

**The Status of Women and Girls in Mercer County
and Available Community Resources**

Princeton Area Community Foundation

Fund for Women and Girls

Executive Summary

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Introduction

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, of the 366,513 people who live in Mercer County, 187,480, or 51.2%, are female.¹ Approximately half of these women and girls reside in Hamilton Township and Trenton.² The county's women and girls are diverse in terms of race, age, birthplace, and marital status.

Approximately 55.3% of the female population in Mercer County is Caucasian.³ African-American and Asian women and girls represent 20.2% and 8.9% of the female population, respectively.⁴ About 2% of women and girls in Mercer County self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, two or more races, or "some other race".⁵ Census data indicates that Hispanic women represent the remaining 13.6% of the female population; however, this percentage is likely not truly reflective of the number of Hispanics living in Mercer County.⁶ New Jersey Policy Perspective, a non-profit organization that conducts research on state issues, estimates that there are "at least 20,000 undocumented [Hispanic] immigrants" living in Mercer County.⁷

About 21.6% of the overall female population is comprised of girls under the age of 18, 14.5% of the female population is over the age of 65, and the remaining population is between the ages of 18 and 64.⁸ When broken down by race, however, the percentages greatly vary. The proportions of Hispanic and African American women under the age of 18 are 35% and 27% respectively compared to 20% among Caucasian females.⁹ Approximately 24% of Asian females are under the age of 18, but it is important to note that the population within this group is increasing at a rapid rate within the county.¹⁰ Additionally, it is evident that more young females self-identify with more than one race as compared to previous generations. Of the 3,131 females in Mercer County who self-identified as "two or more races," about 43% were under the age of 18.¹¹

The women and girls of Mercer County are very diverse in terms of their birthplace. Only about half (53.5%) of all females living in the county were born in New Jersey.¹² About a quarter (27%) were born in another state and 2% are U.S. natives but were born in United States territories, such as Puerto Rico or Guam.¹³ The remaining 17.5% represents 32,330 females living in Mercer County who were not born in the United States.¹⁴ Overall, immigrants from South and Central America make up the largest share of Mercer County residents who were not born within the country, representing 39%, while Asian immigrants account for another 31%.¹⁵ Overall, the number of immigrants in Mercer County has grown by 48% from 2000 to 2006 as compared to an overall county population growth of five percent.¹⁶

The 2009 American Community Survey, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, estimates that approximately half (51%) of the female population in Mercer County, age 25 or older, is currently married.¹⁷ Of the same population, 19% has never been married, but this percentage steadily decreases as age increases. About 3% of women, age 25 or older, are legally separated and 11% are divorced. Another 12% are widowed; however the vast majority of these respondents are over the age of 65. The remaining women identify their current relationship as "other".¹⁸

Economic Security and Housing

According to the American Community Survey released by the U.S. Census Bureau, 57% of Mercer County's total female population is currently part of the labor force.¹⁹ This is slightly above the New Jersey average of 56%.²⁰ Almost half of Mercer County's working women (48%) are between the ages of 35-54.²¹

In regard to income, Mercer County ranks 6th among counties in New Jersey with a median household income of \$71,767.²² However, there are significant income level discrepancies among men and women in the county. Mercer County's median income of \$36,238 for all individuals, male and female, 16 years and older, is slightly below the New Jersey average of \$37,801.²³ However, in Mercer County, women are earning an average of \$31,204.²⁴ The median family income for a married couple with children under 18 years of age is \$114,629.²⁵ Comparatively, the median income for a single female householder with children is \$28,650.²⁶ This is a difference of about \$85,979 and \$3,153 less than the state average of \$31,803.²⁷ Additionally, the median income for single females without children is \$59,563, which is \$30,913 more than that of women who have dependent children.²⁸ On average, families in Trenton with a single female at the head of the household live slightly above or below the poverty line, depending on the number of children in the house. Single mothers residing in Trenton currently have a median income of \$20,522.²⁹

According to the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, New Jersey had an unemployment rate of 9.7% in July 2011.³⁰ This was higher than the national unemployment rate which stood at 9.3%.³¹ In Mercer County, 17,350 people were unemployed, representing an 8.5% unemployment rate in July 2011.³² Although unemployment data is not gender-specific, it is notable that state reports show employment growth within jobs that are largely held by women in our area. For example, the number of jobs in the education field in Mercer County increased 10.7% from July 2010 to July 2011, and the number of jobs in the healthcare field increased 1.5% during the same timeframe.³³ On the other hand, jobs that are commonly held by men did not show much growth in our area. The number of jobs related to finance, insurance, science, and computers remained steady or slightly decreased.³⁴

When asked to identify the most significant issue currently affecting women and girls in Mercer County, Edna Hill of Lifeties in Ewing responded, "a lack of decent, affordable, safe housing". Ms. Hill noted that there are countless agencies in the county who provide a wide variety of programming for needy women; however, according to Ms. Hill, "if [these women] don't have a place to live, they don't have a foundation, and they're not someplace that they feel safe, they fall apart".³⁵ Homelessness is an issue that affects many women, particularly single mothers, in Mercer County. In 2011, approximately 158 Mercer County families were reported to be homeless and of the individuals in these families, 108 (68.4%) were females.³⁶

About 16.5% of the homeless population in the county is reportedly homeless as a result of domestic violence.³⁷ Women who experience domestic violence are often forced to leave their homes quickly, leaving behind many of their possessions and access to money, child support, or alimony.³⁸ Likewise, they may lack the resources and social support systems that are needed to make a fresh start

for themselves and their families.³⁹ Moreover, these women tend to have trouble finding adequate housing due to poor credit and/or rental and employment histories that are often the result of their abusive relationships.⁴⁰ Women who were raised in foster care are also at a higher risk of being homeless. Connie Mercer, Executive Director of Homefront, explained that about two-thirds of women who receive services through their organization were raised in foster care. She explained that these women lack support systems and may not have anyone to turn to during life's "rough patches".⁴¹ As a result, these women and their children are often left without permanent housing. In other situations, low-income women may remain in unhealthy or violent relationships in order to keep a roof over their family's head. Ms. Mercer commented on the need for affordable housing for single mothers, programs that provides mentors to these struggling women, and a curriculum for women that addresses decision making and relationship issues.⁴² There are eight organizations that provide emergency housing in Mercer County, including Womanspace and Homefront, and 15 organizations that provide emergency food assistance.

From 2007 to 2009, the number of Mercer County residents living at or below the poverty level increased from 8.5 to 11.1%.⁴³ Moreover, about 15.5%, or 12,891 Mercer County children are impoverished, representing the 8th highest percentage among all 21 New Jersey counties.⁴⁴ While poverty continues to plague areas of Mercer County, women and girls seem to be overrepresented among this needy population. In Trenton alone, 7,419, or 35.5% of all children living in the city, and 11,979 women, or 30.9% of all women in the city, are living below the poverty line.^{45,46} Mark Lamar, Executive Director of the Family Guidance Center, explained, "women are far more likely to be poor than men" due to "gender bias, discrimination of wages and promotions, and also all of the fall-out from either divorce or domestic violence".⁴⁷ Likewise, it is clear that girls who try to overcome impoverished conditions face many obstacles. Mr. Lamar explains that some girls have a very "narrow view of getting ahead of where their families are, getting jobs that will earn them enough to make a living wage, having an expectation that they will be able to take care of themselves and other people, and living in [adequate] housing".⁴⁸

Mercer County women are faced with many challenges in regard to homeownership. Currently, the median home price in Mercer County is \$258,800 and more than three-quarters of homes in the county cost \$200,000 or more. Owning a home is nearly impossible for Mercer County women who are earning the median county income of \$31,204.⁴⁹ Women who rent are also finding housing costs to be overwhelming. Spending no more than 30% of household income on housing has been the benchmark for affordability.⁵⁰ A family must earn \$23.54 an hour, or \$48,960 a year, to afford the fair market rent of \$1,224 per month for a two-bedroom apartment in Mercer County.⁵¹ In order to afford such an apartment, a minimum wage worker would have to work 130 hours or 3.2 full time jobs per week.⁵² Even at the county's median income, an individual would have to work 1.6 full time jobs per week.⁵³ As a result, 32% (over 40,000) of Mercer's households are renters and of that, 62% of renters are unable to afford a 2 bedroom apartment at the fair market rent.⁵⁴

