

Community Needs Assessment Madison County, Alabama

Released: August 3, 2009

Parker Consulting, Inc.
Birmingham, AL

Introduction

For more than 20 years, United Way of Madison County has conducted a needs assessment every five years in order to fulfill its mission as “a leader in the community uniting volunteers and resources to solve community problems.” In 2008, United Way’s Board of Directors approved funding to commission an up-to-date needs assessment as part of our community impact strategy. This is not a “United Way Needs Assessment”, but a Community Needs Assessment providing independent analysis and reporting of community issues and concerns. While United Way will use the Needs Assessment to ensure that our resources have the maximum impact possible in our community, we hope that service providers, policy makers, and other concerned community leaders will use this assessment to create lasting community change by addressing real community priorities. United Way of Madison County is pleased to offer this Community Needs Assessment as a service to the community.

Why Do We Need a Needs Assessment?

A needs assessment is a tool for planning. A community needs assessment identifies the assets of a community and determines potential concerns that it faces, something civic and government leadership needs to know. Service organizations need constant input from the communities they serve. They should know where needs are greatest and that their services are having an impact. In getting a picture of what the community needs, all segments of the community must be heard from when collecting feedback. This is the only way that strategic program planning can successfully meet community needs. In simple terms, *unless we ask, we can't know*. For nineteen months, the all volunteer Needs Assessment Committee, with assistance from Parker Consulting, Inc. and support from United Way of Madison County, has been asking. The following report is designed to tell you what we now know about our community and the challenges we face.

Acknowledgments

The Madison County Needs Assessment would not have taken place without the commitment of community members, shepherding the process so that it truly reflected the community. Parker Consulting, Inc. identified a list of potential community partners to be involved with the process. United Way of Madison County helped in recruiting individuals, who represented each important contingency for involvement in the process, and invited them to join the Needs Assessment Committee. Those individuals who agreed to serve are listed below. These individuals have helped to make this a true needs assessment of our community. From approving the methodology, to designing the survey, to helping form the structure and content of the focus groups, to approving the final report, each member has provided area content expertise and leadership. The result is a credible product that should only serve and improve the community.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Parker Hannifin Corporation
The Boeing Company
The Huntsville Times
The Schools Foundation
TARCOG
UAHuntsville

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Claire B. Parker and Parker Consulting Inc. provided research support to the 2009 Madison County Needs Assessment Committee. Parker Consulting Inc. has been providing market research and marketing consulting services to corporations, not-for-profits, B2B and consumer businesses since 1977 with a focus on high quality quantitative research. They have conducted Needs Assessments for other communities including one commissioned by United Way of Central Alabama (Birmingham).

In addition, community members across Madison County (including individuals, heads of households, business and government representatives, and service providers) contributed to this project by participating in surveys and focus groups. We are grateful for their honest input and insight into our community.

Special thanks go to those who will use this document in the future to identify and develop strategies to improve our community and the lives of our neighbors.

The Committee's Challenge to the Community

Madison County, its cities and towns, is consistently recognized nationally as a great place to live, work and retire. Yet, like any community, Madison County has situations that prevent all citizens from enjoying the benefits afforded by living here.

The future of Madison County rests with its citizens. The community must join together to find ways to positively and proactively address the most pressing challenges and to create a clear vision for a brighter future that improves life for everyone in our community. United Way of Madison County commissioned this needs assessment to provide the data and insight needed to begin addressing the community change process.

Community Needs Assessment Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of the Community Needs Assessment is to obtain an independent analysis of the challenges facing residents. This summary describes the most current needs and challenges in Madison County. While the needs in Madison County are challenging, past experience indicates that impacting the lives of our fellow residents is possible through cooperation and compassion.

Data collection began with the creation and distribution of a community survey in June 2008. Originally, the Community Needs Assessment Committee set a goal of obtaining 1,000 responses as a representative stratified random sample of Madison County. This goal was exceeded four months later when responses from 1,194 households were recorded. Of the 1,194 responses, 289 were from those who self-identified as either government/civic representatives, business leaders or service providers. An item on the survey asked their interest in participating in a focus group discussion. All those expressing an interest were invited to participate. Fifty-one accepted the invitation and gathered for in-depth discussion groups led by trained local facilitators. Seven distinct groups: Health and Human Resources, Faith, Education, Service Providers, Government, Corporate, and Media discussed their perspective of community needs and resources.

