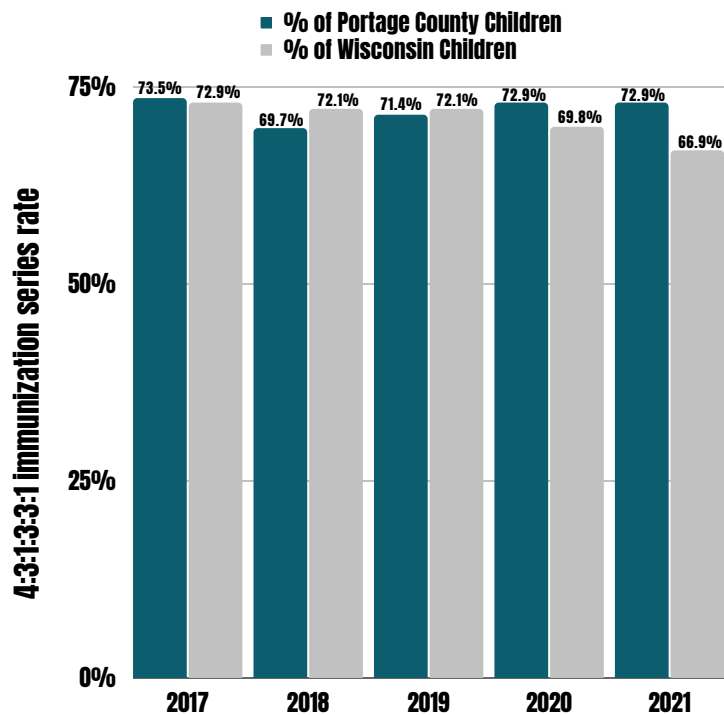
The rate of primary care providers to serve the population in Portage County is 47 per 100,000 as compared to 81 per 100,000 in the state of Wisconsin (County Health Ranking)

31%

Rural residents are 31% more likely to indicate that health insurance is not offered by their employer relative to urban residents

The rate of Portage County Children with 4-3-1-3-3-1 immunization series* compared to WI

*The 4:3:1:3:3:1 series includes the following vaccines: 4 doses of diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTaP); 3 doses of Polio; 1 dose of measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), three doses hepatitis B; one dose varicella (Wisconsin Department of Health Services)



COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- Although 91% of Community Assessment survey respondents felt health care was available, only 33% of respondents felt that health care was affordable.
- Steering Committee members were concerned about limited access to care arising from a decrease in primary care providers, transportation barriers, and HMO agreements that could affect "in-network" and "out-of-network" costs.
- The rate of preventable hospital visits (emergency visits) has improved (per 100,000) Medicare enrollees from 3,133 in 2017, and 2,666 in 2019, 2,349 in 2020 according to the County Health Rankings.
- In the years 2020 and 2021, the number of Pertussis cases in Portage County has decreased to zero, compared with 38 in 2019, a very positive trend according to Portage County Health & Human Services
- 80.3% of births in Portage County had prenatal care that started in the first trimester, but rates for Hispanic and Asian populations are much lower (Wisconsin Department of Health Services).
- A third of Portage County Medicaid members receive preventive dental care, and the rate has dropped slightly going from 34% in 2017-19 to 27% in 2021 (Wisconsin Department of Health Services).

