

FIREFLY

ENGAGE. EDUCATE. INSPIRE.



**Early
Head Start**

2024 Community Needs Assessment
Early Head Start Home-Based Program
Pottawattamie County

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction..... | 3 |
| Community Characteristics | 4 |
| Geography, Governing Structure, Population..... | 4 |
| Demographics..... | 4 |
| Age..... | 4 |
| Race and Ethnicity | 5 |
| Gender..... | 6 |
| Marital Status and Family Structure | 6 |
| Income and Benefits..... | 7 |
| Poverty..... | 8 |
| Housing | 8 |
| Transportation..... | 8 |
| Education..... | 9 |
| Education attainment, Drop-out rates..... | 10 |
| Employment/Unemployment | 11 |
| Key Populations | 12 |
| Children Experiencing Homelessness | 12 |
| Child Welfare/Children in Foster Care | 13 |
| Children with Disabilities | 13 |
| Households with Public Assistance..... | 14 |
| English Fluency | 15 |
| Birth Trends | 15 |
| Birth to Teen Mothers, Adequate Prenatal Care, Infant/child death rate | 15 |
| Food Insecurity | 16 |
| Health Behaviors | 17 |
| Mental Health, Physical Environment, Immunization Rates | 17 |
| Childcare Trends | 20 |
| Stakeholder Surveys | 22 |

Introduction

Firefly maintains a grant from the Administration of Children and Families, Office of Head Start (GRANT #07CH011125), to serve Head Start-eligible children and families residing in Pottawattamie County, Iowa.

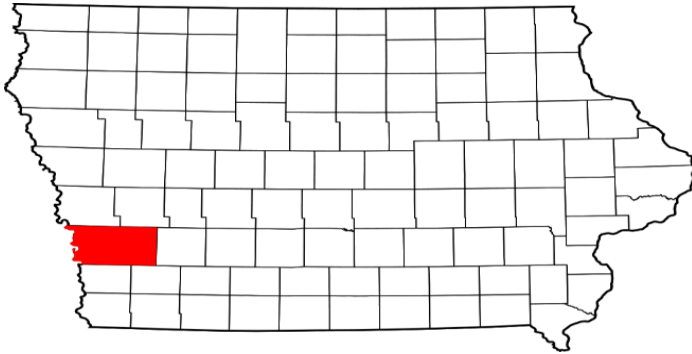
- Early Head Start funded enrollment-75

Early Head Start (EHS) at Firefly, is a free program for children of families with income below the federal poverty line, providing comprehensive early learning in a home-based setting. This successful program helps ensure children's readiness for school and increases parental knowledge of children's growth and development. Firefly's EHS program provides a home-based early learning program option to pregnant women and children birth to three years of age. The program also includes family support such as socialization and training to build parent skills and knowledge of child development and targeted attention on meeting specialized needs for children with disabilities, behavioral challenges, and health concerns. The EHS program provides inclusive services in the areas of health, mental health, nutrition, disabilities, and parent and community engagement, in addition to early childhood education as part of a comprehensive approach to school readiness. All children are screened for developmental progress as well as health, dental, vision, hearing, and nutrition assessments. Any identified concerns are referred to the appropriate professional for treatment. Firefly's EHS program staff understand that to support the child, they must support the whole family. Parents are their child (ren)'s first teachers, and our EHS staff works with each parent to understand and care for the children enrolled in our programs.

As an EHS grantee following Head Start Performance Standard HSPS 1302.11, Firefly is required to conduct a community-wide needs assessment at least once over the five-year grant period and update annually. This Community Needs Assessment gathers information to better understand the people served through the EHS program and ensures program options and interventions meet the needs of the individual communities being served. Data from the Community Needs Assessment is used to set measurable goals and guide program direction.

Community Characteristics

Geography



Pottawattamie County is in southwest Iowa and is 951.3 square miles. The county seat is in the metropolitan city of Council Bluffs (population 62,399). Other cities in the county include Avoca, Carson, Carter Lake, Crescent, Hancock, Macedonia, McClelland, Minden, Neola, Oakland, Shelby, Treynor, Underwood, and Walnut. There are no other cities in the county with a population larger than 5,000. Pottawattamie County has a total population of 93,179 with 6.5% of the population under the age of 9 and 5% under the age of 5. Over 96% of the land in Pottawattamie County is considered rural.¹

County Governance Structure

Pottawattamie County is managed by a Board of Supervisors consisting of five elected members with staggered four-year terms. The Board acts as a general business manager for the county government. Other elected officials include the Attorney, Auditor, Recorder, Sheriff and Treasurer. In Council Bluffs as well as other cities within the county, a city mayor maintains the executive power. City Council structures approve the laws and policies by which each city government within the county operates. Pottawattamie County maintains a Local Emergency Management Commission comprised of a member of the County Board of Supervisors, the sheriff, and the mayor from each city within the county.²

Population Demographics

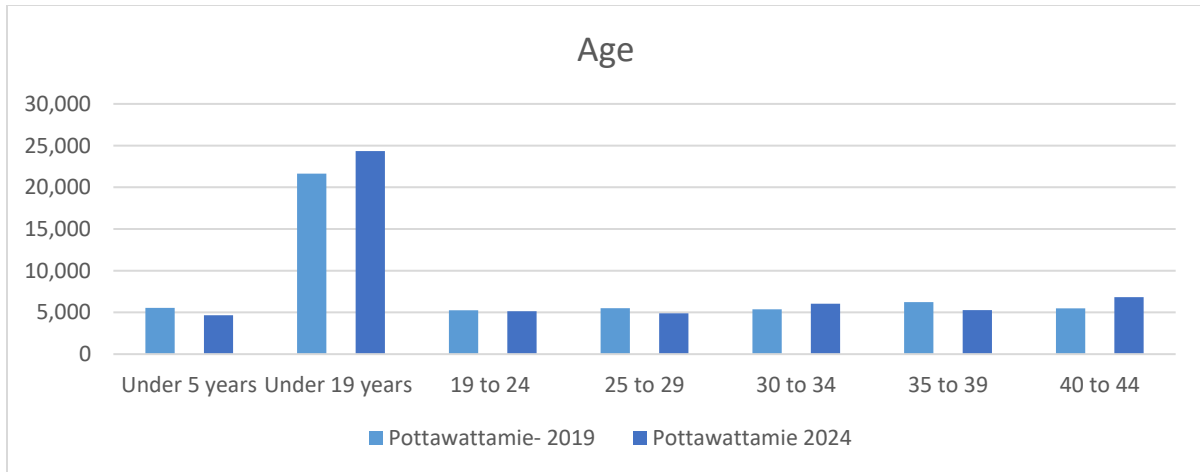
Age

The median age of the population in Pottawattamie County is 40.4 years. 4,668 individuals are under the age of five, and 24,340 are under the age of 19.³ The overall population of Pottawattamie County, Iowa, has not experienced significant growth but has had a moderate increase in children under 19.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau Rural Classification and Urban Area Criteria, 2010

² Pottawattamie County Emergency Management, 2019

³ U.S. Census, [DP05](#) American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2023



Race and Ethnicity

Population Demographics

| Population Demographics | Pottawattamie | Iowa |
|--|---------------|-----------|
| Total population (#) | 93,179 | 3,207,004 |
| White alone (not Hispanic) | 87.3% | 84.2% |
| Black/African American alone | 2.5% | 4.0% |
| Asian alone | <1.0% | 2.4% |
| American Indian/American Native | <1.0% | <1.0% |
| Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander | <1.0% | <1.0% |
| Some other race | 2.5% | 2.3% |
| Two or more races | 6.9% | 6.5% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 9.5% | 7.3% |

Pottawattamie County is comprised of a predominately White/Caucasian population (94.1%) and 9.5% are Hispanic or Latino (8,839).⁴ Pottawattamie County’s Hispanic and Spanish-speaking population is on the rise. According to the State Data Center of Iowa, from 2010 to 2022, Iowa experienced a 46.4% increase in its Hispanic population. It further estimates that 8.2% of Iowa’s Hispanic and Latino population is under age 5 and reports that Latinos have one of the highest concentrations of preschoolers among the other race or ethnic groups.⁵ Over 6% of families in Pottawattamie County households speak a language other than English at home, primarily Spanish.