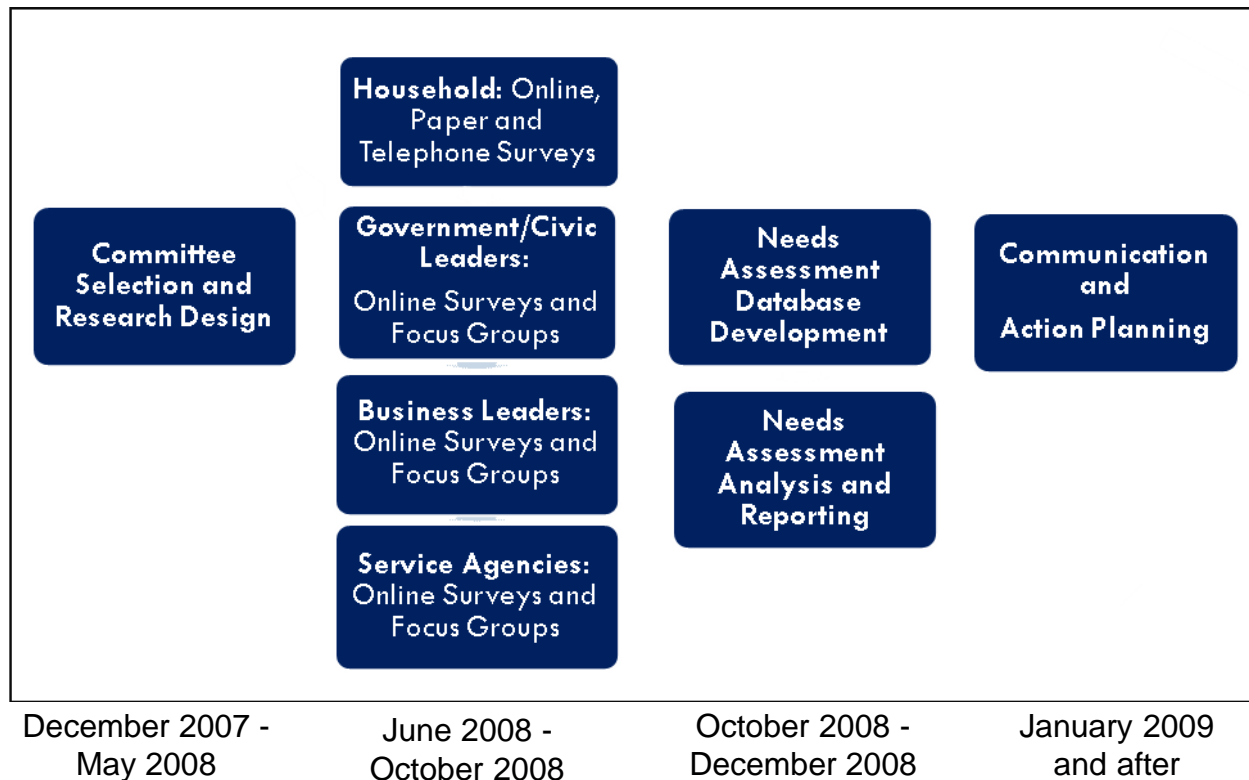
Analysis Methodology

To ensure reliable and valid results, surveys were completed through three methods: on-line, paper, and telephone survey. These methodologies provided a means for every resident of the county to be involved in some way. Using 2007 Census Bureau population estimates, a stratified sample methodology was developed to reflect age, gender, and income distribution within Madison County. Quotas were set for each of these demographics to ensure representation of each variable that generally affects demand for services.

At the end of the survey period, actual surveys were compared to quotas to determine any under-represented or over-represented populations. All of Madison County was adequately represented by the 1,194 surveys, giving statistical validity for the total county of + 3.72% at the 99% confidence level. However, the quotas indicated that low-income populations were over represented. This is attributable to the highly effective survey distribution and collection at the agencies as carried out by the Needs Assessment Committee. These surveys were balanced in the analysis through weighting of the income distribution to more accurately represent the actual income distribution of the county. Likewise, each of the geographic areas in the survey was tracked based on resident zip code to ensure that all geographies of the county were represented. These areas included North Huntsville, West Huntsville, South Huntsville, the City of Madison and the remainder of Madison County. The Committee concluded that the number of surveys for each area was adequate to represent all of Madison County and endorsed the methodology for data collection and analysis.

While the Community Needs Assessment survey process (See Table I) took place during a year of dramatic economic events, the Committee is confident of the results and believes the process used produced an accurate picture of both immediate and future needs of Madison County households.

Table I: Community Needs Assessment Survey Process



THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

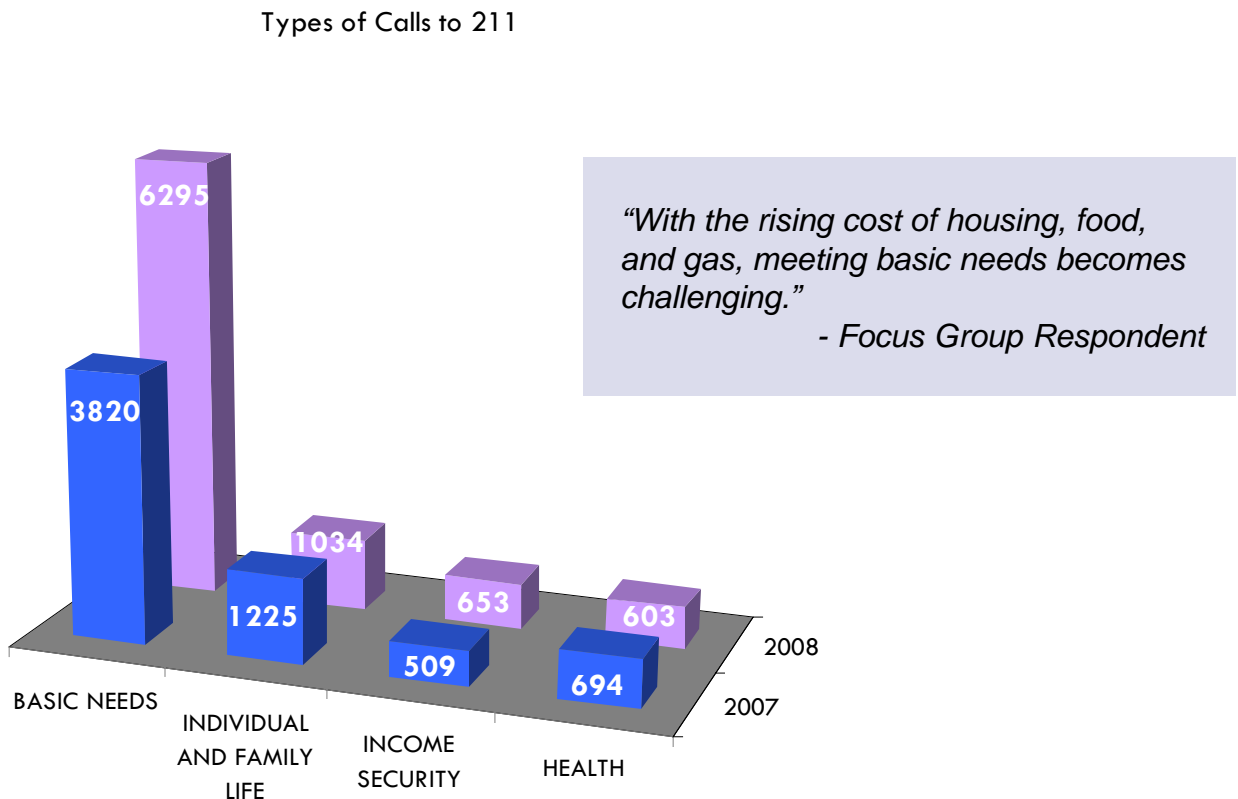
The Needs Assessment was designed to address three category areas:

