

# THE FUTURE OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN MERCER COUNTY

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LISTEN

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IMAGINE

# About the Study

## Research Team

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Commissioned & sponsored by



## Methodology

- Data abstraction
- Literature review
- Key informant interviews
- Focus groups
- On-line surveys
  - Service providers
  - Women ages 18+

# Demographics

## 51.2% of Mercer County's Population is Female



By race/ethnicity:

**55%** Caucasian

**20%** African-American

**14%** Latino

**9%** Asian

By age:

**21.6%** under 18

**73.9%** 18 to 64

**4.5%** 65 or over



# Key Issues for Mercer County's Women and Girls

**Economic Security**

**Education**

**Health & Safety**

**Leadership**



# Economic Security

## Strengths



- In 2011, **homelessness** in Mercer County decreased from the previous year, while homelessness increased statewide.
- The percentage of **women-owned businesses** in Mercer County is higher than the state average.
- Compared to other New Jersey counties, Mercer County has a relatively lower **unemployment rate**. Unemployment rates among women are slightly lower than those among men.

# Economic Security

**\$114,629**

vs.

**\$28,650**

The median family income for a married couple with children under 18 years of age in Mercer County is \$114,629.

The median income for a single female householder with children is \$28,650, a difference of \$85,979 or a **factor of four**.

Average fair market rent for a two bedroom home: **\$48,960**



## Economic Security

Mercer County has one of the highest populations of **homeless** and chronically homeless people in the state of New Jersey.



- African American women are significantly more likely to be homeless as compared to Caucasian and Hispanic women.
- Women who escape domestic violence are more likely to be homeless than other women.
- In 2011, women were **68.4%** of the approximately 158 Mercer County families reported to be homeless.
- 90% of women surveyed indicated it was difficult to find affordable housing in Mercer County.

# Education

## Strengths

- Townships within Mercer County exceed the overall state percentage (87.1%) of female adults who are high school graduates – and most exceed the overall state percentage (32.7%) of female adults who hold a post-secondary degree.
- In Mercer County, proficiency levels on state assessments are generally higher among female students than male students.

## Weaknesses

- GED courses have decreased funding and increased fees. **12%** of the female population within the county, do not have a high school diploma or GED.
- Proficiency levels on state standardized tests among female students in Ewing, Hamilton, Lawrence, and Trenton have fallen below state averages.
- In 2009-2010, approximately 13% of female students at Trenton High School dropped out, a rate that is about 8 and a half times higher than the state average.



## Focus Groups: *On Education*

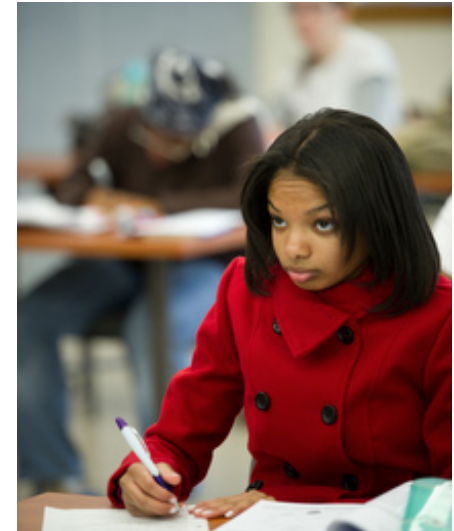
*“No. I don’t have enough money. My school doesn’t have anything good so they won’t give us scholarships.”*

*“If our schools are in good condition and there’s no walls breaking, if we knew we were in a better environment, we would act better.”*

*“I heard an A in Trenton is a C anywhere else. They hold us to a different standard because we’re in such a bad neighborhood and our environment is not good. They should put attention on our environment”*

# Education

- The majority of female students enrolled in Mercer County colleges are majoring in traditionally-defined female fields, such as education and nursing. These jobs generally have lower salaries than careers in math, computers, and engineering fields.
- Increasing costs and decreasing financial aid are putting college out of reach for many girls, particularly those from low-income families.
- Lack of child care, transportation, and housing often prevent women and girls from achieving academic success. None of Mercer County's higher education institutions offer childcare to current students.



# Health Strengths



From 2000 to 2007, there were **no reported suicides** among girls under the age of 18 in Mercer County.



Mercer County has the **lowest rate of cigarette smoking** among high school students in the state. Girls are less likely than boys to try cigarettes.



The number of girls being **screened for lead poisoning** has dramatically increased in recent years.

# Health

## Challenges



- 13% of Mercer County women do not have **health insurance**. African American women are twice as likely to be uninsured; Hispanic women are more than *three times* as likely to be uninsured.
- Despite eligibility for assistance, some women fail to enroll in subsidized health care programs because of language barriers, transportation, child care, knowledge about services, or housing.
- Access to health care is directly linked to income. Of the 9,212 uninsured children in Mercer County, over 50% are living at or below 200% of the poverty line.