Education and Experience in School

Women's educational attainment speaks to their capacity for economic security and their ability to manage the challenges of everyday life.⁵⁵ In today's economy, it is essential that women have a mix of skills and training in order to obtain a job and a secure future.⁵⁶ Since the 1970's, women in the United States have increasingly attained higher levels of education and experienced an increase in their earnings.⁵⁷ Despite the importance of educational attainment, particularly during the current economic climate, approximately 15,000 women in Mercer County, representing about 12% of the female population age 25 and over, do not have a high school diploma or equivalent certificate.⁵⁸ This statistic is significant for a number of reasons. First, high school drop-outs are four times more likely to be unemployed as compared to high school graduates.⁵⁹ Higher education is also a crucial factor in obtaining a steady job and financial stability.⁶⁰ High school graduates earn higher incomes than high school drop-outs, and these income discrepancies affect women even more so than males. Among full-time workers that do not have a high school diploma, men earn an average of \$8,882 more a year as compared to females who have the same level of education.⁶¹ Although an increasing number of women are enrolling for adult education courses, local program directors identified several barriers that women face when trying to obtain their GED, including lack of childcare, transportation, unplanned pregnancy, addictions issues, incarceration, fear of violence or abuse, lack of support from family members, and an inability to afford the \$50 GED registration fee.^{62,63}

A lack of literacy is another issue that affects many women in Mercer County. Literacy plays an important role in women's lives, particularly their ability to obtain and maintain a steady job and income. Approximately 31% of Mercer County residents regularly or occasionally speak a language other than English at home.⁶⁴ According to Census data, it is estimated that approximately 13,000 Mercer County residents do not speak English "well" and an additional 6,000 people do not speak English at all.⁶⁵ While Census data is not gender-specific, this lack of literacy and fluency in English is a problem that seems to affect more woman than men in Mercer County. Female participants significantly outnumber males in local adult literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs.^{66,67}

Educational attainment among younger females in Mercer County is equally as crucial. There are 26,951 female students currently enrolled in Mercer County public schools.⁶⁸ Each year, the New Jersey Department of Education releases a series of reports, including the School Report Card, that provide statistical data on various aspects of the school district as well as comparisons to statewide data. A look at these educational metrics by school district across Mercer County tells two very distinct stories. Some schools boast high graduation rates and standardized test scores while schools in urban areas of Mercer County are not meeting the minimum "No Child Left Behind" standards and standardized test scores benchmarks.

A variety of statewide standardized assessments are administered each year in grades 3 through 12 and are designed to measure student achievement and attainment of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards.⁶⁹ In the area of language arts, female students in Mercer County are generally scoring higher than their male classmates. At the high school level, more girls were proficient on the language arts portion of the HSPA than boys in 8 of 9 districts and 1 of 1 charter schools.⁷⁰ On the other hand, proficiency rates among girls in the area of mathematics are significantly lower. Female high

school students achieved lower rates of proficiency in math compared to male students in 6 of 9 districts.⁷¹ Furthermore, the overall percentage of high school girls who were proficient in math fell below state averages in more than half of Mercer County school districts.⁷² The New Jersey Department of Education recently added a science section to state standardized tests in grades 4 and 8 only. While this section is relatively new, overall proficiency rates throughout the state have been high in general. In Mercer County, science proficiency rates among female students in grade 8 have exceeded state averages in all districts except Hamilton and Trenton, and proficiency rates among female students in grade 4 exceeded state averages in all districts except Ewing and Trenton.⁷³

A lack of proficiency in language arts, math, and science is an ongoing issue within schools in urban areas of Mercer County, particularly Trenton. These proficiency levels certainly indicate issues within the educational system, specifically in regard to elementary, middle and high school students' ability to read and perform basic mathematical tasks. Dr. Sigfredo Hernandez, founder and director of the "Minding Our Business" outreach program at Rider University, identified poor academic performance as the main challenge he sees affecting Trenton middle-school students who attend his program which provides the local youth an opportunity to start and run a small business.⁷⁴ He added that the majority of these students are not performing at grade-level and lack basic skills, therefore making it difficult for them to further their education and apply skills in everyday life.⁷⁵ Mr. Wayne Murray, director of Project S.M.I.L.E./Gear Up!, an academic enrichment program offered by Mercer County Community College for Trenton middle school students, also identified low proficiency levels on state exams and overall poor academic performance as critical problems among Trenton youth.⁷⁶

The Trenton public school district has been identified as a district that is "in need of improvement" for the last 8 years under the No Child Left Behind legislation.⁷⁷ The district was forced to implement a restructuring plan upon year 6 of their "in need of improvement" status, but test scores continue to greatly lag behind state averages. For example, 24.6% of female students and 31.3% of male students achieved proficiency in math on the 11th grade HSPA test, as compared to 74.1% and 75.9%, respectively, in the state.⁷⁸ Each year, the state of New Jersey selects a group of low-performing schools to receive federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) dollars. In order to receive SIG funds, schools must implement one of four federally-approved models.⁷⁹ Funds for the 2011-2012 total \$55 million.⁸⁰ Trenton Central High School was selected by the state last year to receive SIG funds; however, funds were not renewed this year because the school did not fully implement the requirements associated with the grant.⁸¹ While standardized test proficiency rates in Trenton charter schools also fall short of statewide averages, these scores are generally higher than those of the Trenton public school district.

One of the most pressing issues related to public education in Mercer County is the rate of students who drop out of high school prior to graduation. Approximately 1.5% of female students in the state of New Jersey drop out of school.⁸² Two districts in Mercer County, Trenton City and East Windsor Regional, exceed this average. Approximately 2.7% of female students in the East Windsor Regional school district dropped out prior to graduation during the 2009-2010 school year.⁸³ The dropout rates in the Trenton public school district are even more staggering. Approximately 13% of female students in Trenton High School dropped out during the same year, a rate that is about 8 and a half times higher than the state average.^{84,85} According to Bonnie Arkus, Executive Director of the Women's Heart

Foundation and Teen Esteem Program at Trenton Central High School, high teen pregnancy rates are one of the leading causes of high drop-out rates among female students in Trenton.⁸⁶ It is important to note that dropout rates are significantly higher among African American and Hispanic girls as well as girls with disabilities or limited English proficiency.

Students with disabilities present unique educational needs. Mercer County has the second largest percentage (19.1%) of special education students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in the state of New Jersey.⁸⁷ This percentage exceeds the state average of 15.5% and is significantly higher than most counties, which indicates a large number of classified students with learning or physical disabilities in the county.⁸⁸ Each year, the New Jersey Department of Education compiles an annual performance report, required under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).⁸⁹ This report lists indicators of the state performance plan and specifies whether individual school districts are meeting the corresponding goals.⁹⁰ Currently, none of the school districts in Mercer County are meeting *all* of the state special education goals. Some districts, including Trenton, exhibit significant discrepancies between state goals and actual performance results.

Recent budgetary cuts in New Jersey have made a noticeable impact on public schools in Mercer County. Since January 2010, \$1.3 billion dollars of school aid have been cut in New Jersey, and schools in Mercer County have lost over \$48 million in state aid.^{91,92} During the 2010-2011 school year, the Hopewell Valley Regional School District faced the largest decrease in state aid in Mercer County, losing nearly 85%, or \$3.4 million, of their state funding. West Windsor-Plainsboro, Princeton Regional, and Lawrence school districts also suffered large cuts in state aid.⁹³ Additional cuts will likely continue into the 2011-2012 school year.⁹⁴ Although the New Jersey Supreme Court has ordered Governor Chris Christie to increase aid to the state's poorest school districts, including Trenton, the impact of decreased state aid, failed school budgets, and difficult financial times have unquestionably affected students in the county. Cuts have mainly come in the form of teacher and security officer lay-offs, increased class sizes, the reduction or elimination of art and music programs, and the reduction or elimination of extracurricular activities.⁹⁵

In regard to post-secondary education, women in Mercer County are relatively well-educated as a whole, but there are pockets of significant concern. For example, 12% of women in Trenton over the age of 25 hold a bachelor's or higher degree, while 77.1% of female residents of the same age range in Princeton Borough hold a bachelor's or higher degree.⁹⁶ Census data show that all townships within Mercer County, with the exception of Trenton City, exceed the overall state percentage (87.1%) of female adults who have graduated high school.^{97,98} Additionally, Census data also show that all townships within Mercer County, with the exception of Trenton City and Hamilton Township, exceed the overall state percentage (32.7%) of female adults who hold a post-secondary degree.⁹⁹

In addition to the aforementioned barriers, scarcity of acceptable childcare and transportation greatly influence a woman's ability to pursue her education. For educational programs to be successful in Mercer County, particularly in the Trenton area, it is imperative that program coordinators consider these barriers when planning and organizing their programming.