- Financial and Economic Challenges
- Health Challenges
- Education, Youth and Family Challenges

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Although Madison County has been somewhat immune from the most severe economic downfalls of 2008, the ripple effects impacting the State of Alabama and the country as a whole are evident. Calls to 2-1-1 reflect the financial struggles of the community. (2-1-1 is a free phone based information and referral service that is funded by United Way of Madison County. It connects the caller to specialists who can help assess the caller's needs and connect them to services using a comprehensive database.) Chart I shows the changing nature of calls to 2-1-1 for assistance. Calls asking for assistance with basic needs such as food and shelter represent both the highest volume of calls and the largest increase in calls from 2007 to 2008. This data is particularly significant for social service organizations that recognize the demands for services are growing faster than services can be provided.

Chart I: Changes In Demand For Services



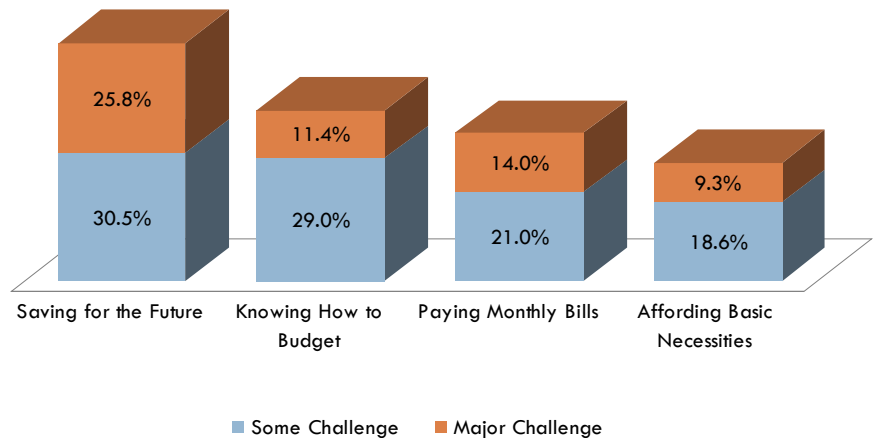
Focus group participants also recognized the immediate impact of financial challenges but tended to take a long-term perspective on the financial and economic challenges facing the county. The consensus of the group was that the financial and economic challenges will be felt most strongly in 2009 and 2010.

Financial Stability

Statistics confirm the growing concern regarding the financial impact of a struggling economy, as indicated in Chart II. The financial challenges most affecting Madison County households are:

- Saving for the future
- Knowing how to budget
- Making basic payments on monthly bills
- Affording basic necessities

Chart II: Percent of Households with Challenges



Budgeting, Paying Bills, and Affording Necessities

Interestingly, concerns about Financial Stability affect both working and non-working residents in every financial demographic. However, these concerns are slightly less challenging for college-educated residents and for married residents.

“So many people live above their means and have not been taught about budgeting and saving.”

- Focus Group Respondent

Focus group respondents also recognized that financial concerns can impact other life areas including health and education as noted in comments below.

“Our economy is very scary which trickles down in every aspect of this survey - health care, education, stress levels, etc.”

“Finances impact health, health care and education.”

- Focus Group Respondents

Employment

Unemployment

Statistics confirm concerns with growing unemployment. While the average unemployment rate in Madison County was 3.6% at the time of the survey, one in four (25%) households (See Graph 1) indicated that unemployment is a challenge they are facing. This discrepancy between the personal experience and the economic data may result from unreported unemployment, unemployment of another adult in the household, and concern of working people that they may become unemployed in the near future.

Lack of job readiness is a second issue. Chart III shows one in five households (22.1%) indicates a problem finding a job because of a lack of education or skills.