### **Nutrition**

Because of poor nutrition and lack of exercise, nearly half of all girls in Trenton are overweight. The national average is just 31%.

### **Drug Abuse**

Mercer County lacks some necessary substance abuse treatment programs, including residential, halfway house services, and detoxification.

### **Sexual Health**

Sexually transmitted diseases are on the rise. Teen pregnancy rates are increasing in Mercer County even as they drop statewide

### **Aging**

Women represent about 70% of the elderly population living in poverty in Mercer County. Some older adults must choose between buying food and medications.

## Health

### Challenges

## Focus Groups: *On teen pregnancy*

*“Some get pregnant on purpose to keep the guy.”*

*If the parents don't like the boyfriend, the girl will get pregnant so the boyfriend has to stay.”*

*“A lot of girls get pregnant and their parents kick them out.”*



# Safety

## Crime & Physical Violence

### GIRLS

- Young victims of child abuse and neglect, dating violence, bullying, and gangs often do not know how to seek help, feel stigmatized, or worry about reprisals from peers or parents.
- New Jersey *is* one of seven states to have what would be considered “strong” legislation regarding dating violence education.

### WOMEN

- From 2008 to 2009, the number of domestic assaults increased 5%, harassment incidents increased 12%, and domestic sexual assaults increased 20%.
- Mercer County had 7 domestic violence murders in 2009 – the highest percentage (18%) of domestic violence homicides among any of NJ’s counties.
- In 2009, there were 2,889 reported domestic violence offenses, a 6.8% increase from the previous year. Nearly half occurred in Trenton. **Most incidents go unreported.**

## Focus Groups: *On safety*

*“My mom and family keep me in the house all the time because you have to walk through bad areas to get to the goods ones. You have to worry about people following you.”*

*“She was like being loud so I told her to shut up and she said, oh what you saying... wanna’ fight? So I just hit her in her face.”*

# Leadership



## Strengths

- In Mercer County, women hold **60%** of the highest leadership positions with local colleges and universities.
- Women represent **61.5%** of principals in elementary and secondary schools.
- Women hold the top leadership positions in **64.5%** of area non-profit organizations
- The percentage of female owned businesses is higher than the state average.
- High school girls are **more likely than boys** to hold leadership positions at both public and private schools.

# Leadership

- Only 3 out of 10 superintendents are women.
- Female professors are underrepresented in most area college/universities
- Of the top ten private sector employers in Mercer County, only two (both in higher education) have women in the top leadership positions.

## Challenges

- Women in elected office can positively influence public policy outcomes for women and girls ...
- But male politicians outnumber females on the county level and within most municipalities: only 2 of 8 assembly seats, 2 of 7 county freeholders, and 2 of 13 municipal mayors are women.

## Focus Groups: *On leadership and mentorship*

“Parents aren’t inclined to tell you the crap they went through—they aren’t the best resource. She won’t tell you when she was drunk at a party or flunked out of school. A mentor needs to be relatable and forthcoming with their own experience. Family isn’t going to tell you how lost they felt and the struggles they really went through.”

“You want to leave feeling empowered versus leaving feeling like you need fixing.”

“The thought of making sure I become better than this. Than what I’m growing up from, I can prove everyone else wrong.”

*“I know somebody that made it big, from a really long time ago. That lady from ‘Who’s the boss?’*



Self-esteem

Drug abuse

Gender gap

Bullying

High school  
drop-outs

Sexually-  
transmitted  
diseases

Nutrition

Teen pregnancy

What are the root causes? Where do we begin to break the cycle?



# Call to Action

An Agenda for the Future

**Sexual education**

**Domestic violence**

**Child care**

**Women's leadership  
and mentoring**

Why these issues?

- Educate and empower girls
- Address root causes
- Current services are overextended, underfunded, or inaccessible
- Philanthropy can have a significant 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. Education to prevent “dating violence” is essential to stop patterns of abuse.

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



**Childcare** is a serious impediment to economic stability for many women.

Single mothers in Mercer County spend an average of **28 to 34%** of their income on child care.

Economic conditions have forced some affordable child care centers to close, while others are inaccessible for many mothers due to cost or distance.

Affordable, accessible child care means more women can support their families (and be role models to girls).

Survey results indicate 37% of women do not feel they have affordable child care options, with 23% describing it as a reason for their unemployment.

# Leadership and Mentoring

- Leadership programs intended specifically for girls and women are scarce and often inaccessible to many girls due to location and cost.
- There are approximately 20 programs in the Mercer County area that described themselves as mentoring programs. However, many of these programs are academically-based



# What can we do? Let's Get Connected!

- Share and discuss these findings with friends, colleagues, and through **social media**.
- We must work to **eliminate the stigma** of seeking help and taking advantage of external resources.
- **Service providers**: work together to ensure that women and girls don't fall through the cracks.
- **Share your feedback** with the Fund for Women and Girls. What issues matter most to you?

*Everyone is welcome to join the fund. Please join us!*



Thank you.