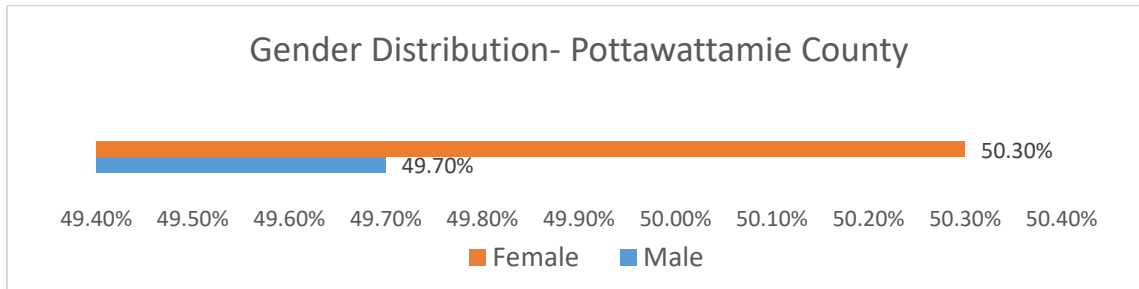
Nearly two-thirds (64.7%) of Hispanic households in Iowa include children under the age of 18. Hispanic/Latino households in Iowa have lower incomes (\$64,447) than the state average (\$70,771). They are also less likely to have health coverage than the state average (12.3% compared to a 4.5% state average).

⁴ U.S. Census, [DP05 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2023](#)

⁵ State Data Center of Iowa. [Latinos in Iowa: 2023](#)

During the most recent program term (2023-2024), Firefly served 30 participants whose primary language was Spanish. During the previous program term (2022-2023), Firefly served 15 participants whose primary language was Spanish. The families were served with bilingual Spanish-speaking staff or through interpreter services.

Gender



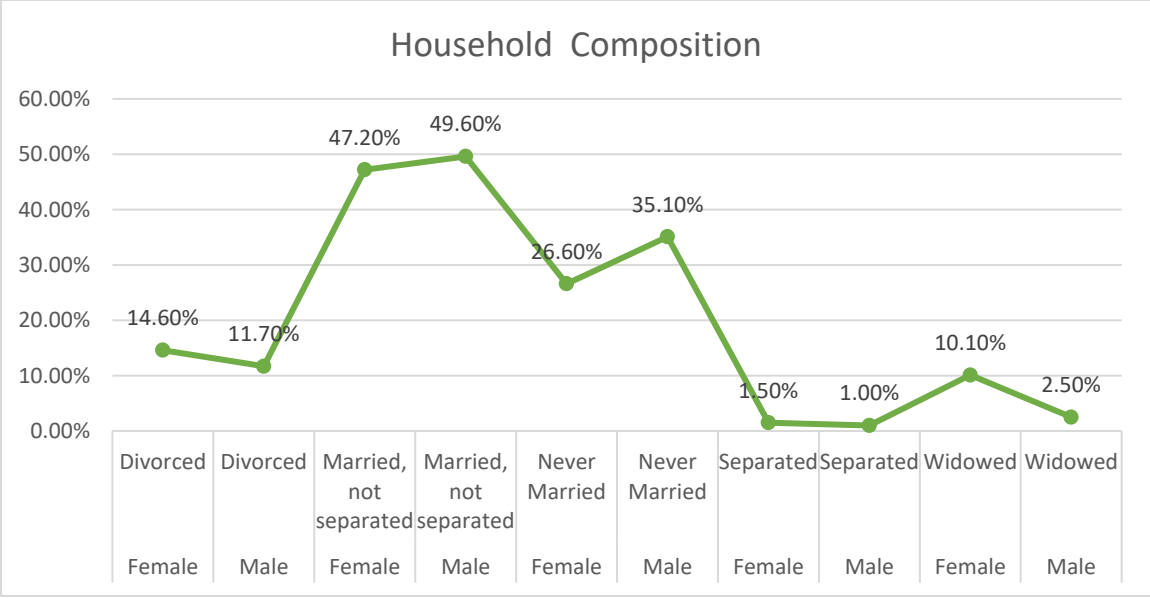
The gender distribution in Pottawattamie County is slightly higher for females (50.3%) than males (49.7%), which is comparable to the gender distribution of the nation.⁶ This has remained steady for several years.

Marital Status and Family Structure

The table below illustrates marriage rates for individuals in Pottawattamie County. Sixty-two percent of Pottawattamie County households are held by married persons; 16% of households have a female head of household.⁷ Thirty-eight percent of children in Pottawattamie County live in single-parent households compared to 31.8% for the State of Iowa. The rate of those single female, heads of household with children under the age of five living below the federal poverty level in Pottawattamie County is 22.4%. Single mothers are a substantial EHS demographic due to higher rates of poverty and needed support for young children. During the most recently completed program year, 47.5% of Firefly EHS program families were single-parent households per the Office of Head Start Program Information Report (PIR).

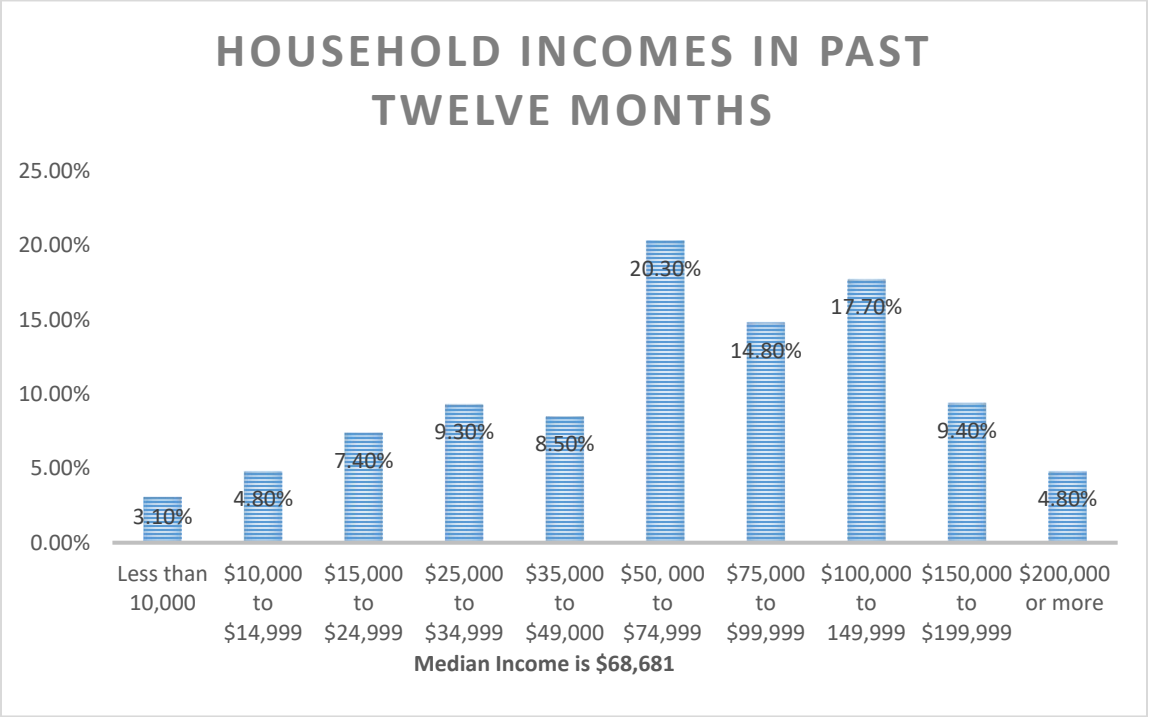
⁶ U.S. Census, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2022

⁷ U.S. Census, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2022



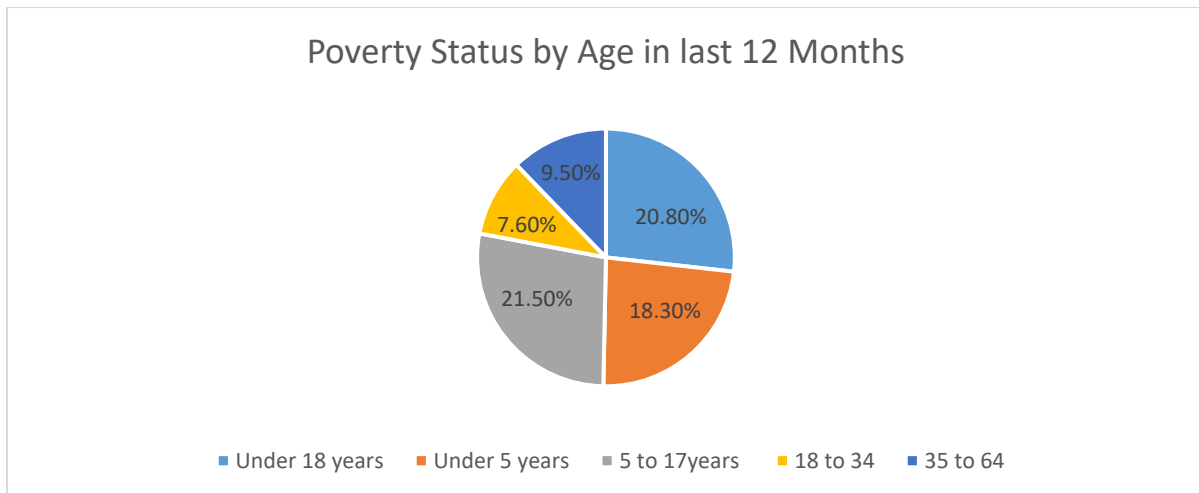
Income

Median household income is the most common economic measure for the financial health of a community. In Pottawattamie County, the median income is \$68,681, well below the Iowa state median income of \$70,571.



