



CRITICAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF marion county

The counties included in the Community Assets and Critical Issues Assessment ("CACIA") are Marion, Muscogee, Harris, Chattahoochee, 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. Town hall meetings and interviews (face to face, telephone and e-survey) all involved people who actively came to an event and chose to participate. Conversely, the random dial telephone survey elicited responses from nearly 2,000 people in the eight county Region at home. All of the qualitative information (from the town hall meetings, personal interviews, and e-survey responses) was analyzed using a 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. Prior studies were also reviewed and are referred to in this report.

This county-level report contains the highlights of the Carl Vinson Institute's findings for Marion 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 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

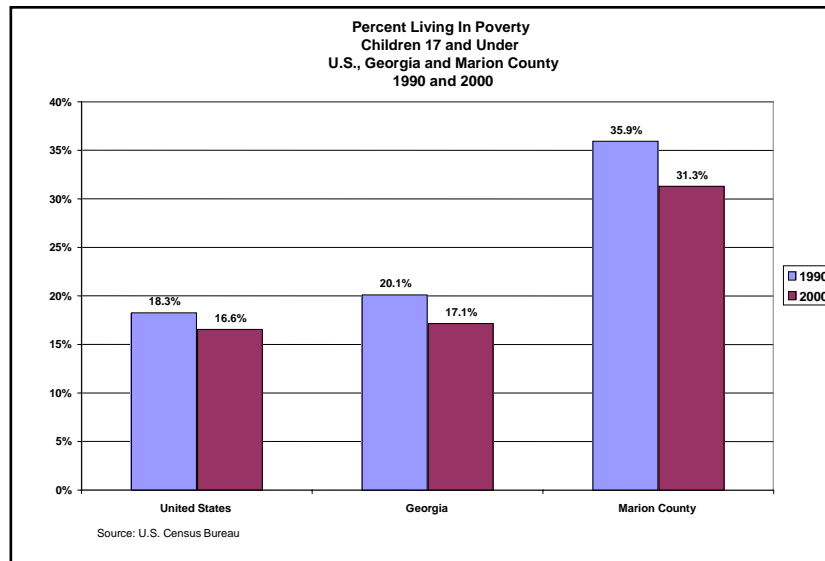
Several key demographic and economic measures provide a comprehensive overview of an area, particularly when viewed over time. These include poverty rates, per capita personal income, educational attainment levels, industrial sector information, and population growth rates, among others. The following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

Poverty rates give a broad indication of how a community is doing and whether it is moving in the right direction by measuring wealth in a way that relates the measure 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 the community is responding to its most needy population. As the following graph illustrates, Marion County's child poverty rates followed state and national trends, improving slightly from 1990 (using 1989 income data) to 2000 (using 1999 income data).

While improvement has been attained, Marion County rates continue to exceed those of the State of Georgia and were still almost twice the national rate in 2000. **Nearly one in three children live in poverty in Marion County.** This rate must decrease significantly in the next few years for Marion County to successfully move ahead.

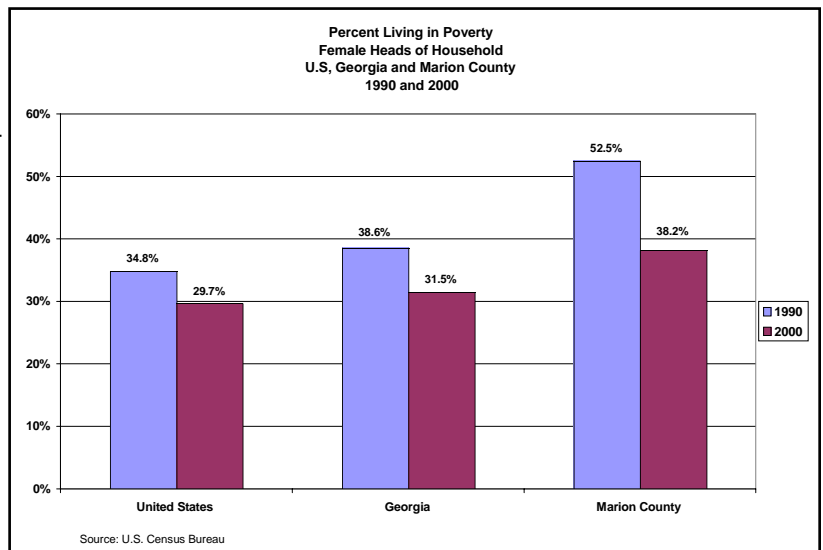
Marion County significantly improved its female head of household poverty levels from 1990 to 2000. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, female heads of household are more likely to be poor than their single male counterparts or than dual heads of household. While Marion County's female head of household poverty rate continues



to exceed both the state and national rates, it declined by a substantive 14.3 percentage points between 1990 and 2000. If Marion County

Marion County also has the highest elderly poverty rate in the eight county Chattahoochee Valley Region. 25.1% of Marion County residents age 65 and older live in poverty, compared to 13.5% of Georgia's elderly residents and 14.8% of all Chattahoochee Valley residents age 65 and older. This population is particularly vulnerable and tends to be more isolated, with fewer avenues or opportunities to access resources.

could achieve that same rate of reduction by the next census, the County would likely have lower female head of household poverty rates than the state and national averages.

