

SHAPING THE FUTURE: WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CENTRAL NEW JERSEY

Why Women and Girls? Why Now? A Call to Action ...

Philanthropists around the world are increasingly focusing charitable work on women. They recognize that women face greater social and economic barriers, and are more likely to be poor – also, that women are more likely to spend donated funds on health, food, and education for their families, helping to uplift communities in a sustainable way. *A philanthropic investment in women is a sound investment in the future.*

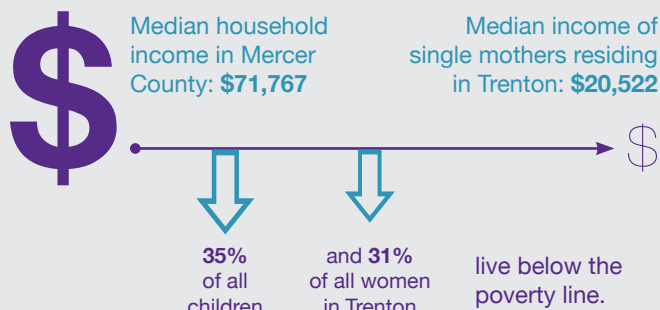
This also holds true locally. Our research illustrates that women and girls in Mercer County are at great risk: they face many social and economic obstacles, plus unique health challenges. Without positive female role models and leadership, education to understand and protect their bodies, and viable pathways to careers, girls and women in our communities are often caught in a vicious cycle.

The nonprofit organizations and government agencies that provide women and girls with vital services are needed now more than ever. But in many cases they are stretched thin by increased demand, strained resources and budget cuts. Even when help is available, there are often impediments to access.

The **Fund for Women and Girls** is dedicated to creating a community of philanthropists working together to improve the lives of women and girls in central New Jersey. The Fund commissioned this research to better understand the challenges they face, so that future grant funding can be targeted to address the most critical needs. We invite you to join us in our efforts to *interpret* these findings, *identify* opportunities to make an impact, and *invest* in the future of women and girls.

Key Issues Facing Mercer County's Women and Girls

ECONOMIC SECURITY



Women represent **68%** of Mercer County's homeless families — **16%** of these as a result of domestic violence.



Renters comprise 32% of Mercer County households, and 62% of them *cannot afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent of \$1,224 per month (\$14,688 per year).*

EDUCATION

12% of Mercer County women age 25+ lack a high school diploma or equivalent. Although an increasing number of women are enrolling in adult education courses, many face persistent obstacles, including lack of childcare and transportation, unplanned pregnancy, drug addiction, incarceration, fear of violence or abuse, lack of family support, and prohibitive costs.



HEALTH AND SAFETY

13% of Mercer County women do not have health insurance. African American women are **more than twice** as likely as Caucasian women to be uninsured. Hispanic women are **more than three times** as likely to be uninsured.



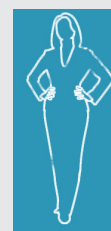
Although reports of sexual assaults statewide have *decreased*, reports in Mercer County continue to *increase* — over 14% from 2008 to 2009 alone. In 2009, Mercer County had the highest percentage (18%) of domestic violence homicides among any of New Jersey's counties.

70% of the county's elderly living in poverty are women. They often face the terrible choice between paying for food or medications.



LEADERSHIP

Women in elected office serve as role models and can positively influence public policy outcomes for women and girls, but they are far outnumbered at the county and municipal levels: only 2 of 8 assembly seats, 2 of 7 county freeholders, and 2 of 13 municipal mayors in Mercer County are women.



The Fund for Women and Girls ... an Agenda for the Future

This research highlights many challenges, and illustrates the complexity and interconnectedness of the factors that can compromise the health and wellbeing of Mercer County's women and girls.

However, these findings also highlight some encouraging strengths as well as **promising opportunities to help**. We believe that focused support to expand and enhance services particularly in these specific areas can break cycles and lead to a brighter future.

Why these issues? They present opportunities to **educate and empower girls**; to address **root causes** of seemingly intractable challenges; to enhance or expand current services that are **overextended, underfunded, or inaccessible**; and for the Fund's grantmaking to have a **significant and long-term impact**.

Sexual Education

- * Rates of sexually transmitted infection in Mercer County rose **41%** from 1999 to 2009. Girls age 15 to 19 are the largest group affected.
- * School drop-out rates in Trenton are **8.5 times** the state average – often due to teen pregnancy.
- * The number of babies born to teenage mothers in Mercer County is higher than the state average and continues to rise. Children of teen mothers are more likely to be born prematurely or at low birth weight, increasing their risk of health problems.

Domestic Violence

- * Many teens are in abusive relationships. Preventing dating violence is essential to stop patterns of abuse.
- * In 2009, there were 2,889 reported domestic violence offenses (domestic assaults, harassment, and domestic sexual assault), a **6.8%** increase over the previous year. Many incidents go unreported due to fear, perception of social stigma, and privacy concerns.
- * Domestic violence is linked to homelessness – some women remain in unhealthy or violent relationships just to maintain housing. **16.5%** of homeless women are reportedly homeless as a result of domestic violence.

Child Care

- * Single mothers in Mercer County currently spend, on average, **28 - 34%** of their income on child care.
- * Some affordable child care centers have closed due to the economy; others are inaccessible due to cost or distance. Many parents are turning to unlicensed and lower quality alternatives.
- * Affordable, accessible child care means more women can support their families. Survey results indicate **37%** of women do not feel they have affordable child care options. **23%** cited child care as a reason for their unemployment.

Leadership & Mentoring

- * Women who hold leadership positions serve as positive role models; they can open doors for young women.
- * Women outnumber men at area colleges, but are underrepresented in student leadership roles. They also tend to major in traditionally-defined “female” fields, which lead to lower paying jobs.
- * Leadership programs intended specifically for girls and women are scarce and often inaccessible to many girls due to location and cost.

What's next?

Please join Fund members as we continue to interpret these findings and consider our responses. Over the next few months, we will convene several follow-up conversations, share this research with policymakers and the press, and work with nonprofit colleagues to create our long-term plan for future grantmaking. Learn more and join us by visiting www.pacf.org/fwg or by contacting the Community Foundation at 609 219 1800.