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CRITICAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF chattahoochee county

The counties included in the Community Assets and Critical Issues Assessment ("CACIA") are Chattahoochee, Harris, Marion, Muscogee, Stewart, Talbot and Taylor counties in Georgia, and Russell County in Alabama. Qualitative information was collected using several different mechanisms during the Community Assets and Critical Issues Assessment. In Chattahoochee County, approximately 50 people attended a town hall meeting in the community and approximately 15 individual interviews (face to face, telephone, and e-survey) were conducted with people who actively came to an event and chose to participate. Conversely, a random dial telephone survey elicited responses from nearly 2,000 people in the eight county area at their homes. All of the qualitative information (from the town hall meetings, personal interviews, and e-survey responses) was analyzed using a qualitative analysis tool called "N-6." N-6 helps remove researcher bias through a process of coding and categorizing every sentence of text from these sources. Faculty and staff from the Carl Vinson Institute of Government's Research and Policy division, who did not participate in the collection of the data, read and coded all transcripts, providing a means to determine those topics that were truly the most significant to participants.

Demographic and economic data were collected from a variety of public and government sources and analyzed according to the County's most significant issue areas. This county-level report contains the highlights of the Carl Vinson Institute's findings for Chattahoochee County. It accompanies and is complementary to a separate county-level report for the other seven counties and a comprehensive regional report combining data and findings for the entire eight county CACIA Region. It also accompanies a lengthy CD data set with tables, graphs, and charts updating key demographic and economic measures for the entire Region.

Demographic & Economic Data

Several key demographic and economic measures help provide a comprehensive overview of an area, particularly when viewed over time. These include poverty rates, per capita personal income, educational attainment levels and population growth rate, among others. The information and charts provide an overall picture of Chattahoochee County and will be referred to later in the report as issues, strengths and challenges are discussed.

Accurately determining the needs, challenges, gaps and overlaps in Chattahoochee County is difficult for many community leaders and social service professionals due to the complex makeup of the County. Although Chattahoochee County is part of the Columbus Metropolitan Statistical Area (because a significant percentage of Chattahoochee County workers commute to Muscogee County for work each

presence of the Ft. Benning military installation often masks certain issues or problems facing the County. Ft. Benning comprises approximately three quarters of the land mass in Chattahoochee County, and over 60% of residents age 18 and older in the County were military personnel in 2000. [U.S. Census Bureau].

To help ascertain some of the differences between residents living within Ft. Benning and non-military residents, the Chattahoochee County Family Connections recently funded a study of Chattahoochee County which separately assessed demographic and economic statistics of the military and non-military areas of the County. This study, *Profiling Chattahoochee County, A Local Perspective* (D. Bachtel, University of Georgia, 2002), will be referred

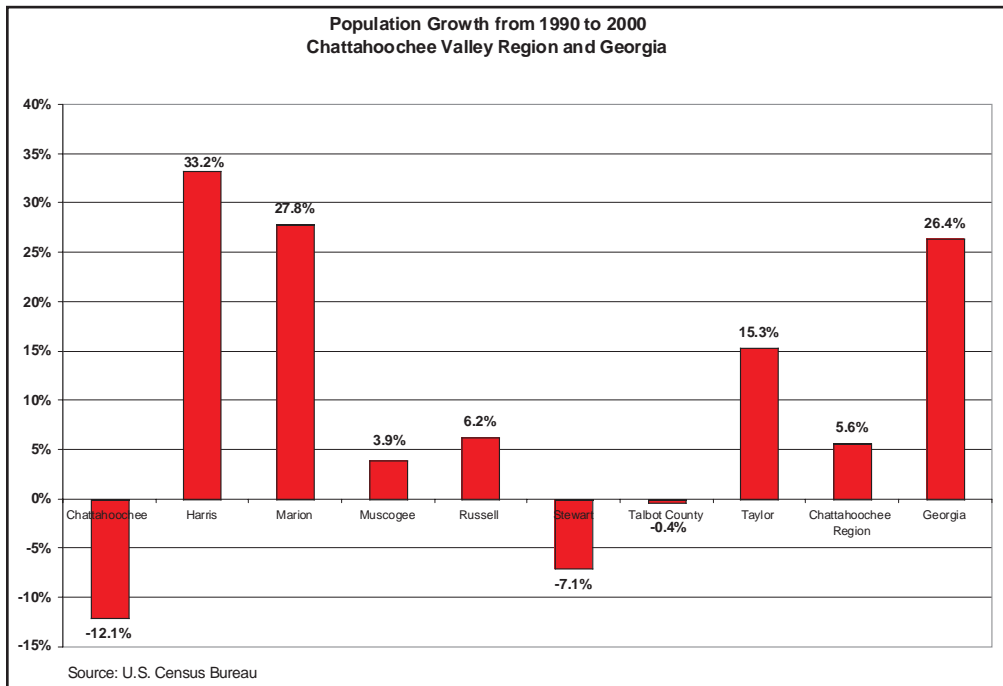
Residents of the County who participated in the CACIA assessment generally view Ft. Benning as a strength for the area, but they conclude that many of the benefits attributed to the County are in relation to the military installation and are not accessible to non-military residents of Chattahoochee County. In addition, residents note that there is a distinct separation between Chattahoochee County and Ft. Benning:

"I don't believe there is any particular animosity between the County and Ft. Benning - they are just two separate worlds."
[Chattahoochee County Interview].

"Ft. Benning is completely separate from the rest of Chattahoochee County."
[Chattahoochee County Interview].

Chattahoochee County has experienced substantial flux in its population, largely due to the nature of the activities at Ft. Benning (training) and the resulting transient nature of many of the military personnel in the area. This is clearly illustrated by an analysis of the County's population over the past 15 years. From 1990 to 2000, Chattahoochee County experienced the Region's most significant population loss, -12.1%.

By the 2000 Census, Chattahoochee County's population had dropped to 14,882, down substantially from a high of 25,813 in 1970. (Georgia Department of Labor). The County's rate of population growth has consistently been well below the Georgia state average, and the



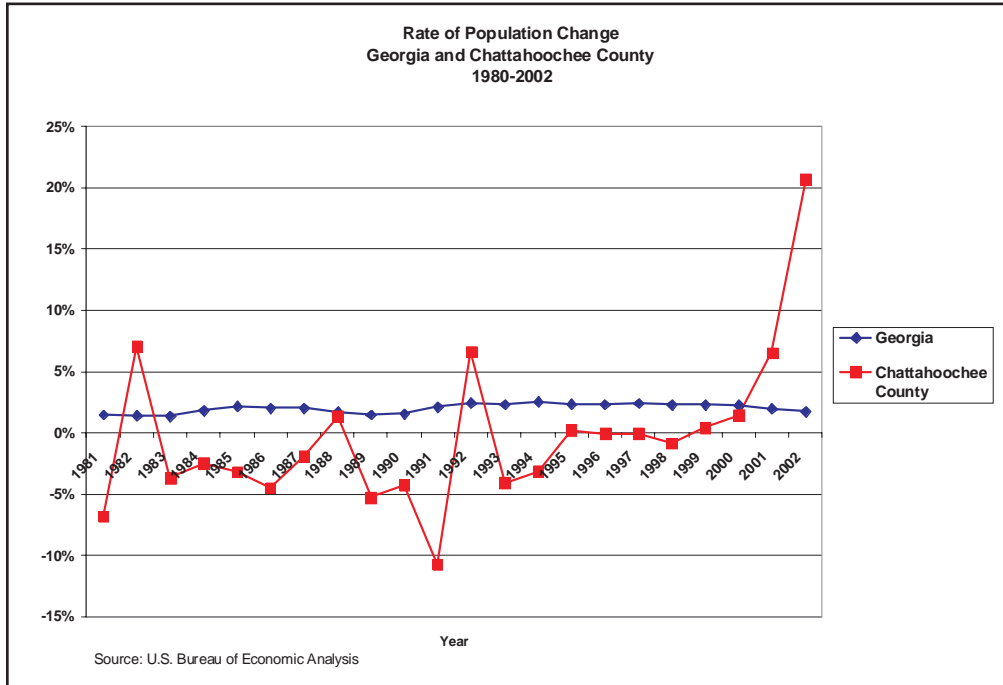
day), the County exhibits both urban and rural characteristics. Additionally, due to its extensive influence on the County, the

to at several points in this assessment report to help clarify the impact of the Ft. Benning installation on the County's statistics.

County experienced a negative rate of growth (i.e. lost population) in at least 14 of the last 22 years.

residents who have attained each educational milestone as their highest level of education. Most notice-

age is largely due to Ft. Benning's influence and the military's requirement of a high school diploma or equivalency certificate. Comparing the educational attainment of residents 25 and over in the "Ft. Benning" census tract with the "non-Ft. Benning" census tract, only 3.7% of people 25 and older in the Ft. Benning tract did not have a high school education, G.E.D. or equivalency certificate. However, in the non-Ft. Benning tract, 31.2% of residents did not have a high school diploma, G.E.D. or equivalency certificate.