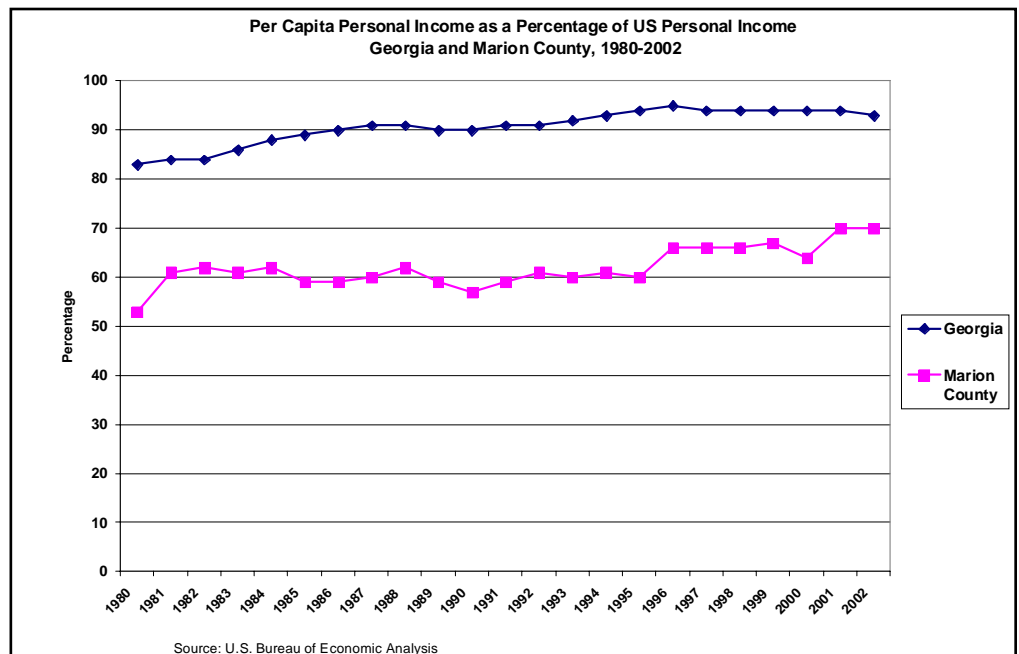
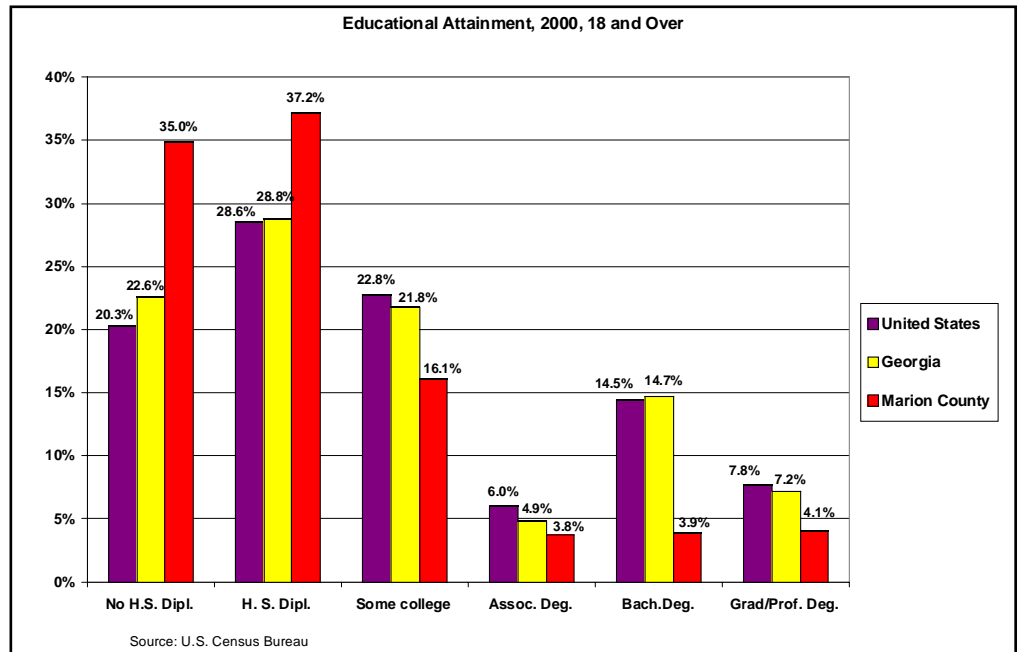
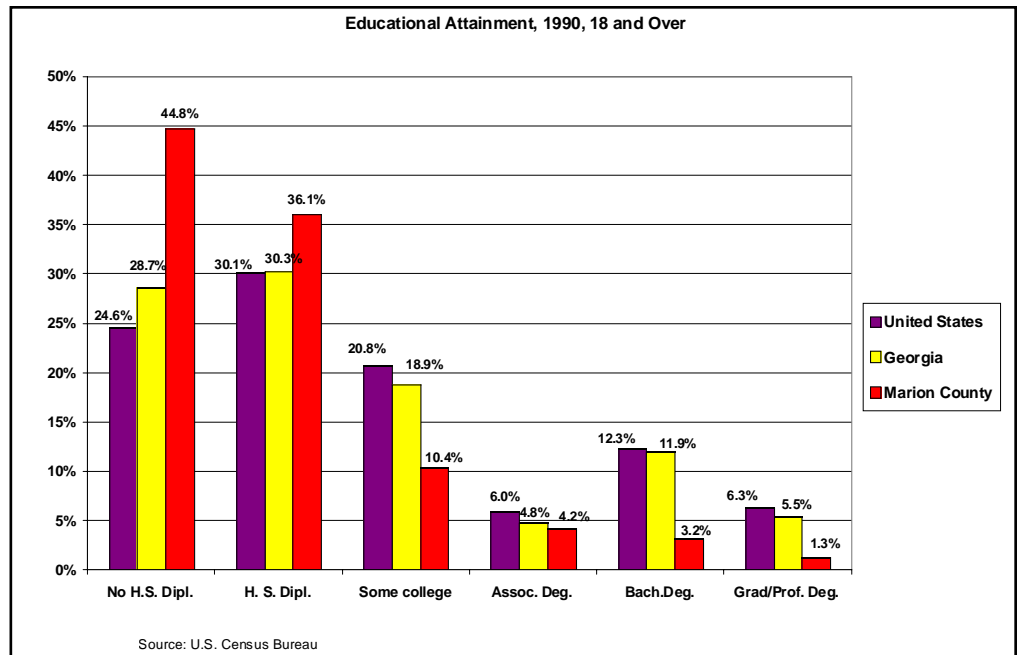


Educational attainment is another strong indicator of the relative well-being of an area. In 1990, nearly 45% of all adults age 18 and over in Marion County lacked a high school education. By 2000, the percentage of adults 18 and over in Marion County lacking a high school education had declined to 35%. While the number of adults lacking a high school education continued to be significantly higher than state (22.6%) and national (20.3%) averages in 2000, Marion County has achieved significant progress.