Graph 1

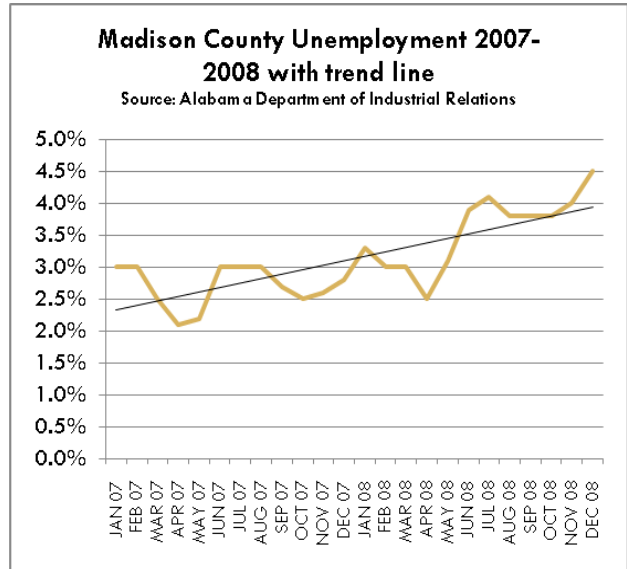
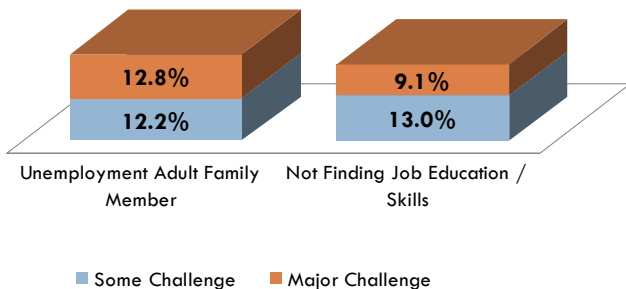


Chart III: Percent of Households with Employment Challenges



Underemployment / Low-income Workers

About 17% of employed respondents are making under \$25,000 annually. As might be expected, these low-income working residents experience greater financial, health and educational challenges. Fact: Families making under \$25,000 annually are identified by the 2009 Health and Human Services Federal Poverty Guidelines as being at the poverty level. As of 2007, the national median household income is \$50,740 and the median household income in the State of Alabama is \$40,554*.

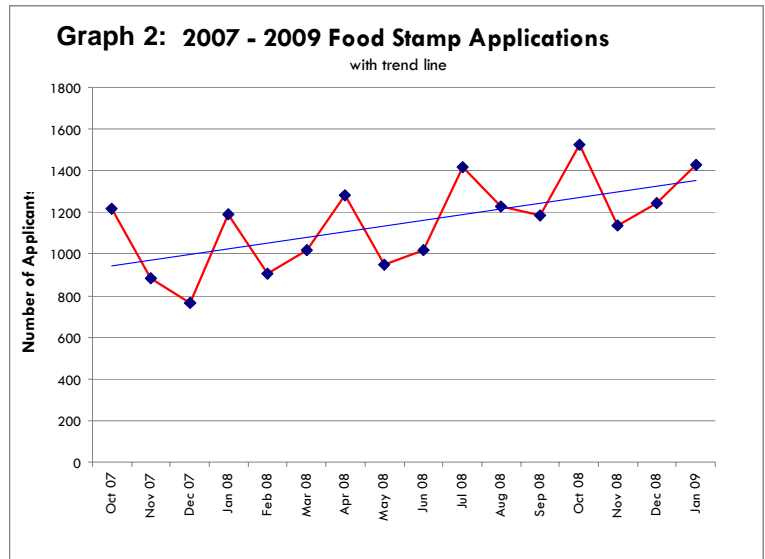
The responses of households with underemployed, low income workers are correlated with the following demographics:

- have children in the household
- are heads of household (primarily single or divorced females)
- are younger than 34 years of age
- are African-American
- have lived in Madison County less than 4 years

Focus group participants spoke of a “new class of poor” or the “working poor” as a population that is particularly affected by the issues in the survey. Generally, these residents earn too much to qualify for income-based assistance programs, but not enough to begin to achieve financial stability.

* US Census data for family of four.

Graph 2 shows the Food Stamp applications received by the Madison County Department of Human Resources for fifteen months from October 2007 through January 2009. The increased number of applications further reflects the increasing demand for basic needs from the population as a whole and particularly for lower-income families from all demographic groups.



Transportation

Nearly one-fourth of residents (23.9%) indicate that lack of transportation is a need. This issue was most frequently reported by low-income and unmarried residents. However, the need for reliable, accessible transportation crosses all of the following categories: education levels, employment, gender, age and ethnicity.

Housing Availability and Affordability

Finding affordable housing is an issue for one in four respondents (25.9%), affecting both working and non-working residents. Paying too much for housing (over 40% of income) is a greater concern for people younger than 25 years, ethnic minorities, low-income, non-married and less educated residents.

Differences in Financial and Economic Challenges by Household Characteristics

Concerns About Savings and Retirement Affect All

The greatest financial issue identified by the survey is being unable to save for retirement. This concern is common to every demographic group surveyed in Madison County.

Household Demographics Affect Financial Challenges

Following national trends of the past twenty years, marital status has the greatest impact on the level of financial and economic challenge households are likely to experience. Similarly, those who are not married have the greatest challenges, and females have greater economic challenges than do males. This also reflects national trends.

Impact of Financial Instability is Concentrated Among Certain Population Groups

While economic and financial concerns affect households at all levels, residents in certain groups are more likely to be unable to pay bills, to be unemployed, to have a need for a budget, pay too much for housing, to be unable to afford basic necessities, and to be unemployed because of lack of education or skills. In particular, the following factors correlate with financial instability: being younger, non-white, having an income less than \$25,000 annually, being unmarried, without a college education.