PHYSICAL HEALTH

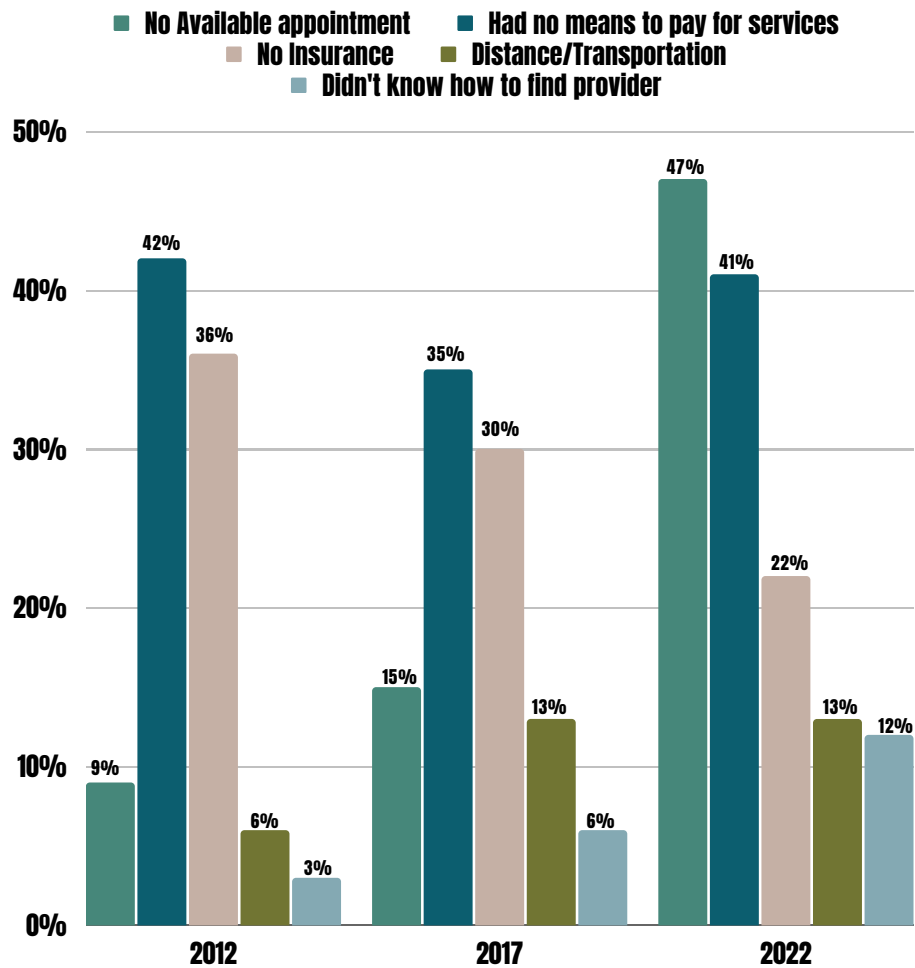
Physical health is influenced by people's genetics and their health behaviors. Health behaviors are affected by people's access to and the availability of healthy options. Physical health can tell us about people's quality of life.

Over half of survey respondents (61%) felt that healthy lifestyles were common in the community.

DATA

- Rate of teenage pregnancy in Portage County in 2020 was 7.6 per 1,000 births, compared with the state of WI rate of 11.6 per 1,000 births, and the US rate of 16.7 per 1,000 births (Wisconsin Department of Health Services).
- 5.7% of births in Portage County in 2020 were low birthweight compared to the 2019 rate of 7.3% (Wisconsin Department of Health Services).
- The 2019 County Health Ranking report indicated that 31% of adults in Portage County were obese, compared to the WI rate of 34%.

Reasons Why Households Did Not Seek Medical Care By Year 2012-2022



COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- According to the 2020 County Health Rankings, adults reported their physical health was not good for 2.9 of the previous 30 days.
- In 2023, the County Health Rankings report ranked Portage County 13th of 72 Wisconsin counties in terms of length of life and quality of life, which places Portage County in the top 25%.
- In 2020, 17% of Portage County adults reported participating in no physical activity outside of work according to the County Health Rankings.
- Steering committee members discussed the need for more dentists that accept Medicaid for payment.
- 23% of respondents to the Community Assessment survey indicated they did not see a dentist when needed during the last year citing affordability and lack of dental insurance as the top reasons, as well as a lack of available dental appointments was an issue, while senior residents indicated they did not have the means to pay for dental care, or had no dental insurance as primary reasons for not accessing care.
- Overall leading causes of Emergency Department visits for all ages from 2016-2021 in Portage County were: (1) falls, (2) struck by or against object or person (3) motor vehicle, (4) cutting or piercing object, or (5) overexertion (Wisconsin WISH Injury Module).