The impact of area universities, community and technical colleges is also evident, with a 5.7 percentage point increase from 1990 to 2000 in the number of residents having completed some college coursework. The percentage of Marion County residents having completed an Associate's Degree declined slightly during this time period, while significant gains in the percentages of residents with graduate degrees were made.

Per capita personal income also measures how well an area is doing, particularly over time and in comparison to state and national averages. In 2002, Marion County's per capita personal income (\$21,678) was significantly lower than the state average (\$28,821) and was at 70% of the United States average (\$30,906). Of note is the fact that Marion County has continued to make progress as compared to the national average, with incremental increases nearly every year since 1990.

In projecting future per capita personal income, the Selig Center for Economic Growth (using US Bureau of Economic Analysis data) does not project significant increases in per capita income in Marion County through 2007, expecting it to remain at less than \$22,006.



Strengths

Overall, 73% of Marion County residents ranked their County as an “Excellent” or “Good” place to live. This was the fourth highest percentage experienced within the eight county CACIA Region and nearly high as the regional average of 74%. Within the CACIA study area, the range of responses varied from 90.1% (Harris) to 37.9% (Stewart). The following graph illustrates that Marion County residents generally felt positive about their local neighborhood, their County, and the Chattahoochee Valley Region.

The strengths of an area vary considerably depending on those answering the question. However, several topics continue to migrate to the top as the most prevalent positives for Marion County. The accompanying graph illustrates those strengths that resonated most strongly with Marion County residents participating in the random telephone survey. The quality of life was identified as one of the greatest strengths of Marion County among telephone respondents. Interviewees and town hall meeting participants defined “quality of life” largely in terms of the low cost of living, the size of the community, and the close bonds that exist between neighbors:

"There is a strong concern for others among the majority of our citizens."

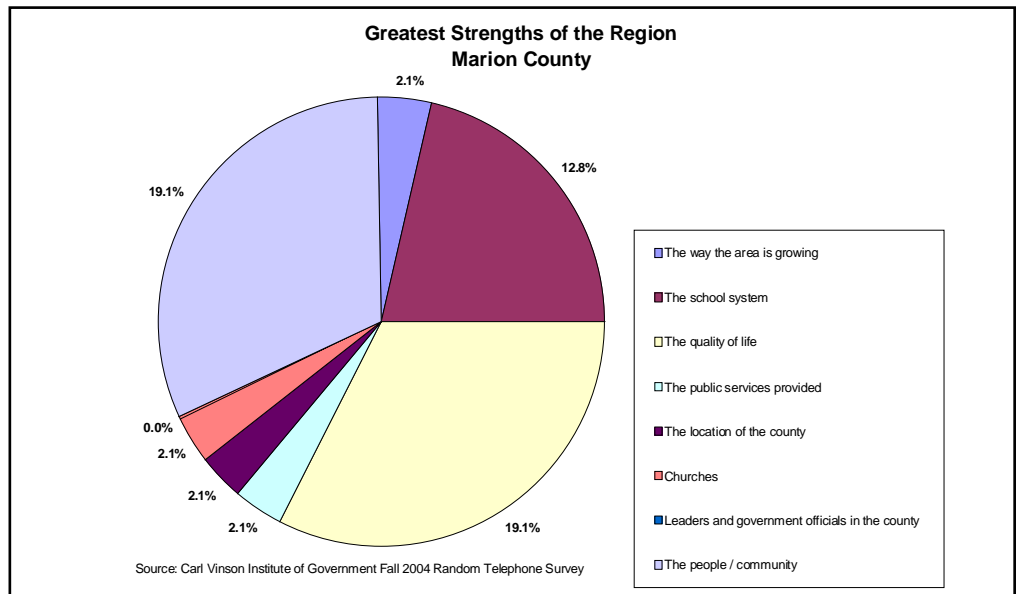
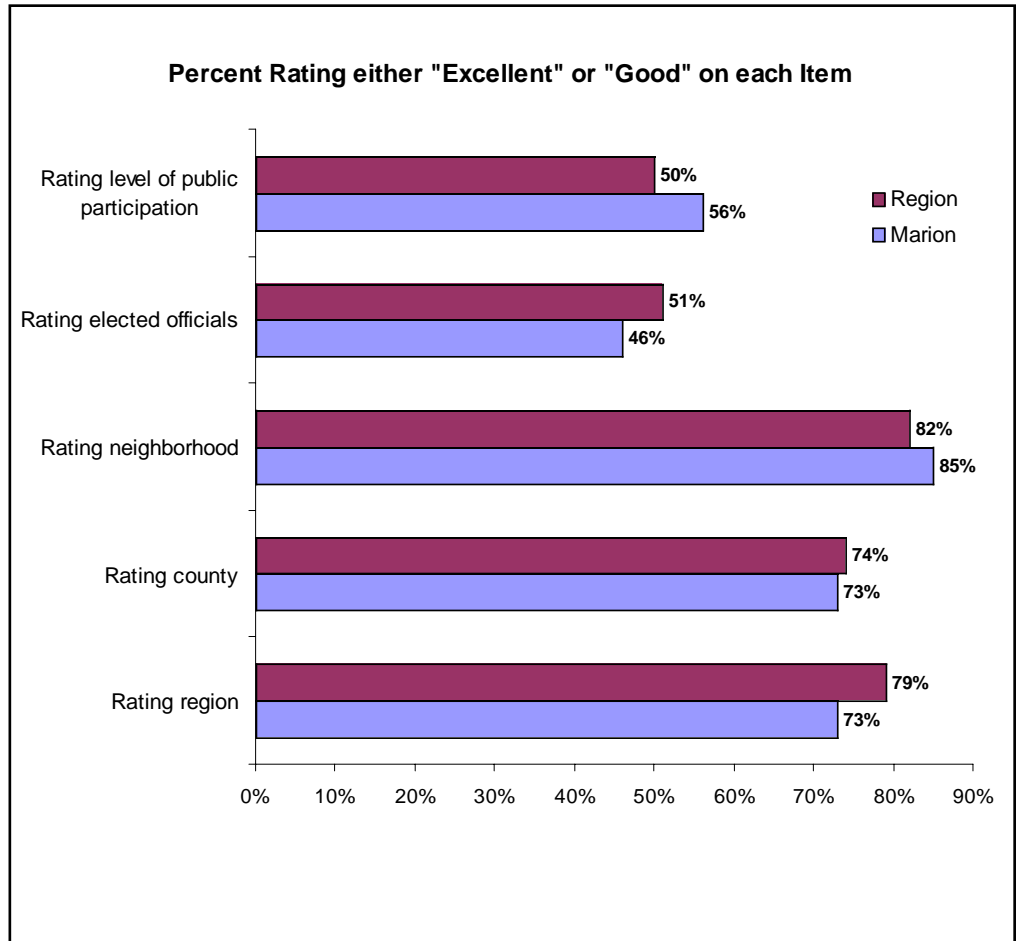
[Marion County Interview].

