

ARE THE CHILDREN WELL?

*A Report on the Movement to Support the Well-being of
McLennan County Children and Families*





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A COLLABORATIVE ENDEAVOR OF THE MCLENNAN COUNTY CHILD WELL-BEING MOVEMENT, FACILITATED BY UNITED WAY OF WACO-MCLENNAN COUNTY



An effort like this doesn't happen alone because *Change Doesn't Happen Alone*. We want to recognize all residents and community advocates who have been critical to this collaborative work. We hope this report serves as an example of what can happen when we harness the power of community to catalyze collective change.

We wish to thank our Community Advisory Board, a group of local residents who've inspired us to propel talk to action in our community. For your time, insight, and candor—we are grateful.

We also wish to express appreciation to our Core Partner Team, representatives from organizations across the county who contributed their time and talents to this work. Thank you for your service to our community.

CORE PARTNER TEAM

Baylor University
Cen-Tex Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
City of Waco
Grassroots Community Development
Greater Waco Chamber
Junior League of Waco

Prosper Waco
United Way of Waco-McLennan County
Waco Family Medicine
Waco-McLennan County Public Health District
Workforce Solutions for the Heart of Texas

OTHER NOTES OF THANKS

To the hundreds of residents who voiced their experiences, dreams, and aspirations for this county: your voices are powerful and are the centerpiece of this work. **Thank you for letting us share your stories.**

The *McLennan County Child Well-being Movement* would like to acknowledge two key contributors to this body of work, FC Research & Evaluation for their contributions to data analysis for this report, and 1000 Feathers, LLC for their commitment to engaging with our communities, conducting the research, and helping to tell the story of county children and families through the creation of this report.

This work was facilitated by United Way of Waco-McLennan County and funded by a grant from Waco Foundation.





LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY

Are the Children Well? As the outgoing CEO of our United Way, my message is not about United Way, but rather about our community. Contained in this report are not just data and indicators that frame the issues of the well-being of our children, families, and communities; this report *is* the voice of this community—*our parents, our community members, and our system leaders*. It provides us with a community North Star that asks us to follow deliberate and meaningful strategies and investments that will help our communities, our families, and our children thrive.

As I step back from United Way, I am proud to share this body of work with you. This report represents critical work, led by a group of community partners, dedicated to assessing the current status of our children and establishing a community movement designed to address the issues that serve as barriers to their well-being. The ***Child Well-being Movement*** is a community movement to ensure all of our children are well.

This movement is focused on improving the quality of life for area children by strengthening the ecosystem in which children exist, not just their social and cognitive development, but the environmental factors in the community that impact the child and family's ability to thrive.

I close out my time and this letter by sharing this thought... The opportunity I see for our community is to write the next chapter in our history. To shape what we will be remembered for. **It is within our power to commit to achieving our greatest legacy, the world we help create for our children.**

Thank you Waco-McLennan County!



**United Way of
Waco-McLennan County**

CHANGE DOESN'T HAPPEN ALONE

BARBARA MOSACCHIO
CEO 2017-2021

INTRODUCTION

More than a decade ago, Waco Foundation commissioned a baseline study related to early childhood supports in McLennan County, known as the *2009 Childhood Quality of Life Index* report.¹ Back then, and still today, the fundamental question remains:

“Are the children well?”

We believe now is an opportune time to revisit this question by broadening our understanding of issues related to children and their well-being, reviewing our progress against the 2009 baseline report, and taking a good, hard look at the current conditions. It’s time to listen to all McLennan County families across all of our communities and hear their voices and perspectives to better understand the current experience of children and families. But just *listening* to the voices of parents and community members isn’t enough; we must *amplify* them at every opportunity, and most importantly, *act* in response to what has been said. This report serves as an initial step in our

commitment to do exactly that. More specifically, as we began planning for this journey alongside members of our community, we remained committed to two things:

- 1 centering the voices of residents, as experts of their own experiences, to begin developing a culture of shared community decision-making; and
- 2 honoring the initial report and carrying on the legacy and work of the last decade by conducting a comprehensive update of local data trends.

For more than a year, our group of community advocates, leaders, and residents have taken on this endeavor by leaning into our community’s collective insights and doing our own research to understand both data trends and the personal experiences of our neighbors. Along the way, we heard loud and clear descriptions of the type of community people hope McLennan County can become.

MCLENNAN COUNTY PARENTS WANT A COMMUNITY WHERE:

parents can be confident to dream dreams for their kids and know that it is attainable for them.

we feel like a village and take care of each other...where every child’s well-being is important, not just (my) child’s.

all children would be valued and that they have all the tools necessary to succeed in this life.

every child is loved and respected and has the potential to be their best self regardless of what their skin color is.

Connecting Past and Present

The *2009 Childhood Quality of Life Index*, written by the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition, included a detailed analysis of federal, state, and local data as well as a summary of community voices gathered via interviews and focus groups. Central to that work was the creation of an index score—a measure of many factors identified as having an impact on the early years of a child’s life and their ability to learn. Those data and the index served as a baseline from which community efforts to improve early childhood have been designed. The initial *SmartBabies Initiative* focused on early childhood education and served children ages 0 to 3. From 2011 to 2017, Waco Foundation served as a funder, convener, and thought leader on this effort.

Early 2018 marked the official transition of the *SmartBabies Initiative* from Waco Foundation to United Way of Waco-McLennan County (United Way). This transition made great sense given that child well-being sits squarely at the intersection of health, education, and financial stability—all core focus areas of United Way. During this time, the effort also expanded its target age group to begin addressing children ages 0 to 5 and United Way immediately began embedding key strategies into their overall Impact Framework. United Way also leaned directly into its role as a convener, collaborator, and funder, and since the transition, has taken on a leadership role overseeing local collaborative initiatives focused on school readiness and maternal and child health—all efforts related directly to child well-being.

Given our community has committed more than a decade of investment, partnership, and work directed at reaching this population of young children, it does seem appropriate to circle back to the original question, **“Are the children well?”** The answer is complex and described in detail throughout this report. In short, we should celebrate the fact that the last decade has brought progress. At the same time, we must continue to recognize and emphasize that too many children, families, and neighborhoods in McLennan County still do not have access to the resources they need to succeed. A history of policies and decision-making has exacerbated inequities by race and geography, disenfranchised entire communities, and created environments not conducive to helping children thrive.

Community partners are stepping up more than ever to address many of these issues, but we know that better alignment of services and a deeper focus on equity and inclusion would lead to even greater results. Success requires transformation in mindset and a deeper commitment to a movement—one that we can all co-create and advance together.

2009

Waco Foundation commissioned a baseline study on early childhood education services in McLennan County.

2011

The *SmartBabies Initiative* is launched.

2018

Transition of the *SmartBabies Initiative* from Waco Foundation to United Way, who then aligned its impact model and partnerships.

2019

United Way launched the *McLennan County Child Well-being Plan* to begin engaging the community in shared decision-making.

2020

McLennan County advisory committees are formed. Research and community listening with parents and stakeholders is conducted.

2021

This report is released to the community; the *Child Well-being Movement* continues.

WHAT IS CHILD WELL-BEING?

Before getting too far, we should take a moment to ensure there is a shared understanding of what we mean by child well-being. Well-being is generally considered a positive outcome. It refers to the quality of a person's life, with higher levels of well-being indicating the opportunity and ability to pursue one's personal aspirations.² By extension, child well-being is a lens through which we talk about the overall health, wellness, and preparedness of our children, and ultimately, our community. Knowing that a child's potential to succeed as an adult begins very early on in these formative years, we set out to understand if systems and structures in our community exist to adequately support our youngest residents ages 0 to 5, and their families during this critical period of life.

Interestingly, there is not a single, agreed upon definition or measurement of child well-being, but there is agreement that child well-being is a holistic term and must be viewed as multidimensional. That is, inclusive of things like physical health, development, and safety; psychological and emotional development and well-being; social development and behavior; and cognitive development linked to educational readiness.³ Broader conversations about child well-being often encompass additional factors, such as family support systems, and larger community measures of economic well-being, such as affordable housing and employment opportunities for parents.⁴

“**Child well-being is the result of an overall healthy community that has access to resources...a parent has a job that's consistent that pays a living wage, has access to high-quality health care and is able to access high quality childcare, outcomes for the children in the household tend to be better.** - *McLennan County service provider*

We heard very similar input from McLennan County residents during our outreach this past year. As a result, we continue to refer to child well-being as a conceptual and holistic term that includes things like early childhood education, childhood development, childcare, and school preparedness, but is also inclusive of other environmental factors, in families and communities.

“**(I want a community) where all children would be valued and that they would have all the tools necessary to succeed in this life and that they would have a support system—family and community—to help them reach their goals.** - *McLennan County community member*

We've always known that this work must center children as future leaders of this community. Yet, we must also focus on a collective approach to ensuring our county is one that provides supportive, equitable environments that enable children, their families, and our community as a whole to succeed for generations to come.

In fact, as far back as the initial 2009 report, there has been an understanding that this topic was complex and multifaceted: “Before the first day in a formal learning environment, thousands of events have helped to shape the young child. Pregnancy and birth, infancy, the availability of health care services, quality childcare, the stability of the family and conditions in the community can have a pronounced influence upon a young child's growth, development and learning.”

It stands to reason that if we truly want to improve overall child well-being we must simultaneously address multiple, interrelated community aspects. We must remember that when the children are well, families and communities are well. Similarly, when families and communities are doing well, children are likely to be doing well. Because of this, solutions should be two-generational when possible (i.e., focusing on the well-being of children and their caregivers) and also take into account the environments and communities where children live.⁵

Efforts designed to improve child well-being that focus only on children will likely be less successful than those that include families and communities. Our work has acknowledged this reality and also stayed true to the multidimensional framework (children, families, communities) first introduced in the 2009 report.

child well-being *[child wel- bē-īŋ]*

1 multiple settings and environments in which children live, learn, work, and play—not merely their physical, social, and cognitive development 2 surroundings in a community have a profound impact on a child and their family’s ability to thrive

(see also: health, wellness, preparedness of child, family, and community)



Why Does Child Well-being Matter?

We all share a belief that every child in McLennan County has the potential to be successful in school and life when they are provided with equitable access to resources, supports, and opportunities. All of us in McLennan County—business leaders, faith leaders, nonprofits, community-based organizations, philanthropists, city and local government—have a shared responsibility to ensure that our systems, policies, and community investments are designed to provide every child and family, regardless of their race or the place they live, with the foundation to achieve their full potential. When every child is able to pursue and realize their aspirations, our entire community is better for it.

While potential may be evenly distributed in our community, opportunity is not. When we fail to invest in and protect our children, it significantly halts a path to prosperity in McLennan County. Too often, the environments in our communities create challenging spaces and produce stressors that undermine well-being, especially for children and families of color. A failure to address these conditions has resulted in too many children in McLennan County growing up in under-resourced families and communities and not getting off to the start in life that they deserve.