Out of School Time

Girls in today's world face a variety of challenges and demands. In school, there is increased pressure to score well on standardized tests, graduate from high school, and obtain post-graduation education or training despite difficult financial times. Girls within our county face challenges outside of school, too. More young girls are growing up in single-parent households, which often presents financial challenges. Approximately 25% of Mercer County children reside with an adult female householder and although Census data is not specific, it can be assumed that the vast majority of these "female householders" are single mothers. Towns that contain the largest percentages of children whose primary caregiver is a single female householder are Trenton (55%), Ewing (21%), and Lawrence (20%). It is clear that there are many unique challenges that single mothers and their children face. For example, single mothers may not have had an opportunity to complete their formal education and therefore are more likely to be unemployed or employed in low-paying jobs.

As childcare costs continue to increase, the ability to afford quality, safe childcare is a challenge that more single mothers in Mercer County are facing. Single mothers currently spend an average of 34.1% of their income on childcare for an infant child and 28.3% of their income on childcare for a preschool-aged child.¹⁰⁰ Due to challenging economic times, some parents are moving their children from licensed programs to informal child care settings. These options may be less expensive but they are of unknown quality.¹⁰¹ Severe funding cuts in recent years have impaired or closed community-based child care centers in Mercer County that offer affordable child care for working parents, particularly low-income families.¹⁰²

Research shows that participation in after-school and extracurricular activities has many positive outcomes. While there are many afterschool and summer programs within Mercer County, these programs are out-of-reach for some girls due to cost or distance. During our research, we identified 17 community organizations in Mercer County that provide low-cost or free after-school programming for children and adolescents. Of these programs, more than half (52.9%) are located in Trenton while 23.5% are offered in Hamilton, 11.8% are offered in Princeton, and 11.8% were offered in other municipalities. For many reasons, the abundance of programs in Trenton is necessary and justified. Approximately 35.5% of children in Trenton are impoverished, so there is an obvious need for free or low-cost programs for these children who are more susceptible to drug and alcohol use, teen pregnancy, and juvenile delinquency.¹⁰³ However, there are 5,562 impoverished children in other Mercer County towns, excluding Trenton, and many additional children from low-income families. For these children, there are fewer afterschool options available, particularly in Hightstown, East Windsor, and Ewing.

Like after-school activities, summer programs provide children with an opportunity to participate in safe, fun activities while school is not in session. While these summer programs greatly vary, some trends can be observed among them. First, the majority of summer programs in Mercer County have an associated registration fee. Next, there are few summer programs intended specifically for girls. Groups intended specifically for girls are often interest-specific, such as the Girls' Gymnastics Camp at the Hamilton Area YMCA. Finally, summer camps and programs are located throughout the county; however, many programs are located in Trenton, Hamilton, and Princeton and few are located in other areas such as Robbinsville, East Windsor, and Pennington.

Health

Women in Mercer County are facing a variety of issues related to health care. Health insurance coverage is a crucial factor in making health care accessible to women. Women who are insured are more likely to obtain preventative, primary, and special care services as compared to women who do not have health insurance.¹⁰⁴ In 2007, approximately 49,031 people, or 16.0% of the overall population in Mercer County, did not have health insurance which is consistent with the state average of 16.4%.¹⁰⁵ Of the 49,031 uninsured Mercer County residents, 28,914 (59%) were men and 20,117 (41%) were females.¹⁰⁶ In relation to the total female population, 13.1% of all women in Mercer County do not have health insurance. Approximately 18.8% of all uninsured people in Mercer County were children under the age of 19.¹⁰⁷ According to the National Women's Law Center, Hispanic women in New Jersey are more than three times more likely to be uninsured than Caucasian women while African American women are more than twice as likely to be uninsured.¹⁰⁸ Access to health care is often directly linked to income and poverty levels. Of the 9,212 uninsured children in Mercer County, 53.3% are living at or below 200% of the poverty line.¹⁰⁹

Current research and data is unclear about the actual number of Mercer County women and children who qualify for health care assistance and of these women and children, how many are actually receiving assistance. Despite eligibility, it may be difficult for some women in Mercer County, particularly those with limited English proficiency, to enroll in subsidized health care programs due to language or cultural barriers.¹¹⁰ Lack of transportation, lack of childcare, an overall lack of knowledge regarding available services and programs, and societal concerns such as a lack of housing are common barriers that prevent women from receiving necessary and adequate health care.

Access to preventative health care is another area of concern in Mercer County. State and county health departments, as well as local organizations, could not provide any concrete statistical data in terms of the number of women receiving preventative health care, such as mammograms, Pap Smears, and colorectal screenings. However, area program directors frequently indicated that women in Mercer County, particularly from urban areas, are not receiving adequate preventative care. Studies have indicated that there has been a recent decrease in the number of facilities and specialists willing to perform certain procedures, including mammograms, within the state.¹¹¹ Social characteristics such as age, race, and level of education may also influence the likelihood that a woman will pursue preventative health care. Liz Johnson, Chief Operating Officer of the Isles organization in Trenton, points out that an overall lack of knowledge among women and girls is a significant barrier to receiving preventative care. According to Ms. Johnson, "most low-income families just go to the emergency room... they use the emergency room as their primary care provider".¹¹² As a result, women are not receiving comprehensive health care, which includes preventative measures such as Pap Smears and mammograms. Fear may also prevent some women and girls from getting necessary screenings. In regard to such screenings, Beverly Gibson of Lifeties in Ewing explained that "there's a lot of fear attached" especially among young girls and teenagers.¹¹³

Likewise, a lack of prenatal care among many young mothers is an issue that plagues Mercer County. Although research has shown the importance and benefits of early prenatal care, the percentage of pregnant women in Mercer County receiving such care has not significantly increased in

the last ten years. The percentage of women who receive early prenatal care has remained generally steady since 2000, ranging from 76.3% to 78.1%.¹¹⁴ These percentages vary from town to town, but a lack of prenatal care is an issue that affects many women in Trenton, where only about two-thirds of expecting mothers are receiving early prenatal care.¹¹⁵ Likewise, the percentage of low birthweight babies in Mercer County continues to be higher than that of New Jersey. During the years 2000 to 2007, low birthweight percentages in Mercer County ranged from 8.3% to 9.9% while these percentages ranged from 7.6% to 8.5% statewide.

Mental health is a key component to a healthy life. However, determining the number of women within Mercer County who are currently experiencing depression, an eating disorder, and/or other mental health illness is very difficult. While some women seek professional mental health assistance, many do not. There are countless reasons why women are less likely to seek medical attention when dealing with depression, including stigmatization. Liz Johnson of Isles, Inc. pointed out that mental health issues are often stigmatized and people who are not well-educated may be hesitant to seek professional help.¹¹⁶ Women also face additional stresses of work and home responsibilities that may hinder their ability to seek help. Many women in Mercer County are single mothers, solely caring for their children, while others care for aging parents. A common perception among many women is that they cannot obtain treatment and uphold these responsibilities. Some women within the county are experiencing abuse, poverty, or a lack of health insurance, which also present barriers to treatment.

