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Community Assessment

Marion County, FL

2022-2023

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# Introduction and Overview

## Location and Geographical Features

Marion County is in the north central region of Florida. With 1,588.5 square miles of land area, it is the “5th largest county in Florida by total area.”[[1]](#footnote-2) According to Kevin Sheilley, president and CEO of the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership, Marion County has been a single county metropolitan statistical area since 1980.[[2]](#footnote-3) Sheilley adds that the area serves as a regional hub for workforce, education, healthcare, and retail for five counties south of Alachua County to Orlando.[[3]](#footnote-4) In their November/December 2022 issue of CEP Network, the Ocala Metro Chamber and Economic Partnership (CEP) reported, “For every 100 people leaving the Ocala Metro, 524 are moving in the community, resulting in an in-to-out ratio of 5.24, good for first in the nation.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

Marion County includes “more than 16,000 acres of lakes and ponds, 180 miles of rivers and streams, and one of the world’s most prolific aquifers producing three first magnitude springs.”[[5]](#footnote-6) “With over 468,000 acres of publicly owned lands and some of the most unique natural features in the world, Marion County is perfectly situated to become the go-to destination for outdoor enthusiasts.” [[6]](#footnote-7)

Marion County has “three major state parks (Silver Springs State Park, Rainbow Springs State Park, and the Cross Florida Greenway).”[[7]](#footnote-8) According to the Marion County Administrative Strategic Plan 2017-2021, Marion County Parks and Recreation department oversees 50 parks (over 2,400 acres), which “contributes not only to the community’s quality of life by providing spaces for people to relax and play and interact socially, it also fuels the local economy by creating and caring for destinations which citizens and visitors both use.”[[8]](#footnote-9) Marion County recognizes that “Open space and a strong park system are fundamental assets to a community when creating economic development initiatives for visitors, current and future businesses, and residents.”[[9]](#footnote-10) “About 36 percent of publicly owned land in Marion County is classified as conservation.”[[10]](#footnote-11)

## Community Strengths

According to the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership website, the cost of living in Ocala is “16.2% less than the US average.”[[11]](#footnote-12) U.S. News & World Reports has ranked the Ocala Metro as “#4 in Safest Places to Live in the U.S.”[[12]](#footnote-13)

# Demographics

In 2022, “The total population of Marion County is 392,598,” a growth of 40,860 people, or 10%, since 2017.[[13]](#footnote-14) As of 2018, there were 143,441 households and 26,064 of these households have children.[[14]](#footnote-15) The median age in Marion County is 49.7.”[[15]](#footnote-16) In 2019, Avalanche Consulting reported that the “millennial population (30-39) is growing at double the US average and among the highest for all small metros.”[[16]](#footnote-17) As of 2021, there were 38,895 children ages birth to nine, and 40,868 ages ten to nineteen.[[17]](#footnote-18) The “average family size in Marion County is 2.94” but is larger is some zip codes, with 34472 averaging 3.44.[[18]](#footnote-19)

In the 2022-2023 school year, 3,199 students are attending kindergarten in Marion County Public Schools, slightly above the average of 3,114 over the past three school years.[[19]](#footnote-20) There are 20,247 students attending public elementary schools.[[20]](#footnote-21)

According to Episcopal Children’s Services 2020 Community Assessment, 2.3% of Marion County households receive Cash Public Assistance and are subject to the federal work requirements.[[21]](#footnote-22)

“Households in Marion County earn a median yearly income of $50,721” and have median household expenditures of $49,030.[[22]](#footnote-23) Due to the number of people moving to the area, Marion County has a wealth migration rate of $164.83 million per year.[[23]](#footnote-24) Still, the poverty rate in Marion County was 14.6% in 2021.[[24]](#footnote-25) According to Episcopal Children’s Services, “Minority populations have higher rates of poverty than non-Hispanic Whites,” with 33% of Marion County Black African Americans and 21% of Hispanic or Latino populations in poverty in 2019.[[25]](#footnote-26) In 2018, 51% of Marion County households were Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE).[[26]](#footnote-27) ALICE “represents the growing number of families who are unable to afford the basics of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and technology.”[[27]](#footnote-28) “As cashiers, waiters, child care providers, and other members of our essential workforce, ALICE earns just above the Federal Poverty Level but less than what it costs to make ends meet.”[[28]](#footnote-29) Of the 26,064 Marion County households with children, 27% live in poverty and 25% are ALICE households.[[29]](#footnote-30)

Sixty-one percent of families with children in Marion County “are headed by a two-parent household.”[[30]](#footnote-31) Of single-parent households, 30% are headed by a female and 9% by a male parent.[[31]](#footnote-32) Poverty rates are “much higher among families with a female head of household and no husband present (27.9 percent).”[[32]](#footnote-33)

In 2019, 88% of Marion County adults had a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) equivalent.[[33]](#footnote-34) Of Marion County adults in poverty, 26% do not have a high school diploma or GED.[[34]](#footnote-35)

