

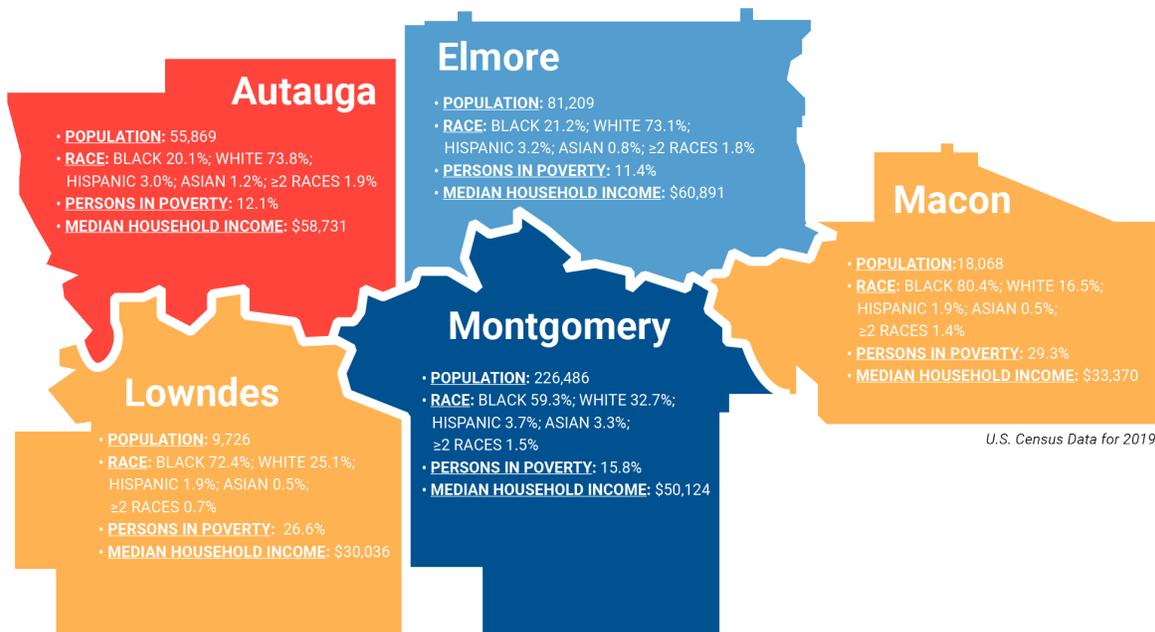
2020 COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESULTS: An Executive Summary

What did River Region United Way learn about the needs in our communities?

Every year, RRUW conducts community needs assessments to outline the needs and identify gaps in services in our service area: Autauga, Elmore, Lowndes, Macon and Montgomery counties. Working with the Center for Public Service at Troy University, RRUW conducted annual community needs assessments in 2017-2019. Data was collected through online surveys, in-depth personal interviews by RRUW Community Council members, and via a drive-through portal. Those participating in the surveys and interviews were recipients of services from human service agencies, our donors, as well as city and county leadership.

In 2020, due to COVID-19 restrictions and mandates, RRUW was unable to conduct its annual community needs assessment. Instead, a three-year comprehensive report of needs assessments was drafted to identify the most prevalent community needs throughout the entire River Region. This document serves as an executive summary of that report, which is available online at www.RRUW.org/Needs. The community needs assessment results shared in the full report are supported by findings from survey responses and interviews, as well as information from national data banks. Several issues of key concern were uncovered through this process in each county and are shared in this summary.

River Region Demographics by County



Poverty in the River Region

Poverty is the underlying cause of most community needs. This is why River Region United Way focuses on the building blocks for a good quality of life: **Health, Education, Financial Stability and Basic Needs**. Together, these blocks are the cornerstones upon which a solid foundation can be built for a strong community, free from poverty.

In the River Region, the **percent of persons in poverty**, by county, ranges from 11% to 29%. By comparison, the national poverty rate in 2019 was only 10.5% -- the lowest rate observed by the U.S. Census Bureau since estimates were initially published in 1959 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Report P60-270). This demographic data speaks to the disparities that currently exist throughout the communities we serve.