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

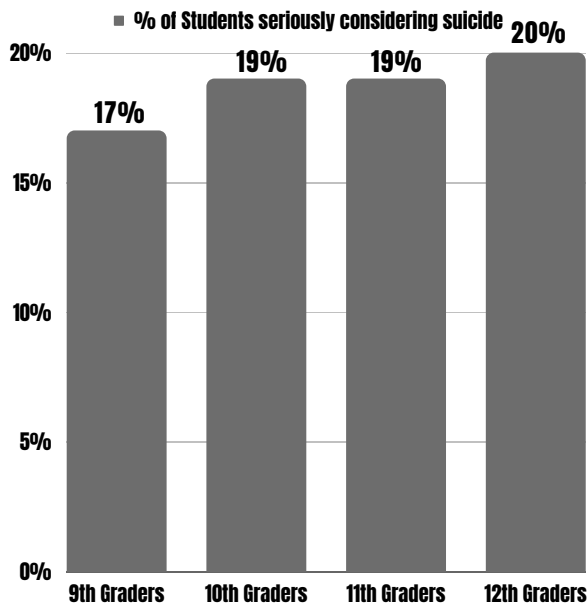
Behavioral health refers to mental health and substance use as well as prevention, diagnosis, and treatment in these areas. Behavioral health tells us about people's quality of life.

Teen rates of self-harm hospitalizations have increased. So has the rate for teens reporting prolonged sadness (YRBS).

2021 DPI YRBS Survey - Youth Suicides and Suicidal Ideation

Youth suicides and suicidal ideation have been on the rise. The YRBS survey asks students whether they have seriously considered, planned, and attempted suicide, and if they received medical care as the result of a suicide attempt.

In the category, Considered Suicide, 19% of "Overall Students" had seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months (2021)



COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

- According to WI WISH (WI Interactive Statistics on Health) Mortality Module, 11.2 deaths in Portage County in 2020 were due to intentional self-harm (suicide) compared to 12.6 in 2019, and 15.6 in 2018.
- Steering Committee members voiced concerns about teen vaping, rates of self-harm (especially among young teens), schools are seeing more mental health issues among students, and alcohol and other drug use.
- About 14% of residents indicated that they did not seek a mental health provider when needed. This proportion has increased over time and unavailability of appointments was the main reason identified by respondents.
- According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 14% of Medicare beneficiaries (persons aged 65 or older, persons under 65 with certain disabilities) were treated for depression in Portage County in 2021, which stayed the same as 2020.
- According to the report, "The Pandemic Divide: An ALICE Analysis of National COVID Surveys" households living below the ALICE threshold faced elevated symptoms of anxiety and depression often related to paying housing expenses, providing food, paying off debt, and losing a job.
- 2022 County Health Rankings indicated that the Mental Health Provider Rate in Portage County increased to 133 providers per 100,000 population, up from 127 per 100,000 in 2021. Providers may include psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, counselors, and advanced practice nurses specializing in mental health care.
- Respondents to the Community Assessment survey felt the top health issues were binge drinking (81%), Prescription (Rx) drug use (80%), and vaping (77%).

DATA

- About 15% of Portage County residents indicated that they consumed alcohol excessively at least 2 times during the last month, although, only 1% of Community Assessment survey respondents agreed to having operated a vehicle after consuming 2 or more drinks.
- The rate of opioid overdose in Portage County that required a trip to the Emergency Department in 2021 was 26.6%, up from 18.2% in 2020 (DHS).
- The 2021 YRBS survey indicated through participants responses that 16% of high school students use electronic vapor products, down from the 26% reported in 2018.
- According to the WI Department of Health Services, in the years 2019-2021, 25.9% of adults in Portage County reported binge drinking at least once during the 30 days prior to the survey. (Male binge drinking is defined as 5 or more drinks on one occasion and 4 or more for females).
- In 2021, 33% of high school students who completed the YRBS survey indicated they had felt so sad or hopeless for two or more weeks that they stopped doing some usual activities.
 - 50% of overall students, (68% female and 34% male) indicated they had experienced significant problems with anxiety in the last 12 months (2021).
- According to National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) 70% of youth in state and local juvenile justice systems have a mental illness.
- Rates of adult and teen smoking have decreased in Portage County, but teen vaping is still high in WI according to the YRBS survey.