Child well-being is related to the overall quality of life of children, families, and communities. We know that successful efforts to lift up children in the early years of their life can lead to better health outcomes, better educational outcomes, higher graduation rates, and higher levels of income later in life.⁶

When children are provided health supports and early learning opportunities from birth, the return on investment is higher than just investing in preschool alone.⁷



Investing in equitable access to high-quality childcare has a two-generation impact. Children begin their learning journey and parents are able to participate in the workforce and grow their income.⁸



Similarly, when their children are well, families are more likely to report positive physical and mental health, strong family and social relationships, family-supporting jobs and quality housing, and access to services and resources.^{9,10}



The relationship between child, family, and community well-being isn't just multi-dimensional; it's multidirectional. We have an opportunity to build equitable communities that provide the necessary environments and foundational supports for families and children to reach their full potential—an opportunity to fundamentally change the life trajectory of McLennan County children. Responding to our community's needs means coming together to invest in children and families now.



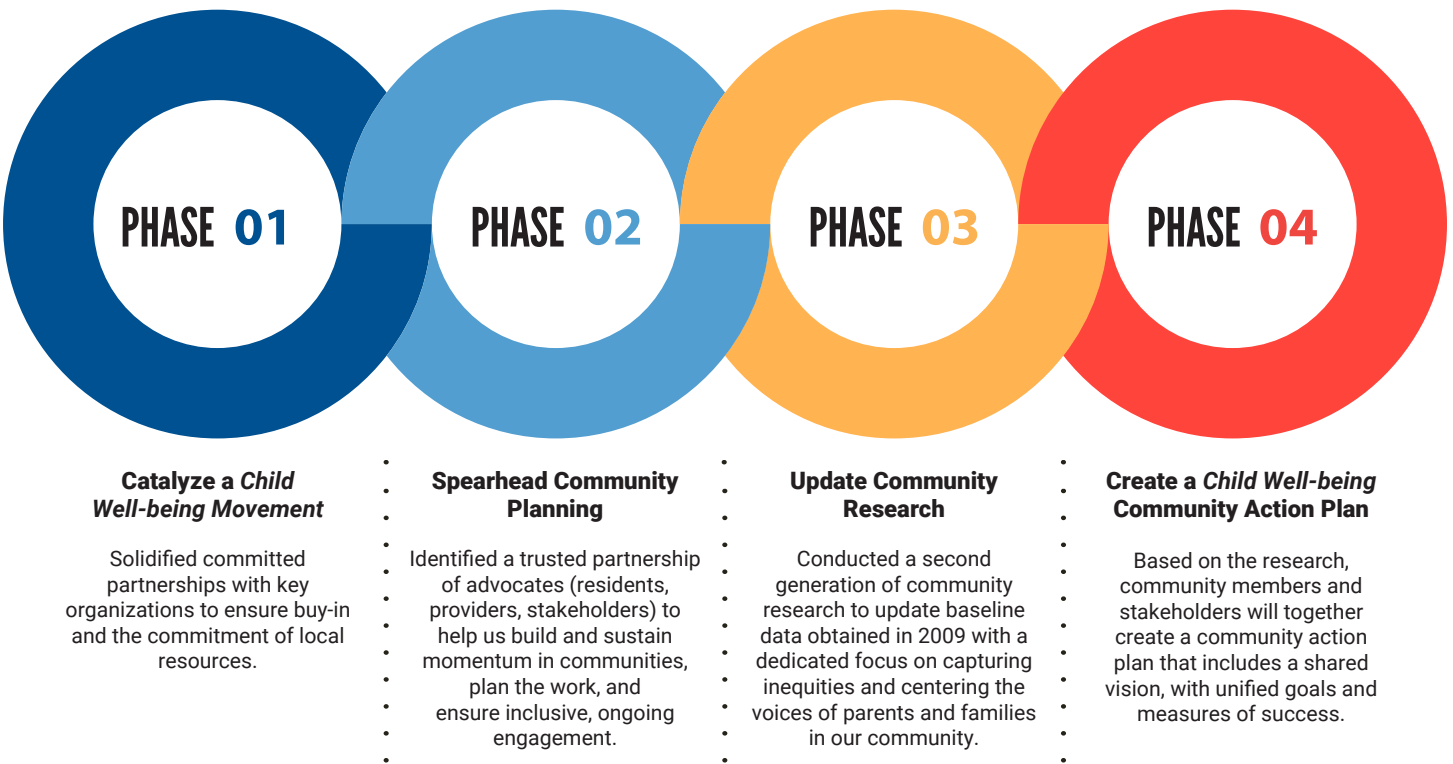
CREATING A MOVEMENT

To move the needle on child well-being, we realized early on how important it was to understand the current needs in our community as well as the community’s readiness to respond to those needs. The process of building a strong network of community partners began in 2019 with the specific goal of identifying child well-being champions from communities and sectors across McLennan County who could help mobilize others, develop innovative strategies, and inform wise investments of resources.

In late 2019, conversations began between United Way and 1000 Feathers, a consulting firm based in Columbia, South Carolina. Those discussions focused on developing a comprehensive strategy to emphasize a key element that had not been a direct focus in previous iterations of this work in the community; deep and meaningful engagement of those in our community most impacted by the decisions we make—in this case, children, parents,

and families. The 1000 Feathers team helped us focus on this meaningful engagement which allowed us to center the voices of parents and families in this effort.

Our community has spoken and their voices are reflected in this report along with those of providers and other community stakeholders. Together, we can co-create a future for children in McLennan County that we can all be proud of. Throughout these pages, we must remember what is being presented is not just a report; it is a call to action. During this research, we operated from a mindset that community assessments are not merely an exercise to gather and review data. When done correctly, assessments can energize members of a community to acknowledge and own its issues and hopefully create meaningful opportunities for everyone to listen, identify solutions, and take action.^{11,12} With all of this in mind, please know that our work isn’t finished; it is only just beginning.



COMPLETE

COMING SOON



WHAT HAS BEEN DONE

Child well-being by any definition is complex. In response, a comprehensive assessment effort that allowed for substantial and meaningful community input was needed. A variety of methods based on community engagement best practices were used on this project, none of which were conducted in a vacuum; each supported the other.

We entered this work believing the community should be directly engaged in conversations about their aspirations and solutions—not just about challenges and shortcomings—and we maintained that commitment throughout. Through significant outreach, community partnerships, and innovative engagement strategies, more than 625 residents of McLennan County had the opportunity to speak directly into this effort.

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ADVISORY
COMMITTEE
MEMBERS

21

STAKEHOLDER
INTERVIEWS

114

COMMUNITY
MEMBERS IN
COMMUNITY
CONVERSATIONS

79

PROVIDERS
IN COMMUNITY
CONVERSATIONS

388

SURVEY
RESPONSES
FROM
PARENTS



REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Building on baseline information from the *2009 Childhood Quality of Life Index*, a thorough review of relevant and obtainable national, regional, state, and local data related to child well-being was conducted. A series of charts, trendlines, and infographics were produced showing the current status of child well-being in the community. Notably, considerable time was also spent updating and replicating the index itself (now referred to as the *Child Well-being Index*). The updated index can be found starting on p. 20.



ADVISORY COMMITTEES

The overall effort was led by two groups of advisors: a **Core Partner Team** made up of community leaders and child well-being advocates, and a **Community Advisory Board** comprised of grassroots community members who represent various sub-communities in McLennan County. Groups were recruited and convened by United Way and were pivotal to the project's success—participating in multiple meetings to ensure that the community's collective voice remained centered throughout the process. Each group played a critical role in identifying individuals and groups who participated in data collection and participated in co-creation events that helped us identify the key themes that emerged.



STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

In-depth interviews with a diverse group of community stakeholders were conducted to gain deeper insight into the existing landscape of child well-being and their thoughts on a path forward. A total of 21 interviews represented a variety of sectors (education, healthcare, finance, government, etc.).



COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Perhaps the most important component of data collection was the hosting of 32 community conversations. The process for conducting peer-to-peer community conversations was informed by The Harwood Institute’s Turning Outward model.¹³ Conversations were held with two groups of people: 1) residents with lived experience (parents and community members) and, 2) organizational representatives from various sectors of the community.

Community Residents

In the midst of a pandemic, the project team did their best to utilize video conferencing, work around busy schedules, and lean on the personal connections of those on the Core Partner Team and Community Advisory Board to reach parents and community members. A total of 21 sessions were conducted with 114 participants. All sessions were facilitated by United Way staff, 1000 Feathers team members, the Core Partner Team, or other community volunteers. Participants were compensated for their time with \$25 gift cards.

Community Providers

Members of the Core Partner Team took the lead hosting, organizing, and facilitating conversations with their peers when possible. As necessary, staff from United Way or 1000 Feathers stepped in to facilitate. Eleven sessions were conducted with 79 participants, including childcare providers, educators, service providers, and business leaders.

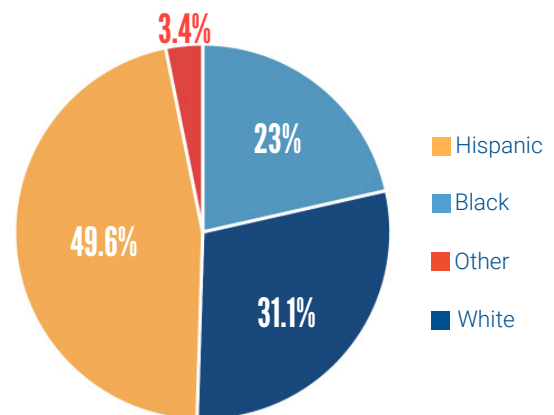


PARENT SURVEY

As it became more obvious that community conversations with parents—who were balancing childcare, employment, home school, and other responsibilities—would be difficult to arrange during the pandemic, intensive effort was made to ensure a direct opportunity for input was available for those who often have no voice in community conversations. An online survey was created and made accessible in both English and Spanish. A diverse network of partners were intentionally recruited to distribute the survey given their ability to reach parents directly, including Waco Family Medicine, Waco ISD and HOPES Parents as Teachers programs, Baylor Scott & White (Nurse Family Partnership), Waco-McLennan County Public Health District, Klaras Children’s Center ECI, American Gateways, Inspiracion, Cen-Tex Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and Mission Waco. All respondents were eligible to receive a \$10 gift card.