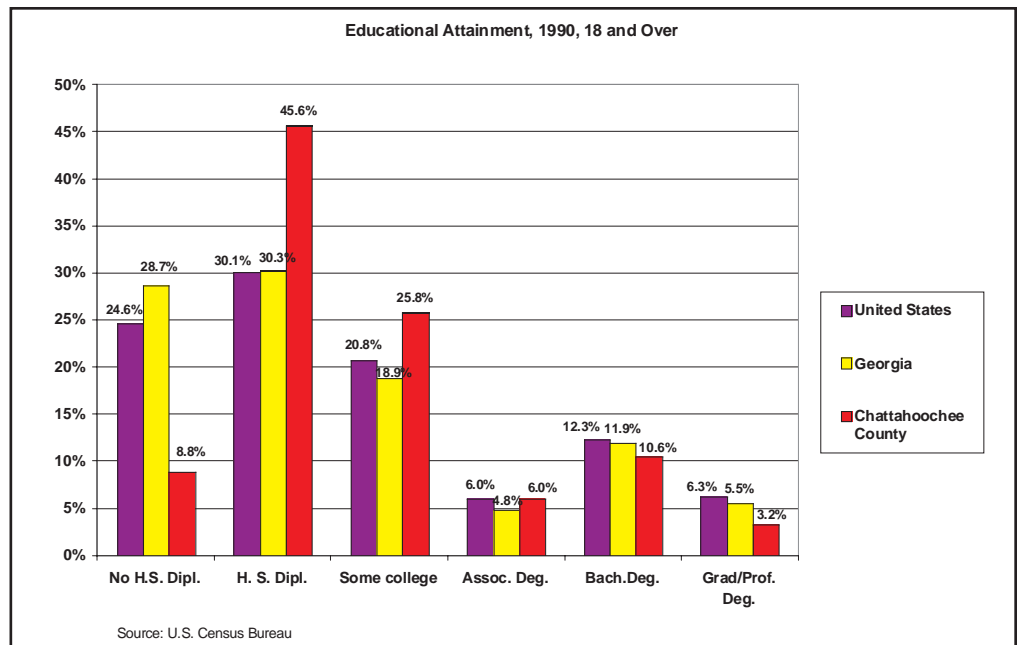


However, from 2000 to 2002, Chattahoochee County experienced a significant positive rate of growth. In one year (2001-2002), Chattahoochee County added approximately 3,301 people. Partially due to increased investment in military spending at the federal level as a result of the United States' response to the events of September 11, 2001. According to 2003 population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (cited by the Georgia Department of Labor and the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget), **Chattahoochee County's population is projected to increase 34.4% by 2010, a gain of over 7,800 people from 2000.** While this growth is not delineated by military and non-military residents, it represents significant challenges for community leaders in the County if current growth rates continue.

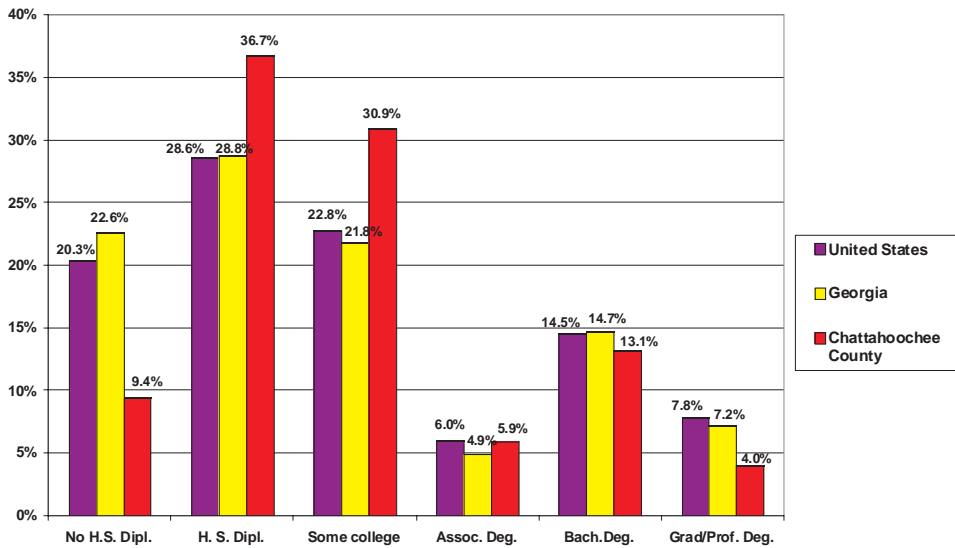
able is the County's extremely low rate of residents lacking a high school diploma. In 2000, only 9.2% of Chattahoochee County residents age 18 and over did not have a high school diploma - less than half the national (20.3%) and Georgia (22.6%) averages for residents without a high school diploma. According to *Profiling Chattahoochee County, A Local Perspective* (D. Bachtel, University of Georgia, 2002), this low percent-

The levels of Chattahoochee County residents who have taken some college level courses continue to be higher than the state and national averages, as well. (Both the 1990 and 2000 educational attainment graphs include Ft. Benning). In 1990, 25.8% of Chattahoochee County residents reported that their highest level of educational attainment was "some college." By 2000, that percentage was 30.9%, the highest percentage in the eight county CACIA Region by more than five percentage points and significantly higher than the national average at 22.8%. The next highest county in the

Educational attainment is another strong indicator of the overall health and prosperity of a community. The following charts illustrate the percentages of Chattahoochee County



Educational Attainment, 2000, 18 and Over



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

CACIA Region was Muscogee County with 25% of residents having taken some college level courses in 2000.

The percentages of Chattahoochee County residents with bachelors and professional degrees increased from 1990 to 2000, with 13.1% of residents having a bachelors degree in 2000, up from 10.6% in 1990.

According to *Profiling Chattahoochee County, A Local Perspective* (D. Bachtel, University of Georgia, 2002), these degrees are concentrated in the military residents of the County, with 31.1% of residents 25 and over in the Ft. Benning census block group having bachelors degrees in 2000.

Poverty rates are directly linked to educational attainment and can help provide a broad indication of how a community is doing and whether it is moving in the right direction. Poverty rates are one measure of overall wealth in a community by expressing that wealth (or lack thereof) to federal program eligibility. As with any statistical measure, the rates have disadvantages. Poverty rates measure income

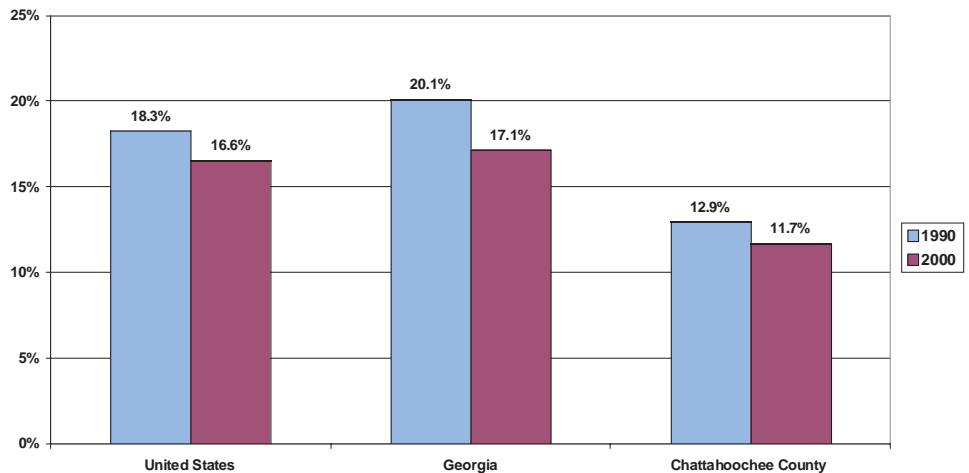
according to a federal equation which varies based on the makeup and number of family members. It is used to determine eligibility for certain federal programs but in reality has little relation to how much money a family needs to survive - it does not necessarily depict a living wage. However, it is a useful indicator when expressed over time to determine if an area's economy, programs and other efforts are having an effect, and where the community falls in relation to other similarly-situated areas.

Child poverty rates are typically higher than overall poverty rates, and they provide a clearer picture on how well a community is responding to its most needy population. In Chattahoochee County, the reverse is true, as the County reported much lower child poverty rates than the state and national averages in both 1990 and 2000. This may be largely due to the high number of military families which, while often not highly paid, are typically living above the federal poverty level.

The percentage of female heads of household (no husband living in the house) living in poverty is another critical measure, as many of these women have primary or sole custody of children living in the house are also living in poverty. This percentage was extremely high in Chattahoochee County in 1990, with 57% of female heads of household living below the poverty level, including Ft. Benning.

While the percentage was still substantially higher than the state and national averages in 2000, it had decreased significantly in 10 years, to 42.1%. According to *Profiling*

Percent Living In Poverty Children 17 and Under U.S., Georgia and Chattahoochee County 1990 and 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Chattahoochee County, A Local Perspective (D. Bachtel, University of Georgia, 2002), the percentage of female heads of household living in poverty still exceeds 50% in the non-Ft. Benning census tracts in Chattahoochee County. Reducing this number must be a high priority for community leaders both within Ft. Benning and throughout Chattahoochee County.