For 2018-2020, Marion County averaged “9.5 births per 1,000 total population.”[[35]](#footnote-36) “Approximately 64.0 percent of all Marion County births were paid for by Medicaid.”[[36]](#footnote-37) The zip codes with the highest birth rates in the county are 34475, 34470, and 34479.[[37]](#footnote-38) Black birth rates are 14.0 per 1,000 total population and Hispanic birth rates are 11.2 per 1,000 population.[[38]](#footnote-39) The zip code with the “largest rates of Black births are in 34488 Silver Springs at 31.7 births per 1,000 total population.”[[39]](#footnote-40) Zip code 34475 has the highest birth rates among Hispanics with 18.3 births per 1,000 population.[[40]](#footnote-41) In 2020, 1.7% of births “were to teens aged 15-17 years old.”[[41]](#footnote-42) In 2019, 54% of births were by women who received “adequate prenatal care”, and 322 Marion County babies were born with low birth rates, “often associated with a lack of prenatal care” and putting babies “at risk for health and developmental issues.”[[42]](#footnote-43) Twenty-four infant deaths were reported in Marion County in 2019.[[43]](#footnote-44)

In 2019, Episcopal Children Services noted there were 875 verified reports of child maltreatment in Marion County.[[44]](#footnote-45)

## Cultural Groups

“According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2020 Census, Marion County’s population was”:

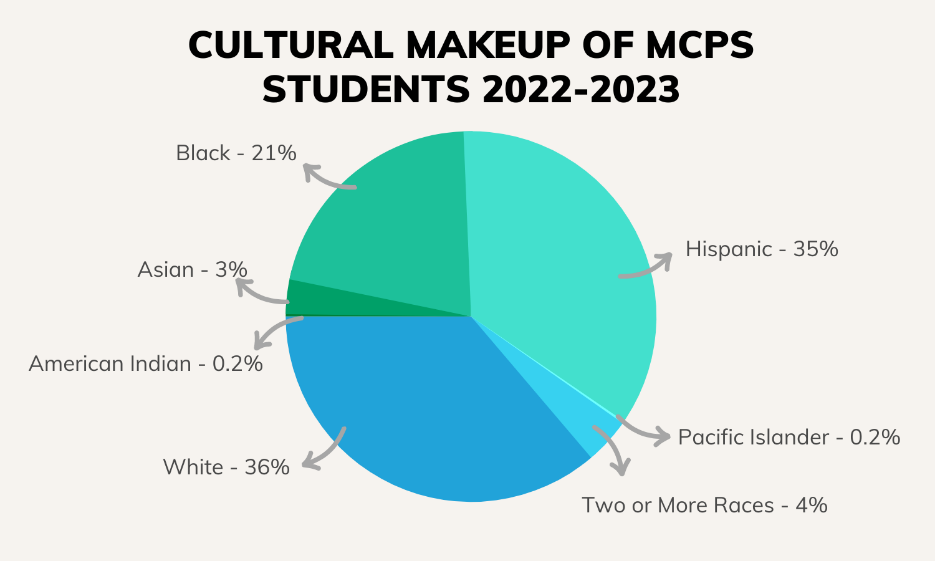
* 71.4 % White
* 11.8 % Black
* 9.9 % two or more races
* 4.8 % some other race
* 1.6 % Asian
* 0.4 % American Indian and Alaska Native[[45]](#footnote-46)

“The U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2016-2020 estimates show that 13.7 percent of Marion County residents identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino.”[[46]](#footnote-47) “The local Hispanic population has doubled since 2000.”[[47]](#footnote-48)

“In comparison to Florida, Marion is less racially diverse.”[[48]](#footnote-49) “On average, the Black population in Marion County is younger than the White population, with a much higher proportion of children. A similar comparison can be made between Hispanic residents and the overall county estimates, with Hispanics also being younger and having a much higher proportion of children.”[[49]](#footnote-50)

“According to 2016-2020 ACS estimates, about 86.9 percent of the Marion County population over the age five years speaks only English compared to 70.6 percent in Florida. About 13.1 percent of Marion County residents speak other languages; in Florida, that figure is 29.4 percent. Among those over the age of five years in Marion County who speak another language, an estimated 32.4 percent rated their English skills as less than “very well.”[[50]](#footnote-51)

The below chart shows the cultural makeup of Marion County Public Schools students, which is more diverse than the overall county population:[[51]](#footnote-52)