In 2011, the Mercer County Partnership for Community Health updated their Community Health Improvement Plan. In this plan, the Partnership identified four public health priority issues within the county, one of which is mental health. According to their report, “historically, ‘mental health’ in Mercer County has been synonymous with treatment and diagnosis rather than the prevention side of the spectrum”.¹¹⁷ Liz Johnson of Isles, Inc. added that mental health services, particularly prevention programming, are limited in our area and pointed out the potential for educational and preventative efforts.¹¹⁸ Our search of programs and services yielded the same conclusion; there are many diagnostic and treatment services available within the county but few preventative programs and services. There are several programs and coalitions who aim to provide services related to suicide prevention but focus less on depression and mental health screening and prevention.

Between 2000 and 2007, there were 177 deaths in Mercer County resulting from suicide.¹¹⁹ Of these deaths, 40 women over the age of 18 (22.6%) committed suicide.¹²⁰ Although males are more likely to complete suicide, females are significantly more likely to attempt suicide. The National Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that males take their own lives at nearly four times the rate of females, but during their lifetime women attempt suicide about two to three times as often as men.¹²¹ The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services estimates that fewer than 25% of suicide attempts are reported.¹²² Therefore, the number of suicide attempts by women in Mercer County is likely to exceed the number of actual suicides since it is clear that not all suicide attempts are completed.

Men and women differ physiologically in both their reactions to addictive substances and the types of drugs they use.¹²³ In Mercer County, alcohol and heroin abuse are the most common reasons for admission to substance abuse treatment centers among women. Since 2003, 35% of all women

admitted for treatment in Mercer County were treated for heroin addiction and an additional 27% were treated for alcohol addiction.¹²⁴ In 2010 alone, 329 Mercer County women were admitted for treatment for heroin addiction and 247 were admitted for alcohol addiction.¹²⁵

In addition to scarce resources available for clients seeking Buprenorphine and methadone treatment (two forms of opiate replacement therapy), Mercer County currently lacks some necessary substance abuse treatment programs, including residential treatment, halfway house services, and detoxification treatment. Services for adolescents are also lacking. There are a number of other barriers that may hinder women who are seeking substance abuse treatment. According to the New Jersey Division of Addiction Services, these barriers may include fear of reprisal from significant others or family members, lack of child care, fear of discrimination, confidentiality concerns, linguistic or cultural barriers, social stigma, fear of child protection involvement (DYFS), and financial concerns such as a lack of money or insurance.¹²⁶

Drug use within the county also influences the number of people living with HIV/AIDS. As of December 2010, 35% of women diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in Mercer County contracted the disease through injection drug use. Currently, 25% of women seeking treatment for substance abuse are injection drug users. These women clearly have a higher risk of contracting and spreading HIV and other infections such as Hepatitis C.¹²⁷ The illegal nature of injection drug use can create additional barriers for women when trying to access adequate treatment and prevention services.¹²⁸

The Mercer County Advisory Committee on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse has identified pregnant women with drug/alcohol abuse issues as the “neediest” population in the county in regard to substance abuse prevention and treatment.¹²⁹ Although numerous treatment facilities indicated that they may provide assistance to pregnant women, many of the program coordinators that we interviewed indicated that pregnant women have unique needs and benefit most from specialized programs. Many of these program coordinators were hesitant when asked if they treat pregnant women, and one provider shared that treatment facilities generally do not accept pregnant women who are beyond their first trimester. In a report to the Commissioner of Human Services and the New Jersey State Legislature, a substance abuse work group reports, “It is undeniable that significantly more treatment programs, especially those which provide treatment to pregnant women and the children of substance abusers, must be developed and funded.”¹³⁰

Poor nutrition and a lack of exercise are other health issues that affect Mercer County women and girls. Bonnie Arkus of the Women’s Heart Foundation and Teen Esteem Program at Trenton Central High School confirmed that many girls are less likely to participate in physical education class as compared to boys. Some reasons that Ms. Arkus cited included girls feeling self-conscious about their weight and body, not having “attractive” gym clothes, and worried about sweating in front of boys.¹³¹ Likewise, local studies have shown that financial hardship and the cost of healthy foods are the leading factors contributing to unhealthy food choices.^{132,133}

The Center for State Health Policy at Rutgers University released an alarming report in 2010 regarding the prevalence of obesity among children in Trenton. The study found that 46% of girls in Trenton are either overweight or obese compared to 31% of girls nationally.¹³⁴ Their study also revealed that 69% of girls in Trenton are not getting at least 60 minutes a day of exercise or physical activity and

44% of girls are not active for at least 30 minutes a day. Additionally, 27% of girls spend more than 2 hours a day watching TV, using the computer, or playing video games during the week and 58% spend more than two hours doing these activities on the weekend.¹³⁵ One factor that may contribute to the lack of physical activity and exercise in urban areas is the lack of safe areas outside. Approximately 39% of surveyed Trenton parents of children ages 3–18 think their neighborhoods are unsafe due to traffic while 45% feel their neighborhood is unsafe due to criminal activity.¹³⁶

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) remain a major public health challenge in Mercer County. In Mercer County, the overall number of reports of STIs has increased by 41% from 1999 to 2009.¹³⁷ Among reported STIs, Chlamydia is the most prevalent STI among women and girls in our area. In 2009, 1,095 women in Mercer County were diagnosed with Chlamydia, which represents a 9% increase from the previous year. However, only 278 males were diagnosed with Chlamydia during the same year.¹³⁸ African American women account for 40.1% of all Chlamydia cases among women even though they only represent about 20% of the overall population.^{139,140} According to Annette Dillon of the Hamilton Township Division of Health and STD Clinic, herpes is becoming more prevalent among female clients, which she estimates to be the second most commonly diagnosed STI at her clinic among female patients.¹⁴¹ Fortunately, the number of women affected by gonorrhea and syphilis has significantly decreased during recent years.

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS among county residents is a disturbing issue. Since the state began tracking the number of people affected by HIV/AIDS beginning in the 1990's, there have been 2,519 people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and 1,163 reports of AIDS-related deaths in Mercer County, as of December 2010.¹⁴² Women represent about a third (32.3%) of all cases, and 27.2% of AIDS-related deaths.¹⁴³ The ages of these women at the time of diagnosis vary; however, approximately two-thirds of the women were diagnosed between the ages of 25 and 44.¹⁴⁴ Girls and young women who were diagnosed at the age of 24 or younger represent 12% of all female HIV/AIDS cases.¹⁴⁵ While HIV/AIDS is a problem that affects men, women, and children throughout Mercer County, there is a disproportionate number of people living in Trenton that are affected by these health issues. Trenton residents represent 81.2% of people currently living with HIV/AIDS and 83.4% of all reported cases of HIV/AIDS in Mercer County since reporting began.^{146,147} Furthermore, the presence of HIV/AIDS among African American women living in Trenton is an alarming problem. At the current number of reported cases, approximately 1 in every 63 African American females living in Trenton has HIV/AIDS.^{148,149}

A strength related to healthcare in Mercer County is the low number of women and girls who smoke cigarettes. Currently, the percentage of Mercer County women who smoke cigarettes, when compared to non-smokers, is less than state and national averages even though all state funding for smoking cessation programs has been recently eliminated.^{150,151} Additionally, Mercer County has the lowest rates of cigarette smoking among high school students in the state, and girls in Mercer County are even less likely to try cigarettes as compared to boys, according to the New Jersey Division of Addiction Services.¹⁵²

Due to increased awareness, more than two and a half times the number of Mercer County children were screened for lead exposure in 2009 as compared to 2003.¹⁵³ The number of children who have been affected by lead poisoning has also decreased by nearly half since 2003.¹⁵⁴

Crime, Personal Safety, and Physical Violence

Personal safety – being safe from crime and fear of victimization – is one of the most important issues that affects women and girls in Mercer County.¹⁵⁵ The most significant issues affecting women’s personal safety in Mercer County are domestic violence, sexual violence, gang violence, child abuse and neglect, teen dating violence, and human trafficking.