A broad overview of Chattahoochee County's economy also provides some insight into strengths and challenges for the area. According to the Georgia Department of Labor, 81.6% of non-Ft. Benning employment in Chattahoochee County came from private sector companies in 2002, with only 18.4% being public-sector employment. Outside of Ft. Benning, the highest wages paid were in the retail services sector, which employed 102 people with an average weekly wage of \$787 in 2002. The five largest employers in Chattahoochee County in the third quarter of 2003 (excluding government and public schools, and listed alphabetically) were:

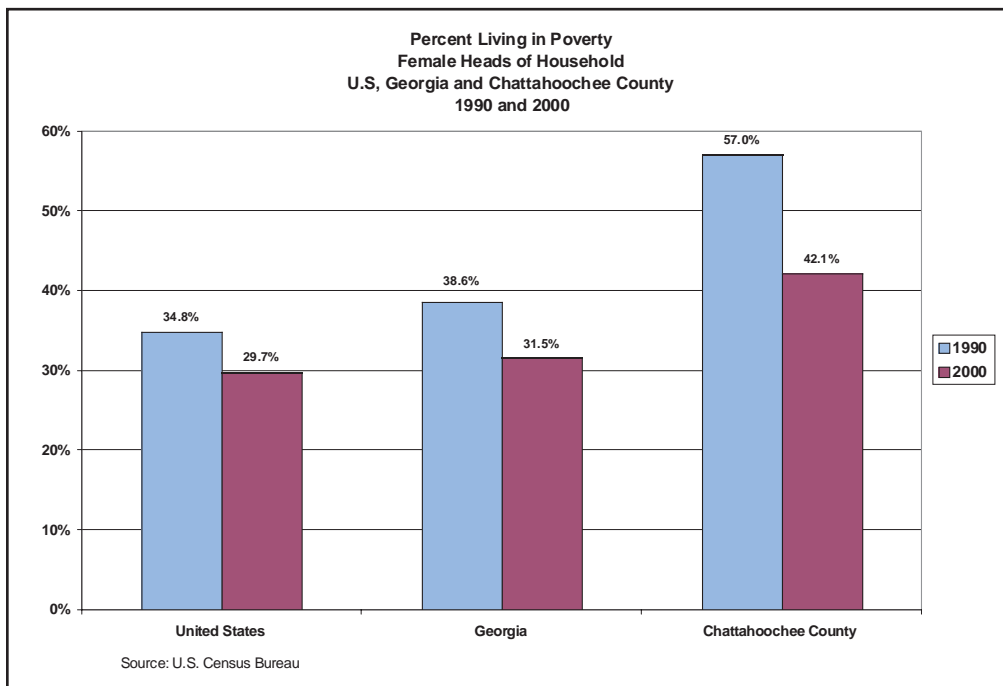
- :: *Cusseta Laundry Inc.*
- :: *Employment Source Inc.*

- :: *Intergraph Corporation*
- :: *Lear Siegler Services, Inc.*
- :: *Thomas Brand Siding*

It would be inaccurate to portray Chattahoochee County's economy as independent from that of surrounding counties and Ft. Benning. Of the residents of Chattahoochee County who were employed in 2000, 64.2% worked in Chattahoochee County, while the remaining 35.8% commuted to jobs outside the County. Nearly 30% of employed workers in Chattahoochee County commuted north to Muscogee County, while a few commuted to Russell County, Alabama and Lumpkin and Marion Counties in Georgia. These numbers are based on a workforce of 8,538 Chattahoochee County residents in 2000. Several residents reported commuting to Korea and California, reflecting the influence of Ft. Benning in the area. (U.S. Census Bureau 2000)

Chattahoochee County also brings thousands of people into the County each day for work who contributed to (and have the potential to contribute more to) the County's economy in a variety of ways. Of the

13,268 people who worked in Chattahoochee County in 2000 (including Ft. Benning), more than half of them (7,786) came from other counties to work in Chattahoochee County. The majority commuted from Muscogee (3,748), Russell (981), and Lee, AL (668) Counties, although nearly 100 people reported a commute from Cumberland County, North Carolina (the home of Ft. Bragg, which again is illustrative of the interrelationship that exists between Ft. Benning and Chattahoochee County). The daily influx of people into Chattahoochee County means the potential for additional economic benefit if those people could be encouraged to shop, dine, and spend money in other ways in the County.



Strengths

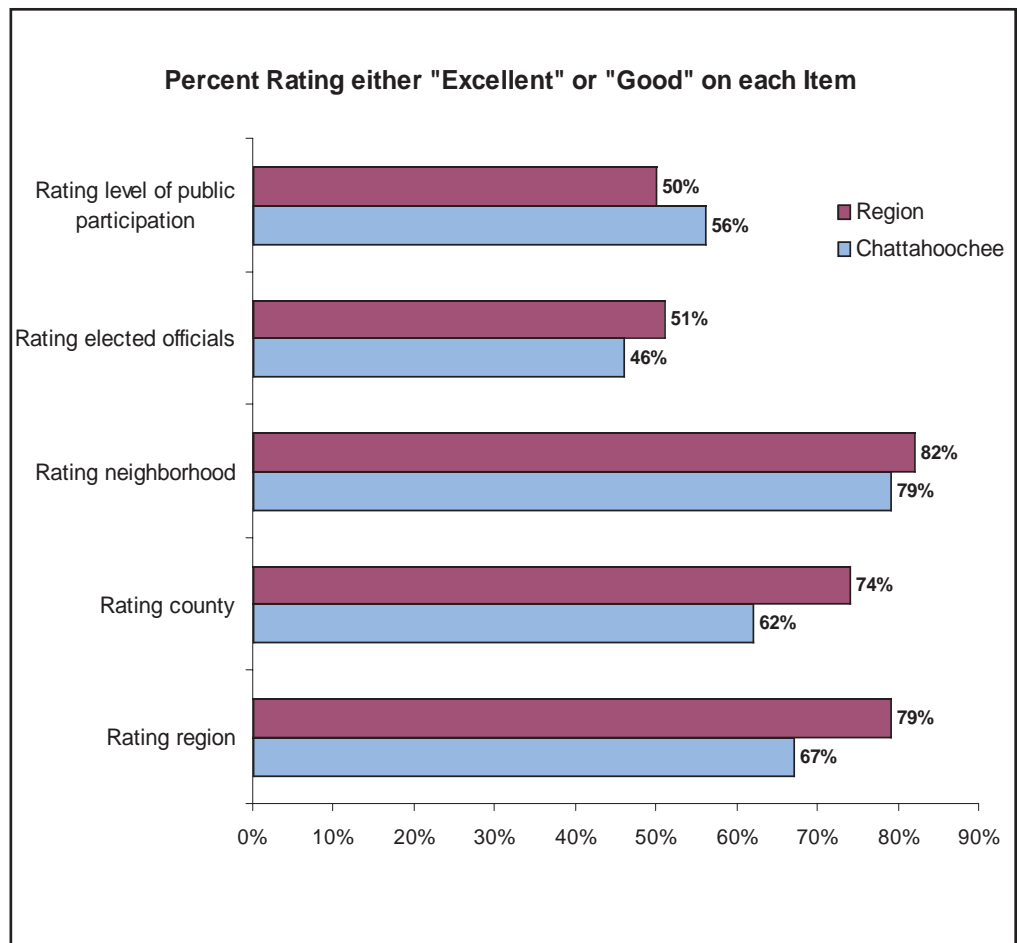
While the main objective of this assessment was to identify challenge areas for the communities involved, it is critical to also briefly discuss the many strengths and positive attributes residents conveyed as they participated in the town hall meeting, interviews, e-surveys and the telephone survey. The telephone survey, in particular, provided an opportunity to test perceptions and issues gathered at the town hall meeting and during interviews.

As part of the eight county needs assessment, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia conducted a random telephone survey in fall 2004 of nearly 2,000 people in the eight county region, including 230 from Chattahoochee County. Residents were asked to assess their perceptions about the places they live and the relative strengths and challenges of their respective communities. Chattahoochee County residents indicated that they feel very positive about certain aspects of their community and the Region, but less positive about others. Over 65% of Chattahoochee County residents ranked the Chattahoochee Valley Region as an “Excellent” or “Good” place to live. This was lower than the average of 79% for all of the eight counties within the CACIA Region (ranging from a low of 52.6% of Stewart County residents ranking the Region as an ‘Excellent’ or “Good” place to live, to a high of 85.7% of Harris County residents ranking the Chattahoochee Valley Region as an “Excellent” or “good” place to live). This may partially reflect the transient nature of many

of the County's residents and the fact that they are not here long enough to develop very positive feelings about the community.