Poverty

According to the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (2023 1-Year Estimate), there are 4,668 children under the age of five living in Pottawattamie County.⁸ While the overall county poverty rate of 11.9% is slightly higher than the state average (11.0%), 18.3% percent of Pottawattamie County children under the age of 5 live below the federal poverty level, a rate that is 6.4% higher than the overall percentage of county residents living below the federal poverty level (12.1%).⁹ Firefly defines extreme poverty as families living below 50% of the federal poverty level. Currently, 6.7% of families in Pottawattamie County live in extreme poverty.



Housing Affordability

In Iowa, spending more than 30% of income on housing costs is the most common housing problem with housing costs at 39.5% for renters. Families with income below 50% of Iowa’s median family income are the most burdened by high housing costs in the state. Sixty-eight (68%) percent of these families pay more than 30% of their income on housing costs.¹⁰ In Pottawattamie County, 29.9% of renters pay 35% or more of their gross income in rent.¹¹

The new Head Start Performance Standards published August 21, 2024, allow for programs to adjust a family’s income to account for excessive housing costs when determining eligibility for EHS Services.

Transportation

Over 90% of Pottawattamie County is considered rural and this complicates families’ transportation barriers within the Firefly service area and illustrates the need for EHS home-

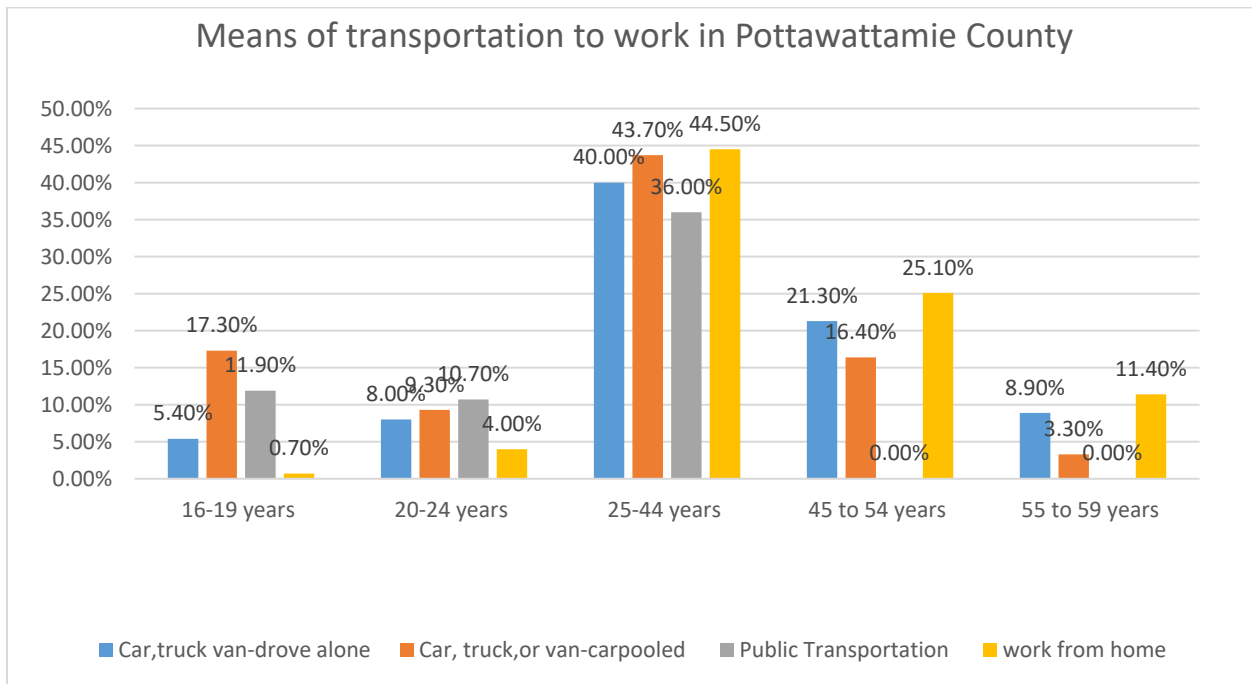
⁸ U.S. Census, S0101 Age and Sex, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimate, 2023

⁹ U.S. Census, S1701 Poverty Status in Past 12 Months, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2023

¹⁰ Iowa Department of Public Health, [Iowa State Health Assessment](#), 2022

¹¹ U.S. Census, DP04 Selected Housing Characteristics, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2023

based program options in Pottawattamie. There is no public transportation for families outside of the Council Bluffs city limit. Even within Council Bluffs, public transportation is run by the Omaha metro system across Iowa/Nebraska state line and has only two routes that each focus on a particular loop of the city. Over half (66.7%) of public transit users report having no car or only one car available.¹² Transportation challenges among rural Pottawattamie families or families with a lack of access to a vehicle is one of the primary drivers of Firefly’s home-based program option.



Communication Accessibility

From 2018-2022, the percentage of households in Pottawattamie County with access to communication devices such as a desktop computer, laptop, tablet, or other portable wireless device was 91.7% of total households. Among those households, approximately 84% had personal access to the internet via a broadband or cellular data subscription. Unsurprisingly, the rate of internet access through a wireless device such as a laptop, tablet, or a portable wireless computer increase based on household income. Over 36% (36.6%) of households earning less than \$20,000/year do not have internet access on their home devices, compared to just 6% of households with annual incomes over \$75,000.¹³

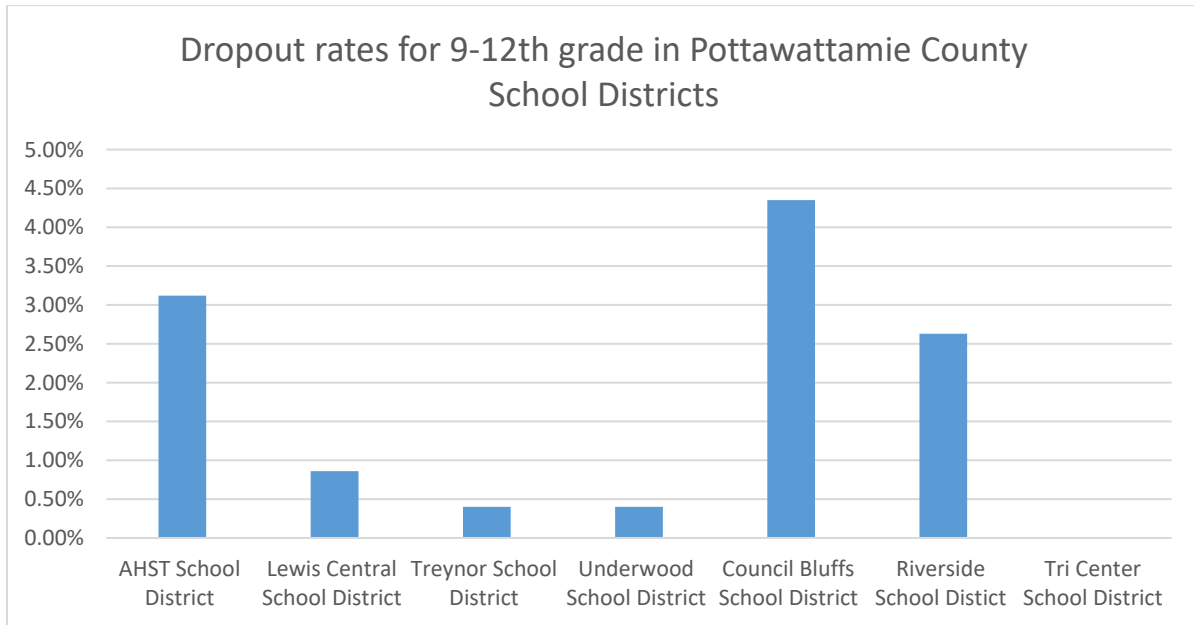
¹² U.S. Census, S0802 Means of Transportation, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2023