"We have the ability to work together. Our community raised over \$130,000 for a Chapel addition to the nursing home."

Some people thought it couldn't be done, but everyone was amazed at what determination and people getting involved could accomplish."

[Marion County Interview].

In addition to the quality of life, an equal percentage of respondents indicated that they believed that the people and the community were the greatest strengths of their County. Town hall participants indicated that they enjoyed the fact that *"our County is small enough that we have a personal touch and that the people are good and willing to work for a better Marion County."*



Challenges

The qualitative analysis for Marion County identified the following issues as broad themes for the most significant problems 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 Marion County:

- :: *The school system.*
- :: *At-risk youth, youth programs, parent's involvement with youth.*
- :: *Differences in the way different races are treated (services offered, etc).*
- :: *Getting people involved in the community (volunteering, involvement with local government).*
- :: *Jobs and attracting industry.*
- :: *Recreation and fun activities.*

The random telephone survey was designed using a series of both open-ended and directed questions. The results from the telephone survey do not necessarily correlate strongly to the town hall meeting and interview results with respect to schools. When asked an open-ended question regarding the greatest challenge facing Marion County, only 2.3% of telephone survey respondents identified the school system as the County's greatest challenge. Public safety, including crime and drugs, (16.3%) and jobs and attracting industry (16.3%) both received the highest percentages of responses to this question.

Telephone survey participants in Marion County were also asked a directed question regarding the amount of time that community leaders should spend on certain issues, including primary and secondary education. Only 53.9% of Marion County telephone survey

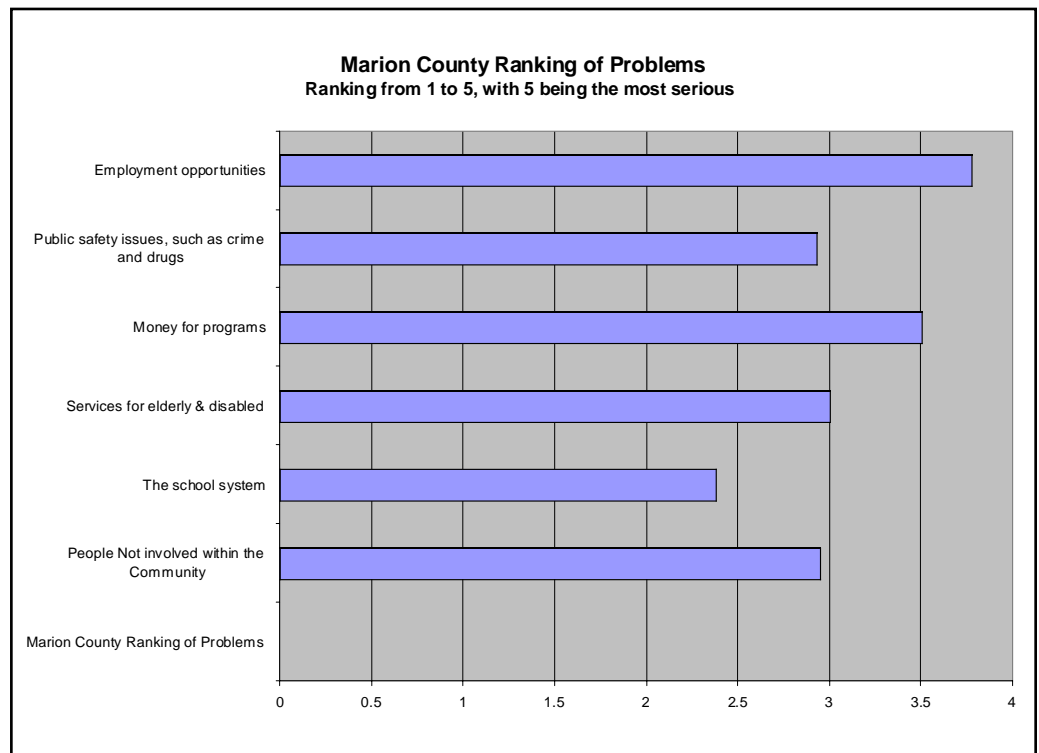
respondents felt that their leaders needed to spend more time addressing education, which was the lowest percentage on this issue in the eight county CACIA Region. The variance in responses between the qualitative portions of the study and the random telephone survey may partially reflect the difference between people who actively chose to attend a town hall meeting, participate in an interview, or participate in an e-survey versus those who were randomly selected for participation 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.

Based on thorough analysis of both types of input, and considering key demographic and economic information, the following issues are those that rose to the top in terms of the overall challenges facing Marion County.