Mercer County was home to 2,889 reported domestic violence offenses in 2009.¹⁵⁶ This represents a 6.8% increase in domestic violence offenses from 2,706 offenses reported during the previous year. From 2008 to 2009, the number of domestic assaults increased 5%, harassment incidents increased 12%, and domestic sexual assaults increased 20%.¹⁵⁷ Most alarming, homicides that resulted from domestic violence increased from 3 reported incidents in 2008 to 7 in 2009.¹⁵⁸ Of all municipalities in Mercer County, the city of Trenton saw the largest percentage (47%) of domestic violence incidents, with 1,352 reported domestic violence offenses in 2009.¹⁵⁹ This represented a 2% increase from the previous year when there were 1,329 reported domestic violence offenses in the city.¹⁶⁰ African American women seem to be overrepresented among female victims of domestic violence in Mercer County. From July 2009 to June 2010, 55% of the women who utilized Womanspace’s emergency shelter program were African American even though African American women only represent 20% of the overall female population in Mercer County.^{161,162}

It is important to note that the number of domestic violence reports is still likely underrepresented since many incidents go unreported.¹⁶³ There are many reasons why women may be reluctant to report domestic violence incidents. According to Heidi Mueller, the Domestic Violence Victim Response Team Coordinator at Womanspace, Inc., some reasons why women are less likely to report domestic violence include fear and a lack of understanding or knowledge of how to get help.¹⁶⁴ Ms. Mueller also shared that a victim of domestic violence will experience abuse on average seven times before leaving or seeking help if they do decide to leave the relationship.¹⁶⁵ Other barriers that prevent women from reporting domestic violence offenses may include embarrassment, economic dependency, and privacy of the family.¹⁶⁶

Like domestic violence, incidents of sexual violence often go unreported. The New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault estimates that only about 15% of sexual assaults are reported to police.¹⁶⁷ According to the New Jersey Division on Women, while the New Jersey Uniform Crime Report from 2009 indicates that 1,041 sexual assaults were reported to law enforcement in the state of New Jersey during that year, sexual violence programs funded by the New Jersey Division on Women served 3,431 new primary victims and 751 secondary victims during that same year—over 3 times the number indicated in the 2009 New Jersey Uniform Crime Report.¹⁶⁸

Although reports of sexual assaults statewide have decreased, reports in Mercer County continue to increase. From 2008 to 2009, the number of reported rapes increased 14% in Mercer County.¹⁶⁹ Sexual violence is a problem that occurs more often in some Mercer County municipalities as compared to others. In 2009, there were no reported sexual assaults in Princeton Township, Pennington, Hopewell Borough, and Hopewell Township and very few were reported in East Windsor, Ewing, Hightstown, Princeton Borough, Robbinsville, and West Windsor.¹⁷⁰ In some of these areas, it may be true that sexual violence is not a prevalent issue, but it does exist. The majority of sexual assault

reports occurred in Lawrence Township, Hamilton, and Trenton. Of the 56 reported rapes in Mercer County, 26 (or 46%) of them occurred in Trenton and 36% occurred in Hamilton and Lawrence (10 in each municipality).¹⁷¹

Female students at local colleges and universities are at a higher risk of sexual assault as compared to other women and girls living in the county. The College of New Jersey conducted a series of surveys among their undergraduate population that examined a variety of issues, including the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment on campus. The most recent survey, conducted in 2008, found that nearly 20% of the surveyed undergraduate women have experienced unwanted or uninvited touching of a sexual nature and about 17% indicated that they had experienced stalking or harassment during the previous year. Furthermore, of the women who indicated that they had experienced some form of sexual assault, very few reported receiving medical care or emergency birth control and *none* of the participants reported their experiences to the police.¹⁷² Some local colleges and universities have established their own offices or initiatives to address sexual violence on campus, including Princeton University and The College of New Jersey.^{173,174}

Dating violence is defined as a pattern of abusive and coercive behaviors or actions whereby one dating partner seeks control over the other.¹⁷⁵ Dating violence can be physical, emotional, or sexual. Young women, ages 16-24, typically experience the highest rates of relationship violence, although it is most prevalent among girls ages 11-14.¹⁷⁶ According to the National Teen Dating Violence Prevention Project (NTDVPP), one in three adolescent girls in the U.S. is a victim of physical, emotional, or verbal abuse from a dating partner, a figure far exceeding victimization rates for other types of violence affecting youth.¹⁷⁷ An emerging concern related to teen dating violence is the use of technology to bully, harass, or abuse others. Alaina Renson of the Princeton Center for Leadership Training commented that dating violence has become more prevalent with the increased use of texting and social media, such as Facebook.¹⁷⁸

While the issue of teen dating violence has been gaining more attention recently, there is extremely little available data regarding local and state prevalence rates. According to the National Resource Center for Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month, only about one-third of teens who are in an abusive relationship tell someone about the abuse.¹⁷⁹ Ms. Allison Daks of Womanspace commented that many adolescent and teenage girls are often afraid to seek help because they are unsure if what they have experienced is abuse, or they may be concerned about their parent(s)' response.¹⁸⁰ Preventative and intervention programming for teen dating violence is scarce in Mercer County.

In 2010, Mercer County represented about 4% (4,054 of 93,699) of the state's reported child abuse and neglect cases as well as about 4% (390 of 9,326) of the state's substantiated cases.¹⁸¹ Within Mercer County, Trenton had 63% (2,571) of the reported cases.¹⁸² Likewise, of those reported cases, Trenton had 63% (246) of Mercer County's substantiated cases. while Trenton's population is only about 22% of the total population for the county.¹⁸³ Hamilton, Ewing, and East Windsor also had higher percentages of reported and substantiated child abuse and neglect.¹⁸⁴ It is important to note that the number of child abuse and neglect reports are likely lower than the actual number of incidents that occur. Program directors including Penny Ettinger, Executive Director of P.E.I. Kids, agreed with this assumption: "Reported cases [of child abuse] are probably grossly underreported".¹⁸⁵

Research has identified a variety of predictors for child abuse and neglect. These risk factors can include family domestic and sexual violence, the parents' own history of abuse as a child, substance abuse, and family marital status.¹⁸⁶ However, many researchers agree that poverty is the single best predictor of child abuse and neglect. Children who live in families with an annual income less than \$15,000 are 22 times more likely to be abused or neglected than children living in families with an annual income of \$30,000 or more.¹⁸⁷ In Mercer County, 11.1% of the population is living at or below the poverty level.¹⁸⁸

Recent research as well as input gathered during interviews with local program directors and service providers revealed that programming is lacking for young adults in our area who have experienced abuse and neglect resulting in foster care placement and who have been released from DYFS custody between the ages of 18-21. These young adults need support in terms of mental and physical healthcare, career counseling, education, and housing. There are very few programs in our area that service this young adult population.

Human trafficking is an umbrella term under which crimes such as sex trafficking and forced labor occur. A common attitude regarding human trafficking is that it does not occur in our state or, more locally, in Mercer County. However, New Jersey is one of the states where human trafficking occurs more frequently due to its location, transportation system, and population size.¹⁸⁹ Allison Daks of Womanspace commented that human trafficking is an issue that has existed but due to increased awareness, is "just coming to light in this area".¹⁹⁰ Staff members at Womanspace have received specialized training over the past two years on the incidence, issues, and resources related to human trafficking.¹⁹¹ As a result, the agency has been identified as one of the eight programs in New Jersey who can provide vital services, including emergency shelter, to this population.¹⁹²

Mercer County is home to 4% of street gangs in New Jersey. Many of these gangs have a significantly large membership, especially in Trenton. However, gang activity is not limited to urban areas in our county. Violent gang crime has recently occurred in Princeton Borough and on the Princeton University campus.^{193,194}

Girls represent a considerable percentage of the gang-involved youth population. The exact number of gang-involved girls is very difficult to determine since many Mercer County gangs do not consider girls "official" gang members. Beverly Gibson of Lifeties explained that many young girls in Trenton live in neighborhoods with significant gang presence and feel helpless.¹⁹⁵ While girls may deny their gang affiliation, it is likely that they are unable to remove themselves from the situation because, according to Edna Hill of Lifeties, "they're afraid".¹⁹⁶ According to Rob Fiorello of PEI Kids, gang-involved girls are often key contributors in the selling and distribution of illegal drugs.¹⁹⁷ Additionally, girls may be entrusted with holding money since some gang members view these girls as more trustworthy. Girls are also becoming increasingly involved in violent gang activity, including shootings and assault. As Mr. Fiorello noted, "[girls] do everything boys do" within local gangs.¹⁹⁸