¹³ Iowa State Data Center, [Types of Computers and Internet Subscribers](#), 2023

Education

In Pottawattamie County, the high school graduation rate is 90%. County dropout rates have increased in recent years, shooting from .76% in 2020 to 1.89% in 2022.¹⁴ During the 2022-2023 school year, Council Bluffs Community School District, the largest district in the county, had a dropout rate of 2.93%, which increased to 3.66% for students with disabilities and 3.26% for English-language learners.¹⁵

High School Dropout



Research shows that children who are enrolled in high-quality early learning opportunities are more likely to graduate high school and enroll in college. Attending early childhood learning programs is linked to a 6% increase in high school graduation and a 5.5% increase in attendance at a four-year college.¹⁶

Educational attainment

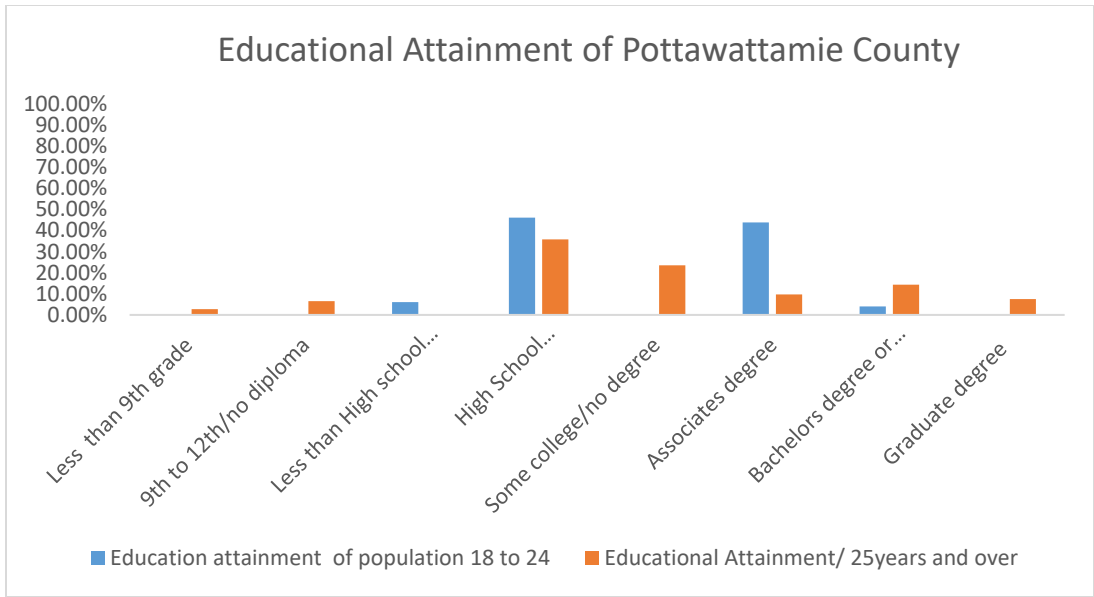
Over 90% of adults over 25 hold a high school diploma or equivalent. Less than a quarter (21.8%) of adults over the age of 25 hold a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁷

¹⁴ Omaha Community Foundation, [Education](#), 2024

¹⁵ Iowa Department of Education, [Graduation and Dropout Rates](#), 2023

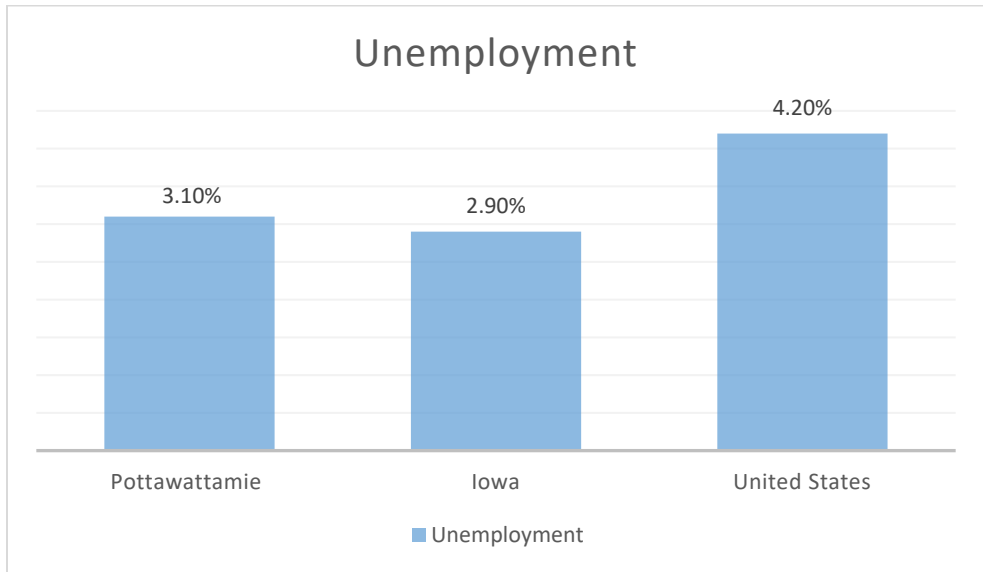
¹⁶ First Five Years Fund, [Why it Matters](#), 2024

¹⁷ U.S. Census, S1501 Education Attainment, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2023



Unemployment/Employment

Iowa’s seasonally adjusted unemployment rate is 2.9%, while the current (August 2024) unemployment rate in Pottawattamie County is 3.2%.¹⁸



Unemployment and underemployment create myriad challenges for families in need of childcare, the cost of which is untenable for many (see Childcare Trends, p. 18). For those who are employed in Pottawattamie County, the most common employment sectors for those who live in Pottawattamie County, IA, are Health Care and Social Assistance, Retail Trade, and

¹⁸ Iowa Workforce Development, [Local Area Unemployment Statistics](#), 2024

Manufacturing.¹⁹ Jobs where employees are more often hourly wage earners. First Five Years Fund (2024) reports that the impact of childcare challenges extends beyond families into the workplace. The national economy loses \$122 billion annually in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue due to issues accessing childcare.²⁰

In Pottawattamie County, the living wage (i.e., the hourly rate that an individual, working full-time, must earn to support themselves and/or their family) for a household led by one working adult with two children is \$46.23.²¹ Yet, the minimum wage in Iowa is just \$7.25 (this is also the federal minimum wage). The contrast in the annual wages is staggering: An individual earning a living wage of \$46.23 earns \$96,158 per year, while an individual earning the minimum wage earns just \$15,080 per year. Thus, a single adult earning minimum wage would have to work more than six times the hours—255 hours in a week or 12,480 in a year—to earn enough to support their two children.

Needs of Children and Families - Key Populations

Children Experiencing Homelessness

According to national estimates, 58% of those experiencing homelessness in 2023 were families with children under the age of 18 (108,190 children). Another 36 percent were adults over the age of 24, and 7% were young adults between 18 and 24 years of age. Most adults in families with children (70%) were 25 to 44 years of age.²² The HUD Point-in-Time Count is a one-night annual census that provides an unduplicated count of homeless persons according to HUD standards in the State of Iowa.

The rates of families experiencing homelessness in the Iowa Balance of State Continuum of Care (CoC), which includes Pottawattamie County, and Omaha and Council Bluffs CoC has continued to rise since 2020, increasing by 1.8% and 1.9%, respectively, between 2022 and 2023.²³ The number of people and families experiencing chronic homelessness surged by 45.2% in the Iowa Balance of State CoC and 63.6% in the Omaha and Council Bluffs CoC between 2022 and 2023. There is only one emergency shelter, MICA House in Council Bluffs, which serves families. In the 2022-2023 program year, Firefly served 10 children who were experiencing homelessness, this increased to 16 children served in the 2023-2024 program year per the Office of Head Start PIR.