When asked about their own neighborhood, however, the following graph illustrates that Chattahoochee County residents feel extremely positively in comparison to their County and the Region. Nearly 80% of Chattahoochee County residents ranked their neighborhoods as “Excellent” or “Good.” Approximately 56% of Chattahoochee County residents

County (61%). Participants in the Chattahoochee County town hall meeting noted the high turnout at the meeting despite the rainy, stormy evening, and several commented positively on the number of people willing to get involved in a variety of causes in the community. One participant commented that more people still need to get involved, because the ones who are presently involved within the community tend to be involved in everything and are bearing the brunt of activity. However, CACIA participants were generally pleased with the level of participation that exists within the community, despite the fact that Chattahoochee County has the lowest voter registration rate in the Region (15.7% in 2000).



rated public participation in the County as “Excellent” or “Good,” representing the second highest percentage of all eight counties in the assessment, second only to Harris

Prior to the telephone survey, an analysis of the town hall meeting notes and interviews of local residents highlighted the following strengths (in no particular order):

- :: *The way groups work together*
- :: *The way the County is growing*
- :: *The resources available*
- :: *The school system*
- :: *The County's location*

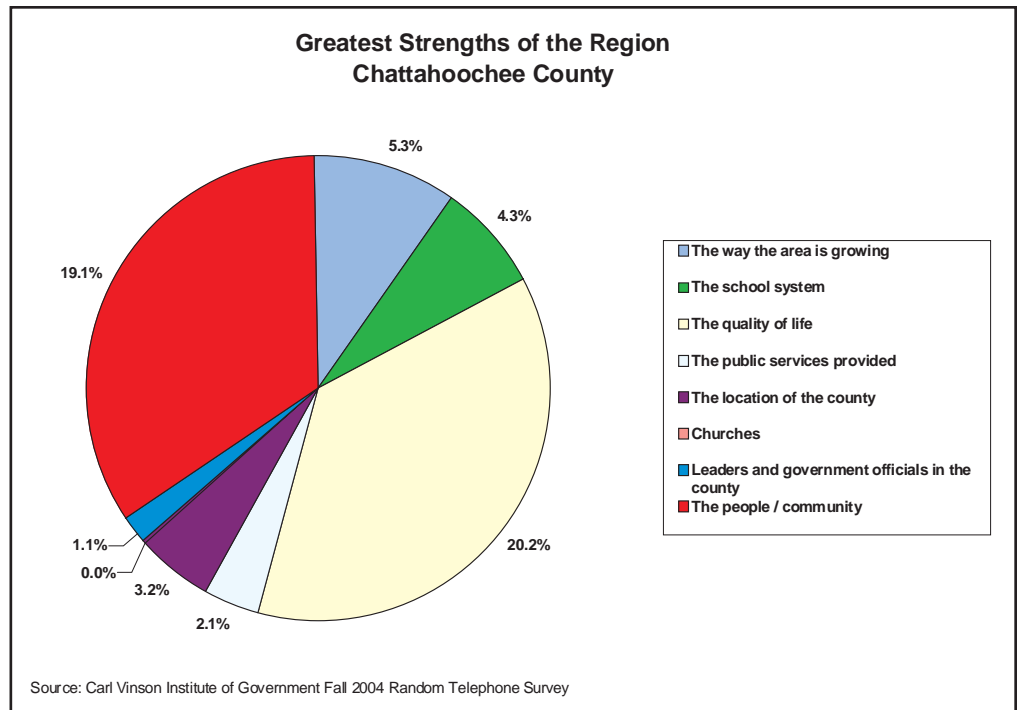
These were then incorporated into the telephone survey given to Chattahoochee County residents, and residents were asked about the area's greatest strengths.

When asked an open-ended question about the Region's strengths in the telephone survey, more than one in five respondents said the area's "quality of life." This description means different things to different people but generally indicates a high level of satisfaction with the area in which they live. Nearly one in five responded "the people or the community" when asked this question. Other residents highlighted natural resources and highway infrastructure when asked this question in interviews:

"The greatest strength of Chattahoochee County is the natural resources that exist within the County and the vast amounts of undeveloped land."
[Chattahoochee County Interview].

"The greatest assets of the area are the natural resources and nature. I like to 'see the stars at night,' particularly after living in Atlanta."
[Chattahoochee County Interview].

"The strengths of the area are Route 26, Route 27 and Route 520 - [however] we let travelers drive right through the area and do not give them a reason for stopping."
[Chattahoochee County Interview].



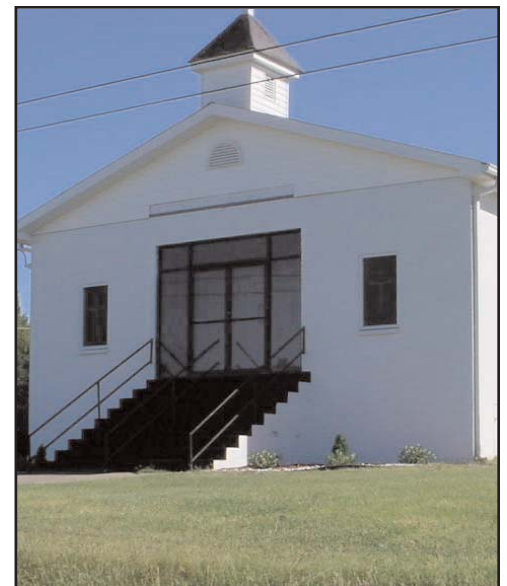
Other strengths of Chattahoochee County that were noted by participants in the town hall meeting include:

- :: *Churches work well together*
- :: *Riverbend Park and Recreation Center*
- :: *Natural beauty of the area*
- :: *Highway accessibility*
- :: *Heritage - people who have been here for generations*
- :: *Friendly community, courteous people*
- :: *The new high school in 2005*
- :: *The new consolidated government and County Manager*
- :: *County water system that provides water to whole county*
- :: *Rural atmosphere*

While Chattahoochee County's school system is the focus of one of the area's greatest challenges, it was also discussed as a strength for the County, particularly with respect to certain teachers or efforts within the school system. For many people, the schools are a source of community pride and a place to gather and share information and resources:

"The school system is one of the area's greatest strengths. It is better than most rural schools."
[Chattahoochee County Interview].

"The schools don't have a lot of bad problems that many of the surrounding schools have. Teachers and administrators know the kids and take a personal interest in them."
[Chattahoochee County Town Hall Meeting Participant].



Challenges

The qualitative analysis for Chattahoochee County identified the following issues as broad themes for the most significant challenges facing the County. In descending order of importance, these issues occupied the most discussion time in interviews, e-surveys and the town hall meeting in Chattahoochee County:

- :: *The school system*
- :: *At-risk youth, youth programs, lack of parental involvement with youth*
- :: *Not enough money or programs to meet the needs of people*
- :: *Jobs and attracting industry*
- :: *Getting people involved in the community (volunteering, local government)*

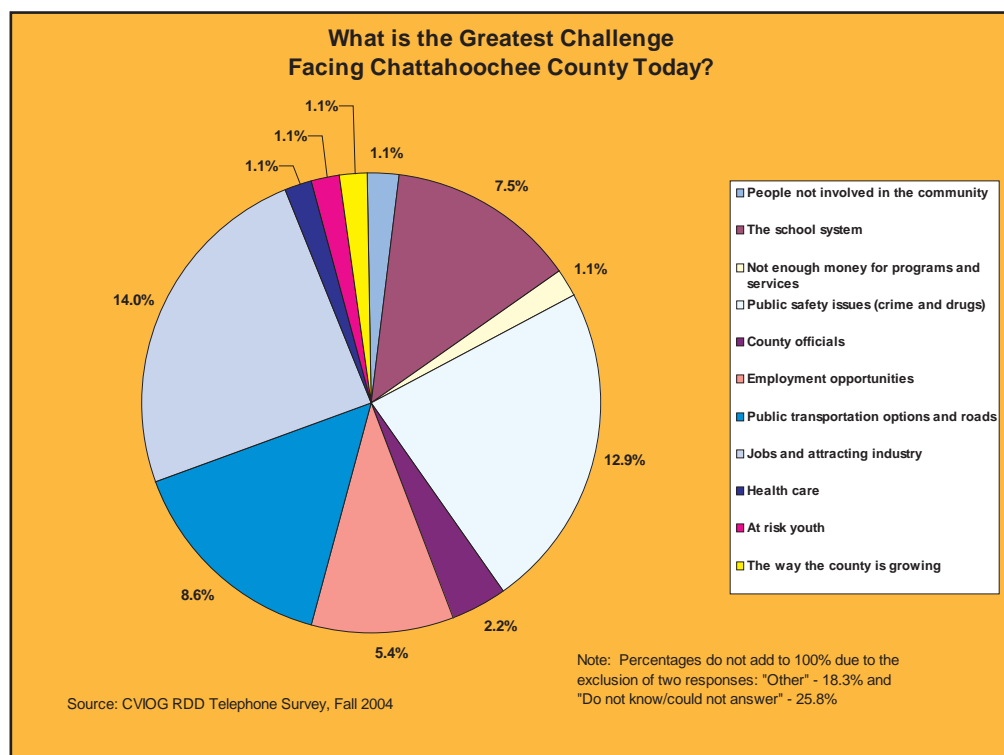
The random telephone survey was designed using these broad issue areas of concern, which varied from county to county. Responses to the telephone survey in Chattahoochee County added several additional issues, some in differing orders of importance that those above. This may partially reflect the difference between people who actively chose to attend the town hall meeting, be interviewed, or participate in an e-survey versus those who were randomly selected to participate in a brief telephone survey. It may also reflect current issues in the community at the time the response was given, recognizing that the assessment was conducted over a nine month period.