HEALTH CHALLENGES

The health priorities of Madison County households are:

- The effect of stress on the household
- The cost of prescription drugs
- High blood pressure

Stress - The Most Commonly Identified Health Issue

Two out of three Madison County residents (67%) report that their households are affected by stress in some way, identifying stress as their number one health issue. Stress was reported as an even greater challenge for households than were financial concerns. Because stress is associated with a number of other health problems, the implication of this finding is that, regardless of its source, stress is likely to play a causal role in future health issues in Madison County.

“Financial issues have been the most discussed issues in our household. From that comes most disagreements and stress in our everyday lives because not having enough makes us incapable of doing many productive things.”

- Survey Participant

Which challenges are most likely to correlate with stress?

FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

- Saving for the future
- Affording basic necessities
- Paying monthly bills
- Knowing how to budget
- Needing legal help
- Cost of prescription drugs
- Paying too much for housing

HEALTH CHALLENGES

- Adult mental illness
- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

It is important to note that low-income working adults report the greatest stress of any group. For working adults with less than \$25,000 annual income, 81% of respondents indicate stress is a concern in their lives.

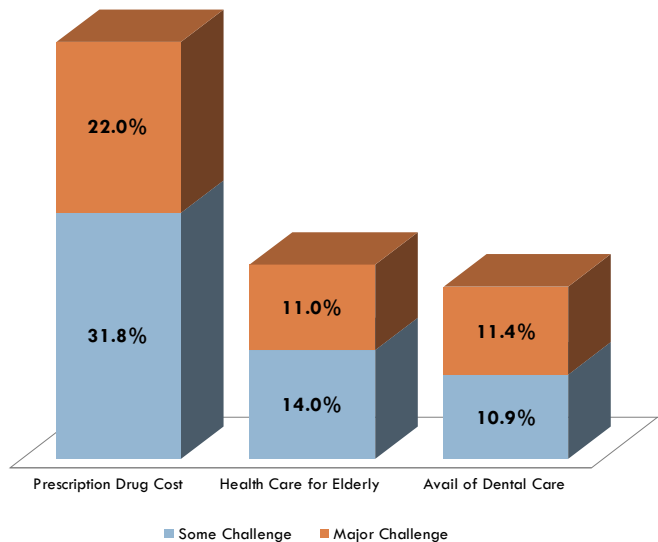
Priority Health Issues

Chart IV summarizes the three prevalent health issues in Madison County, with the cost of prescription drugs as the priority issue.

The following households are more likely to feel the impact of prescription drug costs:

- Low to mid-income (\$15,000 - \$50,000)
- Those without a college education
- Females

Chart IV: Percentage of Households with Health Challenges



Health Care for Elderly

Not surprisingly, those aged 75 and older have the greatest challenges accessing care.

Availability of Dental Care

Members of low-income households, particularly those with limited education and those not working, have the greatest challenge.

This is supported by a national study reported in Kaiser Health Facts (2008):

- 35.1% of adults had not visited the dentist within the past year;
- 14.7% reported that this was due to cost.

Health Conditions

Madison County adults face a wide range of specific health challenges and conditions Table II depicts.

Table II - Primary Health Conditions by Age Group

<i>Health Condition</i>	<i>Percent of Households Affected</i>	<i>Group Experiencing Greatest Impact</i>
High Blood Pressure	40.6%	People over 55 and low-income (\$15,000 - \$25,000 annually) households
Adult Obesity	36.2%	Women across all demographics
Adult Mental Illness/Emotional Illness	29.7%	White and Asian respondents
Smoking	28.5%	People under 45 years old, low income, working, less educated, unmarried
Diabetes	24.0%	People aged 55 - 64
Cancer	21.6%	People aged 65 - 74

Community Health Care Concerns

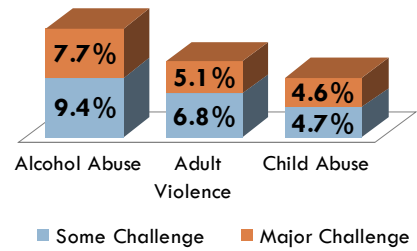
Representatives from various community organizations and agencies identified issues of prevention and management of the aforementioned adult health conditions on the survey. In Focus Groups, participants discussed the impact of these conditions on the workplace, on social service providers, and on the financial situation of the households dealing with health challenges. Further discussion indicated urgency in addressing challenges of children's health issues due to the potential future impact on Madison County.

Family Violence and Substance Abuse

Although service providers and government and business representatives prioritized these issues as a greater challenge in Madison County, households surveyed did not confirm this (as Chart V illustrates). While it might be suggested that these challenges are under-reported by household respondents, the confidential safeguards embedded in the survey process assure the reliability of the results.

While fewer households report being affected by abuse and violence than other health challenges, these challenges occur across all demographics within the county. However, certain households are more at risk. Lower income (\$15,000 - 25,000) households and single people are more likely to report being impacted by adult violence or abuse. However, there was no significant difference across groups regarding incidents of child abuse.

Chart V: Percent of Households Experiencing Violence and/or Abuse



Differences in Health Challenges by Household Characteristics.