JOBS & CREATING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

In responding to the telephone survey, 16.3% of Marion County respondents readily identified jobs and attracting industry as the most pressing challenge facing the County when asked the open-ended question, "What do you see as the greatest challenge facing Marion County?" An additional 7% of respondents indicated that increasing job opportunities was the greatest challenge facing the County. When combined, the total percentage of respondents indicating these two categories as the greatest challenges facing the County eclipse all other issue areas.

Similarly, when asked to rate a series of challenges on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most serious, Marion County residents rated the need for additional employment opportunities as a 3.78, which was



the highest ranking for any of the proposed issue areas. Participants in the town hall meeting, interviews and e-surveys also identified the need for additional employment opportunities within the County:

"Local employers have had recent reductions in workforce. Tyson Foods and Baby Dreams have both laid off workers. As a result, the County needs to recruit business growth and development."

[Marion County Interview].

"We really need jobs. Tyson is the major employer and they have cut back strongly. There are not a lot of jobs within the County."

[Marion County Interview].

"We have a lack of industry, and most of our young people who work are working in Columbus and living here. We have an industrial park but not enough industry. We need to find ways to let people know we're here."

[Marion County Interview].

"Job creation is our greatest challenge. We have had significant job losses as Tyson has cut back from between 1,200 and 1,500 employees to fewer than 500 employees. These jobs were not particularly high paying jobs, but the impact has been strong within the community. The ripple effect to local businesses has been strongly felt. Clearly, we need not only jobs, but better paying jobs."

[Marion County Interview].

Although Marion County residents perceive a strong need to attract industry and to develop additional job opportunities within the County, they also expressed strong concern

regarding the need for a better prepared workforce:

"If we are to develop jobs, we must have a better prepared workforce. We have high rates of illiteracy and a strong need for basic skills and for technical training."

[Marion County Interview].

"We have a significant number of people within our community who are illiterate, and I don't believe that the general public, nor our community leaders, have an adequate realization of the scope of this problem."

[Marion County Interview].

Indeed, U.S Census 2000 data indicated that only 65.4% of Marion County residents age 25 and older had a high school or higher level of education. This compares unfavorably to the percentages for the State of Georgia (78.4%) and the United States (80.4%). The accompanying graph shows that the Marion County school system made significant progress in the past year in regard to improving high school completion rates and is approaching the state average. However, even the Georgia

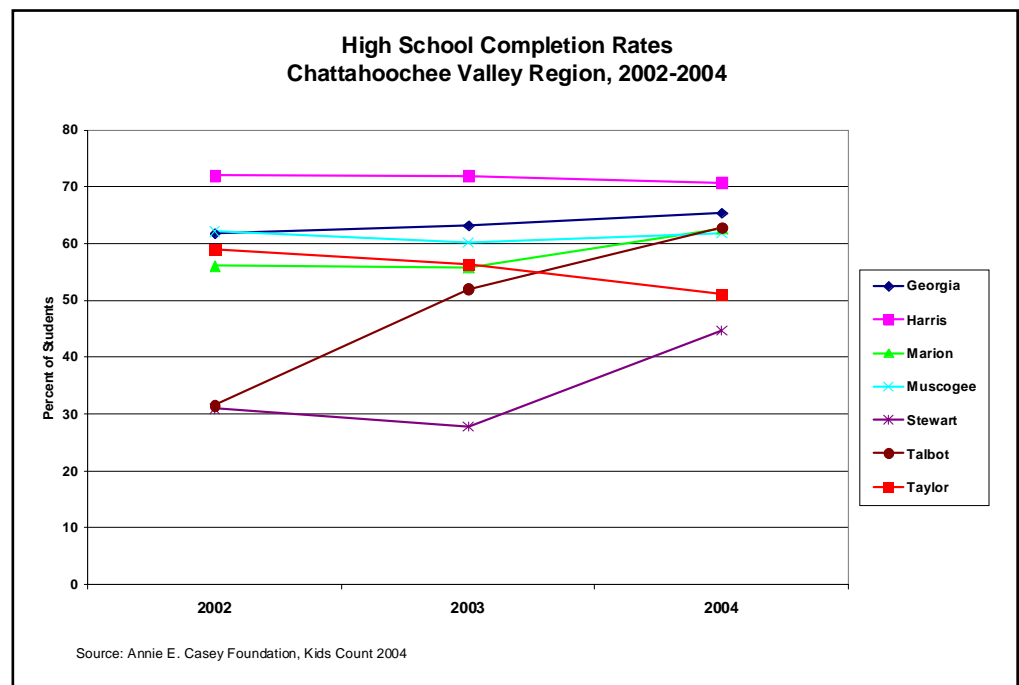
state average of less than 70% high school completion means that over one in four children are left behind.

Improving educational attainment at all levels must remain a high priority for counties seeking to position themselves for economic development in an increasingly knowledge-based economy.

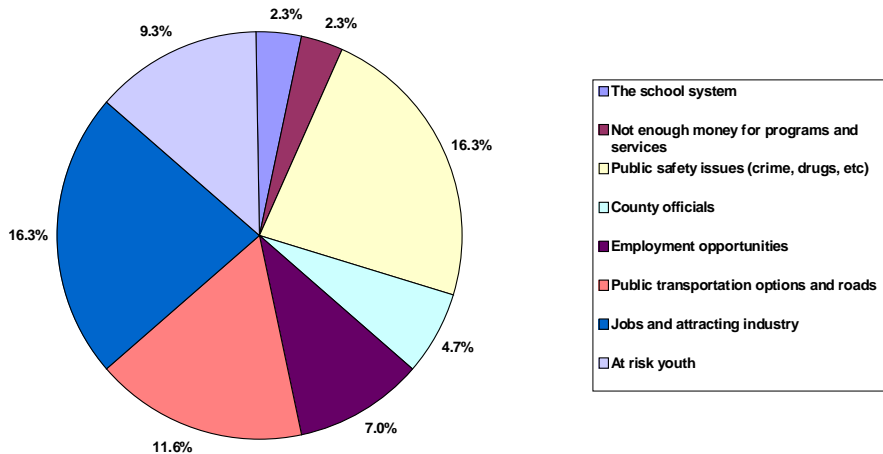
PUBLIC SAFETY

As previously discussed, preventing crime and illegal drug use was perceived to be a significant challenge facing Marion County by 16.3% of participants in the random telephone survey, which was among the highest percentage of responses to this issue within the eight county CACIA Region. Responses ranged from 19.3% in Taylor County to only 6.4% in Russell County, Alabama.