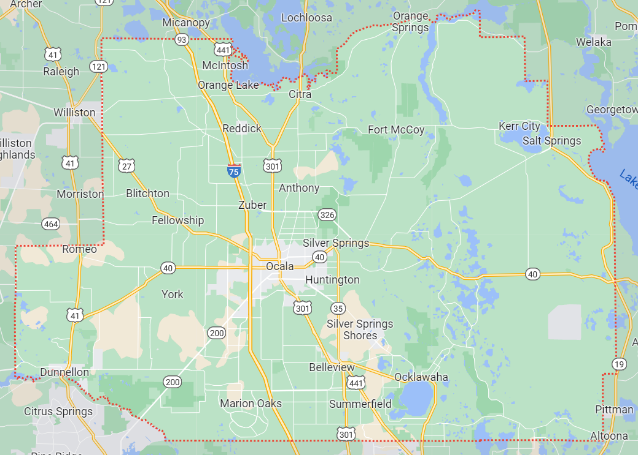


## Children in Poverty

According to the Florida Scorecard Marion County Metrics, Marion County has 15,791 children, 23.1%, in poverty.[[52]](#footnote-53) “Nearly half of the county’s zip codes had more than 25 percent of their children living in poverty.”[[53]](#footnote-54) Episcopal Children’s Services notes the poverty rate for children five and under is higher than the general population: 29% in 2019, dropping from 34% in 2015.[[54]](#footnote-55) Approximately 66% of Marion County Public Schools students are eligible for free/reduced meals.[[55]](#footnote-56) The percentage of kindergarteners eligible for free/reduced lunch has been increasing “for the past three (3) years, while the state steadily decreases.”[[56]](#footnote-57) As of 2021, 68.8% of the population age 0-18 is eligible for Medicaid.[[57]](#footnote-58)

## Geographical Breakdown

The following map shows the geographic areas of Marion County:[[58]](#footnote-59)



“Marion County also has a far greater percentage of the population living in unincorporated areas as compared to the state, at 80.8 and 49.5 percent, respectively.”[[59]](#footnote-60) “Most of the limited American Indian and Alaska Native and Asian populations live in Ocala or Dunnellon, as does the entirety of the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander population. Outside of Ocala, people identifying as Black primarily live in Reddick and Citra; within Ocala, 47.3 percent of the 34475 ZCTA [zip code tabulation areas] are Black.”[[60]](#footnote-61)

“Outside of Ocala, Belleview has the highest percentage of Hispanic or Latino residents at 16.4 percent of 34420. According to these estimates, 35.4 percent of residents in the Ocala ZCTA 34473 identify as Hispanic or Latino.”[[61]](#footnote-62)

Episcopal Children’s Services 2020 Community Assessment breaks down poverty rates by race, ethnicity, and county subdivision as follows[[62]](#footnote-63):

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Marion County Poverty Rates by Race, Ethnicity and County Subdivision** | | | | |
| **Subdivision** | **White, non-Hispanic or Latino** | **Black African American** | **Hispanic or Latino (all races)** | **Total Population** |
| East Marion | 21% | 96% | 23% | 21% |
| Ft. McCoy / Anthony | 21% | 37% | 39% | 26% |
| Ocala | 12% | 39% | 27% | 19% |
| Reddick / McIntosh | 10% | 39% | 18% | 19% |
| Fellowship | 14% | 11% | 31% | 16% |
| Belleview | 10% | 21% | 10% | 11% |
| Dunnellon | 12% | 19% | 14% | 13% |
| Marion County | 13% | 33% | 21% | 16% |
| Florida | 10% | 22% | 18% | 14% |
| US | 10% | 23% | 20% | 13% |

Additionally, Episcopal Children’s Services identifies children under five years old in poverty by area as seen in the below chart[[63]](#footnote-64):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Marion County Children Under 5 in Poverty by County Subdivision** | | |
| **Subdivision** | **Total Number** | **Percent** |
| Ocala | 2,901 | 57% |
| Belleview | 966 | 19% |
| East Marion | 402 | 8% |
| Ft. McCoy / Anthony | 320 | 7% |
| Fellowship | 266 | 5% |
| Reddick / McIntosh | 203 | 4% |
| Dunnellon | 4 | <1% |

Poverty rates by head of household type[[64]](#footnote-65):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Marion County Poverty Rates by Head of Household Type and County Subdivision** | | |
| **Subdivision** | **Two-Parent Household** | **Single-Parent Household** |
| Reddick / McIntosh | 4% | 66% |
| East Marion | 16% | 64% |
| Fellowship | 27% | 58% |
| Ocala | 15% | 44% |
| Ft. McCoy / Anthony | 8% | 44% |
| Dunnellon | 1% | 36% |
| Belleview | 8% | 33% |
| Marion County | 12% | 43% |

Poverty rates by educational attainment[[65]](#footnote-66):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Poverty Rates by Educational Attainment and County Subdivision** | | |
| **Subdivision** | **No high school diploma/GED** | **High school diploma/GED or higher** |
| Ft. McCoy / Anthony | 35.8% | 19.8% |
| Reddick / McIntosh | 34.0% | 13.0% |
| Dunnellon | 33.3% | 9.9% |
| Ocala | 31.7% | 12.7% |
| Belleview | 16.7% | 8.1% |
| East Marion | 25.9% | 16.0% |
| Fellowship | 25.5% | 9.3% |
| Marion County | 26.3% | 11.0% |