Table III - Age Has A Great Impact on the Type of Health Challenge

<i>Health Need</i>	<i>Highest Priority Need Among</i>
Children's medical care	Young adults (age 25-34)
Stress-related issues	Middle-aged adults (age 35-54)
Dental issues	Middle-aged adults (age 35-54)
Adolescent mental/emotional issues	Middle-aged adults (age 35-54)
Childhood obesity	Middle-aged adults (age 35-54)
High blood pressure	Adults (age 55-65)
Diabetes	Adults (age 55-65)
Cancer	Adults (age 65-75)
Availability of health care	Adults (age 75+)

No single age group is more affected by health concerns than any other group. However, each group expressed unique concerns.

Income Also Has A Major Impact

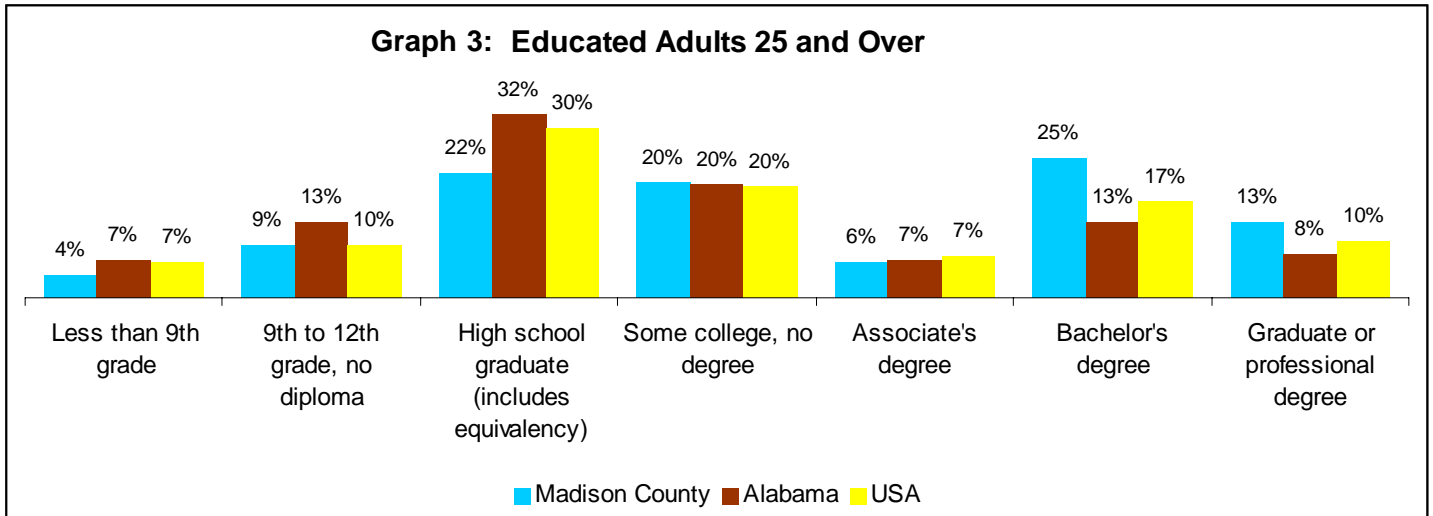
Prescription drug cost is more of a concern for middle income and working people. Other health issues have a greater impact on lower income residents.

Certain Health Challenges Are Less Differentiated by Demographics

The presence of an adult or child with special needs in the household affects all demographics. Women are more likely to report that they are affected by adult obesity, but obesity is reported as a health challenge for all demographic groups. Alcohol abuse and related issues, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and child abuse are similarly reported as concerns by all demographic groups.

EDUCATION, YOUTH AND FAMILY CHALLENGES

The 2005 - 2007 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau shows the estimated education level distribution of adults 25 years and older in Madison County, Alabama. Graph 3 shows Madison County's relatively higher level of education with more county residents having college and professional degrees compared to Alabama as a whole and the nation.



Due perhaps to the relatively high level of education in Madison County, educational concerns rated lower in the 2008 survey than did financial and health issues. However, educational challenges still occur among specific demographic groups. High school dropouts, lack of preparation for college, adult illiteracy and racial/ethnic discrimination were expressed as concerns by the following demographic groups:

- Minority residents
- People earning less than \$15,000 annually
- Singles and people living with a significant other
- High school education residents

This suggests that while education concerns affect a smaller percent of the population than do health and financial issues, their impact is still clearly felt by certain members of the community.

Affording College

One-third (32.4%) of all households (not just those with children) are concerned about affording college. The greatest impact is among respondents who are from 45 - 54 years of age, likely to be parents of college or high school students.

Demographically, the following factors are most likely to be found in households with the greatest challenge in affording college:

- Hispanic or African-American ethnicity
- Income under \$35,000
- Unmarried resident
- High school education
- Unemployed household members

Child Care

The largest education priority identified by respondents was affordable, quality child care. One in three households with children (33.8%) reports dealing with the challenge of affordable child care. The challenges related to child care are greatest among low-income, single females.

Summer Programs

Respondents indicated that the second biggest challenge they face is finding a summer program for children. Three in ten households (29.9%) have a challenge with finding a summer program for children.