388 SURVEY RESPONSES

- 81% identified as parent, 4% grandparent*
- 72% speak primarily English at home*
- 93% female*
- 46% from zip codes: 76704, -05, -06, -07*



READER NOTE: all data referenced in this report originates from one of the data collection methods led by 1000 Feathers described in this section, unless otherwise noted.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

COVID-19 has had an unthinkable impact on our nation, state, and local community. At the time of publishing this report, more than 26,000 cases have been reported in McLennan County alone. The pandemic has disrupted the lives of all people, especially our children and those who care for them.

As work on this project began, we were confronted with the stark reality of the challenges and barriers presented by a global pandemic. Rather than postponing this important work, we leaned directly into those challenges because we recognized that our children and families needed us to be there for them, to listen to their concerns and aspirations, and then act.

The impacts of the pandemic are deep, and in many cases, highlight failures in systems and communities that were present long before COVID-19.¹⁴ Child poverty rates, food insecurity, unemployment, and general economic hardship are all on the rise.¹⁵ These inequities related to child, family, and community well-being did not begin because of COVID-19, but they have been brought front-and-center. We are now forced to grapple with these longstanding realities which persist and are exacerbated in our communities of color. **Simply stated, COVID-19 shined a light directly on the challenges and weaknesses of an already stressed social support infrastructure and highlighted disparities across communities that have existed for decades.**

We know that families and children are suffering. We know the pandemic has enlarged already significant structural and societal gaps, reaching across sectors and through families with long-lasting impact. We know COVID-19 disproportionately impacted people of color who in some cases faced higher exposure to the virus and a decreased ability to work from home given some employment types; had a higher likelihood of severe illness given the presence of pre-existing conditions; and, in some cases, had

less access to medical care if they became sick as a result of biases in healthcare systems and policies that have manifested for years.¹⁶

Furthermore, COVID-19 worsened the stability of many families with young children. Parents—oftentimes mothers—have been confronted with the difficult task of simultaneously balancing employment, the education of their children, and childcare. Women have experienced disproportionate job and wage losses compared to men, increased responsibilities of caretaking, and increased demands at home.¹⁷ This female-centric impact and intersection of race and gender only further perpetuates what was already a significant gap in earning potential for women and families of color nationally and here in our community. While we won't know the full impact of this global pandemic for some time, we must use this moment to carefully examine the inequities which exist today that will only widen unless they are directly and explicitly addressed. Throughout this report, you will clearly see the stark differences in experiences throughout our community that were here long before COVID-19.

The only way to make McLennan County one where families can thrive is to name these disparities and address the injustices that created them head-on. This means systems and organizations must engage with residents to understand their actual experiences, work to better understand how decision making is having a direct (or indirect) impact on outcomes, and then act swiftly to enact change.



DIRECT IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PARENTS IN MCLENNAN COUNTY

Information gathered via surveys and interviews conducted during this project.



81%

say the pandemic has impacted their family's finances.



78%

worry their young children are missing opportunities to learn and play.



75%

worry about their ability to meet their family's basic needs.



67%

worry about the effects on their children's mental health; 64% worry about their own mental health.



55%

say the pandemic has impacted their childcare situation.

VOICES FROM MCLENNAN COUNTY:

Families (are) losing jobs... food insecurity...some families are already getting evicted. Things may only get worse.

Moving to virtual school illuminated a lot of problems. School materials were in English when the home language is Spanish. Parents couldn't help.

I think educationally, emotionally, economically our children are right now bearing a big burden of this (pandemic), and I don't see a lot of people are paying attention to it.

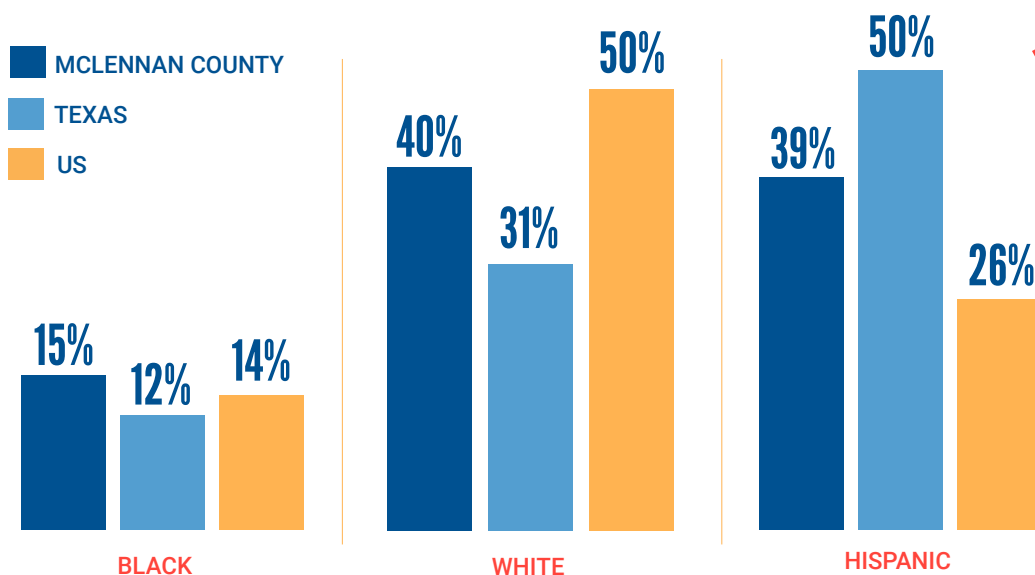
The huge elephant in the room is the impact of COVID on people's ability to work... it really put some families in a bind.

The greatest concern is that the learning gaps have just gotten wider (during COVID). We are watching it widen right in front of us. Those that "have" continue to find a way to have. Those that "have not" have even less.

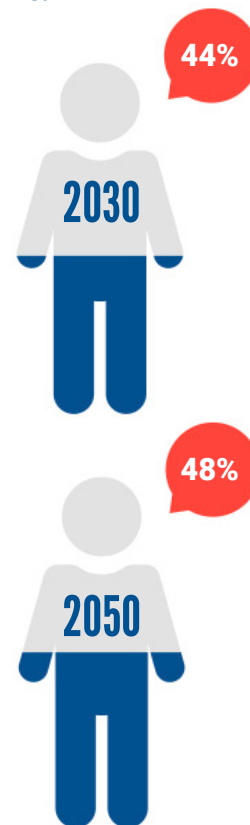
SNAPSHOT OF MCLENNAN COUNTY'S CHILDREN

McLennan County has a population of 251,089 with just over half of the county's population residing in the city of Waco. **More than 21,000 of the county's residents are ages 0 to 5.** The population of young children in the county has remained steady over the last decade but is increasingly more diverse. Over half of the county's children are now non-White with 39% (and growing) identifying as Hispanic and 15% identifying as Black.*

CHILDREN OF COLOR MAKE UP THE MAJORITY OF CHILDREN 0 TO 4 IN MCLENNAN COUNTY.



And, the Hispanic population of young children in McLennan County is growing over time.



29%

OF CHILDREN UNDER 5 LIVE IN POVERTY.

34%

OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN HAVE CHILDREN AGES 0 TO 5 IN THE HOME.

3,216

GRANDPARENTS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR OWN GRANDCHILD.

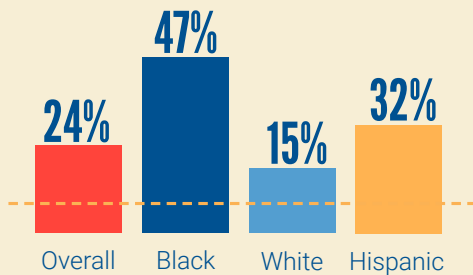
*Note: see references on page 42 for citations.

U.S. CHILD WELL-BEING RANKING

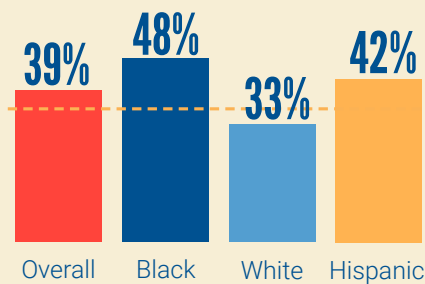


McLennan County lags behind state averages on a number of key indicators related to child well-being. The selected examples below also highlight places where significant racial disparities are present. These disparities in outcomes are not a result of individual behaviors, but the product of persistent systemic barriers, which perpetuate inequities in this country.

Residents utilizing public health care coverage

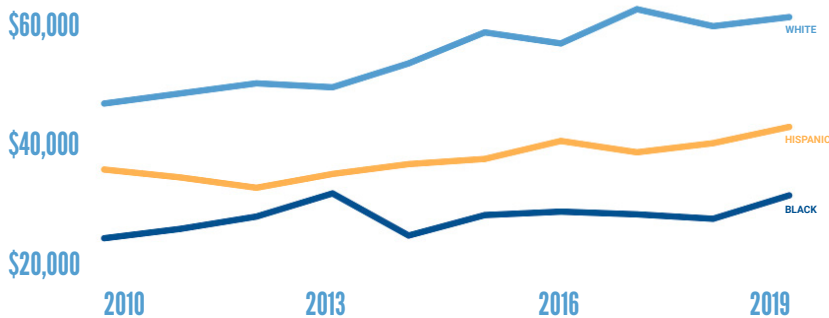


Births with no prenatal care in 1st trimester



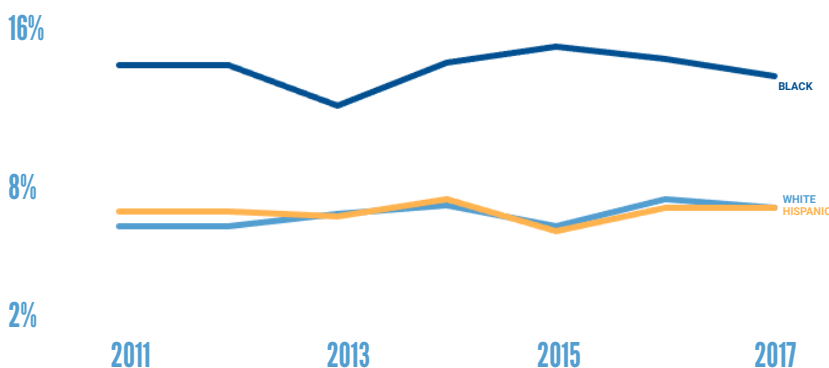
Note: dotted line equals Texas average

Median household income in McLennan County, by race



What progress has been made since 2009? Results are mixed. While some county-level statistics have improved, others have not.

Births that are low birthweight



	2009	2021*
TEEN BIRTH RATE (PER 1,000)	57.8	22.7
UNINSURED CHILDREN UNDER 6	5.3%	4.0%
BIRTHS TO MOTHERS (PAST 12 MONTHS) WITHOUT H.S. DIPLOMA	31.8%	7.6%
CHILDREN IN POVERTY	30.1%	23.7%
REPORTED CASES OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT (PER 1,000)	10.8	17.4
HOUSING INSTABILITY	18.2%	15.9%
FOOD INSECURITY	25.1%	23.6%
HEALTHCARE ACCESSIBILITY	1,552:1	1,340:1

CHILD WELL-BEING INDEX

The 2009 *Childhood Quality of Life Index* revealed significant differences in outcomes and indicators across zip codes in McLennan County. Identifying the areas of our community in greatest need remains important still today given persistent disparities in outcomes over the last decade.