Girls

According to the 2009 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 41,408 girls under the age of 18 who currently reside in Mercer County.¹⁹⁹ This group represents approximately 22.4% of the overall female population in the county.²⁰⁰ About one-quarter (22.4%) of all girls in Mercer County reside in Hamilton Township and another quarter (25.2%) reside in Trenton.²⁰¹

Teen pregnancy is an alarming issue in Mercer County as the number of babies born to teenage mothers continues to increase. In 2007, 7,258 babies were born to teenage mothers between the ages of 10 and 18 in New Jersey, representing 6.6% of all babies born in the state.²⁰² The percentage of babies born to teenage mothers is even higher in Mercer County, where 397 babies were born to teenage mothers in 2007, representing 8.6% of all babies born in the county.²⁰³ In urban areas where there tends to be lower levels of educational attainment and higher rates of poverty, teen pregnancy rates are notably higher. In these communities, teen childbearing has become a cycle in many families. Research has shown that daughters of teen mothers are three times more likely to become teen mothers themselves.²⁰⁴ One of the communities where teenage childbearing rates are exceptionally high is Trenton. In fact, Trenton had the second highest rate of teenage births in the state in 2000 behind Camden.²⁰⁵ Approximately three-quarters of Mercer County teenage mothers who gave birth in 2005 resided in Trenton.²⁰⁶

Children of teen mothers are more likely to be born prematurely and are twice as likely to be born at a low birthweight.^{207,208} Babies born weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces are considered low birthweight. Low-birthweight babies are at increased risk for serious health problems as newborns, lasting disabilities and even death.²⁰⁹ The percentage of low birthweight babies in Mercer County continues to be higher than that of New Jersey. During the years 2000 to 2007, the percentage of low birthweight babies born in Mercer County ranged from 8.3% to 9.9%. In New Jersey, these percentages ranged from 7.6% to 8.5%.²¹⁰

Teenage girls between the ages of 15 and 19 currently represent the largest group of women affected by sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the county. In 2009, 439 girls, ages 15-19, were diagnosed with Chlamydia, representing 40.1% of all Chlamydia cases among women in Mercer County.²¹¹ During 2009, 57 girls, ages 15-19 were diagnosed with Gonorrhea, representing 31.8% of all Gonorrhea cases among women in Mercer County.²¹² According to data released by the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, HIV/AIDS rates among Mercer County girls are generally low when compared to other age groups. As of December 2010, 34 girls and young women between the ages of 13 and 24 were living with HIV/AIDS in Mercer County. This age group represents about 6.5% of all HIV/AIDS cases among women in the county.²¹³ However, Annette Dillon of the Hamilton Township Division of Health and STD Clinic commented that HIV rates among young people in Mercer County seem to be on the rise.²¹⁴

The New Jersey Sexually Transmitted Disease Program provides confidential STI testing at six locations in Mercer County. At these sites, located in Trenton, Hamilton, and Princeton, girls can receive low-cost or free STI and HIV testing. There are also several other organizations that offer similar low-cost or free STI testing, such as HiTOPS in Princeton and the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital clinic.

Unfortunately, recent state budgetary cuts have greatly impacted women's health services offered in Mercer County. As a result, many programs have reduced their services and hours of operation which, at many sites, are offered during school hours. Additionally, there is a lack of testing sites within Trenton even though Trenton has the highest rates of STIs and HIV/AIDS within the county.

Due to recent legislature, bullying in schools has gained much public attention. Likewise, cyberbullying, which occurs online or by cell phone, is an issue that is becoming increasingly more prevalent among adolescents, particularly middle school girls.²¹⁵ Research has found that girls are significantly more likely to suffer from cyberbullying than boys.²¹⁶ School counselors generally provide bullying prevention education within schools, but many counselor positions within local schools were eliminated during recent budgetary cuts in districts such as Trenton, which laid off 6 counselors and 10 social workers during the 2009-2010 school year.²¹⁷

In regard to juvenile justice, there were 2,816 juvenile arrests in Mercer County during 2010. Of these arrests, 1,020 of the arrested juveniles were females. While girls represent about 36% of all juvenile arrests, this percentage is significantly higher than arrest statistics among adults. The percentage of adult females arrested, as compared to the total number of adult arrests made in the county, is about 22%.²¹⁸ More than half (56%) of all juvenile arrests in 2010 were made in Trenton.²¹⁹

Overall, girls are significantly less likely to commit violent crimes as compared to boys. In 2010, girls accounted for 1 of 6 rape arrests, 10 of 47 robbery arrests, and 11 of 47 aggravated assault arrests among juveniles. Additionally, girls represented about 9% of juvenile arrests for sex offenses and 19% of arrests related to the possession of a weapon. Girls were also significantly less likely to be arrested for drug-related crimes.²²⁰ On the other hand, the percentages of female arrests for simple assault and theft-related crimes are higher. Girls represented about 45.3% of all simple assault arrests among juveniles in 2010. Additionally, girls represented 48.6% of larceny theft arrests, 37.5% of motor vehicle theft arrests, 15.9% of stolen property arrests, and 13.7% of burglary arrests. Penny Ettinger, Executive Director of P.E.I. Kids in Lawrenceville, shared that about half of the participants in P.E. I. Kids' Lawrence Township Stationhouse Adjustment Program are girls, and the vast majority of these girls were arrested for shoplifting and other theft-related offenses.²²¹ Similar trends can be seen in other less violent crimes as well. For example, girls represented about 50% of liquor law violations, 41.5% of disorderly conduct arrests, 27.7% arrests for malicious mischief, and 25.6% of curfew violations among juveniles.²²²

According to the New Jersey State Police, girls significantly outnumber boys in the number of runaways who have been taken into protective custody by the police in both Mercer County and the state. In 2010, 329 Mercer County girls were taken into protective custody by police, as compared to 149 boys. The vast majority of these arrests, approximately 80%, occurred within Trenton. State Police reports indicate that African American girls were about twice as likely as Caucasian girls to be runaways.²²³

As mentioned above, street gang presence is an ongoing problem in Mercer County, and girls represent a considerable percentage of the gang-involved youth population. The exact number of gang-involved girls is very difficult to determine since many Mercer County gangs do not consider girls "official" gang members, but girls are still involved in many aspects of gang activity in Mercer County.

The New Jersey Department of Education releases a collection of data for each public school in the state every year. This report, called the “New Jersey School Report Card,” includes average SAT scores and post-graduation plans. Unfortunately, SAT data and post-graduation plans are not gender-specific, and high schools that we contacted during the course of our research were unwilling to provide such gender-information. However, we can gauge overall achievement and get a general picture of college enrollment among girls by analyzing data presented in these reports. College enrollment and achievement on the SATs seem to be closely linked to socioeconomic status in Mercer County. For example, the vast majority of high school students are taking the SATs in West Windsor, Robbinsville, Princeton, and Hopewell where average household incomes tend to be on the higher as compared to urban areas like Trenton, Hamilton, Ewing, and East Windsor. Average SAT scores among Trenton students fall far below the state and national averages. Likewise, average SAT scores at Nottingham High School in Hamilton also fall below state averages and less than half of the students are taking the SATs.²²⁴

Post-graduation plans among high school seniors in Mercer County also vary greatly. During the 2009-2010 school year, Robbinsville High School had the greatest percentage of high school seniors (97.3%) who planned to attend a four- or two-year college. Other high schools that had more than 90% of high school seniors who planned to attend college were East Windsor (93.8%), Hopewell (94.1%), Princeton (91.8%), West Windsor-Plainsboro North (93.9%) and West Windsor-Plainsboro South (94.2%). In Ewing, only 81% of high school seniors decided to pursue college while 16.8% were undecided at the time of data collection. It is important to note that Trenton Central High School reported that 100% of students were “undecided” about their post-graduation plans. Therefore, it is difficult to determine how many high school students, particularly girls, in Trenton continued on to college based on the lack of data reported in the NJ School Report Card.²²⁵