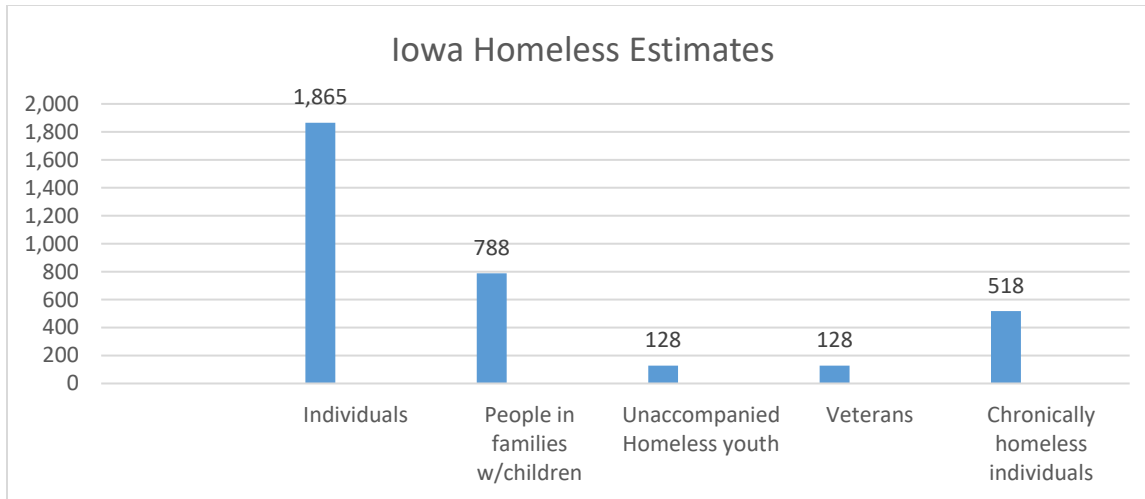
¹⁹ Data USA, [Pottawattamie County, IA](#), 2022

²⁰ First Five Years Fund, [Iowa State Fact Sheet](#), 2024

²¹ Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2024), "Living wage calculation for Pottawattamie County, Iowa," [Living Wage Calculator](#)

²² U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, [Annual Homelessness Assessment Report](#), 2023

²³ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, [2007 – 2023 Point in time \(PIT\) Estimates by Continuum of Care \(CoC\)](#)



Child Welfare

Currently, there are 1,376 children ages 0-17, in licensed foster care in Iowa.

Allegations of abuse and neglect are evaluated by a central intake unit in Des Moines for the state of Iowa. In Iowa calendar year 2023, there were 32,857 assessments for child abuse and neglect conducted. Out of those family and child assessments, 1,459 were confirmed cases of abuse and 6,480 were founded cases of abuse; 59% of all cases were for child neglect or denial of critical care. Of the total number of abused or neglected children, 46% were 5 years or younger, 26% were between 6-10 years, and the remaining 2,951 were older than 11 years.²⁴ EHS programs support, both mothers and fathers, in their role as primary caregivers and teachers of their children. EHS programs assist families in meeting their own personal goals and achieving self-sufficiency across a wide variety of domains, such as housing stability, continued education, and financial security, which in turn reduces economic stressors and prevents child abuse.

Firefly received 8 referrals from Iowa Health and Human Services (HHS) division in the 2023-2024 program year (per the PIR) to serve children and families. Firefly continues to develop partnerships with local HHS staff to serve more families through early intervention.

Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities are prioritized for enrollment at Firefly. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Disability Impacts Iowa report, one in four adults in Iowa (26%) have a disability.²⁵ During the 2021-2022 school year (most recent data), 13.7% of children enrolled in public schools were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).²⁶

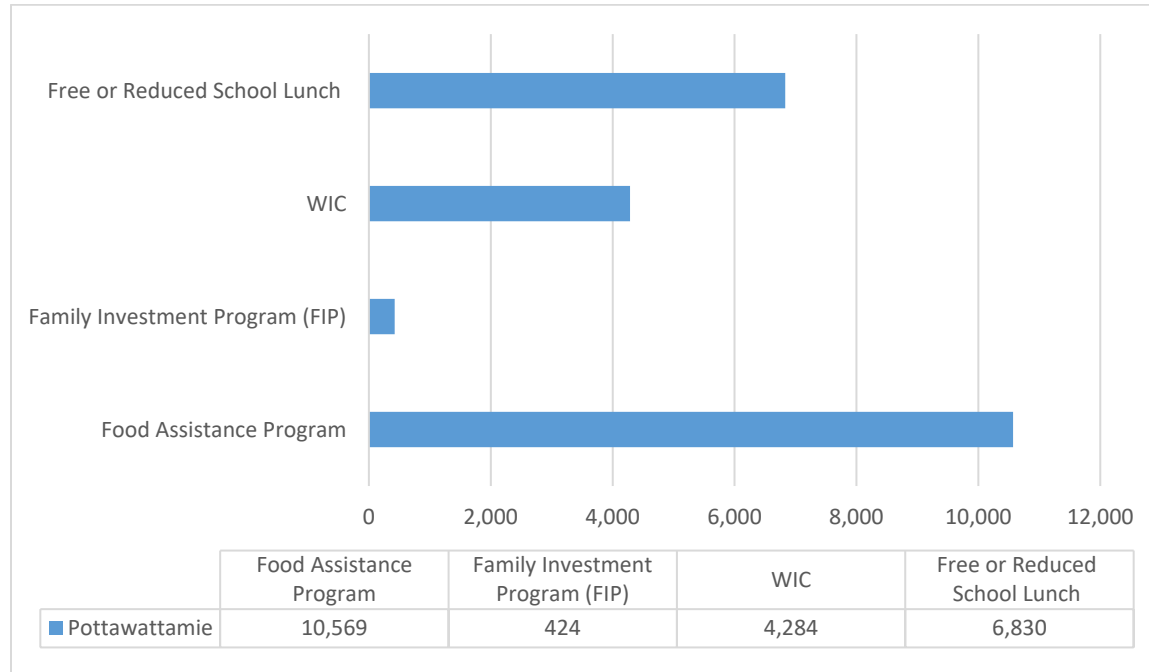
²⁴ Iowa Health and Human Services, [Child Welfare Data Report](#), 2023

²⁵ CDC National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, [Disability Impacts Iowa](#), 2022

²⁶ National Center for Education Statistics, [Digest of Education Statistics](#), 2022

Early identification and intervention can help children learn important skills to improve their growth and development. Firefly performs Ages and Stages (ASQ) developmental screenings on all enrolled children at 2 and 4 months, then at 4-month intervals up to 24 months old, and at 6-month intervals until the child reaches 36 months. Five children were referred to the Area Education Agency (AEA) for further testing in the 2023-2024 program term per the Office of Head Start PIR report.

Households with Public Assistance



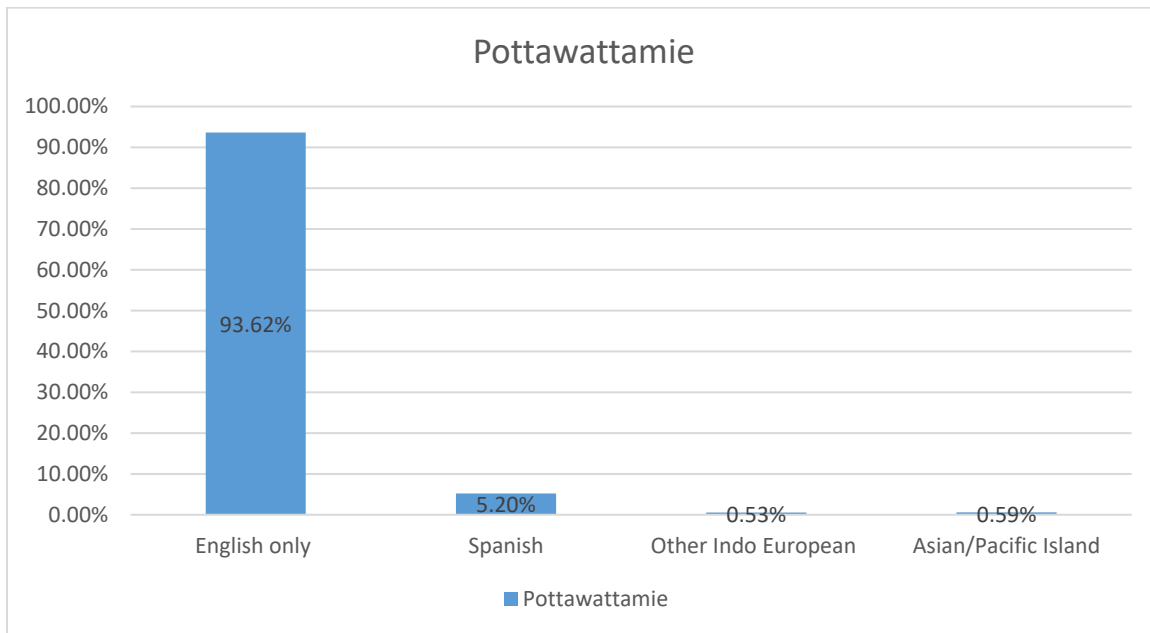
10,569 people participate in the Food Assistance Program in Pottawattamie County. The Iowa rate of participation is 88% compared to the national average of 82%. The payment per recipient in Pottawattamie County is \$170. Four hundred twenty-four people participate in the Family Investment Program (FIP) program in Pottawattamie County compared to 11,011 statewide.²⁷ The Family Investment Program is Iowa's program for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). It provides cash assistance, along with employment and training services, to low-income families in return for an agreement that recipients will work toward self-sufficiency and has a term of 60 months.