Top 5 Major Concerns of Respondents by County

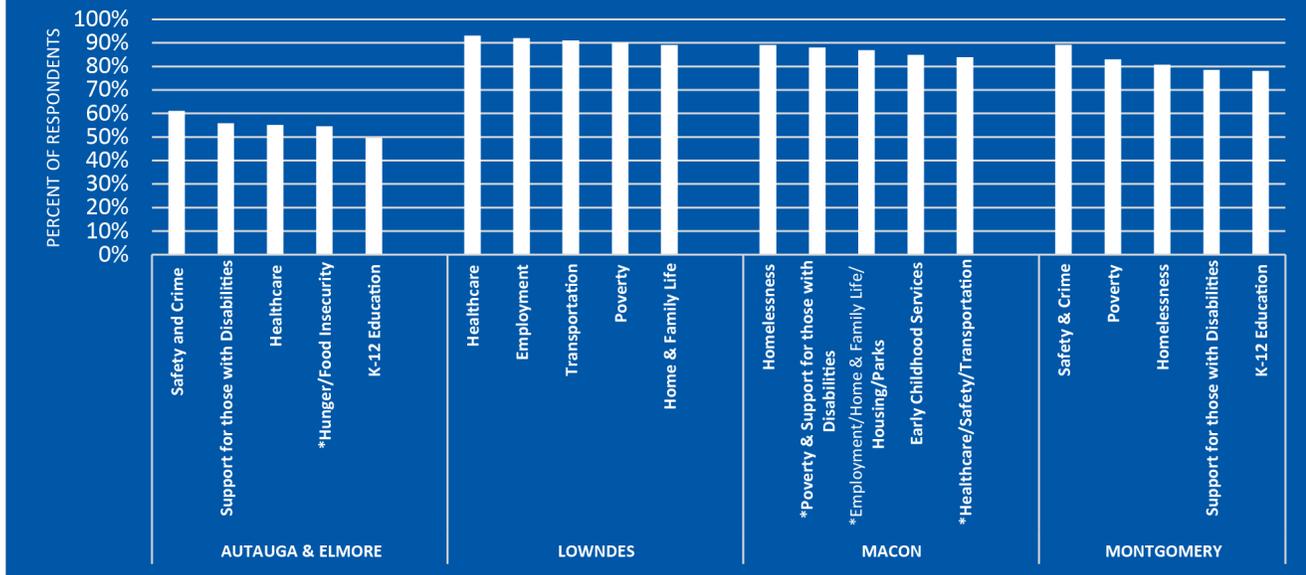


Figure 6 from 2020 Community Needs Assessment – Comprehensive Report: 2017 RRUW Community Needs Assessment –Autauga and Elmore Counties 2018 RRUW Community Needs Assessment –Lowndes and Macon Counties 2019 RRUW Community Needs Assessment –Montgomery County

* Indicates when there was more than one major concern that tied for a spot in the Top 5 Major Concerns

EDUCATION

River Region United Way adopts a **comprehensive approach to education that spans from cradle to career**. Education is critical to an individual's success, and it benefits the entire community. An educated workforce establishes economic stability as it attracts new companies that bring more jobs.

K-12 Education was ranked fifth as the top major concern by survey respondents in Autauga, Elmore and Montgomery counties. In Macon County, Early Childhood Services was ranked fourth among top concerns. Education is the foundation for success in all areas.



Early reading is a pivotal predictor of academic success. Children in Pre-K to third grade are **Learning to Read**, and from fourth grade on, students are **Reading to Learn**. Children who learn to read in the early years have a foundation that will help them in other subjects. Early brain development and schooling through third grade are extremely important in shaping a person's education and life chances. It is around fourth grade when the focus is on reading for information and comprehension. In 2019, only 48% of third graders in Alabama were reading at a level of proficiency or above. By county, the percentage of third graders reading at a level of proficiency or above: Autauga 61%; Elmore 54%; Lowndes 22%; Macon 27%; Montgomery 35% (Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, 2020).

In 2020, the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) also released the results for high school graduation rates and college- and career-readiness for 2019. According to Tom Spencer, Senior Research Associate at PARCA, "Alabama's high school graduation rates rose to an all-time high of 92%. And, a greater proportion of those students, 80%, were rated college- and career-ready than ever before"; however, the table below reflects the percentage for high school graduation rates and the percentage of those graduates who were college- and career-ready in the River Region.

Questions? If you have questions about the Community Needs Assessment, please contact River Region United Way's Community Impact Department at 334-264-7318.

Graduation and College & Career Readiness, 2019

County	High School Graduation Rate	College & Career Readiness
AUTAUGA	89%	80%
ELMORE	91%	87%
LOWNDES	95%	73%
MACON	87%	83%
MONTGOMERY	87%	59%
STATE OF ALABAMA	92%	80%

Alabama defines a college- and career-ready graduate as a student who possesses the knowledge and skills needed to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing, first-year courses in a two- or four-year college, trade school, or technical school without the need for remediation; these graduates possess the ability to apply core academic skills to real-world situations through collaboration with peers in problem solving, utilizing precision and punctuality in delivery of a product, and demonstrating the desire to be a life-long learner (Southern Regional Education Board, 2020). Today's workplace requires that all workers be lifelong learners in order to advance in their careers. College- and career-readiness is a critical factor in workforce development.

Health also plays an important role in education. Children who are hungry cannot learn, and for some children from low-income families, free (subsidized) breakfasts and lunches at school may be their only meals of the day. Likewise, children who are suffering from mental or physical abuse or neglect have an urgent need for mental health services, and it is often at school when a trusted teacher or school administrator first notices that something is wrong with a student. Our country continues to be in a mental health crisis, and schools do not have the resources available to provide the services needed by their students.