Marion County households receiving public assistance, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps; cash public assistance, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI)[[66]](#footnote-67):

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Percentage of Marion County Households Receiving Public Assistance by County Subdivision** | | | |
| **Subdivision** | **SNAP** | **Cash Public Assistance** | **SSI** |
| East Marion | 21.2% | 2.7% | 9.5% |
| Ft. McCoy / Anthony | 19.8% | 2.4% | 5.8% |
| Reddick / McIntosh | 19.7% | 1.0% | 4.8% |
| Ocala | 18.7% | 2.5% | 6.5% |
| Belleview | 11.9% | 2.3% | 4.7% |
| Fellowship | 11.4% | 1.4% | 5.3% |
| Dunnellon | 9.3% | 1.4% | 5.7% |
| Marion County | 15.5% | 2.3% | 5.8% |

Looking at households with children under six where all parents work is one way to estimate childcare demand; however, it does not account for households where a parent may work from home or have informal care arrangements. The below chart shows the number of Marion County households with children under six where both parents work[[67]](#footnote-68):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **2019 Childcare Demand Based on Children Under 6 with All Parents in Household Working** | | |
| **Subdivision** | **2019** | **% Change since 2015** |
| Ocala | 6,822 | 7.96% |
| Belleview | 4,203 | 1.28% |
| East Marion | 433 | -0.92% |
| Ft. McCoy / Anthony | 350 | -25.53% |
| Fellowship | 336 | -23.81% |
| Reddick / McIntosh | 327 | 48.64% |
| Dunnellon | 240 | -41.46% |
| Marion County | 12,771 | 2.12% |

## Special Populations

In January 2022, the Ocala/Marion Joint Office of Homeless Prevention reported 455 homeless individuals in Marion County.[[68]](#footnote-69) As of October 2022, Marion County Public Schools had 895 homeless students on record.[[69]](#footnote-70)

As of November 4, 2022, Marion County had 671 children in foster care and 76 foster homes.[[70]](#footnote-71)

ARC of Marion County reports that approximately 280 Marion County children under 5 are, or will be, diagnosed with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD).[[71]](#footnote-72) “I/DD is defined as any person with an IQ Under 70, any person who has had multiple seizures in the past 12 month, or, any person with an official diagnosis of any of the following:

* Down Syndrome (to include the former diagnosis of MR, or Mental \*etardation)
* Prader Willi Syndrome
* Autism
* Spina Bifida
* Cerebral Palsy
* Phelan McDermid Syndrome.”[[72]](#footnote-73)

In 2019, Episcopal Children Services noted that 361 Marion County children aged 3-5 years were receiving services for diagnosed disabilities and 256 children under three years old were receiving disability services.[[73]](#footnote-74) Approximately 7,350 Marion County Public Schools students are part of the Exceptional Student Education program and 825 attend special center schools.[[74]](#footnote-75)

“Marion County has a higher than state average percentage of residents who are Veterans (12.3 in Marion compared to 8.4 in Florida).”[[75]](#footnote-76)

As of April 2020, Marion County had an inmate population of 5,323.[[76]](#footnote-77)

# Child Care Programs

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in government support for childcare provider stability. In November 2021, Northwestern University and University of Florida conducted a study to explore factors that lead to childcare provider longevity. In their report, Child Care Provider Survivor Analysis, they found that in Florida, “providers who contracted with state agencies [and participated in School Readiness and/or Voluntary Prekindergarten] tended to have greater expected longevity.”[[77]](#footnote-78) The researchers theorized that it seems “to be in the best interest of providers to establish and maintain state contracts in order to maintain the greatest utilization of capacity, which in turn would lead to increased, sustained revenue.”[[78]](#footnote-79)

According to the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) Child Care Administration, Regulation and Enforcement System, there are 149 childcare providers in Marion County.[[79]](#footnote-80) The below table breaks down these providers as follows:[[80]](#footnote-81)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Provider Type** | | **License Status** | | | **Subsidized Programs** | | | **Capacity** | **Gold Seal** |
|  | | **Faith Based** | **Head Start** | **SR** | **VPK** |
| Child Care Facilities | 104 | Licensed | 73 | 12 | 16 | 46 | 42 | 8,163 | 16 |
| Exempt | 32 | 18 | 2 | 11 | 6 | 2,653 | 0 |
| Registered | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Family Day Care Homes | 38 | Licensed | 22 | 0 | 0 | 19 | 0 | 220 | 1 |
| Exempt | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Registered | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 150 | 0 |
| Large Family Child Care Homes | 7 | Licensed | 7 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 84 | 2 |
| Exempt | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Registered | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Totals** | **149** | **Licensed** | **102** | **30** | **19** | **80** | **49** | **11,270** | **19** |
| **Exempt** | **32** |
| **Registered** | **15** |

Note that the above capacity includes children birth through school aged.