According to the local agency WIC Unduplicated Participation Report, 4,284 children and pregnant mothers receive Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits in Pottawattamie County compared to 96,105 statewide participants. 6,830 students receive free or reduced-price lunch across school districts in Pottawattamie County compared to 195,532 statewide (most recent data available).

²⁷ Annie E. Casey Foundation, [Kids Count Data Center](#), 2023

English Fluency

The graph identifies the four most common languages spoken by Pottawattamie County households. The majority (93.62%) speak only English with Spanish as the second highest primary language (5.2%). The EHS program at Firefly works with families through the employment of bilingual staff, language line and interpretation services, and printed learning materials in both English and Spanish.



Birth Trends

Birth to Teen Mothers

The birth rate among Pottawattamie County teenage girls ages 15-19 is 28.4 out of 1,000, which is significantly higher than the teen birth rate for the State of Iowa (14 per 1,000) and the national rate of 13.1 per 1,000 in 2023 (13.6 in 2022).^{28,29}

Adequate Prenatal Care

Women who obtain early and adequate prenatal care have the opportunity to be screened for other risk factors that may lead to birth complications such as hypertension and gestational diabetes. Early prenatal care also provides pregnant women with the opportunity for education to address risk factors that can be modified for poor outcomes such as smoking cessation, alcohol use, and self-care during pregnancy. When babies are born small, they are at risk for health and developmental issues in life. Low birth weights are often associated with a lack of

²⁸ Pottawattamie County Public Health (2023), *Community health improvement plan 2023-2025*, retrieved from [https://hhs.iowa.gov/media/8768/download?inline=.](https://hhs.iowa.gov/media/8768/download?inline=)

²⁹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [NCHS Data Brief](#), 2024

prenatal care. In Pottawattamie County, Iowa, 8% of babies had low birth weights (under 5 pounds, 8 ounces).³⁰ In Iowa overall, the percentage of women receiving adequate prenatal healthcare beginning in the first four months of pregnancy is 84.9%.³¹ However, the number of Medicaid-reimbursed births in Iowa remains steady at approximately 40% of births year over year.³² Poverty and low income are one of the risk indicators for women receiving adequate prenatal care.

During the most recent program year (2023-2024), 15 pregnant moms were served by the Firefly EHS program and 6% were in their first trimester (PIR). During the 2022-2023 program year, 25% of those served by EHS at Firefly were moms in their first trimester (PIR). At Firefly, EHS staff works with expectant mothers to assess and meet their individual needs to increase access to postpartum care, promote breastfeeding, support safe and enriching home environments, conduct child developmental screenings (ASQ), and administer the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) to monitor for postpartum depression. Early detection and treatment can reduce the impact of PPD on the mother's quality of life and mental health and decrease the risk of affecting the child's socioemotional development.

Infant/child death rate

Iowa's infant mortality rate in 2022 was 4.64 deaths per 1,000 live births, which is an increase from the 2021 rate of 4.0. Pottawattamie County's infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births in 2022 was 7.11. Birth defects such as congenital malformations, deformations, and chromosomal abnormalities are leading causes of infant deaths. Disorders related to short gestation and low birth rate are second.³³

Food Insecurity

According to Feeding America, over 11% or 10,990 people in Pottawattamie County experienced food insecurity and 57% of county residents lived below the SNAP food benefit threshold of 160% of poverty in 2022.³⁴ According to the most recent County Health Rankings Roadmap for Pottawattamie County, food insecurity remains an issue for Pottawattamie County families with 9% of individuals in the county experiencing food insecurity compared to 8% across the state.³⁵

³⁰ [County Health Ranking and Roadmaps](#), Pottawattamie, IA, 2024

³¹ Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Family Health. [Access to prenatal care, selected behaviors and selected birth outcomes by Medicaid status, Iowa resident births 2017 – 2022](#)

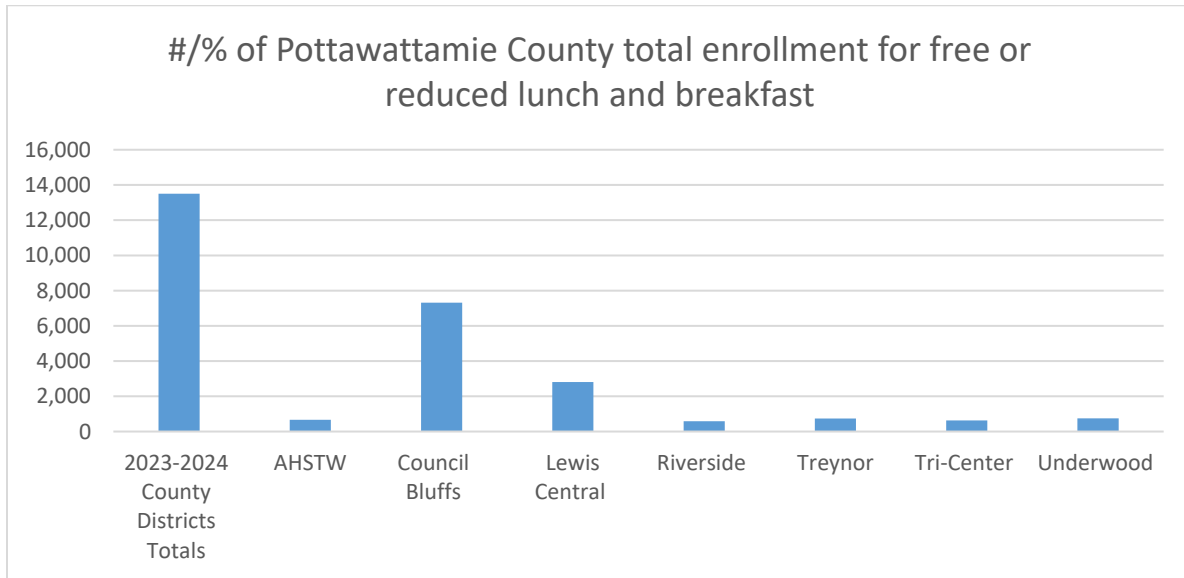
³² Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, [Division of Medicaid Report](#), 2022

³³ Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, [Public Health Data](#), 2018-2022

³⁴ Feeding America, [Map the Meal Gap estimates](#), 2024

³⁵ [County Health Ranking and Roadmaps](#), Pottawattamie, IA, 2024

In the 2023-2024 academic year, 55.5% of children in Pottawattamie County’s largest school district qualified for free and reduced lunch.³⁶ Among the less populated rural areas, free and reduced lunch rates for students are universally more than 30% among the largest school districts. Given that percentages of free and reduced lunch rates are typically higher than the district average at the elementary schools, these percentages show a significant level of income-related food insecurity in the county.