For this version of the index, which we now refer to as the *Child Well-being Index*, variables have been updated from the 2009 methodology to better reflect an evolving understanding of the predictors of child well-being. As we worked to identify an updated list of variables, three key considerations drove our decision making. First, maintaining the ability to conduct a level of comparison to 2009; second, the availability of data at the zip code level; and finally, examples from communities doing similar work around the country. Having an updated list of variables to refer to will allow us to assess our progress moving forward, but not only that; having an agreed upon set of variables also helps us develop a common understanding of the challenges ahead, and hopefully will inspire a comprehensive approach to addressing them.

In total, 14 variables were included in the 2021 *Child Well-being Index*. The methods, calculations, and references for the index can be found on p. 43.

Even with some changes to the variables and scoring from the original index there are remarkable similarities from a decade ago. High scores are still high and low scores are still low.

HIGHEST INDEX SCORE		LOWEST INDEX SCORE	
2009	2021	2009	2021
76633	76655	76707	76704
76712	76643	76711	76707
76655	76638	76704	76705
76643	76624	76708	76701
76630	76712	76705	76706
	76633		76708

Note: shaded zip codes represent a change from '09 to '21.

CHILD

- 1 low birthweight births
- 2 inadequate (late/no) prenatal care
- 3 children 0 to 5 without insurance
- 4 pre-k enrollments

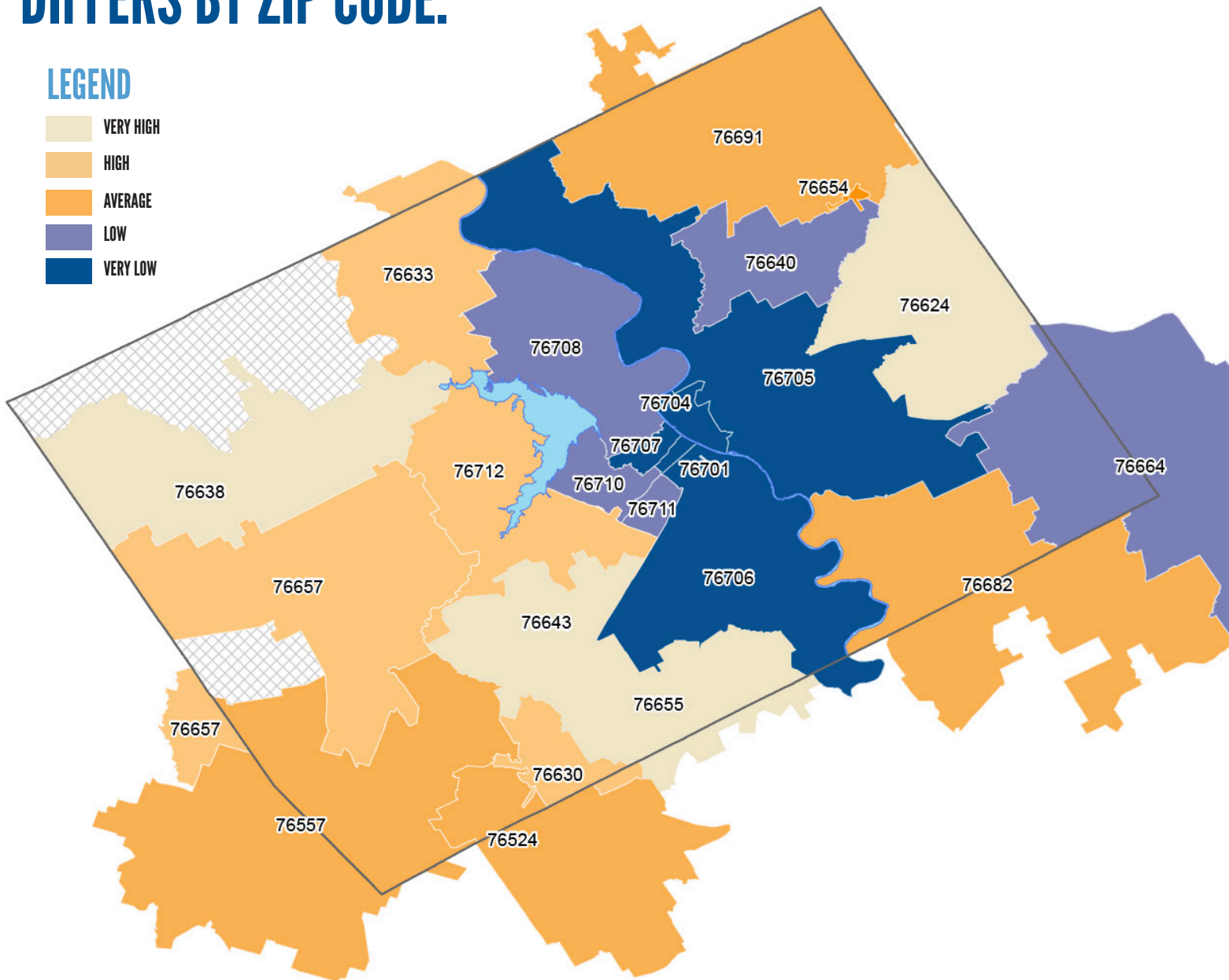
FAMILY

- 5 births to mothers (past 12 months) without H.S. diploma
- 6 median household income
- 7 children in poverty
- 8 childcare availability

COMMUNITY

- 9 adults (over 25) without a H.S. diploma
- 10 unemployment rate
- 11 uninsured rate in community
- 12 food stamp enrollment
- 13 Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed threshold
- 14 excessive housing cost burden

THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN IN MCLENNAN COUNTY DIFFERS BY ZIP CODE.



Nearly half of the zip codes in our county have low or very low child well-being scores, and **those zip codes are home to 70% of children under six in McLennan County.** As a result, more than 14,000 children are living in communities with low or very low child well-being.

Of the 10 zip codes with low or very low child well-being scores, eight of them have populations with more than 35% people of color. We need to repeat a refrain from the authors of the 2009 report, who reminded us that this *Index* has not been created to disparage communities, but rather, quite the opposite. It is designed to show where disparities exist and where under-resourced areas in the county are concentrated. There are still significant structural and societal gaps in these communities that impact our children and families. This is yet another reminder to us that years of policy and investment decisions, systemic racism, and injustice have in large part created this situation in our communities. These inequitable conditions continue to be put in front of us and require us to respond boldly and courageously.

KEY THEMES

In seeking to understand the current condition of child well-being in our county, we, as a movement, believe that it takes more than data trends to answer the original question we asked ourselves, **“Are the children well?”**

An answer begins to emerge when looking at data trends and the updated *Child Well-being Index*, but this isn’t the whole story. Choosing to recognize the community’s voice as one of the most powerful data sources available is the only way to deepen our understanding of the current condition and get the whole story. Our intention during this work was to amplify those voices with quantitative data trends. In other words, to let the community’s experiences drive the conclusions and next steps, not just the data trends.

Admittedly, the volume of data and feedback that we obtained throughout this research process goes far beyond what we have room for in this report. Rather than presenting it all here, we have appropriately summarized findings into a much more digestible format. As a result, information presented in this section has been condensed into Seven Key Themes, each of which emerged from a careful data collection and analysis process—nearly seven months of interviews, community conversations, and surveys.

While each theme stands on its own, the overall story is supported by the community context and is grounded in the lived experiences of McLennan County residents. We, as a community, would be wise to consider and understand the collective story being told. In other words, the themes go together, support each other, and will lead to greater impact when invested in simultaneously. Throughout this process, we also kept coming back to **three important truths, which must be mentioned before any presentation of the Seven Key Themes.**



Understanding these themes is only the first step. This process required all of us to listen intently and reflect deeply on what was being said by members of our community—even when it challenged some of our basic assumptions. Listening is a key step, but only the first step. From here, we must be even more intentional about providing genuine and ongoing opportunities for community members to co-create solutions and action steps.



Increased awareness of inequities and disparities is needed. We must continue to highlight persistent disparities in our community through the use of data. Trends presented in this report and otherwise are a constant reminder that there are historical and systemic issues we need to address that have prevented generations of children and families of color living in our county from thriving.



Keep children and their families top-of-mind throughout ongoing discussions of child well-being. When children and families do well, it is highly likely that our entire community will also do well.



THE CHILD

A McLennan County that provides all of its children with access to the supports they need early in life to set them up for success.

THE FAMILY

A McLennan County that engages, supports, and lifts up all of our families by providing equitable opportunities.

THE COMMUNITY

A McLennan County that acknowledges our systemic failings and is willing to begin taking corrective action.

1

EMBRACE AN APPROACH THAT VALUES THE WHOLE CHILD. Child well-being is a multi-dimensional concept that has no single definition. We must approach the issue in a two-generational way, inclusive of the whole child and their family, and also the variety of community and environmental factors that can lead to positive experiences in a child's life. Addressing ALL of these aspects that contribute to the well-being of children and their families is necessary; no single approach or program will set them up for success.

2

ENSURE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY CHILDCARE AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES. As part of our community's comprehensive approach to child well-being, we must include access to high-quality childcare for area families. We heard about a range of issues including equitable access; hours of operation and affordability; the presence of quality learning opportunities and trained staff; cleanliness and safety. All of these factors must be included in our definition of high-quality childcare. Our charge is to ensure county-wide access to this level of quality for all of our children, especially children from historically underserved communities.

3

MEET THE BASIC NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES. Everyone we spoke to emphasized a desire to ensure that the basic needs of all families and children in the community are being met. COVID-19 has shattered an already fragile foundation for families that can only be rebuilt by ensuring access to a livable wage, housing affordability, health care, and food security.

4

INCREASE ACCESS TO RESOURCES. Becoming a well-resourced community requires us to think deeply about equitable access to services and resources. In this context, access means more than getting to a physical location; it also means making it easier for residents to learn about, enroll in and engage with available resources and services, while also ensuring that no one is being left out, especially non-English speakers. This will require better coordination within and across sectors and a better understanding of both the needs and barriers that exist, through frequent engagement with community residents.

5

ADDRESS THE RACIAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIVIDE. Differences abound depending on where you live in McLennan County. In our conversations, we found this to be a well-documented and openly discussed fact. The racial and socio-economic inequalities that exist in our communities are systemic and rooted in our county's history and will not disappear without a commitment from all of us to address them head on.