## Coalition Services

The Early Learning Coalition of Marion County (ELCMC) contracts directly with childcare providers both within and outside the county limits (for convenience of clients living near the county border). ELCMC also uses grant funding and community partnerships to enhance the scope of direct services available.

Professional development is offered to providers monthly, with an opportunity for free incentives for contracted providers.

### Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten

Florida’s Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program ensures that all 4-year-old children have access to a quality education that prepares them for kindergarten and for the educational setting of K-12. The Florida Policy Institute notes that “Though Florida has one [of] the highest rates of 4-year-olds in preschool, state funding only covers three hours of instruction, making the quality and duration of programming a top concern.”[[81]](#footnote-82) ELCMC has administered the registration and transfers of children since the Florida program started in 2005. As of October 31, 2022, ELCMC is serving a monthly average of 1,700 children in VPK in fiscal year 2022-2023.[[82]](#footnote-83)

The ELCMC is also responsible for contracting VPK providers. In fiscal year 2022-2023, 97 providers are contracted to provide VPK services.[[83]](#footnote-84)

### School Readiness

The U.S. Department of the Treasury estimates that “Less than 20 percent of children eligible for one of the largest federal assistance programs for low-income families, the Child Care and Development Fund, actually receives funding.”[[84]](#footnote-85)

In the 2020-2021 fiscal year, Marion County School Readiness-contracted providers had licensed capacity for 8,002 children and peak enrollment of 2,184, a School Readiness Utilization Rate of 27%.[[85]](#footnote-86)

## Rates

According to Child Care Aware of America, the national average annual cost of child care is around $10,174.[[86]](#footnote-87) The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends “that the price of child care be no more than 7% of household income.”[[87]](#footnote-88) In the September 2021 U.S. Department of the Treasury report, The Economics of Child Care Supply in the United States, it was noted that “the average family with at least one child under age 5 would need to devote about 13 percent of family income to pay for child care, a number that is unaffordable for most families.”[[88]](#footnote-89)

## Capacity

According to DCF, Marion County licensed providers have a capacity of 8,467 children birth through school-aged.[[89]](#footnote-90)

The Center for American Progress identifies “areas where there are more than three young children for every licensed child care slot” and describes “these areas as ‘child care deserts.’”[[90]](#footnote-91) Episcopal Children’s Services 2020 Community Assessment states there is an unmet need of almost 2,000 young children in Marion County needing childcare.[[91]](#footnote-92)

## Florida Gold Seal Quality Care Program

The study by ECPRG showed significant positive “relationships between CLASS scores and four GS [Florida Gold Seal Quality Care Program] accreditation agencies (APPLE [Accredited Professional Preschool Learning Environment], NACECEP [National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs], and NAEYC [National Association for the Education of Young Children] for center-based providers and NAFCC [National Association for Family Child Care] for home-based providers. This indicates that providers with GS accreditation from one of these agencies tend to have higher CLASS scores than non-GS providers.”[[92]](#footnote-93)

As of November 2022, Marion County has 19 GS providers.[[93]](#footnote-94)

The ECPRG study also found a “significant and moderate-large effect on CLASS score variations for both center-based and home-based providers” between coalitions.[[94]](#footnote-95) They theorize that this difference could be a result of “local quality initiatives or it could be attributed to differences in observer ratings.”[[95]](#footnote-96)

## Early Head Start

Early Head Start serves infant to three-year-olds of families whose “household income is at or below the poverty level.”[[96]](#footnote-97) Families receiving public assistance, “those with children in foster care,” and “children who are homeless also qualify regardless of income.”[[97]](#footnote-98) The program promotes child development, nurtures “healthy attachments between parent and child,”[[98]](#footnote-99) and provides support services for parents to help them “move toward self-sufficiency.”[[99]](#footnote-100)

## Head Start

Just like the Early Head Start Program, Head Start serves low-income families in their needs for child care and steps toward self-sufficiency. Head Start primarily serves children 3 and 4-years-old and is designed to meet the developmental needs of the children. Marion County has 19 Head Start providers, and 10 of these also provide VPK.[[100]](#footnote-101)

## Healthy Start

“Healthy Start is a free home visiting program that provides education and care coordination to pregnant women and families of children under the age of three. The goal of the program is to lower risk factors associated with preterm birth, low birth weight, infant mortality and poor developmental outcomes.”[[101]](#footnote-102)

## Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)

Serving a diversity of families to support the parent’s role as their child’s first educator, HIPPY primarily focuses on those most at risk because of poverty. Parents are provided with educational materials to effectively strengthen their child’s needs concerning early literacy, social skills, emotional development, and cognitive functions.