In response to an open-ended question "What is the greatest challenge for Chattahoochee County?", the highest percentage of respondents (14%) said jobs and attracting industry was the greatest challenge for the County. When the 5.4% of people

who responded "employment opportunities" is added to that total, nearly one in five people surveyed indicated that the County's economy was the greatest challenge.

Based on thorough analysis of resi-

"The area needs more commercial development and needs to focus on improving its economy. Ft. Benning shops in Columbus."
[Chattahoochee County Interview].



dents' perceptions and considering key demographic and economic information, the following issues are those that rose to the top in terms of challenges or problems for Chattahoochee County.

JOBS & CREATING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

The economy and job creation also emerged as significant factors in the conversations during the Chattahoochee County town hall meeting and from interviews and e-surveys, as well. Job availability and attracting industry were readily identified as significant challenges for the County:

"Transportation opportunities are needed - there are currently no means of traveling back and forth to Columbus if you don't happen to own a car. People who don't have a car can't access job opportunities there. The County used to have a van service, but the prior County Commissioners eliminated it because it wasn't paying for itself."
[Chattahoochee County Interview].

Participants were also concerned with the skills available in the County's workforce:

"Parents are not educated; they lack basic skills, and many are content to 'just do nothing.' Most people have a driver's license, so the lack of transportation is not as big an issue as some people say it is. It is really just an excuse."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

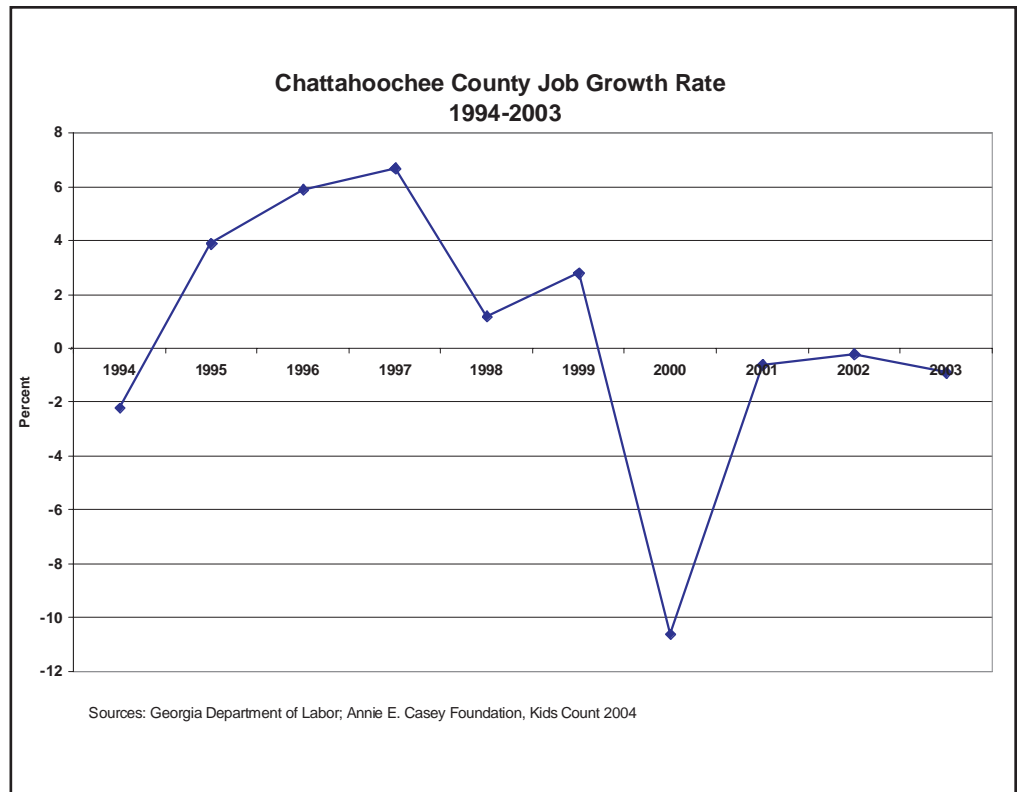
"The larger issue is the lack of work skills and the attitude people have toward work."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

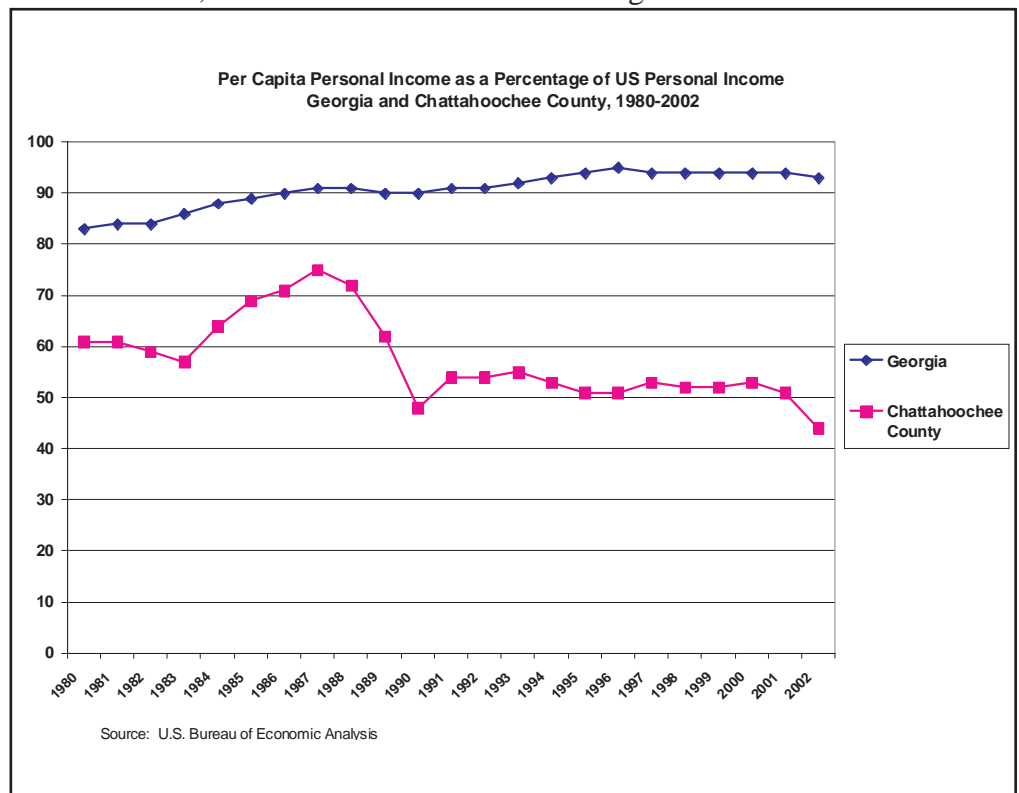
An analysis of Chattahoochee County's job growth rate over the past decade clearly reveals the impact that the recent recession had on the County. After experiencing positive job growth for most of the late 1990s (through 1999), the County had a -10.6 percent job growth rate in 2000 and was still feeling the effects of that year throughout 2001, 2002 and 2003.

These job losses are also reflected in the County's per capita personal incomes. In 2002, the per capita personal income of Chattahoochee County residents was \$13,525, a significant drop from \$15,612 in 2001 after remaining somewhat stable for most of the 1990s.

In 1987, Chattahoochee County residents' per capita personal income was 75% of the national average. It has steadily dropped since that time and **in 2002, Chattahoochee County residents' per capita personal income was only 44% of the national average.** This is partially reflected in the County's high female heads of household poverty rate but is largely hidden by other statistics. These numbers include Ft. Benning and demonstrate strongly the impact



of salaries that, while above the fed- Benning installation. While the



eral poverty level, are still very low when compared to national averages.

A related concern expressed by several CACIA participants is the fact that only 20-25% of the land in Chattahoochee County is taxable due to the presence of the Ft.

installation causes additional concerns in the economic development area, County residents are also cognizant of its benefits and economic potential. Residents noted a division between Ft. Benning and the rest of the County but readily acknowledged that relations and efforts are improving:

"County officials from Muscogee, Chattahoochee, Phenix City and Ft. Benning meet once a month to coordinate efforts and plan. The Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce has a Ft. Benning group, and we are part of the Valley Partnership."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

"This fall, people are planning to start a local Chamber of Commerce, with both Ft. Benning and non-Ft. Benning businesses working together."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

Many people described a pattern of residents who are born and raised here, leave for 20-30 years while they work, and then retire in Chattahoochee County and become involved in the community. People expressed concern that young people become disengaged from the community when they leave to attend high school out of the County, and that the lack of job opportunities makes it difficult for them to return.