Early Education / Preschool / Performing at Grade Level

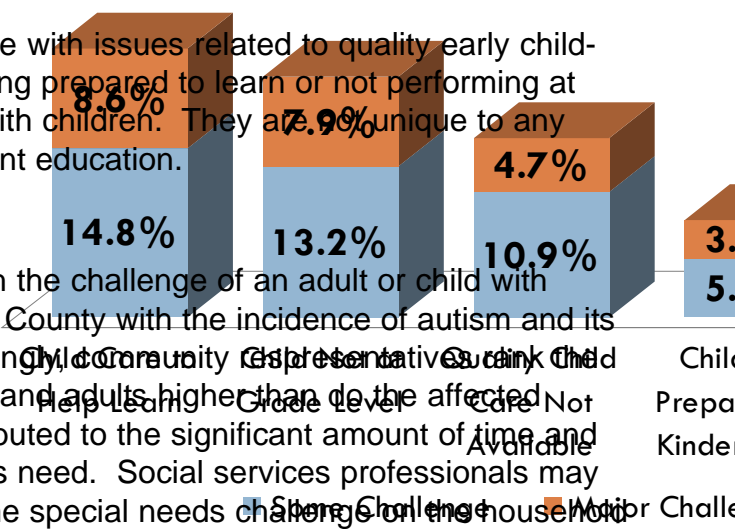
Chart VI:

Education Challenges for Families With Younger Children

As Chart VI illustrates, families with children also struggle with issues related to quality early childhood experiences and school success, whether it be being prepared to learn or not performing at grade level. These concerns occur among all families with children. They are unique to any specific age, income, employment status or level of parent education.

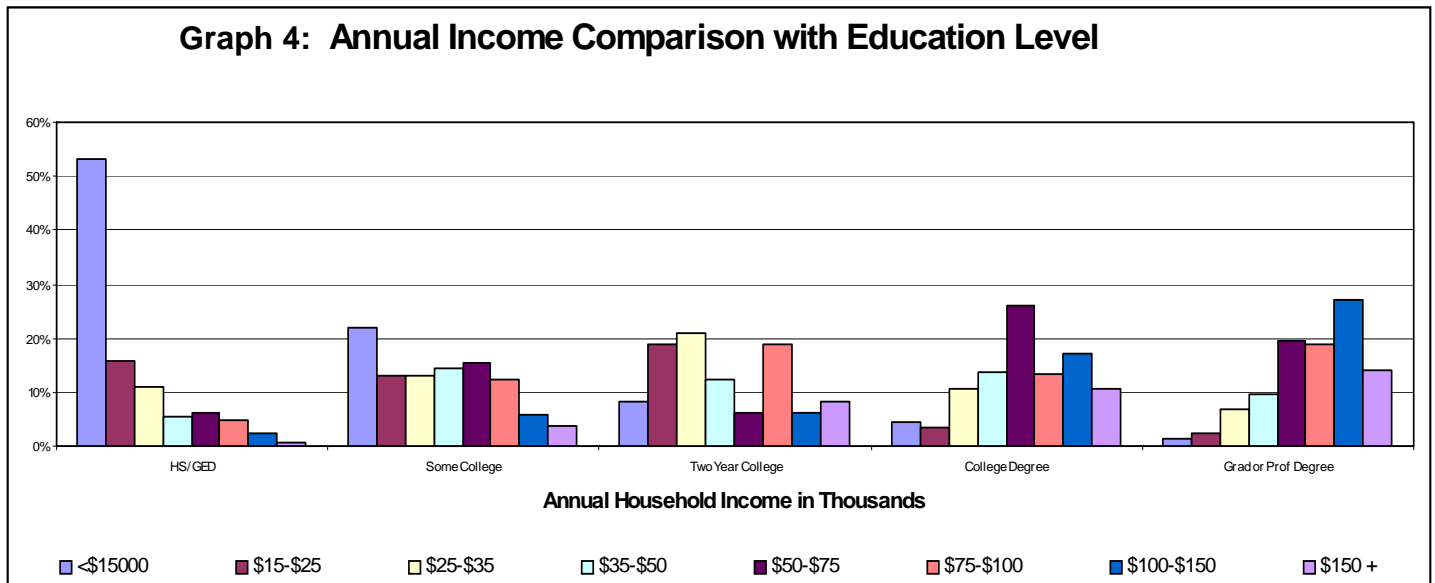
Special Needs Children and Adults

Approximately one in five households surveyed deal with the challenge of an adult or child with special needs. There is a particular concern in Madison County with the incidence of autism and its impact on the family and the education system. Interestingly, the community representative survey and issues associated with caring for special needs children and adults higher than do the affected households rank these issues. This finding may be attributed to the significant amount of time and money invested in providing the resources these families need. Social services professionals may also be more aware of the long term financial strain of the special needs challenge on the household and on service providers assisting the family.



Needs Assessment Confirms Long-Term Impact of Low Education

Graph 4 compares the annual household income to the level of education for survey respondents. It clearly shows the direct relationship between education level and household income in Madison County.



The needs assessment survey results also confirm the long-term impact of education on household challenges. In 2008, households with low levels of education in Madison County were more challenged in many areas including:

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| Financial Matters | Inability to pay bills, unemployment, budgeting issues, needing legal help, foreclosure/eviction |
| Health Issues | Smoking, lack of dental care, heart attack and stroke, not getting medical care for children, low birth weight babies |
| Education/Parenting | Inability to afford college, young adults not employed due to lack of education, high school dropout, adult illiteracy, school transportation needs |

Community representatives are also aware of the long-term impact of education challenges, viewing education as the key to successful future economic growth and as a way to prevent future health and social challenges. Today's education problems become the financial, health and education/parenting challenges of the future.