6

CREATE MORE CONNECTEDNESS. Connectedness showed up in a variety of different ways and meant different things to different people. Families shared a number of ways that they could be better connected to each other and to the community in order to support their family's ability to succeed. Overall, parents want to live in a community that offers greater connection to a network of social supports and is conducive to their family's safety and well-being.

7

TAKE ACTION. McLennan County is known by many for its collaborative spirit and for being a county whose residents embody a willingness to work together to take on the tough issues. However, it's important that we don't stop there. Working together to take on issues like child well-being requires more than meetings, more than community listening sessions, and yes, more than reports. No matter title, position, or location, people agree that it's time for our community to move past the "let's talk about it" phase and get started on the difficult work ahead of making impactful change for children and families.

1 EMBRACE AN APPROACH THAT VALUES THE WHOLE CHILD.

Child well-being is a multi-dimensional concept that has no single definition. We must approach the issue in a two-generational way, inclusive of the whole child and their family, and also the variety of community and environmental factors that can lead to positive experiences in a child's life. **Addressing ALL of these aspects that contribute to the well-being of children and their families is necessary; no single approach or program will set them up for success.**



When I hear the term child well-being, I think it encompasses the child holistically. So that would include making sure they're well, physically, emotionally, mentally ready for school, that they have access to the resources that they need. So, it's more of a holistic approach to a child's well-being than just one individual area. *- McLennan County community leader*

It takes a village. You can't have a child who is doing well without looking at the entire community. One is supported by the other. *- McLennan County service provider*

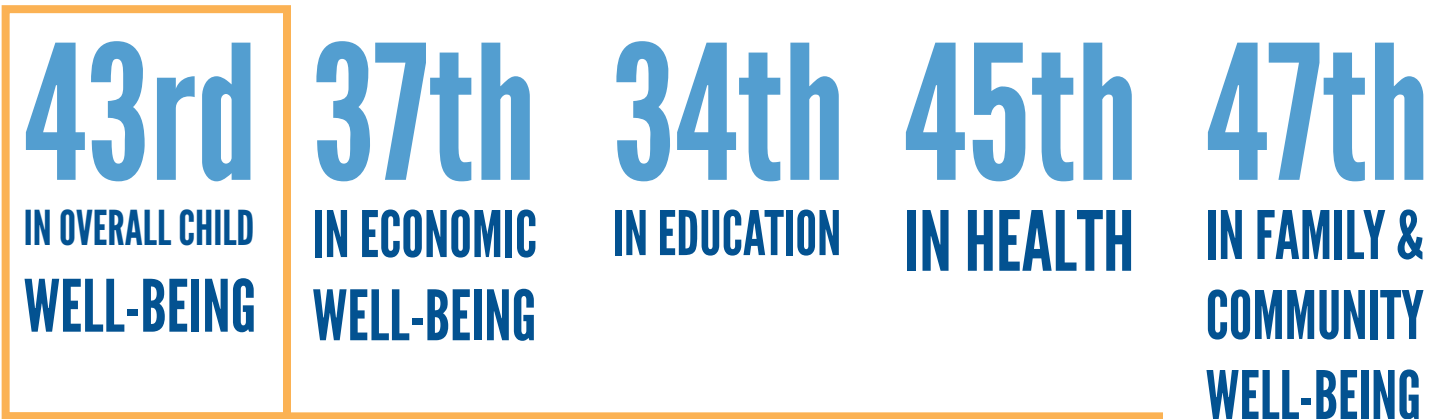


When asked in our survey, “What most impacts you, your child, and your family's overall well-being?” the answers from McLennan County parents highlighted the need for a whole child approach. Parents certainly understand how complex their family's needs are, and it is essential to listen to them. Some of the important topics they mentioned (i.e. childcare, access to parks) are things on which we can take immediate action. Others, like employment opportunities and affordable housing, require a more significant and long-term involvement from the nonprofit, for-profit, and government sectors. Finally, seeing “having a social support network” emerge as the most important factor impacting family well-being (see Theme #6) may challenge some of our assumptions, but it should push us to continually revisit the importance of regularly connecting with parents in order to better understand what matters are of greatest priority to them.

WHAT IMPACTS YOUR FAMILY'S WELL-BEING: TOP 5 RESPONSES



But, is everything OK? Are the children well? Community supports (or lack thereof) strongly impact families; and family stability is directly correlated with a child’s ability to be well. Interestingly, what local parents have communicated regarding their family's greatest needs is also reflective of well-being indicators that need attention at the state level. According to KIDS COUNT¹⁸, when compared to other states, Texas as a whole ranks towards the bottom on a number of key areas. Child well-being in McLennan County (and Texas) will not get better without a direct focus on strengthening systems and advocating for local and state policy changes in order to better support children and their families.



VOICES OF MCLENNAN COUNTY PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

“I consider (child well-being) safety; that they have a safe place that they’re living or staying like for childcare...their nutrition, their health, as well as just their growing development.”

“This is about so much more than childcare. What are the things that need to surround the child in order for them to be successful?”

“Child well-being (must) include family well-being. It’s hard because things are connected and we can’t do everything for everybody, but it is really important to recognize that child well-being is connected to family well-being.”

“It has to do with school, home life, social-emotional well-being...”

“... every kid in our community (needs) somebody on their side advocating for them... kids are particularly vulnerable in any community...”

2

ENSURE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY CHILD-CARE AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES.

As part of our community's comprehensive approach to child well-being, we must include access to high-quality childcare for area families. We heard about a range of issues including equitable access; hours of operation and affordability; the presence of quality learning opportunities and trained staff; cleanliness and safety. All of these factors must be included in our definition of high-quality childcare. **Our charge is to ensure county-wide access to this level of quality for all of our children, especially children from historically underserved communities.**

In surveys and community conversations, parents shared that it is often difficult to decide whether or not to use out-of-home care. In some cases, parents lack trust in the quality of care that is available at childcare centers, but in other cases, parents simply cannot afford to place their child in higher priced centers that do provide quality care. In addition, families who work outside of traditional hours (8 a.m. to 5 p.m.) find a childcare shortage. When faced with these challenges, some parents make the difficult decision to stay at home. This adds stresses to the household including reducing opportunities for children to engage in high-quality learning and social environments but also decreases the number of people in the home who can enter the workforce, generate an income, and provide stable health care for their family.



Helping the community understand that if you really want to support children, and child well-being, where to start is in the childcare facilities where our babies are...not waiting until kindergarten.

- McLennan County childcare provider

And just it's hard when you're looking, 'cause I work just part-time...and then you think okay, well, let's look at daycares, and then you read the reviews and you're like, 'these are horrific; I would never send my kid there.'

- McLennan County parent



WHAT IS IMPORTANT WHEN THINKING ABOUT CHILDCARE?

THE MOST IMPORTANT

- Provides a clean and safe environment.
- Allows my children to learn important skills.

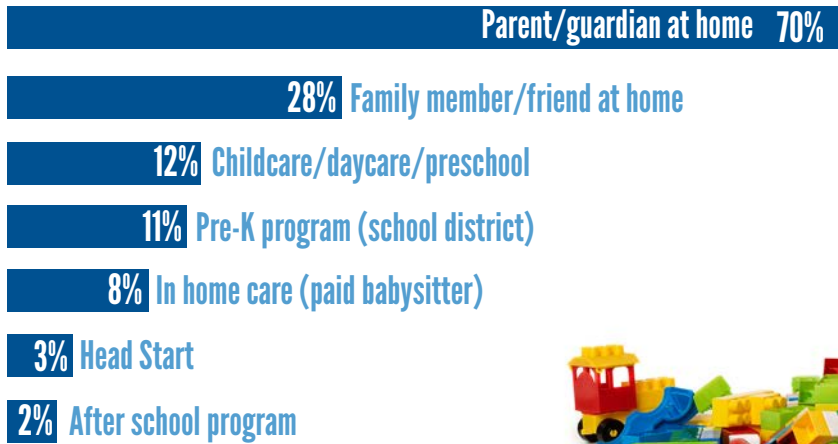
STILL VERY IMPORTANT

- Offers convenient hours that meet my family's needs.
- Is affordable for me.
- Has licensed/highly trained staff.

NOT QUITE AS IMPORTANT

- Is in a convenient location near my home.
- Is in a convenient location near my job.

TYPES OF CHILDCARE CURRENTLY USED IN MCLENNAN COUNTY



Responses may not total 100% given ability to choose more than one option. Data captured during COVID-19 pandemic.

Nationally, less than 40% of infants and toddlers are cared for exclusively by a parent.¹⁹ But, among McLennan County parents who took our survey, this number was much higher. While various concerns may be weighed as a family determines whether or not they will keep their child at home, the concern for availability of high-quality care should not have to be a primary factor in their decision making. We must ensure families who wish to have access to quality out-of-home care are able to obtain it. What if we started thinking about this issue like we think about parks or sanitation or libraries or schools: as a public good? When something is seen as a public good we recognize it benefits everyone and access isn't limited by place, race, or income.²⁰ Because of the many opportunities quality childcare affords a family (i.e., sufficient early learning opportunities, entry into the workforce, access to income and reliable health care) this change in mindset could put us on the path to decreasing inequities in education, health, and income in our communities.

42% OF PARENTS WERE CHALLENGED BY HAVING TO BE PUT ON A WAITING LIST FOR CHILDCARE.

49% OF PARENTS SAY "FINDING OUT WHAT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS FOR CHILDCARE WERE AVAILABLE TO ME WAS A CHALLENGE."



Our college students are having to make some hard decisions about whether to buy textbooks and whether they can afford to pay for childcare. We see people drop out of college because they simply can't juggle.