HEALTH & HEALTHCARE

Access to healthcare and certain health issues were strongly identified by participants in the town hall meeting and in individual interviews. Statistical information validated these concerns so strongly that this issue rises as one of the County's greatest challenges, despite the fact that only a very small percentage of telephone survey participants identified it. One resident succinctly described one of the most pressing concerns in this area:

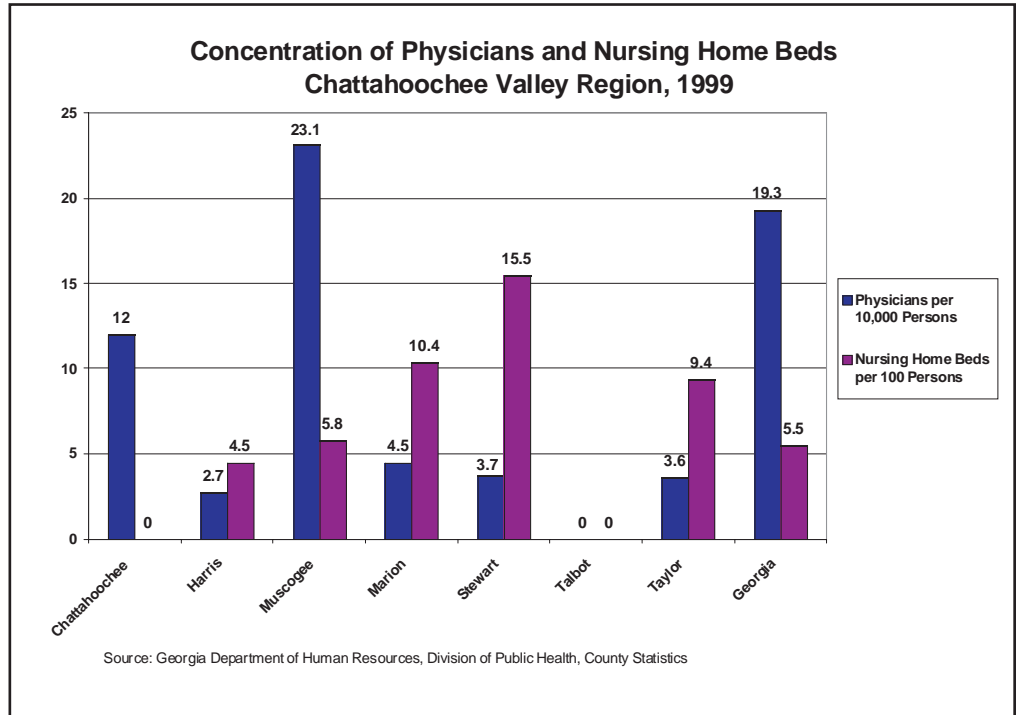
"Gaps in services in Chattahoochee County include healthcare. There are no doctors and no hospital in the County. The demographics show

Martin Army Hospital, but you can't access it unless you're military, even in an emergency. Ft. Benning does provide helicopter and ambulance service in emergencies, but the County needs to include regular ambulance service in its long-range plans."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

he or she is only here several days a week and they have to share their time with other counties. Some people see a nurse at the County health department, but I'm not sure if she's a nurse or a physicians' assistant. Otherwise, they go to Columbus."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].



The chart above illustrates the difference between perception and reality for many of the County's residents. According to statistics from the Georgia Department of Human Resources, Chattahoochee County has the third highest number of doctors per 10,000 people. However, anecdotal and qualitative data suggest that all of these doctors are affiliated with Ft. Benning and are not available to non-military residents of Chattahoochee County.

Resources available through the Chattahoochee County Health Department are not perceived to be sufficient to meet the needs of the entire County:

"Chattahoochee County absolutely needs a doctor, even if

The need for healthcare professionals in Chattahoochee County applies to dentists as well. Participants in the town hall meeting noted that the County has a number of veterinarians, but no doctors or dentists.

Residents are aware of and appreciate the emergency assistance provided by Ft. Benning, but most believe the County needs to be more independent in this area:

"Improved ambulance service is another need. The closest ambulance is south Columbus, with a 22 minute average response time...if they aren't busy. The County has First Responders and volunteer EMTs, but during the day when they are all at their other jobs, it would

be impossible to get one. They cannot call an ambulance from Ft. Benning, although sometimes Ft. Benning will help respond if the County has a very large fire." [Chattahoochee County Interview].

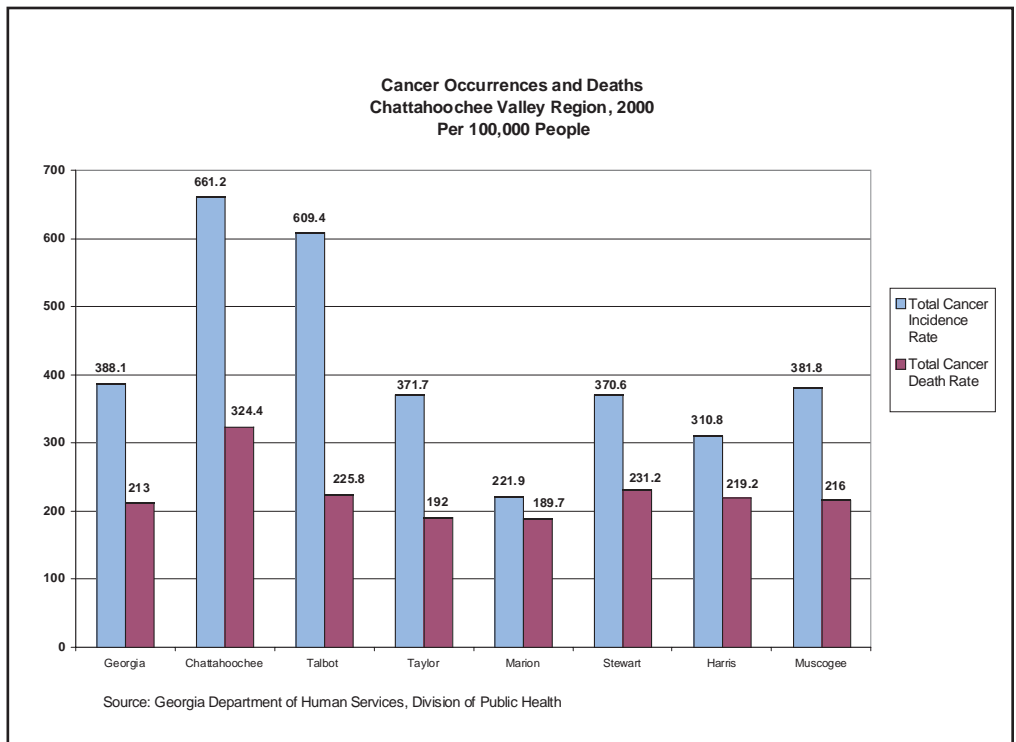
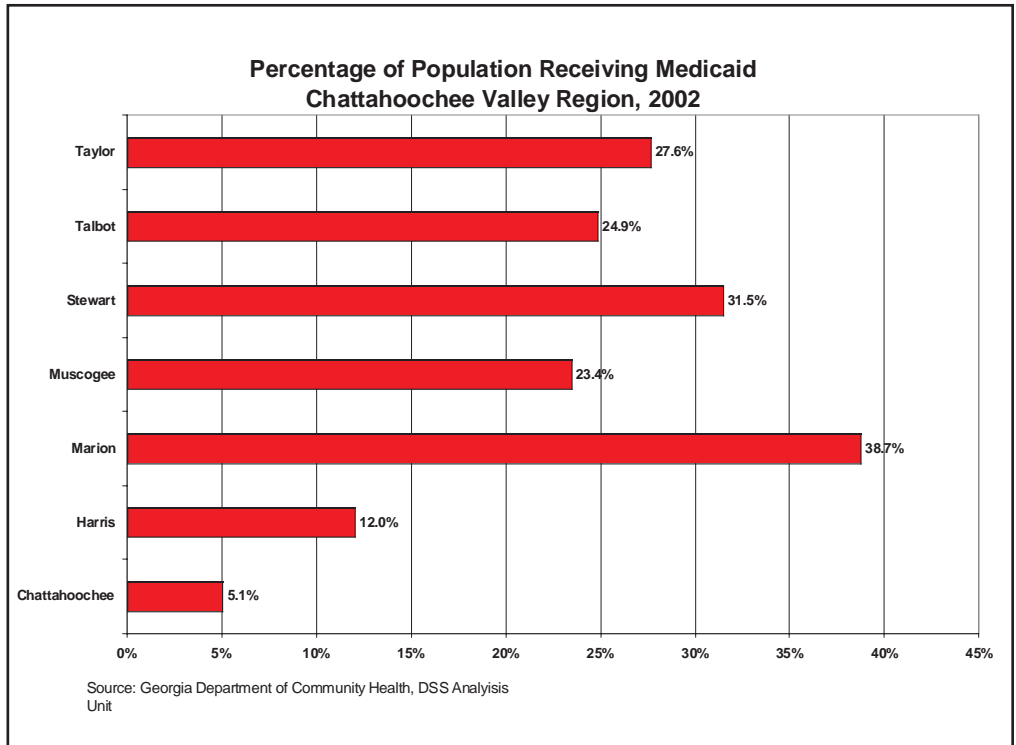
	MEDICAID MEMBERS		
	2002	2003	2004
Chattahoochee	973	1,070	1,106

rate from cancer in Chattahoochee County is 509.2, the highest by far of all the Georgia counties in the CACIA Region. This is an issue on which public health officials and community leaders in the area must focus.