Major Trends in Education, Youth and Family Challenges by Household Characteristics

Local data confirms national trends in the following areas:

Marital Status

Marital status has the greatest impact on the level of education and other challenges faced by Madison County residents. Unmarried residents (single, divorced, living with a significant other) are most likely to face challenges measured in the survey. Low-income individuals, particularly those with an income below \$15,000 annually (100% below Federal poverty guidelines) face the most significant challenges.

Education

Residents without a college education face significantly more challenges related to Education, Youth and Family.

Ethnicity

Hispanic and African-American respondents have greater challenges in these areas.

FOCUS GROUP INSIGHTS

At the time of the survey, Madison County was receiving positive ratings compared to those received by other communities in the United States, including a #1 rating by Kiplinger's magazine in 2009. However, focus group participants are clearly aware of issues that continue to challenge the community and its residents.

Analysis of responses gathered in Focus Groups with community representatives concluded that the four greatest areas of concern about the long-term issues for Madison County are:

1. Access to health care
2. Education
3. Financial literacy and budgeting
4. Challenges facing seniors

Access to Health Care

Community representatives talked about health insurance as a key factor in access to health care and they indicated a gap in availability of care for the uninsured. Participants focused mostly on access to health care - both lack of health insurance and increased demand on health service providers. These leaders discussed specific medical conditions, particularly treatable and preventable conditions such as adult and child obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and chronic illness. However, their focus was on the county-wide state of health care and the delivery of that care, not specific conditions. For example, Huntsville City Schools' HEALS (Health Establishments At Local Schools) clinics are known to have been effective in increasing access to health care for children, but they are not in every school in the County.

Leaders in the groups expressed specific concerns with two primary health issues:

Challenges related to prenatal care, infant mortality, and teen pregnancy

This discussion related to teenage sexual activity and teen pregnancy, especially the perception surrounding pregnancy. Pregnancy was referred to as a "badge of courage," often perpetuating a sense of entitlement in the teen mother.

Mental and emotional conditions

Access to care for adults with mental and emotional illness is a challenge, both for in-home care and for transportation to a care provider. Leaders also observed that it is a challenge to find services for children with mental and emotion conditions within the education systems.

Youth and Education

Madison County leaders believe that the greatest priority for serving children and youth is to increase active parenting and parental involvement in education. Affordable, quality child care and early childhood education were also seen as key factors for success in education.

Providing developmentally appropriate information both to child care givers and to parents at home was identified as significant opportunities to address educational challenges. Leaders are also keenly aware of the challenges schools face in dealing with special needs such as mental illness, dyslexia, Asperger syndrome, and autism.

Financial Literacy and Budgeting

County leaders identified the basics of financial literacy - understanding the household income and how it is spent - as an important skill needed in today's economy.

Families facing financial crises are described as being "on the fringe" or "a new class of poor". Due to current economic problems, people who were once "middle class" are now struggling.

Homelessness is also perceived to be increasing as a challenge for Madison County and was identified as a problem that needs action.

Challenges Facing Seniors

Several topics were seen by leaders as having a particularly strong impact on seniors - health care, mental illness, transportation, housing and finances. In particular, County leaders mentioned affordability and availability of housing will have an increasing impact on the senior population of Madison County.

Survey responses from seniors 65 and older confirm focus group comments, particularly in regards to access to affordable health care and senior care. Seniors report being less concerned with finances as compared to younger residents.

Conclusion

The 2009 Community Needs Assessment analyzed 1,194 survey responses to identify the areas of greatest need in our community. Participants in the assessment indicated pronounced health, financial, and educational challenges. While there was some agreement across the various population groups, significant differences arose in each group. A particular effort was made to include recognized community leaders in the focus groups. Those in positions of influence are critical to the process of not only understanding the complexity of each need, but also to going forward with a plan for improvement. Addressing these issues will take a united effort, one that must include not only community leaders, but also citizens with the passion and power to start the change process. Policy makers, service providers, and other concerned community leaders are urged to use this assessment to create lasting community change to address real community needs.

Going Forward

On behalf of the Community Needs Assessment Committee, United Way of Madison County is pleased to present these results to the community in an effort to initiate change that addresses local issues identified by the assessment. United Way hopes to facilitate the community's effort to address these needs and serve as a convener for the community, addressing the challenges identified within the parameters of our three focus areas: Education, Income, and Health. Once the strategies for greatest impact have been identified, we will work to increase available financial resources through our annual United Way campaign. Then through our volunteer led allocations process, we will provide additional resources to meet identified needs through appropriate programs and ensure accountability for program outcomes.

The community must come together to find ways to address the issues this Community Needs Assessment has identified and to address the challenges by establishing a clear vision for a brighter future that will improve lives in our community.

Madison County's future can be significantly improved with your help. You can make a difference.

- Become better informed about our community.
- Share this report with others who want to affect change.
- Use this information to enhance existing programs.
- Use this report to assist agencies, communities of faith, and other Madison County groups to develop innovative plans to address key issues.
- Provide funds or develop creative ways to increase funding for programs and services.
- Volunteer with a social service organization, your community of faith, or civic organization in Madison County.

United Way of Madison County is forming Impact Councils to further explore these results in order to create meaningful and lasting change in the community. If you are interested in joining this effort, please visit our website at www.madisoncountycare.org.

Data Notes:

- For Madison County Household Survey Participation and Demographics, see Appendix 1.
- For Ranked Household Issues, see Appendix 2.
- For Complete Data Sets, see Appendix 3.

Any questions should be forwarded to Parker Consulting Inc., at claire.parker@parkerconsultinginc.com