# Education and Social Service Needs

The Northeast Florida 2019 Behavioral Health Needs Assessment Report named these as the top five needs in Marion County:

* Short Term Residential Treatment
* Substance Abuse Detox, Residential Treatment Beds and Outpatient SA Treatment
* Care Coordination / Housing Vouchers
* Co-Responder Teams to divert from Acute Care / Justice System
* Workforce Investment (Recruit / Retain staff)[[102]](#footnote-103)

Marion County’s food insecurity rate, 14.4%, is “higher than both the state and national averages.”[[103]](#footnote-104) Feeding America reported that one in four Marion County children are “food insecure.”[[104]](#footnote-105) In 2021, only 51.2% of eligible women and children in Marion County participate in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).[[105]](#footnote-106) Just over 50% of Marion County births are by mothers participating in WIC.”[[106]](#footnote-107)

## Education

According to the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership Metro Profile webpage, 86.16% of the population in Marion County “have a high school degree or higher,” and 29.92% “have an Associate’s degree or higher.”[[107]](#footnote-108) There are two colleges in the community that offer Associate’s Degrees or Certificates and three universities that offer Bachelor’s Degrees or higher.[[108]](#footnote-109)

Forty-one percent of kindergarteners were deemed “ready for kindergarten” in 2021.[[109]](#footnote-110) In 2021, 0.6% of Marion County kindergarteners were not promoted, compared to 2.8% of kindergarteners not promoted across Florida.[[110]](#footnote-111) In 2022, 42% of students achieved Level 3 or Above in the 3rd Grade English Language Arts Florida Standards Assessment, an indicator of reading at grade level.[[111]](#footnote-112) The 2021 overall high school graduation rate in Marion County was 86.5%, an eight percentage point increase since 2017.[[112]](#footnote-113) The 2020 high school graduation rate for students with a disability was 77.5%, a 32.5 percentage point increase since 2015.[[113]](#footnote-114)

Less than 4% of parents with children under six attended school or a job training program in 2019.[[114]](#footnote-115)

“The Marion County Public Library System is comprised of eight interdependent libraries… Headquarters-Ocala Public Library in Ocala and locations in Belleview, Dunnellon, Forest, Fort McCoy, Marion Oaks, Reddick and the SR200 corridor.”[[115]](#footnote-116) The library uses Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant funds to host programs such as Born to Read, Ready to Read, and Relatives as Parents.[[116]](#footnote-117) “Access to public libraries is especially important for ALICE families because libraries provide information on social services and job opportunities, free internet and computer access, and a range of free programs, community meetings, and even 3-D printers.”[[117]](#footnote-118) “A 2019 Gallup Poll found that lower-income households (earning less than $40,000 per year) visit the library more frequently than average- and higher-income households.”[[118]](#footnote-119) The below map shows the comparison of ALICE households to library access for Marion County subdivisions:[[119]](#footnote-120)

Map

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ELCMC partners with Read Aloud 15 MINUTES, a national nonprofit organization “that is working to make reading aloud every day for at least 15 minutes the new standard in child care,”[[120]](#footnote-121) Reading is Fundamental, “the nation’s largest children’s literacy non-profit,”[[121]](#footnote-122) and Kiwanis Club of Ocala on literacy initiatives. ELCMC distributes over 27,000 free children’s books a year to encourage all Marion County families to read aloud for at least 15 minutes a day to improve children’s cognitive development.[[122]](#footnote-123)

ELCMC partners with United Way of Marion County on Success By 6, a parent education initiative supporting parents in being their child’s first teacher. In fiscal year 2021-2022, 257 parents attended ELCMC Parents As Teachers workshops that provide strategies to ensure learning continues when children return home from child care and/or school.[[123]](#footnote-124)

## Social Services

Through partnerships with United Way Success By 6 and Kiwanis Club of Ocala, ELCMC supports family access to needed childcare essentials, including diapers, car seats, and pack ‘n plays.

Through our Help Me Grow grant from Children’s Forum and Help Me Grow Florida, ELCMC offers free developmental screenings to all Marion County children birth to 8, as well as resources and care coordination for any families with additional concerns and needs.

Of the over 4,000 “Marion County residents living with an” I/DD and not being served by Marion County Public Schools, “ARC Marion is providing direct support to approximately 200 daily. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there are THOUSANDS of Marion County citizens who are unserved and underserved.”[[124]](#footnote-125)

## Employment

“Marion County has a labor force of 156,247 people.”[[125]](#footnote-126) According to The Florida Scorecard, 4,742 people were unemployed in October 2022, an unemployment rate of 3.3%.[[126]](#footnote-127) This unemployment rate only counts adults actively looking for work and does not account for those not looking for work for reasons such as transportation or childcare issues.[[127]](#footnote-128) In Florida, “for women 25 to 54 years old, the most common reason for not working in 2018 was in-home responsibilities,” primarily caring for a child, aging parent, or family member with a disability or chronic health issue.[[128]](#footnote-129)