According to the Georgia Department of Community Health, Chattahoochee County has the lowest percentage of residents receiving Medicare of all the Georgia counties in the Chattahoochee Valley Region. However, this rate likely excludes all Ft. Benning military personnel, as they receive healthcare benefits and services through the military. When the number of Medicaid recipients is compared to the non-military population average for Chattahoochee County, the percentage increases several times. In 2000, Chattahoochee County had approximately 4,076 civilian residents over the age of 18; by 2004, over 1,100 residents in Chattahoochee County were Medicaid recipients.

The numbers of Medicaid recipients in Chattahoochee County have increased substantially over the past two years, with Chattahoochee County experiencing the sharpest increase in the number of Medicaid recipients in the CACIA project area from 2002 - 2004, 13.7%. All other Georgia counties in the assessment experienced only 5-8% increases during the same time period.

With respect to health issues, Chattahoochee County residents have the highest cancer incidence rate in the entire CACIA project area, with 661.2 incidents per 100,000 people. This is nearly double the Georgia state average of 388.1. The cancer death rate in the County is over 50% higher than the state average. However, when broken out by gender, the male death



EDUCATION

Optimism about Chattahoochee County's school system (mentioned in the Strengths section of this report) was mixed with specific areas of concern expressed by County residents. One of the most frequently discussed issues was the impact of not having a high school in the County. There are currently two separate school districts in the County (Ft. Benning has its own), and children from both districts attend Spencer High School in Columbus. Many participants grew up in the County when it had a high school, and they believe the new high school will alleviate many of the problems they currently perceive:

"The Board of Education considers their responsibility over when the kids graduate from 8th grade since they go to Columbus for high school. The kids feel abandoned. The new high school will help the community - one of the problems now is that people don't have opportunities to get together."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

"High school students are bused to Columbus so Chattahoochee students often don't have the opportunity to participate in after school activities available and accessible to other students."

[Chattahoochee County Town Hall Meeting Participant].

"Students might be less likely to drop out if they can become involved in activities at the school."

[Chattahoochee County Town Hall Meeting Participant].

Several participants shared concerns that the new high school is not being fully supported by Ft. Benning: *"The Ft. Benning commander is trying to*

arrange flexibility for Ft. Benning students to be able to attend either the new Chattahoochee County high school or Spencer High School in Columbus." Other town hall meeting participants noted in general that there was *"not enough support for the local school system"* in the community. Residents and the school board were trying to work through these issues at the time of the assessment.

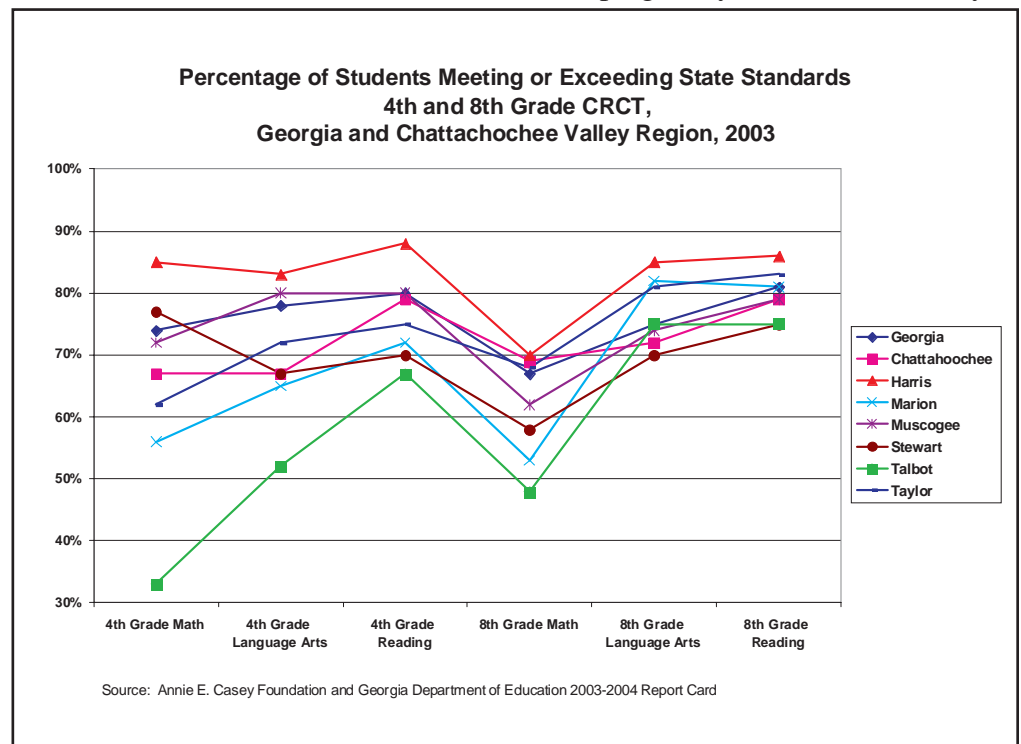
While ACT and SAT scores and high school completion rates are not available for Chattahoochee County because it does not have a high school, an overview of the County's performance on Criterion Referenced Competency Tests for reading, language arts, and mathematics provides insight into how well students are doing compared to other Georgia counties in the Region.

As the graph illustrates, Chattahoochee County students generally performed below Georgia state average in terms of the number of students meeting or exceeding state standards in each of the basic

skills areas (reading, language arts, and mathematics) in 4th and 8th grades on Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT). **Eighth grade math was the exception, where Chattahoochee County students scored above the state average and higher than nearly every other county in the CACIA Region.** Talbot County at 42% had the lowest percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards. One of the interview participants in Chattahoochee County noted that the "mentor liaison program" is helping improve some of these scores.

Many of the counties in the CACIA Region discussed issues related to teen pregnancy rates and the implication that these rates have to high school completion rates. Chattahoochee County has done a good job of lowering its teen pregnancy rate over the past five years, and it now has the lowest teen pregnancy rate in the CACIA project area.

Residents' perceptions regarding teen pregnancy rates in the County



are in accordance with these statistics, and Chattahoochee County was one of the only communities in the assessment that did not have significant conversations surrounding teen pregnancy and teen drug use.

Finally, meeting participants and interviewees discussed the availability of vocational training and G.E.D. classes. The new high school will be incorporating vocational training into its curriculum. G.E.D. classes are currently available in Chattahoochee County only through the Muscogee County Adult Education Program and only in the mornings. They are working on developing evening and online classes that will better meet the needs of working residents and single mothers.

OTHER AREAS OF CONCERN

Public Safety/Illegal Drug Use

Chattahoochee County residents who participated in the town hall meeting, interviews and e-surveys discussed several issues related to crime and drug use in the County. This issue was also the second highest ranked challenge perceived by those responding to the telephone survey in the County. When asked about the area's greatest challenge in an open-ended question, 12.9% of respondents named public safety (including crime and illegal drug use) as the most significant issue. Comments from interviews and the town hall meeting substantiate these concerns:

"The County's drug problem is vast and impacts the dropout rate and the workforce."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

"Law enforcement is problematic, particularly with the lack of response to drug problems."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

"Drug use is rampant in the County. People with outstanding warrants for drug charges in other counties are hiding out here. This means that drug problems in other counties are seeping in here."

[Chattahoochee County Town Hall Meeting Participant].