Nutrition

According to County Health Ranking and Roadmaps data, Pottawattamie County. scored 8.1 out of a possible 10 on the food environment index, which includes access to healthy foods and food insecurity.³⁷ Nine percent (9%) of families in Pottawattamie County have limited access to healthy foods compared to 6% for Iowa overall. Nine percent (9%) of households in Pottawattamie County lack adequate access to food, compared with 8% of families in Iowa, and 10% nationwide.³⁸

Health Behaviors

Pottawattamie County continues to rank as one of the unhealthiest counties in the state ranking 95 out of 99 counties, a further decline from 91 out of 99 counties in 2021, according to the 2024 County Rankings and Roadmaps.³⁹ Individuals fare poorly across the county in a number of health, social, and economic indicators including obesity, physical inactivity, excessive drinking, and access to healthy food.

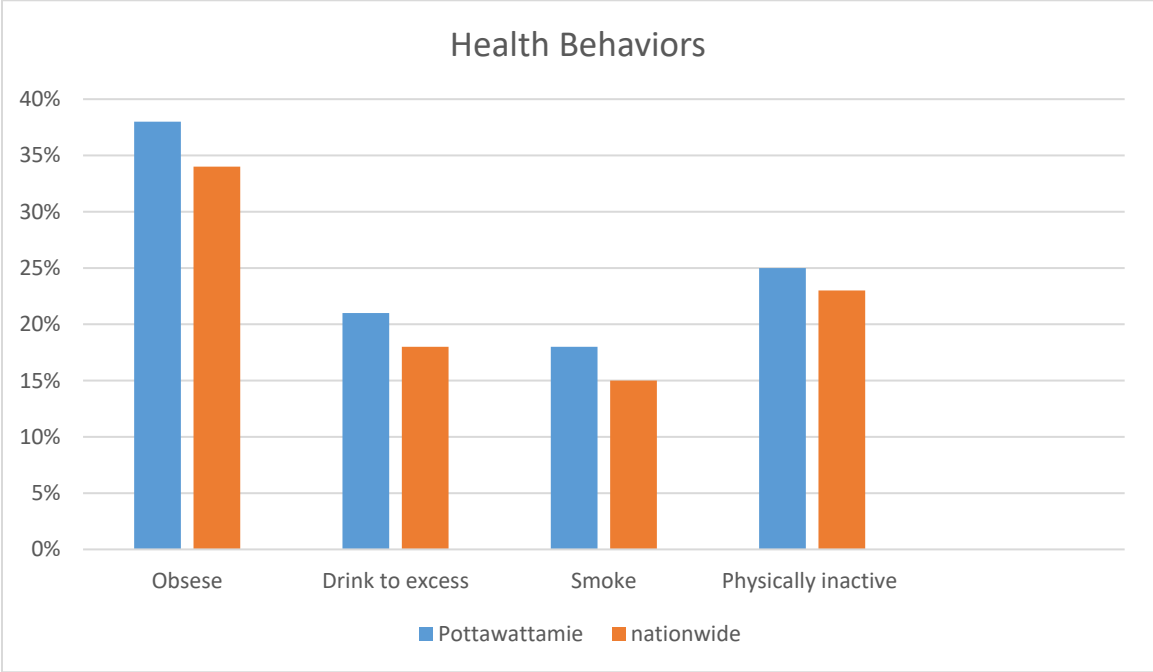
³⁶ Iowa Department of Education, [PK-12 Education Statistics](#), 2024

³⁷ [County Health Ranking and Roadmaps](#), Pottawattamie, IA, 2024

³⁸ [County Health Ranking and Roadmaps](#), Pottawattamie, IA, 2024

³⁹ [County Health Ranking and Roadmaps](#), Pottawattamie, IA, 2024

Thirty-eight percent (38%) of adults in Pottawattamie County are obese compared to 37% in Iowa overall. Twenty-one percent (21%) of adults in Pottawattamie County drink to excess, compared to 23% for all of Iowa. Eighteen percent of adults in Pottawattamie County smoke compared to 16% in the State of Iowa overall. Twenty-five percent of individuals in Pottawattamie County are physically inactive compared to only 24% across Iowa and 15% nationwide.



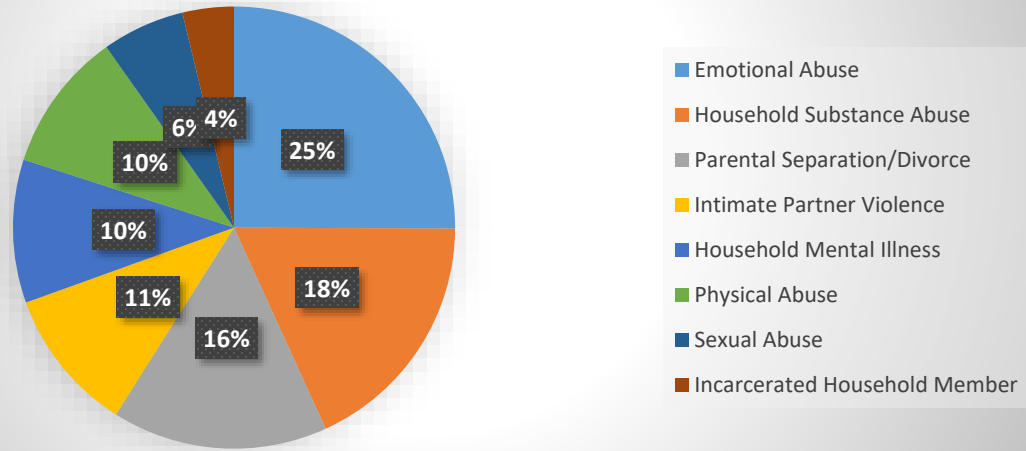
Mental Health

In Pottawattamie County, Iowa adults reported that they did not have good mental health in 4.8 out of the previous 30 days, while all of Iowa reported poor mental health in 4.5 of the previous 30 days.⁴⁰

According to Pottawattamie County Public Health (2023), mental health issues have a greater impact on adults and children in poverty in Firefly’s service area, impeding child development and preventing adults from taking care of their families. The report indicates that mental health is the primary issue for Pottawattamie County residents stating, “During the 2021 Community Health Needs Assessment, over 3,000 residents participated and concluded that mental health and accessing resources to mental health was the main concern for community members.” It illustrates that 17% of Pottawattamie County residents report fair to poor mental health and that 58.4% of residents are experiencing moderate to extreme stress on a typical day. It is well documented that factors associated with poverty lead to toxic stress and ACEs for children.

⁴⁰ [County Health Ranking and Roadmaps](#), Pottawattamie, IA, 2024

Prevalence of ACE's Score in Pottawattamie County



41

Research further shows that 1 in 6 youth/adolescents will experience a mental health condition at any given time.⁴² Additionally, 50% of all lifetime mental health conditions begin before the age of 14, and 75% start before the age of 24.⁴³ According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), “Identifying warning signs or symptoms and seeking treatment early can make a difference in reducing the impact of a mental health condition.” Without early diagnosis and treatment, children with poor mental health can have problems at home, in school, and in forming friendships.

Firefly’s early intervention and screenings through the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) completed on all enrolled children at developmental milestones helps identify developmental areas of concern around social and emotional development. The questionnaire monitors a child's development in the behavioral areas of self-regulation, compliance, communication, adaptive behavior, autonomy, affect, and interaction with people. If a screening identifies a concern, a child may be referred to the local area AEA for further assessment or for a consult with Firefly’s contracted mental health consultant to determine a plan of action.

Firefly also currently utilizes The Life Skills Progression™ (LSP) tool which measures a parent's ability to achieve and maintain a healthy and satisfying life for families. The tool describes individual parent and infant/toddler behaviors, attitudes, and skills. The LSP helps professionals establish baseline client profiles, identify strengths and needs, plan interventions, and monitor outcomes to show that interventions are working. EHS provides a safe space for parents to

⁴¹ The Wellbeing Partners, et al. [Mental Health/ACEs Call To Action Report](#). Accessed October 15, 2024.

⁴² National Alliance on Mental Illness. [Mental Health in Iowa](#). 2021.

⁴³ National Alliance on Mental Illness. [Your Journey: Kids](#). Accessed October 15, 2024.

discuss their own ACEs as a part of providing high-quality care for children. Positive parenting and mental health support can help minimize the impact of ACEs on children in the household, breaking the cycle of ACEs and their myriad consequences.⁴⁴ Firefly’s EHS program helps identify parents’ strengths and allows them to access needed support to create personalized goals, track progress over time, and ultimately build the skills required for a healthy family environment.