“Marion County has a total of 18,318” business establishments.[[129]](#footnote-130) Seventy-three percent of these businesses employ one to four employees.[[130]](#footnote-131) Kevin Sheilley, president and CEO of the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership, stated, “In 2020, the Ocala Metro was only one of four metropolitan areas in the country that added jobs. We had more jobs at the end of the pandemic here than at the beginning, in large part because so much of our workforce was deemed essential.”[[131]](#footnote-132) Forbes identified the Ocala Metro as a “Top 10 Metro for Future Job Growth.”[[132]](#footnote-133)

According to the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership Metro Profile webpage, 66% of the employees in Marion County are in white collar occupations.[[133]](#footnote-134) “In 2022, the leading industries in Marion County were retail, health care and social services, accommodation and food services, and education.”[[134]](#footnote-135) In 2021, there were 9,798 manufacturing jobs, a 10.4% share of jobs.[[135]](#footnote-136) Ocala’s major employers include Lockheed Martin, AdventHealth, FedEx, E-One, Ocala Health, Chewy, Marion County Public Schools, and Custom Window Systems.[[136]](#footnote-137) According to the Marion County Administrative Strategic Plan 2017-2021, "Agriculture in Marion County accounts for 28,362 jobs and $1.2 billion in revenue.”[[137]](#footnote-138) “Employment in logistics and distribution in the Ocala Metro is between 7,000 and 8,000.”[[138]](#footnote-139)

Episcopal Children’s Services notes that in 2019, 54.2% of Marion County residents work, and 64% of those working were working full-time.[[139]](#footnote-140) Nearly 66% of parents with children under six work.[[140]](#footnote-141)

## Housing

According to the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership Metro Profile webpage, 76.61% of households in Marion County own their home while 23.39% rent.”[[141]](#footnote-142) In 2022, 5,640 housing permits have been issued for single-family homes, an increase of 34% in five years.[[142]](#footnote-143)

Marion County “Community Services administers state and federal grants for affordable housing, community development, neighborhood stabilization and homelessness prevention programs.”[[143]](#footnote-144) According to the Marion County Administrative Strategic Plan 2017-2021, "the Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing identified a local vacancy rate of only three percent for affordable rental units. …Lower to middle income renters have difficulty finding affordable units and can spend up to 50 percent of their household income on housing costs.”[[144]](#footnote-145) In 2021, 49.3% of families were housing cost burdened, paying “more than 30 percent of their income for housing,” and 26.4% were severely burdened, “paying more than 50 percent” of their income on rent.[[145]](#footnote-146)

Episcopal Children’s Services noted that despite adding nearly 2,500 rental units, rental occupancies in Marion County remained at 91% from 2015-2019, signaling “intense competition for rental housing” and increases in rental costs.[[146]](#footnote-147)

## Transportation

Marion County has two airports and is served by freight rail.[[147]](#footnote-148) Interstate 75 runs through the county with an average of 97,500 cars per day.[[148]](#footnote-149) According to the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership, “residents spend an average of 25 minutes commuting to work.”[[149]](#footnote-150)

## Health

In 2022, the Florida Department of Health and AdventHealth Ocala conducted a Community Health Needs Assessment. “Important findings pointed to rising and persistently higher than state rates of morbidity and mortality for Marion County residents related to heart disease, cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease, mental health problems, unintentional injuries, and suicide. Data also pointed to disparities in health outcomes by race, ethnicity, and geography.”[[150]](#footnote-151) Heart disease and cancer are the “top two ranked causes of death.”[[151]](#footnote-152) “Marion County residents who responded to the survey expressed concerns regarding issues of healthcare service access, particularly primary and mental health care, mental/behavioral health including substance abuse, and access to meeting basic needs such as food, jobs, and affordable housing in safe neighborhoods. Health-related behaviors of concern were drug and alcohol use, tobacco use, poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, distracted driving, violence, not using healthcare resources appropriately, and loneliness/isolation.”[[152]](#footnote-153) The Community Health Needs Assessment Committee identified “high rates of poverty, lower educational attainment, persistent and unsolved barriers to healthcare, along with county-wide transportation challenges, food deserts, and social isolation of some populations” as “factors or characteristics unique to Marion County that could impact health.”[[153]](#footnote-154)

“Although economic standing is not always a risk factor for drug addiction in Florida, the consequences of addiction hit low-income families harder. The impact of addiction and substance use disorders on families often means a decline in their financial position, causing many families to become or remain ALICE. A family’s income may be reduced if addiction reduces an adult’s ability to work, and these families often have substantial health care costs. …lower-income families may not have access to such treatment programs, which only prolongs and compounds the outcomes of addiction,” taking “a toll on the stability of families and marriages, on parenting, and on the physical and mental health of family members.”[[154]](#footnote-155) In 2018, 22% of Marion County “babies were born exposed to various substances,” including alcohol, tobacco, illicit and prescription drugs, and marijuana/THC.[[155]](#footnote-156) Sixty-seven substance exposed babies were born in Marion County in 2018.[[156]](#footnote-157)