During the telephone survey, residents were also queried about a number of issues that emerged as priorities during the town hall meetings, personal interviews and e-surveys in Marion County. One of the questions asked was whether community leaders needed



What is the Greatest Challenge Facing Marion County Today?



Source: CVIOG RDD Telephone Survey, Fall 2004

Note: Percentages do not add to 100% due to the exclusion of two responses: "Other" - 11.6% and "Do not know/could not answer" - 18.6%

to spend more time, less time, or the same amount of time on particular issues. Consistent with the responses above, 61.3% of Marion County residents surveyed believe that community leaders need to spend **more time** preventing crime and illegal drug use.

Analysis of public safety data for Marion County reveals that arrest rates in 2003 were 209.23 per 100,000 individuals for all crimes. This is well below the average rate for the State of Georgia (538.8 incidents per 100,000 people) and places Marion County 128th among Georgia's 159 counties. Similarly, the number of violent crimes reported per 100,000 people for Marion County in 2003 was 125.5 placing Marion County 117th out of Georgia's 159 counties on this indicator, well below the average for the State (229.28). (Georgia Statistics System, 2004 Georgia County Guide).

The rate of reported property crimes in Marion County per 100,000 people in 2003 was also relatively low at 1,087.9, again putting Marion

County 128th among Georgia's 159 counties. However, this rate is higher than some surrounding counties in the CACIA Region. Talbot (1051.5), Stewart (959.8), Harris (838.1), and Chattahoochee (212.1) Counties all had lower property crime rates. (Georgia Statistics System, 2004 Georgia County Guide).

Juvenile arrest rates in Marion County in 2003 were 1.9%, less than one-half of the average for the State of Georgia (4.5%). (2002 Uniform Crime Reporting Program, Georgia Bureau of Investigation). In 2003, Marion County had one of the lowest ratios of juvenile arrests to overall arrests in the State of Georgia, ranking 148th of Georgia's 159 counties. (Georgia Statistics System, 2004 Georgia County Guide).

It is intriguing that such a high number of telephone respondents identified public safety as a top challenge for Marion County given the relatively low rates of crime indicated through statistical analysis of currently available databases. Notably, property crime rates are higher in Marion County than in many of the surrounding counties, and this may

well be contributing to the public perception that public safety is a major challenge for the county. Additionally, other issues pertaining to public safety were articulated in the town hall meeting:

"Emergency Medical Service response time is a problem in Marion County. We need to have better communication among all of our public safety officials and in order to enhance communication, we are in need of improved communications equipment."

"There is a lack of communication and coordination between the Sheriff's Office, EMS, and our Volunteer Fire Departments."

Comments regarding communication and coordination between public safety entities seemed to be centered largely on the need for enhanced telecommunication equipment. Medical emergency response time was also identified as a strength for the community, although participants noted that there was not a hospital or emergency clinic physically located within the County. This fact was noted as a "gap" in services that exist within the community, and participants indicated that the distance to emergency medical facilities is a critical issue.



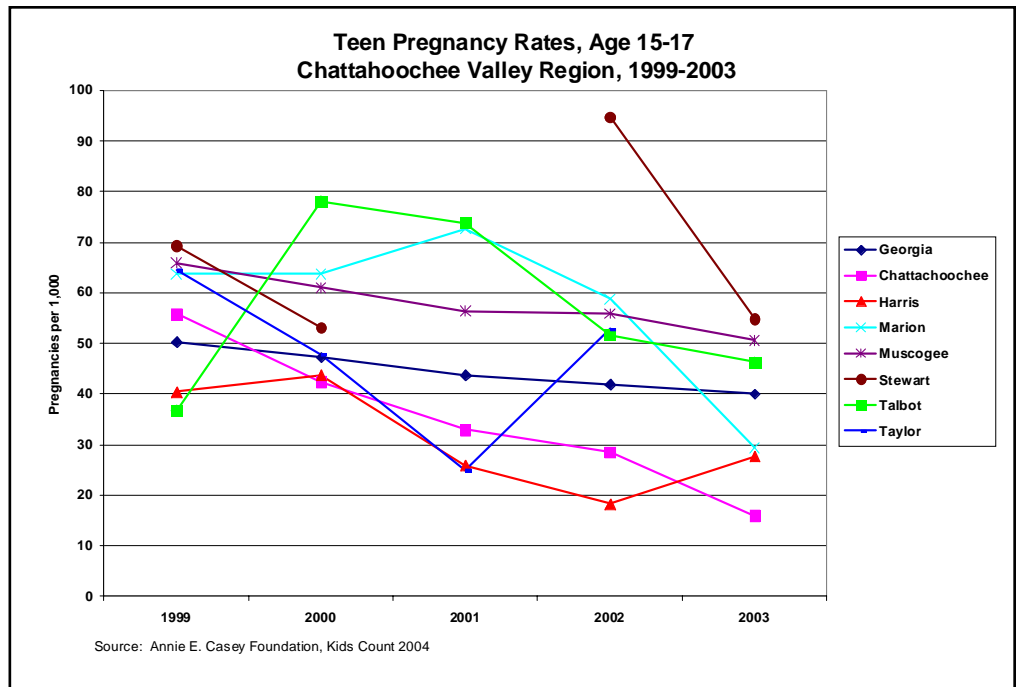
In addition to these needs, town hall participants noted the need for increased enforcement of noise ordinances and for increased enforcement of curfews established for juveniles.