PRIORITY AREA SUMMARY

This section summarizes the interpretations of the Steering Committee and their overall ranking of the priority area as a need within the community. Icons give a general sense of members' interpretations.

Although the Steering Committee selected the top three priority areas as calls- to-action, there were other issues that stakeholders viewed as needing improvement. In review of the data, all of these issues have their strengths and weaknesses. There are also overlapping sub-issues. For example, crime, safety, and behavioral health intersect in the area of substance use.

Community organizations that work to improve these issues should not be put off by the rankings, but rather emboldened to drive their issue to the top by increasing community awareness, community support, and knowledge about evidence-based programs.

	Trend	Magnitude of Problem	Community Support	Rank as a Need	Community Perspective
Behavioral Health				1st	
Early Childhood Ed.				2nd	
Housing & Shelter				3rd	
Preventative Care				4th	
K-12 Education				5th	
Income				6th	
Safety				7th	
Physical Health				8th	
Employment				9th	
Transportation				10th	
Land, Water, Air				11th	
Post-Secondary Education				11th	
Crime				11th	
Hunger				11th	

TAKEAWAYS KEY:



Good Trend



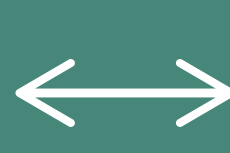
Neutral



Bad Trend



High



Medium



Low

CONCLUSION

The goal of the LIFE project is to identify community calls-to-action through a needs assessment process as well as identify strengths and challenges that help mobilize action. After months of input and effort from the Executive and Steering Committees, including reviewing data, conversations among the Steering Committee, bringing more information to bear on priority areas, and discussing community assets, the Executive Committee selected three calls-to-action.

The areas of behavioral health, early childhood education and care, and housing/shelter were the three top priority areas for the Steering Committee. Each of these areas displayed a data trend that indicated things were getting worse; the magnitude of the problem was viewed as high; the Steering Committee perceived that community support for the issue was moderate to high; and the community's perspective on the issue indicated that they felt it needed significant improvement. Yet, other areas, like preventive health care, K-12 education, and income were ranked closely to the top three priority areas. This suggests that these other areas may need additional work as well.

Nevertheless, Portage County has strengths it can look to. Post-secondary education, the use and care of land, water, and air, as well as improvements that have occurred in hunger, were viewed more positively. One approach might be to examine why progress has been made in these areas and seek to apply similar strategies to the current calls-to-action. Another approach to capitalizing on these strengths might be to find their intersections with the calls-to-action and use the overlapping issues as a springboard to make improvements in the calls-to-action. Whichever approach is selected, community stakeholders are encouraged to use this report for decision-making, economic development, priority setting, program development, monetary allocations, and grant writing. There are many avenues that one can take after reading this report, but one thing we hope you will do is take action. This report is just a stepping-stone on a journey to improve the well-being of the Portage County community and everyone who calls it home.

More information that is kept current can be found on the newly released Portage County Conduit site (PCConduit.org), which is a free and easy-to-use publicly available website that serves as a warehouse for current data on local, state, and national indicators. Links to stand-alone reports are also housed there and include the 2023 LIFE Report, the ALICE Report, CAP Services Community Needs Assessment, and other local community-centered documents.

The LIFE Report is an excellent tool to empower local leaders and other citizens to collaborate to improve the quality of life for all in Portage County.

THANK YOU!