“Marion County residents lived an average of four (4) years less than the typical Florida resident at 75.4 years compared to 79.4 years.”[[157]](#footnote-158) In 2018-2020, “differences by race and ethnicity were evident. Life expectancy for Marion County’s Black residents was 74.9 years compared to 75.3 years for White residents and 78.1 years for Hispanic residents.”[[158]](#footnote-159) “Black residents of Marion County have higher mortality rates due to heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and COVID-19, while White races are more likely to die from cancer, unintentional injury, CLRD [Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease], and suicide.”[[159]](#footnote-160)

“Suicide was a top ten cause of death from 2018-2020 in Marion County for All races, …with White races in particular being 4.5 times as likely to die from suicide compared to Black races… Additionally, we see that males are more likely than females to die from suicide… Among children, suicide is ranked as the 4th leading cause of death in the county, at odds with being only the 6th leading cause of death in the state. It is also notable that suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among 18-44-year-olds – the same as for the state.”[[160]](#footnote-161)

“The death rate due to all causes of mortality for children aged 0-17 in Marion County from 2018-2020 came in at 75.6 deaths per 100,000 population compared to 49.9 deaths for the state, with the leading cause of death being perinatal conditions, unintentional injuries, congenital malformations, suicide, homicide, and cancer. With respect to the state, children within Marion County are more than twice as likely to die from unintentional injuries or suicide… Infants are also consistently slightly more at risk in Marion County than the state for sudden unexpected infant death (SUID), congenital and chromosomal anomalies, perinatal conditions, and unintentional suffocation and strangulation.”[[161]](#footnote-162) The Hispanic population experiences the highest rate of infant deaths in the county at 13.8 deaths for every 1,000 live births, a rate that has increased from 2016-2020.[[162]](#footnote-163)

As of June 16, 2022, 63% “of individuals five (5) years of age or older have been vaccinated” for COVID-19, 11 points lower than the state percentage.[[163]](#footnote-164)

“According to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement’s Domestic Violence 2019 Annual Report, when compared to the state, Marion County had higher rates of murder, rape, fondling, aggravated assault, and simple assault. …To expand, in 2019 Marion County witnessed a murder rate that was approximately 5.9 times that of the state, a rate of rape nearly 2.6 times that of the state, more than double the rate of fondling, and nearly double the rates of aggravated and simple assault”[[164]](#footnote-165)

“The rate of Baker Acts among children who live in Marion County is 2,463.6 per 100,000 persons, double the rate of the state at 1,240.0 exams.”[[165]](#footnote-166)

Episcopal Children’s Services 2020 Community Assessment found that 26% of infants and children under two who participate in WIC are overweight or obese.[[166]](#footnote-167)

The availability of physicians and dentists was lower in Marion County than both the Florida and US average: 20 physicians and 3.86 dentists for every 10,000 Marion County residents.[[167]](#footnote-168) “Pediatricians are particularly scarce, with a rate of 7.9 physicians per 100,000 population.”[[168]](#footnote-169) “Within Marion County, there are three (3) dental care locations, five (5) primary care locations, and two (2) mental health locations that are high priority HPSA [Health Professional Shortage Areas] shortage areas. The same report also identified Low Income/Migrant Farm Workers as a Medically Underserved Area.”[[169]](#footnote-170)

Over 7% of children under the age of 19 are uninsured.[[170]](#footnote-171) For adults 18-64, 20.5% are uninsured.[[171]](#footnote-172)

# Data Analysis and Summary

With Marion County population continuing to grow, especially for younger demographics, the need for childcare providers and teachers will continue to grow. Episcopal Children’s Services identified a childcare need for 12,771 children, based on households with children under 6 where both parents work. DCF reports a childcare capacity of 11,270 for children of all ages.

With an average of nearly 3,200 students entering kindergarten each year, approximately 1,700 students attending VPK, and approximately 1,300 deemed “ready for kindergarten,” there is an opportunity for more research into the barriers for accessing quality early learning programs, such as VPK, for approximately 1,500 four-year-olds each year.

Over 23% of Marion County’s children live in poverty, and 66% of students are eligible for free/reduced meals. Nearly 69% of children are eligible for Medicaid. More than half of households with children, 52%, live below the Alice Threshold. Minority households in Marion County, specifically Black and Hispanic, have more children than the overall household rate and experience higher rates of poverty. Poverty rates are also higher in households with a single female head of household.

While Marion County’s general population is less diverse than Florida, the student population is diverse, with 35% of students identifying as Hispanic and 21% as Black. Only 13.15 of Marion County residents speak a language other than English, but 32.4% of them do not speak English “very well.” Zip code 34475 ranked as one of the top three highest birth rates in the county, with the highest Black population in the Ocala area and the highest rate of Hispanic births.

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