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, females continue to comprise the majority of college students.²²⁶ The number of female students enrolling in two- and four-year colleges has been slowly increasing in Mercer County as well, and female students currently outnumber male students at most area colleges and universities. However, a review of academic majors from four area colleges shows that there was a significant gender gap in regard to the students’ major areas of study. Female students outnumber male students in education/teaching and nursing/health profession fields, while male students outnumbered female students in engineering, math, physical science, and business programs. These career choices have economic implications since the fields that female students are selecting tend to be lower-paying. For example, female students represented 79% of the students who were majoring in an education-related field at Mercer County colleges during the fall semester of 2008. The average salary for teachers in New Jersey is \$54,370. On the other hand, the average salary for math and computer-related fields was \$85,570, but female students at Mercer County colleges only represent approximately 17% of all students majoring in math and science related fields.²²⁷

Aging

According to 2010 Census data, there are currently 46,347 residents in Mercer County who are 65 years of age or older.²²⁸ Of these residents, there are 27,230 women, representing nearly 60% of all adults in the county 65 years or older.²²⁹

In Mercer County, approximately 7,700 grandparents reside with at least one grandchild. Of these grandparents, about 2,200 are the primary caretakers of their grandchildren. Within individual towns and boroughs, there is some variation in the statistics. In three Mercer County towns, the percentage of children living in the same residence as their grandparents exceeds the county average. These towns are Ewing (7%), Lawrence (9.5%), and Trenton (10.5%).²³⁰

Approximately 6.2% of the elderly population in Mercer County is living in poverty.²³¹ This group is especially vulnerable due to an inability to work and increased risk of physical and mental illnesses.²³² There are several gender and ethnic discrepancies among elderly poverty rates. Most striking, older women are at a significantly higher risk of living in poverty than men. The overall 2009 poverty rates in New Jersey were 8.4% among men and 10.3% among women. Among the elderly population, these rates were 6.0% among men and 9.3% among women.²³³ Consistent with state trends, women represented about 70% of the elderly population living in poverty in Mercer County during 2009.²³⁴ Poverty is also more widespread among elderly members of certain ethnic groups. Census data indicate that like the state averages, Hispanics and African Americans are overrepresented among the elderly population living in poverty in Mercer County.²³⁵

Poor nutrition is an issue that affects countless older adults in Mercer County. According to Martha Nielsen of the Mercer County Nutrition Project for the Elderly, the economy has greatly affected some adults' ability to purchase nutritious foods.²³⁶ With medical and prescription costs continuing to rise, some older adults in Mercer County are faced with a difficult decision. Ms. Nielsen stated that many low-income adults in our area "have to decide between medicine and food".²³⁷ Additionally, Ms. Nielsen mentioned that adults who are "cooking for one" often prepare quick meals that do not provide proper nutrition.²³⁸ The Mercer County Nutrition Project for the Elderly currently serves about 700 older adults in Mercer County each day.²³⁹ Of these participants, about 200 receive meals at the Hamilton Senior Center and about 165 receive meals at one of four Trenton Nutrition Sites. The program also provides some nutrition education and social activities, such as Bingo games.²⁴⁰

The Department of Health and Senior Services maintains county-level, gender-specific data related to mortality. The leading causes of death among women in Mercer County, ages 65 and up, are heart diseases (30%), cancer (21%), stroke (6%), Chronic Lower Respiratory Diseases (5%), and Alzheimer's Disease (4.5%).²⁴¹

The Mercer County Office on Aging is the primary advocate, planning and coordinating agency for Mercer County older adults and their caregivers. This agency offers a variety of free health, social, and other services for adults 60 years of age and older and their caregivers. Although all older adults are eligible for services, emphasis is placed on the need to serve those older adults of greatest social and economic need in the county.²⁴²

Leadership

Female leaders have a variety of roles in multiple settings in Mercer County. There are women in key leadership positions in all areas examined in this report: education, government and politics, business, and non-profit agencies. These women who hold leadership roles within an organization undoubtedly serve as positive role models for younger girls. When girls see women from their own communities serve as leaders, the possibilities for their own accomplishments become more achievable.

The need for women to serve in leadership positions in elementary, secondary, and higher education settings is important as we move to bridge the gender gap that exists among such positions. Women who hold leadership positions within schools make important decisions that influence student learning as well as provide young girls with role models of female decision-makers and leaders. In Mercer County, the majority of superintendents are males even though the majority of the workforce in the education field is comprised of women. There are 10 superintendents within Mercer County public school districts, 3 of whom are women.²⁴³ Female leadership is more prevalent within local elementary and secondary schools. Overall, female leaders represent 61.5% of all principals in Mercer County public schools, while 50.1% of school principals statewide are women.²⁴⁴ Charter school administrators reflect a similar trend. Within active charter schools in Mercer County, women represent 6 of 8 top administrative positions.²⁴⁵

Women have made significant advances serving in major positions of leadership in area colleges and universities. In Mercer County, women hold 3 of 5 (60%) of the highest leadership positions within local colleges and universities.^{246,247,248} However, local colleges and universities follow a nationwide trend of underrepresentation of women attaining professorships, especially in several key departments such as math and science. For example, only 12% of full-time professors of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics at The College of New Jersey are female. However, 100% of assistant and associate professors in the nursing department are women and about 64% of professors in the elementary/early childhood education department are women.²⁴⁹ Likewise, only 27% of the faculty at Princeton University is comprised of female professors, representing the lowest percentage of female faculty members of any Ivy League school.²⁵⁰ The percentage of female faculty members within math and science departments at the University is especially low.²⁵¹

Although female enrollment at area colleges and universities exceeds that of males, many leadership roles within these campuses are currently filled by men. This issue has been a “hot topic” at Princeton University, particularly after there had been discussions at the University about disparities between men and women in highly visible positions of campus leadership. There was also growing concern that undergraduate women appeared to be winning fewer academic prizes and postgraduate fellowships than men.²⁵² Princeton University is not the only area higher education institution that lacks female students within leadership positions. Clubs and organizations at The College of New Jersey and Rider University lack female club and organization presidents, even though women comprise about 60% of the undergraduate student population at both colleges.^{253,254}

The importance of women’s participation and leadership in all levels of government and politics cannot be overstated.²⁵⁵ Women in elected offices have a powerful influence on the public policy

agenda and legislative outcomes for women and girls.²⁵⁶ A study by the Institute of Women's Leadership at Rutgers University discussed the importance of equal representation within state and local governments: "women are more likely to examine and evaluate public policy proposals through a... set of lenses [different from] the lenses that men use".²⁵⁷ Despite this research, Mercer County is not equally represented in terms of the number of female officeholders as compared to the number of men who hold public office. Mercer County municipalities are represented in 4 different districts within the state Congress. Within these four districts, 3 out of 4 State Senators are women while only 2 of 8 Assembly members are females.²⁵⁸ More locally, women represent 2 of 7 county Freeholders, 2 of 13 municipal mayors, and 42% of township Council/Committee members.^{259,260} Clearly, the political power and leadership of women in Mercer County has not yet reached its potential. The women of our county need to be educated about the importance of voting and the power their votes can have if they exercise this right.²⁶¹ Workshops and trainings are needed to educate and encourage women to not only exercise their right to vote but also to seek political office.

The percentage of businesses in Mercer County that are owned by women (30%) is slightly higher than the state average (27.3%).²⁶² Although male business owners continue to outnumber female business owners, women are more likely to own businesses in sectors where job growth has occurred during the last ten years. According to the most recent Census Bureau data, collected in 2007, female-only business owners outnumbered male business owners in three sectors in Mercer County: Health care and social assistance; Administrative, Support, Waste Management, and Remediation Services; and Other Services. On the other hand, sectors where women are significantly less likely to own a business include Transportation and Warehousing (10.2%), Wholesale Trade (13.1%), and Manufacturing (13.4%).²⁶³

In Mercer County, there are many private sector companies and corporations. However, only 2 of 9 private sector top employers in Mercer County have a woman in the top leadership position and interestingly, both are colleges. The other large companies are headed by men, including Capital Health Systems, New Jersey Manufacturing, Princeton Healthcare Systems, and Educational Testing Services.