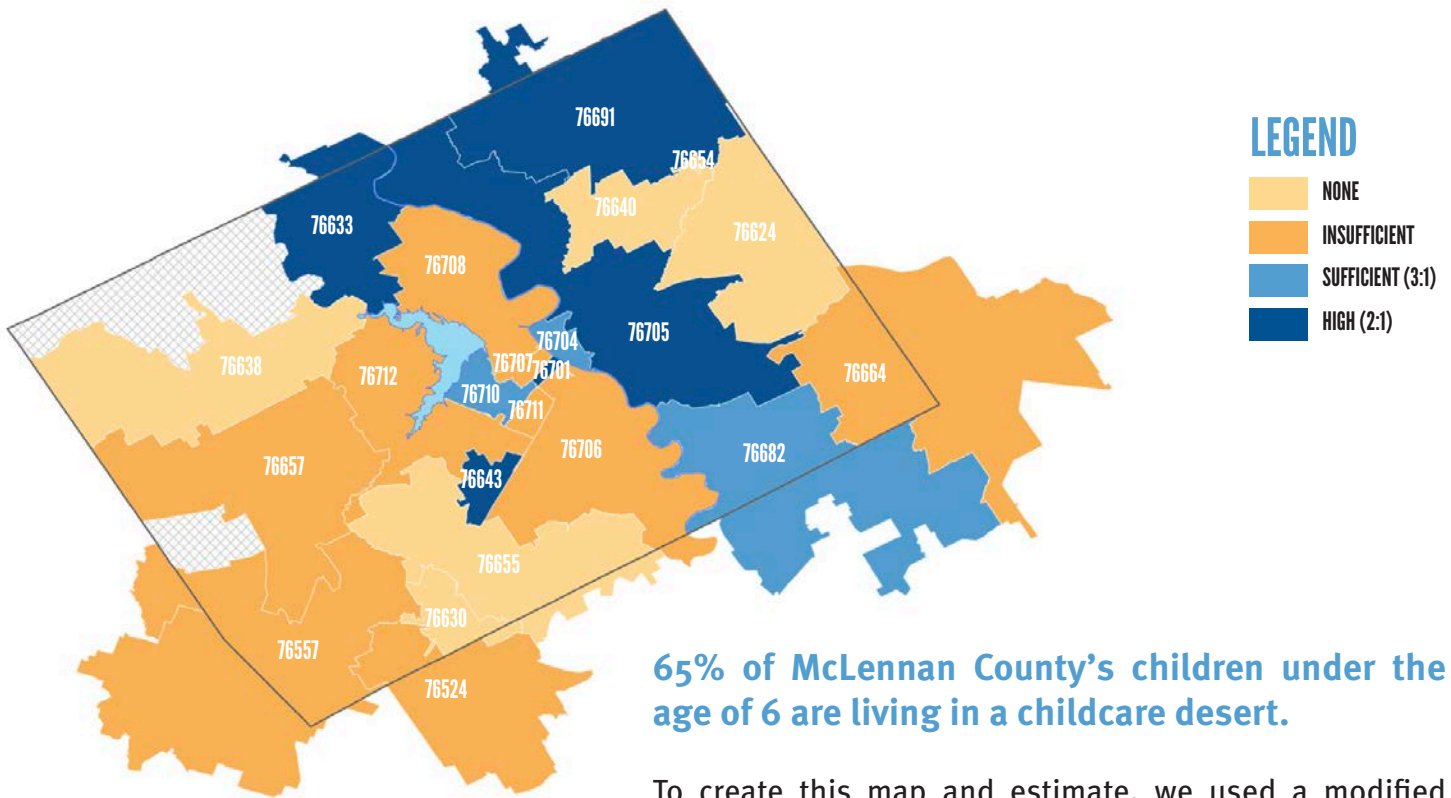
- McLennan County educator

There are resources available, but they're not sufficiently funded or staffed, which creates disparities between families who can afford to pay higher tuition (for the) highest quality childcare centers...and families who can't.

- McLennan County parent



CHILDCARE AVAILABILITY IN MCLENNAN COUNTY



65% of McLennan County's children under the age of 6 are living in a childcare desert.

To create this map and estimate, we used a modified calculation to examine the number of children living in a childcare desert (yellow shading).²¹ In comparing this map to the CWB Index map, it can be noted that high or sufficient availability of licensed childcare in any given zip code doesn't always correlate to higher child well-being scores. This should propel us to begin thinking more comprehensively about childcare access, realizing that it's not just about the quantity of centers in an area, or simply having a seat, but about strengthening the quality of care and educational opportunities available in that area.

LICENSED SEATS PER 1,000 CHILDREN UNDER 6²²

76707	48
76524	68
76557	84
76711	149
76664	183
76708	205
76712	239
76706	273
76657	277
76710	365
76682	366
76704	457
76705	504
76633	600
76691	774
76643	836

VOICES OF MCLENNAN COUNTY PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

"...not enough quality childcare slots... sometimes you almost have to go where the parents are, and you make that facility better."

"They (daycares) start at 7 and they close at 5... I admire all those moms that work and make that work because I don't know how they do it."

"You have like, you know, a handful of really good daycares that are outrageously expensive but are completely limited on the number of students that they can take or kids that they take."

3

MEET THE BASIC NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

Everyone we spoke to emphasized a desire to ensure that the basic needs of all families and children in the community are being met. COVID-19 has shattered an already fragile foundation for families that can only be rebuilt by **ensuring access to a livable wage, housing affordability, health care, and food security.**



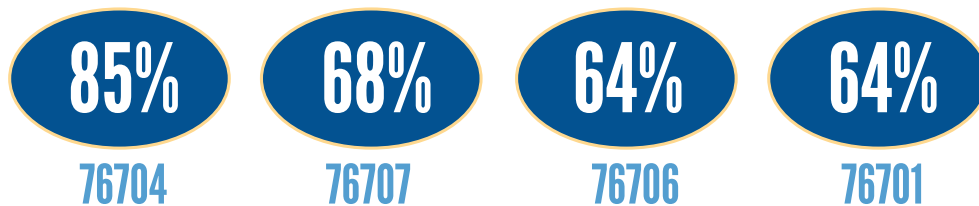
Ensuring we live in a community where all basic needs are met. Whether that's food, that's shelter, whether that's medical services, whether that's mental health services.

- McLennan County parent

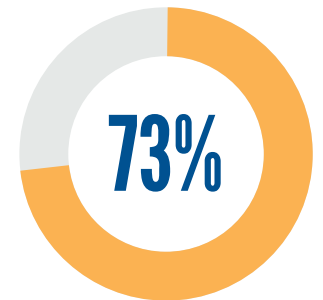


46% OF OUR FAMILIES ARE MAKING LESS THAN THE BASIC COST OF LIVING IN MCLENNAN COUNTY.²³

In four zip codes, that number is greater than 60%.



AND THAT'S BEFORE COVID.



5 in 10 LOST WAGES

Started working fewer hours or took unpaid leave.



2 in 10 LOST JOB

Or quit their job altogether.

of survey respondents say their employment situation was impacted in some way due to childcare responsibilities during COVID.

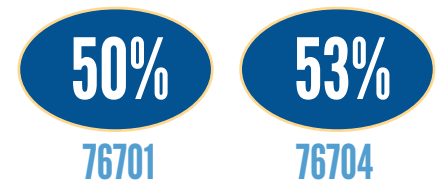
When a family's basic needs are not met, their overall well-being suffers. When parents don't have childcare, they are unable to work. When they're unable to work, they're unable to generate an income and lack access to health insurance. Without adequate income, even basic expenses for food and shelter become part of a difficult series of choices being made every day.

VOICES OF MCLENNAN COUNTY COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

"Housing market is going up and jobs are paying the same...In this town, poverty affects so much, whether that be crime or mental health... so when you have people who are going through things financially, people can't grow."

"I want more time with my kids but can't because I'm one paycheck away from being on the street."

**35% OF WACOANS
HAVE A HIGH HOUSING
COST BURDEN.²⁴**



**FOOD INSECURITY
AFFECTS 24%
OF CHILDREN
(UNDER 18) IN
MCLENNAN COUNTY¹⁸**

VOICES OF MCLENNAN COUNTY COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

"The struggle is that parents/mothers can put in all this work— get their education, get a job, go to work— and still be barely above the poverty line."

"There's a food desert...especially in certain parts of town. I know people struggle to get nutritional meals, especially for their children."

"When you're hungry, you don't know where your next meal is going to come from, or even if you have a place to lay your head, you aren't thinking about how good your future can be, you just want to make it to the next day."

CHECKUPS OVER LAST 12 MONTHS



Good news...

Over 80% of children have had a well visit or checkup.

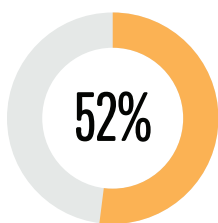


Not so good news...

44% of parents have not had a well visit or checkup.



WHAT INTERFERES WITH YOUR HEALTH GOALS?



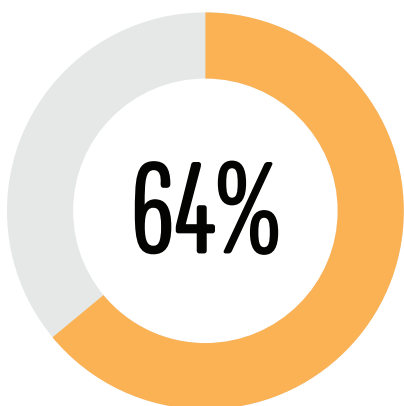
Say lack of health insurance.

- 33% Black
- 49% White
- 60% Hispanic

“If I get sick, I just stay home and take over the counter meds.”

-McLennan County parent

We have to begin seeing access to health care for both parents and children as a basic need. For decades, area community assessments have continued to show wide disparities exist in health outcomes across racial and ethnic groups for families in the county—that has not yet changed. However, during our community conversations, the issue of health care was top of mind for many people, but they did not merely speak about their ability to visit a doctor, but about a lack of available mental health services for both children and adults. While a wide range of racial/ethnic groups spoke about their inability to access mental health services for their families, an additional barrier was mentioned, lack of mental health services provided in a language other than English. More specifically, services need to be more accessible to Spanish-speaking families.



of parents in McLennan County worry about their own mental health during COVID-19.



I think a lot of times with children we wait too long to focus on their mental health...Well-being is just overall mental, physical, emotional; it just all goes hand-in-hand.

- McLennan County community member

My doctor referred me to counseling but there was no one that could see me that spoke Spanish.

- McLennan County community member

There are not many professionals that are bilingual and culturally competent. And in order to work with these families, you need to have both.

- McLennan County service provider



4

INCREASE ACCESS TO RESOURCES.

Becoming a well-resourced community requires us to think deeply about equitable access to services and resources. In this context, access means more than getting to a physical location; it also means making it easier for residents to learn about, enroll in and engage with available resources and services, while also ensuring that no one is being left out, especially non-English speakers. This will require better coordination within and across sectors and a better understanding of both the needs and barriers that exist, through frequent engagement with community residents.

Increasing access doesn't always mean increasing the number of resources available, either. Many of the parents we spoke to expressed a need to know about more family activities and resources that are both affordable and easy to participate in. We heard about a variety of needs that families have, but due to things such as cost, restrictive enrollment criteria and the burden of paperwork, the resources and services that could most benefit them are inaccessible. Increasing access will require an intentional effort to go deeper into community to truly understand parents' and families' needs, understand where parents go to consume information, and take inventory of what communities resources are not getting to.



When you don't have access to the resources, everything else suffers in that kid's life. So anything that we can do to tackle those problems of poverty, employment, good jobs, all of that kind of stuff has a ripple effect for the kids.