Physical Environment

Children in Pottawattamie County are living in households that experience at least one risk to their physical environment such as overcrowding, high housing costs, lack of kitchen facilities, and inadequate plumbing facilities. Twelve percent of households in Pottawattamie County are affected by severe housing problems, compared to 11% of households across the state and 17% nationally.⁴⁵ It is well documented that poverty increases environmental risks exponentially due to the lack of adequate financial and housing resources.

Immunization rates amongst children

Table: Coverage of Vaccine Series 4-3-1-3-3-1-4

Iowa Department Public Health Immunization Program- 2023 Immunization Assessment

| 2-year-olds census population | Total records analyzed from IRIS | Total records up to date on 4-3-1-3 3-1-4 coverage | IRIS population percent up to date on 4-3-1-3 3-1-4 coverage | Census population percent up to date on 4-3-1-3-3-1-4 coverage |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|--|
| 1,200 | 866 | 609 | 70.1% | 50.1% |

The immunization rates in Iowa appear to be lower in Pottawattamie County as families utilize physicians in the neighboring community of Omaha, Nebraska, and they are not required to upload their data into Iowa’s Immunization Registry Immunization System (IRIS).

Childcare Trends

Childcare costs have risen significantly in the last several years and the costs of early childhood education are too expensive for many families. The average annual price of licensed center-based care infant care in Pottawattamie County is approximately \$11,545 and \$8,476 for family childcare homes. For families earning the county median income, center-based care is 15% of

⁴⁴ Buchanan, Gretchen J R et al. “Potential Points of Intervention to Minimize the Impact of Parents' Adverse Childhood Experiences on Child Mental Health.” *Journal of developmental and behavioral pediatrics : JDBP* vol. 44,1 (2023): e24-e31. doi:10.1097/DBP.0000000000001140

⁴⁵ [County Health Ranking and Roadmaps](#), Pottawattamie, IA, 2024

their income before taxes and family home care is 11%. For low-income families, the percentage of childcare costs skyrockets. For a family of three living at 100% of the federal poverty level (equivalent to \$25,820 in annual income), the average annual cost for center-based childcare for one child is equal to 45% of their annual family income.

| Child Care Costs Average per Week (Iowa)⁴⁶ | Infant (0-12 months) | Toddler (13-23 months) | Two-year-olds | Three-year-olds |
|--|----------------------|------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Registered Child Development Homes | \$163.00 | \$161.55 | \$159.70 | \$157.77 |
| DHS Licensed Centers/Preschools | \$222.02 | \$217.71 | \$203.35 | \$167.06 |

An estimated 17,951 Iowan children under age five, just 20.4% of those who are eligible, are served by the Child Care Development Fund program (authorized through the Child Care and Development Block Grant); Head Start and Early Head Start programs; and Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visitation program.⁴⁷ Families receiving a CCDBG subsidy pay between \$8 and \$138 per month for one child in care. A family of three living at 100% of the federal poverty level and paying \$11,129 for childcare is 43% of their income. Iowa CCR&R indicates there are 93 licensed childcare providers in Pottawattamie County.

In 2023, there were 1,801 licensed childcare centers and 1,938 licensed family childcare homes in Iowa, 31 and 177 fewer, respectively, than there were in 2022. This has led to a 15% gap in the supply of childcare versus the potential need in the state.

For families that can afford access to center-based care, in Pottawattamie County, there are 119 childcare programs listed with the Iowa CCR&R with slots for 4,416 children. Unfortunately, nearly half (44.2%) of childcare providers report they are at operational capacity, considering the number of children they can care for versus the total number of staff.⁴⁸ The Omaha Community Foundation reports that 64% of children aged 3-4 in Pottawattamie County were not enrolled in a preschool program in 2022. It further reports that disparities in early learning and education are “largely centered on income and race, often showing up before kindergarten and continuing into adulthood.”⁴⁹ High-quality, early education is proven to dramatically improve a child’s opportunities for a better future while offering parents more job stability, economic well-being, and less family stress. This allows parents to provide better support for their children and a better quality of life.

⁴⁶ Iowa Child Care Resource and Referral, Pottawattamie County Fact Sheet, April 2024

⁴⁷ First Five Years Fund, Child Care and Early Education in Iowa, 2023

⁴⁸ Iowa Child Care Connect (2024), *C3 vacancy dashboard*, retrieved from <https://iachildcareconnect.org/vacancy-dashboard/>

⁴⁹ Omaha Community Foundation, [Education](#), 2024

Families experiencing financial and other challenges accessing childcare must have access to home-based support options like Firefly's EHS program which promotes early learning, healthy child development, and family stability. Firefly currently provides flexible hours within the EHS home-based program, including evening and weekend hours that enable participation in EHS services for all qualifying families, including working families. Currently, Firefly's EHS home-based program has twelve families on the waiting list for enrollment.

Parent and Stakeholder Survey Summary

Parents

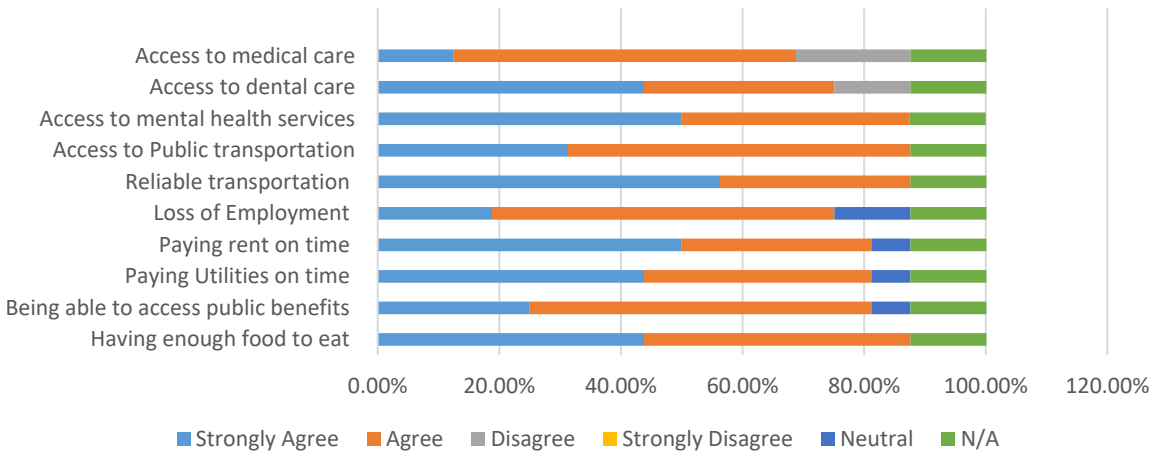
Firefly randomly conducts quality assurance calls monthly to ensure that families feel they are receiving quality visits and PAT activities that increase their developmental knowledge of their child. Out of the 30 families completing surveys in program term 2023-2024, 92% of parents said the program has helped increase their understanding of their child's development stages and 93% agreed the activities strengthen their relationship with their child leading to their children being more confident and improved self-esteem.

Stakeholders

Firefly conducted a survey of twenty-five community partners across various disciplines in Pottawattamie County, including public health, educational services, housing assistance, mental health providers, private funders, food assistance, and case management services. Of the surveys distributed, sixteen responses were returned. Survey results indicated that 56% of stakeholders identified housing as the greatest risk/barrier faced by the community and the populations they serve. Thirty-one percent identified mental health as the greatest barrier and 19% cited a lack of access to affordable resources. When asked about the community's top strengths, all stakeholders highlighted Pottawattamie County's ability to leverage agency resources to collaborate, create collective impact, and find innovative solutions to address the needs of the community and populations they serve.

Other areas of concern noted by stakeholder responses were families' lack of access to mental health services, public transportation or reliable transportation, and families having enough food to eat. Firefly's EHS home visitation program actively addresses transportation barriers, mental health concerns, and food insecurity among families by providing comprehensive support services, including access and referrals to mental health professionals, social service connections to food pantries and other providers, and nutrition education, tackling these issues at the earliest stages of a child's development. This holistic approach aims to promote both the child's well-being and family stability.

Issues of regular Concern for families served by agencies in Pottawattamie County Stakeholder responses



Opportunities for Growth

Engage community leaders to partner with Firefly to build a stronger community. This would provide vital supports to infants, toddlers and their families to improve overall wellbeing.

Educate and advocate for policymakers to expand access to high quality early learning services that ensure young children have the opportunity to thrive.

Inspire parents to invest in their child's future by enrolling them in Early Head start and getting involved in volunteering and policy council to have a direct voice in program spending and decision making regarding their child's education.