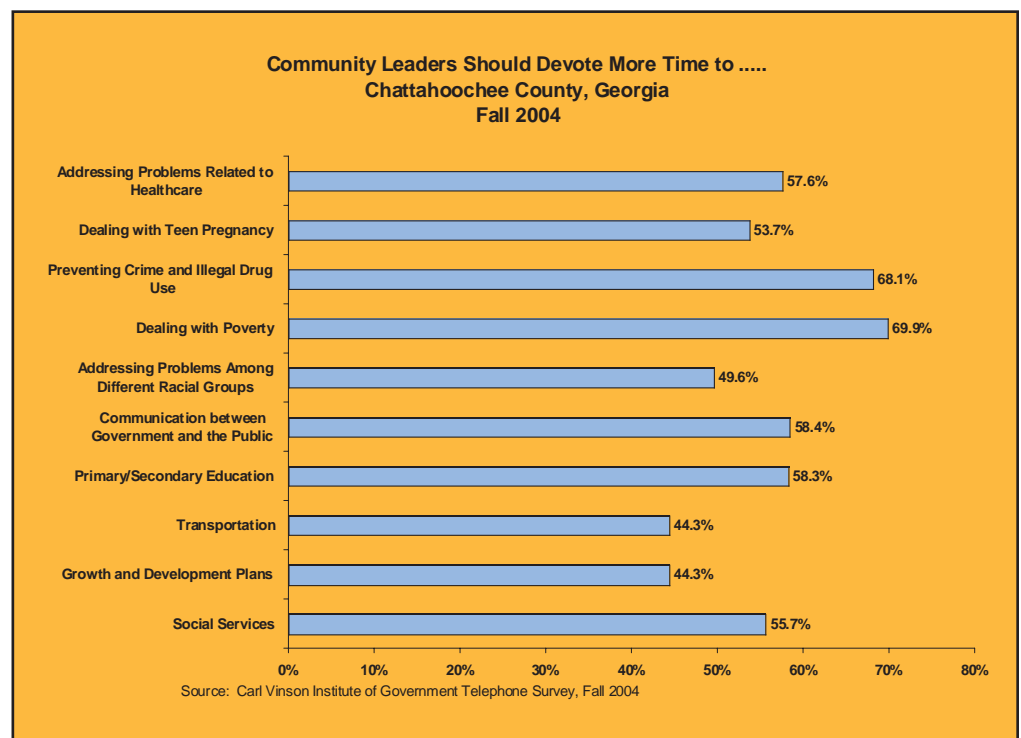
"Drugs are easily accessible to teens. Drug use tends to be a precursor to other problems; control drug use by teens, and truancy and other problems will follow."

[Chattahoochee County Town Hall Meeting Participant].

However, the statistics do not necessarily match the perceptions being expressed by Chattahoochee County residents, particularly with respect to overall crime rates. In 2003, Chattahoochee County had the third lowest Total Index Crime Rate in the

state, with 248.3 incidences per 100,000 people. This compares very favorably to the Total Index Crime Rate in Muscogee County, which was 4th highest in the state at 7,450.1 per 100,000 people. The Chattahoochee County rate is also substantially below the state average of 2,779.6 incidences per 100,000 people. Chattahoochee County sent no juveniles to YDC in 2003 and had no arrests for violent juvenile crimes. The majority of the public's perception appears to be in the area of illegal drug activity and the inability of local law enforcement to arrest drug users who may be seeking refuge in Chattahoochee County. Residents noted the need for "24 hour law enforcement, not just out on the four lane but in the City, as well."

The graph below illustrates the issues Chattahoochee County residents feel community leaders need to spend more time addressing. "Preventing Crime and Illegal Drug Use" was a close second to "Dealing with Poverty" in terms of issues for leaders - including government - to focus on.



Rapidly Increasing Number of Hispanics

In 2000, Chattahoochee County had the 7th highest percentage of Hispanic residents in the State of Georgia at 10.4%. **One in ten people in Chattahoochee County identified him or herself as of Hispanic origin.** This is nearly double the rate of Marion County, which had next highest percentage of Hispanic residents, and triple the average for the counties in the CACIA Region.

Existing communication issues noted in the County are exacerbated by high numbers of residents who may not speak the language and/or who have different cultural backgrounds:

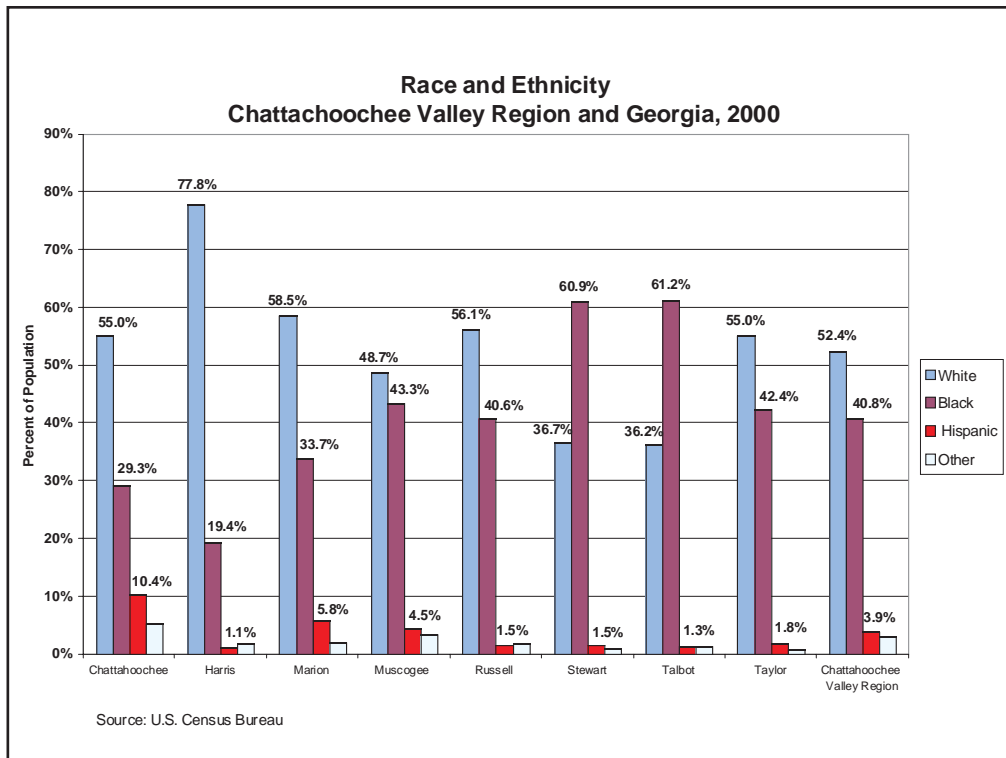
"Communication is the most significant challenge to the area. Many people do not know what is going on, or don't know why they should care. The local paper, the Tri-County Journal & Chattahoochee Chronicle, is only published weekly."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

Even though many of these individuals may be part of the Ft. Benning installation, they interact with and are part of the County, and community leaders must continue to seek ways to incorporate them into the greater community.

Housing

Several issues related to housing arose during the town hall meeting, interviews, and e-surveys. These included the prevalence of mobile homes and substandard housing in the County, high rental rates, and the lack of entry level housing.



⋮ Although Chattahoochee County overall has a relatively low percentage of mobile homes (19.8%), in the non-Ft. Benning census tract areas in the County over half (50.6%) of all housing units were mobile homes in 2000. (*Profiling Chattahoochee County, A Local Perspective D. Bachtel, University of Georgia, 2002*).

⋮ Residents are also concerned with the quality of the housing, indicating that many of the trailers that were brought into the County prior to implementation of the zoning ordinance still don't comply with codes, and many are "just vacant eyesores."

⋮ Rental rates in Chattahoochee County were the highest in the State of Georgia in 2000 with correspondingly low homeownership rates. Due partially to Ft. Benning's influence, Chattahoochee County has by far the highest rental rate in the CACIA project area with a 77.3% rental rate for the entire County.

"Affordable housing is needed for entry level workers and low income families other than substandard apartments and trailers."

[Chattahoochee County Town Hall Meeting Participant].



Conclusion

In addition to the previous issues, communication is an additional gap that was noted by several Chattahoochee County participants and is one that affects all of the issues identified:

"Not enough regular communication [exists] between local groups or government and people in the County."

[Chattahoochee County Town Hall Meeting Participant].

"Many of the services that people think go to all of Chattahoochee County are actually going just to Ft. Benning - the people in Cusseta and other parts of the County do not see them."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

"Communication is by far the most significant challenge - people don't know what's going on, and people who are in the positions to tell them don't know how to communicate. They either don't know how to get the information out, or they think people don't want to know."

[Chattahoochee County Interview].

This included on-line and internet communications, as well:

"Chattahoochee County has a service gap in regard to internet service. At present, DSL is only available in the City limits. Otherwise, only bad dialup is available."

[Chattahoochee County Town Hall Meeting Participant].



The diversity of Chattahoochee County, including ethnic diversity, military and non-military families living in the same community, and the mixture of urban and rural areas in the County make strategic planning, coordination and partnerships even more critical. *Profiling Chattahoochee County, A Local Perspective* (D. Bachtel, University of Georgia, 2002), characterized the challenge in this manner:

"The presence of large numbers of soldiers and their dependents [in the Ft. Benning tract] complicate the challenges of social service programming in Chattahoochee County because while these individuals and families may qualify for assistance, they are different from 'traditional' clients in that they have access to a host of programs and services available to military personnel."

It is hard to overstate the importance of the 34% projected population growth for the County by 2010. This fact, combined with the other critical challenges discussed by residents and reflected in this report, makes planning and coordination essential for the future of Chattahoochee County. The ability of the community to communicate effectively across lines of difference, as exhibited in the town hall meeting, coupled with the community's optimism regarding the new high school and a consolidated government, are strong indicators of the County's capacity to meet these challenges and to enhance the quality of life for all citizens of Chattahoochee County.