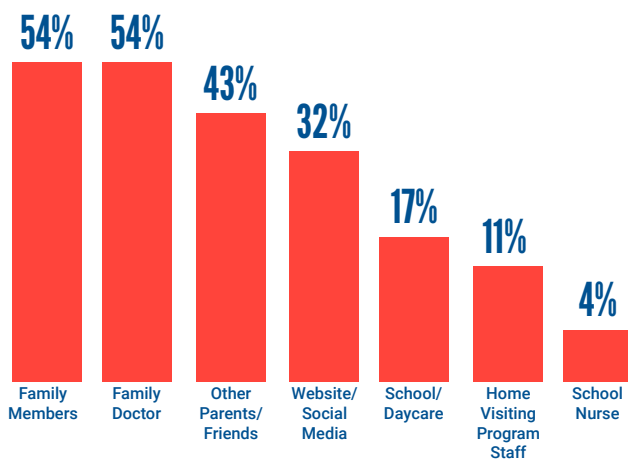
- McLennan County parent

(I want) a community that thinks about its entire citizenry. That means there are resources available... a community that is thinking ahead and giving sincere thought to what the community's potential and immediate needs are.

- McLennan County parent



WHO DO YOU TURN TO FOR INFORMATION ON HOW BEST TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR CHILD?



VOICES OF MCLENNAN COUNTY PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

“... sometimes we make it where people have to jump through so many hoops to get to it. Why aren't we making it a little bit simpler for people to get the resources that they need?”

“I'm a single mom. I'm in the situation where I make barely too much to qualify for certain programs, but I don't make enough to pay the bills.”

“We need more stuff for our kids to do. I think it's really important for their social skills to be developed...if they don't have social skills, they are going to have a really hard time.”

“Get the resources out to the people!”

A group we continued to hear about that is not receiving adequate access to resources is the Spanish-speaking community. We need to understand that we will never truly have equitable access to resources unless we work together to overcome language and cultural barriers in place for non-native English speakers in our community. It's important to point out here that another layer to access is the ability to consume and engage with resources and services, of which language is a critical component. Both parents and the providers we spoke with who serve predominantly Latinx populations were clear that there are not currently enough resources and services available in Spanish and that members of the Spanish-speaking community are not getting their families' needs met as a result.



18%
**OF MCLENNAN
COUNTY RESIDENTS
SPEAK A
LANGUAGE OTHER
THAN ENGLISH IN
THE HOME.**

“We run into (Spanish speaking parents) not always having information available, especially from schools, in their language. So we have a lot of parents on Google trying to translate information so that they can better serve their own children.”

“If (Spanish speakers) need some services they prefer not to go because (of the language barrier).”

“Obviously even in the community, there is not always that bilingual aspect when it comes to resources and information.”

5

ADDRESS THE RACIAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIVIDE.

Differences abound depending on where you live in McLennan County. In our conversations, we found this to be a well-documented and openly discussed fact. The racial and socio-economic inequalities that exist in our communities are systemic and rooted in our county's history and will not disappear without a **commitment from all of us to address them head on.**

Our community has begun work to increase our collective knowledge and understanding of the ways in which inequities perpetuate many of our most persistent, poor societal outcomes. We are beginning to recognize that failing to address the systemic issues plaguing our communities lessens our ability to achieve population-level results and further perpetuates disparities in health, education, and financial stability. Without engaging with and centering the communities most burdened and impacted by our decisions, efforts to improve any issue are likely to be unsuccessful.

VOICES OF MCLENNAN COUNTY PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

“It’s that disparity... and all the policies to this point have just been exacerbating the inequalities that are already there.”



I want to be in a kind of community that’s diverse and inclusive and welcoming. A community that’s equitable; where no matter your race, no matter your gender, no matter your zip code, you’re able to achieve certain outcomes. You’re able to thrive.

- McLennan County community member

We have classism in Waco. If you come from a different zip code or have a different look... communities look different and schools are performing at different levels because money and support aren’t getting to those schools.

- McLennan County community member

I know when I walk in for a job my Spanish surname and brown skin are already putting me at the end of the line. You feel it when you walk in, you can see the distrust on their faces.

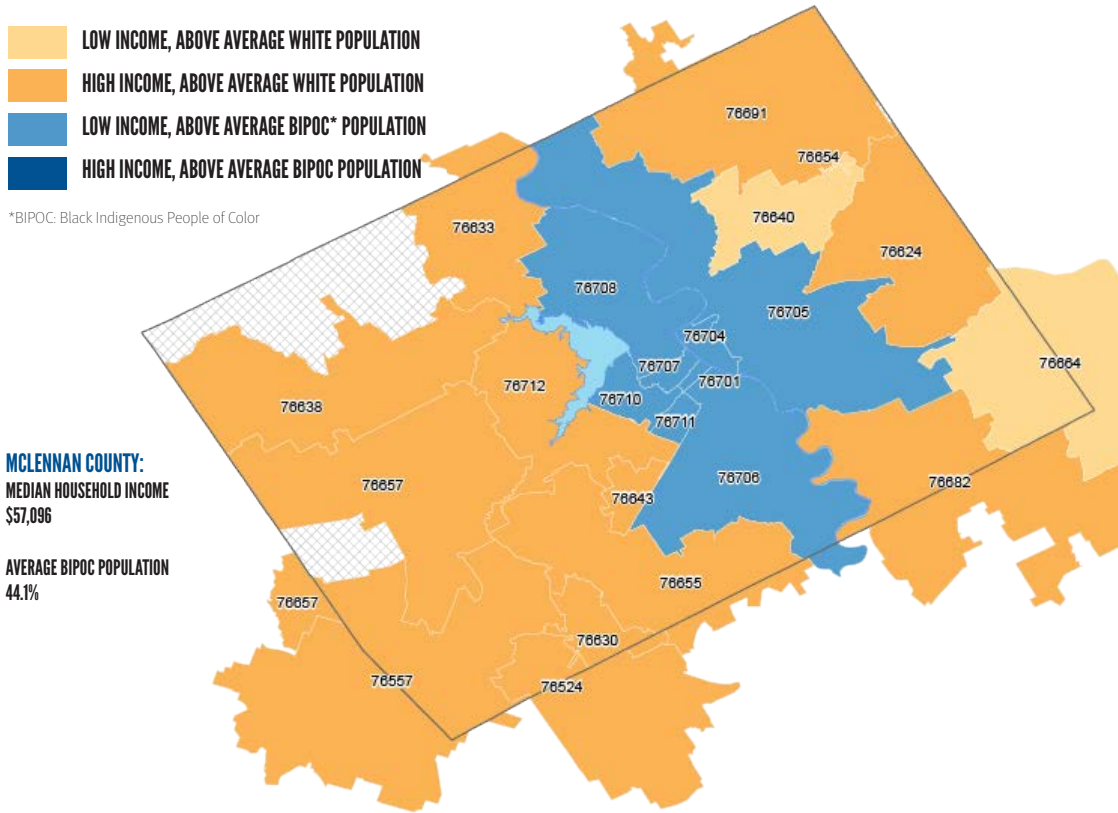
- McLennan County parent



“Oftentimes, we say we need to work on people this way or that way. In reality, it’s not always the people, it’s the system, the institution that needs to improve.”

In short, our community must work harder to change the systems, not the people. We must recognize that inequities across race, ethnicity, and zip code in our communities are the result of decades of underinvestment, systemic racism, and discriminatory policy decisions. The result—as shown via the *Child Well-being Index* (p. 21)—is entire zip codes in McLennan County living in poverty and being exposed to environmental conditions that negatively impact child and family well-being. Resources and opportunity are not evenly distributed in our county and those living in under-resourced communities are able to describe the divide with a piercing familiarity. **There is a strong intersection between race and place in McLennan County.**

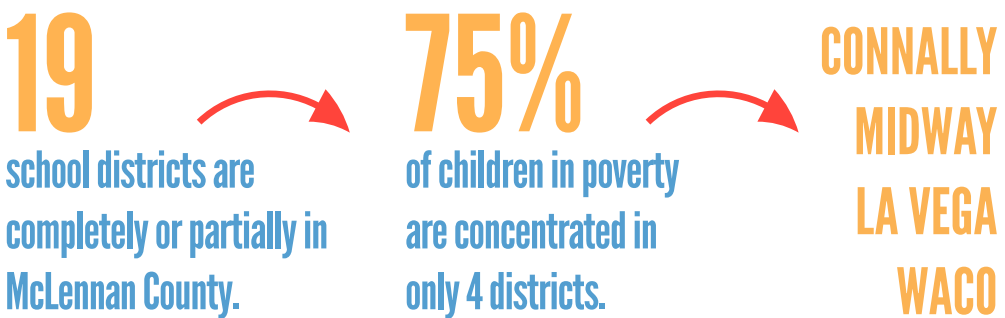
INTERSECTION OF RACE, PLACE, AND WEALTH²⁶



“I think we’re still kind of segregated by economy... but then kind of segregated by groups, whether that’s ethnic lines, racial lines, but for sure, it’s socioeconomic.”

“The divided neighborhoods, the divided schools, means that the resources are divided... it unlocks whole layers of equity issues that have always been there but are certainly visible more now.”

INTERSECTION OF PLACE AND POVERTY²⁷



This combination of school districts may be surprising to some but represents a shifting demographic in McLennan County. Like other areas of the country, our area is experiencing a "suburbanization of poverty."

6

CREATE MORE CONNECTEDNESS.

Connectedness showed up in a variety of different ways and meant different things to different people. Families shared a number of ways that they could be better connected to each other and to the community in order to support their family's ability to succeed. Overall, parents want to live in a community that offers greater connection to a network of social supports and is conducive to their family's safety and well-being.

Social capital refers to the available supports and resources in a community that can greatly benefit its residents, and the health of the community overall. The Social Capital Project²⁸ developed rankings which include several indicators related to family stability, community cohesion, and social organization. Our low county ranking combined with insights from area families tells us that there is still room for improvement in these areas.

We heard that parenting can be overwhelming, and having opportunities for parents to support each other would be helpful. Remember that parents rated "having a social support network" as the #1 aspect that most impacts their family's well-being. Parents recognize that their own social and mental health directly impacts their family's ability to be well. This longing for connection was true across parents of all races, genders, and economic backgrounds. We must hear this as a call to action and begin creating spaces where all community members can feel connected to each other.

**MCLENNAN COUNTY
RANKS IN THE BOTTOM
20% NATIONALLY
IN OVERALL
SOCIAL CAPITAL**

VOICES OF MCLENNAN COUNTY PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

"Access to parent resources would help. Support groups, neighborhood groups, parenting classes. I want to do a good job, but it feels overwhelming sometimes. I can use the support."

"Personally, I would like to see the neighborhoods be back like they used to be where you knew your neighbors, you got out in the evening, and visited with neighbors. I miss all that."

"I just wish there was more opportunities, more places, where you can meet people as moms. Or funding for programs that create connections."