Not only is community philanthropy alive and well in Mercer County, it is one of the arenas of leadership in which women are well-represented.²⁶⁴ Our search identified 116 non-profit organizations that provide services to Mercer County residents. Of these 116 organizations, a woman held the top leadership position in 70 organizations, representing 60.3% of non-profit organization leaders.

Leadership programs are integral in developing the female leaders of tomorrow. The Princeton Center for Leadership Training (PCLT) is a non-profit agency that provides peer leadership and advisory for Mercer County girls and boys as well as school-based workshops for educators. Additionally, the Princeton Day School offers a 1-week leadership training at Princeton University for girls in grades 8-10. Although this is a promising program, the registration fee is \$1500 and therefore cost-restrictive for some girls in Mercer County. Finally, Hopewell Valley YMCA and the YWCA of Princeton offer several leadership programs that are open to girls.

Promising Community Programs and Organizations

Financial Organizations and Services for the Economically-Disadvantaged

Isles, Inc. - Financial Self-Reliance Department

Homefront

Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness

Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK)

Family Guidance Center - The Consumer Credit Counseling Service

The Boys and Girls Club of Mercer County – “Money Matters” Financial Literacy Program

Employment Training Organizations

YWCA of Trenton – The Job Placement Center

The Boys and Girls Club of Mercer County – Career Launch Program

Mercer County Hispanic Association - BEST Program

Mercer County One Stop Career Center/The Career Training Institute (CTI) at the James Kerney Campus of Mercer County Community College

Adult Education Organizations

Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Educational Development (GED) Programs at Mercer County Community College

Mercer Street Friends – Adult Basic Education Program

Literacy Volunteers of Mercer County

Family Guidance Center - The HIV Life Skills program

Medical Clinics and Healthy Women Organizations

HiTOPS

Isles, Inc. – Community Gardens Program

The Women’s Heart Foundation – Teen Esteem Program

Mercer County Traumatic Loss Coalition

Medical Clinics and Healthy Women Organizations (continued)

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) – Mercer

AtlantiCare/Hamilton Township Division of Health – Mammogram Mobile

The Planned Parenthood Association of the Mercer Area

The New Jersey Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) Program (Clinics located at the Hamilton Township Division of Health, Trenton STD Clinic, Princeton Medical Center, and Planned Parenthood)

Lifeties – Rainbow House Program

Children’s Home Society of New Jersey – C.A.R.E.S. for Her Program

Violence Prevention Organizations

Womanspace, Inc.

Princeton Center for Leadership Training, “Safe Dates” Program

P.E.I. Kids

Trenton Police Department, “Speak Without Fear” Program

Youth Organizations

Project S.M.I.L.E./Gear Up! Program, Mercer County Community College

Minding Our Business Program at Rider University

P.E.I. Kids – Comprehensive Juvenile Offenders Outreach Services (CJOOS) and Lawrence Stationhouse Adjustment Program (SHAP) programs

Mercer Street Friends – Back on Track Program

Kidsbridge Tolerance Museum at The College of New Jersey

Lifeties – TILT Program

The Boys and Girls Club of Trenton and Mercer County

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Mercer County

Leadership Development Organizations

Princeton Center for Leadership Training

Princeton Day School Summer Leadership Training Program

Corner House

Agenda for the Future

Based on our findings, we have identified a variety of areas that could greatly benefit from more collective investment and funding. The following list represents urgent priorities related to the well-being of women and girls in our area that have limited existing services.

Childcare and Transportation

During our interviews and focus groups with program directors and community members, two issues were identified frequently as barriers to services – lack of childcare and transportation. Access to transportation by low-income women and single mothers has become limited as many of these women reside in urban areas while community programs are increasingly located in suburban areas.²⁶⁵ Likewise, the cost of childcare in New Jersey has dramatically increased during the last several years. Childcare presents a financial burden for many women, especially single mothers who currently spend an average of 34.1% of their income on childcare.²⁶⁶ For community programs to be successful in Mercer County, particularly in the Trenton area, childcare and transportation must be considered.

A community transportation and childcare program would unquestionably increase involvement within local programs and services. The Princeton Area Community Foundation could take an active role in assisting local programs and organizations by providing these two services. By providing transportation using a van or a small bus, the Community Foundation could establish pick-up sites and multiple organizations could apply for access. A grant-funded program offered in partnership with a local childcare center would also help to remove a significant barrier to services.

Partnerships among Local Organizations

Community leaders and program directors frequently discussed an overlap of services among area organizations. With local and state funding decreasing for such programs, it is important that organizations work together to better serve families in Mercer County. PACF could facilitate conversations among organization leaders and using the data provided in this report, assist these organizations in better integrating services. Perhaps future funding applicants can be required to submit collaborative proposals. Another possibility is for PACF to host mandatory meetings with their funding recipients, affording them the opportunity to collaborate and integrate their services. The directory of services will greatly aid in programs' abilities to formulate such collaborations. It was evident during our interviews that many programs knew very little about other services available in Mercer County. In fact, such a directory of services was identified as one of the great needs for women, girls and service providers in Mercer County.

Mentoring Programs for Girls

Although there are many self-proclaimed mentoring programs in Mercer County, many of these programs are academically-based. While promoting education among young girls is undeniably important, countless program directors indicated an urgent need for women to serve as positive role models to Mercer County's female youth population. Brothers Big Sisters of Mercer County matches volunteer mentors with same-gender at-risk youth in the Trenton area; however, more programs of this kind intended specifically for girls are greatly needed in our area.

Drop-out Prevention Programs in Trenton Public Schools

One of the most pressing issues related to public education in Mercer County is the rate of students in Trenton who drop out of high school prior to graduation. Approximately 13% of female students in Trenton High School drop out of high school, a rate that is about 8 and a half times higher than the state average.^{267,268} Despite these staggering statistics, our search identified few drop-out prevention and mentoring programs within Trenton public schools.

Scholarship Fund for the General Education Development (GED) Exam Registration Fee

In Mercer County, there has been a recent influx of women who have chosen to obtain their high school equivalency by taking the General Education Development (GED) exam. However, local programs directors have indicated that the rising cost of this exam has presented a barrier for many women in the county. To offset the cost of the GED exam registration fee, a scholarship fund would greatly help low-income women in Mercer County who want to obtain their high school equivalency. Eligibility requirements could potentially include proof of financial hardship, participation in adult education and/or GED-preparation courses, completion of a GED practice test, and/or an essay that details future educational and career plans.

Preventative Health Care for Women – Education and Services

Preventative health care, including breast cancer screenings and mammograms, is imperative to women's health. However, access to such preventative care continues to be a challenge for some Mercer County women and girls. One promising program was previously offered by the AtlantiCare Medical Center through a partnership with Hamilton Township Division of Health. The Mammogram Mobile is a mobile unit which provides mammograms at any location, such as a shopping center, provided that 15 women commit to receiving mammograms. Women can sign up regardless of their ability to pay. Unfortunately, the Division of Health cancelled the Mammogram Mobile event last year since they did not achieve the minimum number of previously-scheduled appointments. Knowledge of this event within the community seemed lacking, but perhaps partnerships among community agencies that have strong community ties could improve advertising and awareness of this event among community members.

Nutrition

Access to healthy foods and fresh produce is limited for many Trenton residents. According to a 2010 study, there are only two grocery supermarkets in Trenton which are generally located on the outskirts of the city and not within walking distance or convenient bus routes for many residents.^{269,270} Trenton is home to two farmers' markets, but these markets are not close to inner-city areas and are only open seasonally.²⁷¹ Having increased access to healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables can potentially decrease rates of obesity and improve overall health. A mobile fruit and vegetable service, for example, could provide low-cost or free produce to community members who normally have limited access to such foods while eliminating the need for transportation. Fruits and vegetables could be obtained from non-profit and community farmers and distributed among Mercer County's neediest residents, typically in urban areas. Similar programs throughout the country have partnered with state agencies to accept food assistance vouchers.²⁷²

Footnotes

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