In summarizing public safety discussions, an analysis of existing statistical databases failed to substantiate many of the concerns expressed by telephone survey respondents in Marion County. Likewise, participants in the town hall meeting, with the exceptions noted above, gave the low crime rate in the County and the quality of volunteer fire departments as key strengths for the County. It appears that enhancing communications equipment for improved emergency response could greatly improve public attitudes regarding public safety. Additionally, while public safety officials are doing a good job within the County according to statistical data, they may need to make a concerted effort to communicate results more effectively to the public.

AT-RISK YOUTH

In the qualitative analysis of Marion County that was based on input from the town hall meeting, interviews and e-surveys, discussion of programs for at-risk youth occurred with great frequency. This was corroborated in the random telephone survey, where 9.3% of Marion County respondents indicated that "at-risk youth" and programs organized to help them were the greatest challenge facing the County. This rate of response placed the issue behind only "jobs and attracting industry" and "public safety" in terms of response.

In addressing at-risk youth issues, residents pointed to teen pregnancy rates as a point of concern:



"Teenage pregnancy is a perennial problem. We see teenagers getting pregnant beginning in the 7th grade and the numbers escalate through the 12th grade. The problem is not due to a lack of information; rather it is a cultural problem. Schools have to deal with students leaving for maternity and then attempting to return to classes. I hear girls say, 'I want a baby because I just want to love the baby.' They have no idea how demanding or rigorous motherhood can be and they are

woefully unprepared for the responsibility."
[Marion County Interview].

The statistics confirm this resident's perceptions and concerns. The teen pregnancy rate in Marion County has been historically higher than those in surrounding counties and reached an all-time high in 2001. While it declined in 2002, Marion County's rate was still higher than all other counties in the Chattahoochee Valley Region with the exception of Stewart County.



However, teen pregnancy rates in Marion County improved substantially in 2003 (29.4) and for the first time ever dropped below the state average of 40.1. Community leaders must continue to build on this progress given the impact that these pregnancies have statistically in terms of impacting educational attainment, labor force participation, poverty rates and other social indicators outside of the direct physical, mental and emotional impact upon the affected individuals and their families. In support of this conclusion, 60.3% of telephone survey respondents felt that community leaders needed to spend more time addressing the problem of teen pregnancy in Marion County.

CACIA participants also expressed other concerns regarding a lack of structured activities for youth within the County:

"Latchkey youth are a problem. There is little to do after school hours in regard to structured activities, and many parents aren't at home in the afternoons as they commute to other counties to work."
[Marion County Interview].

"We need a recreation center in Marion County for our young people. They have nothing to do in the afternoon, and there needs to be a center with organized activities."
[Marion County Interview].

"Kids have nothing to do after school hours. Summers are a particular problem when kids are out of school. Definitely, we need more after school programming. We have a program, 'A step', but it is severely limited in resources. Homework assistance needs to

be a priority in after-school programming, although recreation and social development are also important characteristics."

[Marion County Interview].

While the lack of structured activities for youth was frequently cited as a challenge in the interviews, e-surveys and town hall meeting, residents were also quick to acknowledge that part of the problem in establishing youth activities was the lack of sufficient parental involvement:

"In regard to youth activities, scouting is in place, but is not as strong as is desired. Lack of parental interest and involvement appears to be the predominate problem."

[Marion County Interview].

"We strongly need to shore up opportunities for youth and parental involvement in recreational activities."

[Marion County Interview].

"Parents aren't as involved with their children as they used to be, and this leads to many other types of problems."

[Marion County Interview].

Participants also tendered some suggestions for meeting some of the youth development needs of the County:

"We need programs to demonstrate to youth the consequences of poor decision-making. DARE programs are helpful but insufficient because they hit only targeted grades with an infrequent message. We need speakers talking to kids each and every year about the dangers of drug and substance abuse as well as the dangers associated with all forms of criminal activity. The message needs to be strong and frequent."

[Marion County Interview].

"We need a full-fledged recreation department within the County with a full-time director."
[Marion County Interview].

"In reaching youth audiences, emphasis needs to be placed upon early engagement, particularly kids in the 4th to 5th grade. This is still a time when efforts can be effective."
[Marion County Interview].

One related issue that was not identified in either the qualitative or survey portions of the CACIA assessment but which has tremendous impact on youth development and behavior is the relatively high rate of child abuse and neglect in Marion County. In 2003, substantiated child abuse rates were 26.2 per 1,000 individuals in Marion County. This was significantly higher than the state rate (21.2) and almost twice the rate experienced in Marion County during 2002 (13.7).

OTHER CHALLENGES & ISSUES

Other issues may not evoke the title of “greatest problem”, but residents want community leaders to continue to focus on them. This may mean that while survey respondents and town hall participants don't consider these to be the predominant problems, they continue to be critical issues and warrant ongoing time and attention.

"Zoning is an issue. We need to have a county-wide master plan that provides for various forms of well-planned development as well as the preservation of rural character. We need a community vision that is broad and representative of the diverse interests within the County."

[Marion County Interview].