Steering Committee

- Andrea Starr - Justice Works
- Angela Roltgen - Portage County Health & Human Services
- Ben Nusz - Mid-State Technical College
- Beth Smith - United Way of Portage County
- Bob Smith - Aspirus healthcare
- Brian Sloss - UW-Stevens Point
- Bryar Drexler - Portage County Health & Human Services
- Cass Cousins - Portage County District Attorney
- Chris Klesmith - City of Stevens Point
- Cindy Piotrowski - Aging & Disability Resource Center
- Cindy Weber - UW-Stevens Point
- Colin Mitchell - Family Health La Clinica
- Cory Hirsbrunner - Stevens Point School District
- Dana Williams - Stevens Point Police Department
- Dawn Cherek - Big Brothers Big Sisters
- Dennis Kaczor - Rosholt School District
- Diane Shaver - CAP Services
- Helen Luce - UW-Stevens Point
- Eric Yonke - Ethiopian Community Development Council
- Gigi Stahl - Stevens Point School District
- Heather Landon - Emergency Services of ESI, WI.
- Idowu Odedosu - Stevens Point Housing Authority
- Jane Spencer - North Central Workforce Development Board
- Jen McNelly - Portage County Water Resources
- Jenny Resch - UW-Stevens Point
- Jessica Hake - Portage County Health & Human Services
- Jodi Becker - Almond School District
- Joel Lemke - City of Stevens Point Public Utilities
- Julia McKnight - Portage County Health & Human Services
- Kate Mueller - Family Crisis Center
- Kelly Borchardt - Childcaring, Inc.
- Kelly Hammond - UW-Extension
- Kevin Quevillon - Boys & Girls Club
- Kristy Seblonka - CAP Services
- Leigh Ann Trzinski - Salvation Army
- Lindsay Benaszkeski - Portage County Health & Human Services
- Lisa Grashoff - CAP Services
- Lyndsay Barker - Pacelli Catholic Schools
- Lynn Frost - Portage County Health & Human Services
- Maddie Kinscher - Central Rivers Farmshed
- Maggie Marquardt - CREATE Portage County
- Mai Kou Yang - CAP Services
- Mallory McGivern - UW-Extension
- Mark Kordus - City of Stevens Point
- Marlee Samuels - Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin
- Maureen Miller - Aging & Disability Resource Center
- Michael Witte - Portage County Business Council
- Michael Zell - Portage County Circuit Courts
- Micki Krueger - Childcaring, Inc.
- Mike Wiza - City of Stevens Point
- Nathan Sandwick - UW-Extension
- Nicole Harrison - CAP Services
- Rob Manske - UW-Stevens Point
- Ryan Fox - Plover Police Department
- Ryan Kernofsky - City of Stevens Point
- Ryan Zietlow - Stevens Point Area YMCA
- Sam Dinga - Stevens Point School District
- Sam Klebe - Marshfield Clinic Health Systems
- Shari Russell - Portage County Health & Human Services
- Suzanne Rathe - Mid-State Technical College
- Tara Draeger - Aspirus HealthCare
- Teresa Kovach - Portage County Health & Human Services
- Tim Reed - Portage County Planning & Zoning
- Trina Bierman - CAP Services
- Vanessa Kowalski - Portage County Health & Human Services
- Webster Francois - Marshfield Clinic Health System



THANK YOU

Special thanks to John Hartman for capturing the spirit of the Portage County community through his photography and allowing us to use his photo for the cover of the LIFE Report. Thank you to Spectra Print Corporation for their In-Kind printing donation of the LIFE Report. Thank you to Chris Weisgram and Bryar Drexler from Portage County Health and Human Services Division of Public Health for their diligence in seeing the Portage County Conduit site through to completion. Finally, thank you to Hannah Klein from United Way of Portage County for being the graphic designer on this project and infusing her design expertise into the LIFE Report.



**FOR THE
MOST CURRENT
DATA VISIT:
PCCONDUIT.ORG**