"(I need) more resources for stay-at-home moms. Sometimes the depression hits you or anxiety, and you feel like you need someone to like help you out or someone to speak to."

It may appear that connection, support, and safety are independent concepts, however, parents were very clear that issues of safety directly affect their ability to feel adequately connected to and supported by this community. Conversations revealed that safety means different things to different people. Some discussions led to concerns about safe parks in neighborhoods, while other times issues like police presence (both too little and too much) were top of mind.

VOICES OF MCLENNAN COUNTY PARENTS:

"A city where kids can thrive, where parents feel safe. I mean, for example, my neighborhood does not have sidewalks."

"I would also feel safer in my community if there was police reform. If police were more community-oriented."

"I want a community where I feel safe letting my children play outside. I don't feel safe in my neighborhood now."

Another important aspect of connection is the ability to physically connect to different areas of the community through safe and reliable methods of transportation. Residents brought up concerns for a lack of walkability in some neighborhoods due to a lack of sidewalks quite often but didn't mention overall transportation challenges as frequently as one might predict. In fact, when transportation was mentioned it was more often in conversations with service providers and stakeholders than with parents and community members themselves.

We do know that transportation options differ greatly based on where you live within McLennan County. Survey responses were somewhat of a mixed bag. More than one-in-four respondents (27%) said that transportation impacts their family's overall well-being. At the same time, only small percentages of parents indicated that transportation directly impacts their childcare and health care situations. The message here seems to be that transportation is undoubtedly important; however, it may not be the dominant, top-of-mind issue that many providers and stakeholders perceive it to be.



Personally, I think that transportation is one that really lacks. If you don't have a vehicle it's a big struggle for transportation in our community.

- McLennan County community member

Really the expansion of transportation (would help) a lot of needs from the standpoint of not only getting to a job but being able to get to doctor's appointments, to hospitals, getting to the Boys and Girls club, or the YMCA, that would actually help a lot.

- McLennan County community member



27% of survey respondents said transportation impacts their family's overall well-being

BUT ONLY

10% say it impacts their childcare situation

12% say it interferes with their health goals



TAKE ACTION.

McLennan County is known by many for its collaborative spirit and for being a county whose residents embody a willingness to work together to take on the tough issues. However, it's important that we don't stop there. Working together to take on issues like child well-being requires more than meetings, more than community listening sessions, and yes, more than reports. No matter title, position, or location, people agree that it's time for our community to move past the "let's talk about it" phase and get started on the difficult work ahead of making impactful change for children and families.



(Historically there is) a lack of commitment to long-term solutions. How can we commit to a long-term solution...providing those supports to create change that may not produce an immediate return, but a sustaining impact?

- McLennan County pastor

Let's do the work and stop talking about the work...the research has been done, now let's just put it into practice and be willing to put resources towards it... let's put our money where our mouth is and let's be about it and not just talk about it.

- McLennan County healthcare provider

Do you just want to talk about this and discuss the data? Or, do you really want to put your hand to the plow and commit your resources to help see the thing that you're talking about actually happen?

- McLennan County community provider



THERE IS A SHARED AGREEMENT THAT IT IS TIME FOR ACTION TO BE TAKEN AND ALSO AGREEMENT THAT A COMPREHENSIVE, COMMUNITY-WIDE, AND LONG-TERM INVESTMENT WILL BE NECESSARY TO SEE PROGRESS.

We also must admit that it is time for us to consider doing things differently. Historically, we have sought resident feedback in a variety of ways but we've failed to fully engage residents in the co-creation of solutions. This is the critical step where we have failed them in the past.

Decades of conversation and investment has moved the needle for some, but not all of our county's children and families. To design and implement more equitable and meaningful solutions, we must be more disciplined about centering the voices of parents and community members who too often are left out of the decision-making process.

In short, our community's decision makers need to start including those most impacted by the decisions being made in these conversations.

VOICES OF A FRUSTRATED COMMUNITY:

"No one listens to us."

"People have given their input and now are of the mindset that 'things are gonna be how they are gonna be.'"

Throughout our community conversations, we came across two different types of people. There are some who have participated in these types of focus groups and feedback gathering, provided their input, but saw no action come from it. Now, they are hesitant to contribute because they feel that they've been ignored. Then there are others who have been traditionally excluded from community conversations and are excited by an opportunity to contribute. They told us that this was the first time they had ever been asked for their input. Overall, residents are longing for their voices to be heard and to have a seat at the table in the creation of meaningful, long-term solutions that result in action.

Getting to that point will require stronger alignment and accountability across all sectors. Representatives from various sectors have also expressed a readiness to see action. During our community conversations we asked people, "what groups or individuals would you trust to take action on these things?" The answers brought to light a need for more engagement and collaboration at all levels, not just within the nonprofit sector. Churches, nonprofits, educational institutions, the City, health and civic organizations, are among those that residents said they would trust to take action; a reminder that none of us can take on this challenge of improving child well-being alone.

"There's all these nonprofits that we kind of go "oh, that's their job; they're going to take care of this problem" rather than stepping up as a community and helping each other and standing up for each other and supporting each other."

"I think there's a lot of strength in the nonprofit community... but there's a lot more to this than what a group of nonprofits can take on. How (do other community sectors) see themselves integrating into this effort – in an even more holistic way?"

Time



for



action!



OUR CALL TO ACTION

In McLennan County, **14,000 children are living in communities with low or very low child well-being outcomes.** The obstacles and challenges being faced by our children and families did not present themselves overnight nor will they be solved overnight. But that shouldn't prevent us from taking the first steps on what is a long journey ahead. The data and stories shared throughout this report provide us a detailed picture of the needs and opportunities that exist. More importantly, hearing the voices of more than 600 of our community members during this process also reminds us that this is not just about data. We are talking about real people—the children and families in our communities who are expecting more from a community that claims to want the best for all its residents. It is important to take the time to

“ I think that people care and they want what's best for children, but I don't know that as a community we want it enough to go out of our way or to do extra work to make it happen... People will talk about (it), they will talk about improving it, but they don't actually want to do anything.

— McLennan County service provider

get all the steps on this journey right, but it is also important to recognize that people are counting on us to refrain from losing momentum or delaying action.

We know that with consistent, long-term investments of time, talent, and resources, it is possible to make a substantial difference on child and family well-being in our community. This report is only a snapshot in time and so we recognize specific strategies may shift to account for changes in community needs or the external environment, yet still, the call to action is strong. The question now and moving forward becomes, *are we willing to take the bold steps necessary to act?*

If the answer is yes, let us come together to act on these four shared commitments for the future.

1

ELEVATE AND ENGAGE OUR COMMUNITY MEMBERS. Committing to not just talk to, but genuinely share power with those who have lived experience is the path towards equitable and sustainable change in our community.³⁰ Community conversations are not enough, we must continue to engage those most impacted by the decisions we are making and allow them to become the decision makers. This is what we have referred to as Phase 4: community members and stakeholders will together create a community action plan that includes a shared vision, with unified goals and measures of success.

Our Community Advisory Board and Core Partner Team (see inside cover) have functioned as the work's primary advisory committees. Moving forward, we will bring those that offered their voices to this report back to the table and engage other parents and community members in deeper conversations on how to positively impact the well-being of area children and families.

2

FOCUS EXPLICITLY ON EQUITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY. The data trends and personal insights of our community members tell a story that is all too familiar in McLennan County. Experiences, outcomes, and ability to thrive differ greatly by place and race. It is possible to overcome the obstacles that have continued to cause many of our greatest divides. Continued personal and professional education regarding the history which propelled us to where we are today is a start, but we must take further action to change mindsets, practices, and policies in this community that inadequately serve communities of color.

In discussing inequities, we must also talk about the disproportionate experience of caretaking that falls to mothers in the family unit and as single female heads of households who carry a heft of responsibility to raise a family in a community that has not made it easy for families to thrive. We must change systems that lack support for families and accelerate disparities rather than mitigate them. A clear focus on the impact of intersectionality of gender, race, and zip code will improve our decision-making and make our investments more equitable and strategic moving forward.

3

EMPHASIZE A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH TO SUPPORT FAMILIES. The interaction and relationship between child well-being and family well-being has been thoroughly discussed in this report, but we must continue to think and act with a two-generation mindset. Intentionally serving children and the adults in their lives simultaneously has become known as the two-generation (2Gen) approach.⁸

What would a 2Gen approach mean for our community? First, we must articulate and measure outcomes for children and the adults in their lives simultaneously. It also means that we follow the lead of those with lived experience who repeatedly spoke to us about safety, access to recreational opportunities and healthy foods, bilingual resources, jobs that pay a livable wage, affordable housing, and health care being a critical part of child well-being. To be successful, our efforts must address the needs of multiple generations and whole families as it relates to education, health, and financial stability.

4

BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT CROSS-SECTOR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT. The aspirations of our community cannot be realized by a single organization, a single funder, or even a single sector. The challenges raised are complex and require everyone in our community to play a role. Nonprofits and social service agencies are a staple of our community but have been shouldering an unreasonable burden in trying to solve some of these issues on their own over the last decade.

Our call to action cannot default back to the way we have always done things. We need to create a more deliberate environment of public-private partnerships and interagency collaboration to achieve and sustain change. This responsibility to partner transcends our county's borders. We must also be willing to take a more active role in local, state and federal policy decisions to support programs that increase access to needed services which will have a significant impact locally. Advocating for good policy at all levels matters.



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Snapshot of McLennan County's Children

Across pages 18-19 the vast majority of data comes from either KIDS COUNT (reference #18) or the American Community Survey (reference #26 above). While none of the data presented is from 2021, all indicators, graphs, charts, and data points represent the most recent year(s) data available. In some cases, that means data goes as far back as 2017 (prenatal care). When possible 1-year estimates were the default measure, but occasionally three and five-year estimates were utilized, and obtained the most recent data for each of the indicators, graphs, charts, and data points. Some notable source exceptions include the teen birth rate (Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy); McLennan County population under five (Texas State Demographer); and low birthweight births (from Texas Health Data 2015- 2017).

Child Well-being Index:

Both the process of creation and variables included in the Index were updated from the 2009 methodology to streamline the creation and to better reflect an evolving understanding of the predictors of child well-being. Publicly available data were compared utilizing a quintile system that scored each variable from very low (-2) to very high (+2) against the county average for each variable. If data were missing for a particular indicator/zip code a score of 0 was entered representing a neutral condition. With only a few exceptions, all variables were assessed on 5-year averages (2019) from the American Community Survey. Exceptions include population uninsured under six, low birthweight (from Texas Health Data 2015-2017) and ALICE scores (United Way). Once scored, all variables were combined to create a single score and ranking for each zip code which was then mapped to create a visual depicting quality of life outcomes across the county.





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