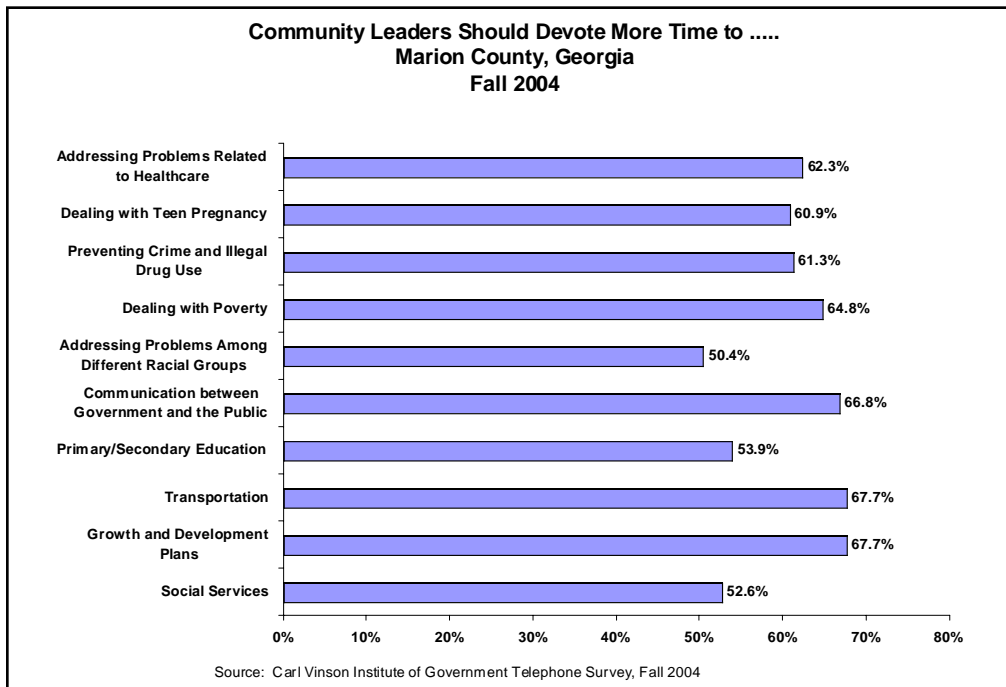
"There is no affordable housing in the County. Lot size restrictions are such that they restrict growth significantly. There is a 10 acre minimum lot size requirement for mobile homes and new home construction. While our land prices are not as high as some of the other counties, this still makes it virtually impossible for young couples and people of limited income to obtain a home."

[Marion County Interview].

"Growth is one of the greatest challenges facing Marion County. We need to pave additional roads, and the 10-acre minimum lot size in the county will hurt families in the future, because not many families own that much land and can't build additional homes for family members."

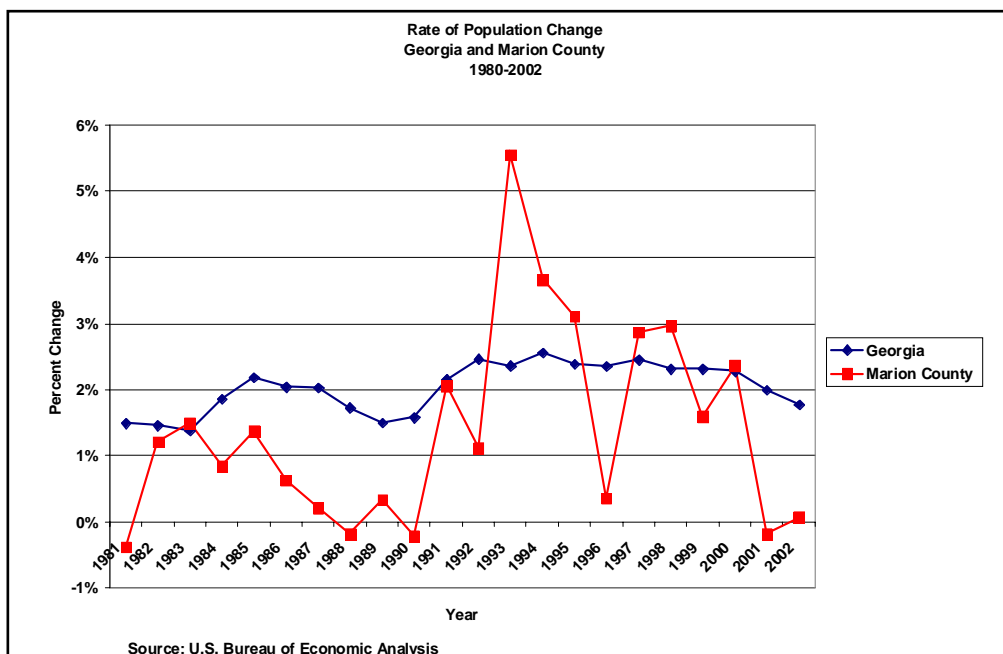
[Marion County Town Hall Meeting Participant].

The following chart illustrates the generally high rates of growth in Marion County beginning in the early 1990s. While the rate of increase was sporadic from year to year, the County's population increased nearly 28% during the 1990s from 5,590 to 7,144 people.



Growth and Transportation Issues

When Marion County telephone respondents were asked to identify the amount of time that they felt community leaders should spend addressing certain challenges for the community, 67.7% percent of respondents felt that community leaders should spend more time on growth and development plans as well as on transportation issues. These issues were corroborated within the qualitative portions of the assessment. Frequently mentioned was the County's overall capacity to accommodate growth, yet this was often tempered with concerns that unchecked growth could sacrifice the quality of life and small-town feel of the community:



.The U.S. Census Bureau (as cited by the Georgia Department of Labor and the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget) projects that by the year 2010, Marion County will experience a 21.4% increase in its population from 2000 rates. Proper planning for this growth and the issues it brings with it is critical for community leaders.

Race Relations

Race relations was an issue that also appeared with some frequency in the qualitative portions of the assessment for Marion County. Within the random telephone survey, however, it is notable that 59.6% of respondents characterized race relations as with "Good" or "Excellent." Among the eight counties in the CACIA Region, only Harris County (64.2%) had a higher percentage of respondents characterize race relations in this manner. While 39.4% of respondents in Marion County characterized race relations as either "Fair" or "Poor" and 50.4% of respondents believed that community leaders needed to spend more time on issues related to race relations within

Conclusion

Marion County, this does not appear to be as significant an issue for Marion County residents as it is in other CACIA counties.

Communication emerged as an overall theme from all the qualitative and quantitative elements of the assessment. Nearly 67% of Marion County respondents believed community leaders (and government in particular) need to spend more time communicating with the public:

“We need improved communication between city and county and among all of the citizens.”

[Marion County Town Hall Participant].

“There needs to be a liaison between government entities and the people.”

[Marion County Town Hall Participant].

At the end of the Marion County town hall meeting, residents appeared to be genuinely pleased with the dialog that had transpired during the meeting and expressed a desire to have continued conversation between government entities and the public through additional town hall meetings. In many ways, this could be considered an early success of the CACIA process, indicating that not only the summary report, but the process itself has been of value to participating communities.