FINANCIAL STABILITY

The **median household income** in our service area ranges from \$30,036 to \$60,891. By comparison, the national median household income is \$68,703 in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Employment was noted as the Top 2 and Top 3 Major Concerns by Respondents in Lowndes and Macon counties, respectively.

Health insurance coverage is a benefit of steady employment and good jobs. All too often, emergency rooms become the primary care providers for those who are uninsured or under-insured, as they cannot afford basic healthcare costs.

Then, there is the issue of **mental health**. According to Mental Health America (MHA), 18.85% of adults in Alabama (691,000 adults) struggle with mental health problems annually. By comparison, the national average is 18.01%. MHA ranked Alabama 48th in Access to Care Rankings (The State of Mental Health in America 2018, MHA).

FINANCIAL STABILITY

Without access to affordable mental health services, employers see a loss of productivity, as well as higher rates of absenteeism and employee turnover – all of which affect a company's bottom line.

Interestingly, **hunger and food insecurity** were ranked fourth on the list of major concerns of survey respondents in Autauga and Elmore counties – and yet these two counties have the lowest percentages of households with food insecurity of the five counties in the River Region. Lowndes and Macon counties were found to have the highest levels of food insecurity in the River Region, due to “food deserts” and lack of resources for making nutritious food choices.

Transportation needs were included among the *Top 5 Major Concerns of Respondents* in Lowndes and Macon counties. Without access to affordable and dependable transportation, getting to work, to the grocery store, to childcare or to the doctor's office can be a huge obstacle for many individuals and families.

Providing solutions to community problems, River Region United Way currently offers programs like SaveFirst and SingleCare through its financial stability and health partnerships:

- RRUW has partnered with Impact America for eight years to bring the SaveFirst Initiative, which provides free tax-preparation services to qualified working families. **In 2020, 30 SaveFirst student volunteers from local colleges helped more than 1,040 families in our area to secure nearly \$2.5 million in tax refunds, and saved them more than \$400,000 in commercial tax-preparation fees.**
- We believe you should not have to choose between filling your prescription medications and being able to feed your family. Through our partnership with **SingleCare**, a national program formerly known as FamilyWize, we are impacting both financial stability and health in our communities. In the last fiscal year, **this partnership allowed River Region United Way to help 5,369 people hold onto \$254,643 in prescription savings.**

RRUW is currently partnering with local financial institutions to provide financial literacy training to adults and students in the River Region.

NEXT STEPS

It is our firm belief that once problems are uncovered, solutions can be found and problems solved. River Region United Way is part of the solution-seeking process. We do this by directing resources to meet identified needs and collaborating with area community partners who are ready to get to work to meet those needs. The results shared in the full report will be used as a tool to help direct resources to areas of greatest need.

Katrina is an eight-year old who often comes home from school to an empty apartment when her mom has to work second shift. She takes the box of mac and cheese her mom left out for her and heats up her dinner in the microwave. Katrina tries to do her homework but needs someone to help her with math. She is struggling in school and falling behind the other students in her class. She prays that her teacher won't call on her to read aloud again tomorrow. Last time, she tried hard not to cry when some of her classmates laughed at her

We know it is critical that Katrina gets the support and tutoring she needs in the coming year. If she is not reading on grade level by the end of third grade, then statistically, we know this decreases her chances of graduating on time and being college- or career-ready.

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Although there are other factors that will influence Katrina's future, we know that the third-grade reading level is a key indicator for future success. Falling behind at this early age will create and compound other problems for her – making it difficult, if not impossible, for Katrina to break the cycle of poverty.

United Way is committed to breaking the cycle.

Rather than addressing only the symptoms of poverty, we must ask ourselves how do we solve the poverty problem? How do we create sustainable change and break the cycle of poverty? We know that no one organization or individual can do it alone. It is going to take all of us – community partners, donors, volunteers, businesses, local government, neighborhoods and private citizens – working together to make a “collective impact.”

The problems facing our communities cannot be solved overnight. They are complex and will require taking a long-term approach. Even so, our communities still face critical needs that have to be addressed immediately.

In the months and years ahead, RRUW will be talking about **Bold Goals** and about long-range, community-based initiatives and collaborative efforts with other partners to solve big community problems. This Bold Goal Coalition will achieve its goals by aligning partners, resources and strategic plans. **We will address disparities in Health, Education, Financial Stability and Basic Needs.**

Workgroups, represented by key regional leaders from various industries and organizations, will identify and address specific needs. Collectively, each group will foster positive change in our communities by examining root causes of problems, establishing measurable goals and aligning current efforts. **We hope you will make every effort to become part of the Bold Goal Coalition as we work together, “Making Life Better for Everyone.”**

You can access the full report by scanning the QR code, below, and sharing those results within your own network. Or, consider being part of the change by volunteering with River Region United Way or one of its 40+ community partner agencies. Only when we all work together toward a common purpose do we truly LIVE UNITED.

Join us and be one of the Hand Raisers, the Problem Solvers and the Game Changers in our River Region!



To learn more about the Community Needs Assessment and to access the full report, go to www.RRUW.org/Needs or scan the QR code.